## Module 23 Feminist Social Work Practice - Key Concept ii: Reflexivity

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<td>Summary</td>
<td>This module examines postmodern and critical theories and how they can be utilized in feminist practice. The module then goes on to enable the reader to understand critical reflection, reflexivity, knowledge creation in practice and creating knowledge from the social position of diverse women.</td>
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Introduction
This module examines some of the key concerns of doing feminist social work and theoretical frameworks that shape the journey of the social worker from reflection to reflexivity and the role that critical theories play in enabling this process. Feminist practice needs to ensure the dispelling of power and hierarchy whilst addressing women’s problems and issues and to do the same it would require the social workers to go through consistent introspection of self and ensuring a level playing ground with working with women as equal participants in the process of developing agency and action.

Learning Outcomes
The main learning outcomes of this module will be:
1. Understand the relevance of postmodernist theory and critical feminist practice
2. Be able to understand reflexivity as a concept in feminism
3. Being able to imbibe a reflexive approach with feminist social work
4. Be able to evaluate theories on reflection using the critical reflexivity to design feminist social work interventions.

Topic 1. Four Theoretical Traditions Underpinning Critical Reflection

1.1 Postmodernism and Deconstruction
Postmodernism emerged out of the unhappiness over the systemic marginalization of specific groups, ideas, behaviours and sexualities. The postmodernist thought was an outcome of a cultural revolution which placed emphasis on thought, process and experience not as a given but as an interactive with the outside world and continuous reshaping of self as well as hegemonies of ideas. In other words “deconstruction” and rethinking realities and theories. This informed and stimulated feminist thoughts and practice in largely the western world. There were two contradictory streams that appeared in feminist thought, one, which espoused the methods of not accepting the dichotomies and categories as existing and the other that brought in new categories and hence contradicted the former. However the third stream brought in the differences and need to not stay with uniform categories as these would make invisible the specific forms of people’s experiences, discriminations and marginalization, which need different theoretical analysis and engagement by feminists.

Postmodern thinking is a questioning of linear (progressive) and unified (one truth) thinking. Postmodern theories enable feminists to challenge hegemonic and stereotypical ideas about race, caste, gender, class and society. Hierarchical dichotomous thinking creates oppositional and zero-sum relationships between areas of knowledge, such as the distinction between policy and practice, which are better represented by a continuous or holistic relationship. This means breaking of realities as understood within systemic constructs and rather deconstructing the realities in a way where power, hegemony, hierarchy are all examined and questioned.
Deconstruction involves understanding the role of dominant discourses in shaping power and knowledge. It also enables the feminist social worker to critique the binaries of difference and rather brings in the diversities of realities and power. For example the feminist theories of gender have been expanded to bring in intersectionalities of race, gender, class and this is further expanded to real lived experiences of people and their marginalization in specific contexts. Foucault (1978) brings out the idea that when history is written or explained several different versions are missed because their narratives are collected. Hence the historical analysis is done from the perspectives of those from whom the narratives were collated. This gives a partial view of history and often of those who are powerful only. This serves to maintain the power relations within any given system and silences those who are not included in the analysis.

Postmodern thought is often seen from the point of view of the structuralists (e.g., Marx, Freud, Lacan etc) and now post-structuralists like Derrida (1978), Foucault (1965) and Kristeva (1982). Structuralists believed in explaining social phenomenon through deep analysis of structures and their interaction, often creating oppressive conditions for some and power and privilege for others. Similarly the post-structural theorists took this idea of structures to examine and highlight differences in societal realities and their impact of lives of people. The theorists believe that this difference needs to be claimed, highlighted and written out in texts and historical analysis. In each case both structuralists and post-structuralists gave a direction to various possibilities for change, bringing people’s realities from the margins to the center and critically the role that language plays in creating oppression and also liberation. This means that all language, symbolism that is used by the majority and powerful, most often valorizes the language construct of some, privileging then over others whose language, symbols and ideas are not used, rather silenced, marginalized and stigmatized. For feminist social workers post modernist theories provide a rich tapestry of frameworks that enable practice by deconstructing such hegemonic language and also unpack patriarchal and hierarchical arrangements of power and privilege. This can be done by deconstruction of the given realities and engaging with the women especially from the marginalised sections, e.g., Dalit and tribal women in India, the Maoris in Australia, the Romas in Romania or the Native Americans and African Americans in the USA. The languages and their meanings, practices and cultures and also life-worlds all provide for a different feminist practice, which enable the social workers to practice reflexive feminist social work. This requires the usage of deconstruction and deconstructive processes to understand differences, language, and communication patterns and also self-thought and appropriate action.

