

## Feminist theory, lesbian parents, and social work.

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As one paradigm of the delivery of social work services, feminist practice has been conceptualized and articulated for decades. Social work's earliest pioneers, such as Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, identified themselves as feminist. Their roots in the feminist movement challenged them to promote

equal rights for all oppressed groups, especially women. They were known for their progressive stance on equal rights to all human beings. Seeking equality among all people, and the alleviation of discrimination, is grounded in these fundamental social work values. Feminist theory has evolved and been refined since the earliest days of social work. However, several aspects of social work practice remain directly reflective of feminist philosophy: the emphasis placed on the person-situation transaction, emphasis on client empowerment, and the politics of equality.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine feminist theory as a paradigm of social work practice with lesbian parents. There was, until recently, the false assumption that lesbianism was exclusively accompanied by a lack of desire to procreate and raise children. Only within the past ten years have social science researchers, judicial systems, and helping professionals been introduced to the idea that lesbianism and motherhood are not mutually exclusive categories (Falk, 1989). There is no doubt that lesbian women have always existed, and some have been mothers. There has been a shift in how lesbian headed families are most likely created. Traditionally, lesbian women have become mothers in the context of heterosexual marriages. These women typically began to identify themselves as lesbians following a divorce from their heterosexual relationship, but maintained custody (or contact) with their children. Lesbian women have more choices today than in the past on how their families will be created. Options such as foster care, adoption, and artificial insemination by a donor are just some of the options available to lesbian women planning a family.

Lesbian headed families have become more prevalently identified now than ever. Some social science researchers have termed this trend the “lesbian baby boom” to explain the increase in lesbian women choosing motherhood (Patterson, 1995). This new trend of family has explicit implications to social work theory and practice.

The implications on theory are twofold. First, social science research has largely concluded that children raised in lesbian headed families develop normally and without psychological trauma due to parental homosexuality (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Faulk, 1998, Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983, Harris & Turner 1985, Vanfraussen, 2003, Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). This challenges psychodynamic and family systems theory in that children need two, heterosexual parents to develop normally. Second, by dispelling the myth that children only develop normally when a man and a woman raise them creates a gap in which new theories must be created and tested.

Implications of the “lesbian baby boom” (Patterson, 1995) in practice are wide spread. First, there is a need for education of therapists in the unique dynamics of this population. Neisen (1987) concluded that therapists are not generally prepared to meet the needs of gay and lesbian clients, and that they need to be better informed about gay and lesbian lifestyles in order to help such families. Following the lead of clinicians such as Bunker (1992) and Roth (1989), who identified unique challenges that lesbian mothers face, social workers need to educate themselves on the dynamics of these families prior to providing treatment. As the field of social work has seen an emphasis on education in cultural sensitivity, we should see the emphasis on working with these families.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of feminist theory and its roots in traditional social work values. Especially of importance to this author is the application of feminist theory to the growing population of lesbian headed families. Also within this text, the philosophical foundations Reamer (1993) describes in *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work* will be

applied and evaluated through a feminist lens, working with lesbian mothers. Strengths, weakness, and gaps in feminist theory as applied to this population will be identified; and implications for future research will also be identified.

### **Background of Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory, when defined generically as women centered practice, is traced back to the roots of social work in the 1890's when women began to fight for the right to vote, own property, and carry some of the other status rights that were only granted to men. After winning the right to vote, women continued to empower one another through feminist organizations fighting for women's rights including reproductive rights. For the first time in history, women were finding their voice and were no longer willing to stay in the shadows of men.

The "mother of social work", Jane Addams' work with women in Settlement Houses offered women, for the first time, an alternative to marriage. By providing women access to culture, education, and companionship in an environment that focused on gender equality, and was operated solely by women, the "mother of social work" empowered women to find their own voice and to use that voice to make a change in their own lives, and the lives of other women. Following feminist thought offered women, for the first time in history, the chance to increase their personal independence and empowerment (Gottschalk, 2003).

