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Article 6

The Personal is Political: Using Feminist Theory as a Model of Career and Employment Counseling

Joanne Jodry and Kathleen Armstrong

Jodry, Joanne, is a Specialist Professor at Monmouth University where she focuses her career interests in feminist theory, spirituality, and world religions. She also owns a private practice where she incorporates her research and teaching experiences into clinical practice.

Armstrong, Kathleen L., is an Adjunct Professor at Monmouth University. Ms. Armstrong has a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. She has done presentations on feminist theory in counseling, including areas of counseling, supervision, pedagogy, and mentoring.

Egalitarian principles, recognition of oppressive systems, gender roles, and other core beliefs of feminist theory hold many implications for the career and employment disciplines of professional counseling. Feminist counseling theory sees all people as equal and is based in advocacy for social justice, advocacy within oppressive social environments, and the recognition of privilege and oppression based on patriarchal norms of most societies. “Feminist consciousness also includes a commitment to ending all forms of domination, oppression, and privilege that intersect with sexism and gender bias, including (but not limited to) racism, classism, colonialism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, white supremacy, ageism, and ableism” (Enns, 2004, p. 8).

According to the National Career Development Association (NCDA), the career and employment counseling mission “is to promote the career development of all people over the life span.” (NCDA, 2009b). To achieve this mission, “NCDA provides service to the public and professionals involved with or interested in career development, including professional development activities, publications, research, public information, professional standards, advocacy, and recognition for achievement and service” (NCDA, 2009a). Incorporating feminist theory into career and employment counseling could include recognitions of historical and contemporary oppressions, patriarchal limitations in the workplaces, social and personal gender biases, and self limiting self-images based on cultural and economic and family value contexts.

Some specific underpinnings of feminist theory to be considered within a career and employment counseling context are:

1. Egalitarian relationships. The counseling relationship within feminist theory lacks any hierarchy. The career counselor can easily be seen as an expert or teacher by the client, due to the amount of information giving, testing, etc. It is incumbent

- upon the feminist career counselor to create an atmosphere of equality by accepting the expertise the counselor holds (training and experience), while also accepting the expertise the client holds (his or her own life experience, feelings, values, goals, decisions). In this perspective, neither expertise trumps the other – rather, both are needed to create an equal relationship through which to explore client issues. So how does a counselor create an egalitarian relationship when much of the duties include psychoeducation, interpretation and direction? Ideas to be considered while trying to create egalitarian relationships include: a) Proper use of self-disclosure; b) Allowing much of the interpretation of testing to be guided by the counselors but completed by the clients; c) Consistent encouragement and empowerment with the clients and not being too directive (allowing the clients to make decisions surrounding what testing, what investigative activities, etc.); and perhaps most importantly, d) Counselors' feeling competent and secure in their professional efficacy so that they do not need to "show" expertise to clients through "knowing" more than they do.
2. Global recognition of oppression and privilege. The competent feminist career counselor understands the interplay of multicultural, environmental, and social influences with clients' psyches. Counselors have respect and understanding for differences in culture with clients from diverse backgrounds. It is also imperative that the counselor take historical; political; contemporary social norms; oppressive systems; glass ceilings; and internalized messages around competency, intellect, abilities, etc. into consideration as part of the career counseling process. There needs to be both recognition of and advocacy regarding oppression and multiple oppressions once they are recognized.
 3. Social, historical, and personal identities are intertwined. "The Political is Personal" is often the mantra of the collective of feminist counselors. As part of the career counseling process, there needs to be understanding and acknowledgement by the clients of personal privilege and oppression, and how these relate to career options and choices. Privileges and/or oppressions, and their psychological impacts, can be processed through a variety of lenses with clients. Areas to consider include, but are not limited to: career histories, social histories, family messages, emotions, morals, education, sexuality, economics, race, roles, etc.
 4. Multiple oppressions are recognized. Additionally, it is the feminist career counselor's function to help the client to explore personal multiple oppressions, as they relate to potential career choices. For example, a lesbian woman would be considered to have multiple oppressions. How does her sexuality and gender intersect when deciding about career choices in terms of social acceptance, socialization, and expectations?
 5. Empowerment and freedom are the goals. The goals of feminist theory include shedding the patriarchal internalized norms so that people are free and empowered to make their differentiated decisions about all life tasks, including career choices. Helping clients toward that goal is a journey of awareness, recognition, advocacy, and empowerment.
 6. Clients know what is best for them. Helping clients to explore outside the box of their own internalized patriarchal messages allows clients to open new

possibilities. There may be some clients who are resistant to these ideas. Use of the word “feminist” might conjure images of man-haters, burning bras, and radical thought. Counselors may want to avoid the feminist word and replace it with “freedom.” If clients are resistant to want to explore and challenge current ideas that are in place, they know what is best for them. The uniqueness of everyone’s personal journey and the right to choose anything is a basic premise of feminist theory.

