

The Female Experience: An American History of Epistemic Injustice



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Introduction

- Throughout American history gender roles have played a massive part in the public health sphere, specifically in relation to women's healthcare.
- Misdiagnosis and a general lack of research around women's healthcare contribute to a bigger picture of epistemic injustice. Without a proper way to describe their ailments nor accurate diagnoses, women have been put at a disadvantage to receive correct treatment.
- Epistemic injustice, for the purposes of this study, can be defined as having inadequate communication skills to express experiences or feelings due to a lack of resources for a disadvantaged group.
- The purpose of this study is to analyze to what extent gender roles play in the American history of misdiagnosis by way of epistemic injustice.
- Expand on how these biases impact the public health response and medical skepticism for illnesses today deemed "women's issues" such as POTS, Fibromyalgia, and most recently, Long COVID.
- Look at the role that men have played in the diagnosis and treatment of women's health over time.

Methods

- Ongoing historical literature review is being conducted.
- Selecting mainly secondary sources and a few primary sources of information that provide general knowledge on key topics surrounding epistemic injustice and diseases such as POTS, Fibromyalgia, and Long COVID.
- Also reviewing secondary sources on figures Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, and Miranda Fricker.
- Including key phrases in my searches such as "gender roles" and "women's health issues".
- Creating general summaries for each selected source.
- Analyzing and taking notes on how each topic relates to women's healthcare.
- Crafting a historical timeline of personal accounts that deal with the basis of epistemic injustice.

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Case Study

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman was diagnosed with neurasthenia by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in the late nineteenth century after giving birth to her child and exhibiting symptoms such as emotional outbursts and anxious tendencies.
- She was prescribed the "rest cure" which consisted of bed rest for several weeks and she was ordered to never write, paint, or read ever again.

Today we know that Gilman suffered from post-partum depression, an illness not officially recognized until 1994. Her story "The Yellow Wallpaper" reflects her own experience with the rest cure and it depicts how neglected women's health has been throughout the history of medicine.

The roles that the main characters in her story, a woman and her physician husband, play are roles that countless women and men have played in healthcare throughout time.



Charlotte Perkins Gilman



Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell

References



Findings

Literature review revealed recurrent themes for illnesses deemed "women's" health issues.

- POTS (Postural Tachycardia Syndrome) – "Females predominate over males by 5:1"
Low et al. (2009)
- Fibromyalgia – "More common in women than in men in a proportion of 9:1"
Yunus (2001)
- Long Covid – "Females had a 3-fold higher risk of being diagnosed with long COVID"
Bai et al. (2021)

Each of these diseases were only recently recognized as official diagnoses in the last half-century.

- POTS – 1993
- Fibromyalgia – 1987
- Long COVID – 2020

Conclusion and Discussion

- Women over time have struggled with communicating their health issues due to insufficient language to relay their problems (epistemic injustice) and an overall gap in research. They have faced a predisposed prejudice due to their gender. Due to these predominantly women affecting illnesses only recently being recognized as official diseases, we can conclude that many patients throughout history went misdiagnosed and mistreated for their entire lives. These studies suggest a further need for research in women's healthcare and an overall shift in attitude from the public health sphere in relation to women.

Long Covid:

- Long Covid is one of the latest illnesses in history to be deemed a "women's" health issue.
- Looking to the future it is important that we focus on conducting research on diseases such as this so that we can not only find a cure for them, but we can also give a correct diagnosis and treatment to patients that deserve to have their medical ailments validated.

My goal:

- As a future professional in the healthcare field, I hope this research is able to reach both patients and providers so that we can all work together to understand how epistemic injustice works in this system and how we can reduce gender imbalance in medicine in the future.