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Abstract: This article delves into a relatively neglected aspect of feminist, or anti-oppressive practice, namely that of practitioners' experiences of this work, and specifically, their personal and professional identifications with feminism. It explores the question: is feminism, in the context of feminist practice, something one does, a professional '-persona-' adopted at particular times and for particular purposes at work, or something one is, transcending-"or linking-"the personal and professional realms? Drawing upon a qualitative, exploratory study, this article investigates understandings of, and identifications with, feminism within the context of an area of practice, namely domestic violence intervention, which is explicitly feminist. It focuses on the relationship of the research participants, practitioners in this field, to feminism in terms of their identification with feminist principles. Paying attention to these issues has implications for feminist and other anti-oppressive ways of working, particularly where these are adopted by organisations as the required model of practice. The broader question, that of whether one needs to-"or -'should' - "be (or identify as) feminist in order to engage in feminist practice, while beyond the scope of the current study, is critical, both for feminist theorising in general and in relation to specific concerns such as professional education, development, and supervision.

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Feminist practice: Who I *am* or what I *do*?

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Abstract:

This article explores a relatively neglected aspect of feminist practice, that of practitioners' personal and professional identification/s with feminism. In short, it explores whether feminism, in the context of feminist practice, is something one *does*, a professional 'persona' adopted at particular times and for particular purposes 'at work', or something one *is*, transcending – or linking – the personal and professional realms. Specifically the article draws upon a qualitative study focusing on the relationship of research participants, practitioners in this field, to feminism in relation to their identification with feminist principles. It is argued that paying attention to these issues has implications for feminist theorising in general as well as for feminist and other anti-oppressive ways of working, particularly where these are adopted by organisations as the required model of practice, and specific concerns such as professional education, development and supervision.

Key words: feminist social work practice
feminism
social work education

Feminist practice: Who I *am* or what I *do*?

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This article delves into a relatively neglected aspect of feminist, or anti-oppressive (Dominelli, 2002), practice, that of practitioners' experiences of this work, specifically, their personal and professional identification/s with feminism. In short, it explores the question: is feminism, in the context of feminist practice, something one *does*, a professional 'persona' adopted at particular times and for particular purposes at work, or something one *is*, transcending – or linking – the personal and professional realms? Drawing upon a qualitative, exploratory study this article investigates understandings of, and identifications with, feminism within the context of an area of practice, namely domestic violence intervention, that is explicitly feminist. Specifically it focuses on the relationship of the research participants, practitioners in this field, to feminism in terms of their identification with feminist principles. Paying attention to these issues has implications for feminist and other anti-oppressive ways of working, particularly where these are adopted by organisations as the required model of practice. The broader question, that of whether one needs to – or 'should' - be (or identify as) feminist in order to engage in feminist practice, whilst beyond the scope of the current study, is critical, both for feminist theorising in general and in relation to specific concerns such as professional education and development, supervision, and so on.

Feminist Practice

Feminism is a complex concept representing variously a movement, a standpoint, a theoretical perspective, an activist stance, and an identity. By focusing on gender as socially and culturally constructed - rather than as the 'natural order of things' - feminism's

problematisation of gender has provided a way to critique gender roles and masculinity in particular (Frey & Bellotti, 1995, p. 142). As such, feminism is widely recognised as a critical influence in various aspects of social science research, theory, policy and practice. Feminism is also acknowledged as having broader impacts and implications within and beyond the realms of social policy and institutional change. In particular, feminism has been pivotal to processes of social reform in Australian society (Phillips, 2006, p. 203).

In the social work context, feminist approaches encourage 'the assumption of a gender-sensitive stance' in work with clients (Dominelli, 2002, p. 40). By taking 'women's well-being as the starting point, though not necessarily the end of its analyses', such perspectives prioritise 'egalitarian social relations' as the fundamental goal of practice (p. 17). Further, as described by Rummery (1996, p. 158), feminist practice encompasses more than just a client-focus, extending 'into all areas of work, examining and analysing the structures in which one is working and in the dynamics between staff members', and, importantly, seeking to deconstruct the notion of the 'expert worker'. Other key characteristics of feminist approaches include an awareness of gendered power relations, the 'interdependent nature of the public and private domains' (Dominelli, 2002, p. 22), and the ways in which the distribution of power impacts on social relations. Profound disagreement exists amongst feminists regarding 'how men fit into their analyses [...], strategies for change and visions for the future' (Bryson, 1999, p. 195) and hence, in the current context, men's ability to engage in feminist practice. Schacht (2001, p. 207), for example, points out that while men might recognise the inequalities experienced by women, very few are 'willing to acknowledge that they are overprivileged'. Herein lies the dilemma; that men, no matter how well-intentioned, 'can be oblivious to their own power in relation to women' (Goldrick-Jones, 2002, p. 76). As discussed in this article these concerns are critical but not insurmountable; whilst men 'cannot individually or as a group

“escape” [their] material position in the social structure’ (Pease, 2000, p. 140), the current study suggests grounds for optimism in relation to some men’s willingness to challenge their ‘ideological and discursive position’ (p. 140).

