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SEXISM IN THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM

The purpose of this paper is to examine parts of the social work curriculum in order to discover the various kinds of sexist bias present in the materials used in social work education. My intent is to give a sense of what these sexist biases might be by discussing some concrete illustrations from materials used in two basic social work courses, "human growth and development" and "family casework." The course on human growth and development is supposed to provide part of the crucial knowledge base that a social worker needs in order to formulate a psychosocial diagnosis and treatment plan. Two books are used as basic texts for this course in schools of social work throughout the country: Erik Erikson's classic *Childhood and Society*, and Theodore Lidz's *The Person*. In order to examine content on female growth and development, I will focus on both authors' treatment of adolescence.

Although Erikson devotes one-third of his book to youth and the evolution of identity, what he really describes is the *male* identity crisis. Seventeen pages are devoted to the adolescent development of a "Protestant, Anglo-saxon white collar" boy. He describes how this boy develops a sense of fair play, is trained for democracy, works on his feelings about his father and grandfather, receives complex expectations about his masculinity from his mother, and so on. *One paragraph* is devoted to female adolescent development.

... the sister's crisis will come when she becomes a mother and when the vicissitudes of child training will perforce bring her to the fore of the infantile identification with her mother.¹

Erikson's sin of omission here is significant and not a mere quibble. Students have learned almost nothing about the female adolescent search for identity when they have finished reading *Childhood and Society*, and have received a series of subtle messages indicating its unimportance.

Erikson has [elsewhere] written:

Young women often ask whether they can "have an identity" before they know whom they will marry and for whom they will make a home. Granted that something in the young woman's identity must keep itself open for the peculiarities of the man to be joined and the children to be brought up. I think that much of a young woman's identity is already defined in her kind of attractiveness and in the selectivity of her search for the man (or men) by whom she wishes to be sought.²

In *The Person*, Lidz does give women equal time. What is striking in his work is that American-stereotypic-female-socialized behavior is seen as the successful resolution of the female adolescent identity crisis. The adolescent girl, in his view, wants to achieve in school for two reasons: first, society puts a high value on achievement, and second, a girl is born incomplete—without a penis. Because of this, she needs to show that "her intellect is as good as a boy's," causing her sometimes "to use her intellect aggressively—phallically."³

During adolescence she is put in a state of crisis because "the plaudits are going to the girls who are finding husbands." The successful resolution of the conflict comes about when "the female prerogative of remaining dependent and gaining status through the husband's achievements becomes more enticing." Thus the successful formation of a feminine identity necessitates "accepting the more passive role, limiting self-expression, having her eventual sense of fulfillment rest on husband and children, and gaining satisfaction through their achievements." If she does select an occupation it will "not be concerned with prestige, wealth, or power," and she will choose to play the role of "assistant, helper and nurturer."⁴

At this point in the theory Lidz takes an enormous jump. He states that the capacity for intimacy is an inherent part of the identity formation in most girls and then goes on to say that "*readiness or intimacy requires acceptance of, or security in a feminine identity.*"⁵ This sounds plausible until the reader realizes how stereotypically he has defined feminine identity.

... the girl may enter late adolescence quite firmly established in her identification with womanhood, *wishing primarily to complement the life of her husband and find happiness in her family.*⁶ (Italics mine)

Social workers are, of course, deeply concerned with the facilitation of true intimacy in relationships. If, however, the price paid by the woman for intimacy is to accept a more passive role, thereby renouncing the ability to use her intellect aggressively, gaining satisfaction solely through family achievements, and performing as an assistant or helper rather than in a leadership role, then for many women the price is too high.

The implications of these theories in our work with families are many and can best be seen if we examine some of the readings used in family casework courses.

What are the sex role norms for family members on which caseworkers base their diagnosis of problems? The answers in the writings vary. Almost all, however, emphasize the anxiety provoking implications of more flexible sex roles rather than the self-actualizing potential that less defined sex roles can provide. For example, Ackerman looks wistfully back on the nineteenth century image of the father, depicted as "a man of vigor, strength and courage, the unchallenged leader and governor of the family." He goes on to give his thoughts on the modern woman:

... women's aggressiveness and mastery are only a facade. Her facade of self-sufficiency and strength represents an effort at compensation, an effort to console herself for her inability to depend safely on a man.⁷

The Head of the House. There is a certain nostalgia in the literature for the time when sex roles were more rigid, when women could be "feminine" because their men were truly "masculine" and vice versa. In this regard, two concepts keep reappearing in the family therapy literature that need examination by social workers. The first is the concept of "the head of the house." If we accept Lidz's definition that the healthy female is the more passive helper who achieves vicariously through her family, it follows that the male counterpart should be an assertive, achieving leader; that is, the head of the house.

There is, in fact, a remarkable amount of dismay expressed by family therapists that the father is no longer the head of the house, and intervention strategies are often based on helping the father to reassert his power. In all the cases I examined, there was no example of a casework goal which encouraged the woman to take charge of the family if there was a male also in the home.

On the other hand, here are examples of how family therapists write about male leadership: Lobsez and Blackburn bemoan that "fathers, caught in the competitive pressures of the business, more or less abdicate their roles as family heads."⁸ Speck suggests that the therapist demonstrate techniques that his male client can use to establish himself as head of the family.⁹ In *The French Family* the caseworker sees her strategy as emphasizing to Mr. French that he is the authority figure.¹⁰ The examples in the literature are endless.

