

# Personal Self, Professional Self and the Women's Movement\*

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Historians of the future are likely to identify the "women's movement" as one of the most profound social, political and cultural phenomena of the 1970's and 80's. For the present writers, there is no question as to its centrality in both our personal and professional lives. The purpose of this paper is to consider the interplay among the three spheres: our personal lives, our professional work and the women's movement. We consider past, present and future links between social workers' lives, their professional activity and feminism.

Our premise is that an integration of these spheres—the personal self, the professional self and the values of the women's movement—is desirable. Integration is positively related to effectiveness in all three spheres.

Because of the heterogeneity and continuing growth of its ideologies, organizations and spokespersons, the women's movement defies a single definition. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that the movement seeks to redress the power imbalance between men and women and

in doing so, is avowedly pro-women. Moreover, the women's movement seeks to unite women and liberate them from the oppressive and distorting limitations of their traditionally imposed roles and to create, in their place, wholly new possibilities for women and men on the basis of equality, non-possessiveness and non-violence.

We employ the term "personal self" to refer to that portion of one's identity and self-image which is related to interactions with significant intimates. It is the sphere encompassing the individual's beliefs, attitudes, customary living patterns, interests and priorities. The term, "professional self" is used to refer to that portion of one's identity and self-image which is related to one's training, employment and professional membership. Clear-cut definitions cannot be provided to differentiate between the vocational and private: both are really different faces of one reality. That we even refer to different spheres is a sign of fragmentation in our lives. Since life is dynamic, the inter-relationships between these two spheres and between them and feminism continue to change and evolve.

The balance of this paper examines the tendency of social work to segregate the personal from the professional, the effects of professionalism and the resulting separation for the feminist social worker of belief and practice. We then note historical relationships between social work and the women's movement that have promoted both this separation as well as positive cross-fertilization. Drawing upon our own experience, we posit mechanisms for an integration of the personal, professional and feminist. We conclude with projections of future relationships between the profession and the women's movement and we offer recommendations with regard to the potential collaboration between social work and feminism.

### **Trisection of the Feminist Social Worker**

Although most social workers would assume a congruence between their personal and professional lives, an integration of the two spheres is not inherent. Social workers often consciously attempt to compartmentalize their personal and professional lives. It is an axiom in traditional social work training and practice that one must avoid revealing one's personal beliefs and never impose them in any way upon the client. Although such an approach is based upon the laudable support of client self-determination, the result is often non-intervention in situations that demand a clear value position be taken, e.g., with regards to a battered woman.

Compartmentalization of the personal and professional selves leads to inconsistencies in belief and behavior. Moreover, when no conscious effort is made to deal with such discrepancies, uncontrolled seepage between spheres occurs. For example, one's personal belief that a woman should separate from her battering husband may distort one's attempt to help the woman make her own choices. For social workers who are actively involved in the struggles of the women's movement, their lives can entail a three-way compartmentalization with a signifi-

cant degree of non-integration among the three spheres. Consider the position of the feminist social worker confronted by wife battering on all three fronts. At home, the worker may view the battering of her sister as victimization by an inhuman brother-in-law; at work, she may describe similar incidents as poor communication patterns between marriage partners; and in a consciousness-raising group, she may come to note patterns of battering and become aware of societal structures that perpetuate such violence. The analysis is shaped by the context, specifically by which of the three spheres the worker is operating within the time.

The unevenness of the impact of the women's movement on the individual social worker relates to the failure of the profession as a whole to come to grips with the oppression of the vast majority of its clientele—women and girls. In the analysis to follow, we consider factors that have fostered a separation between the profession and feminism on the one hand and some areas of mutual enrichment on the other hand. Because of both authors' extensive involvement in the movement to establish services for battered women, we continue to draw upon examples from this area to concretize our examination of the interrelationships among the personal, professional and feminist.

