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THE RELEVANCE OF FEMINISM IN MODERN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present the perceptions of social work educators on the relevance of feminism in the undergraduate curriculum. An exploratory pilot study was conducted among ten social work educators from four universities (two in Gauteng and two in Limpopo province) on factors that motivate educators to incorporate feminism in the curriculum. Purposive sampling was employed to select educators who are involved in teaching direct practice with individuals and groups. Unstructured interviews were used to elicit qualitative data from the respondents. The major findings revealed that educators have divergent opinions on the incorporation of feminism in social work training. Even though the results are inconclusive, different views expressed by educators necessitate future in-depth research in this area.

The early feminist movement emerged in the nineteenth century (Hole & Levine, 1984:533) and has since evolved into numerous branches. The concept of feminism is surrounded by a number of myths. Some critics are of the opinion that those who propagate feminism hate men. Another destructive myth is the labeling of feminists as lesbians. Feminism and lesbianism are not interchangeable as many lesbians are not feminists. Feminists are by no means a homogeneous group (Scacht & Ewing, 1998:8). A few of the most commonly used branches of feminism are summarised in Table 1. Obviously people who spread such myths are threatened by women's criticism of sexual oppression and would like to maintain women's subordination, subservience and dependency. Women's wish for equity and safety in their lives does not mean that they hate men.

TABLE 1
BRANCHES OF FEMINISM

BRANCH	GOALS OF THEORY
Liberal	Equal rights Equal access to services Control over privacy
Cultural	Develop women's culture Develop women's spirituality Peace and ecology Restructuring of society Increase valuation of women
Postmodern	Articulate feminist viewpoint Analyse how women are affected by the social world Examine power and knowledge Imagine society's transformation
Womanist	Social action/social change Articulation of racial consciousness Self-healing Resist systems of oppression
Radical	Draw connections between personal and political Eliminate male privilege in public and private spheres Heal internalised sexism Protect women from male violence Restructure society

[Source: Adapted from Saulnier (2000:25)]

Feminism is a political and social movement as well as a doctrine that advocates legal and socio-economic equality for women (Barker, 1999:173). It is also viewed as egalitarian and validates each person's life in context (Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 1997:53). A more comprehensive explanation of feminism is provided by Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:2), namely that it is a theory of individuality that recognises the importance of the individual within the social collectivity and entails a politics of transformation; hence it is relevant to more than a constituency of women. In addition, Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:2) state that: "It is a vision born of women, but it addresses the future of the planet with implications accruing for males and females, for all ethnic groups, for the impoverished, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, the aged and others." Furthermore, it is not limited to women's issues in the curriculum, since it is broader than an "add women and stir" perspective on social change. This view is supported by Gross (1998:143), who asserts that feminist ideologies are based on ideals that reject "…patriarchy, linear thinking, powerlessness, and the social construction of femininity to create a better society for all (women, men and children)."

FEMINISM IN SOCIAL WORK

The United States of America's National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1980) states that concern for the welfare of individuals includes action for improving social conditions. Similarly, feminism recognises the importance of the individual within the social collectivity. Practising advocacy for individuals, groups and communities for societal change is essentially in accordance with the terms of feminist principles. The failure to fulfil this role places social workers at risk of being perceived as agents of social control by maintaining the status quo. Hence, some radical social workers accuse mainstream social workers of being supportive of an oppressive status quo brought about by persuasive conditioning (Brooke, 1996:64).

Wetzel (cited in Dore, 1994:97), clearly indicates the connection between social work principles, theory and practice with the three core principles of the feminism: "…the unity of all living things, events, and knowledge; the uniqueness of the individual; and personal power and responsibility." For instance, social work promotes the non-hierarchical and collaborative relationship that is viewed as essential in feminist practice. Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:3) also confirm that social work shares many of the fundamental concerns of feminism, particularly the relationship between the individual and community, between individually and socially defined needs, as well as the concern with human dignity and the right to self-determination. Hence, there is a connection between social justice and self-determination (Carter *et al*., 1994:200). Social work, like feminism, is theoretically committed to improving the lives of all people.

The relevance of feminism in social work training involves an understanding of the relationship between personal suffering and institutional oppression as well as validating the unity between public and private life. Empowerment of persons and communities is predicted, which means power has to be redefined as energy of influence and responsibility rather than a commodity to be controlled (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:25). Empowerment is about achieving reasonable control over one's destiny, learning constructive coping mechanisms and acquiring the competence to bring about change at the individual and systems levels (Pinderhughes, 1995:136). According to Norman and Wheeler (1996:207), feminists in social work reject models based on the historical exclusion of women's perceptions, feelings, behaviours, experiences and ways of knowing. They criticise the application of male experiences to women as insensitive, inadequate and destructive. The strong focus on the

individual as well as gender in feminist therapy has made the feminist approach more appealing to social workers (Norman & Wheeler, 1996:208).

Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:19) maintain that feminism values process equally with product: "The therapist is not envisioned as an omnipotent who 'cures' a client, but rather as a facilitator of individuals' innate abilities to heal themselves." Hence, heated debates are currently raging among academics on the use of the concept "help", which according to some critics presupposes that clients are helpless, and their strengths and capacities undermined.

To enhance social workers' flexibility and responsiveness to women's social and personal problems, practitioners should be familiar with various branches of feminism (Saulnier, 2000:6). Feminist theories are viewed as being suitable to address women's issues since women are oppressed and marginalised (Gelles, 1993:41; Wallace, 1998:6; Yllo, 1993:47). However, Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:2) are vehemently opposed to this notion, as they regard feminism as being relevant to more than a constituency of women because it embraces all segments of the population.

In direct practice feminism affords the client an opportunity to rename her/his experience in a holistic and therapeutically beneficial way. The inclination to be self-blaming, guilty and isolated is being negotiated. Consequently, political education should be considered a proper and essential component of the therapeutic process, since it assists clients to be cognisant of the way in which personal conflicts are connected to contradictions within society. It also reinforces the fact that the personal is political (Dietz, 2000:503; Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:23). By incorporating this premise into direct service, the practitioner would be serving as an activist role model.

Feminist theories are mentioned (among others) as facilitating and serving as a resource for empowerment-focused social group work (Hepworth, Rooney & Larsen, 1997:53). Through adopting empowerment principles clients are encouraged to take risks in assuming personal power. Clients should be assisted to develop skills that could be used to influence their environment. For example, assertiveness training, improving communication abilities, and stress and time management, as well as conflict resolution, and negotiation and bargaining skills would form appropriate parts of the therapeutic process. These approaches are regarded by Norman and Wheeler (1996:206) and Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:15) as being significantly different from the examination of client intrapsychic dynamics, which is the hallmark of insight-based psychoanalytic approaches.

In assisting students to comprehend the notion that the personal is political, Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:24-25) presented a range of activities that students should engage in. They should be encouraged to share experiences, discuss issues of ethnicity, sex, class and gender and the way in which these aspects influence their personal experiences. In addition, students should be encouraged to reflect on cultural messages, read memoirs of social workers and conduct interviews with community activists. They should also be urged to embark upon some kind of social change activity during their academic career. This could include, for instance, distribution of leaflets, participation in a peaceful march or demonstration, writing letters to the editor and acting as a spokesperson for a cause. It is essential that students should be clear about the inherent linkage between social work and social change. Insisting that they engage in activist behaviours can facilitate this awareness.

It has been discovered that the models which have been more traditionally linked to social work – such as the psychosocial approach advocated by Hollis and Woods and conjoint family therapy proposed by Satir – lack built-in gender considerations (Norman & Wheeler, 1996:206;

Gross, 1992:9). Norman and Wheeler (1996:206) state that these models "…are systems-focused, however, allowing astute practitioners to use them as frameworks in which to consider gender differences". Obviously, a less observant and insensitive practitioner is likely not to utilise these frameworks to the benefit of the clientele served. Most importantly, students should be made aware of the fact that an emphasis on systems change is central to feminist practice (Shepard, 1991). Moreover, the use of feminism in social work is advantageous for counteracting the gender biases of many traditional theories (Saulnier, 2000:6). Feminist theories, unlike more familiar traditional theories, explain the structure and dynamics of women's experiences within socio-political and interpersonal sexual hierarchies and also pay attention to the ways in which everyday actions can support discriminatory social structures (Carter *et al*. cited in Saulnier, 2000:6).

In this regard recognition, acknowledgement and validation of students' experiences are paramount. Some authors (Dore, 1994:101; Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:18) assert that students can gain a sense of empowerment by receiving validation for the knowledge they have acquired through life experience. They have information and skills to offer, and educators should learn from their experiences. Therefore, providing reinforcement for learner knowledge creates a model that can be replicated by the student in his/her own work with clients and within the human service organisations.

In direct practice with groups social workers should be conversant with various branches of feminism. This would serve to explain why a particular branch might be more suited than others in solving a particular problem or set of problems, as illustrated by Saulnier (2000:7), apart from the fact that group treatment also has a consciousness-raising function by making people aware that others share their experiences.