I do not mean to oversimplify the problem or the handling of the problem. The major responses that I sensed in the family therapy literature on the issue of male dominance in the family were unconscious ambivalence and confusion. The best examples of this ambivalence can be found in *Conjoint Family Therapy* by Virginia Satir, a book that is required reading for most family therapy courses. On the one hand, Satir defines the mature parent as someone who "is able to make choices based on accurate perceptions, who acknowledges these decisions as his and who accepts responsibility for their outcomes."¹¹ This is about as fine a description of a mentally healthy person as we are likely to get.

However, the other side of the ambivalence comes later in the book, in her section on roles and functions.

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The therapist recognizes roles himself, in addressing and treating a family. . . . In history taking, the therapist includes members in a relevant order. He takes the father first, as head of the house, and next the mother.¹²

Where then does the mother's mature responsibility for her decisions lie if she is clearly to be given a subsidiary role—second in command to the male head of the family?

This is not to say that in all families the male or female should not be the head of the house. The issue is the assumption of male leadership before the facts are even explored.

Role Reversal. The second concept that often appears in the literature is role reversal. It takes the head of the family concept one step further. If the preferred state is male dominance and we find a family in which the female is dominant, we have what has become known as role reversal. Ackerman states that "in certain families" there is a reversal of the sexual roles: the woman dominates and makes the decision, she wears the pants.¹³ If we further reverse Ackerman's reversed couple his definition of the healthy family becomes clear. The male dominates and makes the decisions: he wears the pants.

I do not think that most social work educators would agree wholeheartedly with Ackerman's definition. There is a tension in our acceptance of two competing sets of beliefs—the first emphasizing that each person should be independent, fully actualizing, and self determining; and the other emphasizing those traditional behaviors that fit sex-role norms. Since the female sex-role norm deemphasizes independence and the aggressive use of self in general, confusion is inevitable.

The essential issue of how client and caseworker define the problem together is relevant. Many family therapists seem to be accepting Lidz's definition of femininity and masculinity in their conceptualization of the problem. Thus, for example, encouraging a husband to stand up to his mother-in-law, was described as helping him to "affirm his masculinity."¹⁴

On the whole, male aggressiveness is perceived either positively or neutrally while male passivity is not tolerated. Somewhat the opposite holds true for women. Aggressive, controlling, and domineering qualities in women are punished by the ultimate label—castrating—while there is no such negatively charged equivalent for the male who overpowers and thus devitalizes a woman.¹⁵

On the other extreme, while the instrumental needs of women are often looked upon with some suspicion the expressive needs are underlined. We are constantly reading about women's intimacy, sexual, and tenderness needs on which casework goals are too often exclusively based.¹⁶

All this is to suggest that there are complex problems that social work educators need to look at. What I have tried to do here is [to] demonstrate that writers, practitioners, and teachers have points of view often unthinkingly assumed about male-female dominance and that these points of view influence their diagnosis and treatment plans.

Awareness of sexist bias cuts both ways. This perception emerged in a course I gave on new perspectives on women and casework. Many of our students are involved in some aspect of women's liberation and are struggling with what they considered their own internalized sex-stereotyped behavior. Thus many female students are examining their own passivity, lack of striving for excellence, and inability to express anger in an assertive way.

In my class we found that this could have some unfortunate results in the ability to be truly facilitative with clients. One student found herself getting angry at a passive female client because this threatened her own newly acquired and quite fragile ability to be more assertive. Others were sometimes reluctant to make use of some of the more traditional diagnostic explanations that might well have had some validi-

ty with regard to their particular clients. Some could not tune into the client's real concerns because they had their own exclusive feminist norms and explanations.

One of the most important things to emerge from this class was the amount of discomfort female students experienced with specific types of male clients, particularly those who had a *machismo* style or who were sexually provocative. That there is sexism in reverse should not surprise us. It is important, however, that we acknowledge this phenomenon and help our students deal with it.

As educators, we need to be aware that there is much turmoil, re-examination, conflict and introspection among our students as they respond to the stimulus of the Women's Liberation Movement. This stimulus profoundly affects their own sense of self and their expectations of the worker-client relationship. As teachers we need to be sensitive to this turmoil so that we can help students with some of the positive and negative practice results of this phenomenon.

This is a fascinating time to be a social work teacher because of the kind of basic questions that are beginning to be raised about the nature of sex roles in social casework. This questioning is stimulating, healthy, and long overdue. We need as a profession to examine our latent assumptions, look at our own ambivalences, systematically review our literature, and in so doing add to our body of knowledge about men and women.

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¹ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), p. 321. Note that the girl is described in relation to the male—as his sibling.

² Erik Erikson, "Reflections on Womanhood," *The Woman in America*, edited by Robert Lipton, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

³ Theodore Lidz, *The Person* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 350.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁷ Nathan Ackerman, *The Psychodynamics of Family Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 179.

⁸ Norman Lobsez and Clark Blackburn, *How to Stay Married: A Modern Approach to Sex, Money, and Emotions in Marriage* (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1969), p. 16.

⁹ Ross Speck, "Family Therapy in the Home," *Expanding Theory and Practice in Family Therapy* (New York: Family Service Association of America), p. 45.

¹⁰ *The French Family* (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1965).

¹¹ Virginia Satir, *Conjoint Family Therapy* (Ben Lomond, Calif., Science & Behavior Books, Inc., 1967), p. 91.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹³ Ackerman, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁴ Frances L. Beatman, "Intergenerational Aspects of Family Therapy" from *Expanding Theory and Practice in Family Therapy*. Nathan W. Ackerman, Frances L. Beatman, and Sanford Sherman, eds. (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1967), p. 37.

¹⁵ See for example the Nierman Case, *Casebook on Family Diagnosis and Treatment* (New York: Family Service Association of America).

¹⁶ See for example Robert MacGregor, "Multiple Impact Psychotherapy with Families," *Family Process*, (March 1962), p. 27.