
Application of the Feminist Perspective in Social Work Practice with Women in Abusive Relationships

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Working with women who have been abused by an intimate partner is something many social workers do at some point in their careers. Most have heard, and were likely taught, that approaches to working with abused women are based on the feminist perspective. However, although feminist theories have been developed, it is still difficult for some social workers to explain what they mean by “feminist perspective”. This paper will briefly discuss how the feminist perspective differs from feminist theories, will address five tenets of the feminist perspective as applied to situations where intimate partner violence (IPV) is present, and discuss areas where the application of this perspective can be strengthened.

From the beginning of feminism, creating and aligning with a theory has been controversial. One reason was the fear that the construction of feminist theories would create a group of elite that would isolate the views of other feminists, consequently silencing their voices (Orme, 2003). Additionally, the alignment of feminism with postmodern thinking challenged established knowledge, raising questions about creating additional theories, which would be a contribution to this already established knowledge (Van Den Berg, 1995). Although theories were developed, some believe the original reluctance to define feminism led to a lack of a clear model for feminist social work practice (Payne, 2005).

In light of the proliferation of feminist theories, which seek to explain women’s lives and experiences in the context of a society beset with gender inequality, feminism can no longer be treated as one theory (Collins, 1986; Gould, 1987). Additionally, this proliferation has made it difficult to explain why we believe we are using feminist interventions in any given situation giving the appearance of a divided voice (Orme, 2003). One way in which feminists have sought to bring clarity to the broad feminist philosophy has been by highlighting principles that represent common ideologies or enduring themes (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986; Gould, 1987; Van Voorhis, 2008). In general, these themes have brought unity to feminist thought and are ideologies that most feminists can endorse. Ideologies such as empowerment, unity and diversity, and the belief that the personal is political (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986) bring feminist theories together and allow us to speak of a feminist perspective.

The Feminism Perspective and Intimate Partner Violence

One area of social work where the feminist perspective has been widely utilized is the area of IPV (Orme, 2003). It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that IPV was recognized as an issue in need of public attention. Feminists were the first to publicly identify this societal ill (Bograd, 1988; Gould, 1987; Orme, 2003); a problem that women were experiencing in the secret of their own homes. Since then, feminist analysis has been used to describe and explore IPV, the area to which feminists have perhaps contributed the most knowledge (Orme, 2003).

From a feminist perspective, the problem of IPV is rooted in a patriarchal system that in many ways supports and promotes violence against women (Bograd, 1988; Gutierrez, 1987; Shepard, 1991; Sugihara & Warner, 2002). This violence, mainly perpetrated by men toward women, is one expression of a socially learned desire to control and exert power over an intimate partner (Gould, 1987; Sugihara & Warner, 2002). Furthermore, it is connected to society’s

broad support of a culture of dominance and aggression (Shepard, 1991). Feminists see IPV as a social issue that demands attention. This perspective takes the responsibility for the violence away from victims and places it on perpetrators and society. The following section outlines five ideological themes of the feminist perspective as they apply to social work practice and IPV.

It is important to clarify that using a feminist perspective does not mean that there are prescribed steps to follow in an intervention. The following feminist values serve as the basis for many feminist social work interventions and they start with the premise that patriarchal attitudes create and promote violence against women. Additionally, it should be recognized that although a majority of intimate abuse in this society is perpetrated by men toward women, there are cases where men are also abused. This issue, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Empowerment is an important tenet of the feminist perspective (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986) as well as of the social work profession. Empowerment can be employed in many ways when working with women in abusive relationships, and one fundamental area is that of addressing who is responsible for the abuse. It is imperative that social workers help women understand that the abuse is not their fault. This empowers women to achieve greater control over their lives, and helps them understand how the dynamics of power at various levels affect their lives. In many cases, women feel they are the reason for their partner's abuse and blame themselves for the relationship's failure. Social workers are in a position of helping women understand relationship dynamics that can allow them to see their role in relationships in a different light. Additionally, social workers need to be aware that as women are empowered to make their own decisions those decisions may not always correspond with what the worker would see as the best alternative.

In order for women to be empowered, they need to understand the dynamics of patriarchy. This includes their understanding of a system in which women have learned to accept and fulfill certain roles (Sugihara & Warner, 2002), including the preservation of the family structure, sometimes in spite of their own safety. Social workers need to help women understand the oppression they have experienced and encourage them to view their needs and perspectives as valuable. Women in abusive relationships tend to see their needs as irritations that provoke violence. By acknowledging and valuing their own needs they can begin to set themselves free from the oppression to which they have been subjugated.

The value of *process* is also an important feminist concept (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986). For women in abusive relationships their decision to leave the abuser is often a process, one that is frequently misunderstood by society and even practitioners. It is important for women to go through this process without feeling judged for their choices. For many women, the process begins after they leave the abuser and as they begin to rebuild their lives.

Process as a feminist intervention is also used in settings where women can share their stories. Giving abused women a voice is important in their journey to healing. Wood and Roche (2001) called this process radical listening. They view it as a process that allows women to see themselves as experts of their own situation and that allows them to feel validated.

It is important for practitioners to recognize that they are also going through a process as they work with clients to find solutions. Feminists believe that there is no such thing as value free interventions (Collins, 1986; Van Voorhis, 2008); therefore, part of the process should be for practitioners to explore their own values and biases. This is especially important when we add to this discussion cultural differences, class differences, and spirituality, issues that must be taken into consideration with any intervention.