Feminism, pro-feminism and domestic violence intervention

The relevance of feminist thinking to analysing men’s use of violence is well documented (see, for example, Connell, 1996, 2000; Flood, 2004, 2005). Recognition of the cultural association between violence and dominant versions of masculinity, a central feminist insight, provides a critical context for understanding men’s violence against women. As argued by Kaufman (2001, p. 4), because violence against women originates in systematic gender inequalities, addressing this requires attention to the ‘cultural and social permission for acts of violence’ through challenges to the structures of masculine power and privilege. In this respect, feminism is positioned to make a crucial contribution to understanding men’s use of violence and is relevant to both men and women who have an interest in challenging the gendered status quo.

‘Pro-feminism’, rather than feminism, is the term more commonly used in the Australian policy context and is the predominant approach informing domestic violence intervention (Grace 1996; Bagshaw et al. 2000; Laing 2002), providing the basis for a number of the more established domestic violence perpetrator programs in Australia (see, for example, Relationships Australia 2007; The Salvation Army 2010). Internationally pro-feminist approaches have also been widely endorsed (see, for example, Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh & Lewis, 2000). Interestingly however pro-feminism has been most strongly associated with men and with certain strands of men’s politics, reflecting a tendency to distinguish between *women’s* feminism and *men’s* pro-feminism. Thus, in this context, as

emphasised by Pease (2001), pro-feminism represents a position for men outside of, yet closely aligned with, feminism.

The study on which this article is based concerns a South Australian model of domestic violence intervention, namely the *Stopping Violence (SV)* program for 'men who wish to stop violent and abusive behaviour towards their women partners and family' (NMCHS, 1997). The philosophical underpinnings of this program and practice model are explicitly pro-feminist, as evident in this statement in the program manual:

Steps taken to address the issue of domestic violence must address the issue of the power imbalance between genders and the practices which perpetuate this. The framework of this model highlights the politics of abuse and therefore acknowledges that intervention in domestic violence is political in nature. Without such a fundamental change in relationships between men and women the potential for violence remains. (NMCHS, 1997, p. 10)

The aim of the study was to explore the beliefs, attitudes and professional practice of practitioners engaged in work with men who are violent towards women. Study participants were accredited SV program facilitators. Accreditation for established practitioners includes attendance at intensive training workshops, group observation, co-working/co-leading 'at least two groups with an experienced leader', and a commitment to participation in ongoing individual and group supervision (NMCHS, 1997, p. 63).

As an exploratory study, several points of interest emerged. The current article focuses on just one of these, being concerned with an exploration of the relationships between feminist identity and feminist practice, particularly in relation to men's understandings of feminism and the implications and possibilities for men's engagement with feminist

practice. Whilst the study cannot claim to be representative, nor can the findings necessarily be generalised to practitioners working in other feminist or domestic violence services, it highlights the complexities associated with the 'translation' of feminist and other critical theories in the practice setting.

Method

The sample for this study consisted of 10 practitioners involved in domestic violence work and employed in a range of organisations including government (the Department for Correctional Services) and non-government sectors (such as community health and related agencies). All, with the exception of one participant who held relevant vocational certificates, were qualified social workers. Participants were sought on the basis of their past or current involvement in the SV group program; hence the relatively small sample size is indicative of the specialised nature of this area of practice. Consisting of both male and female participants, the sample reflects the 'preferred position' that groups are co-facilitated by 'male and female leaders' on the basis that this enables gender 'accountability' and 'offers the opportunity to demonstrate ways of relating between genders that are based on equity and respect' (NMCHS, 1997, p. 57). Interestingly the final sample had more male (6) than female (4) participants and it is possible that this links with a wider assumption that dealing with violence is 'men's work' (see, for example, Christie, 2006).

