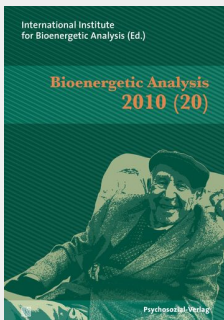


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The Impact of Gender on Subjectivity¹

Fina Pla

Abstracts

English

This paper provides a reflection on the impact of gender in the construction of masculinity and femininity. Particular attention is paid to how gender stereotypes are created and how they affect people. The contribution of new concepts such as interrelatedness and bonding will be discussed in relation to their impact on psychotherapy. Specifically, ways that Bioenergetic Analysts can benefit from these new approaches and concepts will be provided.

Key words: Social Construct, Binary Functioning, Relational Matrix, Micromachismos, Liquid Love.

¹ This paper was originally presented at the International Congress of Bioenergetic Analysis in Sevilla (Spain), May 2007.

Der Einfluss von Geschlechtsrollen auf unsere Subjektivität (German)

Dieser Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit der Bedeutung von Geschlechtsrollen für die Entwicklung von männlicher und weiblicher Identität. Dabei wird besonderes Augenmerk auf die Entstehung von Geschlechtsrollenstereotypen und deren Auswirkungen auf Menschen gelegt. Der Einfluss von neuen Konzepten wie Beziehung und Bindung auf die psychotherapeutische Arbeit wird diskutiert. Außerdem wird aufgezeigt, wie insbesondere Bioenergetische AnalytikerInnen von diesen neuen Herangehensweisen und Konzepten profitieren können.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Geschlechtsrollenidentität, männlich, weiblich, Aktivität, Beziehung.

L' Impact du Genre sur la Subjectivité (French)

Cet article apporte une réflexion sur l'impact du Genre dans la construction de la masculinité et de la féminité. Une attention particulière est portée sur la façon dont ces stéréotypes de Genre sont créés et comment ils affectent les personnes. La contribution de nouveaux concepts tels que l'inter-relation et l'attachement sera discutée en relation avec leur impact sur la psychothérapie. De façon plus spécifique, les façons dont les Analystes Bioénergéticiens peuvent bénéficier de ces nouvelles approches et nouveaux concepts seront donnés.

Mots-clés: identité de Genre, masculin, féminin, subjectivité, inter-relation.

El Impacto del Género en la Subjetividad (Spanish)

Este artículo ofrece una reflexión acerca del impacto del género en la construcción de la masculinidad y la feminidad. Hace hincapié es-

pecíficamente en como los estereotipos de género se originan y en como afectan a las personas. La contribución de nuevos conceptos tales como la interrelación y el vínculo se consideraran en relación a su impacto en la psicoterapia. Específicamente, se proponen maneras en que los Analistas Bioenergéticos pueden beneficiarse con estos nuevos enfoques y conceptos.

Palabras clave: Constructo Social, Funcionamiento Binario, Matriz Relacional, Micromachismos, Amor Líquido.

L'impatto del genere sulla soggettività (Italian)

Questo scritto propone una riflessione sull'impatto del genere nella costruzione della virilità e della femminilità. Una particolare attenzione è rivolta a come gli stereotipi di genere si formano ed influenzano le persone. E' preso in considerazione il contributo dei nuovi concetti quali quello di bonding e di interconnessione per come impattano la psicoterapia. Specificamente l'autrice si sofferma sugli apporti di cui l'analisi bioenergetica può trarre vantaggio a partire da questi nuovi concetti.

Parole chiave: identità di genere, maschile, femminile, soggettività, interconnessione

O Impacto do Gênero na Construção da Subjetividade (Portuguese)

Este artigo traz uma reflexão sobre o impacto do gênero na construção da masculinidade e da feminilidade. Dá-se particular atenção à forma como os estereótipos são criados e como eles afetam as pessoas. A contribuição de novos conceitos como interrelacionamento e vinculação serão discutidos em relação ao seu impacto na psicoterapia. Especificamente, serão propostas

algumas formas com que os Analistas Bioenergéticos possam se beneficiar a partir destes novos enfoques e conceitos.

Palavras Chave: Construção Social, Funcionamento Binário, Matriz Relacional, Micromachismos, Amor Líquido.

Introduction

I would like to start by sharing that my first contact with gender happened when I was twenty and attended the first feminist congress in Spain. I was deeply impacted and a whole new world opened to me. I needed to understand what it meant to be a woman in this world and what happened in the relationships between women and men. As a result of these concerns I first became a member of a feminist group, then a member of a women's therapy group and later I joined a women psychotherapists group. At the same time, I've been a member of different men and women's groups. Since then, my concern and curiosity with this issue has been alive, both in my private and in my professional life. But, what has happened with gender theory in the last decades and what have been its contributions?

The Feminist Movement opened the way and later, contributions from the different fields: psychology, anthropology, philosophy and history have been produced, which have given us tools to understand the dynamics of the patriarchal system and have provided us with new ways to understand reality. These theories reflect the situation in the present world, where ambivalence, change and uncertainty, prevail. They work with the concepts of multiplicity, individuality, instability, variability and complexity. They help us move away from rigid systems that have defined reality in very constrained and exclusive ways. For example, **Chodorow** speaks of masculinities and femininities, meaning that the process to internalize gender is individual and that there are different ways to live masculinity and femininity for each one of us.

