
The Core Principles Of Feminist Theory And Intersectionality

This essay will provide an analysis of the core principles of feminist theory and intersectionality and consider how they can be used to deliver social justice and anti-oppressive practice when working with domestic violence victims.

Although feminist ideas have been evidenced throughout many different cultures over ancient years, modern feminism is thought to have originated with Mary Wollstonecraft and the campaign for Women's suffrage. During this time women fought and won the right to vote however the issue of oppression and inequality for women remained which led to the second wave of feminism from the 1960's (Teater, 2014). The view of women in society shaped the goals of the feminists during this time, although women were fighting for equality, socially and professionally, the second wave was very much based upon more than this, a fight for women's liberation (Heywood, 2012,p. 228). There was a major criticism of the dominance of white, middle-class women being the forerunners of the second wave feminist movement. This, alongside a failure to keep up with momentum built and with theory (Valentich, 2011), influenced the third wave feminist movement principles to be broadened to include issues such as disability, sexuality and racism (Teater, 2014).

The second and third waves of feminism led to the development of a number of variations of feminism (Teater,2014). These include, but are not limited to, liberal feminism, radical feminism, marxist and social feminism, black feminism and lesbian feminism.

The goal of liberal feminism is equality of opportunity through attaining legal rights to resources and occupations by using legislative and judicial action to fight sexist discrimination. Whilst this has been somewhat successful and legislation has been implemented to prevent discriminatory practices within the workplace, it fails to tackle the inherent view in society where women are viewed predominantly from the male perspective (Payne, 2011). Liberal feminists aim to challenge and eliminate this stereotyping of women in language and their portrayal in the media. Liberal feminists consider the characteristics that are usually attributed to women such as being overly emotional, caring/nurturing and to men such as aggression, rationality, and decisiveness to be responsible for creating socially imposed gender roles and further contributing to the oppression faced by women. They believe that men can be involved in supporting women in the fight for equal rights

Similar to the economical issues that concern liberal feminists such as inequality and rights in the workplace, marxist feminists believe that women's oppression lies with the capitalist system and that the economic forms of power enable men to control women for example, wage inequality (Mandel and Shalev, 2009) and lack of opportunity for female promotion into high level management roles (MacKinnon, 1982). Walby (1999) suggests that this fails to recognise specific role differences in relation to power and does not address the relationship between these roles and how these patriarchal views impact upon society.

The idea of patriarchy is the key theme in the views of radical feminists who hold patriarchy entirely responsible for the oppression of women. The promotion of the male figure as leader

ensures continued oppression of women (Ortner, 2014). This approach fails to acknowledge female individual differences within experiences and other factors such as cultural differences and norms. It has been criticised as presenting females as victims of male orientated circumstance as opposed to celebrating female strength (Forcey and Nash, 1998). Dominelli (2002) also argues that it fails to recognise diversity within the male population. Their goal is to actively challenge social systems and institutions that lead to and support patriarchy. Unlike liberal feminists they are less likely to believe that men can be supportive in the fight for equal rights (Teater, 2014).

Lesbian feminists also critique patriarchy and the institutionalisation of heterosexuality. They also view the women's movement as homophobic due to the lack of inclusion of lesbian oppression and issues.

Black feminists reject the suggestion that all women experience gender oppression equally and also originally introduced the notion of intersectionality.

Following on from the issues identified by the black and lesbian feminist movement, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is designed to explore the dynamic between various systems of oppression and identities. Developed in response to criticisms of the feminist movement where women are viewed as a homogeneous group it allows for a more holistic understanding of how gender interacts with other factors such as race and class in a feminist context. Crenshaw discusses how although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, when adopting either a feminist approach or anti-racist approach the two are very rarely considered in conjunction with one another. The basic principles of intersectionality echo the feminist ideologies of equality but with the acknowledgement that challenging one aspect of oppression and power alone is almost entirely ineffective. Specifically, a Black woman and a white woman will both experience life, challenges and womanhood differently due to race. That is not to say one is more important than the other but the lack of consideration for this and treating white females as a definitive standard promoted racism in the feminist movement which is where this key criticism stems from.

