

BEYOND THE MIRRORED SPACE: TIME AND RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST THEORY

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ABSTRACT: Field and Hineline (2008) develop a full-scale account of the conditions under which speakers in our culture—in the vernacular as well as in the more technical parlance of psychological theory—explain behavior by appealing to contiguous events or, in their absence, to entities within the actor. This conforms to an early model of science that has historically dominated feminist work. As a result, feminists have commonly relied on personal agency as an explanatory construct and source of resistance in oppressive environments. I will illustrate the potential conflicts this creates for feminist work by considering the legal defense for battered women who kill their partners and the Battered Woman Syndrome as an explanatory scheme. Third-wave feminists have begun to incorporate Darwinian science into their frameworks. I discuss how this integration can help clarify the roles of extended behavioral relations and temporally distant events to resolve the conflicts in feminist analyses.

Key words: feminism, personal agency, resistance to oppression, battered women, Battered Woman Syndrome

The battered woman defense illustrates contradictions in our legal system noted by Field and Hineline (2008) when traditional dispositional assignment of responsibility and the recognition of the validity of complex extended behavioral relations must be balanced in establishing the guilt or innocence of an individual on trial for a crime. Besides this legal conundrum, the authors lay out a virtually exhaustive treatment of the conditions under which speakers in our culture—in the vernacular as well as in the more technical parlance of psychological theory—explain behavior by appealing to contiguous events or, in their absence, to entities within the actor. The literature on observers' perceptions of causal relations shows that temporal contiguity is a powerful source of causal inferences. These findings lead Field and Hineline to venture that these

. . .relations may even be embedded in fundamental biological functioning rather than being primarily verbal or symbolic in nature. (p. 8)

Field and Hineline use the term *dispositioning* to refer to explanations of behavior that appeal to entities within the actor. One general effect of these

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practices is to obscure the role of extended behavioral relations and temporally distant events related to the behavior being explained. Battered women who kill their partners after years of abuse and their legal defense present a disturbing illustration.

For lethal force to be justified, the laws governing killing in self-defense require that there be an immediate and unavoidable danger of death or grave bodily harm to a person. Yet battered women who kill their partners generally do so following extended periods, often years, of emotional and physical abuse (see Downs, 1996). The act typically takes place when there is no immediate threat, such as when the partner is asleep. If the battered woman's threat is not *immediate*, then self-defense cannot be used in a court of law. Field and Hine line concisely summarize the core issue:

Recognizing the validity of those extended relations clashes with the more traditional, dispositional assignments of responsibility, and as a society we have not resolved the contradiction. (p. 34)

Indeed, the contradiction remains, and one result of the immediate causation standard is that women found guilty of murder have been incarcerated for years. Not surprisingly, these practices have generated audible opposition from the feminist community, including challenges to the immediacy criterion and arguments for change to the standard that defines justifiable self-defense (Lee, 2003).

The pioneering work of Lenore Walker (1984) has been singularly influential in allowing expert testimony in the courts. Her work addresses the impact of temporally extended cycles of violence in the relations between battered women and their partners. In many cases the consequences of these patterns have been understood as mitigating circumstances (Kingston, 2004). While this may be a step in the right direction, it is certainly far from a solution to this complex problem. Its limitations are particularly clear when one considers the implications embedded in explanations for why battered women kill in the absence of immediate threat.

I will return later to Walker's work and the battered women's defense to discuss the problematic implications of what has ironically been the most convincing appeal for justifiable self-defense. The irony relates to a fundamental challenge in feminist theory and its commitment to societal change. So, turning to feminist theory as a genre, I consider one of its central concerns: accounting for individual resistance in the context of oppression. In this accounting, feminists have, to a large extent, relied on the construct of personal agency as the ultimate source of personal resistance by individuals under duress (Ruiz, 1998). In what follows, I consider the role of personal agency as an explanatory construct in feminist theory in the context of two central themes set forth by Field and Hine line: adherence to contiguous causation and the practice of dispositioning. I begin with a brief historical account of the role of agency in early science and feminist work. Next I consider the work of third-wave feminists who have begun to incorporate Darwinian science in their explanatory frameworks, rendering them

more inclusive, transparent, and (not surprisingly) compatible with a Skinnerian account.

