

## Special Thematic Section on "Decolonizing Psychological Science"

### Decolonizing Liberation: Toward a Transnational Feminist Psychology

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#### Abstract

This paper engages the theme of “decolonizing psychological science” in the context of a perspective on psychological theory and research—namely, feminist psychology—that shares an emphasis on broad liberation. Although conceived as a universal theory and practice of liberation, scholars across diverse sites have suggested that feminism—perhaps especially as it manifests in psychological science—is not always compatible with and at times is even contradictory to global struggles for decolonization. The liberatory impulse of feminist psychology falls short of its potential not only because of its grounding in neocolonial legacies of hegemonic feminisms, but also because of its complicity with neocolonial tendencies of hegemonic psychological science. In response to these concerns, we draw upon on perspectives of transnational feminisms and cultural psychology as tools to decolonize (feminist) psychology. We then propose the possibility of a (transnational) feminist psychology that takes the epistemological position of people in various marginalized majority-world settings as a resource to rethink conventional scientific wisdom and liberate “liberation”. Rather than freeing some women to better participate in global domination, a transnational feminist psychology illuminates sustainable ways of being that are consistent with broader liberation of humanity in general.

**Keywords:** feminist psychology, cultural psychology, transnational feminism, gender, oppression, relationship, liberation, decolonization

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*[I]sn't it imperative and a little bit obvious that when we speak of Afghan women and their rights, we must listen carefully to what they themselves have to say about it? As the admirable struggles of women of color, particularly in the Global South, come to the knowledge of the West, we must remind ourselves of the validity of their views and hopes, over our perceptions of what they should say and do, how they should dress and whether or not their oppression stems from being able to have an orgasm.*

Sonali Kolhatkar, 2002

Echoing other contributions to this special section, this paper engages the theme of “decolonizing psychological science” in the context of a perspective on psychological theory and research—namely, feminist psychology—that shares an emphasis on broad liberation. Although conceived as a universal theory and practice of liberation, scholars across diverse sites have suggested that feminism—perhaps especially as it manifests in psychological

science—is not always compatible with and at times even contradictory to global struggles for decolonization (see Ahmed, 1992; Grande, 2003; Lucashenko, 1994). As the opening quote suggests, mainstream feminist work (in psychology) takes insights about gender oppression in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (or WEIRD, see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) spaces and imposes them across settings as a prescriptive standard for understanding “universal” gendered oppression. This approach is problematic not only because its universalistic notions (e.g. regarding “gender”, “oppression” or “liberation”) might be ill-fitting across local contexts, but also because it tends to treat women in diverse majority world settings—that is, among people associated with the “developing world” who represent the majority of humankind (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1995)<sup>1</sup>—as powerless or ignorant victims who look to their liberated sisters in WEIRD worlds for rescue.

In response to these concerns, scholars committed to both feminist and anticolonial struggles have noted that in order to fulfill its liberatory agenda, feminism must first engage a process of decolonization, liberate itself from its (neo)colonial tendencies, and “strive to see the world through noncolonial eyes” (Johnson-Odim, 1991, p. 326). In fact, scholars across diverse disciplines have articulated effective strategies to align feminism with the theoretical and political project of decolonization. Yet, these decolonial articulations of feminism are typically absent in psychological discourses, in part due to psychology’s neglect of decolonial critiques (feminist or otherwise) within and outside the discipline. We suggest that psychology—and in particular, any attempt to decolonize it—has much to gain from feminist scholars’ contributions to decolonizing feminism.

In the present paper, we discuss perspectives of transnational feminism and cultural psychology as tools to decolonize (feminist) psychology. While embracing feminism as a tool for critical intervention within the field of psychology, decolonial perspectives of transnational feminism and cultural psychology reveal how mainstream approaches to psychology, in general—and to feminist psychology, in particular—have roots in (neo)colonial imagination and practices (i.e., reflecting the prevailing colonality of power, knowledge, and being) that limit their liberatory potential. Drawing on transnational feminist critiques of mainstream feminism, we consider how conventional forms of feminist psychology can often reflect and reproduce forms of racial and cultural hegemony that silence or pathologize experiences of people across various majority-world settings. Drawing on cultural psychological critiques of mainstream psychology, we consider how conventional perspectives of feminist psychology share with other forms of psychological science a valorization of ways of being—associated with androcentric perspectives of abstraction from context premised on forms of expropriation and domination—that likewise reflect and reproduce global domination. In either case, the result is a feminist psychology designed to liberate a privileged few to participate in the ongoing domination of the marginalized many. In contrast, we draw upon silenced perspectives of people in marginalized spaces to propose a (transnational) feminist psychology that liberates liberation. Rather than freeing some women to better participate in global domination, a transnational feminist standpoint illuminates sustainable ways of being that are consistent with broader liberation of humanity in general.

## **Feminist Perspectives in Psychology: Liberatory Impulse in a Hegemonic Field**

Feminism and psychology have a complex and contentious history. In fact, psychological theories and models regarding women’s inferior functioning (e.g. Cattell, 1909; Hall, 1905; Thorndike, 1906) constituted some of the first targets of feminist critique and sparked much activist protest in the early days of women’s liberation movements.

Such feminist political activism inspired many psychologists to question the direction of psychological science and led to the institutionalization of feminist psychology within the U.S. during the 1970s.<sup>ii</sup> Since then, feminist scholars have offered pointed critiques of essentialist, androcentric, and universalizing discourses of psychology. An elaborate review of this extensive literature far exceeds the purposes of the present paper. Instead, we present a brief review of some key feminist interventions to psychological science.

## Reconstructing Women's Experience

A primary site of intervention for feminist psychology has involved exposing and redressing both the invisibility of women as objects and subjects of knowledge-production and the corresponding distortion of women's experiences as suboptimal deviations from a normative (i.e. male) standard within psychological accounts (e.g. [Bem, 1993](#); [Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994](#)). Feminist psychologists have documented countless incidents of sexism and androcentricism within mainstream psychology (see [Bohan, 2002](#)), and they have offered incisive accounts of the ways in which "psychology constructs the female" ([Weisstein, 1968](#)) as the devalued other. In contrast to conventional accounts, feminist psychology perspectives emphasize that patterns of women's experience are not pathological deviations from some (implicitly male) standard, but instead constitute viable paths to healthy adjustment and optimal functioning (e.g., [Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986](#); [Chodorow, 1978](#)).

One of the earliest contributions of a feminist psychology analysis involved critiquing the ways in which conventional psychological accounts pathologize the connection and relational agency associated with women's experience. As an example, feminist scholars have noted that conventional psychological accounts characterize women's emphasis on relational concerns and interpersonal obligations (as opposed to justice and fairness concerns) as a deficit or subordinate level of moral development (e.g. [Kohlberg, 1981](#)). In contrast to this pathologizing portrayal, they have argued that women's emphasis on relational concerns reflects a distinct—and equally advanced—morality of caring ([Gilligan, 1982](#)). More broadly, feminist accounts have emphasized the benefits of relational selfhood and "women's ways of knowing" (e.g. [Belenky et al., 1986](#)).