Special Considerations of Feminist Career Counseling

Patriarchal Systems Are Still in Place

Although it may be tempting to believe that patriarchal systems are lessened to the point of nonexistence, current research indicates that traditional gender issues still exist in career matters. For example, women continue to face challenges in terms of career advancement to managerial positions (Schein, 2001). After two decades of research, Schein (2001) describes female managers in the U.S. as generally believing that both males and females can equally hold managerial potential, whereas male managers still believe that males are inherently more qualified than females for management positions. Since females continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in many corporations (Dencker, 2008), this is a troubling finding.

Other aspects of patriarchy also exist. Women may be overrepresented in part-time work, which can allow for flexibility between work and family/home demands – while this may work wonderfully for individual women, it may also continue the gender inequality of work in the home sphere (Webber & Williams, 2008). This issue could be examined with clients on a case-by-case basis. Also, women may be at some disadvantage when it comes to some forms of networking. For “nonsearchers”, that is, people who find a job without doing a formal job search (through personal or professional contacts), males in mid-career find jobs with higher wages than do those males doing formal career searches. For female nonsearchers, this trend was not found, even for those women with the most previous work experience (McDonald & Elder, 2006). Therefore, males may be better positioned than are women in terms of professional networking which could lead to job offers. This finding suggests that career counselors may need to help females find creative ways to tap into networking potential.

Alternative Theories of Career Development

Feminist career counselors can work within many different theories, including traditional career development theories. However, it is also important to remain aware of newer theories that take into account perspectives of privilege, oppression, and social justice. One such theory is the psychology-of-working perspective by Blustein, Kenna, Gill, and DeVoy (2008). This theory was developed to attempt to address the many career counseling clients who do not live in circumstances that allow them to make career choices based on traditional constructs of interests and values. The psychology-of-working perspective allows a counselor and client to explore career needs based on survival, social connection, and self-determination. Blustein et al. (2008) advocate for counselors to be fully cognizant of oppressions and marginalization, as well as barriers that clients face. They also seek to help clients maximize career satisfaction even in the

face of jobs that may be less than intrinsically satisfying. Because this theory builds on work in fields of feminism and multiculturalism, it seems to be a good one with which feminist counselors could become familiar.

Just a Stay at Home Mom... or Dad

Society has many judgments about “stay at home” people. There are strong arguments that support and respect the role of homemaker and caregiver and some that devalue and criticize people who do not “really” work. The argument on both sides is often so passionate that it confounds the psyche and often results in guilt, injured self-efficacy, and indecision. Wintrob (2001) suggested that women make less money and have decreased upward mobility in the workplace because of feelings of familial desertion. Feminist career counselors might include this topic in the discussion of differentiation and freedom. For clients to have real freedom to decide on career choices, they need to explore their internalized values around this topic. For men, in particular, there is often so much stigma attached to this choice of staying at home that it may be prohibitive and male clients may not allow it to be a true consideration.

Other gendered stereotypes can also be influential. If it has been difficult for females to break into traditionally male careers, it can also be equally difficult for males to pursue traditionally female careers. A recent report from Great Britain illustrated that while approximately a quarter of boys surveyed said they would be interested in doing caring work (like child care), only 3% of child care apprentices are, indeed, male (Hayes, 2005). A number of factors may influence this finding, including deeply-held stereotypes about career appropriateness for different genders. Such findings illustrate that male clients, as well as female clients, could benefit from career counseling around nontraditional career options.

Considerations of the Current Family Systems

Current family systems must be taken into account when working within a feminist career model. The client needs to find a balance that will work within the system so no one member is overburdened by disproportionate work, play, or a particular role...unless it is a clear decision to do so. Couples in particular need to look at role expectations within the system and take into account how career decisions may affect that system. Parker and Almeida (2001), for example, attempted to expand the idea of “balance” in family systems from white heterosexual couples to family systems that fall outside of those traditional patriarchal norms. Also, Shapira-Berman (2004) studied 96 married Israeli couples to examine if there was a difference in perception of freedom of choice surrounding marital tasks. Even though the task allocation fell heavier on the women in the relationships, the women reported a greater sense of free choice than did the men. It is the feminist career counselor’s goal to help the clients differentiate from society’s internalized messages and create more freedom and choice related to careers; as long as they make decisions with full knowledge of the context, it is a free decision.

