Gender studies and the hoax paper: could it happen in nursing?

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With ‘fake news’ virulently disseminated on the internet, we should all be on the lookout for misleading or false information. In nursing, the doctrine of evidence-based practice depends on the quality of evidence, and research findings or theoretical argument should not be accepted uncritically, just because they appear in trusted journals. I raise this following an embarrassing hoax in the field of gender studies (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). A bogus paper, written as a parody of sociological discourse from a radical feminist perspective, was published in a peer-reviewed journal. As academic literature is intended to inform policy and practice, the question should be asked: could a similar trick be played on nursing?

As social animals, we follow norms and assumptions about our world. In the past, the heart was deemed the seat of emotion, until the workings of the brain and the nervous system were deciphered by pioneering neuroanatomists such as Thomas Willis. Yet while scientific method has superseded the philosophical musings and old wives’ tales of yore, empiricist enquiry has never sufficed as our means of knowledge. Those humours and passions of bygone medical textbooks were refuted by microscopic investigation, yet the immaterial mind has survived. The predictive laws of science are reductionist, and don’t tell us what to eat for breakfast or which radio station to listen to. Each of us has our own thoughts and feelings, and free will.

Nursing is often described as a craft, merging art and science in a humanistic endeavour. While medicine is keenly orientated to the epistemology of the natural sciences, Barbara Carper (1978) gave equal prominence to four types of knowledge in nursing: empirics, aesthetics, ethics and personal knowing. Various models have been formulated to guide nursing practice, based less on scientific evidence than rational analysis of how nurses should respond to patients’ needs. Such overarching theories may not be fully tested, but this does not invalidate their use in planning and performing person-centred care. Karl Popper famously qualified scientific theory by its falsifiability, but that is to take a narrow definition of theory as applied by the ‘hard’ sciences. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a rationale for a broader theory-based approach to nursing, with statistical and qualitative evidence supporting its development (McCrae, 2011).

Qualitative research is prominent in nursing literature, due to the perceived importance of lived experience alongside a priori outcome measurement. Our discipline has followed humanities and social science in the elevation of subjective truth, a trend begun by the wave of postmodernist critique in the 1960s. Ideological interpretations of scientific method as an instrument of male hegemony gained little foothold in medicine, where tremendous advances in treatment and life expectancy have resulted from objective, empirical enquiry, and it would insult the great number of female medical researchers to suggest that they are contributing to a patriarchal power complex. However, such thinking gained momentum in social sciences, with the emergence of departments focusing on gender and racial inequalities. Emancipatory ideals are laudable, but arguably scientific rigour has fallen by the wayside in pursuit of social goals. Journals in disciplines that overtly pursue redistributive social justice lack diversity of ideas, as scholars and their students mostly sing from the same hymn sheet.

In this context, Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay performed their classic hoax. Written under the pseudonyms Peter Boyle and Jamie Lindsay, ‘The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct’ was a composition of postmodern discourse on male hegemony, ‘ridiculous by intention, arguing that penises shouldn’t be thought of as male genital organs but as damaging social constructions’ (Bogossian & Lindsay, 2017). As they explained in Skeptic magazine, the paper was presented in the style of post-structuralist discursive gender theory, infused with ‘moral sentiments and impenetrable
jargon’. Boghossian and Lindsay correctly believed that ‘if we were merely clear in our moral implications that maleness is intrinsically bad and that the penis is somewhere at the root of it, we could get the paper published in a respectable journal’.

Initially the paper was rejected by a gender studies journal of respectable impact factor, but the authors were invited to transfer it to the relatively newer, pay-to-publish Cogent Social Sciences. The reviewers of the latter journal suggested minor additions to the text and references, and the authors were happy to supply further illustrations of the problematised male. Top marks were awarded across the reviewing score sheet, the message of the paper having clearly impressed:

We conclude that penises are not best understood as the male sexual organ, but instead as an enacted social construct that is both damaging and problematic for society and future generations. The conceptual penis presents significant problems for gender identity and reproductive identity within social and family dynamics, is exclusionary to disenfranchised communities base upon gender or reproductive identity, is an enduring source of abuse for women and other gender-marginalise groups and individuals, is the universal performative source of rape, and is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change.