## Revealing Androcentric Standards of Science

Another major site of intervention for feminist psychologists has involved revealing the extent to which prevailing standards of psychological science do not reflect a positionless "view from nowhere" ([Nagel, 1989](#)), but instead reflect varieties of male experience (e.g., [Bem, 1993](#); [Gilligan, 1982](#); [Hegarty, Parslow, Ansara, & Quick, 2013](#)). Returning to the previous example, feminist scholars have illuminated the extent to which prescriptive models of self and well-being (e.g. including a morality of justice) that inform psychological science are not "just natural" or naturally superior, and instead reflect an androcentric conception of self and agency typical of dominant male experience. More broadly, feminist scholars have noted that science reflects the values and concerns of dominant social groups (e.g. [Eichler, 1979](#); [Keller, 1985](#); [Westkott, 1990](#)) and have charged that scientific knowledge produced by men, for men, actively works against or ignores women's interests ([Bleier, 1984](#); [Harding, 1986](#); [Keller, 1985](#)). To address these problems, feminist scholars have developed alternative epistemologies and methods to guide scientific inquiry (see [Harding, 1987](#) for a review). Despite vast differences among scholars, a key feature of feminist methods (resonating with the decolonial emphasis on theorizing from the perspective of the oppressed) has involved approaching women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge and privileging female subjectivity as a point of departure in psychological theory and research.

## Bridging Theory and Practice

The third major site of feminist intervention into psychology concerns the emphasis on *praxis*, or the simultaneous effort within feminist scholarship towards understanding the world and changing it. In other words, feminism is not merely an amalgamation of ideas or the production of liberatory knowledges; it is also about liberation and the application of knowledge towards personal and social transformation. Despite differences in approach, many feminist scholars share a sense of rootedness in the women's movement of the 1960 and 1970s (DeVault, 1996) and a commitment to feminism's political agenda of social change. Whether it is through individual therapy and counseling (e.g. Goodman, Liang, Weintraub, Helms, & Latta, 2004; Watkins & Shulman, 2008) or community empowerment and engagement in collective action (e.g. Lykes & Coquillon, 2007; Moane, 2006), feminist psychologists infuse a social justice orientation into their work.

Beyond an endorsement of feminist political values or participation in activist struggles, feminist approaches emphasize how the production of knowledge itself is a political act. In other words, knowledge is *situated* in broad sociocultural, historical, and structural contexts (see Haraway, 1988). What is known and how it is known reflect the perspective of the knower, and the knower's perspective reflects a history of engagement with particular systems and communities of knowing. From this perspective, any theory (feminist or otherwise) is inherently political, and any act of knowledge production is simultaneously a political practice. To put it in feminist terms, "the personal is political". This idea suggests, in one sense, that any practice of personal liberation necessitates broad societal transformation, and in another sense, that any theory of the person is simultaneously a theory of and an intervention into political space.

In short, feminist psychology is a pioneer of social justice movements within psychology. Feminist perspectives play a key role not only in producing liberatory psychological knowledge and practice, but also in liberating the discipline of psychology itself. Despite critical contributions of feminist perspectives to psychological science, there is growing concern among various feminist scholars that psychology's positivist tenets mute feminism's transformative vision. For instance, Kitzinger (1991, p. 50) questioned whether engagement with psychology is "the most effective form our feminism can take". Similarly, Marecek (1995, p. 126) suggested that feminist scholars' attempt to gain acceptance by mainstream psychology might distract them from their broader project and that "maybe the time has come to look elsewhere". Resonating with these concerns, we propose that the liberatory impulse of feminism may fall short of its potential not only because of its complicity with positivist and (neo)colonial tendencies of hegemonic psychological science, but also because of its grounding in (neo)colonial legacies of hegemonic feminisms.<sup>iii</sup> In response to these concerns, we first draw upon perspectives of transnational feminism that discuss the project of decolonizing feminism. Then, we draw upon a cultural psychology analysis to consider implications for the project of decolonizing psychological science. We emphasize at the outset that the project to decolonize (feminist) psychology does not advocate abandoning either psychology or feminism. Rather, the goal is to re-imagine and transform both knowledge fields in a direction that is more suitable to the broad interests of the majority of humanity.

## Decolonizing Feminism: Transnational Feminist Praxis

Although all schools of feminist thought generally agree on men's domination of women, there is disagreement regarding the very definition of feminism and other core concepts such as *gender*, *oppression*, or *liberation*. More

directly relevant to the purposes of the present paper, the notion of liberation that informs the “woman’s liberation movement” and hegemonic varieties of feminism (e.g. liberal feminism) suffers from various limitations. The liberatory model of hegemonic feminisms grounded in WEIRD realities draws upon a *liberal* conception of the person characterized by autonomy, rationality, and self-determination. From this perspective, women’s liberation entails extending to women the individual rights and freedoms of (white) men. While this model of liberation offers improved rights and opportunities to individual women, it also falls short in a number of ways.

One limitation of this model concerns the extent to which it occludes alternative models of the person. More specifically, the liberal conception of personhood that hegemonic varieties of feminism uphold is couched in abstracted individualism (e.g. based on ideals of individual agency and fulfillment) prevalent in WEIRD settings. By equating liberation to women’s attainment of the individual liberties of (white) men, this model fails to consider not only the heterogeneity of human experience, but also the extent to which the proposition for “equal rights as (white) men” depends on past and present structures of racist domination and injustice. Another, related limitation concerns the peculiarly anti-liberation genealogy that informs liberalism (including liberal varieties of feminism). For instance, liberalism has long served as a justification for colonialism and imperialism (Choudhury, 2008), most recently evidenced in the appropriation of women’s rights discourse in the global war on terror (Stabile & Kumar, 2005). Finally, liberation takes on a different meaning when viewed from the perspective of women of color for whom sexism may not be the only or primary form of oppression. In such cases, liberation often refers to *freedom from* racist and other forms of structural oppression, rather than *freedom to* achieve the same rights as white men (which may require curtailment and appropriation of others’ freedom in the process). Similarly, the liberatory impulse of hegemonic feminisms might have an imperialist guise when viewed from the perspectives of women working towards liberation from occupation (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009).

These limitations hinder the broad relevance and global applicability of feminist scholarship as a liberatory praxis. In particular, the recognition of diversity in women’s struggles and the extensive power asymmetries among them poses numerous problems for feminism. This recognition not only challenges feminist theories of women’s sisterhood in shared oppression, but also complicates the task of achieving solidarity and a common basis for feminist political action (Ramazanoğlu, 1989). Given the multiple and often interlocking forms of oppression that characterize people’s experience, a fundamental question for feminist scholarship concerns the transformative possibilities of feminist praxis across diverse sociocultural and political sites. Simply put, (how) can feminism contribute to efforts towards liberation and social justice in a global context?

One response to this question comes from discussions in transnational feminism(s). Transnational feminisms<sup>iv</sup>—stemming from the pioneering work of scholars such as Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Jacquie Alexander, Caren Kaplan, Inderpal Grewal, Doreen Massey, and Ella Shohat among many others—constitute an interdisciplinary discourse in feminist and gender studies and provide the basis for new forms of feminist cross-border organizing. Rather than provide a comprehensive review of this body of work, we will use our limited space to selectively focus on some of the major ways in which a transnational feminist praxis serves to decolonize hegemonic feminisms.

## **Illuminating the Diversity of Women’s Experience**

A primary way in which transnational feminisms serve to decolonize hegemonic feminisms involves their rejection of universalized notions of “women” and “global sisterhood” that prevail in hegemonic feminist accounts. Resonating with an array of critical feminist perspectives (e.g. Black feminisms, Women of Color feminisms, Third World feminisms, postcolonial feminisms), transnational feminisms emphasize the diversity of women’s experience and

the complexity of their subject positions. This work shifts the focus of analysis from narrow and essentialist understandings of gender to intersecting identities and broader systemic forces that reveal the ongoing role of colonial power in the production of gendered lives across time and space.

