

Chapter 6

Feminine and Feminist Ethics and Counselor Decision-Making

Until recently, ethical discourse in the United States was dominated by males and reflected an exclusively masculine perspective. With the rise of the women's liberation movement during the 1960s, feminism challenged Western ethical thinking that neglected or depreciated women (Friedan, 1963, 1981; Jaggar, 1992) and was applied to other misrepresented, oppressed, or minority populations as well (Brabeck & Ting, 2000).

The idea that morality is gender-based (i.e., there are different virtues for males and females) emerges in the ethical thinking of many philosophers, and, in particular, is central to the philosophy of Rousseau. In *Emile* (1763/1979), Rousseau contended that what are virtues for women are faults for men. He thought that women could only be virtuous by becoming wives and mothers, and, consequently, dependent and subordinate in marriage. In Rousseau's view, women who pursued goals outside of the family were less desirable. In what is considered the first great feminist treatise, Wollstonecraft (1792/1999) attacked Rousseau's position and argued that virtue should mean the same thing for men and women. Since that time, there have been passionate debates about the idea of a "female ethic" and whether there are specifically female virtues. The arguments have questioned "essentialist" beliefs about the nature of males and females. For example, Daly (1978/1990) took the radical view that violence and destruction in the world are the consequences of activities dominated by men (war, politics, economics). According to Daly, this havoc is due to the unchanging nature of masculinity and

the male psyche, whereas females are “naturally” less aggressive and more nurturing. Most feminist thinking rejects an essentialist position, instead viewing the “nature” of males and females as changeable and socially constructed (Grimshaw, 1993).

MAJOR CONCEPTS

Feminism is not a singular ideology and there are two major streams of “woman-centered” approaches to ethics: *feminine* and *feminist*. Despite the similarity of those two terms, they represent different theoretical approaches. “*Feminine*” refers to a search for women’s unique voice and advocates for an ethic of care. “*Feminist*” refers to an argument against male domination and advocates for equal rights. Both approaches seek to validate women’s moral experiences, to understand women’s oppression, and to eliminate gender inequality.

Feminine ethics addresses itself to aspects of traditional Western ethics that devalue female moral experiences, in particular, the contractual moral theories and justice ethics of Kant. Traditional ethics deal with contractual relations as a model for human relations: A relationship is moral to the extent that it serves the separate interests of autonomous individuals—as in a business contract. The current controversy centers on two fundamental aspects of human relationships, care and justice, and is similar to the virtues versus principles debate, which was considered in Chapter 2. An ethic of care concerns itself with questions of attachment to others, in contrast to an ethic of justice, which is concerned with questions of equality with others.

A feminist approach to ethics asks questions about power, that is, domination and subordination, before it considers questions of care and justice, or maternal and paternal thinking. The feminist position, more than the feminine approach, is political in that feminist ethicists are committed to eliminating the subordination of women and any other oppressed persons. Because feminists are interested in patterns of oppression, their concerns extend to other patterns of domination and subordination, such as racism and classism. The focus on women and oppression is what makes an ethic feminist, as opposed to feminine. The aim of feminist ethics is to create a gender-equal ethic that is based on nonsexist moral principles.

The feminine position is exemplified in the work of Carol Gilligan (1982). She criticized moral reasoning based on a justice perspective as an inherently biased male view. She argued that traditional Western ethical theories ignore or denigrate the virtues that are culturally associated with women. In opposition to Kohlberg’s (1984) contention that moral behavior emanates from the construct of justice, Gilligan suggested that moral behavior focuses more on responsibilities within a

context, often within the context of special relationships. In particular, Gilligan criticized the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) as being centered in a Western ethical tradition that uses a language of justice, emphasizing rights and rules. Kohlberg's studies of moral reasoning favored males whom he thought were better able to discern moral principles. Gilligan insists that this Kantian definition of ethics, which emphasizes justice and rationality in moral judgments, obscures a female moral language of care, which emphasizes relationships and responsibilities. Rather than seeing women as morally inferior to men, Gilligan sought to reframe the issue as a moral difference.

