

Comparing Feminist and Choice Theories: Treatment and Social Reform at Odds?

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The debate between social work treatment and social reform is centered on what is perceived to be two separate processes to affect change, one on an individual level and one on a system level. Social work treatment is intended to provide an atmosphere for individuals, couples, and families to explore options for self-change and self-growth, oftentimes adapting to their environments in order to lead a more fulfilling life, as defined by the client.

Social reform, in general terms, is examining the possibilities of social reform and social change to better suit the needs of the individuals, couples, and families. This may involve, for example, community work, political advocacy work, or legislative work. However, this may also be addressed in contextualizing psychotherapy and raising awareness of social and political structures affecting clients. This perspective maintains that social reform can be addressed and affected through individual therapy, with the requirement of a politicized and contextualized practice (Finn & Jacobson, 2003).

The basic conflict encountered is that social treatment is used to assist the client in adapting and altering themselves to their environment (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). Social reform, in contrast, is intended to affect change on a macro, larger level to alter or deconstruct its structure to better meet the needs of individuals, couples, families, or communities (Homan, 1998).

Two theories which seem to typify the contrast between treatment and social reform are Feminist Theory and Choice Theory. At initial analysis, these two theories, and their accompanying practice therapies, appear to come from divergent sources; they appear to view human problems from dramatically different orientations. However, although their core origins may be different, the two theories can work together to promote both change in the individual as well as change in society.

Feminist Theory and Feminist Therapy

Feminist Theory provides a framework for addressing social inequities through the lens of gender, power, control, and politics. This theory focuses on power balances and imbalances in relationships, whether personal, political, or systemic.

Dr. Laura Brown (1994), clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington, states that feminist theory and the practice of feminist therapy is the practice of a genuinely revolutionary act in which both lives and society are changed. She states that it is a discourse that subverts patriarchy and a male-oriented worldview, which she identifies as a major source of damage to human lives, on both an individual and community basis. Subversion of patriarchy describes a process in which the power of the patriarchy is turned upon itself, to revolution and healing, a revolution that, because it is often subtle and not often obvious, can be effective even in the face of formidable obstacles. Feminist therapy, as one aspect of the feminist revolution as described by Brown, functions to subvert patriarchal dominance at the most subtle and powerful levels, as it is internalized and personified in the lives of therapists and their clients, both female and male, and in communities.

Unlike other operationalizations of feminism and Feminist Theory, which address themselves to external and overt manifestations of patriarchal oppression, feminist therapy is an empowerment based approach that concerns itself with the invisible and sometimes unconscious ways in which patriarchy and the male dominated power structure has become embedded in everyone's daily life. This dominance is seen to be to the detriment of both women and men and the relationships they form with each other and their communities. The patriarchy is in peoples' identities, manners of emotional expression, and experiences of personal power and powerlessness. Unlike other approaches to psychotherapy, feminist therapy concerns itself not simply with individual suffering but with the social and political meanings of both pain as well as healing. It has goals of the creation of feminist consciousness (Lerner, 1994) and a movement toward feminist action. The first and most important *client* of feminist therapy is the culture in which it takes place; the first and foremost commitment of feminist therapists is to radical social transformation (Lerner).

Feminist therapy is a speaking of truth to power in a voice rarely listened to by patriarchy (Brown, 1994). These components of feminist theory help to elucidate the many ways in which feminist therapists believe it is possible to behave subversively while simultaneously offering clients strategies for personal change that respect their uniqueness and diversity. Feminist therapy can be subversive and have political meaning, as therapy commonly does not, largely because of that mixture of revolution and respect; the client need never identify with feminism in order to ask feminist questions or to arrive at solutions that advance feminist goals. However, a critique of feminist therapy in light of the goals of treatment is that it may focus primarily on the culture as its client, and thus sometimes lose the person (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). This analysis highlights a point of reference for criticizing the individual outcome effectiveness of a politicized psychotherapy practice.

