

---

## A Feminist Approach to Teaching Women's Issues in Counsellor Education

---

Anne L. Cummings

*University of Western Ontario*

---

### Abstract

Methodologies used in a graduate course on women's issues in counselling are described and implications for counsellor education are discussed. Emphasis is placed on including experiential learning activities to help students better understand women's experiences within this culture. The didactic section of the course focuses on counselling concepts and interventions for dealing with the many issues that women bring to counselling.

### Résumé

Cet article décrit les méthodologies employées dans un cours d'études supérieures sur le counseling et les questions féminines. On examine également les facteurs à considérer dans la formation des conseillers. Le cours comporte beaucoup d'activités d'apprentissage expérientiel pour faciliter une meilleure compréhension par les étudiants de ce que vivent les femmes au sein de notre culture. La partie didactique du cours met l'accent sur les concepts et les interventions en counseling nécessaires pour aborder les nombreuses questions auxquelles font face les femmes ayant recours à des services de counseling.

A number of authors (Dupuy, Ritchie, & Cook, 1994; Good & Heppner, 1995; Hoffman, 1996; Worell & Remer, 1992) have recently asserted the importance of including gender issues courses in the graduate counselling curriculum. This assertion is based both on the recognition that gender is such a salient factor in the issues that clients discuss in counselling and on the fact that women constitute the largest proportion of caseloads in most counselling contexts (Daniluk, Stein, & Backus, 1995).

The most recent call for courses on gender issues has been motivated, in part, by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (1994) which recommended the study of gender as it relates to a wide range of counselling areas (e.g., assessment, evaluation, counsellor behaviours, career development). While the need for courses on women's and gender issues has been effectively justified from a number of perspectives (Briskin, 1990; Matlin, 1989), Daniluk et al. (1995) extend the arguments further by stating that counsellor education programs have an ethical, as well as professional, obligation to include gender issues in the curriculum. They assert that students who lack knowledge of how gender influences their clients' experiences, and their own understandings of these clients, may inadvertently do harm despite their intentions to the contrary. Doing harm to clients, of course, is considered to be a violation of Canadian and American codes of ethics (Canadian Psychological Association, 1991; American Association for Counseling, 1995).

When 120 counsellor education programs were surveyed (Dupuy et al., 1994), less than half of the programs reported offering courses on women's or gender issues. Although all programs rated highly the importance of addressing women's and gender issues, the survey highlighted that this awareness has not always been transformed into curriculum change. It may be that ideas for innovative approaches to curriculum development concerning gender issues in counselling are needed.

There have been two general approaches for including gender issues in the counsellor education curriculum: a separate course on women's or gender issues, or the infusion of gender issues throughout the curriculum. Convincing arguments have been mounted for both options (Dupuy et al., 1994; Matlin, 1989). When a separate course is the chosen option, there is also debate about whether the focus should be only on women's issues in counselling or whether it should also include men's issues. Daniluk et al. (1995) present advantages and disadvantages for each of these options.

In this instance, the chosen course option is a separate course on women's issues in counselling. This choice was made because women comprise the largest percentage of caseloads in most counselling settings (Dutton-Douglas & Walker, 1988), while men tend to be more unwilling users of counselling services (Meth & Passick, 1990). The literature on the issues affecting women in counselling is so large, that it is also difficult to do justice to both genders in one course. However, it is acknowledged that presenting a gender issues course instead of a women's issues course is also a valid option. In addition, while there are advantages to offering a separate course in women's issues, Daniluk et al. (1995) identify the potential limitation of some students being more knowledgeable about the issues from previous study while other students will be encountering this perspective for the first time.

The theoretical orientation for the course was based on principles of feminist pedagogy. Briskin (1990) identifies the following six principles as being central to feminist pedagogy: (a) the systemic oppression of women in this culture is recognized; (b) power relations in the classroom are identified and process in teaching practice is emphasized; (c) the personal is the political, i.e., individual experience is a political and social reality; (d) women's experiences are re-valued and a multiplicity of experiences based on class, race, sexual orientation, etc. is legitimized; (e) the affective and experiential are incorporated into the learning process to replace competitive with cooperative ways of learning; and (f) the connection between feminist pedagogy and organizing for social change mirrors the link between the classroom and the outside world.

