A common erroneous assumption regarding a feminist family therapy approach is that it is profemale and, by default, antimale (Elliot, 1999). A feminist family therapy approach does not seek to replace male domination over women with female domination over men, nor does it seek to exclude men or isolate women from men (Elliot, 1999). The approach, however, seeks to remedy the prevailing inequality in people's daily lives, which contributes to a variety of life and adjustment stresses and issues. Instead of making choices based on stereotypical gender roles promoted by society, the approach empowers clients, male and female, to make choices consistent with their personal skills and interests and liberates them from confining cultural norms. With emphases placed on gender and power issues, the goal of feminist family therapy is the realization of fairness and equality for all, the inclusion of which benefits all—men and women (Costa & Sorenson, 1993; Elliot, 1999).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to describe what it is to be a man or a woman. Gender, being the most basic issue of diversity (Worden & Worden, 1998), is one of the powerful elements responsible for how people shape or define their self-concept and worldview (Stevens-Smith, 1995; Worden & Worden, 1998). Its pervasiveness
provides us all with a lens that dictates how we view ourselves, how others view us, and how we interact with our surroundings. The gender issue is more than simply a women's issue and should not be seen as "for women only," any more than multicultural issues should be seen as "for minorities only" (Dupuy, Ritchie, & Cook, 1994; Hoffman, 1996). Gender roles are constructed socially through a complex interplay of an individual's biological, physical, psychological, and emotional development interacting with surrounding social and cultural norms (Meth, 1990). Once constructed, these gender roles are held and reinforced to the degree that they become a form of belief system or reality. The differing gender roles for men and women require strict conformance with their own rules and limits (Myers, 1999). Myers stated that the stereotypical polarized socialization process dictates that adherence to one specific gender role means avoidance of the other gender role. Adherence to and avoidance of these strict norms both restrain and control a person, with little or no flexibility, and are so embedded in a person's daily routine activities that he or she hardly recognizes their existence. Men may hold on to their beliefs regarding what it means to be masculine and avoid anything feminine. These beliefs influence their behavior as men and their thoughts about men and women. Additionally, gender roles and stereotyping profoundly affect not only each individual in the family but also the relationship among individuals in the family, as well as the relationships between the family and the larger society.

The feminist perspective provides both men and women with a lens that focuses on knowledge and awareness to liberate them from the bondage of prescribed and well-established dysfunctional gender roles (Meth, 1990). Although not every problem that men bring to counseling is gender related, feminist counselors recognize that many of them bring along issues caused by rigid societal prescriptions that dictate how men should and should not act, think, and feel.

In this chapter, the issues and techniques of counseling men from a feminist family therapy perspective are offered. This discussion does not assume applicability to all men or women because such overgeneralization defeats several premises of the feminist approach. Counselors using feminist family therapy as their approach are advised that the issues are complex and solicit various kinds of responses from fellow practitioners, supervisors, supervisees, or clients. The core idea of this approach often elicits professional, ethical, and personal issues, especially when working with traditional men and women. It also challenges the
status quo, that is, familiar ways of doing things. The approach is relatively new, and it is still evolving. It is attracting more attention from practitioners while, at the same time, as in any growing approach, having its own unexplored issues. Many of these unexplored issues occur around the intersection of race, ethnicity, and culture. The perspective offered in this chapter is culturally bound and applies mostly to White European men. Differences occur both within individuals in the dominant culture and between cultural groups.

### Counseling Men: Issues

Counselors using a feminist family therapy approach must recognize the powerful impacts that gender socialization have on men. To seek counseling, men who are the products of such socialization must violate several principles of their beliefs of stereotypical “manhood.” By seeking counseling services, the male client challenges the premises of a perception or belief of being a “real man,” one who is supposedly self-reliant, invulnerable, and in control. Thus, seeking counseling in itself can be seen as requiring courage from the male client because counseling is an act that challenges the foundations of what is considered masculine. In counseling, “real men” who are preoccupied with knowing the rules and keeping score and who prefer rational, active solutions will face ambiguity and emotional talk, an antithesis to their concept of masculinity and a taunt to both client and counselor alike. These issues may be intensified when the therapist is female.

Zunker (1998) stipulated that special programs are needed to help men reevaluate their roles, beliefs, and values in all spheres of their lives, including their relationships with women in the home and workplace. Many men may have difficulty sharing family roles. Men, socially conditioned to play the role of a “king of the household,” may have issues regarding the management and sharing of household tasks. This issue is becoming more prevalent with the increasing number of dual-career families. Increasingly, more men, especially those who are recently divorced, may now be forced to learn the balancing acts of juggling responsibilities of parenthood and managing a home and work.