Feminist activists continue in these early feminists' footsteps to confront issues of inequality through political campaign to achieve recognition and equality for lesbian parents. Hitchens (1980) identified that more lesbian women are willing to admit their sexual orientation and fight for custody of their children because of the feminist driven gay rights movement. This is a result of decades of empowerment. This same empowerment is allowing women the interpersonal freedom to make the choice to begin a family.

### **Goals of Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory is defined differently among various feminist groups; however, three central aspects remain constant despite subtle variations. The three constant goals of feminism are; understand the unique experiences of women within a patriarchal society, empowerment of women, and seeking change in a patriarchal society via political activism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of feminist thought when working with lesbian headed families. Feminism defines lesbianism (and all sexual orientation) as being socially determined and influenced by the interplay between the personal, family/social experiences, and the values and social arrangements of the dominant culture (Gottschalk, 2003). Feminist theory has been successfully applied to various groups including individual, couples, and family therapy, group, advocacy, and therapeutic case management. Application of the four goals of feminist theory to the author's identified population, lesbian parents, follows.

The primary goal of feminist theory is to understand, and ultimately change, the processes that keep men and women thinking and acting within patriarchal frameworks. It understands the differences between male and female experience, and thus understands that those differences must be accounted for in assessment and intervention. In other words, the ultimate goal of feminist theory is to understand the inherent and deeply rooted imbalance of power between men and women; and through that understanding creating a level playing field.

Women experience discrimination in the form of lower wages, less status in general society, and the workplace. Lesbian women also experience discrimination because they are a part of a sexual minority. Lesbian mothers face discrimination because society believes that lesbians should not be mothers. This form of discrimination is less obvious, but certainly exists. An example is the rejection of extended families that previously accepted her lesbianism, but become estranged after her decision to have children. This loss could obviously be devastating to a new mother, regardless of sexual orientation. Another example of societal discrimination is the growing political force that speaks against these families and is trying to enact legislation to ban lesbian unions, foster, and adoption. The discrimination forced upon lesbian mothers can take many forms, and includes loss

of custody, fewer visitations in the event of a divorce, both partners not being permitted to use FMLA (Family Medical Leave), etc.

After gaining an appreciation of the unique experiences of women, including lesbian mothers, feminist theory strives to empower women. Empowerment defined within the feminist process includes the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their lives (Gutierrez, 1993). Through the empowerment of women, the final goal of feminist theory becomes clear. The final goal of feminist theory is to seek change in a patriarchal society via political activism. Feminist clinicians encourage empowered clients to participate in political action events on behalf of lesbian mothers that are not yet empowered. There is credence placed on the impact of the empowered empowering.

The overall goals of feminist theory are clear, to understand the experiences of women within a patriarchal society, empower women, and influence societal change via political activism. The goals are especially suited to working with lesbian parents because they provide a framework to acknowledge the disadvantages faced by lesbians based on the fact that they are women, and part of a sexual minority as well. Moreover, the theory focuses on empowerment of women and seeking political change in the form of equality for lesbian relationships and families.

### **Techniques/Methods of Feminist Theory**

While the goals of feminist theory are clearly defined, there is less clarity in the techniques of the theory. Feminist thought incorporates techniques and methods from various theories including cognitive behavioral therapy, empowerment theory, psychosocial theory, social constructivism, and psychoanalytic theory. Empowerment theory is especially applicable to feminist???

While feminist clinicians borrow techniques from various schools of thought, there is a central theme to all feminist based social work. Empowerment and connecting the personal and political are essential tenets of feminist interventions. Empowerment is facilitated in various ways, including individual therapy and group sessions.

