Closeup: Buffalo's Course on Women and Social Casework

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The purpose of this course was to look at actual social work that 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 importance of the sex of the social worker was also examined in terms of its modeling effectiveness. The students examined a variety of views, ranging from Phyllis Chesler’s assertion that a female client should only be treated by a female because of the automatic model authority position of the therapist, to the position that the sex of the social worker was irrelevant because the client would transfer onto the therapist the sex and qualities of the person around whom she needed to work out her problems. The students’ own cases and feelings about whether they in fact played an important modeling role with their clients was examined. The all-female class (no males signed up) also looked at their complicated feelings about their male clients. One of the more interesting things to emerge was student discomfort with specific types of male clients, particularly those who had an oppressively “machismo” style, or were inappropriately sexually provocative.

We also looked at our own professional choices of social work with its reputation for being a “do good,” not highly intellectual, nurturing, low-status field. Did the field and our own female socialization patterns make too good a fit, and if so, what were the implications for future professional practice?

The issues dealing with sex roles and case work are complex and varied, and many of the questions raised by this course have no ready answers. The major goal of the course was to alert social work students to some of these issues in their own casework, for it is in their actual professional practice that the varied kinds of sexist bias have real effect.

Mary Cahn Schwartz

CLOSEUP: UTAH'S COURSE ON WOMEN AND EDUCATION

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