Snowball sampling, a method of non-random sampling in which 'the sample is compiled as the research progresses' (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2006, p. 205), was used to identify and solicit participants for the study. As noted by Yegidis and Weinbach (2006, p. 203, 205) snowball sampling is often used in exploratory studies in which the aim is to learn more about the 'nature and impact' of an issue from the perspective of those who have an 'in-

depth understanding' of it. Potential participants, initially identified through the author's own connections within the Department for Correctional Services in South Australia, were contacted and asked to suggest other possible contributors to the research. In this way, use was made of professional networks to gain access to 'information-rich' (Patton, 1990) participants. The age range of participants, all Anglo-Australian, was broad, from 25 to 46-plus years of age, as was the employment experience represented within the sample, ranging from 2 years to over 15 years.

Data was collected using open-ended questions, in the context of semi-structured interviews, in order to obtain qualitative data. Participants were provided with an explanatory statement outlining the aims and process of the project including an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were conducted with the approval of the Department for Correctional Services, via their Research Management Committee. Questions focused on practitioners' experience of the work with particular reference to feminism and feminist identity. Recognising the distinction between 'feminism' and 'pro-feminism', as discussed in the previous section, either or both terms were used in interviews in accordance with each participant's stated preference. In the interests of comprehensibility however, the term 'feminism' will be used throughout this paper. Participants' names and any identifying information have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

Each interview was audio-taped. Transcribed interview data was coded inductively, using NVIVO computer software, with a focus on identifying emergent 'analytical categories' (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000, p. 114). Key themes and patterns were thus identified, consistent with a grounded theory approach to qualitative research. Grounded theory, as the name suggests, involves a process of building theory 'from the ground up'. Because its

aim is to generate, rather than test, hypotheses, sampling, data collection and data analysis 'occur simultaneously rather than in a preestablished sequence' (Yegidis & Weinbach, 2006, p. 173), thus enabling the 'progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning from the data' (Willig, 2001, p. 33).

Findings

Participants in the study occupied a diverse range of positions in relation to feminism as both a political/theoretical perspective and an identity. Whilst this is hardly surprising in light of the contested relationship between women, men and feminism in general, it takes on particular significance here due to the foregrounding of feminism in the stated philosophical and practice principles guiding the work. This emerged as an especially interesting aspect of the research. While discrepancies between espoused and actual practice have been observed elsewhere (see Lancaster & Lumb, 1999), in this context it might be expected that individual practitioners would articulate a more unified position. Each participant, however, expressed, firstly, a different understanding of feminism - as explored in the following section; and, secondly, a distinct position in relation to the identity 'feminist' in their work and personal lives.

Understanding feminism: 'different meanings for different people'

As noted by Russell and Carey (2003) and others, feminism means very different things to different people. This was particularly apparent in the participants' responses to the open question: 'what is your understanding of feminism?'. Interestingly it was a question that, relatively consistently, generated considerable uncertainty, as evident in the tentative and cautious nature of the responses provided. Robert, for example, says: 'I haven't studied feminism, so um, I wouldn't be able to, you know, espouse some of the theories'. The respondents seemed anxious to position themselves as non-expert, or as 'lay-knowers', in

relation to the field of feminist knowledge. This is in contrast to the generally confident and more definitive explanations regarding topics such as domestic violence and working with men, in relation to which they were more likely to position themselves as professional 'knowers'. Given the specifically feminist theoretical and practice context for this work, this is a significant finding.

The diversity of feminism(s), and the meanings, perspectives and issues that are encompassed by this term, was a theme reiterated throughout the interviews; as expressed by Joan, feminism 'has different meanings for different people'. Participants' perspectives of feminism ranged from the more straightforward or traditional to the more developed and complex. This was so for both the female and male participants. Representing the former, Joan, for example, offers a conventional view of women and men as intrinsically different, equating feminism with women and women's experience, when she says 'I think that that men and women are different and that their experiences are different'. Simon and Robert's responses, similarly, reflected a narrower understanding of feminism, focusing more specifically on its associations with women, women's issues and equality, that is, as essentially women's, not men's, business:

[...] my belief is that it's that women want equality and should be treated equally and should have the same rights that a man has. (Simon)

What it means to me, at a very basic level, it's a movement by women to reach, to gain equal footage with men in society, as equals, you know, to address the inequality, the injustice etc, the imbalance in power. (Robert)

Most of the participants included issues of power and control in their explanations of feminism - not surprisingly, given the emphasis on power in prevailing domestic violence

discourse. Mary and Joan, for example, focused on the structural and institutional forms of gendered power:

I guess, for me, feminist theory - probably more than any other theory - unpacks issues around power and control. (Mary)

