Closeup: Utah's Course on Women and Education

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The importance of this course was to look at actual social work practice, using some of the critical perspectives that have emerged in the women's liberation movement. Professional schools that are training practitioners obviously must take a hard look at what they are actually teaching people to do. Social work's emphasis on clinical education gave us an unusual opportunity to examine our own practice. It seemed particularly important to look at the possible sexist assumptions in social work, because the profession deals with concerns that are especially relevant to women, i.e., marriage, families, medical care, abortion and family planning, child guidance, individual identity crises, etc.

The course began with a study of some of the classic texts that form the basis for our clinical practice. Books by Freud, Erikson and Lidz, which are used to teach students the various life stages, were found to have varying degrees of sexist bias. In The Person, for example, Theodore Lidz saw the reasons for women choosing a "masculine" field as being determined by "wishing to compete or surpass men, fear of marriage and childbirth, or of the dangers of dependency." The more positive motivations for women choosing such a field simply were not considered. If part of our diagnosis of client problems is based on such obvious sexist assumptions, such assumptions need, at the very least, to be reexamined. Much of the term was devoted to looking at our own feelings and intellectual assumptions about male and female mental health norms. The Broverman study on "Sex Stereotypes and Clinical Judgements of Mental Health" was reviewed in terms of the social work student's treatment goals for their own cases.

The course singled out for consideration the special, though common, problem of the family therapy client who does not play a conventionally acceptable role. Lately, adoption agencies have taken a new look at whether to give a child to a one-parent family, to a family in which the male plays the classic "maternal" role, to a one-parent homosexual family, etc. The impact of the parents' nonconformity on the children, so often used as a cop out by some social workers, also has frequently reflected a genuine concern for the children's welfare. Students, as they discussed their cases, began to take a hard critical look at their own complicated concerns for the children of parents playing unconventional sex roles.

Discussions of cases led to introspection on some students' difficulty in empathizing with clients who played the more traditional sex roles. Thus, one student who was struggling with her own stereotyped feminine passivity, found herself angry at a passive female client. Other students were sometimes reluctant to make use of some of the more traditional diagnostic explanations that might well have some validity for their specific clients. Perhaps, (to use the example from Lidz quoted above), a particular female client did choose a traditionally "masculine" field, at least in part because of the reasons Lidz suggested, and needed to talk about fears of this. Some students could not tune into the client's real concerns because they had their own exclusive feminist norms and explanations.

The telephone rang before my alarm clock could sound its bell. "Hello, have you seen the morning paper? The cover story on your class in women's studies has just been released!" announced my excited secretary. A second call extended an invitation to be an immediate guest on a party-line hookup with Two-way Radio, and before lunch an additional interview had been taped for airing the following morning. This startling reaction opened the way for a hectic two weeks. During this time I would be referred to as a heretic and a corrupter of youth, and my husband would be accused of abnegating his priestly authority. (Ecclesiastical offices in our church are held by lay members.)

What lit the proverbial fire in the kitchen was my public statement that it was a frustrating experience to be a woman in Utah; that our religious subculture put blinders on women and effectively bound her to the home. If women were allowed to grow individually, I commented, it wouldn't come as such a crushing blow when she discovered in later years that she was not the perfect mother.

To more clearly understand the religious implications in both my remarks and those of my detractors, one must know a little about our particular subculture. Indoctrination of males and females into their respective roles begins early in Mormondom, but the critical turning point takes place at age 12. It is then that males receive the priesthood...
and begin concentrated training for leadership. Tasks designed to achieve this objective are not confined to ecclesiastical duties but encompass community service as well. From the moment of ordination, a male's authority supersedes that of any and all females. Instructions in secular as well as sectarian matters come directly from the priesthood. Husbands, brothers, and fathers are considered the final mediators and dispensers of divine wisdom and counsel. Girls, on the other hand, learn that their foreordained role is motherhood. The period between menopause and death is a false promise of relief, for childbearing will be her exclusive calling throughout her future and eternal life. Under these circumstances, for me to offer the possibility of self-fulfillment rather than self-denial was to encourage women to build false hopes and to deny the divinely instituted plan for womankind.