Empowerment theory, which is often adapted into feminist driven interventions, outlines five ways that the clinician can empower their client. First, the social work clinician – client relationship should be characterized by genuineness, mutual respect, open communication, and informality. The client is considered the expert on their situation. Once rapport is created based on the previous foundations, the social worker aims to assist women to experience a sense of personal power. Therapeutic techniques that allow the client to experience a sense of personal power include role-play, practices engaging in assertive behaviors, and engaging clients in roles in which they assist others (Shapiro, 1984). Third, the social worker actively involves the client in the change process. This can take on many forms, and generally begins by the social worker seeking guidance from the client about her goal(s) of therapy. For instance, the social worker should accept the definition of the problem as offered by the client. Taking this stance, the social worker expresses to the client that she is a creator in the therapeutic process. The next two steps allow the social worker to begin to identify the client's strengths and build on those strengths. The final phases of empowerment within the feminist framework connect the personal and political. The social worker engages the client to analyze the power structures of the identified situation. Specifically, the social worker collaborates with the client to analyze the conditions of power and powerlessness that contribute to her perception of the identified problem. Then, the client and social worker work together to create methods in which the client can reconstruct the problematic power structure, so that the client is able to have her needs more effectively met.

Feminist clinicians believe that to understand empowerment we must understand the role that power plays in all (micro, macro, and mezzo level) relationships. Feminist clinicians guide the client to deconstruct their innate acceptance of values instilled by a patriarchal society and resource their personal power structures to create a gender-neutral balance. Through various methods, feminist clinicians hope that the client will be empowered to make these changes.

## Philosophical Foundations

In his groundbreaking book on the subject of the philosophical foundations of social work, Reamer (1993) postulates that five foundations are seen throughout the field of social work. He begins with the political philosophies that include distributive justice and the role of government. He moves from the political ties in social work to the moral and ethical boundaries of the profession. After discussions on the role of politics and morality, Reamer (1993) moves on to describe the logical foundations that social workers use to define the professional position on various topics. He describes the harm in using faulty logic to form inappropriate arguments. After discussing logic, Reamer (1993) discusses epistemology, or our methods of knowing. The epistemology of social work has been debated for some time between constructionist and positivists, but Reamer (1993) focuses the debate on the philosophy of learning and knowing. Reamer's (1993) final foundation is termed aesthetics and is defined as the artist trend in social work. Like epistemology, the role of aesthetics in social work has been debated within the field. To ensure clarity each of these philosophical areas will be explored separately.

### **Political philosophy**

Reamer (1993) discusses the role of government and the implications for governmental action or lack of action. Feminists have long understood the implications of politics in personal experience. In fact, one of the major tenets of feminist theory is that the personal is political. Feminists call for political action to create gender, class, and racial equality among all people.

Feminist theory defines sexual orientation as a political choice. Hoagland cites Cheryl Choice, a classical feminist author, as she explores the relationship between lesbianism and politics. She writes “for a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic imperialist culture such as that of North America is an act of resistance... The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a lift of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential mutuality in a lesbian relations.” This seeks to the

political nature of a women's choice to adopt a lesbian identity, and the fact that western, heterosexist politicians view this as an act of defiance.

Lack of political blessing has been especially devastating to lesbian parents. Antihomosexual laws and lack of antidiscrimination legislation creates the real and constant threat of losing custody of their children (Falk, 1989). Feminist activists believe that the well being of all people should be at the heart of the social agenda. Political aversion to allowing equal rights has created an imbalance of power by not recognizing lesbian marriages legally, not allowing second parent adoptions, and not offering domestic partner benefits.

Feminist social work aims to improve women's well being by linking their personal predicaments and often-untold private sorrows with their social position and status within society. Bringing lesbian families into the line of sight of political leaders is essential to gaining political equality, and is a basic tenet of feminist social work theory.

### **Moral philosophy**

Reamer (1993) stated that normative ethics are characterized somewhat by distributive justice. That is, the method by which we decide who is worthy to receive services. Feminist theory states that it is a mission of the theory to provide services equally and without prejudice creating the appearance of having strongly defined moral philosophy. Feminist theory seeks to provide equal services to women without regard for race, class, or sexual orientation. However, feminist authors seldom address the possibility of feminist applications to men. Specifically, feminist authors and researchers rarely address the application of feminist thought to men as victims of oppression themselves.

