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Applying Critical Psychology Education in Classroom: The Gender Studies Classroom as a Space to Open Discussion on Gender and Sexuality Issues

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Abstract

My interest in critical psychology led me to incorporate critical psychology education principles in my classes. Through critical psychology, I became familiar with critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. These pedagogies, especially feminist pedagogy, shape my practice in the gender studies classroom in Japan and have let me appreciate the potential of these classes for opening up psycho-social spaces for students to explore gender and sexuality issues. In this paper, I focus on implementing feminist pedagogy principles and practices in a gender studies class at an American university in Japan. In doing so, I draw on interviews with students to share insights, challenges, and reflections from different perspectives.

Keywords: critical psychology, critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, gender studies classrooms, psycho-social spaces

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Encounter with critical psychology

I want to start this paper with how I got to know critical psychology. It has been a long and ongoing process. I am originally from Burma/Myanmar and have been living and teaching in Japan for over half of my life. My education in psychology both in Burma/Myanmar and Japan is mainstream psychology. I did my PhD in Japan on the leadership orientation of women, focusing on facilitating and inhibiting factors in the development of women leaders. After I completed my PhD in Japan, I went back to Burma/Myanmar and taught in the Department of Psychology at the University of Yangon for 1½ years. The first research project I took part in Burma addressed children in especially difficult circumstances and was funded by UNICEF. For this project, I interviewed about 30 underage girls who were living in a rehabilitation facility. It was an eye-opening experience. Out of the 30 girls I interviewed, 10 were in the facility for prostitution. Some were street children who had been rescued from the street on the brink of being sold to brothels. One of the underage sex workers had HIV/AIDS. She was only 19. Common underlying factors for all the girls were poverty and failed economic, education, and welfare systems that created and reproduced social and economic inequalities. From understanding these girls' lives, I experienced profound disorientation in a process of rejecting what I had learned as psychology in my education and training (Goodley, Miller, & Runswick-Cole, 2018, p. 68). Nothing I had learned in psychology seemed to fit the girls I met because the psychology I knew was not about them or the circumstances of these girls. I started to doubt whether mainstream psychology could help to address the massive social and economic inequalities experienced by these girls.

I returned later to Japan, and when I started teaching a Women and Society course at an American university campus in Japan, I was intent on raising awareness of gender issues in the students' everyday lives. I focused on the gender division of labour, masculinity, single mothers, LGBT+, reproductive rights, and intimate partner violence. To have a deeper understanding of the roots of gender issues, I chose to highlight the social, economic, historical, legal, and political contexts that shape such issues. In this endeavour, I had trouble finding psychological research in Japan which dealt with these issues or theorized gender-related issues from multiple perspectives. In my classes, I was keen to employ a multi-disciplinary approach to give a comprehensive understanding of gender-related issues. Some students who majored in psychology criticized me for not teaching psychology because I didn't focus on the gendered psychology of the individual. The criticism made me think about what psychology is, and from this I realized that I wanted to teach psychology that can comprehensively explain social inequality.

In my search for a new way to teach psychology, I stumbled on Isaac Prilleltensky and Geoffrey Nelson's (2002) "Doing Psychology Critically: Making a Difference in Diverse Settings." The chapter, The Making of a Subversive Teacher (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002, pp. 37- 49), gave me some initial ideas about how to teach critical psychology. Their writing introduced me to the two traditions of critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, which let me see me a holistic view of teaching social inequality in the classroom. Teaching in critical psychology focuses on transformation and

change rather than imparting knowledge to passive students (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Although I had already tried not to focus just on imparting knowledge by shortening the lecture time and expanding group discussions in my classes, I was not that reflective nor did I focus specifically on transformation and change.