### **Professionalism**

The term "professional" adds to the fragmentation of social workers by the inclusion of very disparate elements in its definition. The sociologist Ernest Greenwood specifies the major attributes of a profession: "(1) systematic theory, (2) authority, (3) community sanction, (4) ethical codes and (5) culture."<sup>1</sup> Professional social workers readily identify themselves as utilizing a body of knowledge and skills and as operating an ethical framework. They less fully recognize that professionalization encompasses entry into a subgroup with certain norms and socially assigned powers. Professional membership has

led to the desire among social workers to belong to an elite and separate group and to imitate the model of well-established professions, social workers have sought to build their credibility by appearing to be “scientific” and adopting principles of practice such as “functional specificity, emotional neutrality, service to others and impartiality.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, conflicting expectations have been placed on social workers, e.g., to be functionally specific versus holistic, objective versus empathic, impersonal versus self-disclosing, neutral versus committed, apolitical versus politically active, non-judgemental versus socially critical and authoritative versus egalitarian.

Divisions within social work have been further exacerbated by the locating of service within social agencies, generally established by charitable or governmental bodies, to help individuals cope. The employment of social workers within institutional settings has resulted in: (a) a focus on individual problems rather than a holistic social analysis and (b) a provision of short-term remedies rather than fundamental social change. Ultimately the profession serves a social control function in maintaining the established social order. The historical development of the social work profession in our industrial, individualistic society is further discussed below.

### **Social Work and the Women’s Movement: The Historical Relationship**

The limits of the present work do not allow for a thorough history of the social work profession of the women’s movement. Instead, certain aspects of the relationship between the two are examined as they pertain to the interdependence of the personal, professional, and feminist.

The women’s movement should properly be seen as having its beginning during the late 1700’s and early 1800’s. It thus predates the profession of social work, which began in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the women’s movement opened the door for the birth of social

work, for social work was at its inception carried out primarily by women (although its overseers were men). Social work began as philanthropy in the form of the so-called “friendly visitors” of the scientific charity movement that developed into the social casework stream of the profession.<sup>3</sup>

The other early social work stream—the settlement house movement—developed at the turn of the century. The notion that a woman’s place is in the home caused some initial difficulty, but the dilemma was resolved by one of its leading spokespersons, Jane Adams, who asserted that “woman’s objective is to make the whole world more ‘homelike.’”<sup>4</sup>

In all of these early manifestations, the precursors of modern social work were clearly extending women’s traditional unpaid labour at home—the nurturing and caring for others—to the world outside. Margaret Adams has observed that the compatibility between women’s traditional socialization and women’s role in the helping professions is based on the unfounded but

...pervasive belief that women’s primary and most valuable social function is to provide tender and compassionate moments of life and that through the exercise of these particular traits, women have set themselves up as the exclusive model for protecting, nurturing and fostering the growth of others.<sup>5</sup>

On the one hand, then, the early days of pre-professional social work can be seen as a function of women’s emancipation from the structure of “home and hearth.” On the other hand, social work has, for the most part, not been an emancipation from the value-content of “home and hearth.” The traditional functions for women have simply had their field of implementation broadened. Within the profession itself, a traditional sex-based division of labour has been maintained: most social agencies are

populated largely by women at the rank-and-file level and by men at the administrative level; most schools of social work are male-dominated. Traditionally, male practitioners have gravitated toward those functions more compatible with traditional masculine role behaviour, such as probation and rehabilitation milieux, while female practitioners have provided so-called supportive, one-to-one services.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the largest influx of males into the profession came in the 1960's when community organizing became fashionable within social work.<sup>7</sup> Casework has generally been oriented in support of the traditional family: female social workers have served a social control function, in this sense, over other women. Social options by which women live independently of men have been ridiculed ("the old maid" stigma), condemned (lesbian relationships), or regarded as a problem (the single parent family, the "unwed" mother).<sup>8</sup>

Although a number of the early social workers in the settlement house movement were advocates of women's suffrage and improved working conditions for women and children, social work and the women's movement have not progressed hand in hand. Quite the contrary, much of the thrust of social work practice, theory, and workplace relationships has conflicted with the basic values of the women's movement. Gripton describes "the relative indifference of female social workers to the women's liberation movement" as paradoxical in that "social work throughout its history has been preoccupied with problems of women that are linked to traditional sex role definitions and their restricted participation in male dominated institutions."<sup>9</sup> "Indifference" does not seem the most appropriate characterization; opposition, conscious or otherwise, has often been the case.

