

**Counselor Education and Supervision
Is Feminism Alive?
Exploring the Feminist Identity
of Counseling Students**

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Introduction

Counselors begin to construct meaning about their client's presenting problems and range of functioning during the initial sessions (Vogel, Epting, & Wester, 2003). This process of making meaning of a client's world and concerns in it can be influenced by the counselor's own socially constructed gender role stereotypes (Hare-Mustin, 1983). These beliefs may be counterproductive to the therapeutic process and restrictive to the client's range of functioning (Vogel, et al 2003). Gender is a socially entrenched, powerful aspect of identity formation and is often unexplored by the general population. Therefore we, as the researchers, believe it is imperative that counselors-in-training be sensitized to gender issues and their subsequent implications for the practice of counseling (Whipple, 1996). Unfortunately, counseling training programs do not adequately address the role of gender issues in counseling (MohdZain, 2001).

Feminism, as a social and political movement, has provided the momentum for overcoming limiting gender scripts and promoting gender equity. Current feminist literature supports the need for research that includes the exploration of counselors' and counselor educators' feminist identities. Graduate students' perceptions of feminism, its role in counseling and counselor education, and their

own feminist identities are a few areas in the forefront. These explorations could be guided by the following three research questions: (a) What role, if any, does feminism play in the identity development of counseling students? (b) What role does feminist identity development play in counselor education? (c) How do graduate counseling students perceive that a feminist identity impacts their counseling practice? The author's intention in seeking answers to these questions is to provide beneficial information to counselor educators, counseling students and professional counselors.

Qualitative research is relevant to the author's line of inquiry because our intention is to capture and honor each individual student's perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The results of a qualitative study provide a richer understanding of the context of the students' responses to our interview questions. As feminist researchers, we are especially attuned to the practices of reflexivity and praxis. Reflexivity highlights the importance of explicit self-examination by the researchers. Practicing reflexivity creates an awareness of conscious and subjective knowledge—What do I know and how do I know it?—overtly and covertly expressed through research assumptions, language, and context (Schram, 2003; Patton, 2002). Praxis establishes the importance of valuing those participating in research, authentically communicating their perspectives and considering the impact of the inquiry on those being researched. This includes the potential for the knowledge provided by the participants to be used in a way that can be empowering and have ongoing impact (Patton, 2002). As identified by Olesen (2000), qualitative feminist research, due to the subjugation of women and the minimization of the reality of gender oppression in society, “centers and makes problematic women's diverse situations as well as the institutions that frame those situations” (p. 216). Furthermore, qualitative research allows for more direct attention to the feminist question of whose knowledges are presented in research (Olesen, 2000), and thus propels us to seek the voices of those who are underrepresented.

Feminist researchers do not make the assumption of having exclusive, uninhibited access to insider information of those interviewed (Oleson, 2000). They recognize and seek to understand

the cultural, historical, and social circumstances in which perspectives were developed, including their own. Personally, the author's collective experience as researchers includes being White women in a counselor education doctoral program. We self-identify as feminists. Our familiarity with the topic emerges from personal interests, in addition to overlapping academic interest for coursework and dissertation preparation.

The authors collaboratively constructed a definition of feminism that amalgamates each of our perspectives, *developmental feminism*. Developmental feminism recognizes gender as a central organizing identity for men and women that interacts with other identities: Culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class in diverse and overlapping ways, such that the dominant gender, male, has a disproportionate allotment of power and opportunity. Developmental feminism integrates and fuses inclusive tenets from several feminist philosophies that have emerged during the last forty years—socialist feminism, academic feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, activist feminism, eco-feminism, multicultural feminism, lesbian feminism, and liberal feminism. Thus the construct of developmental feminism is fluid and continually evolving. It also allows individuals to be accepted at their particular developmental level and encouraged to embrace new information in order to enhance personal growth and to explore their unique feminist identities. An implicit goal of feminism is to achieve liberation of societal oppression of women in a male-dominated, patriarchal society by creating an opportunity for greater awareness and a richer landscape of knowledge for experiencing life. A second goal is to promote harmony rather than division among women and between men and women, while honoring diversity and establishing unity and cohesion (Whipple, 1996). The differences in the roles that men and women experience in life reflect the unequal power distribution that is pervasive, yet often covert. Even everyday circumstances are open to gendered power analysis (Oleson, 2000). Developmental feminism asserts that there are multiple meanings of the gendered experience, as well as communal group experiences of women and men as gendered beings.