Very few courses in counsellor education taught with feminist pedagogy have been described in the literature. Good and Heppner (1995) describe a gender issues course that is a combination of lectures,

guest presentations, exercises, roleplays, and discussions. However, the description did not include feminist pedagogy. On the other hand, Hashizume, Greggs, and Cairns (1994) describe their experiences as students and instructor in a course on counselling theories taught with feminist pedagogy. While they provide helpful insights about the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, they give very little detail about the structure of the course. The following course description is provided to fill this gap in the literature.

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The Women's Issues in Counselling course is offered yearly during the students' third term in an Intersession semester for six weeks in the Master's of Education (Counselling) Program at The University of Western Ontario. The class meets twice a week for three hours daily for a total of 36 semester hours in the first year of a two-year program. Generally, 12-15 students enrol in this elective course taught by the author, a female professor and psychologist in the graduate counselling program. While most of the students are women, a few men have also taken the course.

On the basis of ethical arguments presented by Daniluk et al. (1995), one could easily contend that a course on women's issues should be a required course rather than an elective course. However, in a small counselling program with more than half of the courses already required (5 of 8 courses), it was felt that the women's issues course should be an elective to allow students more freedom of choice.

#### *Course Objectives*

The course objectives include the following: (a) to raise awareness of roles, stereotypes, and societal expectations for women that hinder psychological health; (b) to review theory and research related to counselling women from a feminist perspective; (c) to examine a variety of issues typically presented by women in counselling; (d) to learn appropriate counselling ethics and strategies for working with women clients of many diversities; and (e) to explore personal experiences and feelings about women's issues in counselling and to connect those experiences to theory about women. These objectives are based on the principles of feminist pedagogy (Briskin, 1990) of recognizing the systemic oppression of women in this culture, linking the personal with the political, legitimizing the diversity of women's experiences, and incorporating the affective and experiential into the learning process.

To meet these objectives, each class session is divided into two equal sections. The first half is experiential in smaller groups on the topic of the day, while the second half involves large group discussion of readings on the same topic. A number of authors (Briskin, 1990; Daniluk et al., 1995) have advocated the importance of using experiential learning activities

in the teaching of gender as a way of helping students to examine their values and biases. Each of these two class components will be described in more detail.

### *Experiential Component of Course*

Beginning with the feminist principle of moving from the personal to the broader, sociopolitical, and cultural context (Briskin, 1990), each class session begins with students in two smaller groups answering structured, personal questions about the topic of the day and then moving to academic readings (broader context) on the same topic in the second half of the class. The topics and related questions come from the National Organization of Women's (NOW) Guidelines for Consciousness-Raising (1983). The following are sample questions: "Do you fear rape? How does this fear affect your daily life?" (rape and violence); "How did you feel about the changes in your body at puberty? What attitudes were displayed toward your body when it changed?" (body image).

These types of questions are used because they elicit the affective, experiential component of women's lives and meet the principle of feminist pedagogy that seeks to incorporate the emotional into the learning process. The NOW manual also includes a separate consciousness-raising section for men. Questions from this section are used when there are male students, as well as adapted questions from the women's section.

The main purpose in using the consciousness-raising format is to help students hear stories of other women, with a focus on hearing both the commonalities and differences of women in this culture. It is then hoped that students will bring this personal experience to bear on the academic readings and discussion that occur during the second half of each class. As Daniluk et al., (1995) assert, students need to be aware of how gender constructs their life experiences as well as the experiences of their clients. The message communicated by the consciousness-raising groups is that the experiences of women are as valid a source of information for helping counsellors to understand women as are academic readings, and reflects the principle of feminist pedagogy of re-valuing women's experiences. It also reinforces a principle of feminist therapy that women are the experts on themselves (Butler, 1985).