Beyond mere recognition of differences in women's experience, transnational feminisms further note the extent to which such differences and existing power asymmetries among women are interconnected via historical legacies of imperialism and current practices of globalization that (re)produce (neo)colonial relations of domination and subordination (Nagar & Swarr, 2010). From a historical perspective, transnational feminist scholars note how advocates of colonial expansion have frequently claimed women's liberation as a justification for imperialist intervention. These forms of "colonial feminism" held that European colonization was primarily a "civilizing mission" that resulted in liberation of women from allegedly barbaric cultural practices of many colonized peoples (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 151-153). In these and other cases, apologists for colonial expansion have often won public support for intervention by appealing to a moral duty for "white men [to save] brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1999, p. 93; see also Mohanty, 1991). Resonating with such historical instances of "colonial feminism" is the recent appropriation of women's rights discourse in the global war on terror, as European and U.S. leaders cite defense of women's rights as a justification for ongoing military intervention in Afghanistan and elsewhere (see Stabile & Kumar, 2005). From a transnational feminist perspective, these examples help illustrate the colonial legacy of feminism and advocate caution regarding the residues of (neo)colonialism implicit in even presumably good-intentioned feminist efforts to "liberate" and "develop" majority-world women.

## Revealing (Neo)Colonial Standards of Hegemonic Feminisms

Transnational feminist perspectives further reveal the extent to which hegemonic forms of feminism engage in "White solipsism" (Rich, 1979, p. 299) by emphasizing the universality of (white) women's experience while ignoring various forms of racial, classed, imperial, and neocolonial oppression that women of color, First Nations women, poor women, women in the Global South, and queer folk experience across numerous majority-world spaces (e.g. Hooks, 1981; Liebert, Leve, & Hui, 2011; Lugones & Spelman, 1983).<sup>v</sup> For instance, feminist perspectives by women of color within the United States have highlighted the devastating influences of the legacy of slavery and colonization on women's lived experience and prioritized ongoing forms of race, class, immigration status, and land-based oppression as key sites of struggle (e.g. Collins, 2000; Hurtado, 1998; Smith, 2005). Even so, these topics rarely figure into hegemonic varieties of feminist discourse. In a parallel vein, Indigenous feminist scholars within Latin American settings argue that hegemonic feminist discourses of women's "individual" rights fail to consider the collective rights of many Indigenous communities, particularly Indigenous land rights (Bastian Duarte, 2012). As Ecuadorian leader Blanca Chancoso points out in her criticism of hegemonic feminisms,

We talk about land, although our women companions do not need to talk about land. But we [Indigenous women] do, because land is not only the farm where we work, it is also the Pachamama, our territory... Violence doesn't come only from the husband or the father, it is also generated by those who have taken our land (as cited in Rivera, 1999, p. 19).

From these alternate standpoints, hegemonic feminist agendas prioritize the concerns of white, heteronormative, Western, and middle-class women (Butler, 1995; Carby, 1997) while marginalizing the experiences of women and men in diverse majority-world spaces. The implication is that prevailing liberatory discourses of hegemonic feminisms rest on foundations of racial and cultural privilege, and thus function (though inadvertently) as a model to liberate relatively powerful women to better participate in racial and colonial domination.

## Recognizing the Spatiality of (Feminist) Knowledge Production

Besides tracing geographical and temporal (dis)continuities and connections in people's experience, another main contribution of a transnational feminist analysis is to render visible the *spatiality* of feminist knowledge production. The notion of spatiality expands the feminist emphasis on reflexive engagement with positionality (e.g. the ways in which a researcher's own identity as a relational position influences the research process) to consider how the knower's particular location(s) in hierarchies of space informs what is known and how it is represented. The clearest expression of this idea finds voice in transnational feminist critiques of the prevailing construction of Euro-American academia as a privileged site for knowledge production. From a transnational feminist perspective, hegemonic feminisms' prioritization of northern feminist agendas, homogenization of women's oppression, and pathologization of majority-world women's experience (implicit in models of "rescue") perpetuate neocolonial violence through imposition of Eurocentric models of agency, modernity, development or human rights. In contrast, a transnational feminist perspective gains insights from majority-world women's alternative experiences of struggle and resistance and provides ways to rethink gender and gendered oppression. By so doing, a transnational feminist perspective provides the means to reformulate models of liberation in the service of broad human interests. Without losing sight of the extent to which "global processes ...require global alliances" (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997, p. xxix), transnational feminisms reject the model of "global sisterhood" that attribute superiority to the West (see Mendoza, 2002) and reproduce asymmetries of power, domination, and control. Instead, they articulate an alternative vision of globality based on horizontality, mutuality, and interrelatedness among people across multiple positions and sites.

## Decolonizing (Feminist) Psychology: A Cultural Psychology Analysis

Feminist perspectives have been highly effective at illuminating and critiquing how conventional psychological science pathologizes women's experience and portrays it as "Other" to an androcentric norm. However, conventional varieties of feminist psychology generally share tendencies of conventional psychological science to either ignore majority-world women's experience or cast it as "Other" to an ethnocentric norm. This is because conventional accounts in feminist psychology with roots in WEIRD cultural spaces—similar to hegemonic forms of feminism—often export and impose universalizing constructions of gendered experience, drawing attention away from different constructions of gender across settings. From a transnational feminist perspective, one problem with this failure to account for diversity in the construction of gender is the reproduction of essentializing or marginalizing views of the "Other" associated with such oppressive ideological systems as racism, colonialism, and Orientalism (e.g. Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978). Another problem concerns the possibility that the fascination with "barbaric" gender practices of exotic others serves a false sense of cultural superiority and directs attention away from typically obscured forms of everyday gender oppression that operate in WEIRD settings (see Grabe, 2013). These problems not only limit the liberatory potential of feminist psychology, but also suggest its likelihood of reproducing systems of exclusion and domination, especially given psychology's claims to universality.

One response to the racial positioning of mainstream feminist psychology comes from psychologists who draw on feminisms of color within the U.S. As an example, a key framework that aims to disrupt the discipline's universalizing accounts of women's experience and essentialist constructions of gender is the feminist notion of *inter-*

*sectionality* (e.g. Cole, 2008; Shields, 2008). This notion originated in the work of feminist scholars of color who suggested that most feminist scholarship focused on the experiences of white, middle-class, educated women, and hence ignored how gender operates in the context of broad power relations regarding race or class (e.g. Collins, 1990; Dill, 1983; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). In response to these concerns, scholars have proposed that gender (and gender-based oppression) must be understood in relation to other social locations or identities concerning dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, ableness, and sexual orientation (e.g. Crenshaw, 1994). While this emphasis on intersectionality is one of the most critical advances in feminist psychology in recent years, feminist psychological analyses of intersectionality (as with most other feminist psychological work) remain U.S.-centric (see Patil, 2013). That is, they tend to limit their attention primarily to ethnic and racial dynamics within U.S. settings and often fail to apply the framework of intersectionality to majority-world spaces. Even when feminist psychological accounts take up the topic of cross-national diversity in gendered experience, they often do so in ways that extend psychology's Eurocentric gaze to explain cultural or national others, rather than challenging prevailing standards of (feminist) psychology grounded in WEIRD realities.