Acutely aware of the discrimination facing professional women educators in Utah who faced this religiously sanctioned attitude, I requested permission from the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Utah to construct a course in women's studies. The broad objectives I posed were to (1) enhance the self-image of women, and (2) provide some specific skills to help women assume more active leadership in society, in education, and in the political sphere. The class, "Women and Education," will be offered spring quarter of 1973, and includes the following: The practical how-to of publishing; women's rights under the present laws and how to realize them; methods of developing political voice; exercises in parliamentary procedure, communication, cooperation, and decision making; techniques of writing resumes and job applications; and effective performance during interviews. Emphasis will be placed on student participation, as opposed to the lecture method, and opportunity will be provided for field-study projects. Guest speakers will include professionally successful women who can provide not only methods of by-passing discriminatory practices but also life-style models for aspiring women.

Feminine response to news of the forthcoming class was overwhelming in its support. Routine details in my office came to a standstill as I attempted to counsel women who phoned, wrote, or dropped by for a more personal chat. Even as I revealed in my unique opportunity to meet some of the needs of my sisterhood, I realized that the classes I had developed could not possibly satisfy the wide spectrum of women who were appealing to me for help.

With new educational challenges arising before the course "Women and Education" has even begun to answer previously identified problems, we can only guess at future solutions. "But women shouldn't need special help," objects one of my male graduate students. "Every individual has to learn to stand on his own two feet and make his own way in the world," he chides me. I merely smile in response, and think what an interesting observation this is coming from a man whose brothers expected his achievement, who prodded him into success, who opened doors of opportunity for him, who was born to assume leadership, and who undoubtedly thanks God each day that he was not born a woman.

Dorothy J. Schimmelpfennig

NEWS FROM THE CAMPUS

In the past three months, twelve new programs in Women's Studies have been announced, one of them—George Washington University—an M.A. program. At the University of Hawaii, students may earn a B.A. in Women's Studies through the Liberal Studies Program. Other programs: California State University/Humboldt; College of New Rochelle (N.Y.); CUNY/City College; Oregon State University; Sangamon State University (III.); University of South Florida; University of Massachusetts/Boston; Stockton State College (N.J.); Weber State College (Utah); University of Utah. The total number of Women's Studies programs now listed with the Clearinghouse is 61.

In the past three months, the Clearinghouse has received materials on women's courses and programs from 30 continuing education or extension programs attached to colleges and universities. While some of these courses and programs are career-oriented, most also reflect the variety of concerns present generally in Women's Studies: courses in history and current issues; courses in "Growing up Female," courses on "The Single Woman in Today's Society," and so forth.

A graduate program in practical politics with a possible special focus on the changing role of women in politics has been announced by the Eagleton Center for the American Woman and Politics. One-year fellowships are also available to women seeking political careers. The Center offers seminars in practical politics, government internships, campaign and media participation, etc. For 1973-74 applications, write to Ruth Mandel, Director of Educational Programs, Eagleton Institute, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. J. 08901.

The Extension Services at California State University/Sacramento offer for credit a Women's Studies course on the radio. Called "Women: Sexuality and Identity," the PR for the course insists that "you deserve units even if the learning situation is convenient and entertaining."

Fight Against Sexism in Textbooks:
A group of women in San Francisco, formerly the education task force of NOW, have made a study of the textbooks used in the city's schools, selecting at random a fourth of the readers used. Resulting statistics and quotations successfully shocked both the Curriculum Committee of the Board of Education and the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. The Curriculum Committee agreed to recommend to the Board that Little Miss Muffet Fights Back, the feminist bibliography of children's literature, be consulted when choosing new readers. The group is currently writing up their study, including suggestions for other women embarking on projects of textbook protest. They also are starting three new projects: 1) continuing education for adult women to include counseling services and a traveling panel, 2) an in-service training conference for teachers on eliminating sexism in the classroom, and 3) a letter-writing lobby in support of Patsy Mink's women's education bill. Contact: Adele Meyer, 361-14th Ave., San Francisco.