

Principles of Feminist Social Work Practice

Whilst there is a great deal of diversity in feminism and feminist approaches to social work / welfare, there are some principles which are common to many forms of feminism and which writers in this area have suggested are consistent with a feminist approach to practice, both individually and organizationally.

The Personal is Political

This is obviously one of the most significant phrases to come out of the feminist movement. The "guts" of the statement is probably quite obvious. It is a worthwhile and I think, enlightening experience to actually explore in some detail the ways in which our personal experiences are actually linked to the political, social system. It is certainly suggested here that one of the ways that change to the social system has been avoided is through the separation of this connection between the individual and the social.

Valuing Process and Product

The idea that the way that you go about something is just as (if not more important) than the actual end product or goal that you might achieve, is one of the strong messages that has come from feminism to social work. In many ways this seems to be a key principle for (my) social work practice. Part of this includes the importance of relationships, learning to

value the simplest things (like listening and simply being there for someone), and processes that value and affirm people. It seems to be those process issues - the issues about how we go about our interactions with people - that often really make a difference in people's lives.

Reconceptualising Power

The whole notion of power as it is currently understood by mainstream society seems to be about power over others rather than the power to live one's life in the way that we might choose. Feminism has had a great interest in exploring the ways that power has been used as an oppressive force in women's lives, as well as developing ideas about ways in which women can reclaim some sort of power in their own

lives. In terms of social work practice I think the notions of empowerment and choice really need to be explored and clarified so that we avoid perpetuating people's powerlessness by putting them in positions of impossible empowerment.

Challenging Separations

Feminism suggests that our whole way of living is characterised by dualisms. We are either male or female, black or white, good or bad, right or wrong, rational or emotional, and so on. The separations between things such as theory and practice for example, seem to be more about keeping apart things that actually need to be considered together. It is this wholistic, integrated aspect to feminism that

is being stressed here.

Valuing Difference

One of the ways in which we have been able to perpetuate a social system that values some over others, is through a culture of intolerance of difference. One of the significant contributions of feminist theory has been a reconceptualisation of difference so that difference might come to be seen as a positive and enriching thing to be celebrated rather than a justification for oppressive behaviours and fears. Given that women are obviously all different, and that women have been subjected to oppressive experiences primarily because of their constructed differences from men, it would seem that there is a lot to be gained through the celebration of difference.

Feminism as Ontology

Feminism is often considered to be a world view. By this I mean that people who feel committed to the ideas of feminism tend to attempt to live these views in all aspects of their lives. In this sense, I question whether feminism can be something that you only incorporate into your working life for example. It seems to me that most feminists would recognise the importance of striving for some sort of consistency between what we ask of others and what we ask of ourselves. Needless to say, this is a hugely difficult thing to achieve and given the dominant social pressures in our lives it's not surprising

that we often find ourselves acting or thinking in

ways that seem inconsistent with our beliefs.

(Much of this material has been derived from the ideas expressed in

Van Den Bergh, Nan & Cooper, Lynne B. 1986 Feminist Visions for Social Work, Maryland: NASW.)

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