Reamer's (1993) description of distributive justice or the definition of a "worthy" client is challenged by lesbian headed families. Societies (and social work) have accepted that a worthy family consists of a mother, a father, and 2.2 children. Lesbian mothers (and gay men) challenge this belief and are thus met with societal resistance in the form of discriminations. Feminist theory

challenges these assumptions and advocates for social reform that will change our narrow and patriarchal definition of family.

Reamer (1993) defines the broader term “metaethics” to include those lofty concepts of right and wrong as well as our duty to provide services. He further explains that duty can be broken down to mean very different things among clinicians. The idea of providing services to lesbians and encouraging their decisions to have children can create some interesting ethical dilemmas for social workers. Especially social workers that practice from a faith based perspective, which treats homosexuality as a sin. Such clinicians would have to assign priority to their religious duty and professional duty, as the expectations of each are different.

## Logic

Reamer (1993) stated that the effectiveness of social work depends on our ability to make logical arguments, as well as, the power of language and the importance of using language precisely. Feminist theory is strong in this area. Feminist theory asserts that equality is a logical assumption, and that male dominated societal structures perpetuate the power imbalance for their own gain. Feminist theory asserts that the overlying assumption within society is that women are not as capable of performing. This is not accurate, and feminist theory seeks to alter that faulty assumption.

Logic testing is also insightful when applied to opponent arguments against lesbian and gay families. Knight and Garcia have written a scathing article about the inability of lesbians to conduct research and parent. The logical fallacies in their statements are discussed in the following section. In their article about homosexual parenting, Knight and Garcia point out those studies about homosexual parenting are seriously flawed, because lesbian researchers complete most studies. This hardly seems to be a logical conclusion. If Knight and Garcia intend to say that research cannot be valid if the researchers personally believe in the topic, then their ideas are equally flawed. This would imply that heterosexual researchers who devote time to the study of heterosexual or

“traditional” families are inaccurate as well. Logic would state that neither of these statements is true.

Knight and Garcia also state that homosexual households are incapable of providing adequate role models because they do not offer the opportunity for children to observe adults of the opposite sex interacting. This inaccurately implies that homosexual parents live a sterile and socially void life.

Feminist theory aims to deconstruct the existing logic applied by male dominated patriarchal policy makers. Feminist theory highlights faulty assumptions and challenges those assumptions.

### Epistemology

Reamer (1993) highlighted some of the debate within the social work field about the best way to accumulate and dispense knowledge. Epistemology is the weakest area of feminist theory. To date, feminist research has largely been conducted from a constructivist or what Reamer (1993) defines as the rationalist perspective. This is to say that there is no collective reality, but each experience is so unique that generalizations would be inaccurate and inappropriate. Information has been primarily obtained in qualitative methods via narratives, storytelling, and lengthily interviews, among small sample populations. Within the feminist theory, there is mistrust for male dominated research methods that have failed to encompass the complexity of the female experience within society. However, there has been a push to include qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Feminist research is guided by three principles. First, listen carefully to the client. Feminist researchers assert that the stories shared by women are the basis from which all knowledge is obtained. Thus the adaptation of qualitative research methods that allow clients to use open-ended narrative type responses. Second, the researcher will try to reflect and understand the lives of research participants as they see them. This influences social science research because feminist researchers are not willing to categorize women's experiences, or rate them. Her reality is

exclusive to each person. Last, the researcher will create theories that support those experiences (Reinhartz, 1992).

Feminist research has primarily been conducted from a constructivist point of view. The choice of methods is a conscious one for feminist researchers who often have mistrust for male dominated scientific approaches. Feminist researchers share social work beliefs that individuality should be fostered, thus they avoid generalizations.

