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A Call to the Profession: Incorporating Feminist Competencies into Professional Counseling

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Professional Counselors pride themselves on stressing the importance of all counselors' becoming competent about issues of multiculturalism. Multicultural competence is an

important practical and conceptual underpinning of Professional Counseling.

At its core, multicultural teaching is an ethical, even political, enterprise. Its aim is not just to impart lots of interesting facts, to equip students to be proficient trivial pursuit players, but to help make the world a better place. It highlights injustice of all kinds – racial, gender, class, linguistic, ethnic national, environmental – in order to make explanations and propose solutions. It recognizes our responsibility to fellow human beings and the earth. It has heart and soul (Bigelow, 1999, p. 5).

Feminist therapy has the same *core*. “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).

Although feminist theory is based on promoting gender/sexuality competence in psychotherapy, as well as, multicultural competence, feminism appears to be underutilized in counseling practice and infrequently cited in the Professional Counseling literature. The counseling relationship is a holistic, wellness model, as is feminist theory. Wyche and Rice (1997) wrote that “to operationalize this value, the feminist therapist focuses on the client’s strengths, not deficits. ‘Symptoms’ then are viewed as adaptive strategies in the face of oppression and adversity” (p. 61).

Both Counseling and Feminism reject the mainstream patriarchal, medical model as a conceptual philosophy or a treatment modality for counseling. Counseling rejects the medical *illness* model and replaces it with a *wellness* model which allows for holistic respect and understanding for clients. Feminism historically began to reject the medical model because of the patriarchal view of women’s pathology and treatment in mental health (Chesler, 1972).

Multicultural counseling promotes an egalitarian relationship between counselor and client; such is also a basic principle of Feminist Counseling. The goal of the competent multicultural counselor is to create a space in which a client can be understood in the context of his/ her culture, gender, sexuality, etc., and free from judgment in order to facilitate healing. Similarly, the goal of feminist therapists is to empower a client to break from patterns of societal oppression and heal.

Social justice and advocacy have been a part of the Counseling Profession’s roots from the beginning of its history in school settings. Advocacy is a large part of the counseling role as cited in the American Counseling Association’s ethical guidelines of 2005. As stated, (in A.6a) “...when appropriate, counselors advocate at individual, group, institutional and societal levels to examine potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or growth and development of clients.” The “personal is political” is the mantra of modern feminist theory. Feminist counselors believe that the social, political,

patriarchal, etc., systems and policies interplay with the mental health of individuals. “The idea of pathology is moved from being located in individuals to be located in social environments” (Remer, 2008, p. 414). As one can see, social and political issues and advocacy are underpinnings of concerns for both multicultural counselors and feminist theorists. “Multiculturalism is a social-intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect and as equals”(Fowers & Richardson, 1996, p. 2). Similarly, Feminism is a social-intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups (including genders) be treated with respect and as equals.

Recently the Social Justice Division of the American Counseling Association has been recognized to advocate for inequalities and injustices. In addition to the existing *Counselors for Social Justice* and the *Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development*, a ‘*Gender Studies*’ or ‘*Woman’s Division*’ of the American Counseling Association should be considered going forward. Since both counseling and feminist theory promote egalitarianism, perhaps a coordinated relationship with existing feminist groups, with established foremothers, could be integrated. The egalitarian concepts of feminism are a natural bridge between helping and mental health disciplines.

Counseling is a profession populated by people who strive toward individuation and personal growth; also an objective of feminist theory. The multiculturally-competent counselor understands and embraces enough about other cultures to understand that everyone is an equal individual; a principle in feminist theory. Some in the Counseling Profession have felt oppressed by other helping professions, insurance providers, legislation, etc. The feminist movement in psychotherapy promotes equality for and welcomes all of the healing professions as equals.

Basic Concepts of Feminist theory include:

1. *Viewing all people regardless of their gender or culture within the context of society.* In addition to processing counseling information through a cultural lens, the feminist counselor conceptualizes past and present social constraints (due to gender, culture, etc.) and hence, considers the current psychological damage that society has placed on the individual;
2. *Promoting egalitarian relationships in all settings, including the counseling relationship.* Feminists reject the patriarchal medical models in the therapeutic relationship. The goal of counseling is to empower the client, within the context of counseling, towards psychological strength in equality;
3. *Realizing that social and personal identities are intertwined.* The individual conceptually cannot be removed from his/her history (socially and personally). There are always underpinnings of social privilege and/or oppression; traditional psychological theories, as well as all other societal norms, are based in patriarchy. Government policies,

history books, religious dogma, cultural norms, work places, literature, and all other parts of society interplay with a person's self image, self-efficacy goals, and expectations. Due to the psychological and emotional limits and expectations placed on people by society, well-being is often wounded. Most traditional psychological theories (incorporating acceptance of gender roles, ignorance of cultural differences and the role of social oppression) now need both multicultural and feminist principles integrated into them, as automatically as counselors incorporate empathy into their practices.

