

## Psychology 460 Counseling & Interviewing

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## Feminist Therapy

Chapter 12

### History & Development

- Beginnings traced to women movement of 1960s
- During 1960s, responding to emerging needs of women, a shift occurred as many female psychotherapists spoke out critically against traditional views of mental health
- Feminist or Gender Sensitive therapy was developed in response to criticisms that traditional psychotherapies were experienced as non-supportive & possibly damaging to women

### History & Development

- It was thought that little or no considerations of social & cultural causes of mental distress were present in traditional views
- Feminist therapy developed in grassroots manner
- No single individual can be ID as founder
- Sisterhood developed & some of services that evolved from women's collective desires to improve society included
  - shelters for battered women,
  - rape crisis centers,
  - women's health centers &
  - reproductive health centers

### History & Development

- Only when women therapists participated in consciousness-raising groups
- And were changed by their experience
- Then formed feminist therapy groups that operated from same norms as consciousness raising groups, including
  - nonhierarchical relationships,
  - equal sharing of resources & power, &
  - empowerment of women
- These feminist principles soon began to find their way into their work with individual clients
- Stance that therapy
  - needed to move away from reliance on an intrapsychic psychopathology perspective (in which the sources of a woman's unhappiness or mental illness reside within her)
  - Needed to a focus on understanding the pathological forces in the culture that damage & constrain women

### Key Concepts of Feminist Therapy

- Client knows what is best for her life and is the expert on her own life
- Emphasis on educating clients about the therapy process
- Traditional ways of assessing psychological health are challenged
- Assumed that individual change will best occur through social change
- Clients are encouraged to take social action

## View of Human Nature

- Worell & Remar (2003) describe 6 characteristics of traditional theories that are outdated and contain biased elements:
  - **Androcentric** (uses male-oriented constructs to draw conclusions about human nature)
  - **Gendercentric** (Proposes separate developmental paths for women & men)
  - **Ethnocentric** (assumes that human development & interaction are similar across races, cultures, & nations)
  - **Heterosexist** (views heterosexual orientation as normative; same-sex as abnormal)
  - **Intrapsychic** (attributes behavior to intrapsychic causes; often results in blaming the victim)
  - **Determinism** (assumes present personality patterns & behavior are fixed at early developmental stage)

## View of Human Nature

- Worell & Remar (2003) describe the **constructs of feminist theory** as being
  - **Gender-fair**
    - Explain diff.s in behavior of women & men in terms of socialization processes (rather than 'true' nature)
  - **Flexible-multicultural**
    - Uses concepts/strategies that apply equally to both individuals & groups regardless of age, race, culture, gender, ability, class, or sexual orientation
  - **Interactionist**
    - Contains concepts specific to thinking, feeling, & behaving dimensions of human experience & account for contextual & environmental factors
  - **Life-span-oriented**
    - Assumes that human development is a lifelong process & that personality patterns & behavioral changes can occur at any time than being fixed during early childhood

## Four Approaches to Feminist Therapy

### 1. Liberal Feminism

- Focus
  - Helping individual women overcome the limits and constraints of their socialization patterns
- Major goals
  - Personal empowerment of individual women
  - Dignity
  - Self-fulfillment
  - Equality
  - All the above possible with bias-free work & social environments

## Four Approaches to Feminist Therapy

### 2. Cultural Feminism

- Oppression stems from society's devaluation of women's strengths
- Emphasize the differences between women and men
- Believe the solution to oppression lies in feminization of the culture
  - Society becomes more nurturing, cooperative, and relational
- Major goal of therapy is the infusion of society with values based on cooperation

## Four Approaches to Feminist Therapy

### 3. Radical Feminism

- Focus
  - The oppression of women that is embedded in patriarchy
  - Seek to change society through activism
  - Therapy is viewed as a political enterprise with the goal of transformation of society
- Major goals
  - Transform gender relationships
  - Transform societal institutions
  - Increase women's sexual and procreative self-determination.