Post modernist feminists have recognised that liberal feminism is largely located within the domain of white, heterosexual and middle class women and this is very confining. Both postmodernist and third world feminists bring in the dimension of difference and divest the category of ‘women’ as ‘sameness’. They bring in the category of women of color as well as third world women, lesbians and others. The most critical aspect of post modernist thought is that feminism enables women to come together for common cause and also celebrate the differences depending on the context of the issues facing them as well as the politics of their positionality. Post modernist thought has enabled feminists to break the barriers of oppressive structures, engage with power, privilege and collectively strategise for change in these hegemonies from different points. Deconstruction involves the unpacking of self as a feminist worker, checking out one’s own notions and ideas that are hegemonic and that may reflect our own identities. Postmodernism provides the space to all forms of categorization. It involves
shifting away from regular and accepted categorization, notion of dichotomies, certainty, objectivity, world-views and grand narratives.

Deconstruction is useful in critical reflection in helping unearth how we participate in constructing power by participating in dominant discourses:
- Constructions (and categorizations) of our own identities and how we make difference in others
- Constructions of binary ‘dilemmas’ in practice
- What perspectives we leave out.

1.2 Critical Theory and Reflective Practice
The initial ideas regarding reflective practice are credited to Argyris and Schon (1976) and these writings originate from education literature especially by Dewey (1933). Dewey’s idea of reflection was about an assessment of how one’s beliefs are formed and the assumptions that we may hold and how that shapes our convictions. Several theorists like Paulo Freire (1972), Habermas (1971), Shulamith (1970) and the post modernist theorists inform the practice of critical reflection. See link [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_critical_theorists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_critical_theorists) for more information.

There are five key points which informs critical reflection, these are:

a. Consistent engagement with self as a practitioner, theory analysis and intervention strategies with individuals as well as collective. As Fook (2006) has explained in detail

“Critical reflection, from the standpoint of this type of critical perspective, is reflection which enables an understanding of the way (socially dominant) assumptions may be socially restrictive, and thus enables new, more empowering ideas and practices. Critical reflection thus enables social change beginning at individual levels. Once individuals become aware of the hidden power of ideas they have absorbed unwittingly from their social contexts, they are then freed to make choices on their own terms. In this sense they are freed to change the operation of the social at the level of their personal experience.”

b. The acceptance of the fact that domination of ideas is both personal and structural and as practitioners one is very much part of this domination as much as the persons with whom one is working with. Hence critical theories like Giddens (1991), how people make meaning of their social worlds and develop selfhoods, how people make meaning of their experiences and convert the same into action, how people experience social structures and relations, which include class, caste, race, gender, disability, ethnicity and sexualities and mediate personal experiences and behaviours and lastly how language is used to create certain hegemonies of communication, which marginalizes others. For a practitioner it’s these that need to be reflected upon and also the strategies used by professionals in workplaces need to be analysed accordingly.

c. Often individuals as well as collective groups imbibe their secondary and marginalized status due to structures of societal oppression over the years of
denial and cultural deprivation. Therefore as Fook (2006) explains critical reflection brings in the social contexts of professional practice more broadly – this includes workplaces, but also professional cultures, social, political and cultural contexts.

d. Significant to critical reflection is the shift from ‘victim blaming’ as well as ‘system blaming’ and recognizing that the individual and the organization or system co-construct each other, therefore there are possibilities of change for both self and organization. To ensure this its imperative to utilize reflectivity to recognise power and roles that often exist in organisations, which are not located formally but operate at invisible and hidden levels. Thus wherever social work practice is used its significant to analyse power structures and work towards change both at the personal and collective levels.

For useful critical reflective practice its important that:

a. Use of an eclectic mix of critical theories as frameworks for understanding power dynamics, structures and cultures of oppression and liberation, privileges and marginalisation, socio-political processes and opportunities of possible engagement for social change.

b. Defining how hegemonies operate in peoples lives and analyse and work with the same with people to unearth, converse, unpack and develop transformative strategies for change.

c. To do so linking personal and collective processes for change is the key for transformation.

d. This would mean the need to interrogate and unsettle dominant assumptions and their operation in everyday practice by both the social work practitioner and individual and collective, hence dialogue, conversation and an equal and safe process is required.

e. Provision of a space, skills and capacity of both practitioner and individual to free themselves from restrictions of dominant thinking, providing choice of thinking and actions.

This is a model for improving practice by reflecting directly on experience. It involves a ‘bottom-up’ approach wherein theory and practice come together to inform the interventions with specific women. As the process moves forward there is a constant enquiry into the theory, exposing problematic gaps between espoused and enacted theory. This is like consistently testing theory while in practice and trying to close the gap, which emerges from intuition. This enables the feminist social work practitioner to break the boundaries of the ‘given’ and enables creative expressions and ways of doing practice. Hence it involves the practitioner and the practiced in an even process, which is contextual, holistic and experiential.