### Cultural Psychology: What is it?

As a parallel response to these concerns, we draw upon a cultural psychology analysis that has the potential to serve as antidote to universalizing discourses of mainstream psychological science (Adams, Kurtiş, Salter, & Anderson, 2012), including canonical perspectives of feminist psychology. A cultural psychology analysis considers the dynamic relationship of mutual constitution by which psychology and culture “make each other up” (Shweder, 1990, p. 1; see also Adams, 2012). Although perspectives vary, our approach to a cultural psychology analysis utilizes two key decolonizing strategies (Adams et al., 2012). The first decolonizing strategy is to *normalize* patterns of experience, typical of cultural others, that mainstream psychological approaches treat as deviant or suboptimal. In other words, a cultural psychology analysis examines the extent to which patterns of experience regarded with suspicion from a conventional scientific standpoint may instead provide viable paths to human welfare. The second decolonizing strategy is to *de-normalize* or *denaturalize* patterns of experience that mainstream research tends to treat as standard. In other words, a cultural psychology analysis reveals the extent to which patterns of experience that conventional accounts regard as normal or optimal are not “just natural”, but are themselves products of engagement with particular cultural worlds—especially the WEIRD spaces that disproportionately inform mainstream psychological science.

### Similarity With Feminist Psychology Perspectives

One can note strong parallels between cultural and feminist perspectives in psychology (see Kurtiş & Adams, 2013). Just as feminist psychology perspectives critique “deficit model” accounts of women's experience, so too do cultural psychology analyses critique pathologizing portrayals of cultural others' experience. Resonating with feminist psychology perspectives which hold that patterns of women's experience are not pathological deviations from some (implicitly male) standard, the normalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis suggests that patterns of experience in majority-world settings are not suboptimal deviations from some (implicitly WEIRD) standard, but instead constitute optimal paths to healthy adjustment and optimal functioning. Resonating with feminist psychology perspectives that shift their standpoint (Harding, 1991) to interrogate the androcentric character of conventional standards within psychology, the denaturalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis “turns the lens” (Adams & Salter, 2007) to reveal how prevailing standards in psychology reflect engagement with WEIRD realities rather than the expression of universal human nature.

## Tension With Feminist Psychology Perspectives

While cultural psychology and feminist psychology share a similar critique of universalizing discourses of psychological science, at times they appear to function in an antagonistic fashion. Feminist theorists have suggested that prevailing research in cultural psychology does not pay adequate attention to gender and tends to imply that women and men inhabit a unitary cultural space, which obscures the operation of gendered power in ways that are antithetical to feminist goals (Burman, 2005). To the extent that a cultural-psychological emphasis on local understanding appears to excuse or even celebrate “oppressive practices” (e.g. polygamous marriage or wearing headscarves) as valuable expressions of “cultural tradition”, it can serve to legitimize patriarchal control that poses a threat to universal human rights and women’s well-being. Conversely, a cultural psychological analysis illuminates how conventional varieties of feminist psychology with roots in WEIRD spaces risk re-inscribing (neo)colonialism via imposing hegemonic constructions of gender and marginalizing alternative experiences of gender across settings. As a decolonial alternative, a cultural psychology analysis—resonating with perspectives of transnational feminisms—takes the standpoint of people in majority-world settings to rethink the liberatory potential of feminist psychological prescriptions.

## The Cultural Psychology of Gender Oppression in Personal Relationship

Key points of tension between feminist psychology perspectives and perspectives of cultural psychology and transnational feminism are particularly evident in phenomena related to personal relationship. Prevailing accounts in psychological research rooted in WEIRD settings describe and prescribe an *expansion-oriented* experience of relational belonging as a somewhat voluntary, effortful choice of atomistic “free agents” who strive to create connection in contexts of inherent separation (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004). Conventional wisdom in psychological science portrays as optimal standards such patterns as creation of a relatively large network of intimate friends (Adams & Plaut, 2003); a sense of freedom from enemies (Adams, 2005); an emphasis on verbally oriented, emotional intimacy as the essence of social support (Adams & Plaut, 2003; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008); patterns of authoritative parenting characterized by verbal give-and-take (Baumrind, 1989); and an emphasis on self-disclosure as a mechanism for establishing intimacy and communion across the space of inherent interpersonal separation (Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010).

There is a strong resonance between this construction of optimal relationality and an influential strain of canonical feminist thought which emphasizes the importance of relationality in “women’s ways of knowing” (Belenky et al., 1986). Strong versions of this perspective emphasize in almost essentialist terms how universal conditions of women’s experience (e.g. predominance in caregiving roles) promote characteristically “relational” tendencies of self-understanding and interpersonal relationship that lead women to desire and create expansion-oriented, high-disclosure forms of connection (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

In contrast, research in various majority-world settings reveals a *maintenance-oriented* experience of relational belonging as embeddedness in environmentally afforded connection. In the West African settings that inform much of our research, this experience finds expression in tendencies for people to report a relatively small number of friends (Adams & Plaut, 2003), to be vigilant for attacks from envious personal enemies (Adams, 2005), to emphasize the materiality versus emotionality of care and support (Coe, 2011; see also Kim et al., 2008), and to emphasize silence and concealment rather than self-disclosure and revelation (e.g., Ferme, 2001; Shaw, 2000). Against the background construction of expansion-oriented relationality as a “natural” standard, the tendency in mainstream psychological science is to view such cautious ambivalence as a deviant and suboptimal way of being.

Canonical perspectives of feminist psychology share tendencies of conventional psychological science to pathologize the maintenance-oriented forms of relationality prevalent across diverse majority-world spaces. From a canonical feminist perspective, one might consider maintenance-oriented forms of relationality as cases of gender oppression to the extent that the associated constraints on choice, obligations of silence, or burdens of care fall heavily on women. This perspective further suggests that liberatory practice in such settings requires interventions to promote expansion-oriented forms of relationality that provide people with opportunities for self-expression and the pursuit of maximally satisfying connections.

In response, decolonizing strategies of a cultural psychological analysis suggest an alternative account that resonates with decolonial perspectives. The normalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis proposes that maintenance-oriented forms of relationship are not necessarily manifestations of pathology; instead, they constitute viable paths to human welfare that embody important insights about human experience. Likewise, the de-naturalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis proposes that expansion-oriented standards of mainstream science are not mere expressions of context-free human functioning or optimal development; instead, they are the product of particular realities—including neoliberal individualism and androcentric constructions of relationship—that mainstream scientific work typically obscures.

## Synthesis: Toward a Transnational Feminist Psychology

In an attempt to resolve these tensions between perspectives of cultural and feminist psychology, we draw upon interdisciplinary discussions in both postcolonial and feminist studies to propose a *transnational feminist psychology* (Kurtiş & Adams, 2013). While a transnational feminist psychology shares with mainstream feminist perspectives a concern for gender oppression, it diverges from hegemonic feminisms that “continue the imperialist project” via “ignoring the subaltern’s voice” (Spivak, 1988, p. 298) and depicting majority-world spaces as sites of ignorance awaiting rescue. Instead, a transnational feminist psychology draws upon the decolonial strategies of a cultural psychology analysis, which take the epistemological position of people in various majority-world settings as a resource to rethink conventional scientific wisdom and illuminate concepts more conducive to broader human liberation (Martín-Baró, 1994; see also Adams et al., 2012).

Likewise, rather than serve as cultural apologist for problematic practices, a transnational feminist psychology shares with mainstream feminist perspectives the recognition that local practices of relationship—in majority world spaces and elsewhere—often reflect and reproduce patriarchal oppression. What distinguishes a transnational feminist psychology from hegemonic feminist perspectives is its response to this oppression. Resonating with conventional wisdom in psychological science, mainstream perspectives of feminist psychology typically adopt a celebratory understanding of expansion-oriented relationality as a liberatory manifestation of women’s interdependent ways of being (e.g., Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). In contrast, drawing upon the context-sensitive vision of cultural psychology perspectives, a transnational feminist psychology suggests that these supposedly liberatory forms of expansion-oriented relationality rest on androcentric foundations that undermine efforts at liberation.

