

The Challenges for Us Psychologized Moderns

A Commentary on Dana Simmons' "Imposter Syndrome, A Reparative History"

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Abstract

In a reparative history Dana Simmons boldly faces self feelings of imposture and guilt and engages them to consider how science studies can move beyond critical appraisals to undertake the greater, more important task of reassembling the self and studies of the self. For readers who are aware of their psychologized self-conceptions, her history promises opportunities for re-appraisal and re-assemblage. This commentary appreciates Simmons' illumination of the race, class, and gender constituents of the psychologies of achievement which, among their products, have yielded the very idea of Impostor Syndrome. Further development of the kind of reparative histories advocated by Simmons demands attention to the enormity of our psychologized modernity and the complexities of reflexive psychology.

Keywords

Psychology; psychologized modernity; re-assemblage; reflexivity

Introduction

This journal invites scholarly "experimentation," "work that takes risks" and meaningful interventions into "discussion of the most crucial issues of the day." Dana Simmons' (2016) reparative history of the Imposter Syndrome artfully and self-consciously responds to the invitation. It entails bold experimentation wherein Simmons first situates the history with her own embodied experiences, in feelings (anxiety, fear, even horror) that come with diagnosing oneself as experiencing imposture. The journey begins with the matter of self care, and continues with care in mind: her self appraisal and estimation of feminist psychology both smartly

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appreciate Michelle Murphy's cautionary observation that "Care is not a new dimension feminists are bringing to technoscience but rather a clearly circulating, hegemonic force in our worlds" (Murphy 2015, 731). Simmons' self-admission moves decisively forward: she "stay(s) with the trouble," to echo Donna Haraway's advice, and acknowledges the residual feelings, including guilt, that attend the non-innocent history of the Imposter Syndrome. Her venture is risk taking in other ways as well because it takes up *psychological constructs* (about reparation, self care, and suspicion) as interpretive tools to better understand the crucial issue of the rampant *psychologizing* of modern personhood. Through its reflexive operations, the reparative history accurately if briefly queries its own analytic, undeniably psychological terms of "reparative" and "affect"; it thus offers an introspective illumination experiment in giving "emotion a social life" (109).

Sharing her own reflections and consequent move to re-assembly, Simmons beckons science studies scholars to move beyond practices of suspicious interpretation (critique) to re-assemble scientific practices in ways that "foster other kinds of differential subjectivity" (124) and help build science that works toward "epistemic justice" (106). Her study presents examples of racial and class injustices in achievement psychology. Heeding this call opens a world of differences and undeniable epistemological injustices in need of repair and reassembly. The magnitude of such a project haunts her study's conclusion. In this commentary I consider the first steps toward its realization—the importance of scholars' self-awareness of their position—and then explore the analytic tools that are central to the project.

Imposture and Reassembly

At the outset, Simmons' account beckons readers to recall their own affect residues that emerge when they have tried on or internalized a psychological category. In such recalling, imposter syndrome can be substituted with attention deficit, implicit attitudes, birth order effects, micro-aggressions, introversion, social anxiety, heuristic biases, and trauma (the list goes on, ever expanding as the number of diagnoses increases).

Simmons details the slipperiness of reparative work, identifying the risks involved whether it is used as a concept or as a practice. Her brilliant self-awareness and the insights generated through sustained reflection serve as an exemplar for engaged science studies scholars. The project maps a complex path toward reassembling a "problem into something we can work with" (122). Simmons walks readers through the several understanding of repair—to care, to cure, to rescue, to sustain, and to reassemble—while acknowledging the dangers attending her original aim of self care. Her reflections and archival research together yield appreciation of "reparative history as a non-innocent accounting for the past and a making of amends. A re-assembly, figuring and reconfiguring objects to make them more livable. A generous, generative process, testing, cutting and employing old tools in different ways" (123). These responsibilities are applied to her own feelings of imposture, notably in her highlighting the specific ways that these feelings reinforce visions of mastery, self-deprecation, apologetic gestures, and the dynamics of paranoia. "Cutting" these components of imposture enables her to abandon

identification with the Impostor Syndrome and assume the position of a “Reassembled Impostor” who replaces self care with projects that foster justice and “other kinds of differential subjectivity.” The Reassembled Impostor “reassembles achievement worlds” (124). Indeed, the Reassembled Impostor offers a model for engaged science studies scholars: feeling, detecting, cutting, and re-constructing the majestic scientific hailing of modernist subjectivity.