Personal Agency and Causation in Feminist Theory

While the feminist community is significantly diverse, a core issue in feminist theory across the spectrum is a tension between the recognition that oppressive environments have historically limited the opportunities for women, racial minorities, and other marginal groups and the need to identify sources of individual resistance in such oppressive contexts. Personal agency is commonly offered as a source of feminist resistance, but this explanatory scheme leads to conflictive tension if one assumes person–situation dualism, as is the case in a considerable segment of feminist scholarship (Ruiz, 1998).

The hypothesized autonomous agent in feminist theory is deeply rooted in early modern science, and it inhabits the organism that Field and Hineline allude to in this passage:

The assumed necessity of contiguous causation, while often unacknowledged, results in the privileging of organism-based explanations in a way that adheres to a 17th century conception of science. (p. 7)

Descartes was an influential architect of 17th century science. In embracing the separation of mind and body—a legacy from Platonic philosophy—and by endorsing the separation of soul from nature—a legacy from the Christian tradition—Descartes linked dualism to the modern foundations of knowledge. He elevated mind to a position over and above nature, including the body. As a result, science focused on the natural world, but the subject (i.e., the scientist) “became radically subjectivized as that which *eludes* science” (Costall, 2004, p. 183, emphasis original) and remained outside its scope. Descartes construed the body as a self-moving automaton, and this understanding

. . .underlies some versions of feminist theory which see patriarchy as the system of universal male right to the appropriation of women’s bodies. . .the body is typically regarded as passive and reproductive but largely unproductive[W]hatever agency or will it has is the direct consequence of animating, psychical intentions. (Grosz, 1994, p. 9)

Descartes also provided the basis for patriarchal dualism and other derivational Cartesian splits, which Morawski and Agronick (1991) maintain

. . .reflect the cultural dualities of gender: male equals mind, rational, and autonomous; female equals body, irrational, and dependent. (pp. 568-569)

The 17th century conception of science that Field and Hineline reference is based on a model of Newtonian physics that posits a universe that is, in principle, determinable and governed by a set number of laws. If one could capture a particular moment in time within a mirrored space, it would, in principle, be

possible to predict the future of any element visible within that space and its walls, and its configuration as a whole.

In psychology, this model of science was passed on to modern cognitive psychology, which Field and Hineline characterize as “mediational and dispositional by nature” (p. 58), and constitutes the dominant paradigm in contemporary psychology. It is not surprising that this dominant paradigm has also produced a substantial proportion of feminist scholarship (Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Wallston & Grady, 1985).

Biological/Cultural Dualism in Feminist Theory

While feminists have successfully challenged many of the prevailing Cartesian dualisms that create artificial binary categories inimical to women (Ruiz, 2003), they have also historically embraced one form of dualism to their peril. Feminists have adopted biological/cultural dualism in their unflinching effort to eschew biological determinism and its derivative, essentialism. Naturalism regarded the biological distinctions between the sexes and associated personal and cultural manifestations such as dependent/autonomous, emotional/rational, and passive/dominant as fixed and unchanging characteristics describing women and men, respectively. Clearly this view of the natural order is anti-feminist.

Not surprisingly, second-wave feminism, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s at the same time as constructionism, embraced naturalism’s conceptual antithesis (Bohan, 1993). Constructionism, which remains a strong philosophical tradition in feminist work, came to be understood as the architect of culture and the conduit for political change. Elizabeth Grosz (2005) explains it this way:

Culture was rendered equivalent to the changing, the historical, the unpredictable, while nature came to be understood as fixed, unchanging, limited in advance by being governed by invariable, universal and predictive laws. Nature became the background against which the cultural elaborates itself, the contrast that distinguished variation, difference, becoming, from the given, the unchanging and the inevitable. (p. 45)

The bifurcation of biology and culture in feminist theory has resulted in a dearth of exploration of the biological and its potential contributions, particularly in feminist analysis focusing on social and cultural issues. This is unfortunate, as is the lack of consideration of Darwin’s work in feminist cultural analysis over the past three decades (Grosz, 2005).

