



Feminist and Multicultural Counseling and Psychotherapy

Big Picture: Overview of Counseling Process

The feminist counseling process evolved around two primary themes: (a) an egalitarian counseling relationship and (b) recognition of sources of oppression. The process of counseling involves the following:

1. *Developing an egalitarian relationship:* The initial goals of the counseling process are to develop (a) a relationship in which clients feel safe and understood and (b) a sense of having a voice in shaping the process.
2. *Exploring sources of marginalization and disconnection:* Next, the counselor works with the client to identify sources of relational disconnection and social marginalization that relate to and fuel the presenting problem.
3. *Fostering authenticity and empowerment:* Using the counseling relationship as a place to experience empathy and authenticity, counselors empower clients to transfer learning in session to address areas of concern in their everyday lives.
4. *Building better relationships and communities:* In the later stages of the counseling process, clients are encouraged to promote social change to reduce forms of oppression for themselves and others as a means of increasing their sense of being part of growth-fostering relationships and communities.

Making Connection: Counseling Relationship

Egalitarian

Because social power is a central focus in feminist counseling, the counselor strives to make the counseling relationship *egalitarian* by closely attending to the inherent power imbalance in the relationship (Brown, 2010; Enns, 2004). How exactly do they achieve this seeming paradox? Feminist counselors have open discussions about the power dynamics and politics of counseling, such as the diagnosis process, communications with other professionals, and the counseling theories chosen. In these conversations, the counselor *demystifies* the counseling process and invites clients to share their opinions, ask questions, and do their own research, all of which is considered equally alongside the counselor's thoughts and theory (Worell & Remer, 1992). Much like in collaborative therapy (see Chapter 13), the feminist counseling process is a *mutual exploration* of how best to resolve clients' issues, in which counselors recognize clients' expertise in their own lives.

In addition, feminist counselors use *self-disclosure* to increase the sense of equality in the relationship and help clients develop hope and courage in their own lives. Counselors' egalitarian self-disclosure also involves admitting when they are wrong, being open to correction, and acknowledging personal defensiveness rather than assuming that relational disruptions are solely clients' faults. Instead, the counseling relationship is—in good times and bad—a two-way street where the counselor is equally responsible for bumpy roads and misunderstandings.

Feminist Code of Ethics

Feminists at the Feminist Therapy Institute (2000) have developed a *Feminist Code of Ethics*, which counselors use to guide their work and relationships with clients *in addition to* other professional codes. This ethical code describes a commitment to recognizing the impact of dominant cultural norms, acknowledging power differentials in relationships, managing overlapping relationships to avoid abuse, establishing counselor accountability, and promoting social change:

Feminists believe the personal is political. Basic tenets of feminism include a belief in the equal worth of all human beings, a recognition that each individual's personal experiences and situations are reflective of and an influence on society's institutionalized attitudes and values, and a commitment to political and social change that equalizes power among people. Feminists are committed to recognizing and reducing the pervasive influences and insidious effects of oppressive societal attitudes and society. (p. 1)

The Viewing: Case Conceptualization

The Personal Is Political; the Political Is Personal

One of the foundational assumptions of feminist counseling is that *the personal is political*, meaning that a person's internal reality—and therefore pathology—is inherently interconnected with political issues from the broader social context (Brown, 2006; Remer, 2008).

The reverse is also true: the political is also personal (Brown, 2006), meaning that what happens at the societal level affects people in a very personal way. Thus, when developing a case conceptualization, feminist counselors help clients separate internal and external sources of problems by *raising awareness* of oppression, privilege, and societal impact on individual experience.

The Politics of Diagnosis

As you may have surmised, feminist counselors are in no rush to find a diagnostic label to slap on clients. Instead, they carefully develop a thoughtful case conceptualization that includes the impact of social norms, cultural differences, gender politics, trauma, and clients' subjective experience and understanding of their situations (Brown, 2010).

Marginalization and Oppression

Contemporary feminist counselors have far more on their agenda than women's issues. They are aware that in addition to gender, people can be marginalized because of culture, race, sexual orientation, age, ability, economic class, religion, and numerous other factors. All of these contribute to a person feeling *disconnected* and marginalized from the dominant group, rejected for one's "otherness." Chronically having to hide parts of the self to be accepted leads to psychological symptoms and pathology (Jordan, 2010). Thus, feminist counselors consider *social oppression* and isolation to be the root cause of clients' problems (Brown, 2010). By identifying these sources of marginalization in the case conceptualization process, counselors identify where and how to help clients build the connections they need to live full, authentic lives.

Targeting Change: Goal Setting

Sociopolitical Awareness and Empowerment

Feminist counselors strive to increase a person's *sociopolitical awareness* of how their individual identity is interconnected with one's broader place in society and *empower* clients to define themselves by alternative standards. Feminists strive to have all clients become more aware of how their *gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, physical characteristics, and physical abilities* significantly affect a person's identity and sense of self-worth (Worell & Johnson, 2001). Thus, one of the goals is to help clients develop greater awareness of how these sociocultural variables inform their identity, critically evaluate their effects, and ultimately develop their identity by crafting their sense of identity with full awareness, using personal values and the values from communities that have personal significance.

Social Activism and Social Justice

Sometimes clients ask counselors where they can make a difference in the community with certain groups, such as children who have been sexually abused or immigrants needing assistance, and counselors should be ready and able to help them connect with appropriate community resources. Often, helping others who have experienced similar painful situations can be a transformative experience in which a client shifts from feeling like a victim to full recovery.

In addition, feminist counselors themselves are committed to social justice causes, using both professional and personal venues to effect societal change. This may take the form of advocating for clients in obtaining mental health or other services, in court situations, or in other contexts related to the client. Additionally, feminist counselors typically are involved in broader social movements, women's movements, clients' rights groups, children's advocacy, political campaigns, and similar efforts to promote social change.