Simmons is reporting, then, on the reassembly of the science studies scholar. However, by her own reckoning, “reparations enjoin everyone implicated in this shared history to engage in a collective accounting and repair” (123). Everyone is beckoned; in fact, everyone is needed. It is here that “staying with the trouble” might trouble some. The virtues of a re-assembled scholar are made clear, but then what? The everywhere-ness of psychological modernism, illustrated in the case of achievement psychology, warrants additional attention. If an astute scholar can be captured, even if temporarily, by the Impostor ideology and need practice sustained attention to move beyond it, then by what means can the immense reparative work go forward even when scholars are so re-assembled? How does one show the 25 million viewers of the TED talk on “power posing” (Cuddy 2012)—a handy self-help technique whereby the self can change neurochemistry and, consequently, success in life’s undertakings—that the scientific project might ride on objectification, paranoia, self-deprecation, and economic development fantasies? The popularity of the power pose TED talk is an apt example, for it seemingly inverts the impostor syndrome, claiming achievement by posing as powerful, but it clearly retains the racial and class exceptionalism that Simmons identified with the Impostor Syndrome.

The problem ahead is not only some public (mis)understanding of science, for the romance of psychology has seduced all, even feminists in the 1960s and 70s who recognized the oppressions of psychological science yet nevertheless themselves often relied upon psychology’s techniques of consciousness raising. The problem, then, resides inside as well as outside our academic communities. We need ask, what is needed to enjoin psychological and brain scientists to engage in critical reflection, to apprehend and repair their contributions to modernist subjectivity and the “epistemological violence” inhering in those projects (Teo 2008)? There is now considerable evidence of the dynamic ways that the psychological sciences not only explain mental life but effect changes in it, and scientists are integral to this dynamic circuitry. Studies in historical ontology and dynamic nominalism trace the production (of psychological knowledge) of the self and translations of this knowledge for uptake by individuals living under neoliberalism (Hickinbottom-Brawn 2013; Rose 1996; Sugarman 2009); they also reveal the influences of psychologists’ self conceptions (Cohen-Cole 2005; Morawski 2005; Richards 2003).

Simmons’ account lends a tempting provocation to self diagnose, although I initially did not do so. Trained as an experimental psychologist who brought that training to critical historical analyses of 20th century American psychology, my immediate recollections were of the very psychological science and feminist enterprises discussed in the paper and only afterward to my own place in those enterprises. The joined mention of “achievement” and “fear” prompted memory of a personal photograph taken at my graduation while receiving my diploma. The elation recalled is less about the diploma in hand than a momentary proximity to Matina Horner, who appears in the background of the photo. Recipient of an honorary degree, Horner gave the

commencement address; my memory of that speech is vague save her enthusiastic summons for the female graduates (being a women's college, that meant all the graduates) to seize the new dawn of the achieving (aka "liberated") woman. This recollection, occasioned and enriched by Simmons' review of Horner's contributions to feminist psychology, brought to memory's daylight the optimistic fervor of 1970s feminist agendas that included concerns about race and class. It also brought to light recognition of how these agendas not innocently failed to comprehend the inextricable intertwining of women's rights visions with extant racial and class conditions.

