Sexism in Science and Nursing

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Since time immemorial, society has always tagged women as the “weaker sex”; and unfortunately, many are tempted to take it literally. The word “weak” has imprisoned women for the longest time. Whether understanding “weak” to mean lack of physical strength, emotional stability and/or mental prowess, society has viewed women under a distasteful light. This perception on women made them shy away from any scientific undertaking.

Does science relegate women to be the weaker sex? Who defines what science is? Is gender disparity still present in science? From where does it come from? Does sexism affect our concept of nursing? Can we still change the course the profession is headed to? The central thesis of this article revolves on the slowly disappearing “art” in nursing, as the “science” aspect of the profession is gradually taking over. This article illuminates how sexism in science has affected our nursing knowledge and practice.

Gender is a term that refers to the socialized, acquired traits that render a person’s identity as masculine or feminine. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines sexism as unfair treatment of people because of their sex. The word “sexism” has a strong connotation of unjust treatment of women. Science has always been seen as masculine engendered. The historically pervasive association between masculine and objective, more specifically masculine and scientific, is a topic which academic critics resist taking seriously. Many claim that the link of masculinity with scientific thought has the status of a myth, which either cannot or should not be examined seriously. Science as masculine, as Keller (1979) posit, is self-evident and nonsensical- meaning it is common knowledge, and that it is emotionally and sexually neutral. Even Francis Bacon, whose influence on the ideology of science is generally admitted to be enormous, saw science as masculine, since it is a hard and serious undertaking leading to Man’s domination over Nature (Agassi & Agassi, 1987). The undertaking and the domination are masculine characteristics par excellence and Nature therefore, is female (Bacon, n.d. as cited by Agassi & Agassi, 1987). Historically, scientists have been and continue to be men; and most culturally validated intellectual and creative endeavours have been domain of men (Keller, 1979). The overwhelming male population of science is a consequence rather than a cause to the attribution of masculinity in science (Keller, 1979). We could clearly view that science is indeed masculine. It can be associated with hard data or the empirics, hence the development of hard science. On the other hand, the feminine traits are considered soft and sentimental, which defeats the purpose of hard science as asexual and unemotional.

Did women organically turn their backs against science? Or has misogyny driven them away? According to Bleier (1986, as cited by Welch, 1999), the history of Western thought is a history of male Western thought and therefore, so much of our language, concepts, and frameworks are rooted in a male perspective. More so, Bleier (1986 as cited by Ginzberg, 1987), articulates the question “How can we even begin to conceptualize science as non-masculine... when most of our written civilization- our history, language, conceptual frameworks, literatures- has been generated by men?”. History reports resistance of Western civilization to women’s education. Men were allowed to do scholastic works, while women were culturally reduced to childbearing and home-tending. Scientific findings also include women’s biological inability to think in the same manner as men do (Welch, 1999). Women’s brains are physically smaller in size, and their ovaries and uteri were believed to require more energy to provide continuation of the human species. Women were tagged as less capable intellectually. They were also looked at as inexpert of objectivity, and this shortcoming is not acceptable in the domain of science. Females are incapable of sophisticated thought, and they were only fit to be mothers (Genova, 1988; Love & Hubbard, 1983 as cited by Welch, 1999). A classic
example of this is McClintock’s devalued work because of an observational stance which was too personally connected with her maize/subject. Her approach was seen as too subjective, too personal, too sentimental, and too feminine to be considered science (Keller, 1979). More so, Gilligan (1982) articulated the total absence of women from the scientific sample, and yet the findings are generalized to include all of humanity. For these reasons, science has adapted an androcentric entity.