Due to the powerful effect of socially constructed gender roles on the cognitive conceptualization skills of human beings, it is important to create favorable circumstances to increase consciousness and sensitize individuals around these issues. The need for counselors and counselor educators to be given the opportunity to investigate the concepts of feminism and their own feminist identity is vital for facilitating positive counseling outcomes, yet is rarely offered in any setting (MohdZain, 2001). Being challenged to consider what often amounts to covert and embedded oppression of women may provoke disequilibrium in counseling students as they begin to assimilate and accommodate new information. A supportive environment, an open forum for discussion, and guided reflection will assist counselors-in-training to alleviate ensuing disequilibria.

Developing an identity as a feminist is an ongoing process impacted by positive and negative life events (e.g., parenting, divorce, and career change). Many women will recycle through the Feminist Identity Development (FID) stages proposed by Downing and Roush (1985) several times. These stages were developed to illustrate the progression of a feminist identity and are based on Cross's (1971) Black Identity Development Model. In the first stage of the FID model, *passive acceptance*, individual's oppression is accepted or denied; women's subordination to men is preferred. The second stage, *revelation*, emerges after a crisis and is marked by dichotomous thinking (i.e., men are bad, women are good). The third stage is called *embeddedness-emanation* and is characterized by a confirmation of the collectivity of women. Stage four is termed *synthesis* and is discernible by an increasing value for female qualities. *Active commitment* in the fifth stage entails the combination of personal fulfillment and commitment to societal change. Cross's model has been updated since its original publication and recommendations for change have been documented for the FID model, yet not implemented (Moradi & Phillips, 2002).

Applying the cognitive developmental theoretical model set forth by Sprinthal (1978) to the Downing and Roush model, the lower the feminist identity developmental level, the greater the ratio of support to challenge necessary for growth. An educative format that balances

support with challenge and is designed to promote stage growth is called the deliberate psychological education (DPE) model (Sprinthall, 1978). The DPE model can be used in counselor education when teaching feminist theory to counseling students. It includes the combination of reflection with a new role-taking experience (such as that experienced by counseling students in their first clinical work) balanced in an environment that supports and challenges thought to stimulate growth (Kaiser & Ancellotti, 2003). Cognitive developmental theory asserts that human psychological growth, similar to feminist identity development, occurs in a predictable series marked by the expansion of increasingly complex cognitive structures, with lower stages being marked by more concrete thought and higher levels being marked by the ability to assimilate and accommodate more complex information (Sprinthall, 1978). At higher levels, people are able to explore a broader range of perspectives and this may increase counselor aptitude.

Using the Feminist Identity Model proposed by Downing and Roush (1985), with an overarching focus on cognitive developmental theory, the author's goal is to encourage counselor educators to create a safe environment for counseling students at varying developmental levels to explore the effects of feminism and their feminist identity on counseling practice and instruction. Qualitative research findings will provide rich information, a context for understanding these issues and exploring counseling students' own perceptions of feminism.

Summary

Developmental feminism is invested in the concepts of inclusion, integration, equity, acceptance and growth. While incorporating cognitive developmental theoretical concepts, the intent of developmental feminism is to promote harmony and cohesion. Due to the social construction of personal identity this perspective allows individuals to examine their own feminist identity, development at their own unique developmental levels. It is the authors' hope that insights developed through this process will reprise enthusiasm for feminism, anchor the importance of analyzing ones' own feminist

identity, and inspire the inclusion of feminist principles in counselor education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, feminism continues to develop and must adapt to be inclusive of diverse populations; however, it is in danger of being subsumed by the equally important concept of multiculturalism. Distinctly including feminist thought in counselor education is a step towards keeping feminism alive for future development of counseling.

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