### Aesthetics

Reamer (1993) cites Siporin (1988) as “art in social work refers to developing patterns of human behavior and relationships that are original and beautiful.” Feminist theory is strong in the area that Reamer (1993) defines as aesthetics, as a fundamental premise within the theory is that all relationships and behavior are original and, asserts that they should be appreciated as such. Feminist theory places a large emphasis on personal experience and the beauty of women’s story telling as an artistic form of expression. Also of primary focus is the passing on of information from one generation to the next in the same story telling fashion.

Siporin is also cited to have discussed the eureka experience (Reamer, 1993). Feminist theory facilitates this experience by collaborating with the client to consider the effects of an invisible power structure as it affects the client’s perception of herself and her abilities. Many feminist clinicians refer to the moment of insight when this is considered for the first time. This can be related to Siporin’s discussion of the eureka experience.

Reamer (1993) also discusses the importance placed on the initial contacts between the social worker and client. This is the critical phase of social work assessment when rapport is established. Feminist practitioners place specific emphasis on this phase, as they believe that the method in which they obtain information is as important as the data itself (Dominelli, 2002).

Feminist theory collates closely to the philosophical foundation termed aesthetics by Reamer (1993). Feminist practitioners focus on the originality of each client's experience, the beauty of the moment in which a new insight is gained, and the importance of skillfully and respectfully gathering information.

### **Major issues**

#### **Strengths**

Feminist theory is strongest in Reamer's (1993) political and aesthetic foundations. Feminist theory is also strong in logic and morals as defined by Reamer (1993). Feminist social workers have made a commitment to promoting change in all oppressed groups, which is a central value of all social work practice. Several other key aspects of feminist theory are rooted in the original core values of social work practice as well. For instance, focusing on recognizing the person in environment, respecting individuality and diversity, and empowerment. One strength of feminist theory is that it strives trying to include all methods of knowledge, including those that were previously dismissed by other fields of thought. For instance, there is a push to include qualitative and quantitative research; they embrace the possibility of change through all forms of intervention from cognitive behavioral therapy to hypnosis and biofeedback. In short, the central commitment to feminist practice is that of healing, change, and growth - the method of that change is seen as largely individualized.

#### **Weaknesses**

Feminist theory is weakest in Reamer's (1993) epistemology foundation. Specifically, without a definition of theory to include specific interventions, Feminist theory has failed to produce any empirically driven studies to prove their theory helpful.

One criticism of this body of research is that it lacks external validity. Specifically, it may not be representative of the larger population of lesbian parents (Patterson, 1995). However, no one actually knows the composition of the entire theoretical lesbian parent populations because many

choose to remain hidden for fear of loss of custody of their children, hate crimes, or the like. Research has also been criticized for using poorly matched, or no control groups in designs that call for such controls. For instance, several comparative studies have been conducted that compared lesbian families and the children of lesbians to single parent heterosexual families and children of single heterosexual parents (Kirkpatrick, Mandel & Hotvedt, Golombok, Spence, & Rutter). These two groups are hardly equal. Research designed to ensure that children raised by lesbian families should aim to include comparison groups of children in heterosexual families. Another issue is that sample sizes are generally small and the method of choice is rarely probability sampling. This draw questions about generalization, reliability, and validity.

Another criticism, which cannot be explored fully due to the brief nature of this test, includes feminist research as targeting only a small amount of women with radical philosophies, rather than all women. Although there are central themes within feminist practice (seek an end to patriarchy, empowerment, person in environment, the personal is political, etc.) each social worker may interpret those themes differently. Feminist response to this critique is that diversity is sought in the experiences of the women they study and likewise in the women who study feminist thought.

In addition, given that few social work clinicians limit their practice to exclusively women, the lack of inclusion of treatment with men limits the practicality of social workers adopting feminist theory exclusively in their practice. Postmodern feminist clinicians are attempting to more widely apply feminist theory to populations such as men. However, the majority of feminist researchers and clinicians overlook the possibility of male clients.

