A Response to the "F" Word

Meera Chetty and Estelle Mendelsohn

This paper is an invited response to "The 'F' Word: The challenge of feminism and the practice of counselling 20 years on." As two women who had not met before, we discovered that we had come from vastly different worlds, from different ethnicities, cultures, life and work experiences, and we came together holding different perspectives on and understandings about feminism and its relationship to counselling. In presenting a response to issues this article raises, we first speak individually about our backgrounds, work, and views of feminism, then we join together to comment on the challenges presented by feminism in relation to the practice of counselling at the present time. We identify some options for a way forward, while also encouraging further engagement with the topic.

In attempting to produce a joint response to "The 'F' Word", we found ourselves engaged in stimulating and thoughtful discussions in which we came to appreciate each other as individuals and as women counsellors, savouring the areas of commonality and difference. We grappled with the topic of feminism, listening to and learning from each other, bringing to the dialogue the very different worlds we emerged from and our varied life experiences, as well as referring to academic literature. We came to new personal understandings and a thirst for further engagement on the subject. We also appreciated the transparency and reflective practice of the authors of "The 'F' Word" as they initiated what we consider to be a very necessary discussion among counsellors.

We recognise that this debate is multifaceted and complex. In sharing our musings about issues raised in the article, we hope to contribute to what will no doubt be an ongoing process of engagement with the implications of feminism for the practice of counselling. First, we introduce ourselves.

Estelle Mendelsohn

I was born in Australia, but have lived more than half my life in Aotearoa. Diversity is alive and well in our family in many dimensions. I trained as a psychologist decades ago, then as a psychodramatist, so I have a love for group work. My work has focused on moving beyond trauma survival, especially for women. Earlier on, much of my work concentrated on sexual abuse trauma, but it has expanded to working with refugee and immigrant women. Doing this work and writing it up for my MPhil made me become much more disciplined and focused on just how I operated as a feminist in a transcultural context.

As I talked with Meera, I remembered why the human rights umbrella was not enough for me. In my thesis (Mendelsohn, 2002), I quote some major feminist activists who point out that human rights organisations, from the United Nations to Amnesty International, have not readily addressed issues of women and oppression. I still want to foreground gender equity and power structures.

Whether I overtly call myself a feminist or not depends on where I am and what my purpose is, and there are times when I may choose not to use the term. Over five decades of professional practice, I have needed to revisit this concern on many occasions. I have also had to endure being stereotyped and misunderstood when I do call myself a feminist, but part of my decision is to honour the many waves of feminism that have gone before.

In order to reflect the diversity of thinking, especially across cultures, I underscore the need to talk about feminisms, rather than feminism. Fluidity is another key word for me, as it reflects the changes in my own thinking as a result of reading the work of Middle Eastern and Indian feminists.

Meera Chetty

I am a South African woman of Indian origin and have lived in New Zealand for the past twelve years. I trained as a counsellor in South Africa and have worked with both adults and teenagers. Since coming to New Zealand, my client base has been very multicultural, and my work now includes individual, couple, and group counselling.

In responding to the article, I had to consider my position with regard to feminism. My answer to the question of whether I would call myself a feminist was a somewhat tentative, "No, but …" I felt the need to clarify my response with explanations about how I still believed in and practised many of the tenets of feminism in my life. I had never identified myself as a feminist. However, as I pondered this question, I realised that gender issues had never taken precedence in my life for two reasons. First, having spent most of my life under the oppressive system of apartheid in South Africa, racism and human rights were my focus. The rights of women were incorporated into that struggle. Second, I wondered to what extent I had been riding the wave of, and benefiting from, the work of feminists of the previous generations. It seemed as though life for women had changed significantly between my parents' generation and mine, so that gender issues were not a priority, certainly not enough to take priority over racism.

As a consequence of having been faced with racism in various forms for all of my life, and having experienced the impact of assumptions people have made about me or my life experience based on my ethnicity, I hold strong beliefs about human rights, about valuing diversity, and the unique experience of every individual. When working with my clients, I am careful not to make assumptions about the outer coverings that I see, reminding myself of the importance of getting to know each person, beyond the limits of my vision. I attempt to understand their experience of the world and to enquire about the meanings they make of their experiences, often asking questions to ensure that I have an accurate grasp of the situation.

My response here represents my current position, as well as my ongoing quest for further understanding of the relationship between feminism and counselling.

The "F" word: what does it mean today?

We concur with the authors of "The 'F' Word" that it is important to raise the issue of feminism, and to encourage further discussion about the commonalities of definition as well as the diversities. Gender issues and inequities remain alive in our world, as do other forms of oppression.

As we explored literature on the issue of feminism, it was interesting to note that writers comment on the reluctance of many women to identify themselves as feminist (Crown, 2005; Dankoski, Penn, Carlson, & Hecker, 1998). Dankoski et al. (1998) found that therapists, even when reluctant to describe themselves as feminist, believed in and practised many of the tenets of feminist-informed therapy. They suggested that the

multiple, divergent definitions as well as stereotypes of "feminism" appear to prevent many therapists from claiming adherence to the label "feminist".

Several feminist philosophies have emerged over time, including socialist feminism, academic feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, activist feminism, lesbian feminism, multicultural feminism, and liberal feminism (Holman & Douglass, 2004). A definition that attempts to integrate and fuse various tenets of several of those philosophies, and one that resonates with both of us, is offered by Holman and Douglass (2004), who suggest the term *developmental feminism*. Their definition keeps gender as a central organising identity for men and women, which interacts with other identities such as culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class in diverse and overlapping ways, resulting in the dominant gender, male, having a disproportionate allotment of power and opportunity. However, the construct of developmental feminism is fluid and continually evolving, while allowing individuals to be accepted at their developmental level, and encouraged to embrace new knowledge and explore their unique feminist identities (Holman & Douglass, 2004).

The complexity and diversity of feminist issues become especially apparent when viewed from a multicultural perspective. As reflected in the preceding article, we are increasingly likely to find ourselves working in our counselling practices with clients from different cultures, given the effects of globalisation and migration. Evans, Kincade, Marbley, and Seem (2005) remind us of the key tenet of feminism, which has always been that the personal is political. They point out, however, that the nuances of what feminism means for individual women will differ on the basis of their particular racial, cultural, and class-related circumstances. Further, they warn that it is essential to construct theories and therapies that are "shared, inclusive; and culturally, racially, politically, and gender sensitive" (p. 8).

The concept of intersectionality also resonates with us in this regard, and reminds us to respect the individual experiences of women. Chandra Mohanty (1991) points out that the intersections of the various systemic networks of class, race, sexuality and nation all position us as women (Mohanty, 1991, cited in Mendelsohn, 2002). Speaking of "a theoretical gridlock that characterises much current feminist discourse about race, racism and ethnicity," Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) observes that

> *Scripts of denial, produced largely by white women for whom race has not been a source of oppression, cover a range of stories affirming female and feminist sisterhood that, in their exclusive focus on gender, covertly refuse the significance of race.*
>
> (p. 41)

The "blindness to categories of race and ethnicity as coordinates of identity" that can arise from adherence to the feminist goal of an alliance of women everywhere against patriarchalism, may be associated with denial of "the structural process of 'othering' by a host of other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, national origin, and age" (p. 41). In our work with our clients, we are in danger of replicating the power relations we intend to challenge, if the scripts we reproduce are determined by the way we create otherness through our white feminist lenses. These may inhibit us from seeing the nuanced complexity of our clients' identities and experiences.

In an earlier paper, Mohanty (1988) pointed out the danger of stereotyping both men and women:

> *An analysis of "sexual difference" in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I shall call the "third-world difference"—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries. It is in the production of this "third-world difference" that western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries.*

Whether one is engaged in feminist academic discourse, or in attempting to build relationships with clients in our counselling rooms, "defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into 'objects-who-defend-themselves,' men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,' and (every) society into a simple opposition between the powerless (read: women) and the powerful (read: men) groups of people" (Mohanty, 1988). Discussing the development and importance of relational thinking about identity, Friedman (1998) explains the ways in which cultural narratives of relational positionality help us move beyond binary perspectives, and recognise the fluidity of interacting situational identities. "Power and powerlessness, privilege and oppression, move fluidly through the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and national origin" (p. 49).

Feminism and counselling

We believe that a challenge exists for any counsellor who wishes to express feminism as a practitioner in ways that will enable her to meet the needs of both men and women: Is it possible for those beliefs and values to be held in a manner that allows the counsellor to engage respectfully with her clients? We see the vignettes in the "The 'F' Word" as illustrative of contexts in which counsellors may encounter this dilemma.

The problem is not inherent in the feminisms practitioners may identify with, but in the potential impact on their interactions and relationships with clients.

Based on the information provided in some of the vignettes, we were concerned with the ways in which counselling environments, counsellors' emotional reactions to client issues, and counsellors' assumptions and worldviews seemed to impact on the counselling processes. We offer some questions for consideration.

What are our obligations as counsellors to ensure that the physical environment in which counselling takes place is welcoming and inclusive for clients? In choosing the way in which we decorate our rooms, to what extent should we focus on what may be comfortable for our clients, rather than primarily for us as counsellors? To what extent could our assumptions or worldviews limit our ability to enter fully into a client's world? To what extent does the intensity of our emotional response hamper our engagement with a client? Could our generalisations and stereotypes about other cultures prevent us from entering into clients' individual life experiences? When might the lenses through which we see the world and through which we interpret our clients' experiences, and the filters through which we hear our clients' stories, limit our capacity to respond compassionately and competently as practitioners?

We also believe that the following questions need to be addressed. How do we stay present with and respectful of our clients? Would we have the courage to take these issues to supervision and would they be addressed there? Are there supervisors available who hold an awareness of, and sensitivity to, issues related to *both* feminism and multiculturalism? How do counsellors hold their perspectives as feminists while working with individuals from other cultures, in the counselling environment, who may or may not be feminists, or sensitive to feminist thinking? How do counsellors ensure that they do not impose their views of what it means to be feminist on their clients?

A way forward?

It seems to us that, as counsellors, we need more opportunities to examine and reflect on our perspectives on issues related to feminism, as well as on the various forms of oppression experienced by women. This could happen in supervision, particularly as relevant issues arise in the context of working with clients. However, due to the risks associated with discussions of race, gender, and culture, it would be important that supervisors understand their own experiences and position on these issues, prior to engaging in discussions with supervisees (Nelson, Gizara, Hope, & Phelps, 2006).

Instead, it may be more productive and satisfying for women practitioners to

meet with other interested colleagues to have open discussions about their experiences as women in the world, and about feminist theories that may illuminate or challenge the ways in which we make meaning of these experiences. Particularly enriching would be having such discussions with groups of women from various backgrounds or life experiences, to provide us with wider perspectives. To be effective and ethical practitioners, we need to make every attempt to understand the individual experiences of women, rather than, however unwittingly, making "blanket" judgements about groups of women and men based on their ethnicity or culture. While acknowledging that we are always affected by our own particular cultural lenses, through which we see and interpret the world, developing personal relationships and engaging in genuine dialogue with diverse women is likely to enable us to be more available to our clients, and more able to explore their unique experiences with them. Only when rapport and relationship are established with our clients do we have a mandate to challenge or propose alternative viewpoints within the counselling process.

Coda

Having engaged with this material individually as well as in discussion with each another, we have each evolved to a new but different stance with regard to the construct of feminism. Meera needs to have a human rights perspective, but now also sees the need to engage more consciously with the specific, gender-related needs of women and men in their social contexts. Estelle would still like to foreground feminism, as she is still not convinced that human rights, as currently constructed, pays sufficient attention to the needs of women. We join with the writers of "The 'F' Word" in hoping that through further debate and discussion, new meanings might emerge that could lead to new actions.

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