To illuminate how tensions between feminist psychology and cultural psychology analyses manifest in a particular case, we turn our attention to two areas of concern within feminist psychology that bear on issues of gender-based oppression within personal relationship.

## Voice and Silence as Sites of Oppression and Liberation

Our first example concerns phenomena of voice and silence, which have been key themes within feminist psychology (Baker, 2006; Belenky et al., 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Fivush, 2002; Gilligan, 1982; Jack, 1991). Throughout this literature, voice and silence reflect dynamic and relational processes emerging from one's place (i.e. positioning in a particular time and space) and power (Belenky et al., 1986; Fivush, 2002). Reflecting the feminist commitment to break silence and demand voice, much of this work conceptualizes voice as authentic expression, empowerment, and agency while depicting silence as the *lack* or *loss* of voice reflecting women's subordination and internalized oppression.

A primary example of this framework is *Silencing the Self Theory* (STST; Jack, 1991) concerning women's experience in dating/mating relationship contexts. Briefly, STST proposes that women suppress their own thoughts, feelings, and desires (i.e. their "voice") if these are likely to produce conflict with partners. This inhibition of self-expression and action, in turn, leads to their "loss of self" (Jack, 1991). Numerous studies conducted primarily in WEIRD settings associate women's self-silencing in dating/mating relationship with a wide range of negative health outcomes including depression (Jack & Dill, 1992), eating pathologies (Frank & Thomas, 2003), and coronary heart disease (Eaker & Kelly-Hayes, 2010). From this perspective, an emphasis on silence (in the service of relationship harmony) is a gendered phenomenon that disproportionately jeopardizes women's well-being.

To the extent that prevailing practices of relationship in many majority world settings emphasize silence and self-restraint, feminist psychology perspectives might suggest that they put people at risk for low quality relationship and less fulfilling lives. To the extent that obligations of silence and restraint are especially relevant for women's experience, canonical perspectives of feminist psychology might identify these relational forms as cases of rampant patriarchy and gender oppression. In contrast, our work draws upon decolonizing strategies of a cultural psychology analysis to re-think these conclusions.

### Silence as Authentic Expression of Relational Self

Without denying that particular relationship practices in various majority-world spaces might have potentially oppressive consequences, the normalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis invites observers to re-think the extent to which these patterns of relationship may be beneficial. As an example, consider again conventional scientific wisdom regarding self-restraint and silence in relationship. Rather than a deficit in relationality or a sign of universal gender oppression, a cultural psychology perspective identifies practices of silence as a feature of maintenance-oriented forms of relationship associated with cultural worlds of *embedded interdependence*: conceptual and material realities that promote a sense of rootedness in context (Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; see also Adams et al., 2004). Practices of mutual disclosure for the production of intimacy may be unnecessary in worlds of embedded interdependence where people experience relatively stable networks of connection. Moreover, densely overlapping networks of connection within these worlds might lead to greater possibilities for harm through violations of privacy and provide little opportunity to escape disruptions of interpersonal conflict. Accordingly, people in these worlds may ensure psychological well-being through guarded management of information rather than open disclosure and through restraint rather than impulsive expression of unconsidered reactions (Ferme, 2001; Shaw, 2000).

Evidence for these ideas comes from a survey study of women in Turkish settings (Kurtiş, 2010), which scholars have associated with cultural worlds of interdependence (e.g., Imamoğlu, 1987; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1973). Participants in this study completed measures of self-silencing, relationship satisfaction, and depression. Consistent with the

normalizing strategy of a cultural psychology—but contrary to theory and research in North American settings which link self-silencing to depression and low relationship satisfaction (Harper & Welsh, 2007; Jack & Dill, 1992)—self-silencing scores of these Turkish women were unrelated to depression and predicted *greater* relationship satisfaction.

An interview study among a different sample of Turkish participants helps to illuminate motivations for restrained silence. When asked whether there are things they do not disclose to romantic partners and the rationale for such nondisclosure, some participants mentioned that they “chose not to share” information that they deemed to be private (often regarding primary loyalties to families of birth), suggesting a strategic use of silence as *privacy maintenance*. Other participants mentioned that successful communication among romantic partners occurs via non-verbal means when partners understand each other through their “natural reactions”. In other words, these participants described an experience of silence as *indirect communication style* associated with a satisfying experience of implicit common ground. Still other participants mentioned that they “choose to keep quiet” to prevent the escalation of conflict. In these cases, participants described an experience of silence as a strategy for *conflict management*. In general, participants in this interview study noted that silence served as a tool to preserve or affirm relationship quality. In fact, they considered silence to be a better tool for expression of an authentic self—constituted to a large extent by the experience of relational embeddedness—than direct forms of disclosure that implied distance from partners or risked the long-term pain of conflict for the short-term gain of expressing momentary annoyances.

Although still in its initial stages, results of this research are consistent with the idea that silence is not antithetical to authentic personal desires and does not necessarily constitute a threat to (women’s) well-being. In fact, silence may even be expressive of authentic personal desires and promotive of well-being.

### Expression-Oriented Relationality as Neoliberal Individualism

Besides normalizing patterns that conventional accounts consider as pathological or suboptimal, a parallel contribution of a cultural psychology perspective is to “denaturalize” patterns of relationship that mainstream psychological accounts consider as standards of optimal functioning and gender justice. Applied to the present case, a cultural psychology perspective proposes that patterns of expansion-oriented relationality are not naturally superior. Instead, they reflect engagement with neoliberal individualism associated with what scholars have referred to as cultural worlds of *abstracted independence*: conceptual and material realities that afford an experience of bounded separation or insulation from physical or social context (Adams et al., 2004; Markus et al., 1997). In worlds that do not afford a sense of inherent commonality and interdependence, people are compelled to create intimacy and the basis for emotional connection through processes of mutual disclosure (Oliker, 1998).

By denaturalizing the mainstream scientific emphasis on expansion-oriented relationality—treating it as the reflection of particular realities rather than a natural fact—a cultural psychology analysis provides an important window on discussions of gender and relationship. Although conventional varieties of feminist psychology celebrate women’s relationality (in its expansion-focused forms) as a source of liberation (Belenky et al., 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gilligan, 1982), a cultural psychology perspective raises the possibility that their source may instead lie within traditions of *affective individualism* (i.e. a value emphasis on exploration, expression, and indulgence of unique, individual feelings) associated with neoliberal forms of subjectivity typical in contemporary North American settings (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985; Oliker, 1998). Prior to the rise of affective individualism, everyday realities promoted an experience of relationship characterized by “distance, deference, and patriarchy” (Stone, 1977, p. 18). With the rise of affective individualism, relationship became a domain

for self-expression and indulgence that assumed particular importance among women. Since everyday worlds continued to deny them broader opportunities to perform these cultural imperatives, women became “experts” at self-expression and indulgence in domains—relationship and emotionality—that remained open to them (Oliker, 1998).

This historical perspective suggests two points for the cultural foundations of emotional intimacy and self-disclosure. First, rather than attribute emphases on emotional intimacy and self-disclosure to women’s *interdependence*, this perspective locates the source of these tendencies in a set of cultural forces (affective individualism) associated with abstracted *independence*. Second, a historical perspective suggests not only how practices of expansion-oriented relationality developed in tandem with larger forces of neoliberal individualism, but also how they became a gendered activity.

