What can critical femininity offer reviewing?

A case for reviewing with empathy

Abstract

In academia, hegemonic patriarchal norms equate scientific quality with masculinity, and reviewing has followed in this tradition often channelling an angry army general instead of an empathetic peer invested in supporting the development of a manuscript. Indeed, femininity and emotionality are ostracised in favour of 'rational' and 'scholarly' (masculine) 'science'. What can, then, critical femininity offer reviewing? In this piece, I put a case forward for reviewing with empathy.

Am I the only one who braces herself before reading a peer review because it can feel a bit like being shouted at by an angry army general yelling drill commands? Am I the only one who notices the inherent toxic masculinity of the peer review process and who questions whether critical femininity can offer an alternative lens? In the late 1970's, renown poet and feminist Adrienne Rich wrote that, "the university is likewise a replica of the patriarchal family" (p. 139). It seems like not that much has changed since those resounding words - as evidenced by the recent *Nature Communications* article on how women are better off seeking male mentors. Yet, the subsequent Twitter uproar clearly shows that I am *not* the only one who notices how femininity in academia is devalued. Indeed, gender is an integral part of our organisational practices (Acker, 1990) and others have time and time again showed how milliard of challenges and obstacles impede women in academia (e.g., Gasser & Shaffer, 2014; Huopalainen & Satama, 2018; Jones & Palmer, 2011), including perceptions that women are less competent, produce lower quality outputs, and have lower citations rates (Cardel et al., 2020). Certainly, women *are* ostracised in academia (Zimmerman et al., 2016) because academia is a gendered masculine environment (Savigny & House, 2014) that upholds

male hegemony (Bagilhole, 2002). Entrenched within academia are cultural norms of masculinity (Savigny, 2017) where that which is perceived to be 'scholarly' and 'high-minded' is associated with masculinity whereas that which is perceived to be feminine is devalued (Bagilhole, 2002).

Indeed, even notions of what we agree to be 'scientific quality' is embedded in gendered and masculine constructions (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). Within academia, we strive towards 'reason' and 'rationality', towards that which is 'cerebral', and detach ourselves from 'base' emotions, and as noted by Wollstonecraft (1792) the former consist of so-called masculine attributes whereas the realm of emotions are taken to be feminine (Knights, 2015). In this way, 'scientific quality' and femininity are dichotomised (Benschop & Brouns, 2003) and we are led to believe that the former can only be accomplished by renouncing the latter (Donaghue, 2017). How do these forces play out in the review process? In an environment where masculine discourses embolden discrimination (Knights and Richards, 2003) but where feminine writing can be a 'political act' to challenge dominant power structures (Savigny, 2017), why do we still accept angry army general reviews? Is it not time to disrupt the taken-for-granted assumption that good quality scientific reviews have to be detached from emotions, in particular empathy? In this piece, I put forward the case for critical femininity in the peer review process.

It is all a bit tongue in cheek and many of us have certainly chuckled while scrolling through 'Reviewer 2 must be stopped' on social media, but it is not at all flippant when one realises how endemic mean reviews are in academia under the guise of 'science'. The main purpose of peer review before publication is quality control (Roulet & Van Meerbeek, 2013) – but what is a gal to do when that quality is masculine and those guarding it are the patriarchy? Publons (2018, p. 2) admits that, "there is still a substantial gap in our basic understanding of who the reviewers are, how much review work they undertake, the quality of those reviews, and what researchers think of it all". They also note that there are great disparities in terms of inclusion when it comes to reviewing. Of particular importance to my argument here is that blind peer review is a part of an oppressive system that reproduces hegemonic inequalities in favour of the masculine – especially white, middle-class men (Ozbilgin, 2009). Indeed, the dominant group (who are, ironically, charged with being the quality gatekeepers) are disproportionately consisting of White men from North America and Britain

(Özbilgin, 2004). Women on the other hand have fewer opportunities to participate in peer review (AGU, 2016) – even though 75% of journal editors cite finding willing reviewers as the hardest part of their job (Publons, 2018).

Part of the issue seems to be that those tasked with being the guardians of 'quality' science (the editors, the authors, the reviewers) are themselves part of the patriarchal system (Ozbilgin, 2009). In this way, inequalities and the gendered status quo are reproduced via "restricted circles of power and control" (de Groot, 1997, p. 136) that are dominated by masculinities. In academia, gender is done in a specific way – that is, a masculine way (Benschop & Brouns, 2003). Women are welcome, but only when they perform science in the 'right' way (read 'rational' and 'emotionless' thereby 'masculine'; Knights and Richards, 2003). The peer review process, often cloaked in anonymity and secrecy, is fertile grounds for these gendered norms to be enacted, because as Pacholok (2009) argues, our occupational cultures reinforce hegemonic masculinities under the guise of 'reason' and 'rationality' – which is contrasted with femininity (Benschop & Brouns, 2003) and emotions (Knights, 2015), and repudiated in the name of quality science (Donaghue, 2017).

