

## 2007WST 200 Feminist Families, Relationships, Identity

WST 200 Discussion notes from 26 November and 11 December 2007

**This document is intended as a progressive definition. The first Women's Studies class developed the basic premises, and during each semester we will adjust it, add to or subtract from it, and develop it as a continuous process of striving toward comprehensiveness, fairness, and wisdom.**

### Keynotes:

In *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, bell hooks suggests that "feminism would liberate family so that it could be an affirming, positive kinship structure with no oppressive dimensions based on sex differentiation, sexual preference, etc. . . . ; [further, feminist activists need] to graphically address links between sexist oppression and family disintegration, and to give examples, both actual and visionary, of the way family life is and can be when unjust authoritarian rule is replaced with an ethic of communalism, shared responsibility, and mutuality" (39, 40).

The minute you say "family" in the singular, it defines one kind of family as normal and renders all other forms peripheral or wrong. The truth is there have always been many, many different kinds of families—extended families, communal families, families in which, in the African tradition, children were raised by the grandparents, because it was thought that someone young enough to have a child was not wise enough to raise it.—Gloria Steinem

**I. Healing as necessary prologue to developing a healthy relationship:** "know yourself and your partner": the class explored a variety of unhealthy relationships as a way to get at the problem of identifying the sources of problems in relationships and marriage.

These included the co-dependent partner in denial of her own circumstances, battered woman syndrome, the problem of compartmentalizing one's personality (honest with others, silent or compliant with an abuser or a dominant partner), and the question of male violence (learned behavior, brain and hormone research, phenotype predisposition, etc.)

We also explored the likely need for a good model—one student's three-year close observation of a good relationship as a model for her own; another student's identification of problems she lived through via her parents' relationships, which gave her a sense of what she needed to avoid in her own relationship; the problems of the woman being abused by her husband and of her own unsupportive parents; and the problem of divorced parents forcing their children to take sides.

In addition, we asked the question of what the institution of marriage provides a feminist. Initial answers included (a) a long-term commitment with a supportive best friend, and (b) someone to help with raising one's children. A further suggestion involved distinguishing between the institution of marriage and the relationship itself: the health of the latter being of greatest importance. Also, we touched on substance abuse issues and how they play into family dysfunction, verbal and physical abuse. Finally, Luann showed us <http://www.womenslaw.org>, a website which displays women's legal rights state-by-state, provides forms and explains how to proceed in domestic abuse and other relationship problems involving the law.

The upshot: given the problematic state of so many lives and relationships, the implicit beginning is that in order to develop feminist families, one must first untangle the knots that hinder personal empowerment and emotional health. Initial principles that the class developed:

<Partners may need a model of what a healthy relationship looks like in order to develop their own.

<Partners need to avoid idealizing relationships: develop a pragmatic view with a balance of friendship and shared tasks.

<Partners need to learn their stressors, whether learned or phenotypical: we need to know ourselves and each other, and to maintain openness to personal revision.

<One needs to distinguish between the institution (marriage), which has often been unhealthy for women, and the relationship.

<When there are children, parents need to be supportive of their children's needs even after growing up; but they should also be wary of placing themselves in the middle of their kids' minor relationship disputes. Practical judgment is important.

## **II. Envisioning a Feminist Family, Relationships, Identity: what is important in a relationship?**

In our discussion, we agreed that "family" and "relationships" don't account for those who are solitary, so in one sense we explored the notion of feminist identity both in solitude and in relationships ranging from the way people treat those we care for to the more formal notion of feminist families (keeping Steinem's sense of multiple approaches to family in mind).

Important values include:

### **Communication**

<Communication is necessary for equality because it allows us to develop shared interests and implies that one must be able to articulate what one means. A further key is to avoid communication that includes passive aggressive signals, "spelling it out" or "saying what you mean" in a non-aggressive way, efficiently. Relationships can devolve into picking at each other if the communication is not rigorous and precise, avoiding passive-aggressive signals in an otherwise honest message. Related to this, we discussed the practice of active listening (wherein one partner must say what bothers her/him, the second partner not interrupting and later repeating back what the first partner said until both are satisfied that they understand each other).

<We also talked about the problem of how the medium of communication can shape the ability to communicate: electronic communications such as email can remove the closeness and the multiple levels of communication that come from actual presence, and thus we distort the very messages we intend, sometimes without even realizing how words/language can be removed from feeling.

### **Willingness to grow together.**

<We are all creatures with faults, and it is important to learn to forgive our partner's faults if possible, while at the same time developing accountability so that we can grow together and avoid past mistakes and co-dependent behavior. We need to know ourselves well enough to know what we won't accept and to demand respect from our partners.

<Such a premise requires that we have multiple strategies for communication: sometimes a partner can be awakened with a gentle conversation, but sometimes it is only “the line drawn in the sand” or the forthright demand that helps us see what we need together.

<We noted the five aspects of “love languages”: acts of service, quality time, touch, words of affirmation, and gifts. At the same time, we discussed how one partner might feel he/she is showing love through acts of service when indeed the other partner may need some shared quiet time for talk, that “doing” is not necessarily loving if one’s partner needs shared time. Gifts, too, may not seem to be what they are; a toaster, for example, may not be a fitting holiday or birthday present, even though it may be offered in a spirit of love. Thus partners need to be sensitive to what moves one’s partner, what seems appropriate: there’s an element of intuition, an element of paying attention to what one’s partner says, and a certain awareness of what “works” that either one has or has to learn.

### **The importance of solitude and a space:**

<We discussed the fact that a person is whole and complete in and of herself/himself, that a relationship does not complete one’s sense of being, and that indeed some are solitaries, preferring their own company to a relationship.

<Regardless of whether or not one is in a relationship, people need to provide for space and separateness (“a room of one’s own,” as Woolf noted), valuing time with oneself.

<We also noted that one needs an awareness that one person cannot fully sustain another, that we all need other friendships across gender boundaries as well as within them. Related to this, we discussed how this principle can be risky, as these freedoms can awaken jealousy in a partner who is not fully empowered or who perhaps carries undue anxieties about loss or betrayal, but that partners need to talk through these feelings and learn to trust each other.

### **Identity**

<One must have an ability to appreciate the different understandings of self, the wholeness of self in others (solitaries, bisexuals, gays and lesbians, traditional relationships—all “types”). It is also important to become aware of how one’s spoken assumptions can hurt (e.g., “when are you going to get a boyfriend?” or “when are you going to have a baby?”).

<One must refuse to shape oneself to a partner’s pressures, especially when this interferes with one’s sense of self. One should strive to develop an empowered, imaginative self, a healthy self-concept, communication with oneself and with others, and live by it.

<Those in relationships need to negotiate (communicate) a way to be comfortable with shared power; we need to avoid the sense of one partner being dominant and strive for a working relationship where all are comfortable with their efforts and the efforts of one’s partner, and where an open communication allows for adjustment as needed.