Darwin and Feminist Theory: Reconsidering Nature, Culture, and Science

The Darwinian account of life calls for a different view of science and how we understand time, causation, and personal agency and what generates resistance and change. It dismisses the bifurcation of biology and culture and recognizes the latter as the continuation of nature rather than its overcoming. In dispelling

TIME AND RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST THEORY

resistances to biological determinism that have dominated feminist theory for more than three decades, some third-wave feminists have argued for the incorporation of Darwin's work into feminist theory as his

. . .writings may provide feminism with richer and more workable concepts of nature, the body, time and transformation. . .because Darwin. . .opened up a new way of thinking, a new mode of interpretation, new connections and forms of explanation. (Grosz, 2005, p. 17)

Darwin's conception of life is not based on fixed characteristics, but evolving or temporally becoming something different over time. Oyama (1997) explains:

There is a tendency to view the biological as static, but it is, in fact, historical at all levels. When I say "history", I am referring to contingency, interaction, possibility and change. (p. 529)

This process of becoming, as Oyama tells us, combines history, contingency, and events, while change over time is characterized not by linear progression, but by spatial and temporal dispersion. The emerging picture of Darwinian science has the subject at its center, not beyond its scope, as is the case with the Cartesian agent. Temporal contiguity is no longer a necessary condition for causal relationships, and therefore neither is its understudy, personal agency. Moreover, change over extended time is understood as a transformative process.

An important ramification of Darwinian science for feminist analyses of resistance and oppression is the optimistic view that individual change and growth are natural processes of overcoming. Oppressive contexts incite resistance in natural as well as cultural domains, and the logic by which overcoming occurs is the same for both. Some third-wave feminists (e.g., Grosz 1994, 1995, 2005; Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008; Heywood & Drake, 1997) have begun to develop non-dualistic accounts that incorporate a Darwinian framework and are conceptually compatible with Skinner's (1953, 1961, 1971) views and radical behaviorist feminist accounts (Ruiz, 1995, 1998, 2003).

The Battered Woman Defense

The irony of the battered woman defense is that while it has worked to benefit some defendants, it has done so at the expense of broader societal change. Lenore Walker's book *The Battered Woman Syndrome* was groundbreaking in 1984 when it was first published. It reported her research and described the Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS). BWS was said to result from cycles of violence after which the woman experiences learned helplessness that debilitates her and interferes with her ability to leave the relationship. The BWS is recognized by the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) as a medical disorder.

Walker's book, currently in its third edition, and her work in the courts as a forensic expert, were critical events in opening the way for the admissibility of

(temporally dispersed) cycles of violence in the history of a couple as evidence in the defense of battered women charged with murder. But in Walker's conceptualization, the effects of cycles of violence are indirect. That is, Walker's explanation for the woman's behavior lies squarely on the BWS, a mental health syndrome and medical disorder that are said to *result* from the cycles of violence. The reader will recognize this practice as a form of what Field and Hine line refer to as integrative dispositioning and the dysfunctional agent as source of contiguous causation. The syndrome presumably explains why leaving the relationship is not an optional form of resistance for the dysfunctional agent.

Despite advancing progressive practices in the courtroom, the BWS defense reframes historical events in a fashion that pathologizes and revictimizes the woman (Schneider, 2000; Stubbs, 1991). As Field and Hine line note, this type of dispositioning

. . . can facilitate "blaming the victims," obscuring crucial events that are beyond their control while contributing substantially to their problems. (p. 36)

Ultimately, the greatest disservice to the woman—and to our culture—by these practices may be that they characterize "problematic behavior in ways that obscure the best way to change it" (Field & Hine line, 2008, p. 35) and direct attention away from the countless social, economic, political, and cultural factors that can perpetuate, condone, or sanction violence against women and prevent truly transformative change.

Feminists, in general, view scientific work as political activity and share a pragmatic goal of improving our social and cultural institutions. The BWS takes an approach to psychological explanation that depoliticizes a serious social problem by pathologizing the victim. Considering the pervasiveness of dispositioning practices in our verbal community as documented by Field and Hine line, the cultural selection of a syndrome-based explanation by the courts in the case of battered women should not surprise us. At the same time, it is a raw and glaring illustration of the conceptual impasse in feminist work that appeals to agency as a source of resistance while aiming towards institutions and social change. The work of third-wave feminists who incorporate a Darwinian perspective in feminist analysis is promising, as it affords conceptual tools with which to bring the roles of time in the transformation of human behavior out of obscurity and to rethink agency and resistance in novel and more liberating ways.

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TIME AND RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST THEORY

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