The process of socialization is largely responsible for many powerful gender biases that men have, including a fear of femininity. These fears, in turn, influence the way men act, feel, and behave. Hence, men avoid any behavior or mannerisms construed to be femi-
nine and put forth concentrated efforts to appear nonfeminine and, by default, masculine (Zunker, 1998). O’Neil (1982, as quoted in Zunker, 1998) stated that men’s typical self-disclosure is restrictive because of the fear that their thoughts and actions might be associated with femininity. The conflicts, stress, and strain that men experience in living their stereotypical gender role can result in health problems. Masculine role conflicts have been found to be associated with psychological distress related to depression. Among the severe symptoms of distress are paranoia, psychoses, and obsessive–compulsive disorder (Good, Robertson, Fitzgerald, Stevens, & Bartels, 1996). Emotional expression and self-disclosure can be serious problems for men. Through gender role socialization, men may believe that expression of grief, pain, or weakness is perceived to be unmanly and therefore resist being open, honest, and expressive because such expressions are considered an open admission of vulnerability and loss of control. This restrictive emotionality may be a leading cause of poor interpersonal relationships between and among men, between men and women, and between men and children.

Stereotypical masculine traits such as competitiveness, independence, and self-reliance, if adopted and valued inappropriately, interfere with men’s ability to learn to relax. Men’s typical leisure activities that involve those values to the extreme are not conducive to relaxation. A typical social gathering could be spoiled and ruined when men try to outdo each other. A supposedly relaxed game of cards or checkers could turn into a fight. This is important because leisure is a source of need satisfaction, and the choice and control of leisure are important to self-esteem and holistic health (Herr & Cramer, 1996). Zunker (1998) stated that intense competition among men in the workplace might result in some men being very reluctant to be honest with their peers and having difficulties in developing interpersonal relationships. Thus, intense competition among men may be highly related to stressful work environments and work anxiety.

In their clinical experience working with men, Allen and Gordon (1990) saw their clients with very real problems revolving around fears of dependency, vulnerability, femininity, self-disclosure, and failure. These fears in turn threatened the men’s gender identity, which underlay many of their clients’ presenting problems. Thus, the problems and stresses men experienced when they entered counseling revolved around shifting images of masculinity, especially in the areas of autonomy, emotionality, and relationships. There appeared to be some resentment and sadness for some male clients
because the privileges of being a man as dictated by the cultural socialization process did not lead them to their perceived rewards. Men who believe and live up to stereotypical rigid masculine roles that emphasize separateness, independence, and control often experience emotional and physical trouble and perceive their life as “out of balance” (Allen & Gordon, 1990, p. 134). Many men grow up believing that relationships are the primary work of women. Men often rely on women to take responsibility for maintaining connection with other people in their lives. For example, women are expected to maintain contact with extended family on both sides and plan family rituals, celebrations, and social events with others. When the marriage or relationship breaks up, men often are left feeling bereft and lonely. As a result, men tend to lose many more connections than just the relationship with the wife or lover, leading them to experience stress and dysfunction. Typically, the greatest imbalance occurs between work and family. All too often, men are overly invested in their work at the expense of familial relationships.

Part of being “manly” is to deny and to dissociate from such natural human feelings as fear, sadness, and dependency. Logic and rational thought are valued as “masculine” traits, whereas so-called emotional responses, such as being fearful, compassionate, anxious, irrational, dependent, and indecisive, are designated as “feminine” characteristics and are thus to be avoided by men. The one emotion seemingly acceptable for men is anger. This restricted emotionality may be associated with violence, addictive behavior, fear of intimacy, communication and relationship problems with women, and difficulty in parenting. The internal lives of many men are manifested in communication problems with significant women in their lives. If these communication problems are to be resolved, men must learn how to recognize, own, and express their feelings.

Self-understanding and developing options for ways to change could be general goals for men in feminist family therapy. Feminist family therapy offers men opportunities that they normally do not allow themselves, such as expressing their emotions, admitting to their emotional needs, and confessing “weakness.” Feminist family counseling also provides an opportunity for counselors to educate clients about the restrictiveness and potential destructiveness inherent in their beliefs about gender and to help them develop options from a wide range of life choices. Gender socialization is a central concern and is a part of therapy that must be addressed with all clients.
Counseling Men: Techniques

