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Feminist Therapy: A Review From Two Perspectives

A Review of

Feminist Therapy
by Laura S. Brown
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Reviewed by
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Feminist Therapy by Laura S. Brown is the third of 24 planned books within the Theories of Psychotherapy series from the American Psychological Association. The series is edited by Jon Carlson and Matt Englar-Carlson and provides an introduction to some of the major theories of counseling and psychotherapy.

The current review represents the views of two reviewers who approach the book from very different perspectives. While Mary Ballou is a colleague of the book author, has participated in the development of feminist theory over the past few decades, and has written collaboratively with Brown, Elizabeth Markle is relatively new to the literature on feminist therapy. Therefore, this review combines the impressions, reflections, and understandings of both a newcomer to the field and a veteran of the discussions.

From the perspective of a therapist new to the feminist orientation, Brown's book offers exactly what the series intends: clarity, accessibility, scope, and a convenient introduction to a complex theory. The author does an excellent job of presenting the fundamentals of feminism, its history and development, and its current iterations in both theory and practice, linking the two seamlessly. Detailed case examples featuring a diverse selection of clients make this connection clear, helping the reader navigate an understanding of the ways in which feminist theory translates to actual therapist–client interactions. In this way, Brown holds true to one of feminism's central tenants: Theory is based in and formed of lived experience, as opposed to empiricism, the constructs of authorities, and so forth.

Perhaps most valuable to the newcomer is Brown's welcoming, informative, and intentional framing of contemporary feminism and feminist therapy. She shares some historical background and context of the feminist movement as well as the political underpinning of the theory, and she also depicts the ways in which feminism has developed to represent a much more nuanced understanding of power and influence. Through this balanced approach, Brown effectively presents feminist therapy in a manner that is understandable, palatable, and appealing, even to those unfamiliar with the theory. In these conservative social and political times when feminism is frequently devalued, demonized, and misunderstood, it is remarkable that Brown is able to accomplish this with grace.

From the perspective of one who has both witnessed and participated in the inception and development of feminist therapy as it stands today, this book is striking on several levels. First, the inclusion of feminist therapy in this series is significant in its own right, exemplifying its evolution from a grass-roots, radical challenge to traditional therapy to its current status, holding a place of its own among the major contemporary psychotherapeutic theories.

While some may take this for granted, those who fought for and slowly developed the feminist perspective know both the rewards and the costs of such admission to the academy. On one hand, it offers all of the privileges, prestige, and

power that are associated with formal recognition and status as “a theory of psychotherapy.” On the other hand, one must consider what is lost in the transformation from the radical, subversive, grass-roots, consciousness-raising standpoints to its inclusion into the mainstream.

For example, the radical feminist perspective might challenge the very foundations of power within the field of psychology: the individual-focused diagnostic naming and norming, the constricting of knowledge to only the empirical and the subsequent restriction in care to what is “empirically validated,” the control of practice through model licensing laws and training program approval based heavily in the science of behavior perspectives, and so forth. While the more radical feminist perspectives may critique and/or condemn these developments, feminist therapy now carries the responsibility of continuing to create change working from within the academic and professional establishment.

Looking more broadly at feminism outside of psychology, we are reminded that one of the most vibrant and important aspects of feminist analysis is strong analysis of the economic, social, and political forces that act upon individuals, groups, and organizations. It is always the danger that this larger picture is lost when feminism is brought into the academy and discipline and required to function within the very culture and constraints it critiques and seeks to dismantle. Brown’s work does a fine job of balancing these conflicting aspects of feminist psychology in its current positioning and bears the tensions inherent in the task of writing in a mainstream about what is inherently radical.

One who has witnessed feminism’s coming of age would also note the necessary condensing and prioritization that Laura Brown gracefully navigated. The task of integrating the many diverse, colorful, and even contradictory perspectives held within the larger umbrella of feminist therapy is formidable, and Brown has done a thoughtful and gracious job of choosing (and acknowledging) those perspectives and theorists who have made formative contributions to the theory.

Interested readers will find references to works that incorporate a secondary level of depth, complexity, diversity of viewpoint, and detail, such as Carol Enns’s (2004) *Feminist Theories and Feminist Psychotherapies: Origins, Themes, and Diversity*. Similarly, further exploration of international feminist initiatives and developments in standpoint and postmodern feminist therapy would form the basis for an accompanying text.

Able to nimbly bridge the gap between the radical and the mainstream, Brown is both rooted in the political heart of feminism and well appraised of and involved with developments within mainstream psychology. Perhaps because of her ability to speak to both the historical, sociopolitical grounding of feminist therapy and to the literature of contemporary evaluation and outcome studies, Brown has emerged as the ideal author for this text. She does a phenomenal job of presenting feminist therapy in a clear and compelling way; her work will be appreciated by those new to the work and old hands as well!

Reference

Enns, C. (2004). *Feminist theories and feminist psychotherapies: Origins, themes, and diversity* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Haworth Press.