The NOW Guidelines (1983) present several suggestions for structuring group sessions which are followed in the course: (a) no confrontation, questions, or probing of the speaker is allowed; (b) one person speaks at a time while others listen with undivided attention; (c) group members may choose not to answer any question by passing; and (d) absolute confidentiality is required.

These guidelines give speakers full control over what they disclose, which lessens the fear that others will push them to say more than they

want to disclose. The silence of the listeners also makes the communication of attention and respect for the speaker possible. While some students complain about not being responded to as speakers, this guideline is maintained because it serves three helpful purposes. It keeps the focus on listening to women's stories rather than on the self-disclosure function. Secondly, it helps make the groups safer places for students because they know that they will never be attacked. Finally, it prevents the small groups from becoming therapy groups with listeners responding empathically and taking speakers deeper into their stories which would be inappropriate for this particular course context.

Membership in the two small groups is varied every session so that students will hear as many different stories as possible. Students take turns being small group facilitators by reading the questions orally for members to answer and ensuring that the guidelines are followed. Generally, 5-7 questions are answered in the 1-½ hour sessions. Topics covered in the sessions include the following: roles and stereotyping, mothers and daughters, women's friendships with women, dependence and independence, anger and depression, women and race, body image, troubled eating, lesbianism, and violence against women.

There are certainly many other equally important topics that could be covered in such a course, such as drug dependence, ageing, reproductive health concerns, poverty, and class. The topics chosen for the sessions are viewed as being representative of women's issues in counselling, rather than being seen as the most important issues about women.

As course instructor, I take part in the small groups as a member in order to model self-disclosure and to lessen the power differential between professor and student, one of the principles of feminist pedagogy. As Hashizume et al. (1994) note, however, it is impossible to achieve complete equality with students when the instructor maintains the power of evaluation in the course.

While being a group member means that the course instructor is in a dual role with students, I have observed generally that the benefit to students of hearing common themes between their stories and the instructor's stories outweighs the possible negative effects of this dual relationship. Also, as Briskin (1990) notes, this type of participation may reduce the tendency of students to place the female professor in the role of all-knowing and all-nurturing mother. This role conflict experienced by many feminist teachers is described by Morgan (1996) by using the metaphor of the bearded mother: students expect the nurturing mother, but also get the critical, rational, course evaluator. Even with this potential pitfall, my experience in these small groups as a self-discloser has been positive and has not seemed to interfere with my additional role of course evaluator.

### *Didactic Component of the Course*

The second half of each class session involves discussion of readings on the same topic that was addressed in the experiential groups. A collection of readings and three textbooks are used as the basis for these discussions: *Women's Growth in Connection* (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991), *Mother Daughter Revolution* (Debold, Wilson, & Malone, 1993), and *Radical Feminist Therapy* (Burstow, 1992). The books and readings are selected to provide a wide range of feminist thought to stimulate students' thinking, from a relatively liberal feminist approach (Jordan et al, 1991) to a more radical feminist approach (Burstow, 1992). While the focus of these readings is on women's issues and developmental socialization, the first two books also include considerable information about male socialization and male gender roles.

Once again, one student is responsible for being the discussion leader for the didactic course content for each class session, with the course instructor being a participant in these discussions. These discussion leaders prepare a few questions from the readings to stimulate discussion.

Briskin (1990) believes that students need to be taught leadership skills so that power can be more equally shared between teacher and students, much as feminist counsellors work to decrease the power difference between themselves and their clients (Butler, 1985). As well as teaching them leadership skills, having students assume the leadership function can also increase their sense of autonomy. By having the didactic discussion after the experiential groups, students are better able to draw on the common themes that they heard in the small groups and apply them to the theoretical concepts in the readings. The focus of the discussions is on understanding concepts that will be helpful to counsellors in dealing with women's issues and on specific counselling interventions for each of the topic areas. As a group member, I share my knowledge of the pertinent issues at appropriate times in the discussion. As with the smaller, experiential groups, an ethic of respect for differing student opinions is established for these large group, didactic discussions. This norm is based on the finding of Good and Heppner (1995) that fear of angry responses most hindered the learning experience for the students in their gender issues course.