Care is the key concept from the feminine perspective. Care reasoning can be differentiated from justice reasoning; the former emphasizes relational understanding (Gilligan, 2004; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988) whereas the latter emphasizes logic. *Care is a compassionate determination of how to meet a person's needs* whereas *justice is an objective weighing of principles to determine moral rights and responsibilities* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Care and justice are distinct ethical approaches: (1) care takes a contextual approach whereas justice takes an abstract approach; (2) care assumes human connectedness whereas justice assumes autonomy; (3) care focuses on the maintenance of relationships whereas justice focuses on equality; (4) care is most applicable in the private domain whereas justice is most applicable in the public sphere; (5) care stresses the role of emotions in *good* character whereas justice stresses the role of reason in performing *right* actions; and (6) care is female whereas justice is male (Clement, 1996; Tong, 1998). Debates have ensued concerning an ethic of care versus an ethic of justice: Do men and women actually have different moral voices? Do the affective (care) and rational (justice) perspectives conflict, or are both needed for moral and ethical conduct? Are the virtues of care (benevolence) and justice (fairness) incompatible so that a single individual could not possess both? There is the view that women do not act on principle but are influenced by intuition and personal considerations. Grimshaw (1993) suggested that it might not be the case that women and men reason differently about moral issues, but that they have different ethical priorities: What is regarded as an important moral principle by women (maintaining relationships) is seen as a failure of principle by men.

Like Gilligan's, Noddings's (2003) relational ethics approach is feminine, but unlike Gilligan, Noddings claims that an ethic of care is not only different but better than an ethic of justice. She is critical of traditional ethics because it undervalues caring, as if it is easy to care for people. For Noddings, ethics are not about rules to guide behavior. Rather, ethics are rooted in particular relationships, such as that of mother and child, and involve special interactions between a caretaker and the one receiving the care. From this relational perspective, the practices

associated with parenting, as well as our memories of receiving care, are the expressions of moral life.

Accordingly, a gender-equal ethics should not use the “contract” model prevalent in men’s experience because most relationships are between persons of unequal status (Baier, 1986, 1994). Contracts are only appropriate for those who have equal power and are capable of voluntary agreements. They are not appropriate in situations where one party is vulnerable because of limited power due to gender, sickness, or age. Women’s life experiences often involve caring for those who are dependent (children, aging parents) and both Noddings and Baier agree that ethics should be built on those everyday life experiences. People do not interact as business people negotiating a deal but as two individuals with different strengths and weaknesses.

The psychoanalytic perspective of Chadrow (1978) supports the view that women may be more disposed than men to a care perspective and that this caring sentiment originates in the mother-child relationship. Girls can identify with the mother and maintain that identification throughout life. However, boys identify with their fathers and detach themselves from the primary caring relationship. The different male and female styles of moral reasoning come from these two gender-specific developmental trajectories (Gilligan, 2004; Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988).

Maternal ethics is a feminine point of view that is concerned with the preservation, growth, and acceptability of one’s children. According to Held (1987), mothers know that relationships are about cooperation, community, and serving others’ needs. Held suggests that because women spend so much time mothering, they should develop theories that fit relationships in the private rather than the public domain.

Care ethics are consonant with a virtue ethics point of view—a virtuous person is caring (Halwani, 2003; Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996; Solomon, 1993). Because an ethic of care is based on contextual decision-making, often in the context of special relationships, its application is consistent with the outlook in some multicultural communities where the concept of community and relatedness is emphasized over autonomy and individual rights (Vasquez, 1996).