As one can see, feminist theory and Multicultural Professional Counseling have much in common. Yet many counselors have been underexposed to feminist theory as it relates to the process of counseling. Although in the scheme of psychological theories, feminist theory is in its infancy. The same could be said about multicultural theory. As cited in *Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Standards: A Call to the Profession*, Sue, Arredeondo, and McDavis (1992) wrote that:

Despite the long history of warnings and recommendations concerning the need to develop a multicultural perspective in the counseling profession and the need to develop multicultural competencies and standards, it is ironic that the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development finds itself continuing to justify its concerns. (p. 477)

Similarly, possible resistances to the infusion of feminist theory will be examined here:

1. *"The turmoil is over; can't we just all get along?"* The word "feminism" often triggers images of unsettled times in American history. It brings emotions connected to histories of bras burning in the streets, riots, anger, hatred, and fear. These images in our society have been subverted by the materialistic culture of consumerism. In fact, the trend has begun in the mental health world of calling clients "consumers." This may indicate a shift toward the materialistic society that Americans have embraced. The word "feminist" may be perceived to endanger the blissfulness ease of assimilation.

2. *"They're all man haters."* Concepts of Radical Feminism have been mutated and are often associated with images of man-hating women. Unjustified visions of angry woman can make feminist theory feel exclusionary to men and some women. Nothing could be further from the reality of feminist theory. In actuality, men, women, gay, bisexual and transgender people are equally empowered to shed unfair societal roles and expectations which allow for health, wellness, and individuation. "The nurturance of multiculturalism is expected to enrich all of us through understanding and interacting with the multiple sources of meaning and the vastly expanded cultural resources available in a truly multicultural society" (Fowers & Richardson, 1996, p. 4); the same is true of feminism.

3. *"The patriarchy is the norm."* The "melting pot" culture of assimilation may contribute to a hesitation in embracing the "feminist model." The feminist model calls into question the patriarchal authority of traditions, systems, and hierarchies. As immigrants come to

the American culture, they are compelled to embrace patriarchal American traditions set forth in Judeo-Christian underpinnings. This becomes basic Darwinian survival. The immigrant must conform in order to survive and thrive. Likewise, most children, immigrant or not, are raised in the conformity, assimilation model with little understanding that it is happening. Assimilation often becomes the “right” way to do things as opposed to the “wrong.” Assimilation continues to often promote sameness, not rightness.

4. *“We tend to identify with the oppressor.”* If you tell a lie long enough it may become the truth. Most counselors have been confronted with clients who are treated unfairly by systems. Many of the systems in society are broken, or at least have broken parts. These systems include the schools, the law, the government, child protective agencies, health care, insurances, etc. All of these systems have a patriarchal lineage that gives unspoken privileges to the privileged. At some level of consciousness, many people accept an unspoken agreement to the justification of that privilege.

5. *“We have reached the mountain top?”* When did the civil rights and feminist movements end? There is not a specific moment in history when it was declared over, but it seems to have ended. There was a point of feeling some success, and then it was gone. Some say it was the Civil Rights Act of 1964, others attribute it to government suppression, assassination, deportation, jailing of major proponents, or feelings of frustration, helplessness, hopelessness, and fatigue. Whatever the reason, once resistance is over, people tend to move on with assimilation, even at the risk of personal mental health.

6. *“Who cares about equality?”* The American culture has had a shift in the passionate focus from “us” to “me.” People today may be more superficially connected and intimately isolated due to technology, influences of media, and changing social norms. Adolescents are finding identities in cultural sexual shifts that lower self-esteem and devalue both feminine and masculine humanness. The focus of the culture is technology and consumerism. Inequality and unfairness have moved to the cultural background.