Because students often report strong emotional responses to readings in this area, Daniluk et al. (1995) recommend that students be warned of the possible personal consequences of examining gender issues and the personal risk involved in doing experiential learning activities. For this reason, prospective students for the present course are told in advance, and on the first day of class, to expect emotional upheaval in their lives while they are reading and processing the emotionally difficult materials for the course and are given the general guidelines for the experiential

groups. Students are encouraged to bring any emotional difficulties that they are experiencing with the readings to the large group discussion for processing. One common area of concern each year involves discussing how to share their new insights with male partners in nonthreatening ways.

Each class ends with a focus on action by asking, "What action can we take on this issue?" (NOW, 1983). The goal of this ending is to provide a hopeful focus of energy directed outward and is based on the feminist pedagogy principle of connecting the classroom with the outside world by organizing for change. Too often students become depressed when they read about the issues that women bring to counseling (e.g., incest, rape, troubled eating). The students are encouraged to turn their depression into anger and their anger into action. As Brisikin (1990) notes, this process turns an individualistic focus into a societal focus, i.e., from a stance of victim to agent, or from reactivity to proactivity.

If instructors use this action ending, they need to be prepared for the possibility that some of the action suggestions may involve requests for change in their graduate counselling programs. For example, some students were dissatisfied with some of the questions in the NOW Guidelines and took action by spending the following year after the course to update the questions in the NOW manual. Some of these changes were incorporated in the course during the following year. One such change included new questions that addressed women's diversities in each topic area. For example, for the topic of women's friendships with women, the following question was added: "How does the context of another woman's life affect your opportunity and decision to pursue a friendship? (Consider sexual orientation, class, age, race, culture, ethnicity, religion, physical challenges.)"

### *Course Assignments*

As mentioned earlier, having the course instructor be a member of the experiential and discussion groups helps to reduce the power differential between students and instructor, but also creates the problem of dual relationship with students. To help reduce somewhat the impact of the dual relationship, students are not assessed on their participation in either of the groups. In this way, students can feel more free to self-disclose without being evaluated by the instructor for the quality or quantity of their participation. In actuality, the structure of the two groups promotes a high quality of participation by all students.

There are two courses assignments. The first assignment is a major paper that is a critical review of the research literature on an area of women's issues in counselling and a discussion of how to apply the major concepts for the chosen issue to a counselling context. This assignment is related to the course objectives of reviewing theory and research related

to counselling women and of learning appropriate strategies for working with women clients.

For the other course assignment, students have the choice of either keeping a journal of their reactions to the readings and class discussions or interviewing their mother in order to write a biography of her life. For the journal option, students are asked to react critically and personally to both the readings and the class experiences. This assignment meets the course objectives of raising awareness of societal expectations which hinder psychological health and relating personal experiences to theory.

The other option for this second assignment, writing a biography of one's mother, is included in the course because of the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship for many women, both students and clients. Because all women receive a contradictory message of motherhood being devalued compared to work outside of the home while simultaneously having motherhood presented as the ideal of a successful woman, our feelings about our mothers are quite complex (Briskin, 1990). Both Caplan (1989) and Debold et al. (1993) believe that how a woman feels about her mother strongly influences how she feels about other women and herself. Therefore, many women can benefit from healing the sometimes fractured, hurtful relationships that they have with their mothers.

Caplan (1989) recommends interviewing one's mother as a way of mending the mother-daughter relationship. By interviewing her mother and writing her life story, a woman is forced to view her mother as a person with her own life struggles, rather than keeping her in the role of mother. In writing the biography, students also are required to analyze how they and their mothers fall into Caplan's myths of motherhood (e.g., mothers are endless founts of nurturance, or mothers are never supposed to be angry) and analyze the sociopolitical context of their mother's life. This analysis helps daughters to understand society's impact on the relationship and provides a different perspective of their mother. For those students who choose this assignment, the experience can be powerful for both the student and her mother. Students usually discover information about their mother that they never knew before. They also usually develop new respect for their mothers as they gain awareness of the life circumstances that their mothers faced.

