SPR 470 - Gender Perspectives in Social Work Practice

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Lecture on Gender Sensitive Social Work

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Outline

- **Environmental perspective**

- **Social work paradigms**

- **Power**

- **Empowerment**

- **Seminar assignment + questions**

What is Professional Social Work?

Payne, Malcolm 2006. What is Professional Social Work? Bristol: The Policy Press.

What differs social work from other helping professions?

(e.g. doctors, nurses, psychologists, teachers, counsellors)

What is Professional Social Work?

- **Politicians, economists, journalist, campaigners etc. aim social change, but do not work with individuals.**

- **Social workers in the middle between social and personal. They connect personal help with social change** (Payne 2006).

Person-in-Environment

Environment/ social structure

- source of oppression as well as source support and resources

Person/individual

- individual agency: capacity to act and use the resources for own benefit
- ´person´ - employ intersectionality
- not ´only´ coping

Definition of Social Work as a Profession:

"A service and practice using social and psychological sciences in **interpersonal interactions with people**, especially from **deprived social groups** and experiencing practical and emotional difficulties in social relationships. Social work balances three objectives: **maintaining social order and providing social welfare services effectively, helping people attain personal fulfilment and power over their lives and stimulating social change**."

(Payne 2006: 5)

Views on Social Sork

- link between liberal vs. socialist feminism or rational choice and structuralist view

- related to the broader discussion in social sciences about the relationship between the individual and society

- person-in-environment approach

Therapeutic Views on Social Work

- seeking the best possible well-being for everyone by facilitating growth and self-fulfilment

Transformational Views on Social Work

- oppressed and disadvantaged people can gain power over their own lives

- identify and work out how social relations cause people´s problems

- make social changes so that the problems do not arise

Social Order Views on Social Work

- social work as maintaining the social order in society

- providing help or services so that clients will fit in better with general social expectations

Can we help without power?

How various power relations look like?

Power

- **Foucault: power not only repressive, but also productive**

- **power non zero-sum-entity (victim / agent)**

- **Dominelli (2002): power over/to/of/**

'Power over'

- **power that social workers can hold over their clients**

- **hierarchical powerful position**

- **they can make crucial decisions about client's life**

- social worker – client / also women oppress other women

  (Dominelli 2002)

'Power to'

- capacity to do things or take action

- more equal distribution of power

- neither party is considered completely powerless

- each has the capacity to exercise agency and exert some control of what will happen

'Power of'

- **identity-based collective action**

- **e.g. creation of activist group of women who have personal experience with sexual abuse and work collectively to challenge the violence against them**

(Dominelli 2002)

Empowerment

- „Empowerment is like democracy: everyone is for it, but rarely do people mean the same thing by it."

  (Young 1994: 48)

- "does not correspond to a single existing social work method, although it can be shown to have links with all of them."
  (Adams 2003: 5)

1) Empowerment as a Psychological Quality

- **"a psychological quality that provides individuals with the feeling that they can control the direction of their lives."** (Pollack 2000: 76)

- **social work practice is then aimed to enhance client's feelings of self-worth, self-control, autonomy and confidence**

2) Empowerment as a Social Change

- **Individuals are seen as "empowered through sharing experiences, raising consciousness, collective action and advocacy."** (Pollack 2000: 76).

- **Crucial is "development of a sense of collective influence over the social conditions of one's life"** (Young 1994: 48)

- **self-help groups, human rights movement and social activism**

3) Empowerment as Social Work Method

- **a set of practitioner skills**

- **desired outcome or product of a social service intervention** (Pollack 2000)

Empowerment / Common Characteristics

- collaboration between worker and client

- focus on strengths, capacities and resources

- oppression not a permanent state

Empowerment / Common Characteristics

- against individualising social problems = blaming individuals for problems that arise from structural problems (disempowering)

- client is not the only one experiencing the problem / not an individual failure

Social Worker as a Source of Dis/Empowerment

- **critical view on social workers as possible sources of empowerment**

- **empowerment not as something ´which is done to you´** (Adams 2003)

- **"Power might not be given to people, they must be helped to take it for themselves."** (Payne 2005: 296).

Social Worker as a Source of Dis/Empowerment

- social workers are mediators between clients and society

- crisis of identity / social workers as source of support, but also control and oppression

- one person's empowerment may be another person's disempowerment

Examples of empowering practices

Against further victimisation

- experiences of victimisation and oppression not perceived as permanent state

- victimisation and oppression as dimension of experience, not as an individual identity / woman is not oppressed but has experience with oppression

- domestic violence: battered women described as survivors rather than victims

Examples of empowering practices

Deconstruction of rigid categories and negative stereotypes

- challenging the idea of ´typical client´

- client in wide variety of relations and roles not only negative and pathological relations

- understanding form client´s point of view / subversive stories / clients as important source of knowledge

- learned helplessness among helping professionals themselves if they believe that clients have no choices or power

Examples of empowering practices

Many ways to be woman/man

- workers themselves need to challenge their own assumptions and expectations of what being female/male means (Crinall 1999)

- any rigid adherence to any singular, prescribed or defined code for being a woman has the potential to be strongly oppressing

- postmodern feminism oppose any kind of fixed identity, and supports variety of options and ways to be women

Examples of empowering practices

Self-help groups / clinical model:

- "a means by which individuals or small groups can deal with their own problems and survive in the world for which they are seen not to be ideally suited." (Ettorre 1992: 133)

- e.g.: AA, imbedded in the disease model of addiction

- not taking the structural inequalities into account

Examples of empowering practices

Self-help groups / structural model:

- support communities to organise themselves, raise collective awareness and refuse the victim role.

- e.g.: women's rights or gay rights movement (Ettorre 1992)

Discuss the possible advantages and disadvantages of women only or men only (self-help or therapeutic) groups, or services designed only for male or female clients.

Pros and cons of specialized women's programmes

- mixed-sex groups can be complicated for men and women to discuss some specific issues

- but other differences important too (e.g. age)

- **treating two groups differently is not necessarily discrimination if the two groups have different possibilities**

- **treating two groups in the same way can be discriminatory if the same treatment gives the groups different opportunities**

Seminar 2 / Compulsory Reading:

Pollack, Shoshana 2000. Reconceptualizing Women's Agency and Empowerment: Challenges to Self-Esteem Discourse and Women's Lawbreaking. *Women and Criminal Justice,* Vol. 12, No. 1, 75-89.

Young, Iris Marion 1994. Punishment, Treatment, Empowerment: Three Approaches to Policy for Pregnant Addicts. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 32-57.

Seminar 2 / Questions:

- Based on the readings, write what empowerment means to you. How would you define it?

- Give an example of situation when you felt disempowered (victim) and one example of situation when you felt empowered. Try to explain what was the cause of feeling dis/empowered. When you felt disempowered, try to think what could help you in that situation.

Seminar 2 / Questions:

- Which are, according to Young (1994), the necessary program elements to make services empowering?

- **Length: 750 words.**

- Please upload your assignment to the Homework Vault no later than on **Monday 21st March.**