One central challenge is what kind of transformation we should bring about and what we should be critical of as critical educators. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002, pp. 40-42) put forward three tenets that can transform the qualities of education in terms of content and process, values, assumptions, and practices. First, as critical educators, we should encourage students to examine inherent values in our discipline, theories, and practices. To do so, we need to create a safe space where everyone can voice and reflect their values. Teaching students to critically examine normalized assumptions can highlight the power relationships that maintain the status quo in the discipline and society. Encouraging students' active participation and engaging in dialogue can not only raise the awareness of normalized assumptions but also co-construct educational processes that promote students' growth and critical awareness.

Critical education requires practices that foster change. Prilleltensky and Nelson (2002) advocate encouraging students to employ interdisciplinary perspectives that involve multiple level analyses rather than focusing on person-centred approaches. Insights from multiple level analyses can enrich students with a broader understanding of the issues in developing solutions and taking action. Action-oriented projects such as working with communities, and learning from advocacy groups and activists, can encourage students to take action locally and globally.

These three tenets of critical psychology have helped me envision the teaching I want to pursue in my classes. For me, an important question was then how I could tailor these principles to my gender studies classroom. I started to draw on practices from critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy, especially feminist pedagogy practices. I tried, for example, to create discussion as a safe space in collaboration with students by having them draw up guidelines to create a safe and comfortable space for everyone to share their thoughts and experiences. However, it was not a linear process, i.e., I did not consciously adopt critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy practices straight away to give my students a critical psychology education. Rather, I see my classroom practices as similar to those of critical and feminist pedagogical practices. Importantly, applying the thinking behind these pedagogies helps me make sense of the dynamics and insights I have observed in class discussion sessions. In the next section, I will discuss particular transformations in the classroom by applying critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy practices in my gender studies classroom.

"Space" in the classroom

We as teachers use the classroom without thinking much about how we teach impacts students' learning processes. For many teachers, classrooms are a mere

physical space where we transmit information/knowledge to our students. Often as teachers, we focus more on preparing “what we should teach” and less on considering “how” we should teach, even less on using the classroom to create active learning spaces. I discuss here constructing a gender studies classroom in Japan as a space for students to express their thoughts, opinions, and emotions, as well as to discover new understandings about themselves and society.

Previous studies on space in critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy (e.g., Morgan, 2000; Byson & Bennet-Anyikwa, 2003; Kannen, 2014) have discussed creating a space that equalizes the power between instructor and students. Both feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy empower marginalized groups in the curriculum and classroom by creating a safe and supportive classroom (Bryson & Bennet-Anyikwa, 2003). The critical and feminist practices involve transforming the power relationships in the classroom, the production of knowledge, and raising critical awareness of inequality and oppression based on gender, race, sexual orientation, ableism, and religion, (see McLaren,1999 cited in Morgan, 2000, p.274, McCusker, 2017).

Both critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy focus on making space in the classroom to raise awareness and critical perspectives on current practices, systems, and the ideologies that marginalize and disempower certain individuals and groups. Ellsworth argues for example that

> “... the role of the critical educator is to create space within the classroom where students can engage with their colleagues and their experiences of oppression in order to learn about, and from, each other.” *(Ellsworth, 1989)*

In practice, students can engage with each other to learn about oppression or oppressive systems through exploring personal experiences in the spaces created in the classroom. McCusker expands on these ideas in articulating the main features of a feminist pedagogy as

> “…effecting social change, redefining pedagogical power and authority, valuing personal experience, diversity and subjectivity, reconceptualising classrooms as spaces for social justice, and using learning to help students to become activists and go beyond the classroom to effect the necessary wider changes that are needed” *(McCusker, 2017, p. 448)*

Thus, feminist pedagogy focuses on empowering students to reshape power relationships in the classroom by valuing personal experiences, diversity and subjectivity. The practice constitutes the classroom as a space for social justice where students may become empowered as agents of social change.

