

Ordinary People Application Paper: Feminist Therapy

Wendy Hou

Alliance University Graduate School of Counseling

GCN 502 OA: Theories and Foundations

Professor George Ramos

April 18, 2023

Ordinary People Application Paper: Feminist Therapy

Borne out of a collective effort by women to improve the mental health treatment of women, feminist therapy is a “postmodern, technically integrative approach” that focuses on issues of gender, power, and culture in the oppression of various marginalized people within society (Corey, 2017, p.341). With a systemic perspective, this counseling model understands individuals in their sociocultural context, and explains differences in behavior as due to socialization processes rather than innate natures. It asserts that women and men have been socialized to accept “traditional” gender roles and expectations from birth; these societal stereotypes then become ingrained in their personality, define their identity, and perpetuate social inequities and power differentials in this world. Living a life determined by what society dictates is viewed as constraining and oppressive, negatively affecting emotional well-being. Feminist therapists, therefore, recognize clients’ presenting problems as originating from their social, cultural, and political realities. Instead of “blaming the victim” and dwelling on intrapsychic dimensions like most traditional counseling theories, they reframe symptoms as distress rather than psychopathology, as a coping response to external circumstances and a resistance to unjust systems. As a result, diagnostic labeling is rarely used, if at all, and therapy is aimed toward empowering clients to be agents of change in their own lives and in the society around them.

Through the eyes of a feminist therapist, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is seen as a psychologically distressed young man living a constrained life due to the gender-role and social class-related expectations imposed on him. He has uncritically accepted and internalized some of society’s notion of what it means to be a man- i.e., a man must be strong and tough, should not show or talk about emotions (restrictive emotionality), should be achieving in the eyes of others, and values power and control (Corey, 2017). While trying but failing to live

up to these “ideal” male gender stereotypes, Conrad negatively judges himself and his dad (i.e., they are both weak and too passive, unable to stand up to Mom), and restricts his own freedom to express feelings (i.e., even at his brother’s funeral) (Redford, 1980). Gender socialization has also impacted the way he views his mom. He has bought into the idea that women, and especially mothers, should be gentle, warm, and loving. So, when his mom exhibits none of those female/motherly qualities, he can’t help but blame her for being a “bad” mom. Not only is Conrad affected by gender-role expectations, but he is also oppressed by the social pressures that come from being a member of the White, upper-middle class. His society emphasizes the importance of being, or at least appearing, “perfect,” which includes being athletic, social, and popular. On the other hand, being “sick” and needing help from others are signs of being a failure. However, since his suicide attempt and hospitalization, Conrad has been regarded by others and by himself as being “defective”- weak, socially awkward, and not athletic enough. And because he knows he isn’t measuring up to these societal standards that he has allowed to shape and define him, he feels depressed, anxious, and alienated from others.

If I were a feminist therapist treating Conrad, I would first want to apply the technique of gender-role/social identity analysis. I would ask him to think through and identify the societal messages he received about how men and women should be and act and then consider how that might have shaped his values and behaviors (Corey, 2017). I hope to show Conrad and help him understand how constraining these gender and environmental expectations are and how they are contributing to his psychological distress. I hope to help him redefine himself with healthier notions, such as “real strength sometimes comes through our vulnerabilities” (p. 356). As his therapist, I would also want to help Conrad develop a sense of personal and social power. I believe this would lessen his symptoms of depression and anxiety. One empowerment strategy to

use is asking the following question, “What is the most powerful thing you could do for yourself right now?” (p.349). This question would show him that he is not a victim of powerlessness, but that power is actually available to him.

While the feminist therapeutic approach can be useful in working with male clients (Corey, 2017), I think it is of limited value to helping Conrad. I don’t believe his problems can be adequately explained by viewing them through the social context lens (the etiology of his symptoms seems to be multifactorial, with both intrapsychic and environmental dimensions). Confronting oppressive factors in society while pushing for social justice, which are core to feminist therapy, also don’t seem very applicable to his situation. In addition, the strength of voicing the perspective of women and other marginalized groups would be mostly lost on Conrad, a person of the dominant gender from the dominant culture. Therefore, I believe his psychological issues would best be addressed and treated with a counseling modality other than the feminist therapy.

References

Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary people* [Film].