Both nonfeminist and feminist writers have attacked the position of an ethics of care. Nonfeminist critics point out that both care (benevolence) and justice are ethical obligations derived from a traditional Western moral tradition (Scher, 1987). Ross (1989) argued that a feminine approach can reinforce a sexist division of roles where women are relegated to the private, nurturing, domestic sphere, and men to the impersonal, public, and power realms. Veatch (1998) criticized the ethic of care as having an incoherent definition. Moreover, not all women are mothers, and there are questions as to whether one human relationship, that of mother and child, can serve as a paradigm for all human relationships (Brennan, 1999).

Feminists caution that it may be ethically unwise to link women with care because it can promote the view that women should care no matter what the cost to themselves. Tong (1998) suggested that men may be all too willing to concede that women are more caring than men, thus leaving it to women to foster personal relationships and to deal with emotional issues. Mill (1970) pointed out that praising women for their virtue measured a woman's worth based on the extent of her willingness to sacrifice for others. Caretaking is more of what society demands of women rather than something women created. According to Mullett (1988), a woman cannot truly care for another if she is economically, socially, or psychologically forced to do so. An ethic of care may only serve to reinforce traditional stereotypic roles for women. Also, a feminine explanation of female ambivalence about attachment and autonomy ignores the political forces that have confined women to caretaking roles (Spohn, 1992).

Moreover, there is empirical research (Blasi, 1980; Rest, 1986; Stewart & Sprinthall, 1994) to indicate that women actually use a justice perspective in ethical thinking, which undermines the feminine argument that care is more important than justice in women's ethical decision-making.

There are several schools of feminist ethics: existential, postmodern, multicultural, and lesbian, among others (Tong, 2003). Proponents of these various schools of thought maintain that the destruction of all systems, institutions, and practices that support the power differentials between women and men is a necessary prerequisite for the creation of gender equality.

Oppression is the key concept from the feminist perspective. In *The Second Sex* (1953), existentialist feminist Simone de Beauvoir wrote that, from the beginning, man named himself the Self and woman the Other. If the Other is a threat to the Self, then woman is a threat to man, and if men wish to remain free, they must not only economically, politically, and sexually subordinate women to themselves, they must also convince women that they deserve no better treatment. Thus, if women are to become true Selves, they must recognize themselves as free and responsible moral agents who possess the capacity to perform in the public as well as the private world. Socialist feminist thinking affirms that women must be men's economic as well as educational and political equals before they can be as powerful as men.

Postmodernism is a complicated idea that arose in the 1980s. In contrast to *modern* thought, which equates knowledge with science, *postmodern* thought is concerned with the social construction of knowledge, which is always situational, conditional, and temporary, and which denies universal truths (Klages, 2003). Postmodernism, with its acknowledgement and acceptance of multiple meanings, attracts feminists who see that all attempts to provide a single explanation for

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women's oppression will fail and who see it as yet another instance of "male thinking" in seeking one truth about reality. Because there is no one entity, "women," upon whom a label can be fixed, it is important to reveal the differences and resist the patriarchal tendency to rigid thought and "truths" (Tong, 2003).

Historically, feminism has been influenced by white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-class women. Minority women criticize feminism for failing to incorporate the experiences of more diverse groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, lesbians, and poor or working-class women (Espin & Gawelek, 1992). Multicultural feminists believe that feminist thought is inattentive to issues of race and ethnicity. Because Western culture values "white" ideals of beauty, for example, African American women are doubly oppressed—subject both to gender and racial discrimination. Feminists also address the life experiences of disabled women (Wendell, 1996), challenging the accounts of universal female bodily experiences. In response to these criticisms, feminism has broadened its scope.