In retrospect, I can see now that feminist pedagogy became the backbone of my research and practice when I started teaching gender studies classes in Japan. However, feminism and feminist pedagogy were not part of my education in Myanmar/Burma and Japan. When I was a student, I was not at all aware of the

student-centred participatory approach in my classroom. I was educated in a traditional top-down approach (teacher as the sole authority and students as passive recipients in the classroom) in my country, Myanmar/Burma, and most of my education in Japan. Compounding this mode of teaching is the underlying cultural assumption in my country that students should pay ultimate respect to teachers and never question their authority. This has the effect of silencing of students' voices and the development of their critical thinking. In the same vein, classroom practices and teaching in universities in Japan often follow a lecture-type, top-down style. Although there are women's studies and gender studies courses at Japanese universities, with few exceptions, it appears that the teaching approach in these courses often follows the same top-down approach (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996). Regardless of substantial feminist scholarship in Japan, feminist pedagogy is not seen as part of feminist scholarship and very little attention has been paid to feminist pedagogy practices in the classroom. There is general a lack of ongoing discussion on the goals and purpose of teaching women and gender studies courses by teachers in the Japanese educational context and society (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996, p. 338).

Although I knew very little about teaching when I started, I very much wanted my students to be active participants. I saw small-group discussion and creating an interactive class as the way forward to encourage participation in the classroom. Small-group discussion allows every student to share their thoughts and experiences, facilitates active participation, and take responsibility for their learning. It is also a space for students to explore the diverse views and experiences of other students. Discussions are also a practice of active co-construction of knowledge with students. In discussions, teachers and students co-construct knowledge or analyse a particular issue by sharing knowledge, making connections, and asking questions, and responding to questions.

I started small-group discussion in my classroom to create a space for students to learn from each other and voice their opinions freely. I then became aware that the group discussions could open up a psycho-social space for students to explore gender and sexuality issues that they may not have an opportunity to voice or discuss in other public and private spaces. Some researchers have explored the construction of spaces in the classroom as part of feminist practices (Bryson & Bennet-Anyikwa, 2003) or as a different set of interactions with students (McCusker, 2017). Others have analyzed what space symbolizes in the classroom (Kannen, 2014). However, as mentioned above, I wanted to explore how the classroom as a physical space can further open up psycho-social spaces for students in the gender studies classroom. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how these psycho-social spaces help students connect gender issues covered in the class with their experiences and identities. In what follows, I attempt to explore how a classroom as a shared physical and social space may open other (emotional, personal, intellectual, reflective) spaces in students. To do this, I share insights from the inquiry that I carried out with a group of students from my gender studies class at Temple University, Japan Campus, in Tokyo.

The class

In this exploration, I focus on the class “Women and Society in Japan” at Temple University, Japan Campus in Tokyo (TUJ). It was an upper-level Gender, Sexuality and Women Studies course taught in English. I taught this course for 13 years in the same university. In 2017, there were 20 students (Female = 15, Male= 5) in the class. Among them, four were Japanese, and 16 were non-Japanese (Americans, Filipinos, Pakistani). The class met twice a week, and each class was 2 hours and 15 minutes long.

I usually used half of the class time for lectures and the other half for small-group discussions. I did not participate in the small-group discussions as I wanted to give students more freedom to pursue the issues and questions of their interest about the topic. In each group, a student discussion leader facilitated the group discussion. Students could choose a topic/issue they wanted to lead the discussion with. It was a requirement for all students to be the discussion leader at least once. The discussion leader was not to dominate the group or “lead” the group, but rather to facilitate the group in having an in-depth discussion and keep it on track (not to waste discussion time talking about unrelated or idle chats). In the first class, I asked students to draw up guidelines for creating a safe space so that everyone would feel free to voice their opinion or views. In small groups of 4 to 5 students shared ideas with each other to create a safe and comfortable space for discussion.

To have a fruitful discussion where everyone can learn from each other, the students had to prepare. Ahead of each class students posted their responses for the readings and one discussion question they wanted to discuss on the discussion board of a learning management system. After the lecture, students discussed their views about the issue, following the discussion questions they had posted and the information and analysis from the lecture they wanted to further explore in small groups. Each group discussion leader facilitated the discussion and reported the content of their small groups discussion to the class.