In terms of my practice, I think it's been, you know, having an understanding about the make-up of society and the systems in society ... [W]hen we look at the way that things have been made or the way the systems are made up, that it is dominated by men and it has been for a long time. .. [T]here's been shifts towards equality for women and those sorts of things but we've still got, you know, laws and policies and all that sort of thing that are made by men. [So it's] working from that framework, looking at the power imbalances, the gender imbalances. (Joan)

Other participants presented an expansive and more nuanced conceptualisation, such as might be associated with a poststructural approach to feminist theorising. Whilst acknowledging the origins of feminism in the women's movement and women's activism, here Mary draws attention to the broader utility and applications of feminism as a way of critically analysing the social world, rather than it being simply about women and women's issues:

Now [it's] obviously driven by women and because of women's experiences, however I actually think feminist theory and therefore feminism can be or should be a way of viewing the world, so it's not just about you know the relationship between men and women in society, but could be used to unpack issues of racism, and ageism, and a whole range of different power and control issues. (Mary)

Karen also stresses what she sees as feminism's crucial role in creating space for alternative views; opening up, rather than shutting down, complexities and points of difference:

[W]hen I think of the word 'feminist' and the feminist view and perspective, I always think of ... a view that's just not heard, [...] of a different approach to the ways of working ... and encompassing just a variety of ways of thinking. Whereas I think the male, stereotypical male, perspective just seems to be so straightforward and so narrow-minded and so clear, that this is black and white. So when I think of a feminist view, it's *not* black and white, [...] There are so many different other perspectives. (Karen)

Similarly David sees feminism as a *positioning*; a perspective or a way of seeing and understanding that encompasses a broader range of issues and concerns:

I guess for me it's a way of understanding, it's a whole lot of ideas about, you know, things like entitlement, expectations, and a way of explaining a lot of things that have happened in the world. It's a way of explaining violence [as well as] a whole lot of other inequalities.

Importantly, David makes it clear that, in his view, feminism is not necessarily, or exclusively, 'women's business'. He does not distance himself from feminism: instead he refers to it as a way of understanding 'things that have happened in the world', that is, not just in 'women's world'. In contrast, Thomas has difficulty defining feminism and expresses a sense of discomfort, explaining that:

Its [feminism] an unfortunate term really because it got rather tarred with the old days of Germaine Greer and bra burning. [...] Its got a whole lot of connotations and most of them, probably, negative connotations really, which is unfortunate.

(Thomas)

The participants' accounts, as demonstrated here, thus represent a range of perspectives and levels of understanding, confirming Lancaster and Lumb's (1999, p. 119) observation that use of feminist theory may, in practice, be 'only partial' and that 'practitioners who say they are espousing feminism [may not be] in touch with the subtleties of feminist analysis'.

Identity

Because the personal and professional realms are interconnected, as suggested by Whipple (1996), feminist consciousness is a crucial step towards the development of one's professional identity as a feminist practitioner. Whipple (2006, p. 386) identifies four stages in this progression, of which 'having a personal sense of identity as a feminist' is the starting point, moving through to the 'final stage' involving the 'consolidation of a personal and professional identity'. Themes in relation to participants' personal and professional relationship to feminism, in terms of their *identity* as feminist, are explored in the following section.

'Who I am, wherever I am'

The participants' complex relationships with feminism, particularly in terms of its personal and professional relevance, emerged as a clear theme throughout the research interviews. Karen is the clearest and most unequivocal in her feminist identification, saying that being a feminist is 'certainly who I am, wherever I am'. Carol, whilst relatively clear in her identification as a feminist, is more equivocal in this regard. For example, when asked whether she would describe herself as feminist Carol replies 'I guess so, I don't know, I'm

not into labels like that'; later adding that, 'it's part of my life, yeah, I don't know how to describe it specifically but, yes, it's the approach I have'. She strongly equates feminism with independence, noting that she is 'sometimes known as being a bit too independent, a bit too stroppy', not fitting with 'some of the norms of 'normal' middle-aged women'. Thus both Carol and Karen are clear that feminism is integral to 'who they are', albeit in different ways, this transcending the personal and the professional. Ron also talks about the impossibility of containing this to the workplace, saying:

It's something that I'm conscious of and I certainly aim to [embody] all the time. I believe that they're kind of my personal values and not just the stuff I have at work. ... [A]nd away from work, I guess, yes, it becomes a framework to look at the world, so in that sense its there all the time.