Two of the major principles of a feminist family therapy approach—the personal is political and counselor–client interactions are seen as egalitarian—guide counselors in delivering counseling services. “The personal is political” refers to the need to become aware of how people’s lives are being influenced by societal expectations and roles, whereas the egalitarian relationship refers to counselors treating clients as equals and collaborating in the counseling process. Men who have been socialized to be providers of help may enter counseling with different expectations and thus provide counselors with unique challenges. It is not uncommon to find men seeking treatment because of external pressures or a forceful referral because of crisis in the family, at work, or with physical health. Such clients may bring considerable shame and hostility into the session, which are usually projected onto the counselor. Counselors often have a harder time gaining trust and commitment to the counseling process from men than from women. During the initial stage of counseling, in order not to turn clients off and not to reinforce their stereotypical notion that counseling is a “touchy-feely” exercise, counselors may want to use the “male” model of communication. The methods suggested by Allen and Gordon (1990) include defining the boundaries of counseling and giving clients some control over the process. Counselors could utilize strategies such as setting goals, using lists and diagrams, delineating tasks in sessions, and creating contracts to structure the counseling relationship. This is the time when counselors want to reframe clients’ sense of desperation and failure for having to turn to professional counselors into one of strength and determination, facilitating clients’ feelings that they are in control of their self-doubts. Next, counselors may want to normalize the client’s immediate problems and assist him in appreciating the larger social context of his problem, allowing him to defuse some of his guilt and shame (Allen & Gordon, 1990).

When counseling men, Allen and Gordon (1990) begin by assessing the beliefs of the individual client, mainly to examine and appreciate the restrictive quality of his belief system. In dealing with men’s restrictive self-disclosure, counselors are encouraged to use videotape presentations, role clarification exercises, feedback, group counseling, and peer-group interactions to illustrate unexpressive behaviors and to demonstrate the impact of unexpressive behaviors on interpersonal relationships (Zunker, 1998). Thus, working with male clients begins with the task of identifying the beliefs that
they hold about masculinity, the sources of those beliefs in societal institutions and in the family of origin, and some of the potentially harmful results of those beliefs. Then, connection between those beliefs and the presenting problems must be made, while at the same time cautioning the client that those are freely chosen beliefs (“not carved in stone”) and that they can be changed, should the client choose to do so.

To help men become comfortable with the therapeutic process, counselors are encouraged to be patient, nonthreatening, and nonjudgmental. Allen and Gordon (1990) stated that the “thinking through” process of counseling provides men the impetus and direction for change. They suggested that the counselor use reframing to explain the client’s difficulties in a readily acceptable way by associating those difficulties with his detrimental set of beliefs about the meaning of manhood. Clients may begin to identify certain negative effects of male socialization, including a fear of experiencing some basic human qualities such as vulnerability, dependency, and the need for nurturing. Often, when men see how little choice they have had in generating their beliefs about masculinity, they react by questioning some of their lifelong premises and become able to imagine and accept different options.

Allen and Gordon (1990) help their clients understand the strong connection between their beliefs about gender and their problematic behaviors. They encourage their clients to change their “reality” about the meaning of masculinity to a more functional one. Facilitating this recognition also helps men to accept that their emotional needs are basic needs. Feminist family counselors continue to help male clients understand their needs for connectedness and ways to connect. This also helps clients understand the profound influences of their family of origin and find ways to differentiate themselves in healthy ways.

Counselors need to encourage men to get in touch with their deep sense of longing for relational connectedness as espoused by a feminist family therapy approach. This is an opportune time to assist the male client to connect with himself and his own feelings, thoughts, and knowledge. Human connection is a fundamental locus of psychological development, whereas disconnection is a basis of diminished self-esteem, energy, awareness, and disempowerment (Giblin & Chan, 1995). Usually, this process begins with counselors demonstrating and diagramming how men’s lives are centered on performance and competition in the work area. This is followed with a discussion that focuses on how relationships are pushed to the periphery when work takes center stage.
Counselors can be effective in pointing out the irony of the situation in which male clients end up losing, through overzealousness at work, those very relationships that they had hoped to secure by hard work. Men can easily connect their ability to support a family to their efforts for recognition and achievement in the workplace. The awareness of this connection is an opportunity for feminist family counselors to stress that the solution becomes the problem when this motivation overshadows other aspects of life. This situation precludes men from the kind of connectedness to family, friends, and other pursuits that could enrich and support them. Feminist family counselors help clients realize that their lives are out of balance and out of control in many ways. One of the goals of a feminist family therapy approach is to facilitate men's understanding of interdependence and connectedness as positive values that anchor one's life. This adaptive balance is not achieved through passivity but is created through active choices made on the basis of developing self-knowledge, including an appreciation of present and past influences (Allen & Gordon, 1990).