Dialogic Interviews

Two weeks before the last class of the semester, I introduced my inquiry to the students and asked whether they were interested in participating in an interview with me. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how my practice and principles impacted their learning. Six female students volunteered to participate. I conducted (20-40 minutes) interviews in a dialogue about the class, encouraging the participants to ask me questions and freely share their views of the class. We explored students’ thoughts on the gender issues we had covered in the class, memorable experiences, discoveries, and transformations in their learning and identity, struggles/challenges they had in the class, and their experiences in the group discussions.

Insights and observations from the interviews

Group discussion: A space for alternative learning

Although I had observed in the class that small-group discussions opened up alternative spaces for students to talk about gender and sexuality issues that were not part of their daily conversations, the students mentioned the group discussion as a memorable experience in the class.

> "Probably in the group discussion. Again I do like getting different perspectives from the peers… It's always **enlightening** to see people of my age what they are thinking and the information they bring. I really like those open discussions, especially with those LGBTQ discussions." *(Noa[1], 21 years old female student)*

> "I think the most memorable is when like small things in like the group discussion like we would have and the questions we would have, with everyone being **on the same page** and yes! yes! yes! I understand. Yes, I get it! Or all these types of things you say like some experience or you would give some examples. Yes! Yes! Yes! **on the same page**. I think that was really nice like **affirming relationship** to have with your classmates. If, even if they are men or even if they are women, it doesn't matter. Being on the same page is really a nice experience that I felt." *(Chika, 21 year old female student)*

> "This class was like the first class since I've been at Temple where I have this forum and it's actually **refreshing** because the readings were all interesting. Everything came together like a puzzle. I think we covered not just about women but you know all aspects about the society. So it was just a **refreshing**. Sitting here, listening to lecture after lecture, uh, because even for a lot of the classes, the professors don't even open up for questions because there is no time like they have to cover all the information. So pretty much 5 minutes left. Like anybody has any questions and you know, by the time a person asks a question, the class was over. So it was **refreshing** to be in the class to be able to respond, share your thoughts, …for the discussion to hear about other peoples' experiences, you know… What I like was we always have someone Japanese in the group, you know, it would be able to really say when I was at school this is what happened. You always got more insights of social issue… You can read about it all but you have someone sit there and say 'You know I

1 All participants' names are pseudonyms.

> didn't see my parents hug or', you know what I mean, 'I rarely saw my dad' or something like that." *(Penny, 45 years old female student)*

The small-group discussions provide alternative learning spaces where students develop social relationships and connections with their classmates through personal experiences and views. These shared connections and learning are affirming their identity. Penny uses "refreshing" to differentiate her experience from other classes with the class to emphasize personal experiences shared by other students are as important as the information transmitted in the lecture part of the classes. According to her, the shared experiences provide a deeper insight into a social issue.

Spaces for Personal Connection and Personal Growth

Sharing personal experiences provides a deeper insight into a social issue. Reflecting or incorporating one's personal experience in learning is crucial for personal growth, which is probably the critical aspect of education for some students. Juno was baffled by how education, in general, failed to make personal connections.

> "The question I have is why is personal connection often not incorporated or looked down upon. I don't understand that we are spending so much time here, we have space. How can we utilize it?"

> "I think my favourite day was that ...she came in for ...she told us that the work she does was directly related to her own personal experiences. …I feel like that day was the best. She is awesome. But also because I think so to me, I wish teachers are allowed to tell us more about either why they are teachers, what brought them here, like personal. I want to see more the teachers' personal because I think I saw her personal and why she is doing her work and I connected like… I really did it to so much deeper level. I can remember that deeper connection comparatively to other classroom setting or lectures. **I think this is what education should be**." *(Juno, 21 years old female student)*