To summarize, the decolonizing strategies of a cultural psychology analysis helps to illuminate the ironically individualist foundations of mainstream feminist psychologies of gender, self, and relationship. Canonical feminist psychology celebrates expansion-oriented relationality as the liberatory manifestation of women’s communal or interdependent ways of being (Belenky et al., 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gilligan, 1982). In contrast, a cultural psychology analysis suggests that expansion-oriented forms of relationality valorized in canonical feminist psychology might not necessarily yield optimal well-being or gender justice, and they might not constitute the defining features of a universal gender regime rooted in women’s inherently relational selves. Instead, a cultural psychology analysis proposes that these forms of relationality reflect engagement with broader sociocultural affordances that promote affective individualism, neoliberal economic subjectivity, and ways of being about which we as feminist researchers might have second thoughts.

### Intimate Justice in a Context of Global Injustice

A second area of concern within feminist psychology regarding “gender-based” oppression concerns issues of sexual freedom and satisfaction. The issue of women’s rights to pleasure, agency, and satisfaction during sex has been an increasingly prominent topic of discussion in both feminist scholarship and popular media during recent years. To cite a particularly illustrative example, consider the work of visual artist Sophia Wallace. In 2013, Wallace initiated a campaign titled “Cliteracy” designed to educate audiences about the female body and to advocate for women’s sexual pleasure. The slogan for this campaign, “Freedom in society can be measured by the distribution of orgasms”, implies a fairly straightforward equation of liberation with sexual pleasure of a particular variety.

Another highly popular example is Eve Ensler’s “V-Day Campaign” initiated in 1998: a global activist movement aiming to end violence against girls and women. Briefly, the V-Day Campaign seeks to promote awareness about violations of women’s rights and raise funds in support of anti-violence organizations through various creative events, including theatrical performances and film screenings. Central to the campaign is a staging of Ensler’s (1994) play, “The Vagina Monologues”, designed to break silences concerning women’s sexuality and promote women’s sexual rights. Given their wide-spread popularity across women’s activist groups and especially on college campuses within the U.S. and internationally, Ensler’s “Vagina Monologues” and the accompanying global anti-violence against women campaign have come to “embody female liberation from violence all around the world” (Njambi, 2009, p. 167).

At the heart of both projects is a reasonable and valuable concern for women's (limited) rights to sexual satisfaction, and a corresponding understanding of sexual satisfaction as a key domain for freedom and liberation. As a manifestation of this enduring concern, feminist psychologists have noted ongoing inequities in women's access to sexual satisfaction and emphasized the necessity of examining sexuality within a framework of *intimate justice* (McClelland, 2010). In brief terms, this perspective extends discussions about such fundamental rights as freedom of expression and pursuit of happiness to the domain of sexual activity. To the extent that women and LGBT communities experience barriers to these fundamental rights (i.e. due to their status as gender or sexual minorities), this perspective frames the denial of sexual rights as a question of injustice.

The concept of intimate justice and the issues that it raises may seem straightforward. After all, is it not clear that one should support freedom of (sexual) expression and pursuit of maximum (sexual) satisfaction? However, ambiguity arises when one considers whom it is who suffers from sexual oppression. On the one hand, research indicates that men report greater orgasm frequency than women (see Lloyd, 2005). On the other hand, research suggests that, despite lower rates of orgasm, women nevertheless tend to report high rates of sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2010). In fact, studies examining gender differences in sexual satisfaction find that overall men and women report equal levels of satisfaction (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Purdon & Holdaway, 2006; see Hyde, 2005 for a review) or, in cases where gender differences do emerge, women tend to report being more satisfied than men (Colson, Lemaire, Pinton, Hamidi, & Klein, 2006; Sprecher, 2002).

How is one to understand claims about sexual satisfaction in light of differences in orgasm frequency? Taking a cue from the literature on experience of injustice, McClelland (2010) suggests that reports about levels of satisfaction (e.g. "How satisfied are you with your sex life?") might fail to capture important variation in people's perceived entitlement to or deservingness of satisfaction (e.g. "How much did you expect?"). From this perspective, women's reports of high satisfaction, despite lower orgasm frequency, reflect women's "ignorance of alternatives" (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976, p. 499). This ignorance leads women to feel less entitlement to (and lower expectations of) sexual satisfaction, which leads them to feel satisfied with inferior sexual outcomes. Alternatively stated, inequity in access to sexual satisfaction constitutes a case of injustice in the intimate domain, as deprivation of "actual" sexual satisfaction (despite the illusion of being satisfied) threatens the personal and relational well-being of women and other sexually marginalized people.

Scholars have articulated the intimate justice framework in reference to experience in WEIRD settings, yet it extends easily to feminist concerns regarding majority-world women's "deprived" access to sexual satisfaction (relative to their WEIRD sisters). In fact, "sexual liberation" has been a key domain in which hegemonic feminisms exude a sense of cultural superiority about oppressive constraints on sexual expression of majority-world women. This sense about denial of sexual freedom finds frequent expression in stereotypical representations of "Third World" women as tradition-bound, family-oriented, veiled, forcefully-wed, genitally-mutilated, and honor-killed. Such (neo)colonialist depictions of "the sexually oppressed Third World woman" not only cast women in majority-world settings as victims of their "cultural" traditions, but also, as Mohanty (1991, p. 337) suggests, further embellish self-representations of "Western women...as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions".

Perhaps the most sensationalized example of this tendency throughout academic and advocacy groups concerns female genital cutting practices across various African settings. Numerous voices within WEIRD as well as African spaces condemn the practice and find it antithetical to women's sexual rights. For instance, scholars from a hege-

monic feminist standpoint have suggested that the goal of the practice is to “mutilate the sexual pleasure and satisfaction of women” (e.g. [Hosken, 1981](#), p.11). In contrast, numerous African scholars and non-scholars alike resist the framing of genital cutting as “mutilation” suggest that the practice serves diverse meanings and functions in local contexts (e.g. rite of passage), and argue that it does not hinder women’s enjoyment of sex (see [Njambi, 2009](#)).

How does one understand such cases where the purported victims of an oppressive practice deny constructions of the practice as oppressive? Again, a typical response implicit in mainstream feminist discourse has been to regard such denial of oppression as a form of ignorance akin to false consciousness. This response assumes that proponents of genital modification practices are ignorant of alternatives and invites interventions to educate African women who appear to have internalized their oppression. More strident responses—including, most notably, the “V Day Campaign”—call for policies banning the practice.

Implicit in this characterization is a pathologization of majority-world spaces as a site of ignorance waiting for neocolonial intervention. In contrast, we take insights from transnational feminisms that advocate greater listening to (rather than speaking over) majority-world women’s voices—especially in discussions concerning their bodies, experiences, and rights.

### Listening to (Majority-World) Women’s Voices

Let us clarify at the forefront that “listening” to the voices of (majority-world) women in discussions of sexual satisfaction or genital cutting practices is not a plea for cultural relativism or legitimization of (intimate) injustice. Rather, it is a plea for listening more carefully to reasons that local actors offer when they speak either for or against the practice. Without denying the voice of local actors who demand equal access to sexual rights and satisfaction—and, more fundamentally, bodily safety and integrity—of women or people anywhere, the normalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis informed by transnational feminisms invites researchers to reconsider women’s experience of sexual satisfaction in a non-pathologizing light. Rather than dismissing women’s responses as a case of “ignorance”, a cultural psychology analysis encourages researchers to take seriously their claims about satisfaction as a form of awareness. To do so, one must examine not only levels but also meanings and constituents of “satisfaction” (sexual or otherwise).