Androcentric science spawned from social, cultural, and political stigma. Ginzberg (1989, as cited by Welch, 1999) acknowledges the idea that there had been women scientists throughout history, but due to their powerless position in society, they were not able to pursue their scientific works and ideas. Women were part of the minority group. Females were not a part of the dominant community with the power to determine what constitutes knowledge (Welch, 1999). Feyerabend (1975) also argued that science is a political term. Women’s works, as is typical of oppressed groups, were cast outside the mainstream of Western culture. But that does not mean that these activities were not occurring, nor that they were not valuable, nor does it necessarily mean that they were not science. These works of women, as Bleier (1986) calls gynocentric science, has been present all along, but it is not formally recognized by the society as science because it traditionally has not been awarded the honorific label ‘Science’. Women’s works were not the subject of favourable attention from the members of the dominant cultures. Even if these activities have been model examples of inquiry to knowledge of the natural world, women’s activities were not called “science” because of political reasons (Feyerabend 1975 as cited by Ginzberg, 1987).

Gynocentric science often has been called ‘art’, as in the art of midwifery, or the art of cooking, or the art of homemaking. Had these arts been male activities, they would have been called obstetrical science, food science, and family social science (Ginzberg, 1987). Furthermore, Ehrenreich and English (1973, as cited by Ginzberg, 1987) used the topic of witchcraft and midwifery as an example on this topic. It has been made clear that the work of these women in the middle ages was as scientific as anything being done by physicians at universities. Ginzberg (1987) believes they were the real empirical scientists of the time. With the advent of obstetrics, these women’s works were devalued, ridiculed, and made obsolete. Women practicing midwifery were vilified as witches. Witch hunts were sexist campaigns aimed at driving women out of public positions, especially of folk medicine, midwifery, and more (Keller, 1979 as cited by Agassi & Agassi, 1987). Although it was cruel to persecute women folk healers, excluding them from the medical profession was the inevitable and progressive result of scientific/medical progress (Agassi & Agassi, 1987). In addition, the run-of-the-millmen healers during the end of the last century were just as poor as the ordinary female healers who were so maligned as witches (Agassi & Agassi, 1987). Why then were men healers not vilified as warlocks? Men’s works were favoured more than women’s because of political and cultural reasons.

One might argue of the scientific success of Marie Curie, a female enigma of science, whose discovery of radium has received a Nobel Prize in the year 1903. Curie’s work, though work of a woman, was part of the androcentric science tradition, and was individualistic in nature, fitting it well within the model of what men scientists do (Ginzberg, 1987). A woman thinking scientifically or objectively is thinking “like a man” (Keller, 1979). Curie used androcentric, masculine models and methodologies “like a man”, making her way into the recorded histories of science.

Social stigma has hindered women from pursuing scientific ventures. Cultural stereotyping has made it easy for gynocentric science to be easily overlooked as real science (Ginzberg, 1987). Androcentric Western culture regarded women’s work to be non-work and non-scientific. There are, however, good reasons to believe that women’s early knowledge of food and nutrition had to include some fairly sophisticated knowledge of botany, ecosystems, as well as human nutritional needs. Food production and preparation were largely women’s provinces—and far from simply being social past-times, they were indispensable to the sustenance of life (Ginzberg, 1987). Knowledge about the differences between the edible and non-edible plants, about prevention of spoilage and food poisoning, about companion planting and crop rotation were women’s baby steps in science, but were not recognized as such. Hitherto, this predicament still lingers. In Nature’s Readers Comment Online (2013), a female scientist by the name Tina M. Iverson conducted a personal experiment for bias against individuals. She submitted 16 grant applications in her full name in the year 2005, but only one
received funding. On her second application, her success rate went up fivefold because she used only her initials and her last name. In Iverson’s (2013) words: “I am the same applicant. The replicates are low, but the outcome apparently differed only when it was obvious to the reviewer that I was female” is a clear manifestation that women’s works are still devalued.