Feminist family therapists may introduce a model of a balanced person, one who can participate fully and comfortably in relationships without fear of compromising or losing autonomy or being overwhelmed by closeness. This modeling sets the stage for counselors to challenge the vision of maleness as logical and unemotional. Feminist therapists can further challenge male clients with an idea that traditional men, because of gender role socialization, may use “logic” as a detour route to avoid their own fear of experiencing strong emotions. This avoidance of experiencing strong internalized emotions serves as an intellectual defensive response against normal, natural human feelings. With this understanding, male clients can be helped to see the negative aftermath of their emotional denial.

One of the most powerful and enduring influences in people's lives is the family in which they grew up. Revisiting family-of-origin issues is immensely valuable in helping men to rid themselves of emotional baggage around gender issues and relationships. When a client understands that unresolved emotional issues are often rooted in the family of origin and that these issues may impede his development of healthy and satisfying relationships throughout life, he also learns how the unresolved emotional issues from the past trigger automatic behavioral responses in the present. The main task a feminist family counselor is trying to achieve here is moving the client toward acceptance of his need for connectedness. Men often bury this need with a deep sense of grief, often masked by feelings
of anger, indifference, or both. Often men are puzzled over finding themselves repeating behavior patterns they detested in their parents, especially their fathers. As these men identify the emotional triggers associated with earlier family relationships, they will begin to see how these triggers reappear and are reactivated in other relationships.

**The Counselor**

Feminist counselors understand the differences of growing up male or female in society. The profound results of gender role socialization compound the effects those differences have in terms of power, status, position, and privileges that a person enjoys within his or her family and in society in general (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). To provide effective counseling using a feminist family therapy approach with men, counselors are greatly challenged to examine and be aware of their own value system and the results of their own gender role socialization experiences. They recognize the impact of social, cultural, and political factors on their own lives. They accept the fact that some behaviors are or may be the reflection of internalized social norms or standards held by individuals. Furthermore, despite their training and experience, they recognize that they are neither immune from social influences nor able to readily free themselves from traditional gender roles that inadvertently lead them to view clients not as people but as male or female. Notice how easy it is to fall into a vicious cycle of accepting gender stereotypes as “truth” and to perpetuate gender biases in therapy.

Counselors, in their attempts to empower clients and reverse the present inherent disparity between the sexes, choose a feminist family therapy perspective in part because it emphasizes the collaborative nature of the counseling relationship that values equality, fairness, and joint effort. Feminist counselors typically encourage clients to examine traditional gender roles, make nonstereotypical life choices, develop equality in the assigning of tasks in their relationships, experience their power and strength, and become their own person (Thomas, 1977, as cited in DeVoe, 1990). Feminist counselors serve as role models and share their values openly and honestly in an attempt to answer clients’ questions and explore any unexamined values or assumptions that they may hold.

To work effectively with men, the counselor must first comprehend the fact that most men are unaware of how little control they exercise in their lives (Meth, 1990). Emerging from and experienc-
ing masculine gender role socialization processes, men are equally 
disadvantaged as women and thus suffer from family and society's 
sanctions of rigid and limited roles they can play. Men's roles are 
typically confined to a narrow range of being a provider (which is 
male) much to the exclusion of being a nurturer (which is 
feminine). These stereotypes, when internalized, limit clients' per-
ceived alternatives or options. The feminist family therapist helps 
clients recognize and transcend those limitations of their own per-
ceived alternatives. DeVoe (1990) stated that counselors must un-
derstand how political, economic, and social forces profoundly affect 
every person. Thus, counselors' awareness of the diverse and com-
plex lives that people live and their commitment to social change 
may assist them in establishing the egalitarian, collaborative coun-
seling relationship advocated by feminist family therapists. Recog-
nizing how social context influences men's sense of manhood, 
feminist counselors use this context as a point of reference in their 
advocated that counselors first must admit their own sexism and 
go beyond thinking about male and female as a dichotomy in their 
counseling practices and personal lives. Counseling relationships, 
much like other relationships that counselors experience, are shaped 
and influenced by various cultural patterns of thinking, feeling, and 
behaving.

Gender-related issues, in spite of their importance and pervasiv-
ness in people's daily lives, still receive lukewarm acceptance in 
the training of counselors. As for professional development, Whipple 
(1996) stressed the importance of counselors continuing to edu-
cate themselves about feminist theory, to discuss gender issues with 
colleagues and supervisors, and to allow their personal experiences 
and their culture to inform their style of therapy.

Conclusion

Feminist family therapy approaches offer both male and female 
counselors alternative ways of addressing issues in helping clients, 
especially men. Feminist approaches that emphasize mutuality, 
collaborative relationships, respect for individuality and uniqueness, 
and multiplicity of perspective empower and benefit clients as well 
as counselors. This chapter described the concerns and benefits in 
counseling men using a feminist family therapy approach. Feminist 
family therapy is not gender specific and definitely not for women 
only.
References