The applications of reflective approach brings out the discrepancies between implicit and explicit assumptions, which are then challenged during practice and enables assessment for a starting point for evaluating feminist social work practice. Reflective practice ensure researching the indistinguishable constructs – hidden and difficult to measure in practice and finally it supports developing practice theory and creating practice knowledge.
1.2 Reflexivity: A Critical Approach

Reflexivity is one’s ability to recognize that all aspects of our contexts influence the ways we research, create knowledge or work with issues of inequality and deprivation. The efforts are directed towards recognizing and affirming that all conversations and communication is knowledge and that this knowledge creation is embodied, social, reactive, and interactional. Reflexivity, as a concept that recognizes the multiple interrelations between power and knowledge and therefore as a way of reframing emancipatory objectives in social work practice, has been influenced by social researchers (Humphries and Truman, 1994) and feminist sociologists (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Feminist researchers, from the discipline of sociology, who have challenged knowledge as an outcome generated by research as neutral techniques have instead centralized the process by which knowledge is generated, as socially constructed by researchers, informants and other significant participants (e.g. gatekeepers). Therefore, ideas about 'objectivity' are critiqued and, instead, reflexivity by researchers is offered as an alternative way to achieve ethical and intellectually sound research. That is, the researcher's own participation in the conception of the research, the choice of methodologies, analysis and documentation are open to scrutiny, as processes of constructing knowledge, in relations of power (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Humphries and Truman, 1994; Kaidonis, 1998; D'Cruz, 2000,2004; D'Cruz and Jones).  

Reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as social worker/researcher. Indeed reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new ideas for interventions and interactions. A more reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork and research allows the social worker to be more open to any challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises.

Reflexivity is useful in critical reflection for:

- Awareness of ourselves as practitioners and researchers creating knowledge directly from practice experience
- Focus on assumptions about knowledge and its creation and moving towards transformative practice.

2. The Process and Design of the Critical Reflection Model

The earlier sections have dealt with the theoretical perspectives informing reflective practice and reflexivity on part of feminist social workers. Some of key steps required for practice can be as follows:

a. Working with women in small groups, wherein the common grounds of each participant are well defined on the basis of their experiences.

b. Within the groups various participatory methodologies can be used which are creative and interactive like story writing, poetry, group work wherein individual

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expressions are encouraged but social worker also consistently locates individual differences and standpoints, including her/his own.

c. Using critical reflective questioning as a tool for engaging participants and enabling the unpacking and recreating new possibilities.

d. Working through with the participants to unsettle the fundamental assumptions that are implicit in their context and are part of the hegemonic world.

e. Developing ideas from earlier examples of specific and concrete practice successful experiences

f. Working towards collaborative processes of action and change from group work and individual work

2.1 Key Principles for Reflexive Practice:

a. The importance of dialogue and a communicative process for learning

b. Participatory and democratic values

c. A focus on the interactions between individual and society – individual reflection in the social context, as well as reflection that includes both individual and social responsibility

d. The importance of context, culture and climate in supporting reflection – tools and techniques are seen as a way to create the appropriate cultures, not necessarily as the main defining features of critical reflection

e. Process and outcome are intertwined

f. The importance of developing a culture that supports a process that allows open-ended outcomes

g. The importance of making and maintaining direct connections between theory and practice

h. An inclusive approach to outcomes and theories – a recognition of the importance of multiple and diverse perspectives

i. A commitment to focusing on the hidden and the taken for granted

j. The importance in learning of personal experience – direct, specific and concrete – taken from one’s own perspective

k. The importance of the individual participant’s perspective – in presenting the initial account of practice, in focusing on meaningful assumptions and changed practices and approaches

Summary

In this module the theoretical frameworks of post modernism and critical reflection has been discussed in detail. These are key perspectives that inform feminist social work practice and are the key components for developing the method and praxis. Reflexivity is the process that begins with the social worker herself/himself wherein there is consciousness of where she/he is beginning to work and intervene. The capacity to delve within one-self, be aware of one’s own social context and accepting that the same influences the knowledge creation is a major part of reflexivity. Reflective practice enables the process towards reflexivity as post-modern theories open up the ideas of multiple realities and break the binary of all understanding of the social phenomenon. This enables the first step towards acknowledgement that social realities are not just what is embodied in ‘my’ reality but there are other realities which is embodied in many other ways, hence working with the marginalized entails the recognition of the same.
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Interrogating power and hegemony within patriarchal systems as well as unequal social relations is the key to unlocking potential processes for transforming the structures of disempowerment. Reflexivity is the next step wherein this understanding gets translated into action and strategy towards working with a feminist approach, which is distinct and key to enabling change in the oppressive situations that women, men, persons with gender non-normative behaviours and sexualities may find themselves in. This module is an effort in sharing with the reader these aspects to inform social work interventions with a reflective approach and reflexivity.