> "The lady that came to talk about domestic abuse. That was personal for me. She was talking about your past life and pretty much saying, you know you can start a new. I was just aware of that, um, I am aware of that but for her to share her experience and to see where she is at was big for me. What was really big for me also was when she was saying that there are days she still has to fight to, uh, to pretty much live. You know, and that it's OK

> to be that way. I am a veteran and you know I've been war 3 times. I've done a lot and I deal with anxiety issues. A lot of people who know me they all think that I have everything together because I don't open up about all that going on in my life. Because many days for the past two years where I get up like I have to really talk myself out of bed. So to hear her say that is really big for me because I've never heard anybody express it out loud like that. That's what exactly what I go through and it resonated with me as far as it's OK for me to be successful and still have problems (laugh)". *(Penny, 45 years old female student)*

The personal connections students make with their peer learners and the guest speaker or their own experiences open up different emotional spaces and lead to profound and meaningful learning. The guest speaker's personal experience of surviving intimate partner violence evokes different feelings and connections in students. The presence of the guest speaker touches various cords in the students. They can relate to her and the issue she represents in different ways.

> "…I think the one that close my heart obviously were the one that I could connect to personal level but not for myself but for my friend or my family like, um… I have a friend who was domestically abused, who had abortion and there are others, … that was probably hit home the most like even though I don't know people personally but that happens to so, that applies to every woman in every culture. So that was the one that hits closet to home and I was kind of afraid of that situation happening to me, like my kindness will be taken advantage of some kind of fear like that." *(Chika, 21 years old female student)*

> "I think you mentioned that a lot of people are affected by Sachi (the guest speaker) when she came. It was really important. …I think that I have had friends who gone through this (IPV). I think primarily what hit me the most is when she said that "Time cannot heal" but that's what a lot of people are thinking. People say things like that. I have said to my friend who have come and talked to me about it." *(Hazuki, 20 years old female student)*

Intimate partner violence is a prevalent issue in many societies, and I often encounter female students who are the victims of violence or someone close to them who experienced violence. However, many students are unprepared or do not know how to help victims of intimate partner violence. As a survivor of intimate partner violence, the guest speaker standing in front of the class and talking about her deeply personal experience was a powerful learning experience for my interviewees.

Going out of Comfort Zone

The discussions are not always smooth sailing. Some can be uncomfortable for some students. However, the discomfort they feel prompts students to explore further and grow.

> "I think what I really like about this class is I was a bit uncomfortable. ...It's not great to be, to me personally, it doesn't feel great to be really like someone stabbing me. It also feels like browsing through. I think there was like a great middle ground of like, this is what I initially thought, this is what presented to me. How can I evaluate my initial understanding. I feel like that was uncomfortable. I feel like in this class too because I really like feminism and I read about it. So to the concepts like we learn here like, especially in Japanese culture I've never done that before. So that means I feel like I grow." *(Juno, 21 years old female student)*

Sometimes a discussion can bring out discomfort in talking about familiar issues.

Hazuki had friends who were LGBT+ and did a fieldwork presentation on the LGBT+ community on the campus. However, she was surprised to find out of the topics we covered in the class, other students felt most uncomfortable talking about LGBTQ+ issues and were afraid of saying offensive things.

> "Yes, I was really surprised as well. I have talked about and I do talk about with a lot of my friends outside of class just in causal conversation and I did my fieldwork, field research on LGBTQ community as well. But for some reason during that class, after the (guest speaker) presentation it was just very, I don't know, during my group discussion, um I really, I think I had larger sense of 'Oh, I don't wanna say the wrong thing or I want to really choose the word carefully because I feel like if I use one wrong word, it could be very offensive' and I didn't want what I was thinking to come across in a wrong way. But until that class I didn't realize that out of all the topics we covered the hardest for me, may be the hardest for me to talk about."
>
> "It might also be, now that I think of it, while we were in discussion, others had said that, I remember, someone refers to LGBTQ community as 'they'. May be little things like that I hear come out of people and it makes me flinch a little. I feel, 'Oh, I don't wanna phrase it in that way'." *(Hazuki, 20 years old female student)*

The discomfort she experienced in discussing LGBT+ issues made her realize how seemingly casual expressions referring to LGBT+ can be othering and offensive. Discussion can provide spaces for students to explore uncomfortable feelings. However, going beyond their comfort zone and feeling discomfort are push points for students to take a further step towards a new learning experience.