The last point is brazenly speculative for a journal unrelated to climatology, but it conveys the symbolism of the male organ and the rape of virgin nature. Approval of the paper confirmed the suspicion of Boghossian and Lindsay (2017) that ‘gender studies is crippled academically by an over-riding almost-religious belief that maleness is the root of all evil’. Their inspiration was a previous academic hoax by physicist Alan Sokal (1996), whose paper ‘A Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’ exposed the dubious legitimacy of postmodern intellectualism. In a subsequent book Fashionable Nonsense, Sokal and Briemont (1997) observed that critical appraisal is suspended by peer reviewers when favoured ideas are presented. A combination of scientific credentials, conformity with left-wing politics and flattery of a journal’s editorial board is sufficient for publication. Based on their experience, Boghossian and Lindsay disparaged the peer review system in the likes of gender studies as an echo chamber.

Boghossian and Lindsay did not expect their mischievous revelation to lead to an intellectual overhaul. The paper was expunged by the journal, and the publishing house (Taylor & Francis) is investigating, but there are too many vested interests in carrying on as before. In comments below the Skeptic magazine article, defenders of gender studies were angered by Boghossian and Lindsay being given a platform, despite their work being an exemplar of sceptical corrective. The authors were accused of ‘fragile masculinity’, and likened to ‘upper middle class white boys in high school, writing naughty words on walls’. One argued:

To critique the academic space of the marginalised is disgusting…maybe your real penises don’t match your conceptual ones.

A reasonable criticism is that Boghossian and Lindsay overegged the cake in claiming that one paper in a marginal journal trashes a whole academic discipline. Nonetheless, several comments support their prediction that the meaning of the paper would be upheld, regardless of its declared fabrication. Indeed, Boghossian and Lindsay were not writing anything that would look out of place in a gender studies journal, as shown by this typical abstract (Webber, 2005) from the mainstream journal Women’s Studies International Forum:

This paper explores resistance to feminist course content in social science courses cross-listed with women’s studies as an example of social reproduction at work. Drawing on both interviews and anonymous student course evaluations, student resistance to feminism is examined from the layered perspectives of faculty, teaching assistants and students in these courses. The author argues that a regime of rationality still operates in the academy and is made evident when feminist course content is met with continual dismissal or disapproval.
This appears to be identity politics masquerading as scholarship. Sadly, postmodern social science has allowed too many of what eminent sociologist WG Runciman (1999) called ‘attitude merchants’ to hijack academe for ideological ends. Critical sociology has become the church of a remodelled intellectual establishment, indoctrinating younger people in the tropes of cultural Marxism. As Lenin purportedly remarked on his quest to create Soviet man (quoted by Ahlert, 2013):

Give me a child for the first five years of his life, and he will be mine forever.

Such tunnelling of thought is regrettable, because gender studies should be a useful academic enterprise, particularly with the blurring of conventional identities and roles in Western society, contrasting with the marked distinction of the sexes in conservative Islam. In any field of study students should be encouraged to think creatively, while also learning the true scientific attitude of doubt. Theories and concepts, whether new or established, should be scrutinised: are backed by evidence, and are research findings trustworthy? Disciplines with moralising tendency lack the dialectic process of questioning that could enhance their validity and status.

How susceptible is nursing to a similar spoof? Our discipline merges scientific objectivity with humanistic caring, influenced by ethical imperatives, regulatory standards, multidisciplinary teamwork and government policy. There is plenty of room for personal, professional or political opinion, but as a practical domain, nursing is relatively free from self-imposed ideology. We treat patients as individual beings, rather than pigeon-holing them into identity groups. Aspects such as socio-economics, gender and ethnicity are important considerations, but do not overshadow the primacy of the person.

In our rational-interpersonal enterprise, no proffered message is exempt from scrutiny in its claim to truth. Ideology can stimulate lively and useful discussion, but ideologues should be challenged. In my field of mental health nursing, there are always a few recruits who naively think first and foremost of fighting the system, purportedly on patients’ behalf. They want sectioning repealed, drugs withdrawn, and struggle to understand the need for public safety. Many leave the profession on finding the incompatibility of their ideals with reality. Radical libertarian perspectives are heard at conferences, and published in journals as a contribution to debate, as they should be. Ideology, however, is only as good as its feasibility in practice. Patients want treatment, not the deconstructive verbiage that passes for scholarship in other fields. Florence Nightingale (Woodham-Smith, 1951) was cautious of politicising nursing for good reason.

References


Woodham-Smith C (1951):