Collins (2000) developed further on Crenshaw's theory, arguing that multiple forms of oppression connect to form a "matrix of domination" just as identities intersect so do the hierarchies by which structural power imbalance is maintained. Taking this into consideration a change in attitudes and patterns is required with intersectionality at the forefront of the practitioners approach in order to understand the full range of human experiences and challenges within the diverse social contexts that social workers encounter. For instance when working with female domestic violence victims, if a practitioner adopts a feminist approach and uses interventions based solely on the experiences of women in general as a homogenous group, or white women, this will be of limited help to women that have experienced domestic violence due to their culture or race. Pan et al (2006) discuss how the intersection of cultural expectations of gender roles, migration history and religious beliefs create a difference in the experience and reporting of domestic violence among immigrant and refugee women when compared to the dominant culture. Many cultures often view violence against women as justified when women do not follow traditional expected gender roles or norms (Heise & Ellsberg, 2001). Being aware of these differences are key to delivering social justice particularly for victims from ethnic minority backgrounds. Continuing with refugees as a particular example there may be legal factors to consider depending on immigration status, language barriers and also the emotional impact of leaving their birthplace. Garcia and McManimon (2011) discuss the impact

of religion with female partner violence. Previously, in many religions it has strongly discouraged women from leaving their abusers. Within many societies there are issues around victim blaming and this is particularly dominant within a number of religions. Some religious leaders were even known to attempt to exorcise the demons from the woman who “caused” her husband to abuse her which demonstrates the extent of some cultural victim blaming. Frowning on divorce, many religions today still stress the importance of family counselling and discourage victims from leaving their abusive husbands. Whilst many religions have changed and developed in recent years, many still continue with this notion and the expectation of the women to fix the problem. Without support from authorities, women in poor financial circumstances have little ability or means to escape the relationship and are subsequently more likely to remain in an abusive relationship than a wealthier woman. Access to family money is more likely to be restricted in a relationship where culturally the male is responsible for the finances and so it is important to consider all of these intersections when working with victims of domestic violence. Providing support with prosecution for example, is futile if the victim has no alternative accommodation or means to support themselves financially. There is also risk of exclusion from family due to cultural expectations which could lead to isolation and further put the victim at risk of abuse, loneliness is one of the contributing factors to domestic violence and all of these risk factors should be considered. In order to achieve true social justice all of these barriers must be considered and overcome.

Adopting the feminist qualities and applying them to social work practice uses women’s experience of the world as the starting point and then by focusing on the links between a woman’s position in society and her individual predicament, responds to her specific needs (Dominelli, 2002). By being aware of the structural inequalities that cause women’s oppression and addressing those, it allows the practitioner to tailor the interventions to the specific needs of women, which differ from men (Teater, 2014). This will produce more positive and effective outcomes by challenging oppressive practices within society and so providing long term liberation for women and social justice. It also creates an equal working partnership between the practitioner and the service user (Dominelli, 2002) which empowers the service user and further encourages long term recovery.

Feminist theory principles suggest that partner domestic violence is the result of male oppression of women in which men are the primary perpetrators of violence and women the primary victims (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1979) due to patriarchy within society. McPhail et al. (year??) discuss how male violence results from power differentials that keep women subordinate through various measures of control such as physical, sexual and financial. Whilst linking patriarchy and male violence in relationships allows further discussion around the causes of domestic violence, it fails to take into consideration the implications for this with same sex relationships and female perpetrators. Fitzroy (2001) discusses how feminist theory should be more inclusive of and “own” women's violence. Also placing women in the context of patriarchal oppression, she views women as participants who can benefit from the power relationships within the family, as women are oppressed due to a power imbalance in society, within family settings they can enact power against others who are inferior to them such as disabled people. Fitzroy develops on this idea of power and applies it to a woman's use of violence within the context of her environment. By understanding the common issues and concept of power within domestic violence, practitioners are able to support victims to overcome these and challenge power differentials that not only lead to domestic violence but also hinder recovery. Whilst this is anti-oppressive for female victims and delivers social justice in a patriarchal society, it does not consider same sex relationships and instances where males are