Simmons' "non-innocent" history directed me toward better understanding of the naiveté of that optimism. As importantly, her account illuminated the ways that much feminist psychology, not just the feminist work discussed in her essay, re-located matters of the outside world to inside the head, abetting a psychology where achievement was attainable if only one self-corrected bad cognitive habits like fear of success (or later, feelings of imposture). As Ellen Herman described one social scientific assessment of rioting and urban unrest of the late 1960s in the US, such work "made individual subjectivity an ever more significant factor in policy calculations and a new and undisputed subject of government" (135). Taking the long view backward in time, one might wonder whether it could have been otherwise—whether feminist psychology of the 1960s and 1970s could have done anything but turn the matter of gender inward to the individual mind and consequently take up (self)consciousness raising, socialization theory, and self-esteem building. Yet again, upon further personal reflection, this narrative of feminism in psychology does not fully square with research efforts that aspired to change social practices. Nor does it square with the feminist science that explored the ways that subjectivity was at least partially constituted through social and material conditions (Abigail Stewart, Michelle Fine), examined the distinctiveness of women's experiences (Carol Gilligan) or interrogated the ideologies of scientific psychology (Rhoda Unger, Mary Brown Parlee, Stephanie Shields). Tracing the origins of the impostor syndrome importantly helps make sense of much contemporary feminist psychology's focus on "bio-sociality" and diversity defined through empirical studies of group differences. But it eclipses feminist psychologies such as those mentioned above that investigated the out-of-doors social world and performances of gender in that world. However, it seems that just as we need to better understand the success of psychologies that have been motored by (and productive of) modernization and development, so we need attend to the remainders, the other ontological models and their fates. Often marginalized or forgotten, the critical acumen of such alternatives offer perspectives for rethinking the social, cultural, and material constituents of subjectivity.

Simmons' experiment with generating a reparative history yields a story of collaborations—some inadvertent and some intended—that enabled just as they mirrored the extensive modernization of distinctly psychological citizens. The history exposes the triumph of achievement as a core *psychological* feature of personal identity. It is a story of the achievement of achievement, so to speak. Notably, Simmons aims here not to uncover the definitive conditions of psychology's implication in modernization and development but, rather, to provide a beginning for sustained reparative work. Her first step serves as a constructive object lesson for engaged

science studies; however, it leaves aside some central matters of concern. More specifically, the objective and structure of this historical prolegomenon pose two problems: the first concerns the seemingly unwieldy reflexivity that attends psychological histories of the psychological sciences and the other centers around the feasibility of undertaking the kinds of reparative work that Simmons' defines as "cutting" and "re-assembly." Each warrants closer examination in order to advance the work of reassembly.

Reflexivity

Any historiography that explicitly employs tools of psychology to interrogate the psychological sciences risks the slippages of psychologizing, and it necessarily demands some measure of reliance upon the very science that is being submitted to critical examination. Three such uses of psychology as *explanans* appear in Simmons' chronicle of repair. The central idea of "reparative" can be traced back to Eve Sedgwick's writing and then further back to its more distal roots in the psychologies of Melanie Klein and Silvan Tompkins (Sedgwick 2003). Next, the "reparative" work somehow, sometimes gestures back to "suspicious" interpretations, resonant of psychologies of suspicion, notably psychoanalysis. Finally, affects, although often intended to mean more than or other than "emotions," remain largely understandable only through utilizing the elaborate psychological language of emotions and especially brain-based explanations. Among the residual problems, these scientific emotion models afford little or no place for agency, cognition, and rationality (Leys 2011; Martin 2013). Put otherwise, in their current forms, reparative histories and affect histories are entangled with the very modern psychology they aim to supplant.

Such dependence on psychological accounts of the (psychologized) world to produce new observations (and new accounts) of that world raises what Steve Woolgar (1988) calls "the horrors of reflexivity." Admittedly, the situation appears daunting: accounts of the human sciences appear to be destined to encounter such reflexive regress. Many historians of the human sciences are keenly aware of this situation; some consequently avoid using human science in their histories (Pettit and Davidson 2014). Yet, as Roger Smith (1997) prefaced his comprehensive history of the human sciences, every attempt to stand back and observe "is a way of being human that, in turn, some other person will be able to study" (13). The history of psychology is distinctive in this regard, being a science that is produced by and generously produces the psychological. This means, as Graham Richards (2002) shows, not only that "any account of it must be a Psychological Model" but also that psychological subject matter "*constantly transforms itself*" (8-9). Not surprisingly, this circuitry of the psychological has occasionally troubled research psychologists who then undertook critical self-assessment of the psychology of their psychology (Morawski 2015). Were that not enough, the challenges of modern psychology extend further.