Struggling with 'the to be a feminist stuff'

Joan's account of feminism points to a much more complex and contested relationship:

I do, I do see that, like I work within a feminist framework, from a feminist perspective, but I think that .. I'm probably not somebody who would say yes I'm a feminist – that's probably not something I would say.

While Joan is clear that she works 'within a feminist framework' she rejects a feminist identity, saying that she 'struggle[s] with the "to be a feminist" stuff'. In seeking to explain this, she suggests that it is partly, 'because of how it [feminism] is received'; pointing to the 'negative images' that people have of feminism; and partly, 'maybe because I don't know enough it'. Like Joan, Thomas and Simon's accounts of their relationship with feminism are characterised by ambivalence and a degree of uncertainty, indicative of a distancing from a feminist identity position. Consider, for example, the responses of Thomas and

Simon to the specific question of whether they would describe themselves as feminist, either personally or professionally:

I'm a bit of everything; bit of a mongrel in all of the sorts of influences that come to bear and so I don't think I would take any one particular label and stick [with] it. [...] I don't like labels, I just do it! (Thomas)

I'm not sure ah, I've tried to look at it from a man's point of view, but [...] I've got to put myself in the [position of the] person that I can't hear, their story and that's the victim, .. so I'm not sure what point of view that is, to be honest with you. (Simon)

Robert's response to this question is more detailed, reflecting the difficult and complex issues associated with the negotiation of an evolving gender identity, particularly in relation to the challenges to hegemonic masculinity that a feminist subjectivity represents. Although Robert is initially quick to deny the identity of feminist, in exploring this further he explains that:

the reaction is to do with not wanting to be seen as *not* masculine actually. [...] I'm constantly challenging what it means to be a male. I think as men we have to work out what it means to be a male in today's society ... I think that we're going through a transition in discovery of new identity that we need to make, because while we don't, until we discover a new sense of our own identity - declaring ourselves as male and with a real healthy perspective on that - until we can do that as men, then, our insecurities are going to rise to the fore and cause some reaction, undermine a lot of that work and you've just heard a bit of that defensiveness in me. Like it's to do with, um, I don't want to be alienated from males either ...

Whilst emphasising that he doesn't 'want to be alienated from men [by being] labelled as a feminist, pro-feminist or whatever', Robert nonetheless acknowledges his readiness to identify, or rather the inability to avoid being identified by others, as a feminist practitioner in the work context:

Look I've no doubt that I come across as a pro-feminist in a domestic violence group, I would expect that ... [H]ow could you not read my challenges to their thinking any other way?

Despite the aspects of ambivalence or discomfort evident in Robert's responses, he identifies other aspects of gender awareness with absolute clarity, especially those associated with gendered power issues. For example he explains that he is:

incredibly sensitive to issues to do with power and control. I've got to guard against not being over sensitive in that area. I read it all the time, I smell it. I, I hear it in language, you know, like, just manipulation, manoeuvring and all that .. [...] [It might be] just a phrase they've used or something, that is actually labelling and derogative towards women, for example, but it could be other more broad power issues.

Further it is clear that Robert's awareness and commitment to gender inequality extends beyond the workplace, constituting a personal as well as professional stance:

you can't 'turn it off' [when you leave work], no. As I said, with your neighbours [for example], it's a matter of often biting your tongue and deciding do I say something or when do I say something? Do I pose a question? Do I get them to think about what they've just said?

Ron, though clearer about his identity as feminist, emphasises the inherent difficulties for a man to engage in and maintain a gender critique in relation to challenging masculinity in particular:

I can say that that I don't have problem with violence and abuse in my relationship but I'd be kidding myself and everyone else if I thought that these aren't issues for me, that I've not been socialised the same as any other man in this place, you know. And I've tripped myself up sometimes, with thinking, you know, why am I thinking that? You know, where did that come from? That sort of stuff.

Lee also recognises these dilemmas as inevitable given the pervasiveness of gender; that 'no matter where you do the work you're doing that in a culture that is gendered'. Two issues, relating to the importance of 'commitment' and the complexity of identity, emerge in Lee's account. The notion of commitment, 'out of a sense of some relationship [to] or ideas about professionalism, or some accountability', that is with regard to personal responsibility and critical reflection, is especially significant for Lee:

I suppose that goes back to your commitment doesn't it, about where your commitment is going to be. [...] I mean, that state of tension around being willing to not get it right but being willing to acknowledge that it needs a commitment to attempt to get it right.