victims of domestic violence in a heterosexual relationship. Whilst same sex partner violence has been acknowledged (Renzetti, 1988, 1997) within literature, it has not been fully integrated into the feminist theoretical perspective (McPhail et al). This could be viewed as oppressive towards other victims who fall into minority categories and fails to take into account other contributors towards domestic violence and theories that support it. Failure to consider these could have an adverse impact on achieving social justice for victims who do not fall into the dominant category, particularly within domestic violence, where literature and intervention has been developed with white female victims in mind.

The feminist perspective of focussing on the female victim and empowering them certainly helps to deliver anti-oppressive practice but only with that specific service user group in mind and fails to address the wider issues and contributing factors that would lend itself to delivering social justice for all domestic violence victims. Leonard and McLeod (1980) reveal that social workers ignore men in cases of domestic violence, but argue that men need therapeutic intervention if their behaviour is to alter. This is an important factor to consider and whilst it's important to recognise patriarchy as a key factor in male on female violence (the macro), theorists shouldn't ignore the significance of micro factors such as psychological factors, substance misuse and economic factors such as poverty and unemployment. Whilst working with female domestic violence victims a holistic approach and consideration of all contributing factors would be much more effective in achieving social justice and reducing the risk to other women.

Whilst feminist theories challenge the existing stereotypes and gender roles that are established by the dominant members of society (Teater, 2014) it is important to consider that whilst patriarchy is a cause of female oppression, men can also be negatively impacted by this. Patriarchy damages both men and women – limiting men's emotional growth and oppressing women (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989). Also when considering domestic violence victims, male victims in particular are usually associated with a great deal of stigma, especially in heterosexual relationships. This stems from the patriarchal view of men being the powerful leaders and a view of women being weak subordinates and whilst the feminist approach views women as being the victims of male oppression, here it is useful when working with male victims to understand how these stereotypes can have a negative impact and create stronger feelings of shame with male victims due to expectations within society (reference?). Challenging these stereotypes is important when supporting male victims in dealing with the aftermath of experiencing domestic violence and by overcoming these issues it also challenges oppressive views within society that affect females and places male and female victims on an equal level. Studying sexually aggressive women from a feminist perspective is important as the outcome could broaden the feminist focus beyond sexism to be more inclusive of other issues and forms of oppression such as same sex relationships, transgender victims as well as male victims (Muehlenhard, 1998). This could lead to development on existing theories around sexism and power struggles and challenge gender stereotyping which could help to address the issue of sexual aggression as a whole and be effective for all potential victims and not just female victims.

Whilst applying feminist theory to interventions as a practitioner allows an understanding of the oppression women face and the power differentials that cause this, it fails to truly consider the other factors that contribute to oppression for other groups of people, particularly minorities. It also fails to acknowledge that victims of oppression can in some cases, use their other privileges to oppress others in the same marginalized category such as white women silencing concerns of women from minority cultures who have both been victims of domestic violence. A

white female victim will experience the criminal justice system, social services and responses from family and friends differently to that of a female victim from another culture due to the cultural expectations of others as well as the systemic racism that is still an issue in society.

Whilst females will always be victims of oppression, as will people from ethnic minorities or with disabilities that doesn't mean that they are all co-existing or relevant to other forms of oppression that people may experience. It is also important to consider that these forms of oppression can still negatively impact on the dominant group, similar to the discussion earlier around how male's experience of patriarchy can negatively impact on their emotional development. Intersectionality as a concept warrants us to be aware of what privileges we may have and how that interacts with our oppressions. It also asks us to consider how this can cause further oppression for others and it's application to social work as an expansion on feminist theory truly helps to deliver social justice and anti-oppressive practice by being considerate of all intersections and promoting empowerment for all service user groups. It also helps to address the criticisms and limitations described within feminist theory, although more research and literature within this area will help to promote it further as an effective universal approach moving forward.