Although social work practitioners and consumers of its services are predominantly women, it seems that it has been difficult to inculcate feminist views in the profession. There is evidence that feminism has had an impact on the broader society, although it has apparently influenced the field of social work only superficially (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:2). Critics such as Kimball (1990:x), who are reluctant to embrace change, argue that feminist studies have become damaging to American intellectual life and its mission. Kimball (1990:x) regards feminism as "…nothing less than the destruction of the values, methods and goals of traditional humanistic study."

Since one of the objectives of this paper is to start an academic debate on the relevance of feminism in social work education at the undergraduate level, the findings based on an exploratory pilot study on views of social work educators in this regard will be presented.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this study was to undertake a preliminary investigation before conducting an in-depth structured study on the relevance of feminism in social work education and training. The study sought to answer broad questions regarding factors that motivate educators to include or exclude feminism in the curricula and the contribution of the feminist theories towards social work education and training. Since little has been written on the subject to determine priorities for future in-depth qualitative study, an exploratory pilot study was conducted.

The sample was drawn from four universities. The respondents were from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, gender and academic qualifications. Ten (10) social work educators from four universities, viz. the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Pretoria (UP), the

University of Venda (UNIVEN), and the University of the North (UNIN) participated in the study. The respondents' ages ranged from 34 to 62 years. Of the 10 respondents, six had obtained a DPhil in Social Work and four had obtained an MSW. Of the respondents, three were males and seven females. The overwhelming majority of the respondents were women (since social work is a female dominated profession and male social workers are in the minority). In terms of race, two of the respondents were white, one coloured and seven were blacks. Indians were not represented in this study. The majority of the respondents were black and this is in line with the demographics of the Republic of South Africa. The average number of years of the respondents' teaching experience was 16.2 (SD = 8.38).

Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for this study as it enabled the researcher to select the respondents who met the following criteria: being social work educators responsible for teaching direct practice with individuals, groups and those interested in feminism as well. Some of the respondents also offer classes in policy and management at undergraduate and/or supervise research projects at masters and doctoral levels.

Unstructured face-to-face interviews were employed to elicit relevant in-depth information on the respondents' views on the relevance of feminism in social work education and training in direct practice with individuals and groups. The interviews afforded the researcher an opportunity to seek follow-up information and to observe the respondents' non-verbal cues. Open-ended questions were utilised, as they were appropriate for this preliminary phase of a future in-depth study. These questions gave the interviewees the latitude to respond freely. The interviews were taped, transcribed and common themes identified.

UNDERSTANDING OF FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Respondents attached different meanings to the concept of feminism. Only a few were articulate and conversant with the relevant perspective. Some of the responses by the female respondents are as follows:

"Feminism is stigmatised due to lack of understanding. The perspective is about women, men, children, and the elderly and all other segments of the population" "There is a parallel between feminism and the social work profession. Feminism, just like social work, is about caring for others using empathy, genuineness and warmth. It is also about the empowerment of women."

"Feminism is about the recognition of women's rights. Its aim is to negotiate a new social structure that is not oppressive."

Male respondents indicated that:

"Feminism is about women trying to be heard. It should be borne in mind that social work was driven by women such as Jane Adams, Mary Richmond and Helen Harris Perlman, to name a few. This perspective is inclusive, as it does not address women's issues only."

"Feminism is about women taking control of their destiny. It is also about empowerment of women."

Almost all the respondents indicated that they were aware that departments of Sociology and institutes for gender studies offer different theories on feminism. They agreed that the challenge for social work educators is to incorporate feminism into their teaching to conscientise students and demonstrate its relevance in practice. The respondents also observed that there is dearth of South African literature on the subject.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION OF FEMINISM IN THE CURRICULUM

The respondents indicated that vital aspects that influence educators in deciding whether to include or exclude feminism in the curriculum include: the theoretical framework; time allocation; educators' knowledge base; their sensitivity towards women as a vulnerable and oppressed group; attitude towards feminism; and their personal experiences.

The following statements represent the general feelings on the inclusion of feminism in the curriculum:

"I have no choice but to incorporate feminism in my teaching as the South African Constitution seeks to promote a non-sexist and non-racial society. It must be borne in mind that men have always had privileges."

"Feminism helps students to understand women's issues – oppression, domination, inequality, power relations, and violence against women and children."