Many cultures around the world are patriarchal, and sex discrimination often has cultural roots. Although multiculturalism includes worthy goals of tolerance, flexibility, and respect for diversity, protecting the rights of minority groups may also serve to reinforce practices that facilitate the control of men over women while women remain hidden in the domestic or private sphere. Multiculturalism has raised questions about the danger of moral relativism for feminist ethics (Brennan, 1999; Jaggar, 1991). Nussbaum and Glover (1995) stated the dilemma thus:

To say that a practice endorsed by tradition is bad is to risk erring by imposing one's own way on others who surely have their own idea of what is right and good. To say that a practice is all right wherever local tradition endorses it as right is to risk erring by withholding critical judgment where real evil and oppression are surely present. (p. 1)

Okin's (1997) work is a reminder of the problem of moral relativism and how the multicultural movement may oppress women. For example, she cites cases where a successful "cultural defense" (p. 6) resulted in reduced charges for kidnap and rape by Hmong men who claim their actions were part of the cultural practice of *zij poj niam* or "marriage by capture." Those types of cultural defenses do not afford women equal protection under the law.

Lesbian ethicists (Hoagland, 1989) believe that feminine and maternal approaches reinforce female oppression. They also go beyond feminists, who affirm some relationships with men, by taking a radical position in claiming that what is good for lesbians is not necessarily good for heterosexual women or men. Heterosexuality is seen as patriarchy. Lesbian ethics is not just a sexual

orientation; it is a refusal to be defined either sexually or morally by men. Instead of a “mother” ethic, lesbian ethicists prefer a “daughter” ethic because all women are daughters but not all women are mothers. The daughter ethic does not presume that all women should care for children or be trapped by caring duties as an obligation from which there is no escape.

Feminists have been particularly concerned about issues of reproductive technology, such as in vitro fertilization. Mullett (1988) points out that bioethicists use utilitarian arguments stressing the good of reproductive technology in offering infertile couples an opportunity to be biological parents. However, this technology may be contributing to women’s continuing oppression because it suggests that now that women can, they *should* fulfill their destiny as biological mothers. Even though feminists are concerned about reproductive technology and want to raise the consciousness of women about these issues, they are not opposed to the development of technology because those technological advances also offer women more choices in life.

Nonfeminist critics complained that feminist approaches are female-biased, and that ethics cannot proceed from a specific standpoint (Rawls, 2001). Feminists suggest that the traditional ethical principles, rules, and norms actually serve to support patterns of domination and subordination. Yet, feminists have not articulated a clear and unified position on key moral issues of interest to the widest possible range of women.

Baier (1985, 1986, 1994) responded to the call for a clearer ethical theory that incorporates the moral perspectives of both men and women. Central to her concept is the idea of *trust* as the *bond in human relationships*. As Baier (1985) explained, trust rather than control is embedded in the caring relationships. *Trust is defined as the “reliance on others’ competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm, things one cares about which are entrusted to their care”* (p. 59). This raises the issue of symmetric and asymmetric relationships. For example, reason-guided justice perspectives emphasize symmetric relationships among equals, who determine the rules and enforce sanctions on those who break them. However, Baier noted that most trust relationships are asymmetrical, with unequal responsibilities borne by each party.

This notion of a trust ethic is important in counseling, which is inherently an asymmetric relationship, because the counselor is in a position to affect the well-being of the client. There is even greater asymmetry in counseling situations that involve minority clients or those with physical or psychological disabilities, who do not experience equal status in society at large (Nicki, 2002). Counselors need to acknowledge the vulnerability of clients and the potential for abuse of power in relationships.

Feminist counseling grew out of dissatisfaction with male-centered theories, deficits in knowledge about female psychology, sex-role stereotyping, and general neglect of women's mental health concerns (Worrell & Remer, 1992). Radov, Masnick, and Hauser (1977) noted that behaviors considered indicative of psychopathology in women were often those that did not fit with the feminine stereotype. Martin (2001) also suggested that the medicalization of women's psychological distress, by medicating socially induced depression, for example, serves to further oppression and ignore the social injustice. Cummings (2000) noted that many of the problems that women bring to counseling are the result of their limited power in society (e.g., abuse, harassment) and their internalization of societal oppression (e.g., lookism, eating disorders).

ADDITIONAL READINGS: FEMININE AND FEMINIST ETHICS

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