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy

Choice theory, and its operational practice mechanism Reality Therapy, focuses on an individualized process to identify a client's unmet needs, to attempt to meet these needs, and to assess the adequacy of this attempt. The traditional analysis of this theory and practice is that it fits solely into a narrowly defined conceptualization of treatment from a psychotherapeutic model. The intended change is meant to occur within the individual and assist them in understanding how to change their behavior to achieve their basic needs (Glasser, 2000). The intent is also to teach the individual client how to adjust and adapt to their surroundings. The clients are guided through a process of questions to identify their true basic needs, how they may or may not be achieving them, and how they can achieve them through altering their thought processes and behavioral changes (Glasser, 1965). These basic needs consist of:

1. *Survival* is defined as food, shelter, and safety (physiological needs).
2. *Love and Belonging* refers to the need for relationships and social connections, the need to give and receive affection, and to feel part of a group.
3. *Power* is referring to the person being skilled, to achieve, to be competent, to be listened to, and to feel a sense of self-worth.
4. *Freedom* is defined by the need to be free and autonomous, independent, to have choices, and to be able to take control of the direction of one's life.
5. *Fun* refers to the need to find pleasure, the need to play, and to laugh and enjoy one's life.

Glasser (1984) states that the counselor helps the client to make a workable plan to get what he or she wants. The essence of a workable plan using Reality Therapy is that implementation of the plan depends on client resources rather than social reform.

Explanation and interpretation of Choice Theory and Reality Therapy includes the traditional view, which is often a pathological, individualized conceptualization of human problems, encouraging the individual to adapt to environmental and systemic situations. The critique of this approach is that the social worker may be practicing psychotherapy without a larger context in which to place the person's problems. The social worker may be primarily focused on the often narrow vision of setting a specific, attainable goal to guide the client toward and lose sight of the often societal origins or matters that encourage the disharmony of the client (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). This approach may not contribute to social justice movements and instead create an atmosphere of solely individual responsibility without an awareness of the systemic problems that can contribute to the presenting problems of clients. This approach suggests that individual adaptation to a non-social justice focused orientation toward the world can often sustain social inequalities and injustice.

Are Feminist Theory and Choice Theory Really at Odds?

The seemingly opposite theories and practices of Feminist Theory which focused often on structural change and Choice Theory which focuses on individual change are, in actuality, compatible approaches to working for both individual change as well as social change. If the practitioner maintains a broader context view of social problems while practicing Reality Therapy, then he or she creates an opportunity to address the client's basic needs (Glasser, 2000) while accommodating the larger social and political structure into the analysis of the problem, maintaining a person-in-environment perspective (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). This approach allows the client to explore and achieve their identified basic needs while viewing their problems through a lens shaded by issues such as social expectations, control and awareness and personal/political power structures.

The delicate balance necessary in order to create a changeable person and, concurrently, a changeable society is a process of exploring the basic needs, working toward obtaining them, but also maintaining a larger perspective of the origins and systemic history of the personal problems that may be fueled by social, rather than individual, sources (Finn & Jacobson, 2003). This would seem to require of the social worker a thoughtful examination of the presenting problems and abilities to guide the process in both directions: individual needs being met while sustaining a person-in-environment perspective at all times.

In another critical analysis, a new perspective can be gained by exploring the transformational opportunities using Choice Theory and Reality Therapy in working with *proponents* of social injustices and social inequities. Instead of the traditionally defined empowerment process of guiding the clients through the system to affect their own personal and political change, this approach intervenes from the standpoint of the individuals, groups, or communities that gain from the social and political exploitation of a person or group. This indirect approach to addressing social reform and social change focuses on working with the people or communities that are, in the analysis from the Feminist Theory perspective, benefiting from exploitation and control of individuals' choices and personal options.

The assumption underlying this process is that if people who do not have a social awareness of systemic problems are able to focus on meeting their own individual basic needs, they may not be compelled to perpetuate exploitive behaviors against other individuals. Alice Miller (1983) discussed how people will often grasp for power and control when they feel they have neither. Her assertion is that if children and adults were provided with their needs, they would not look elsewhere to obtain them, often damaging the people around them.

Conclusion

If the social work practitioner can maintain a person-in-environment perspective throughout their practice, they can maintain a balance of how both Feminist Theories and Choice Theories contribute to a client meeting their needs while viewing their problem from a contextualized perspective. The decision to utilize specifically either a Feminist Therapy or a Reality Therapy, with them being viewed as mutually exclusive in operationalization, becomes less important. The importance is then on the integration of the tenets of strengths of each approach to assist the clients in meeting their basic needs while moving toward self-awareness and social awareness.

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