One respondent made the assumption that social work educators incorporate feminism in their teaching by stating that: "Teaching feminism is not formalised in social work training, but I regard it as a thread that runs through the entire curriculum". However, when this issue was explored further, it emerged that the respondent was unsure about other educators' stance on the matter. This implies that educators have not deliberated and reached a consensus on the inclusion or exclusion of feminism in their curriculum.

Six respondents were of the view that the undergraduate programme is generic, therefore, students should be exposed to a variety of practice models to be better prepared as generalists. The following responses capture their views:

"It is important to impart to students a variety of models that are available and leave it up to the students to put together their own framework. We should bear in mind that we are training students for different markets locally, nationally and internationally. Therefore, students should be exposed to a variety of models as this would enable them to fit in any setting and be able to recognise the approach adopted by those human service agencies."

"Providing students with a narrow perspective is not helpful as it would also limit their chances of employment."

"To choose three or four practice models would be limiting to students and they are likely to develop a narrow view of reality and the world."

"I am actually in favour of the 'fruit salad' (a variety of practice models). In my opinion, a whole semester should be devoted to exposing students to different practice models. Confining students to a few models would be stereotyping them and they will later become judgmental when they are unable to conceptualise the client's problem."

"We need to expose students to a variety of practice models in order to produce a well-rounded graduate. This is in line with the policy on higher education."

As opposed to this, four respondents who were reluctant to include feminism in social work training indicated that:

"I am not comfortable using the term feminism when teaching because I have witnessed lesbians who claim to be feminists shouting, being disruptive at conferences and making others angry. The concept has a negative connotation. However, in my teaching I do engage students in issues of equal rights, women's strengths and capacity."

"Feminism views women as good and men as bad. Literature on feminism does not emphasise the process but focuses on cause-and-effect. Students should be exposed to approaches that would help them to develop and operate from a particular framework and I strive to avoid what I call a 'fruit salad'. Furthermore, the curriculum is saturated at undergraduate level and there are gains and losses in the selection of practice models."

"I think we need to avoid exposing students to a whole gamut of perspectives as this may be confusing to students. Each department or school has its own focus/niche area that would dictate a selection of a combination of appropriate practice models to teach their students."

The following statement encapsulates the point made by the respondent who regards the feminist perspective as a specialised area that has to be pursued by students at postgraduate level: "Feminism does not emphasise the process and that is the reason I do not include it at the undergraduate level. However, if a postgraduate student is interested in using the feminist perspective in a research project, I would have no problem supervising him/her."

A respondent who was exposed to multiple practice models at the undergraduate level complained that: "As a newly qualified social worker in the field I was confused, not knowing which model to apply in a particular case. I strongly feel that students should be helped to develop a particular framework. To my knowledge, feminism is taught in Sociology and we work in collaboration with other departments."

The failure of educators to incorporate feminism was accounted for as follows:

"I am ignorant and lack knowledge in this field and maybe it is high time that I read extensively on this subject."

"Some educators are afraid to rock the boat, hence they reserve their opinions for fear of alienation."

"Feminism is being stigmatised because of a lack of understanding. Some educators are not ready to leave their comfort zone and make a paradigm shift; hence they stick to the traditional methods that are suitable for clinical practice. Others fail to appreciate the plight of the oppressed, while others would not like to be perceived as radicals."

"I feel that the failure to embrace feminism in social work training is indicative of a loss of focus on the profession's major concern of social development, given the fact that the majority of the clients are from impoverished backgrounds."

The respondents made the following suggestions:

- Conduct an audit of the modules offered to determine whether the feminist perspective is incorporated in the curriculum;
- Assess the relevance of selected practice models in preparing students for the reality of practice;
- Feminism should be incorporated in training students at undergraduate level to broaden their theoretical framework;
- Educators should leave their comfort zones and experience a paradigm shift;
- Educators should read extensively on feminism to gain an understanding of the theory and its implications for practice;
- There is a need for scholars to analyse the practice models edited by Turner (1979) and document how feminism should be infused in students' training;

- There is a need for continuing education for social workers, as some of them may not have an opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies;
- Feminism should be pursued by postgraduate students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An interesting observation was that both male and female educators seemed informed about feminism as they provided examples to illustrate their points. Some also indicated that they had read extensively on feminist perspectives and incorporate them in their teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Most importantly, male respondents recognised the contribution made by women in the development of the social work profession and women's efforts to liberate themselves.

Two major impediments against change were identified, namely the reluctance on the part of social work educators to incorporate feminism in the curricula because they view the approach as radical and anti-men, as well as the reluctance of some female educators to promote feminism for fear of being associated with or labelled as lesbians, thereby fearing alienation from their colleagues.