Because of the control of the profession by men, "social work is among the last of the so-called 'helping professions' to recognize the impact of institutionalized sexism."<sup>10</sup> Only very

recently, after other disciplines had published scores of books relating to women's issues, has social work begun to address them. Women's movement activists can justifiably be angered by such belated interest. They also are likely to feel torn between the desire to support a potential ally and the fear that social work may reveal itself to be, at best, a mixed blessing to the cause of women's liberation.

The women's movement has benefitted from the education of women, including some social workers. It has had the expertise of women from many disciplines to draw upon in conceptualizing social change strategies. The movement has freed these women to rethink the teachings of their educators and to create new approaches. In turn, social workers, the authors included, are increasingly attaching themselves to these new modes of operating and are being meaningfully educated. However, although social workers as individuals have supported the women's movement, the profession itself continues to lag in effecting social change to enhance the position of women.

Changes for women in the form of new ideas and services are not coming from social workers but from women's groups and community groups, for example, transition houses, rape relief centers, women's health collectives and welfare rights organizations.<sup>11</sup>

An issue to which social work has only very recently begun to direct some attention, after it was first brought to public notice by people who were primarily activists in the women's movement, is that of the battered woman.<sup>12</sup> In fact it has been the women's movement which has pointed out the systemic violence and its various forms which are committed by men against women in general. The helping profession having perhaps the most direct contact with battered women has been one of the last to identify or respond to them as such, as is apparent in the dearth of any

references to family violence in the social work literature up to the latter half of the sixties.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the nature of social work as described above, it is not difficult to understand the reasons for this delay. Moreover, one worries as to what it implies about the likely nature of social work's future involvement with the issue. Walker found that battered women reported that most therapists avoid dealing, specifically, with battering incidents but instead concentrate on their psychological consequences. Most psychotherapists "have been trained to believe that victims often provoke their assault."<sup>14</sup>

Client self-determination as a sacred principle in social work practice, has in some respects extended to the process of problem identification: if the client does not identify her being battered as a problem, rarely does the social worker inquire about such abuse. The likelihood that battering will be identified as a profound problem in the client's life depends greatly on how the counsellor defines such behaviour. If battering is defined as merely a function of unique interpersonal conflicts between two intimates, its significance is diluted. If battering is defined as a function of the traditional and socially sanctioned power relationship between men and women and as a manifestation of male oppression of women, its significance is much more profound and one responds to it quite differently.

According to the traditional social work orientation toward any husband-wife difficulties, one intervenes with marital or family counselling; one mediates between the man and woman; one avoids blame or "taking sides"; one tries to help the man find other avenues to express himself; one does not act as an advocate for either party; one may coach the woman in ways of avoiding the "triggering" of her husband's violence. According to the feminist orientation, one helps the victim understand the social basis for her abuser's actions; one is primarily concerned

about the victim's present and future safety; and one acts as an advocate for her vis-a-vis the legal and human service system.

