

ABSTRACT

GENDER EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION 2014

Gender in Research: An Example drawn from Research on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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We will focus on the inclusion of gender in research on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and trauma with consideration of three approaches. The first approach tackles gender as analysis of differences between men and women. In this regard gender in research mainly covers the comparison between men and women, mostly with only an implicit consideration of gender as a social construct. In this case, comparison between men and women can elucidate similarities and differences, but gives only limited or no information about the sources of differences and similarities. Taking PTSD as one example, differences between men and women regarding the development of PTSD are well researched, showing that women are two to three times more likely to develop PTSD (e.g. Kessler et al., 1995; Tolin & Foa, 2006). The second approach to gender in research includes gender as a social construct; however, empirical studies on this matter are done to a limited extent. Gender as a social construct can be understood as dynamic, re-creating process of what is seen as feminine and masculine in a given society or culture (West & Zimmermann, 1987) and also includes the ascription of gender-stereotypical traits to men and women. For example, Olff and colleagues (2007) assume that femininity may be influential in the development of PTSD. This indicates that feminine traits are related to trauma symptoms, hence, explaining the higher vulnerability of women regarding PTSD. The third approach is an intersectional approach that considers gender as interwoven with other constructs (e.g. class, ethnicity) instead of a stand-alone variable. Intersectionality (e.g. McCall, 2005) views gender as one dimension among others to detect mechanisms of discrimination. Intersectionality contributes to the explanation of differences between men and women regarding the development of PTSD. It was found that examining individual perspectives of trauma contributes to an understanding of gender differences in PTSD (e.g. Seng et al., 2012). It is assumed that men and women react to specific aspects of a traumatic event causing different patterns of distress in men and women, even though they are exposed to the same event.

Research on psychotraumatology, more specifically on PTSD, can be taken as one example to show how the integration of gender in research facilitates the understanding of a complex phenomenon. The mere comparison of men and women has brought limited understanding of differences between men and women regarding PTSD. When gender as a social construct is taken into account the meaning of gender-stereotypical traits are brought forward. Applying an intersectional approach hence including additional dimensions (e.g. ethnicity, class, age) into research on PTSD enables the development of a gender-sensitive model to explain gender differences in psychotraumatology, more specifically in PTSD. Integrating gender into research should not only aim at enhancing knowledge on gender differences, but should also tackle the understanding of gender differences through development of gender-sensitive models on a specific topic.

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