### **Gaps in knowledge**

Feminist theory is weakest in epistemology. Much of social science research is dominated by male oriented design and language. Hesitation of feminist researchers to attempt to fit within those standards, and lack of more gender-neutral methods, has created a large gap within the empirical

body of research. Several of the major studies conducted from a feminist perspective exploring lesbian parenting is identified below.

Findings in all research reviewed suggested no psychological trauma to children raised by lesbians (Falks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Falk, 1989, Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983, Harris & Turner 1985, Huggins, 1989, Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). Of these studies only one (Vanfraussen, 2003) controlled for the method in which participant families were created. Specifically of interest to Vanfraussen was the impact of planning a family using artificial insemination with sperm chosen from an anonymous donor. This creates special circumstances that warrant further exploration including the lack of involvement from a biological father, emotional effects of not knowing one's birth parent, etc. This method of planning a family is especially interesting in its potential effects of children and warrants further exploration.

There appears to be a lack of available support to lesbian parents and their children (Neisen, 1987). Although interest in this area is gaining ground within groups such as PFLAG and various alternative family groups, the issue still deserves exploration. This researcher was unable to locate a needs assessment conducted within this population. Neisen (1987) found that families with gay or lesbian members generally get their support and information from newspapers, books, and acquaintances rather than local or community based support groups. A needs assessment would be interesting to review areas in which these families perceive a lack of support. In addition, following Neisen's (1987) observations, the reasons for unstructured support system choices are of interest.

Research thus far has only captured a small portion of lesbian parents and their children. Samples generally targeted families attending parenting and support groups, families of upper socioeconomic status, and predominately-Caucasian parents. Research should be aimed at meeting those families still unidentified with the goal of assessing their needs, designing, and implementing programs to meet those needs.

In order to address the fears of feminist researchers to work within the male dominated research models, the American Psychological Association (APA) has developed guidelines to eliminate sex biased research methods, designs, and samples. Currently, the empirical base within the feminist theatrical framework is narrative style done with qualitative research methods, which limits generalization to persons outside of the sample population. Critiques of feminist researchers have used this as a limitation of feminist clinicians. However, generalization is not the goal of feminist research, but rather is considered more valuable by the large society of social science researchers. Despite this argument, research should continue. The topic of lesbian headed families is critical to social workers effectively applying interventions with these families. Feminist researchers should continue to conduct and replicate research within the methods they feel would most accurately represent their clients.

### **Implications for future social work practice**

#### **Policy**

Clinicians viewing lesbian parents through a feminist lens will see the disparity in judicial rulings preventing lesbians from retaining custody of their children. The legal system continues to use gay and lesbian parents' sexual orientation against them when making custody recommendations. Courts have assumed (despite social science research) that lesbian parents are mentally ill, less maternal than heterosexual mothers, incapable of providing adequate role models, and most devastating, pedophiles. Social science research has not confirmed any of these assumptions (Falks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Falk, 1989, Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983, Harris & Turner 1985, Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). Judicial discretion allows personal and political bias to uphold a heterosexist hierarchy in which gay and lesbian parents continue to be oppressed and victims of discrimination. Feminist theory encourages political activism by lobbying and supporting programs designed to create gender neutral politics and equality such as domestic partner insurance, laws to allow and protect

second parent adoption, permission for gay and lesbians to be foster parents, and all other rights asserted to heterosexual persons and families. Social workers operating within the feminist framework will use politics, including networking within professional organizations, and policy as tools to further these issues working toward equality.