Individual social workers have found the women's movement to be an important revitalizing source; as a profession, we should draw upon this source in a more systematic fashion. The women's movement has already demonstrated to social work the utility of a number of new forms of "service delivery." It has also demonstrated the effectiveness of feminist consciousness-raising and peer counselling as therapeutic modalities. It has introduced assertiveness training as a legitimate and growth-producing experience. It has shown the effectiveness of developing supportive networks to promote social change. The women's movement has stressed

...the need to train therapists to be effective in helping women achieve their individual potential and the need for individual therapists to be aware of their own social conditioning and biases.<sup>15</sup>

The women's movement has done a great deal for social workers *as* social workers, by virtue of the effect it has had on the way we think about men and women. It has begun to free individuals of both sexes from the pressures of unrealistic expectations and uncomfortable roles. Women do not always need to be the care-givers; men do not always need to be the authority-setters. This trend may eventually result in a breaking down of the gender-based division of labour within social work and equalization of men and women throughout the profession. Unconstricted by sexist norms, social workers with their helping skills will be able to assist men and women to more fully actualize their human potentials.

### **Progressive Integration of the Feminist Social Worker**

With such an historical dichotomy between the profession and the women's movement, femin-

ist social workers should anticipate their failing to make connections between belief and practice. Integration and feminist values into the authors' personal and professional lives was not instantaneous but is an ongoing struggle.

Like many feminists, the authors were first introduced to the women's movement while attending university. Joan participated in the formation of a campus women's group; David, in community groups with agendas ranging from women's issues to anti-war activities and union support struggles. Unlike the experience that has come to be reported as commonplace (in which the central activists were young men and the Gestetner operators women), that to which David was exposed involved a number of women in leadership functions.

On an intellectual level, Joan readily agreed to the basic tenets of the women's movement while David did somewhat more slowly (quite likely a common difference between the process experienced by women and that experienced by men). In seeking to apply these feminist principles at home and at school, both experienced "blind spots." For instance, Joan provided support to two abuse victims who were personally close to her; she also participated in women's groups with abused wives; but she failed to notice the omission of any mention of women battering in an entire course on family counselling. On an emotional level, our pro-feminism has not been conflict free. For instance, David had difficulty relinquishing the model of the dominant male. His struggle was marked, as it continues to be, by friction with traditional men and feminist women: rejection by the former because of his support of feminist values and attacks by the latter for presuming to speak about what services are needed by women.

During those student years, David experienced a marked discontinuity between the talk of the "liberated" committee meetings and the reality of domestic life. For Joan, such tensions did not

arise with marriage but rather later with motherhood. During the beginning years of professional practice, Joan found herself advocating feminism in her personal life while suffering a curious myopia at work. Overwhelmed by the chaos and pain in her clients' lives and confined by the policies of her employing agency, she found it easiest to slip back into a liberalized but conventional, socially sanctioned attitude toward families. She was shaken out of this self-fragmentation as a result of time away from her career in order to bear and care for her own children. Parenthood led to a rethinking of family relationships in a world suddenly bounded by a baby's needs.

While not formally employed but working to maintain professional skills and involvement in social and political issues, Joan found herself involved simultaneously with the local social work association and women's centre. She became the liaison between the two groups in their joint efforts to establish a transition house for battered women. Acting in each group as interpreter of the other group's terms (the word "professional" was particularly subject to conflicting definitions), she was forced to solidify her own position. Later as a social work educator, she was further compelled to clarify her values and practice approaches in order to discuss the theories and issues with students. Involvement in women's organizations has also permitted Joan to expand into non-traditional (for a women) areas of work, e.g., organizational development, and to open up opportunities for her applying these new skills to professional agencies.

With the acquisition of social work as his professional identity, David felt that the professional lagged behind both the personal and the feminist spheres of his life. This gap has narrowed, however, to the extent to which David has been able to conduct social work around an issue of central concern to the women's movement (battered women) and to the extent to which he has been able to incorporate into his

work the knowledge, values and techniques developed by the women's movement.