This particular assignment must always be voluntary as some students will be unable to interview their mothers because the mothers are unavailable due to death, distance, or past abusive behaviour. A few mothers also refuse their daughter's invitation for an interview for a variety of reasons. In the past, male students have chosen this assignment and have also reported it to be a very worthwhile experience.

Using a mother's biography as a course assignment meets the course objective of relating the personal to the theoretical, raising awareness of

women's roles, and learning about a potential counselling strategy that could be used with clients who are wanting to mend their relationships with their mothers. There are certainly many other assignments that could meet these course objectives. Both the mother's biography and the journal assignments are presented as two ways of combining the experiential and theoretical in one assignment. While using assignments that combine experiential learning with scholarly analysis is recommended by feminist educators (Briskin, 1990; Matlin, 1989), Daniluk et al. (1995) warn that such assignments can involve personal risk for students.

### *Course Evaluation*

To evaluate the course a questionnaire, developed by the author that is a combination of two previous research instruments, is given to students at the end of the course. The first four questions are adapted from a questionnaire used by Heppner and O'Brien (1994) in a similar study of a course on multicultural counselling: (a) What changes have you made in your thinking and feeling about women's issues as a result of this course? (b) What in the course helped you to make these changes? (c) What in the course hindered you from making these changes? (d) Did you derive any benefits from this course that you did not expect? If so, what are those benefits?

The next two questions come from a questionnaire used by Bargad and Hyde (1991) in their study of a women's studies course: (e) Do you think that you went through some different phases of awareness about yourself as a feminist during this course? If yes, please describe. (f) Did this course influence your wanting to be involved in some community or school activity that focuses on women's issues? While feminist identity development is not an expectation of the course, my observation is that most students do experience changes in their feminist consciousness during the course. Therefore, I included a question to tap that experience. The last question relates to the course emphasis on proaction rather than only reaction to women's issues in counselling.

Students have listed a number of changes in their thinking as a result of the course: "more sympathy and sensitivity to women's issues," "heightened confidence to speak out for equality between men and women," and from a male student, "I've questioned my biases and assumptions about women's experiences." When asked what in the course helped them to make these changes, almost all the students listed the readings and the consciousness raising groups: "discussing issues with other women and sharing our experiences. I am always surprised to what degree women's lives have been affected by sexism."

Most students felt that nothing hindered them in making changes to their thinking, although some women find the presence of men in the

course hindering to their full expression of ideas and feelings. Unexpected benefits gained from the course included new information about specific topics as well as the following from a male student, "the courage to stand up for my beliefs and to accept parts of myself that I was afraid of or rejected (i.e., feminine side)."

When asked about going through different phases of awareness of themselves as feminists during the course, a male student wrote, "Yes. 1. denial, 2. anger/threatened, 3. depression over issues as I accepted responsibility for my part, 4. resolution/acceptance of issues." Finally, in response to wanting to become involved in community issues, most students responded positively if they were given enough time for community involvement. One woman wrote, "I'm going to start a women's group in the summer and I'd enjoy working with young girls."

#### CONCLUSION

As with all courses, this course is not without its limitations. By devoting only one class session to each topic, the course is more of a survey course with no topic covered in depth. In particular, the treatment of eating disorders and sexual abuse deserves more time than is given in the current course structure. It is hoped that students will be motivated to read further and attend intensive workshops in both of these areas during the second year of the program when they are in internship placements in the community. In addition, choosing to spend half of each class on group process further limits the amount of material that is covered in the course.