Discoveries and Transformation

Once students learn more about gender issues in society, systems and institutions that produce inequality and gendered (re)actions, their critical awareness of gender spreads to the public, intellectual, and business spaces. However, the transformations vary from one person to another.

Eye-opening: Gender awareness of gender in public space

Chika became more aware of her surroundings and saw people through a gendered lens, i.e., her awareness of the widespread effect of gendered systems on individual women and men. She started to notice advertisements that recruit women to work in the sex industry, which is normalized in public spaces (billboard ads near train tracks and central places in town) in Japan.

> "I became a little bit more aware of just, even like a small everyday things like, sitting in the train where so many people sitting quietly where everyone was kind of anonymous, thinking obvious issue like how people, you know like the kind of hierarchy system, like how people can be treated badly or differently for some innate reason, …kind of change or kind of like thinking what if this women kind of like having problems that she can't tell anyone that what if this man face some kind of discrimination and like it kind of like open my eyes a little bit more and before coming to this class I was just like, you know, like kind of tunnel vision and I become a little bit more aware and even like those advertisement you said for the sex industry. How they just kind of basically subliminal." *(Chika, 21 years old female student)*

Critical Perspective of Gender Issues

For some students, the change is a critical shift in their world-view of gender inequality in Japan. Chihiro's way of thinking about gender issues changed. She used to think culture was the culprit of gender inequality. She realized culture as a default explanation for gender issues is insufficient for understanding gender

inequality in Japan. She came to see the need to go beyond culture to understand gender problems in society and think about gender inequality from multiple aspects.

> "Before taking this class, I believe and feel those issues but I didn't really have like a… If I were to argue with someone about something I didn't really have evidence, proper evidence like historical, socio-economical. But after taking this class like I was able to really learn like how these problems really occur because I used to blame it all on culture, that's how everyone is. We can't just say culture is sexist itself. That was a big realization for me. …I was able to analyze more logically about things." *(Chihiro, 21 years old female student)*

Changing Perspectives and Understanding

Some students reported that they had gained a better understanding of how gendered systems and institutions shape individual women's responses and choices in Japanese society. Through the class, Penny, an American citizen living and working in Japan, developed a different understanding of Japanese women and society. The new insights she gained about Japanese women and society made Penny realize her business plan did not include Japanese women's perspectives and how things operate in Japan. She could appreciate Japanese women's strength by understanding the barriers they face.

> "In my business plan I have written out the type of program I wanted to do. On paper it sounds great! But after taking this class, I realize it's so unrealistic (laugh). Even though it sounds great, it is something that I will not be able to do not because Japan is a bad place but culture wise I'd not be able to do that. So this class has made me look at different way how I'd be able to help in the future and gave me a plan how to go about that."

> "As a woman in Japan, I look at Japanese women and I never understood why they were the way that they were. So what I assumed was they were just weak but now taking this class it's not that they are weak (laugh) (They are strong). …It's like that they are different kind of strong. If I wouldn't have known that I would have just assumed that…" *(Penny, 45 years old female student)*

As an educator, these changes in students perspectives and ideas are rewarding since my aim is for students to become critically aware of social issues and make connections with their own lives, the people they encounter, and the relationships they have outside of the classroom.