The major tension that now exists for David is not between the personal and the feminist but between the professional and the feminist. On the one hand, there is tension between the traditional currents in the profession (those which set the primary goal of marital counselling as maintaining the marital relationship) and the principles advocated by David in his practice (e.g., separation and divorce have no negative connotations in themselves; they may be healthy or regressive steps). On the other hand, there is a tension between David's professional, pro-feminist activities and the fact that he is a male. At its more superficial level this tension is manifested in the somewhat esoteric debate about whether a male can be a feminist. At a more fundamental level this translates into an argument about whether even a "pro-feminist" male can ever be involved in a central dynamics of the women's movement, whether, ultimately, he is very relevant at all to the struggle. Wanting to be involved in a movement which he sees as having fundamental and pervasive importance to his personal life and the society in which he lives, David is constantly aware of the limitations imposed on him by his socialization and gender membership, but also he is aware of restrictions imposed by members of the women's movement.

For example, Joan has been asked to lead support groups for battered women—a task seen as inappropriate for David. The pro-feminist male is left casting about for some contribution he may make which would be appropriate to his gender. An obvious choice would be the organizing and leading of a group counselling project for battering husbands. The legitimate criticism of such activity made by many feminists, however, is that scarce resources should not be siphoned off to projects of questionable merit which are meant to help the abuser while thousands of victims still receive no services. The

reality is that many battered women return to or develop new relationships with men and male counsellors can play an important role in re-educating the male partner to adopt non-violent modes of interaction. While it is no more appropriate for men to assume leadership positions in the battered women's movement than for whites in the black freedom movement, unless separatism is advocated, the proposition that men must be integrally involved seems undeniable. We recognize that the strength of the battered women's movement is and will continue to be based upon the commitment, sensitivity and competence of women and that women should be together to form bonds, plan strategies and act in concert. Pro-feminist men nevertheless can serve effectively in a variety of functions: public education, research, community organization, advocacy and some forms of counselling to both men and women. Their participation must occur if the battered women's movement is to achieve its primary goal of effecting throughout the total society major changes in values and institutions.

### Conclusion

The authors expect that the women's movement will continue to be in the vanguard in identifying problem areas of concern, creating innovative, non-sexist intervention approaches, implementing social change mechanisms and campaigning for funding of new programs. As the women's movement establishes the credibility of these programs, social welfare agencies will assume responsibility for them. The question of whether it is desirable for the social work profession to become so involved seems ultimately irrelevant as the process is well underway and not reversible. As these feminist-initiated programs become "part of the establishment," funding becomes stabilized and a wider range of services available. There is, however, a high likelihood that (a) their structures will become more hierarchical, (b) the counselling process will be changed from that of helping a peer to that of

helping a subordinate and (c) the women in need will once again be placed in a position of assumed helplessness.<sup>17</sup> In order to counteract the transformation of feminist organizations into mainstream service agencies, feminists will have to maintain their involvement and ensure the continued implementation of feminists' principles in these settings.

A fundamental message of the women's movement has been that "the personal is political," that personal relationships are affected by the unequal distribution of power. As social workers, we must realize that the professional is also political. Rather than denying or evading this professional power, we should use it in a purposeful manner. This entails discussing our authority position with clients, either to decrease the inequality in the relationship (e.g., as in a counselling role) or to clarify it (e.g., when monitoring a family for violence against women and/or children). To develop a cooperative, egalitarian approach with the client, workers must share rather than impose their expertise, be empathically involved rather objectively neutral and apply a broad social analysis rather than an isolated problem - resolution focus.

Besides the adoption of these feminist counselling principles, women's organizations must ensure the maintenance of feminist administrative structures and processes. These would include wide-spread use of collective decision-making, minimization of status and rank distinctions and implementation of generalist job descriptions.

For individual social workers, the process of integration will continue to necessitate a removing of blinders and a connecting of the three spheres. The writing of this paper has been for its authors such a process of integration: on one level a connecting of the personal/professional/political for the individual social worker and on another level of the female and male experiences.

## NOTES

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17. See Lois Ahrens, "Battered Women's Refuges: Feminist Cooperatives vs. Social Service Institutions," *Radical America* 13 (May/June 1980): 41-49; and Patricia Morgan, "From Battered Wife to Program Client: The State's Shaping of Social Problems," *Kapitalstate* 9 (1981): 17 - 39.