Lee articulates an awareness of the multiplicity and fluidity of identity in relation to his own performance of masculinity in particular, distinguishing between the 'identity I hope to perform and how I hope to have my identity described by others, in *their experience* of it' (my emphasis). He explains:

[W]hat this work has helped me understand is the sense that my masculinity will be how it is experienced and the description of how it's experienced needs to have as much space in my thinking as how I choose to describe it. [...]

Here Lee clearly acknowledges the dilemmas associated with men's involvement in feminist practice. As discussed further in the following section, given the embeddedness of gender and ordinariness of male privilege in everyday life, worthy intentions, whether guided by sound philosophical principles or individual integrity, are not enough. Referring specifically to the effects of dominant masculinity on definitions of social reality, Lee draws attention to the ways in which culturally dominant meanings associated with gender shape our ways of thinking, our ways of seeing the world and our ways of seeing ourselves, and in particular, the impossibility of separating one's identity from one's gender:

[It's important to] try to dislocate from ... the man defining what is and what isn't [in order to move towards] that space of thinking about, well, I wonder how my actions affect others? And I suppose that would be a useful way for me to be thinking about the performance of my masculinity.

It is clear that the participants' accounts, as outlined in the preceding sections, raise a number of significant issues, discussed next, regarding feminist models of practice, particularly where these are embedded in organisational policy in relation to specific programs and practice settings.

Feminism and Feminist: 'not very useful words'

Feminism, as observed by Phillips (2006, p. 196), is 'clearly not a singular body of thought and has no singular definition' but, rather, is an 'ongoing and evolving discourse' (p. 214).

The notion of feminism as 'highly contested political terrain' (Mohanty, 1995, p. 71) and, in particular, its potential to exclude, is raised by Mary as a crucial issue:

[H]ow useful is the label [feminism] in conversations with a lot of people? .. I think that unless you're unpacking it, or having the conversation with somebody that you know has a similar definition of it to you, then it's probably not a very useful word.

Acknowledging the great diversity of views and stances that exist within feminism and feminist theory, Mary clarifies her initial claim that, 'I mean for me, you're either feminist or you're not' by explaining that, 'I guess, [that's] what I was *going* to say, [but] well that's ridiculous because there's a continuum of feminism, a continuum of understanding'. The issue here is whether feminism continues to represent a meaningful and relevant point of identification, professionally or personally. This perception of relevance, as evident in Joan's explanation of her struggles with feminism discussed earlier, is by no means assured, and is confirmed by the wide range of literature devoted to discussing the ambivalence associated with feminist self-identification, for younger women in particular (see for example, Aronson, 2003; Bulbeck, 2000; McCabe, 2005; Peltola, Milkie & Presser, 2004).

Men and feminism: 'I just don't think it's possible'

As indicated, it has been widely argued that men cannot be feminists because feminism is, or should be, based in women's common experiences of oppression (see, for example, Hearn, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Braidotti, 1994; Pease, 2001a, 2001b). That is, men 'have not inherited a world of oppression and exclusion based on their sexed corporal being; they do not have the lived experience of oppression because of their sex' (Braidotti, 1994, pp. 138-9). Whilst on one level this seems a reasonable, and indeed commonsensical,

proposition, it shares the problematic elements that lie at the heart of most commonsensical 'truths'; in this case, the assumption that feminism is universal and uncontested territory. The position that feminism is 'inseparable from its origin in the experience of women' (Schmitt, 2001, p. 403) is nonetheless clearly represented in the responses of the men and women interviewed for this project, though some of the men do not, as will become evident, accept it without question.

The, 'general failure of male feminists to engage at the personal level', that is, their 'tendency to separate their feminist work from their personal experiences as gendered subjects' (Ashe, 2004, pp. 191-192), has been raised as a key concern regarding men and feminism. This claim is not borne out in the current research. All of the male participants, as shown here, speak of the impact of their heightened gender awareness across both their work and personal lives. Robert, for example, is clear that in his experience it's not something that he can just 'turn off' when he leaves work. Here we have evidence of some men working to create 'a committed engagement that is both personal and political' (Ashe, 2004, p. 202), whilst not necessarily experiencing – or expressing - this in terms of feminism or a feminist identity.

Reflecting the continuing and unresolved debate regarding men's place in feminism, Karen claims, given her 'presumption that it [feminism] would only apply to females', that laughter would be her initial response to a man identifying as feminist. She goes on to explain her position:

I've just never thought about it before. I guess, I certainly think that it is legitimately possible for men to have an understanding of a perspective - say, of a female - without being female. I think that there are certainly men that are capable, as there

are females that are capable of doing that with men, um, but I guess I just don't think it's possible.