In summary, this course on Women's Issues in Counselling incorporates principles of feminist pedagogy which emphasize the affective and experiential as part of the learning process and attempt to replace the traditional competitiveness of classrooms with a more communal and cooperative approach to learning (Briskin, 1990). This approach includes working to lessen the power differential between students and professor, while concomitantly teaching students necessary leadership skills for increased self-sufficiency.

These principles are congruent with humanist counselling approaches already being emphasized in many counsellor education graduate programs and as such, could be incorporated easily into an existing curriculum. While the approach described here may be best suited for counselling courses about gender and multiculturalism, some of the components may also fit well into other counselling courses. As counsellor educators, it behooves us to search for new ways to meet changing ethical standards for teaching about diversity in counselling. The course described here provides one example of fulfilling this ethical standard.

## References

- American Association for Counseling. (1995). *Ethical standards* (Rev. ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Bargad, A., & Hyde, J. S. (1991). A study of feminist identity development in women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *15*, 181-201.
- Briskin, L. (1990). *Feminist pedagogy: Teaching and learning liberation*. Ottawa, ON: CRIAW/ICREF.
- Burstow, B. (1992). *Radical feminist therapy*. Newbury Park, NJ: Sage.
- Butler, M. (1985). Guidelines for feminist therapy. In L. B. Rosewater and L. E. A. Walker (Eds.). *Handbook of feminist therapy* (pp. 32-38). New York: Springer.
- Canadian Psychological Association. (1986). *A Canadian code of ethics for psychologists*. Old Chelsea, QC: CPA.
- Caplan, P. (1989). *Don't blame mother: Mending the mother daughter relationship*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (1994). *Accreditation procedures manual and application*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Daniluk, J. C., Stein, M., & Bockus, D. (1995). The ethics of inclusion: Gender as a critical component of counselor training. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *34*, 294-307.
- Debold, E., Wilson, M., & Malone, I. (1993). *Mother daughter revolution: From betrayal to power*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Dupuy, P. J., Ritchie, M. H., & Cook, E. P. (1994). The inclusion of women's and gender issues in counselor education programs: A survey. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *33*, 238-48.
- Dutton-Douglas, M. A., & Walker, L. E. (Eds.) (1988). *Feminist psychotherapies: Integration of therapeutic and feminist systems*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Good, G. E., & Heppner, M. J. (1995). Students' perceptions of a gender issues course: A qualitative and quantitative examination. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *34*, 308-20.
- Hashizume, L., Greggs, R., & Cairns, K. V. (1994). Feminist practice in counsellor education: Student and faculty experience. In J. Gallivan, S. D. Crozier, & V. M. Lalande (Eds.), *Women, girls, and achievement* (pp. 170-84). North York, ON: Captus University Publications.
- Heppner, M. J., & O'Brien, K. M. (1994). Multicultural counselor training: Students' perceptions of helpful and hindering events. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *34*, 4-18.
- Hoffman, R. M. (1996). Gender: Issues of power and equity in counselor education programs. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *36*, 104-12.
- Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (1991). *Women's growth in connection*. New York: Guilford.
- Matlin, M. W. (1989). Teaching psychology of women: A survey of instructors. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *13*, 245-61.
- Meth, R. L., & Passick, R. S. (1990). *Men in therapy: The challenge of change*. New York: Guilford.
- Morgan, K. P. (1996). The perils and paradoxes of the bearded mothers. In A. Diller, B. Houston, K. P. Morgan, & M. Ayim (Eds.), *The gender question in education: Theory, pedagogy, and politics* (pp. 124-34).
- National Organization of Women. (NOW, 1983). *NOW Guidelines for feminist consciousness-raising*. Washington, D.C.
- Worell, J., & Remer, P. (1992). *Feminist perspectives in therapy: An empowerment model for women*. New York: Wiley.

## About the Author

Anne L. Cummings is an Associate Professor in the Masters of Education (Counselling) Program at The University of Western Ontario. Her research focuses on counselling process and women's issues in counselling.

Address correspondence to: Anne Cummings, Ph.D., Counselling Psychology Research Group, Faculty of Education, The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6G 1G7.