### Research

Courts have voiced three major fears about the effects of gay and lesbian parents. The first fear focuses on impaired development of sexuality as seen in disturbances in gender identity and/or gender role behavior (Falk, 1989, Hitchens & Kirkpatrick, 1985). In other words, children raised by gay or lesbian parents will in fact be gay themselves (Falk, 1989). The second concern is that children being raised by homosexual parents will be more vulnerable to mental breakdown with an overall lessened mental stability in response to their parent's sexuality (Falk, 1989). The third fear is related to the possibility that having gay or lesbian parents will cause children mental anguish by being teased at school or stigmatized by peer. Empirical evidence that these assumptions are false exists (Falks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Falk, 1989, Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986, Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983, Harris & Turner 1985, Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). Criticism of these studies includes mismatched comparison groups, small sample sizes, and inability to generalization outside of the study population. Hence, researchers should be driven to replicate the results of previous studies using closely matched comparison groups, larger sample sizes, random sampling when possible to allow for generalization to other groups, and sound methodologies allowing replication.

### Practice

Feminist theory utilizes practice models from other theories such as cognitive behavioral therapy, empowerment, and solution focused. This is a limitation of Feminist theory. Lack of specific practice model limits feminist theory because it prescribes no guidelines to clinicians regarding which interventions from various theories closely match feminist ideations and assumptions. It

creates an environment in which a clinician has to select from various interventions created within other theories, which are not aimed at achieving the same result as a practitioner working within a feminist perspective. For instance, cognitive behavior therapists are largely concerned with effecting changing within the individual. A feminist clinician would hope to empower change within the individual, so that she could affect change within her larger ecosystem given her newfound empowerment.

Feminist theory has a specific focus on the importance of language in definition and explanation. This focus on language impacts social work practice by creating words that empower and unite rather than oppress and divide. For instance, Thompson (1971) identifies specific ways to empower lesbian families by altering common language used to define them. She suggests that lesbian mothers and their advocates should speak of “planned” families rather than alternative or non-traditional. She suggests that this will highlight the fact that choice and agency are central to the act of becoming a lesbian parent (1971). Feminist clinicians will be sensitive in their use of language in diagnosis and intervention.

## Advocacy

Feminism suggests that the personal is political, and this has clear implications on social work practice. Political action in the form of lobbying congress, speaking on behalf of oppressed groups, supporting equal rights legislation such as DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) and encouraging people to seek action via politics are typical actions encouraged by feminist social workers. Social workers operating within the feminist framework understand the implications of oppression due to gender and sexual orientation. They also feel the empowerment of the individual is not enough to create socially desirable change. Rather, the feminist social worker will encourage her client to promote social change via political action.

## Education

Social work schools include minimal instruction on feminist theory or lesbian issues in their curricula. Any course offerings are likely to be electives, and seldom offered. Lack of focus on lesbian issues leaves graduates unprepared to provide effective interventions to this growing population. Feminist theory should be infused into social work education curriculums beginning with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requiring that all accredited social work programs include formal instruction on the topic.

## Conclusion

Feminist social workers follow in the footsteps of social work pioneers Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, whose feminist roots motivated them to fight discrimination and oppression. Social work professionals dedicated themselves to respecting individuality, diversity, and self-determination. There are all core values of feminist theory as well. Feminist theory also shares the emphasis placed on the person situation transaction, emphasis on client empowerment, and the politics of equality with traditional social work values.

This paper has examined feminist theory as a paradigm of social work practice with lesbian parents. Lesbian headed families have become more prevalently identified, making it inevitable that these families are likely to be encountered by more and more social workers in private practice. Exploration of the “lesbian baby boom” (Patterson, 1995) has yielded new focus for social workers in the fields of theory and practice.

Also within this text, the Reamer’s (1993) philosophical foundations were evaluated through a feminist lens, working with lesbian mothers. Strengths, weakness, and gaps in feminist theory as applied to this population were identified; as well as implications for future research. In conclusion, feminist theory offers insight into struggles of lesbian women choosing motherhood. Feminist theory highlights the specific challenges these brave women face as they continue to struggle for equality in their relationships and families. Feminist theory borrows interventions from

empowerment theory, which offers techniques that social work professionals can use to effectively intervene within these families, and advocate for them.

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