## Four Approaches to Feminist Therapy

### 4. Socialist Feminism

- Also have goal of societal change
- Emphasis on multiple oppressions
- Believe solutions to society's problems must include consideration of:
  - Class
  - Race
  - Other forms of discrimination
- Major goal of therapy is to transform social relationships and institutions

## Principles of Feminist Therapy

- Personal is political (problems have sociopolitical roots)
- Personal and social identities are interdependent
- The counseling relationship is egalitarian
- Women's experiences are honored
- Definitions of distress and "mental illness" are reformulated (reject the disease model)
- There is an integrated analysis of oppression
  - Which emphasizes importance of working against oppression on basis of race, class, culture, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, age, disability

## Goals of Feminist Therapy

- To become aware of one's gender-role socialization process
- To identify internalized gender-role messages and replace them with functional beliefs
- To acquire skills to bring about change in the environment
- To develop a wide range of behaviors that are freely chosen
- To become personally empowered
- Note: Work toward reinterpreting women's mental health (depathologize) and social change

## Therapeutic Process

- Gender sensitive therapy not only provides a model of empowerment for women who are treated as an oppressed minority in society,
- But also is suitable for men, who are constricted by sex role injunctions
- In regards men, social norms for the most part, demand strength, autonomy, & competition & limit expression of vulnerability, sensitivity & empathy
- Both men & women benefit from counseling in which the costs & benefits of role-prescribed behavior are weighed & opportunities to explore flexible emotional & behavioral alternatives are provided

## Intervention Techniques in Feminist Therapy

- **Gender-role analysis and intervention**
  - To help clients understand the impact of gender-role expectations in their lives
  - Provides clients with insight into the ways social issues affect their problems
- **Power analysis and power intervention**
  - Emphasis on the power differences between men and women in society
  - Clients helped to recognize different kinds of power they possess and how they and others exercise power

## Intervention Techniques in Feminist Therapy

- **Bibliotherapy**
  - Reading assignments that address issues such as
    - Coping skills
    - Gender inequality
    - Gender-role stereotypes promoted
    - Ways sexism is promoted
    - Power differential between women and men
    - Society's obsession with thinness
  - Self-disclosure
    - To help equalize the therapeutic relationship and provide modeling for the client
    - Values, beliefs about society, and therapeutic interventions discussed
      - Allows the client to make an informed choice

## Intervention Techniques in Feminist Therapy

- **Assertiveness training**
  - Women become aware of their interpersonal rights
  - Transcends stereotypical sex roles
  - Changes negative beliefs
  - Implement changes in their daily lives
- **Reframing**
  - Changes the frame of reference for looking at an individual's behavior
    - Shifting from an intrapersonal to an interpersonal definition of a client's problem

### Intervention Techniques in Feminist Therapy

- **Relabeling**
  - Changes the label or evaluation applied to the client's behavioral characteristics
  - Generally, the focus is shifted from a negative to a positive evaluation

### Third-Wave Feminist Approaches

- **Postmodern feminists** provide a model for critiquing both traditional and feminist approaches
- **Women of color feminists** assert that it is essential that feminist theory be broadened and be made more inclusive
- **Lesbian feminists** call for inclusion of an analysis of multiple identities and their relationship to oppression
- **Global/international feminists** take a world-wide perspective in examining women's experiences across national boundaries

### Contributions

- Feminist therapy recognizes role of oppressive environmental forces on individuals
- Feminist perspective of understanding use of power in relationships has applications for understanding inequalities due to racial & cultural factors as well
- Both feminist & multicultural therapists work to encourage change & not adjustment to status quo

### Limitations

- Price may be high for clients whose cultural worldview is violated by feminist principles
- Persuading client to work towards more egalitarian relationships in therapy may violate cultural norms
- Therapist job is not to take away any pain in struggle not to choose for client, but to be present in such a way that client will truly be empowered
- Core values of equality & individuality in feminist therapy limit effectiveness of therapists in working with clients from culturally different backgrounds