Challenges of Group Discussion

Group discussions are not without challenges. They can be formidable spaces to negotiate and navigate, especially when discussing sensitive issues such as gender, sexuality, race, and religion. One of the main challenges of discussion comes up when you disagree with someone's view. An outlook you disagree with, especially when discussing issues you strongly care about, can make it difficult to discuss or understand the other person's view. Juno deals with the opposing views are more indicative of how she thinks rather than the other person's way of thinking. Not judging is a necessary condition in a safe discussion for everyone to voice their opinion. However, it can be a struggle for students who do not see eye to eye on some issues. Juno was probably implying it is difficult not to judge opposing viewpoints:

> "When topics like these (gender/sexuality/race) come up in classes, how can you respond to different points of view? Again I feel like that's personal reflection on myself." *(Juno, 21 years old female student)*

Inclusiveness (of male students and men)

Gender composition affects participation in discussion. Female students tend to take women/gender studies classes more than male students in general. Although I have seen in my teaching career that it is never a problem for male students to dominate the class or discussion, they tend to hold back in women/gender studies classes. Since none of the male students in my class volunteered to participate in the interviews, I don't know how they feel about participating in female-majority discussion spaces. However, lacking male voices in the discussion can make some female students feel uneasy, especially for the long-term effect on resolving gender issues.

> "Also talking about like women's issues and women's problems in general, of course like women are, like a group, I guess in tune with everyone like issues and conversations. But I also like at the same time, there are a few men in the classroom. I did notice that they are not that vocal. Of course, there are so many issues like women, they do realize that they are kind of minority situation. I think that is kind of like an issue for me too. I feel like if we are talking about like society, …, society men are also included in there. I would like to hear more opinion from the men in the classroom. Or that's what, in my high school even when we were, visit like women leaders. Of course, that was inspiring all to hear about all these successful women but in the end we all have to incorporate men as well. …It's hard for me to trying to balance

> improve women's issues also try to recognize men's issues as well." *(Chika, 21 years old female student)*

Chika's observation highlights both male and female students' perception of gender issues as womens issues. This perception probably holds back male students from participating fully in the discussion and staying in peripheral spaces in gender studies classrooms. Although the limited participation of male students was particularly noticeable in this class, in my experience, this is not a consistent phenomenon in all gender studies classes. I observed that in my gender studies classes in Japanese universities, male students participate more or less equally as female students, although issues such as reproductive rights, abortion and sexual violence can be challenging topics for men to discuss.

Society in general

Discussion can also highlight the challenges and struggles beyond the classroom. In Japan, the gaze of other people is a form of social control. People have to be mindful of how they present themselves in public spaces. Chihiro is aware this form of social control is gendered. Women feel more conscious of being under the gaze and navigate their behaviour more than men.

> "I feel like, this might not directly relate to the class. When I go to other countries, I can dress or do things as I want to. In Japan, I can't wear certain things because it's like, known to be like, not very mannered. So I feel like that kind of explains that we got sexist problem. How you look, how you judge other people. This is not about gender. I guess, Japan in general. You have to really care about what other thinks. In a way I feel like I am so restricted in Japan. So I guess that could relate to what we talk about in class." *(Chihiro, 21 years old female student)*

The struggles of Chika and Chihiro may seem like different issues contextualized in separate spaces (classroom discussion vs public spaces). However, both have a strong connection with gendered spaces in society. Chika felt uncomfortable about male students being on the edge of discussions where the spotlight shines on women's experiences. She was aware that the gender studies classroom was a specially constructed space where women could freely voice their opinions. The class (discussion) opened a space for Chihiro to reflect that the issues raised in the gender studies class connected to the social control of women in society.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reflected on critical psychology education in a gender studies class through the lens of critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy practices. Specifically, I have attempted to understand how a classroom as a shared physical and social space opens other (emotional, personal, intellectual, reflective) spaces in students. I adopt a student-centred participatory approach through small group discussions. The group discussions provide spaces where students can reflect on gender and sexuality issues, share their experiences and thoughts, and co-construct learning experiences. Group discussions extend the opportunity to explore both universal and manifold experiences for students of different nationalities and diverse cultural backgrounds. Through the group discussion, students become critically aware of the constraining of gender in their lives. The critical awareness of gendered values, systems, and institutions results in transformations of perception and understanding of gender in Japanese society.

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