These contributions allow us to reflect about how the person is structured within a gender system and what are the profound effects in his/her subjectivity. They explain how these unequal patterns originate and get reproduced with consequences in the psyche of both sexes. They show there is a binary functioning which is still present both in open and subtle ways, where men are associated with reason and culture, while women are related to body and feelings. This creates a division where the rational power is deposited in men and the affective power is deposited in women, with devastating consequences for the lives of all. By this I refer to all the pain and misunderstandings between men and women when they try to relate to each other and they attempt to live their masculinity and their femininity.

For a long time there was the belief that masculine and feminine traits had a biological basis and were innate, but gender studies have shown evidence that gender is a social construction. What was believed to be natural: masculine active, feminine passive, has been proved to be a social construct.

These theories also deconstruct the idea that only women suffer in a patriarchal system and give us the vision that both women and men are stuck and are prisoners of such a system, though in different ways. They help us understand the deep suffering women and men have to undergo if they do not fit into the accepted social roles.

Some examples follow from my practice: **L.** wants to be a mother and she has no partner at present. She is fighting with her sense of inadequacy for not having a partner and it is hard for her to give herself permission to make her desire real. **M.** is a gay man who has to work through his idealized fantasy of what it is to be a virile man and so overcome his inner sense of inadequacy. **M.** is a feminist woman who has to work with her denial. She needs to accept her dependency needs and give up her ideal of being a completely autonomous woman who doesn't need anyone. Then she can get involved in a relationship with her partner. **B.** has difficulty affirming her right to her parent's inheritance in a family where femininity is devalued. **T.** is torn between her desire to go to university

and her partner's desire of living with a woman who takes care of him. C. Is depressed because her partner tells her that her body is not sexy enough and she has to resist his need to control her. L. is a middle-aged professor who has to face his newborn fatherhood and his clumsiness in relating to his baby son. Those are just some examples of how gender issues become present in a therapeutic process and how important it is that we understand and address them.

Contributions to psychotherapy

The conjunction between Gender theories, Attachment theories and Relational psychoanalysis has produced fruitful results. They open new windows in our theoretical concepts and bring forward new ideas that enrich our comprehension. **Winnicott, Benjamin, Stern, Chodorow** and others, redefine psychoanalysis with Attachment theory and introduce some interesting concepts. One important concept is the idea of interrelatedness where the idea of bonding is emphasized above the idea of drive. I quote **Benjamin**: “The life of a baby gets developed in a bonding network and his/her subjectivity is built through the relationships with the others” (Benjamin, 1988).

They stress the importance of interrelatedness in the construction of subjectivity. These authors overcome the idea of a linear development and support the notion that psychic structures get developed from a relational matrix, which starts with primary bonding.

In the classical oedipal model, father separated child from mother, but current research shows that the baby develops different attachment patterns with each parent that get developed at the same time. Differently than classical psychoanalysis, they recognize and value the role of mother as essential for the developing self. They also support the idea that there is a previous gender identity upon which the oedipal identity is built later.

These theories remark that there does not exist a natural feminine or masculine essence but it is from a complex unconscious process that libido

gets oriented towards a masculine or feminine body. As a result, neither heterosexuality is natural, nor homosexuality unnatural, but both are the result of complex bio-psychosocial processes. I think these contributions broaden some ideas which have been present in bioenergetics and which have limited us.

Gender and gender identity: Money and Stoller

Money and Stoller are psychoanalysts who propose that there is a difference between the concept of sexual identity (which is the consequence of biological differences between sexes) from the concept of gender identity, (which would be the inner feeling of being a girl or a boy as something that gets structured on a social level).

Chodorow in her book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, says:

“Each body is created in an intrapsychic way and incorporates a relational unconscious story from birth which is the result of how one has been cared for and the unconscious messages received.”(Chodorow, 1978)

Taking gender into account means understanding the impact of culture and at the same time the impact of our unconscious processes in our subjective choice of being a woman or being a man, being heterosexual or being homosexual, how we live our life and how society values or denigrates these differences.

The androcentric system we live in has produced a model of hegemonic masculinity associated with heterosexuality, which comes to mean something natural and excludes what is different as unnatural. Not very masculine men or homosexual men and women get excluded and are considered a problem. Again, we have to critically review how these gender biases are present in bioenergetics concerning masculinity and femininity, as well as concerning heterosexuality and homosexuality. We also have to reflect on the impact gender has upon women and men's bodies.

Consequences of the gender system: The ideals of Masculinity and Femininity

The gender system is based upon a different set of ideals for men and women. Let us have a look at some of these ideals, as, even if they are in a process of change, their roots in our subjectivity are very deep.

Masculinity has been associated with being hard, an achiever, a provider and being autonomous. It implies a self-centered ego and a type of bonding that is often distrustful and with low empathy. The attributes of virility are defined by sexual potency and reproductive ability. In contrast to femininity, which is more focused on bonding, masculinity values autonomy, separation and distance. In their identifying process, men must repress their needs and their vulnerability, creating an emotional armor that provokes harmful effects in their psyche and in their way of relating.

The patriarchal system has legitimized the belief in the superiority of men for a long time. Still in many countries, to be a man is to have rights, while to be a woman means to have to fight for these rights. This unequal situation takes hold because of a lack of economic resources for women and also because of thought systems that still define reality only from a masculine perspective.

Luis Bonino, a psychologist who lives in Madrid, has created the term micromachismos to stress the subtle ways in which inequalities are reproduced in relationships. They would be imperceptible, almost invisible, control and power mechanisms that men do. They are strategies that restrict the personal power, autonomy and psychic welfare of women. They are woven like a network that grabs women and leaves them in only an availability role towards men. Some examples of how they manifest in relationships would be:

- