

Constructing Feminist Counselling: 'Equality' as a Discursive Resource in Counsellors' Talk

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ABSTRACT *Feminist counselling has an uneasy relationship with mainstream counselling approaches. Feminist counselling/therapy is diverse both in theory and in the practice of those who refer to themselves as feminist counsellors, which means that many counsellors outside the feminist tradition are unclear about what it entails. There are also tensions between the discourses of feminism and of therapy (Maracek and Kravetz, 1998). This makes for confusion in the wider counselling population about the nature and validity of feminist counselling. In this study I asked counsellors (not selected on the basis of feminist identification) about their understanding of feminist counselling. They attached four main meanings to feminist counselling: exclusivity, imposing a viewpoint, broader perspectives and a commitment to equality. In exploring the validity of feminist counselling the participants drew on competing meanings of equality, namely relational equality and external equality. This contrasts with much feminist counselling writing, which claims these as complementary. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist counselling is a form of therapeutic practice that seeks to take account of and respond to social power differences. (The terms 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' are used interchangeably in this paper. I see them as overlapping sections of a continuum, rather than conceptually or practically distinct activities.) The early feminist interest in gender inequality has been enlarged in contemporary practice to encompass all forms of systematic social inequalities (Rubin and Nemeroff, 2001; Sinacre and Enns, 2005). Arguments for counselling to address explicitly power imbalances in society (including those related to gender) are familiar (Totton, 2000), but are contested by those who see an engagement with political issues as inappropriate to the counsellor-client relationship. The latter position rests upon an assumption that counselling *can* be disengaged from issues of social power and

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that it *should* be so. This is rejected, however, in arguments that any social practice that does not challenge existing power relations within society is supportive of the continuation of these power relations. Counselling and psychotherapy that focuses solely on the individual and takes no account of social power is itself politically positioned by its silence (Totton, 2000) and in treating psychotherapy as neutral to social power 'we may inadvertently be asking our troubled consultees to adjust to the unjust' (Kaye, 1999, 20, citing Cross, 1994). Counselling that focuses on the individual's psychology and ignores the material and cultural context in which the client lives, risks blaming individuals for a situation that may more usefully be seen as part of their social positioning. A woman who does not leave a violent husband may still be seen as having problems of dependency in her personality rather than for this to be seen in the light of imbalances of economic earning power or dominant constructions of femaleness in contemporary society (Burstow, 1992; Smailes, 2004). Eating problems may be interpreted more in the light of individual pathology than of gendered cultural dissonances (Fallon et al., 1994; Malson, 1998).

Traditional models of counselling focus on the individual in a way that leaves them blind to issues of class, gender and other differences and have neither the language to deal with the historical dimension of oppression (Ernst and Goodison, 1981) nor the legitimacy to do so.

Feminist counselling and therapy offer alternative perspectives on ways of working with individuals and groups to facilitate personal and social change in a hierarchical and gendered world, combining the personal and the political in a therapeutic process. There is a very considerable body of work on feminist counselling and therapy (Taylor, 1996 offers a useful overview) and a number of studies of feminist counsellors' descriptions of their practice (see below) but few data on the ways in which the feminist counsellor is viewed by other counsellors. In this study I consider what counsellors' discussions of feminist counselling can tell us about the relationship between feminism and counselling and about the potential discursive space for developing power-sensitized therapeutic practice (Spong and Hollanders, 2003).

FEMINISM, COUNSELLING AND GENDER EQUALITY

There are multiple and sometimes conflicting dimensions to feminist counselling and therapy; with no clear consensus on either the definition or the practices involved (Juntunen et al., 1994). Some common aspects are the idea of the personal as political, and a focus on social and therapeutic egalitarianism (Gilbert, 1980; Feminist Therapy Institute, 2000). Feminist counselling can be responsive to inequalities in three main ways: by incorporating an *awareness* of social inequalities, in a commitment to *challenging* these (e.g. Burstow, 1992; Worell and Remer, 2002) and by drawing on ways of *understanding* how inequalities (especially of gender) might be *psychologically determined or expressed* (for example, Gilligan, 1982; Benjamin, 1988; Ernst, 1997; Chodorow, 1999). In doing so, the feminist counsellor may challenge androcentrism and eurocentrism, focus particularly on women's issues and/or valorize attributes or values such as intuition and relatedness usually attributed to women and other non-dominant groups (Chaplin, 1999; Worell and Remer, 2002). Goals of feminist counselling may include increasing the client's awareness of patriarchal and discriminatory systems, increasing resistance to external power relations and helping clients resist oppressive psychological processes.

Feminist counselling has been described as being primarily a value system or way of thinking (Sturdivant, 1980; Brown, 1994; Chester and Bretherton, 2001) but it has also been associated with particular skills and practice activities (Chaplin, 1999; Cummings, 2000). Process elements of feminist counselling typically include an emphasis on the development of empathic, nurturing relationships, with boundaries that are flexible rather than rigid. In this way feminist counselling builds on women's relational strengths, offering a form of caring that women may not experience elsewhere in their lives but are expected to provide to others (Chaplin, 1999). A second group of process elements are associated with the development of a non-hierarchical relationship in which power inequalities are minimized (Taylor, 1996; Chaplin, 1999; Worell and Remer, 2002). The client's ability to resist and challenge power inequalities in the external world is increased by experiencing an egalitarian relationship within counselling.

Addressing inequality and especially gender inequality is one important facet of feminist counselling but feminism cannot be reduced to a commitment to gender equality, nor is it wise to assume that all those who advocate or agitate for gender equality would adopt the label of 'feminist' (Riley, 2001). Feminism carries a range of diverse meanings within which 'equality' can be interpreted and managed in different ways. Theoretically, this is particularly important given the current analysis of the third wave of feminism, which is moving away from the second-wave feminism focus on the commonality of women's experiences and a focus on gender as the primary power categorization (Rubin and Nemeroff, 2001; Sinacre and Enns, 2005). Empirically, it is useful to notice the multiple positions available around issues of equality for those who do or do not identify themselves as feminists or as feminist counsellors.

FEMINIST COUNSELLORS' VIEWS OF FEMINIST COUNSELLING

The multiple meanings of feminism, the sense that feminist counselling is more a philosophy than a set of practices and the intersection of feminist ideas with a wide variety of counselling traditions (Burstow, 1992; Heenan, 1998; Jones, 1998; Proctor and Napier, 2004) combine to give a situation in which there is little clear agreement about the nature of feminist counselling. Furthermore, the practice descriptions of feminist counsellors do not entirely match any formal statement of 'feminist counselling'. There are two helpful studies that consider how feminism is manifest in the practice of self-identified feminist counsellors. The more recent of these (Chester and Bretherton, 2001) combines a developmental stage theory of feminist identity (Downing and Rousch, 1985) with themes of feminist counselling developed from an earlier study (Thomas, 1975). Chester and Bretherton offer six themes that were cited by their research participants as indicative of feminism in their practice. These are: being woman centred, egalitarianism, beliefs, action, critique of patriarchy and a positive vision of the future. Of these, being woman centred was the most frequently cited, while egalitarianism was relatively uncommon. However, in the developmental model used by Chester and Bretherton, being woman centred tends to occur at an early stage of development of feminist identity whereas egalitarianism is characteristic of a later stage of feminist identity. These themes identified by feminist counsellors provide a useful comparator to the discussion by the participants in the project described here (not chosen as feminist counsellors) of how they understand feminist counselling.

An earlier study is Marecek and Kravetz's (1998) research into feminist therapists. Their analysis of feminist counsellors' explanations of their practice emphasizes a fundamental divide between the ideologies of feminism and of psychotherapy. They argue that the notion that each individual has the power and responsibility to fulfil their own potential (important to therapy discourse) is in contradiction to an understanding of the institutional and social forces that constrain individuals' choices (important to feminist discourse). In managing this conflict, the counsellor needs to decide the extent to which her own feminist identity is reflected in the process she adopts in the counselling and whether she would see herself as actively helping her client to become more aware of and to challenge women's relative lack of power. In other words she needs to determine which elements of feminism she takes into her counselling: and in particular whether having her own awareness of gendered power relations is sufficient, or whether she adopts goals of increasing her client's awareness of and resistance to gendered power relations. If she does intentionally focus attention on those aspects of her client's experience that are mediated by living in a patriarchal society then she risks challenging the implicit values of counselling concerned with client autonomy (Erwin, 1997; Holmes and Lindley, 1998).

MANAGING CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE DISCOURSES OF THERAPY AND OF FEMINISM

Although Maracek and Kravetz's analysis placed the discourses of therapy and feminism in conflict, their respondents did not identify this. Some of their descriptions of the distinctively feminist aspects of their practice did not relate strongly to established feminist theory and neither was it particularly different from certain approaches to mainstream counselling. For example, respondents frequently described as feminist such elements of practice as a focus on empathy, lack of hierarchy and being real, which are also key elements of person-centred counselling. Although there are these significant overlaps between person-centred counselling and feminism/feminist counselling, there are also substantial discursive contradictions between the two (Waterhouse, 1993; Proctor and Napier, 2004). In particular these are concerned with the level of focus on the individual or society. Maracek and Kravetz (1998) suggest that most of their respondents spoke from within a therapy discourse rather than a feminist discourse when describing their practice. Their positioning of their practice as feminist seems to have been primarily based on personal belief rather than on an integrated feminist counselling theory or on specific elements of practice. This raises questions about the extent to which counsellors' introduction of their feminist belief systems into their practice is compatible with counselling discourse and how this might appropriately take place. The wider question here concerns how counsellors manage the boundaries of their own personal and political beliefs in relation to their counselling, particularly where those beliefs may be seen as inconsistent in some way with dominant forms of counselling discourse. In this study I explore this, asking counsellors for their response to the idea of a 'feminist counsellor'.

THIS STUDY

Although feminist counselling and therapy are well-established as the subjects of a considerable body of literature, they are less familiar within everyday practice in south Wales, where I work. This paper comes out of a larger project involving focus groups of counsel-

lors in south Wales who discussed various topics around the influence of the counsellor on the client. Here I concentrate on the responses of three of these focus groups who were asked the question: 'What would you understand if someone described themselves as a feminist counsellor?'

The study is within the paradigm of discourse analysis and makes particular reference to discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003). There is currently a relatively small but increasing body of literature that uses discourse analysis to provide a critical understanding of ways in which counselling/ therapy operates (Avdi and Georgaca, 2007), or that relates specifically to the ideas which underpin feminist therapy (Burman, 1992). This study, however, has a different focus from either of these uses of discourse analysis in that it employs discursive psychology to explore how groups of counsellors discussed the meaning of feminist counselling.

The focus groups were recruited using personal and institutional contacts, which then snowballed through respondents' professional networks. Recruitment did not take account of feminist identity and the participants were not expected to have any special knowledge of feminist counselling. Participants adhered to various counselling traditions, with a bias towards humanistic and integrative work. They worked in a wide range of contexts. The group discussions were recorded, and were then transcribed using a simplified version of the Jefferson system (Jefferson, 1984). The analysis was developed from a close and systematic engagement with the text (Wood and Kroger, 2000) rather than being based on *a priori* categories. All the participants were sent a draft copy of these findings and asked for their comments.

THE NATURE OF FEMINIST COUNSELLING

The groups' discussions about the meaning of feminist counselling were based on a mixture of personal experience and inference by the participants. As such, the dialogue is replete with meanings accorded to political concepts in counselling and arguments concerning the influence of the counsellor on the client, as well as reflecting contemporary theory and practice. There was a great deal of uncertainty expressed about the nature of feminist counselling, which suggested a lack of information and sometimes a disapprobation of the idea of feminist counselling: that it was difficult to imagine how feminism and counselling *could* be combined. This uncertainty may reflect the absence from much mainstream counselling practice and training of the considerable tradition of radical approaches to counselling and psychotherapy as well as acknowledging tensions between the two discourses of counselling and feminism. The relatively little information participants had about feminist counselling and the absence of an agreed construction of feminist counselling allowed the participants to speculate, drawing on a range of discursive resources to interpret the possibilities of feminist counselling. This study therefore tells us something about how these respondents construct counselling as well as their responses to the idea of feminist counselling.

FOUR ARGUMENTS

Four main categories describing the nature of feminist counselling were derived from participants' discussions. These categories are framed as descriptive (what is feminist counselling) but also function as evaluative categories in that they provide arguments about the

validity of feminist counselling. The two negative categories or arguments are feminist counselling as 'exclusive' and as 'imposing a viewpoint'; the two positive categories or arguments are feminist counselling as 'incorporating broader perspectives' and as involving a 'commitment to equality'.

Exclusivity

One consistent theme is the feminist counsellor as limited in terms of who she works with (for example, women, feminist women), what issues she works with (for example, women's issues), or the perspectives she adopts. The following examples are responses to the question: 'what would you understand if someone described themselves as a feminist counsellor?' The identifying numbers are the group identification followed by the line number of the transcript (for example, 1: 599). Participants' names are pseudonyms.

1: 599

Angela I think I'd probably feel that this was someone who's kind of on one track who didn't really see too much .. apart from this feminist bit. I . I would be wondering how . how that person worked and .. with whom she wouldn't work

Louisa I was thinking if . if well I . I doubt if she'd work with men .hhh . umm

6: 577

Annie *I don't know what it means* .. what does being a feminist counsellor mean

Carol well does it mean that they . it's like if you wanted to that you can say ah . they are a feminist counsellor but they are nothing else . they are not other things . or they're only counselling feminists . ((laughter)) .. or well I just do . ((unclear)) it's a bit like . it makes me wonder you know what's going on . and um it's um .

These responses relate to the category of feminism that Chester and Bretherton describe as 'woman centred'. This is a rendition of 'woman centred' as narrow and limiting and of feminist counselling as a form of counselling that operates through the exclusion of certain groups and aspects of life.

Imposing a viewpoint

Participants frequently expressed concern that a feminist counselling might involve the counsellor imposing her perspective on the client:

6: 566

Barbara I think . my kind of whoa . is about . about my initial thought was that word . but generally about .. it feels a very strong politically term ((umm)). and: my kind of whoa is anxiety and fear is about how much of that .. comes into their . work . which could be (unclear) by that because if . it's so important for me to try as much as I can to be open . that the thought of someone having a strong political leaning and that influencing someone .. presumably putting the two words together means that that influences how they work . yeh . it's just a strong reaction .. does that mean *they have their own agenda with how they work*

Here the introduction of ‘the political’ into counselling provokes ‘anxiety’ and ‘fear’ because it is in opposition to the openness the counsellor strives for. The opposite of openness is for counsellors to ‘have their own agenda’. This implies an ideal of the counsellor as not only ‘open’ (as stated) but also as neutral in respect of direction of change. The strength of this speaker’s reaction to ‘having an agenda’ carries the powerful negative construction of directional influence within counselling discourse.

The extract below shows concern that the client may experience the counsellor’s views as an imperative, even though this may not be deliberate:

1: 758

Angela Or how might their beliefs be imposed upon (yeah) um the client.(um) (yeah) .. Intentionally or .. unintentionally . it is . it’s something about the power of the word [ie feminist] isn’t it ...

It is not only intentional proselytizing that is of concern but also that the counsellor’s views can be accidentally imposed on the client. This relates to the counselling wisdom that emphasizes that the counsellor’s felt responses (which may implicate beliefs and values) are likely to leak through to the client (and possibly be misinterpreted) if they are not made transparent. That ‘leakage’ is an influence that it is difficult for the client to resist given the power balance in counselling.

Broader perspectives

This construction of feminist counselling as incorporating broader perspectives is one of two main positive categories/ arguments. It offers a contrasting view to those described above where feminist counselling is described as narrow or imposing one particular view. Here feminist counselling is seen as placing the client’s story into a broader social narrative, which takes account of historical, social and power issues.

1: 714

Renee It’s interesting as you both kind of see it as a narrowing down ((um)) whilst for me I would see it as a broadening out (hm) ((response omitted))

Renee Well as I said earlier, my reading of women and society .. um . various feminist books .. social history art history all around . the last couple of years ago or so of of women’s role and the evolution of women’s role in society um and how women have been used, moved around and very much disempowered in various various stages ((cough)) that gives me a broader understanding of issues

Below, Carol describes how an awareness of gender power relations might be significant in a counselling relationship by discussing her experience of offering clients an alternative view of their own story based on an understanding of social power relations:

6: 683

Carol I worked for a rape crisis centre and their actual philosophy was a feminist (unclear) around what . why rape happens and why sexual abuse happens and the agency

(unclear) because of inequalities really (unclear) rape can happen in some way umm and it's .. we never forced it on our clients as such . I mean I think the actual approach to counselling was based on the feminist idea it was very much about having an open humanistic phenomenological (unclear) entirely so we hadn't got that directive in the sense of saying yes isn't that atrocious (laughs) . but there was still an element that when people were coming in sort of blaming themselves for things that had happened to them that we were saying . well hang on lets let's actually look at that . let's look at challenging that . ((mm)) cos is this about me wearing a short skirt or going out having a couple of drinks and flirting with somebody ((mm)) is this about . sort of ..

Carol makes a crucial differentiation between acceptable and unacceptable constructions of feminist counselling. She distinguishes 'challenging' the client's self-blame by offering an alternative construction based on a broader social perspective, from 'pushing some of that ideology onto people'. This is a central distinction in the discussion of the impact on the client of the counsellor's beliefs and values and so of the validity of feminist counselling within counselling discourse.

Feminist counselling as valuing equality

The second main positive construction of feminist counselling is that of a commitment to equality. Equality is assumed by some speakers to be a value held in common by counsellors:

6: 632

Christine I could describe myself as a feminist counsellor . because if . feminism .is .um a a commitment to equality . and as simple as that . then we'd all be feminist counsellors . wouldn't we . it depe- so it depends on what . what load you give that word

6: 752

Susan And if it does just mean equality then isn't that what we all strive for as counsellors anyway

Equality is proposed here as an uncontested value: none of the participants dissented from the idea that equality was a value of counselling and the speakers' comments ('we'd all be feminist counsellors' and 'we all strive for anyway') suggest that they do not anticipate any disagreement. (Equality is a rhetorically powerful value in Western liberal democracies, and it would be unlikely for it to be challenged outright – Billig et al., 1988.) However, there were differences between participants about what 'load' to put on the words 'feminist' and 'equality'.

The discussion of equality in group six provides an example of this. The structure of the debate noted above is:

*If feminism means valuing equality and
As we all value equality
Perhaps we could all be described as feminist counsellors.*

However, other participants responded to this explanation by questioning whether feminism means something more than valuing equality. This was argued in two different ways: feminism means more than valuing equality in that it is 'political' (and so the consensus does not hold). Secondly, if feminism is not more than *valuing* equality it fails in its purpose of *addressing* inequality. To summarize:

*If feminism means valuing equality and
As we all value equality
Perhaps we could all be described as feminist counsellors.*

*But feminism means more than valuing equality:
– it is political (and therefore inadmissible within counselling)
– if it is not more than valuing equality it does not address inequality.*

The consensus about equality is not challenged and nor is the *association* of feminism with valuing equality. However the *reduction* of feminism to valuing equality is rejected by the group and with it the idea that 'we'd all be feminist counsellors'. Feminism is more than just valuing equality and it is this 'something else' that positions participants' responses to feminist counselling. In addition, there begins to appear a differentiation in the meaning of 'equality' as is discussed below.

THE VALIDITY OF FEMINIST COUNSELLING

I noted earlier that the categories that participants used to describe feminist counselling frequently also acted as evaluative categories commenting on whether they saw feminist counselling as a valid form of therapy. Discussions in the groups about the validity of feminist counselling were hedged with provisos that reflected their uncertainty about the nature of feminist counselling. However there are two arguments about the perceived validity of adopting a position of 'feminist counselling', which arise from the discussions about the nature of feminist counselling. The first of these pivots on the difference between 'having a stance' and 'having an agenda'. The second extends the discussion of the meaning of equality in the context of counselling.

A stance or an agenda

Participants used the terms 'having a stance' and 'having an agenda' to differentiate acceptable from unacceptable ways in which a counsellor's own beliefs might impact on her practice:

6: 749

Barbara *but I think having a stance and holding it . ((yeah)) is different from having a an agenda ((yeah)) ((yeah)) ((yeah)) in that sense you can keep your stance and then. if the client leads you can weave things in . you know maybe .. but I think that's different from having an agenda*

Barbara sums up the difference between the counsellor drawing on a politically informed world view when this is triggered by the particular client relationship or material and

the position in which the counsellor actively engages with political material in the counselling.

A counsellor who 'has a stance' has a particular view of the world that may inform her interventions or perspective, within circumscribed limits. 'Having a stance' frames an acceptable way for a counsellor to *hold* political beliefs (such as a commitment to feminism) that may be relevant to her counselling by, for example offering a wider social perspective that the client is not able to see, or by making the client's context more comprehensible to the counsellor. Examples included helping the client to reframe rape to remove self-blame, based on a feminist analysis.

'Having an agenda' is always referred as undesirable. (The counsellor '*having an agenda*' carries different implications from '*agenda setting*' jointly by counsellor and client. The latter is a standard procedure in counselling approaches such as cognitive-behavioural therapy but is rejected by counsellors in, for example, the person-centred tradition.) The implication of the view that 'having an agenda' is undesirable seems to be that it is inappropriate for a counsellor to *actively* bring to her work the *desirability* of change. In terms of the three ways, discussed earlier, in which counselling can be responsive to inequalities, having a stance incorporates an *awareness* of inequality, for example, whereas having an agenda involves an intention to *challenge* this inequality.

The meaning of equality

This leads us to the second set of arguments about the validity of feminist counselling, which can be formulated as a discursive struggle between different meanings of *equality*. Participants drew on alternative conceptualizations of equality that either focused inwards on the therapy relationship or outwards to external social relations.

Reservations expressed about feminist counselling in respect of the counsellor's agenda were cast in terms of the counsellor's (ab)use of their power within the relationship. Participants used terms such as 'imposing values' to express how this inequality of power is manifest. The feminist counsellor is constructed as *too* powerful within the counselling relationship: she excludes some potential clients; she only works with some issues. She has 'an agenda' to work to and she 'imposes' her political 'leaning' on her clients. The significant dimension of equality in this discussion is *relational equality* – the relative power of counsellor and client.

The extract below is concerned with external equality, or equality outside the counselling relationship:

3: 500

Janet I would think that . somebody who was a feminist counsellor was interested in um the position of women um and relationships and in their community .. who was concerned about . erm enabling clients . women clients . to look at um issues of finding erm a voice and err .some sort of assertiveness ((umm)) in these sort of situations .. and who was .. um .. not quite willing . it may be stronger than that in terms of working with err with men in a way that might challenge er their ... assumptions about their relationships with women .. or their position in relation to . gender .. so that they .. um were prepared to address some of the issues around power . ((umm umm)) in their relationships or in their err [in their position]

External equality is concerned with the fairness of access to resources within society and appears in the discussion groups as a salient concept in arguments that are positive about feminist counselling. External equality was not explicitly invoked frequently and, when it was, sometimes it was without personal commitment to the position described.

6: 755

Jon but equality in what context y'know if if the power structures (unclear) are really unbalanced out there outside the counselling room . then I guess some people would say that that .. we need to compensate . or . or the equality in a small context might not . given that everything else in the balance outside might not be equal

Jon begins tentatively to articulate an argument in favour of positive action to address structural inequality and goes on to explore some ideas around the redress of power imbalances. The stance adopted here is the interested reporting of a possible position ('I guess some people would say that') rather than a personal commitment. As such it indicates the problematic nature of a personal integration between the social power analysis stated and counselling practice and between relational equality and external equality.

Within these discussions, the two different meanings or contexts of equality are not necessarily specified. When Susan says 'And if it [feminism] does just mean equality then isn't that what we all strive for as counsellors anyway' other participants can respond to this as either internal or external equality: the speaker's intention is not made explicit. The focus on feminist counselling has made salient both meanings of equality (internal and external) and so both are readily available to participants. The section of text below gives two previous extracts in context, and shows the counsellors exploring the differences between these different concepts of equality:

6: 752

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In this instance Jon is responding to the previous comment *as if* Susan has specified equality as internal to the relationship. His response tentatively challenges this, based on a formulation of external equality. This exchange offers an example of the focus of counselling discourse, in which the meaning of equality as *internal* to the relationship has priority over *external* equality. The term 'feminist' is replete with meanings of external equality and so the combination of 'feminist' and 'counsellor' in one expression leads to powerful emotional responses and a considerable degree of disturbed speech.

Empowerment

I have made two points about the use of concepts of equality in these discussions: first that relational equality and external equality are frequently used as oppositional arguments

about the validity of feminist counselling and, secondly, that where they conflict relational equality is discursively dominant. However, there are also points at which participants argue for a resolution of the tension between these two meanings of equality in a way that is, in fact, more in keeping with writing about feminist counselling. I noted earlier that in feminist counselling theory (for example, Chaplin 1999; Worell and Remer, 2002) the concepts of relational and external equality are allied, in that developing non-hierarchical therapy relationships is seen as an essential element of feminist practice. Clients who are 'disempowered' by unequal social power relations (external power) can be 'empowered' through the experience of an egalitarian counselling relationship.

'Empowerment' is a word with great resonance in counselling (Proctor, 2002), and recurs in these discussions. In the following extract Jon suggests that a feminist perspective can be empowering to clients so long as relational equality is maintained.