Similarly, Joan, as shown earlier, understands women's experience as the necessary basis for feminist identity. However she is more optimistic regarding men's capacity to be feminist or, at least, to work in a way that is consistent with feminist principles:

I would've thought so, yes, [...] [But] in some ways it might be difficult for them to have an understanding of some of the systems that support those ideas.

Robert, Lee and Ron are acutely aware of the potentially fraught nature of the relationship between masculinity and feminism. Lee articulates this eloquently when he says:

I think, however I describe myself, the word feminist has to be in there somewhere because I think by using that term you acknowledge a history.. that has been hard won ground, and I wonder what it would mean for, as a man who has been benefiting from some of that history, to invisibilise [sic] that history by not referring to it in some way.

In this context, the differentiation of 'pro-feminism' and 'feminism' in the relevant literature, represents an attempt to resolve this impasse. Positioned as an affinity with the 'women's cause' of feminism, the pro-feminist stance involves an 'ethical and moral commitment' to recognising and addressing gender inequality (May 1998, cited in Pease, 2001b, p. 4). Interestingly, despite this broader emphasis on the association between pro-feminism and men's positioning, in this study Ron was the only male participant who identified, unequivocally, as pro-feminist. Acknowledging the problematic relationship of men to feminism, he observes that:

I think as a man, ... in some ways, I think, in some of the ideas I've got to work harder to, because I haven't experienced looking at the world through the eyes of a woman if you like, so I've got to work harder, in some ways, at understanding.

Lee discusses his experience of the issues associated with feminism/pro-feminism debate, highlighting the inherently contested nature of men's positioning in this regard:

[O]ne of the female workers here was questioning me about using the term profeminist in terms of, she thought that that was a 'malestream' term. [...] She was talking to me about a history of men connecting with, then attempting to colonise by rephrasing, and re-authoring, renaming things [...] I mean, I suppose there's different schools of thought though – there's schools of thought that would say it's unattainable for a man to claim to be feminist, in fact what would be more useful would be describing himself as maybe aligning himself to feminist thought or aligning himself to feminist theory. But I suppose there are other people who would say that's quite appropriate, I'm not sure.

Lee is clear however that, for him, it is the act of maintaining an engagement with feminist issues, rather than the title he chooses to adopt, which is most critical. In bell hooks' (1992, pp. 111-117) terms, men's involvement in feminism is necessary because 'everyone has a role to play'.

Discussion: From theory to practice

As highlighted by Healy (2001), in social work, as in other disciplines, there can be 'an uncomfortable fit' between theory and practice. Social workers' reluctance to engage with theory, Healy argues, 'might be partially explained by the practice and organisational

cultures' as well as the failure of theory, especially 'radical' or critical theories, 'to speak to and with the concerns' of practicing social workers. Here Healy is referring to the tendency of critical theorists to focus on social-structural contexts, thus overlooking the 'institutional and interpersonal levels' of practice such as the 'many influences shaping human action, including institutional pressures and individual irrationalities'. Within the context of feminist practice based on a critical understanding of 'social arrangements' (Green, Gregory & Mason, 2006, p. 455), therapeutic practice with (and by) men, specifically with regard to *how* feminist theory should inform interventions (Lancaster & Lumb, 1999), has been relatively neglected. As suggested by Lazzari, Colarossi and Collins (2009, p. 352), 'intentions (theories) are important, but if you do not take the "right" actions (means) or analyse results (ends), all sorts of things can go wrong'.

Occupational standards of competence, such as the *Competency Standards for Intervention Workers – Working with Men who Perpetrate Domestic Abuse and Violence* (Colley, Hall, Jenkins & Anderson, 1997), establish benchmarks in relation to requisite skills, knowledge and attributes, providing a means to address, or evaluate, the translation of theory into practice. Competency standards have however been criticised for their 'functionalist underpinnings', resulting in a 'technically rational solution that reduces values to individual performance' (Issitt, 1999, p. 200). The assumption that 'the complex mix of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values can be broken down into measurable and observable performance' (p. 197), is especially problematic in relation to feminist models of practice in which the emphasis is upon challenging existing power arrangements and, generally, disrupting the status quo. Further, in presenting a feminist approach as a 'set of "how-to's" which can be easily adopted' (Rummery, 1996, p. 158), insufficient attention is paid to the complexities of embodying a feminist perspective in the context of the immediacy of direct client practice.