Publications are extremely important in academia (Drame et al., 2012); they count for esteem and progression (Christou, 2016) and the emphasis is on publishing in top journals (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b) – some have called this the 'ultimate fetish' in academia (Willmott, 2011). Yet, writing can exclude and marginalise (Grey and Sinclair, 2006). Peer reviewing can be insidious and political (Kriegeskorte, 2012). Reviews allege neutrality vis-à-vis excellence (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a) – but impartiality and objectivity only mask the privileges of the powerful (Brouns, 2004). Reviewers are people who have a vested interested in the manuscript that they are reviewing; they might be possessive about the topic or the theory, they may feel competitive (Kriegeskorte, 2012). In a content analysis study of 1285 reviewer comments, Bornmann et al. (2010) found 1113 negative statements as compared to only 172 positive statements. It only takes a quick perusal of 'reviewer 2 must be stopped' and our own inboxes to see how negative some of these comments can be: "The paper is, simply, manure", "What the authors have done is an insult to science", "You should look closely at a career outside of science" (Silbiger & Stubler, 2019). Why must they be so … mean? Indeed, others have already shown how the dominance of masculinity can undermine ethics (Knights,

2015). Furthermore, the effects of this toxic negativity are not shared equally, no – women and minority groups are disproportionately affected by doubting their capabilities and performance, and then experiencing delays in their productivity (Silbiger & Stubler, 2019), which further reinforces and reproduces the exclusionary and discriminatory cycle. Besides, toxic reviewing is just one manifestation of an oppressive system; these issues are symptomatic of wider problems with emotionality in academia (e.g., poor mental health amongst doctoral researchers, tough and cruel supervisors, hyper competitive cultures etc.; Metcalfe et al., 2018).

So, what can critical femininity offer reviewing? Critical femininity can be a "tool of resistance against hegemonic systems of oppression" (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019, p. 1). Applied to reviewing, it means that we can review with emotionality and empathy, with humility and appreciation for the work of our peers. Empathy begets an altruistic motivation to benefit the other (Batson et al., 1995) and compassion urges us to minimise their suffering (Goetz et al., 2010). Savigny (2017) argues how feminine writing can be a form of political activism, a means to challenge and push back against dominant power structures. Writing with/via femininity can give voice to previously unheard voices and disrupt how gender is gone. In this way, we can 'undo' gender to embolden change (Butler, 2004) and 're-write' hegemonic gendered scripts of how-to review. We can refute the dichotomised binary between femininity and science (Benschop & Brouns, 2003) and challenge the patriarchal discourse of the angry army general. These only serve the micro-politics of academia by reinforcing and reproducing a masculine gendered culture which equates scientific excellence with masculinised images and discourses (Morley, 1999). Indeed, as Butler (2011) notes, repetitions lead to naturalisation, and as we receive and in turn give angry army general reviews, the more we internalise these norms and legitimise reviewing in this way. Critical femininity offers an alternative lens where reviewing with kindness is permissible and encouraged, and one that defies the 'spirit of competition' (Springer et al., 2017) and encourages plurality of marginalised voices (Bohannon, 2013). By embracing critical femininity in our reviewing, we can disturb masculine hegemony from reproducing itself (Ozbilgin, 2009).

There have been recent calls for more open, transparent reviewing (e.g., Kriegeskorte, 2012; Osterloh & Frey, 2020) rooted in a mutual aid perspective (Springer et al., 2017), and I applaud these

discussions to transform the peer review process. For instance, Research Gate has an open review option where users can share reviews and Publon also allows reviewers to post their reviews. Yet, we need to go further and detangle the patriarchal association that 'quality' science can only be rooted in masculinity. This is especially important in our post-COVID19 world where nurturing cultures of care are even more critical for academia (Corbera et al., 2020). I echo the call to 'slow things down' and embrace "a commitment to good scholarship and a feminist politics of resistance" (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1238). Indeed, critical femininity in reviewing and reviewing with empathy pose a threat to institutionalised norms of patriarchal dominance by offering an alternative discourse.

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