These findings confirmed the prevalence of fears and myths already expressed by some authors (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:49). The opposition to feminism is based on a denial of the continued prevalence of disparity. Generally, many respondents seem to view feminism as a perspective that addresses the plight of women only. It is vital for social work educators to be mindful of the fact that feminist theories have evolved over time, while their main aims are to dismantle structural oppression and to refrain from blaming the individual for existing social ills. Moreover, compartmentalisation of feminism is dangerous and educators should guard against it. Van den Berg and Cooper (1994:2) succinctly state that feminism should not be considered as an 'add women and stir' perspective to social change.

Even though the results of this study are inconclusive, social workers are reminded to alter the perception of their being "do-gooders" (Van den Bergh & Cooper, 1994:21) to one that recognises them as agents for social change. Social workers should organise, advocate and become actively involved in campaigns geared towards the elimination of institutionalised inequality and economic oppression. Action to be taken by social workers in repositioning themselves within a changing environment should include breaking away from the constraints of the traditional role of counsellor. In other words, they have to challenge the sexism, racism and other prejudices within service delivery systems as well as in the larger society.

Evidently, the social work educators' decision to incorporate certain practice models in the curriculum and exclude others has far-reaching implications for social work practice. Notwithstanding the fact that their decisions are guided by a number of factors, namely current political, economic, technological and social forces as well as the school or department's niche area, some educators are slow in acknowledging the trends that dictate a shift from the past to the present. Many conceptual frameworks used in social work point to individual rather than social pathology. Van den Bergh and Cooper (1994:15) contend that "Theories that blame people for their victimisation or distress, or that view them out of the context of the historical period and social order in which they live, need to be replaced."

The feminist approach appears to be relevant in social work training, since it involves an understanding of the relationship between personal suffering and institutional oppression as well as validating the unity of public and private life. It also seeks to ensure that social workers should recognise their roles as change agents, advocates and activists in order to bring about

social change for the betterment of individuals, groups and communities. Social work should promote the non-hierarchical and collaborative relationship that is viewed as essential in feminist practices. Generally feminism affords clients an opportunity to define themselves, articulate their needs and aspirations and to comprehend the contribution of societal influences towards their problems. For instance, Canadian and immigrant students who were exposed to feminist social work education classes reported the positive results the education made to their professional and personal development. It also bolstered their self-confidence and assertiveness (Pennell & Ristock, 1999:317).

Service delivery can only be improved if social workers are well equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to respond appropriately to diverse clients' difficulties and concerns in a changing environment. Therefore quality service is dependent upon the knowledge and skills the social worker has acquired from the university and the human service organisation. With a grounding in several branches of feminism, social workers could choose wisely among the theories. A solid understanding of a broad range of feminist theories would have a profound effect on the social workers' practice framework and also equip them to function at a higher level.

The time has come for South African social work academics to incorporate feminism into the mainstream of their profession. Based on the respondents' views, it is evident that the benefits of incorporating this perspective in social work education outweigh the losses. The struggle for equal opportunity and treatment, the fight against oppression and domination has to be taken more seriously than ever before. When selecting practice models to be incorporated in the curriculum, social work educators should be mindful of the fact that the bachelor's degree serves as a foundation for the students' career development. However, the feminist approach should not be seen as a panacea for addressing individual, group and community issues. A combination of feminism with the ecological and systems approaches is thus deemed suitable for preparing students for practice in a changing environment.

Undoubtedly, the divergent opinions and suggestions expressed by the respondents in this study call for future in-depth study with the aim of developing intervention strategies. In terms of future research directions, it is imperative that educators should evaluate whether programmes offered are fulfilling their goals of advancing a culture that opposes structural oppression and affirm the strengths of people from diverse backgrounds. Undoubtedly, educators are challenged to engage in academic debates around this issue and they should seriously consider forming links to empower one another in different areas of specialisation. Further research should also focus on evaluating the impact of social work programmes on practitioners' service delivery, particularly newly qualified social workers who have been in the field for a year or two.

Those resisting change should take heed of Scacht and Ewing's (1998:9) warning that "... real change will take place in people's lives, in spite of any debate over terminology or proprietorship, and the larger cause will move forward." For instance, South African society has experienced rapid changes over the nine years since the advent of democracy. It has also become part of the global village. Societal changes call for the application of more rigorous professional approaches in order to deal with the challenges presented by the transformation to the clientele served. As a democratic country South Africa strives towards a non-sexist and non-racial society. Consequently, the country shares the ideals of every democratic society, namely freedom, equity, equality and social justice.

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