What does it mean to be (sexually) satisfied? Here again, [McClelland’s \(2009\)](#) work is illuminating. In her study of sexual satisfaction among young adults in the U.S., [McClelland \(2009\)](#) found important qualitative differences in what “low” or “high” sexual satisfaction means to women and men. Although women’s descriptions of low satisfaction emphasized pain, harm, and damaging outcomes, men’s description of low satisfaction involved loneliness, having an unattractive sexual partner, or insufficient sexual stimulation. Moreover, although women’s descriptions of high satisfaction involved both partners having orgasms and feeling connected, men’s descriptions of high satisfaction involved “extraordinary” or “mind-blowing” sexual stimulation.

Although it is possible to interpret this gender difference in terms of inequity in *how much* satisfaction people expect ([McClelland, 2010](#)), an alternative interpretation concerns differences in *what* constitutes satisfaction.<sup>vi</sup> Implicit in conventional accounts is an androcentric standard of sexual satisfaction as “mind-blowing” stimulation and individual pleasure. It is against this androcentric standard that women appear to suffer low satisfaction. Yet, who is to say that this androcentric emphasis on individual bodily pleasure is the standard for sexual satisfaction? Instead, an alternative understanding—one that resonates with both the liberatory impulse of feminist epistemologies and

methodological perspectives of accompaniment common in various articulations of liberation psychology—might be to listen to the voices of women about their experience of sexual satisfaction. If women report high sexual satisfaction based on experience of connection with partner, then what basis do we as feminist researchers have for distrusting this response? Should we understand it as a manifestation of ignorance and relative deprivation, or as a case of women speaking “in a different voice” (Gilligan, 1982)—and a more human(e) one, at that—about sexual satisfaction?

### Justice Beyond (Sexual) Satisfaction

One can extend this line of reasoning to discussions of sexual deprivation and oppression of majority-world women. As a concrete example, consider again the highly contested case of female genital modification practices across various African communities. While hegemonic feminist discourses portray participants as ignorant victims whose sexual capacities are “mutilated” by their barbaric cultural “traditions”, many women in these communities report that female genital cutting does not inhibit their capacity for sexual satisfaction (see Njambi, 2009). Numerous scholars similarly challenge the notion that female genital cutting is antithetical to women’s sexuality (e.g. Abusharaf, 2000; Ahmadu, 2000; Njambi, 2004). While systematic studies on the topic are rare, existing research calls into question the hegemonic feminist assumption that female genital surgeries are incompatible with women’s sexual enjoyment (e.g. Obermeyer, 1999; see also Shweder, 2002).

Besides providing a less pathologizing account of the practice, one might question whether the ability to have an orgasm—or sexual satisfaction, in general—is an apt indicator for universal gender oppression. From its earliest days, the feminist movement has emphasized women’s sexual rights; however, women of color have also long critiqued the feminist movement for its quickness to equate women’s liberation with sexual liberation (Hooks, 1984). More recently, Kolhatkar (2002) questioned whether (lack of) sexual satisfaction—defined in androcentric terms as “being able to have an orgasm”—looms large in women’s experience of oppression across diverse majority-world settings. More broadly, her comments prompt us to reconsider the extent to which “(equal) distribution of orgasms” serves as an adequate basis for assessing “freedom in society”.

Resonating with Kolhatkar’s (2002) critique, the denaturalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis suggests that this construction of sexual satisfaction promotes an androcentric conception of well-being as individual bodily pleasure. We propose that, by treating women’s alternative experience of sexual satisfaction as an indication of relative deprivation, feminist psychology accounts elevate men’s experience of sexual satisfaction to the status of a general or desirable norm. Implicit in these accounts is the idea that women should aspire to this androcentric norm, demand the same satisfaction, and prioritize individual entitlement to bodily pleasure.

In contrast, one might take a cue from marginalized perspectives of (majority world) women and propose a more human(e) standard of satisfaction based on relational connection rooted in the experience of embedded interdependence, rather than asking women to assimilate to an androcentric standard of satisfaction based on individual pleasure rooted in the experience of abstracted independence. Again, the point is neither to condone practices that might harm bodily safety or integrity, nor to deny the importance of struggles for sexual rights or the necessity of examining sexuality within a framework of justice. Instead, the point is to problematize the conflation of “justice” with an emphasis on attaining the same rights and privileges that (white) men enjoy, without questioning the social and historical structures that afford enjoyment of these rights and privileges.

In a different vein, one can note the extent to which the elevation of the androcentric standard of sexual satisfaction to a prescriptive norm for gender justice deflects attention away from other, more material forms of gendered inequality and domination. For instance, critics have pointed out how the emphasis on personal fulfillment and realization of “authentic self” through pleasure and the expression of “true” desires—an emphasis central to articulations of “pure relationship” (Giddens, 1992) and to sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s—is a byproduct of consumer capitalism (Blum, 2002), whereby “all human relationships are evaluated and experienced through grids of consumption” (Blum, 2002, p.5). To the extent that the pursuit of satisfaction is a product and proponent of consumerism, it is not clear whether more equal levels of (sexual) satisfaction can provide greater (intimate) justice in the context of gross asymmetries in gendered distributions of income and wealth, gendered labor markets, and gendered divisions of domestic labor.

Similarly, the denaturalizing strategy of a cultural psychology analysis helps to recognize the extent to which the quest for intimate justice via sexual liberation reflects the historically rooted preoccupations of North American and European women. This perspective reveals how prevailing constructions not only of intimacy and satisfaction, but also of justice are rooted in particular positions of privilege and domination that afford ignorance or indifference about more immediate axes of oppression—including material deprivation, military occupation, environmental exploitation, and racial violence—that many others experience on a daily basis.

### Summary: Liberating Relationship Research

To summarize, a transnational feminist psychology perspective—informed by the decolonizing strategies of a cultural psychology analysis and transnational feminisms—provides a conceptual tool to reconsider emphases on intimate disclosure, maximal pleasure, and satisfaction (sexual or otherwise). In particular, it helps to illuminate how these supposedly liberatory forms of expansion-oriented relationality rest on particular androcentric foundations that undermine efforts at broad human liberation.

One manifestation of androcentrism in expansion-oriented relationality is evident in the mainstream emphasis on self-disclosure as a technology for the production of emotional intimacy. Feminist perspectives often portray self-disclosure and emotional intimacy as liberatory manifestations of women’s relationality. In contrast, a transnational feminist psychology perspective associates this way of doing relationship with the rise of affective individualism (emphasizing self-exploration and free expression of authentic, affect-rich relationship; see Olicker, 1998; Stone, 1977). Beyond the association of affective individualism with ontological separation (which we elaborate in the next paragraph) the androcentrism of expansion-oriented relationality is particularly evident in the initial articulation of the emphasis on self-disclosure and emotional intimacy: social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The idea of social penetration provides a remarkably apt and androcentric metaphor for the process by which inherently separate partners use reciprocal disclosure to build on initial attractions, probe each other’s beliefs and desires, and achieve a sense of common ground. In contrast, a transnational feminist psychology draws upon the epistemological standpoint of diverse, majority-world settings to propose socially responsible concepts—associated with maintenance-oriented relationality and the experience of embedded interdependence—that better realize the social justice aims of feminist theory and research.