7. *“Women’s ‘femininity’ is valued.”* Women are raised not to “rock the boat”. Counseling is a woman-dominated profession. There are certain ‘feminine’ constructs that are valued in our society like charm, sweetness, and consideration of others. These traits may not always be compatible with advocacy work. Feminist theory does not embrace those traits as feminine. Likewise, men are often raised to gain self-esteem from being a financial supporter and emotionally barren. Feminist theory does not embrace these social pigeon holes as masculine.

8. *“Psychology and Counseling.”* The foremothers of the feminist psychotherapy movement began their roots in psychology. As reported by Remer (2008) concerning the history of the feminist therapeutic movement, the American Psychological Association (APA) produced a report in 1975 on *sex bias and sex-role stereotyping in*

psychotherapeutic practice. Due to some disagreements with those in more mainstream APA- Division 35 (including the roles of the patriarchy, medical model treatment plans, and a desire to work with other disciplines), organizations such as the Association of Women in Psychology have emerged to be strong independent forces in the feminist theory world. While Counseling continues to mature and nurture professional independence of identity, there may be hesitation to join forces with groups that have risen through other disciplines.

9. “*What about other theories?*” Authors of *Theories and Techniques of Counseling* books have begun to include Feminist theory (Corey, 2005; Frew & Spiegler, 2008). Some may imagine that feminist theory may conflict with other theories and treatment modalities. This would be the same argument as multicultural competencies being in conflict with other theories. Feminist principles can be seen as a point of view that can coexist with most, if not all, counseling theories and techniques.

Sue, et al. (1992) proposes a basic minimum of multicultural competence for all counselors to continue to educate themselves on client’s culture and worldview without judgment. In addition, Sue, et al. (1992) challenged each counselor to stay “actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations and so forth” (p. 481). This article (i.e., Sue, et.al., 1992) set the guidelines for multicultural competencies that most counselor education programs use to train counseling students, as well as, set the standard for multicultural *best practices*. Feminist concepts now need to be similarly considered. This article is suggesting a feminist augmentation to multicultural competencies. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, a division of the American Counseling Association, has outlined and divided multicultural competencies into three categories: 1) Counselors’ Awareness of Own Cultural Values and Bias; 2) Counselors’ Awareness of Client as a Worldview; 3) Culturally Appropriate Intervention Strategies. In addition to the existing objectives, the following feminist principles would deepen gender understanding and cultural healing:

1. *Personal Counselor Awareness* includes a counselor gender-role analysis (Worell & Remer, 2003) and an understanding of personal areas of societal privileges and oppression. Each counselor needs to understand oppression and privilege as it relates to gender, sexual orientation, etc., as well as cultural history and norms.
2. *Counselors Awareness of Worldview* includes acknowledgement of patriarchal norms infiltrated through society (government, religions, social systems, etc.) and how patriarchy affects gender roles through oppression and privilege. Broken, oppressive, patriarchal societal systems need to be considered as part of the pathology, as opposed to the individual struggling with assimilation.
3. *Culturally appropriate intervention strategies* include a deep understanding and respect for gender and cultural oppression and privilege. Interventions should include considerations of societal oppression to the individual thoughts, self-esteem, self-efficacy and well-being. Advocacy for social justice issues may be

considered as part of interventions.

In addition to the above accompaniments to the multicultural competencies, feminist theory should be infused into counselor education programs, as multicultural counseling has been. Feminist training can be promoted the same way in order to further increase counselor competence. Enns (2004) stated that:

In order to develop a fully integrated feminist counseling approach, it is important for the therapist to have working knowledge of a variety of academic and applied fields of study. These disciplines include but are not limited to the psychology of women and gender; women's, gender and sexuality studies; ethnic, multicultural and global development studies; counseling and psychotherapy theories; sociological perspectives on gender, race, and class; and political science and social change strategies.
(p. 9)

Professional counselors should view feminist competency synonymously with multicultural competency. Both have similar goals, directions and values. Feminist theory enhances multicultural theory and takes it to another level. Where multicultural counselors view clients in a multicultural context so as to consider all factors, feminist counselors also consider the patriarchal, historical culture as part of the psychological wound that needs healing. Although many who strive toward multicultural competencies have greatly improved Professional Counseling discipline through broadening concepts, re-evaluating diagnosis and treatment surrounding mental illness, re-defining personality disorders and emotions, etc., it is still important to continue to move forward. The infusion of Feminist Theory and Competencies into the profession of Counseling moves us in a forward direction.

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