Power and Control

Power differentials in the client’s life are underpinnings to the concept of feminist theory. The clients need to explore many aspects of power in their lives – who holds it? When? How is that expressed? Do clients give away their power, or retain it? For

example, most men in traditional relationships do not have an issue surrounding whether or not they will change their name at the point of marriage. Women, however, often change their names for traditional reasons to their husbands' names. For some women, changing their names could be an entirely positive outward sign of marriage. For others, this may not be so. If a great deal of a woman's personal identity is tied to her surname, she may not want to change it, but may feel pressured to do so. If women are not allowed to process this change and make their own decisions about it, they may be blindly following patriarchal norms, and therefore can be viewed as giving away their power over this identity issue. Research on women's name changes suggests that characteristics associated with women who do not take their spouse's names are: 1) having feminist attitudes; 2) being older at point of marriage; 3) having higher levels of career commitment; 4) placing less value on the role of motherhood (Hoffnung, 2006).

As a feminist career counselor, it is important to help the client explore the differentiation related to power and control between self and others. The feminist career therapist might ask questions like: Who has the power in your life? Can we explore both unconsciously and consciously, times when it was given away? How did you come to the formation of beliefs about external locus of control and external validation? How was/is your self-efficacy established? Based in what context? When do you feel successful or unsuccessful, and is that contingent on approval from anyone else?

Testing

Categorizing clients into typologies could be injurious to people who have been oppressed by systems in the past. For example, SAT scores can limit students' possibilities. Academic testing determines your "groupings" in school and may or may not reflect the whole person. Being labeled can have negative implications for self-esteem. Women and men have been grouped into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals for many years in Axis II categories based on societal injuries. One of the most important parts of feminist theory is that individual stories hold as much value as quantitative testing. It is important for the feminist career counselor to be considerate with testing and after the clients are empowered, they can decide if the testing would be helpful...or not.

Developmental Model of Feminist Career and Employment Counseling: Freedom of Career Choice Theory

In this model of feminist career and employment counseling, we seek to address how to explore career issues at any stage of career development through a lens of feminist principles. As stated before, the relationship between counselor and client is key, and must be a priority. Additionally, clients are exposed to feminist principles and invited (but never required) to explore how these principles may help them reflect on their past, and future, career journeys. As such, this is not a "value free" perspective, and can include aspects of psychoeducation and broad discussion of the whole client, and not just a narrow focus on getting or retaining a job. Clients are viewed as fitting into (or nearer) to one stage upon beginning the career counseling. Interventions are therefore based on and adapted for the stage where each client finds himself or herself.

Stage One: Creation of career images. In this stage, cognitive schemas develop based on roles, careers, duties, leisure, mannerisms, and behaviors that the child experiences and connects with gender, race, good, bad, valued by family of origin or not, etc. This is not necessarily realized by the client and part of the process may be understood as “truth” or the “way it is.” It is the feminist career counselor’s job to help the client realize these beliefs or biases concerning career choices. This stage often begins at early stages of life in young childhood but may continue to be reinforced throughout a lifetime. Without helping the clients reveal their inner beliefs that have been set in place by the patriarchal norms, they may go through life without an awareness that there may be other career possibilities. Therefore, a younger client may fit into this stage as the career schemas are developing; likewise, an older client may also fit this stage if these cognitive schemas are already in place.

Stage Two: Vision expansion. In this stage, clients can envision themselves in other, nontraditional careers based on gender, race, sexuality, etc. They discuss realistic visions based on their internalized values due to the patriarchal societal norms. In this stage, the clients can think outside of their own social boxes and ideas of “right and wrong” related to roles that are appropriate for types of people.

Stage Three: Differentiation from patriarchal norms. In this stage, the feminist career counselor explores the client’s personal patriarchal injuries to the psyche, self-esteem, and self efficacy. The feminist career counselor explores past personal oppression and self limiting due to beliefs of the patriarchal messages that have been internalized. In this stage, the clients decide if they would like to keep these values or reject them. If they chose to embrace values that are consistent with the societal standards, the clients can now own them as a conscious decision as opposed to a belief that was given to them. If the client refuses to accept the societal standards related to careers, the client can broaden choices.

Stage Four: Freedom of choice. Once a client has fully explored the context of limitations, the client is then free to make decisions based in a new context. The client can chose from all possibilities rather than the opportunity or lack of opportunity based on patriarchal values and design. For clients to be truly free, they must unlearn the norms that have been given to them by the patriarchal society and explore the options based on their own well thought out beliefs.

Stage Five: Choosing for now with flexibility for later. The point of the career freedom is that clients have unlimited possibilities, not just the ones designated to them by birth, culture, and values. Consequently, the freedom is now owned and the client can explore the same or different possibilities for the future at any time. At the same time, counselors work with clients regarding the reality of both benefits and potential challenges of making free career choices. Counselors also help clients become self-advocates for free career choices.

Stage Six: Re-evaluate if needed. Follow up with the clients to see if they still feel that the choices that they made were based in freedom. Point out how this freedom relates to

other areas of their lives as well. Introduce ideas of advocacy and social justice, if appropriate.