Even in the present era, feminine works still go unnoticed and unappreciated. The nursing profession, a discipline of both science and art, also has clandestine animosity towards femininity being translated in the workplace. As Fletcher (2001, as cited by Defrino, 2009) stated, relational work is “a way to achieve goals and getting the job done using skills such as listening, mutuality, reciprocity, and sensitivity to the emotional context”. On the contrary, these relational skills are not acknowledged by the society as valuable. Relational practice is not viewed as a skill; rather, it is simply female attributes of being “nice” and “natural”, and are traits merely rooted in women’s greater emotional needs. Moreover, there is a lingering incorrect assumption of nurses’ interaction with patients and other members of the health care team as a way of making things more enjoyable (May, 1992b as cited by Defrino, 2009). The niceness and friendliness of nurses are seen not as proficiency but a gendered silliness that makes nurses’ works easier (Foster & Hawkins, 2005 as cited by Defrino, 2009).

Even in a discipline which is supposed to be a mix of hard and soft science, of masculinity and femininity, the former still dominates the latter. It is gradually becoming evident that science is dictating nursing, and that the profession’s heart and soul is slowly being overlooked, forgotten, and unlearned. This claim can be further corroborated by the fact that systematic reviews, evidence-based practice, and evidence based nursing appraise statistics-bound data to be of higher strength, while the qualitative studies are graded as less important. More so, nurses need to pass a series of examinations before they are allowed to practice. Sadly, these examinations only measure the mental vigour of nurses, but do not necessarily quantify their ability to serve, empathize and care. This is another proof that empirical/hard knowledge is given more weight in nursing. The pin of the scale of the nursing profession is slowly tilting towards the scientific side, while its artistic side is slowly being abandoned.

Engendered science has forced us into looking at science in radical dichotomy: objectivism against subjectivism, feminine against masculine, Man and Nature, androcentric against gynocentric, and so on. Agassi and Agassi (1987) agree with Keller’s (1979) claim that the view of science as utterly objective and so as utterly free from bigotry and bias is an idealization and an illusion. Agassi and Agassi (1987) allude Keller’s (1979) attack on positivism as an idealization of science and claims it valid, but they disagree on Keller’s choice of extreme alternative to positivism- subjectivism (feminine approach). As Agassi and Agassi (1987) posit, the use of subjectivism may easily destroy science by blocking all criticisms because of some objective feelings. Nonetheless, the idea of instilling feminism in a traditionally masculine science poses several threats that might give rise to a new view of science. Agassi and Agassi (1987) may be right in their claim that subjectivism may destroy science, but in my humble opinion, destroying the traditionally masculine form of science may give rise to the kind of body of knowledge that both use the masculine and feminine side to come up with a body of knowledge that is considered empirical and aesthetic because of the objectivity of men and the heart of women. Rather than taking subjective and sentimental traits as “feminine” and foe of the objective and macho science, it should instead be validated as a normal, human experience occurring in both genders.

Keller (1979) suggests that for science to be egalitarian, and for alternative possibilities to be discovered, examining the dynamics of the differing approaches is necessary. It is necessary for us to look beyond the classical dichotomy to a more dynamic conception of reality, and a more sophisticated epistemology to support it. The disengagement of our thinking about science from our notion of what is masculine could lead to an emancipation of both from some rigidities to which they have been bound. Not only might science become more accessible for women, but also our very conception of “objective” could be freed from unnecessary constraints (Keller, 1979). We need to get to a place where scientific endeavours are investigating all humans in order to create useful theories about the nature of our world. Multiple models and research are what is needed. Harding (1987) concluded that there is no one method that is sufficient to capture all human knowledge. What we need to do is find
ways to create human science that is inclusive while not totally reducing knowledge to relativity. Harding (1987) calls for reflexivity in the scientific process that will put researcher on the same plane as the object of study. Agassi and Agassi (1987) believe that science can greatly benefit from the female experience and from recruiting, encouraging, and recognizing women equally with men. New methodologies and research approach that transcend gender and other universal boundaries should be designed for our quest for the ultimate truth.

In conclusion, science has been and will continue to be sexist, and we will be stuck with what we already consider as “true” unless we embrace a new paradigm which accepts other sources of knowledge. Openness to change is the key. And if ever this pursuit of the real truth leads us to destroying and forgetting everything we already know, we should not be tentative. Hesitation is the seed of defeat.

References