Simmons attends to the circuitry: her narrative links self-feelings to a psychologized modernity, then to the achievement psychology requisite of modern self-hood, and ultimately to groups and social conditions that have been sidelined, erased, or pathologized by these world-making and world-sustaining practices. Yet any accounting for the psychological must consider

the pervasive and comparably inescapable condition of the psychologizing of modernity. The expansiveness, the everywhere-ness, of the modern psychological worldview and the psychologized subject inhabiting the world cannot be located in the history of the academic discipline(s) of psychology, for modernity is thoroughly psychologized. Heeding this condition, Mark Jarzombek (2011) urges looking beyond the academic disciplines of psychology to find psychologizing in “various messages, theories, and operative intentions in an almost infinite number of fields, including, of course, the arts, for it was there that the struggle to find suitable expressions of our liberated psychological modernity is thought to play itself out the best” (25). It is a psychologizing in modern societies that turns back on itself, a process termed “reflexive modernism” wherein both individuals and institutions reflect on means to enhance effectiveness and wellbeing. When seen broadly, “It is a politics of self-actualization in a reflexively ordered environment, where that reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope” (Giddens 1991, 214). The everywhere-ness of the psychological—our psychologized modernity—opens way for an expansive array of possible interrogations into the history of subjectivity and subjectification. It is a modernity that is psychological through and through. And it reminds us that our psychological objects of analysis have their origins in multiple sites and practices.

Simmons' astute attention to the reigning ethos of achievement intimates the omnipresence of psychological logics, indicating that there is much more to be done to understand the psychological conditions of experience and devote sustained attention to reflexivity. To note, she makes relatively modest use of psychological explanations, mainly orienting them toward self-analysis, and recognizes the reflexive implications and complications of using psychological models to pry other psychological models, though the underlying problem of reflexivity remains. The rare prescriptions for escaping such circular or repetitive psychologizing, such as calls to take ourselves to be “posthuman” (Hayles 1999), have gathered few adherents. Beyond challenges of reflexive regress, a more serious, undesired outcome is that certain psychological accounts of history will prevail, and these successor chronicles are likely to be fashioned with scientifically and culturally dominant explanations. As such, these explanations tend to transmit the racist and classist legacy of achievement psychology. Thus, creating psychological accounts of psychological accounts requires vigilance lest, for instance, reparative work be assimilated into positive psychology whenever “reparative” is understood as conventional self help or moving beyond a troubling situation; affect studies translated into neuroscience models (or, worse, evolutionary ones) of emotion with their nuances of different human kinds; and suspicious hidden intentions revealed through the latest visualizing technologies of neuroscience. Briefly put, just as the modern psychological sciences mobilize (both enable and constrain) certain instantiations of subjectivity, so do their histories mobilize certain conceptions of subjectivity. Despite having no ready resolution, the dynamics of reflexivity accompany and challenge science studies of all the human sciences, especially psychology. The ease with which the prevailing psychological worldview can be marshalled to explain human history (Burman 2012; Leys 2011) at once attests to the significance of the tasks ahead and also underscores the urgency of undertaking science studies of modern psychology.

When juxtaposed with the Re-assembled Impostor, my rather sober assessment of the challenges of re-assembly can be diagnosed as a “depressive position,” borrowing a term that is central to Klein’s conceptualization of the reparative. In her appraisal of reparative work, Jackie Stacey (2014) returns to Klein’s writings and reports how the depressive position, an acceptance of good and bad in the object, opens the way for reparation but that reparation “is necessarily accompanied by the ambivalence of such restoration” (44). Close reading of Klein’s logic, Stacey (2014) argues, finds that “the nature of repair brings with it fresh anxieties that then need to be managed” (45). One need not be a Kleinian or even psychoanalytically inclined (I am neither) to notice here an analogy to the ambivalence of critical science studies, including suspiciousness of a ubiquitous, institutionalized psychologized modernism. Perhaps ambivalence is tacitly present in Simmons’ invocation to “stay with the trouble” although her “first stage” history simply intimates the enormity of the trouble. The next stages of engaged cutting and re-assembly stand to be articulated. Science studies scholars might consider innovative, reparative methods for doing so, including forging alliances with practicing scientists, developing innovative engagements with the publics, and recovering (for re-assembly) some of the sidelined, near forgotten psychologies that attempted to give emotion a social life (Martin 2013).

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