Advocacy Efforts

From a feminist perspective, counselors need to not only educate clients about oppressive systems, but they also need to be advocates for a just society (Jodry & Trotman, 2008). In feminist career counseling, it is necessary to work with clients on how to navigate oppressive systems, while advocating to change them. In terms of the feminist career model presented, counselors can help clients self-advocate at any stage. In addition, as with other multicultural and social justice perspectives in counseling, it is hoped that feminist career counselors would be advocates for change through several avenues: from working with individual clients, to educational and training efforts within systems, to efforts in public policy arenas. Advocacy efforts need to continue on multiple levels if we are ever to live in a society where freedom of career choice can truly exist.

Techniques That Can Be Used Within This Feminist Career Model

Freedom Career Choice “techniques” for career and employment counselors to explore feminist theoretical principles with clients might include:

1. *Career power analysis.* The goal of a career power analysis is to explore how and to whom power is given by the client when making decisions surrounding career choices. The career counselor might ask: Who has influence in my career decision making? Am I trying to impress or gain approval from anyone by career choice? Who has sent the messages to me about money? Power and career goals? Am I differentiated from my family, historical, political and social messages and free to make clear decisions? Are my options limited by oppressive values sent to me by the patriarchal mainstream society? What are the ways I take my power back? Are they functional adaptive ways? How will all of this interact with career choices? Who is better than me? Who knows more than me?
2. *Gender analysis.* The goal of the gender analysis is to evaluate how gender has affected career options and choices of the client. Exploration might include ideas surrounding roles and places of genders, duties assigned at birth due to gender, and the ways the family of origin values people differently based on gender. A *Gender Career Genogram* might be helpful by exploring the family history and what careers have been held by gender.
3. *Guided career fantasy.* A relaxation exercise with a client which includes guided imagery of different careers and how it would feel to have those careers. The career counselor might want to include telling people who are “power” figures in the clients’ life about their career choices and measure the levels of anxiety. Additionally, non-traditional career choices may be explored as well.
4. *Feminist definition of success.* This existential exercise helps the clients to define a differentiated definition of success. Exploration of meaning of life, freedom of choices without societal influences and how values differ from families of origin, etc. *Watch use of the “F” word.* It is important not to create defensiveness by using the word “feminist” before it is defined in the counseling process. Helping the clients to define success by their differentiated personal standards helps in career exploration.

5. *Internalized messages or Who's in my head?* This is an exploration of the internal script surrounding career options and choices. The feminist career counselor then challenges the messages and attempts to investigate the context of the messages. New choices are explored from a feminist egalitarian context. This can be done in free association exercises. For example, name a career and ask them to quickly answer who they envision in that role. Additionally, one can show pictures of careers and ask the clients if that is a possibility and why or why not.

Additionally, constructivist career exploration exercises may be used within a feminist perspective. Constructivist techniques include the deconstruction of meaning in clients' lives thus far, and assisting them to create meaning for the next part of their lives, including their careers (Brott, 2004). Constructivist techniques can help clients learn about their own subjective meaning-making, while a feminist overlay can help to point out how gender and other social constructs may affect this meaning-making.

6. *Card sorts.* Card sorts can be used in a number of ways. Traditional card sorts can be used, such as cards of different occupations being sorted by the client into piles of jobs of interest, jobs not of interest, and jobs that may be of interest (Brott, 2004). These piles can then be processed by a client and counselor using gender and/or power analyses. Furthermore, clients themselves can generate cards (or concepts) and then sort them into meaningful hierarchies. For example, a counselor can help a client identify desired aspects of a career choice (financial security, time to be with family, a sense of making a difference, personal status, etc.), and then ask the client to rank the choices from most important to least important. This hierarchy can be processed through a feminist lens – for example, if a female client prioritizes personal status, how might societal messages influence her journey? If a male client wants to express his artistry through flower design, how might societal messages about gender or sexual orientation impact him?
7. *Life role analysis.* This exercise “helps the client to examine the costs and benefits of role expectations as defined by culture and gender” (Brott, 2005, p.144). A life role analysis includes aspects of the *gender analysis*, *career power analysis*, and *Who's in my head?* exercises listed above. In life role analysis, the client identifies messages received from various sources about gender and career, and then processes the positive and negative aspects of these messages. This analysis allows for the possibility of rejecting harmful messages while retaining (or creating) positive messages (Brott, 2005). The “pros and cons” approach of the life role analysis may make it appealing to clients who prefer to process choices in that manner, but it also allows both counselor and client to creatively and collaboratively explore the impact of gender on career development.

Infusing feminist theory into career and employment counseling can add significantly to the clients' experience and process of career exploration and decisions. The above model is advocating for assisting clients to differentiate from the patriarchal society's historical, traditional, and oppressive values and norms. Once the clients have differentiated from society, they are then free to make real differentiated choices and possibilities may open additional conversations and options related to careers.

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