The connection of the personal and political is one of the defining features of feminist practice, as is the focus on critical reflection. James (2001), for example, in emphasising the importance of 'consciousness' and values, observes: 'I don't think that it can be said that there is a feminist [...] model or practice. Feminist ideas infiltrate our lives [and] our experiences' (p. 43). Similarly, Rummery (1996, p. 158) describes a 'feminist framework' as 'flexible and evolving, and involves as much an analysis of one's self, as that of the women (sic) with whom one is working'. In this perspective there is no division between identity and practice; feminism is clearly who one *is*, in order to be able to *do*. To what extent is it possible, however, to capture and communicate, let alone evaluate, feminist 'consciousness' in the 'how-tos' of program manuals, competencies, required skills, knowledges and so on associated with the 'realities' of social work practice in an institutional, often statutory, context? As observed by Leslie and Clossick (1996, p. 263), after the initial conceptual shift required to integrate feminism and practice, 'a great deal of additional effort and experience is needed to incorporate this shift effectively into interventions'. This is a real dilemma, particularly given recognition, as discussed by Green, Gregory & Mason (2006), of the 'intersection of the head and the heart' (p. 454) in terms of the role of intuition in practitioner decision-making, drawing attention to the ways in which practice decisions transcend the personal / political realms.

Issitt (1999, p. 190) has observed that the 'reality' of social work practice is its engagement with 'indeterminate zones of practice', these requiring 'a mixture of on-the-spot complex judgements, decision-making and action'. This is a particular concern in situations, as seen in this study, in which, there is a lack of clarity regarding feminism and its implications for practice: if practitioners aren't entirely clear what feminism is, how can they be sure 'whether their practice can be labelled as such' (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005, p. 438). Critical

reflection, via 'reflecting teams' (NMCHS, 1997, p. 64) and individual and group supervision, generally a central requirement for practitioners involved in feminist practice, is one means of addressing this issue. Whilst reflection, particularly in relation to domestic violence work, is primarily linked to 'gender accountability', other key objectives include the opportunity to participate in structured conversations, 'actively seek feedback', and accept 'advice and criticism' (p. 63), within the context of a supportive and 'non-hierarchical learning environment' (p. 64). The role of critical reflection in facilitating the integration of feminist theory and feminist practice, particularly in terms of practitioners' experiences of this process and its impact on their identity as a feminist practitioner, whilst not explored in the current study, warrants further research.

Conclusion

The findings of this study should be regarded as preliminary at this stage; they might not adequately represent professional attitudes nor can they be generalised to other practitioners and settings. Nonetheless these findings suggest important directions for further research. It is clear that the implementation of feminist and other anti-oppressive models of practice is complex and challenging. Because such models represent, ideally, a way of looking at the world rather than 'just' a set of skills and competencies, they necessarily encompass the personal, the professional and the political. However, as this study suggests, it cannot be assumed that practitioners identify with the theoretical, or political, principles underlying particular practice models. Evaluation of the extent to which different theoretical positionings impact on the nature and quality of practice would provide an interesting extension of the current study. The study also raises questions regarding the capacity of existing social work education programs to produce critically conscious, reflexive practitioners, particularly in relation to understandings of gender and gender relations. This is a critical issue for social work educators and the profession as whole.

Future studies should also aim to explore mediating factors in linking complex ideas and principles to practice. It would be particularly useful to explore ways in which to maximise the potential of professional supervision in ensuring that both theoretical discussion and critical reflection inform the work in this area.

It is clear that there is no simple answer to the question with which this article began, that of whether feminism, in the context of feminist practice, is an identity (who one '*is*', personally and professionally) or an activity (what one *does*, in a particular work role). Certainly enormous diversity exists, as evident in the current study, regarding women and men's understandings, interests and investments in feminism. As in the broader community, even when conceptualised as the 'province' of women', there is no singular feminism and no common feminist identity. Hence the idea of feminist practice as a unitary model, based on the assumption that feminist theory can be 'translated' into practice, is clearly problematic. This is especially so given the institutionalisation of feminist models of practices in some work settings and the associated move towards performance measures and management.

The question of whether one *should* be feminist in order to practice in this area is a broader, and more contentious, issue but nonetheless one that is important to explore and debate, raising issues in relation to, not only, the practice realm but also matters of ideology, theory, and politics. For instance, debate and discussion regarding contemporary feminism, its meanings and parameters, at both policy and practice levels, have the potential to develop a 'working' feminism that constitutes both 'valuable symbolic acts' and 'practical and concrete action' (Goldrick-Jones, 2002, p. 137). These are not easy questions but ones that, through open and wide debate, have the potential to enrich social work knowledge and practice.

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