A second manifestation of androcentrism is apparent in the model of agency that expansion-oriented forms of relationality imply. A transnational feminist psychology locates the foundations of expansion-oriented relationality in the experience of ontological separation and disjoint agency associated with cultural worlds of abstracted independence. This corresponds to the same models of “human” that feminist scholars have long critiqued as a case

of androcentrism in psychological science (e.g., [Belenky et al., 1986](#); [Chodorow, 1978](#)). Despite emphasizing the benefits of communal or relational forms of self and agency, conventional accounts in feminist psychology continue to valorize manifestations of expansion-oriented relationality rooted in androcentric assumptions about ontological separation. As both postcolonial and feminist scholars have noted, this sense of ontological separation and disjoint agency is itself a product of privilege associated with freedom from material constraint. In other words, this experience is a manifestation of domination and injustice not only because the associated sense of freedom from constraint is unavailable to people in less privileged positions (i.e., the vast majority of humanity), but also because the exercise of disjoint agency reflects and reproduces the marginalization of people in less privileged positions ([Shaw, 2000](#)). From this perspective, conceptions of gender justice that prescribe equal enjoyment of expansion-oriented relationality for women (at least those with enough power to take advantage of resulting opportunities) may result in the reproduction of racial, ethnic, and class domination in the name of gender equality.

Rather than reinforce androcentric models that contribute to oppression, a transnational feminist psychology perspective draws on context-sensitive research in a variety of majority-world spaces, as well as foundational work of feminist theorists (e.g. [Belenky et al., 1986](#); [Gilligan, 1982](#)) to reimagine forms of relationality that may better serve interests of liberation. Resonating with the feminist recognition of embeddedness as a fundamental feature of the human condition, a transnational feminist psychology perspective looks to everyday experience in various majority-world spaces for inspiration about more sustainable ways of being that can better serve feminist goals of gender equality and global social justice.

## Conclusion: Liberating Liberation

As our empirical examples pertain to personal relationship phenomena, we have focused our attention on the potential of a transnational feminist psychology analysis to liberate relationship research. In our concluding section, we extend this discussion to consider the extent to which a transnational feminist psychology can serve to liberate from their neocolonial and neoliberal confines the hegemonic understandings of “liberation” that underpin mainstream feminist and psychological approaches.

Though feminism is a project of liberation, our analyses—drawing on perspectives of cultural psychology and transnational feminisms—suggest that canonical forms of feminist psychology might be limited in their liberatory praxis. One reason has to do with their grounding in psychological science. The model of “human” that informs conventional forms of psychological theory and practice is rooted in neoliberal economic subjectivity and the coloniality of being particular to WEIRD worlds. This model of the person does not correspond to the lived experiences of many people in majority-world spaces. Moreover, the model of human flourishing—emphasizing individual liberties, growth, and fulfillment of individual needs and desires—that mainstream accounts in psychology take as standard and prescribe as optimal is a product of engagement with historical and ongoing systems of privilege and (neo)colonial domination.

Another reason why conventional forms of feminist psychology may be limited in their liberatory praxis is because of their grounding in liberal feminism. The primary concern of liberal feminism is equality or the extension of (white) men’s “human” rights to women. While the struggle for equal rights is a laudable goal, liberal feminism has several limitations. First, it does not adequately challenge the (androcentric and Eurocentric) model of the “human” as a primarily “independent”, “free” agent. Second, the emphasis on women’s “individual rights” draws attention away

from broad contextual and sociopolitical affordances (see [Liebert, Leve, & Hui, 2011](#)). Third, liberal feminism tends to occlude the coloniality of power that went into securing the liberties of (white) men (and to some extent, white women). From this perspective, the liberal model of the person is one that builds on privilege and fails to address the ways in which such “liberties” might be accrued or maintained via histories and ongoing systems of global social injustice (see [Shaw, 2000](#)). Put differently, it is an understanding of “human” that depends on the oppression of racialized or colonized others (see [Smith, 2013](#)).

In light of these concerns, we have proposed a transnational feminist psychology that provides an alternative vision for broad human liberation. From a transnational feminist psychology perspective, the struggle for liberation is one of global social justice, rather than a “liberal” quest for individual “human” rights. As [Bulhan \(1985, p. 259\)](#) notes: “A psychology tailored to the needs of the oppressed would give primacy to the attainment of ‘collective liberty’”. The collective liberties that a transnational feminist psychology seeks are not limited to “women’s rights”, but also involve an acknowledgment of multiple ways of being human. To attain this more global vision, a transnational feminist psychology looks to majority-world spaces for insights about alternative forms of human experience (including alternative understandings and struggles for justice) that are typically silenced from mainstream accounts. Once again, the goal is neither a relativist acceptance of pluralism nor a mere tolerance of difference. Instead, the goal is to generate knowledge from multiple sites, going beyond existing epistemological hierarchies, and dismantling the structures of domination that enable hegemonic feminisms and psychologies emanating from WEIRD spaces to claim their global “liberatory” status. In the process, a transnational feminist psychology analysis highlights the extent to which hegemonic forms of (feminist) psychologies—in their self-claimed role as *liberators*—might fail to see the ways in which they too require liberation.

In conclusion, a transnational feminist psychology constitutes a response to [Fanon’s \(1963\)](#) call to “work out new concepts” and imagine new models of the person. This response attends to subaltern voices ([Spivak, 1988](#)) in marginalized, majority-world settings as a resource for more inclusive, relational, sustainable, and human(e) models of the person. These models have the potential to liberate (feminist) psychology from its neocolonial residues and provide an alternative imagination for the creation of other, better worlds.

## Notes

i) Postcolonial feminist scholars often describe these settings as the “third-world” (e.g. [Mohanty, 1991](#)) to highlight the extent to which globalizing discourses (e.g., of geopolitical relations, international development, and mainstream social science) treat people (in particular, women) in these spaces as junior sibling or primitive “other”. We prefer the phrase “majority world” to recognize the extent to which these settings constitute the descriptive norm for human experience, despite their portrayal within globalizing discourses in terms of deviation from a presumed standard. At the same time, the term does not imply uniformity or monolithic unity across diverse spaces. We explicitly reject notions of “the West and the Rest” and approach both the “West” and the majority “rest” as constructed categories.

ii) Rather than a specific area of psychological study, we approach feminist psychology as a strategic site for collaboration and contestation between feminism and psychology. In other words, feminist psychology is not a “woman-centered psychology” or “psychology of women” that extends the discipline’s normative gaze to describe and explain women’s experience. Rather, it is a critical intervention into psychological knowledge and practice which shifts “gendered agency from object (‘of women’) to subject (‘feminist’)” ([Burman, 1998, p.3](#)).

iii) We use the term “hegemonic” to refer to dominant forms of “global” feminist or psychological discourse that originate in WEIRD settings and get prescribed to diverse local contexts as though they were “universal” or context-free laws.

iv) Scholars deploy the idea of the transnational in multiple ways: as a framework for theorizing migration, as a synonym for *diasporic*, as a form of postcolonialism, or as a signal for the demise of the nation-state in the current era of globalization (see Grewal & Kaplan, 2001).

v) Within this list of marginalized knowledge forms, LGBT and other queer perspectives offer particularly rich resources for decolonizing the study of gender, relationship, and other topics in mainstream psychological science. Although space constraints prevent sustained attention to contributions of queer/LGBT perspectives, their relevance is evident in the discussions that follow (e.g., regarding the task of denaturalizing conceptions of sexuality and satisfaction). An adequate account of the implications of queer and LGBT perspectives for decolonizing psychological science remains a project for future work.

vi) Yet another alternative interpretation concerns differences in what constitutes sexuality across diverse settings. For example, Njambi (2009) notes how ideas of sexuality (including satisfaction) upon which Western feminists draw are rooted in Western Christian understandings of bodies and sex(uality). These ideas do not consider alternative meanings, practices, or experiences of body and sex(uality).

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