The above mentioned issues lead us to the principle of *unity and diversity*. Its major thrust is the respect we show each other (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986), even if our views differ from the views of those we are helping. For situations where IPV is present, it can be difficult to respect someone's choices regarding the abusive relationship. This may include staying or going back to the relationship, continued contact with the abuser, shared custody of children, among others. Whatever the decision made, it must be the client's decision. Expecting her to do what the worker thinks is best, places the worker in the same position the abuser occupied, that of controlling her and not allowing her autonomy. This is not only an issue of respect of her views, but also part of empowering women to take control of their own lives. Obvious safety issues must be taken into consideration; however, autonomy is not autonomy if we place our own values on those we help.

One challenge for practitioners is to help women understand that their experiences, although unique, are not only personal but impact society at large (Gould, 1987). The feminist perspective emphasizes that the *personal is political*. Understanding that violence against women is an issue that has historical and cultural roots helps women realize that the abuse is a societal issue that necessitates broad interventions. It also helps them see that they are not powerless and that they can join other women in taking action to solve this problem.

Feminism goes beyond presenting principles or ideas that can bring feminists together. A feminist perspective is an ideology that encourages action (Gould, 1987), through *consciousness raising*. The battered women's movement was founded on the thought that only the force of a collective voice would someday end violence against women. There is still a long road ahead for this goal to be reached, but the need to continue to think globally and act locally (Bricker-Jenkins & Hooyman, 1986) is the same today as it was when feminists first brought the issue of IPV to light. This is a challenge for direct service practitioners as they seek to balance the need for services with diminishing resources. It is imperative that they continue to make the needs of women known in their communities in order to maintain IPV at the forefront of policy making, program development, and funding distributions. It has been argued that no profession is in a better place to ascertain the impact of social policy than social work (Domanski, 1998; Haynes & Mickelson, 2000; Schneider & Netting, 1999). Social workers are in a unique position to continue to raise consciousness regarding the detriments of IPV, not only for the lives of women, but for the lives of their children and our communities.

Strengthening the feminist perspective's application to IPV

Using a feminist perspective to help women in abusive situations has many strengths. However, as is the case with all theories and perspectives, there are also areas that leave gaps in our interventions. These gaps and weaknesses must be addressed in order to strengthen the perspective. The following section outlines some of these areas.

One of the challenges in addressing IPV has been the reluctance and perhaps inability of some programs to address the mental health issues women who have been abused bring with them when seeking services (Powell, 2009, personal communication). Dutton and Gondolf (2000) stated that the number of abused women with major psychiatric disorders is small. This may be true; however, regardless of how small these numbers are, this issue needs to be addressed. Using a feminist perspective should not preclude us from seeking the help of mental health professionals who can address these issues. One of the fears has been that identifying mental health issues can somehow be utilized to justify the abuse (Berg, 2002; Humphreys & Thiara, 2003; Petretick-Jackson & Jackson, 1996). Although a reasonable concern, in order for

true empowerment to occur, women's programs must address mental health issues. Identifying and treating mental health problems does not have to be anti-feminist.

Another challenge for the feminist perspective is the potential bias some of the principles promote. Baines (1997) questions whether some feminist principles are based on the experiences of white middle-class women and do not encompass issues faced by minorities and women of lower socio-economic status. This is a sensitive issue and one that calls on the need for self-awareness and constant self-evaluation. Recognizing that different experiences give us different lenses through which we see the world can help social workers utilize appropriate interventions.

One last area to mention is the meaning of feminism; unfortunately, feminism is a laden word that has polarized women who support and believe the principles discussed in this paper. One of the major consequences of this polarization has been the seemingly divided voice in addressing women's issues, something that has social policy implications. Perhaps in our quest to advocate and voice women's concerns, we have marginalized groups that can help make a difference in the lives of women who are abused—law enforcement, judges, and non-offending men who could be allies in the work of ending violence against women. In order to honor feminist principles, we must strive to be inclusive and not divisive.

This list is obviously not inclusive, but a sample of areas where an honest discussion about the application of the feminist perspective can begin. As stated earlier, pointing out the gaps of this perspective is not intended to dismiss its value. The feminist perspective has considerably informed social work practice in the area of IPV. Gaps are pointed out with the intention of challenging the profession to continue to analyze the perspectives and interventions used with clients. One arena in which this can occur is in schools of social work. The profession would benefit from incorporating feminist understandings of oppression, not just of women but also of other groups, in education and practice. By doing so, areas in which the perspective can be strengthened can be addressed at the same time that students are learning to apply it in their practice. It is important that social work education does not simply present women as victims of oppression, but also as active creators and promoters of knowledge. Students need to know that feminism is more than a way of viewing women's problems; it is a valid perspective that can be utilized to influence social policy, build knowledge, and improve social work practice.

Conclusion

This brief analysis of the feminist perspective sought to show its value in working with women in situations where IPV is present. In spite of criticism that the feminist voice has been divided by the proliferation of feminist theories, the common ideologies of feminism bring these theories together to provide a unified front. The feminist perspective continues to be beneficial in working with women and other disadvantaged groups. It is our challenge as social work practitioners, educators, and supporters of equality to continue to move these principles forward and give them a solid and valid place in social work practice.

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