6: 722

Jon the way you put it is that it's there . it's not imposed . but if the client is bringing it and it's right there in the session then that might be a perspective that one could share it could *give them empowerment if ...* ..

In this way, 'empowerment' acts as a bridging concept between internal and external meanings of equality and feminism is enacted as 'a stance' rather than 'an agenda'. This is exemplified in the following statement:

3: 440

Janet I think that counselling as a as a process is about er um is partly about individual: empowerment . it's about people .um through the process finding a way of gaining control over their situation and their own circumstances and .. making decisions about their way in . in the world ((umhm)) . and that's what . feminism's ((um)) about so it it's a precise fit . there's no contradiction as far as I'm concerned

CONCLUSION

I have discussed two ways in which feminist counselling was constructed in the groups in quite a different way from the way in which this approach is owned by feminist counsellors themselves. These are firstly, the implications of woman-centred practice and, secondly, the relationship between relational and external equality.

Woman-centred practice is a cornerstone of feminist counselling (Maracek and Kravetz, 1998; Chester and Bretherton, 2001), involving an focus on issues of particular relevance to women, combined with a female-oriented perspective including the valuing of characteristics culturally associated with being female. However, key elements of woman centred practice were sometimes evaluated negatively in these focus groups. A specific focus on women and on women's issues was described as narrow and exclusive.

The second difference concerns how equality is constructed in relation to counselling practice. The two uses of 'equality' differentiated between positive and negative arguments concerning feminist counselling. Arguments that challenged the validity of feminist counselling were built upon a dualism of relational equality and external equality, within which relational equality was the dominant option. Arguments that were more supportive of the

idea of feminist counselling drew on both meanings of equality and at times resolved the tension between the two meanings using ‘empowerment’ as a bridging concept.

The latter understanding of equality is more consistent with the way in which feminist counselling is described by its advocates (Chester and Bretherton, 2001). Worell and Remer (2002) state the importance of an egalitarian therapeutic relationship in facilitating personal and political empowerment. In this view, relational equality is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for counselling to contribute towards external equality.

In *both* positions, equality was articulated as a central and undisputed value in counselling and this is significant in considering the possibilities of power-sensitized counselling, or ‘counselling that takes account of power differentials, both across society and within the counselling room’ (Spong et al., 2003, 216). That paper proposed three ways in which equality is represented in power-sensitized counselling:

1. A commitment to equality of access to counselling.
2. A counselling relationship that aims to minimize the enactment of inequality of power within the counselling itself.
3. A commitment to the reduction of social inequality.

The positions of the participants in the current study were to varying extents dissonant from the principles of power-sensitized counselling in two ways. The first concerns the *possibility* of achieving both relational equality and external equality (points 2 and 3 above); and the second, the *legitimacy* of addressing external (social) equality within the context of the counselling relationship. ‘Taking a stance’ was an expression for a legitimate way in which the counsellor’s beliefs about, for example, feminism, might impact on her practice; ‘having an agenda’ was deemed inappropriate and in conflict with the ethics of counselling. This differentiation references the subtle and ideologically difficult issue of the influence that the counsellor – her beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks – has on the client. It raises questions about whether such influence is permissible within the discourses of counselling and whether it is possible to avoid it.

The legitimacy of the counsellor addressing issues of social inequality within her therapeutic practice continues to be a vexed question. The construction of relational and external equality as oppositional is one way in which counselling and feminist discourses can be construed as competing rather than complementary discourses of change and this challenges the meanings of feminist counselling proposed by its adherents. Developing a deeper understanding of radical and non-radical constructions of counselling discourse can enable practitioners to consider new and creative ways in which to engage with the external/internal boundary, within a framework of ethical practice.

TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS (ADAPTED FROM WOOD AND KROGER (2000))

[yes]	Square brackets indicates an interjection by the other speaker.
.	Indicates pause. Multiple use indicates relative length of pause.
Doc-	Dash indicates sharp cut off of speech.
.hh	Indicates an audible inbreath.
hh	Indicates an audible outbreath.

(unclear)	Unclear speech
((coughs))	Transcriber's description.
(.....)	Indicates talk omitted from the data segment.
<i>Italics</i>	Indicates overlapping talk
<u>Emphasis</u>	Underlining indicates emphasis given to a word or phrase

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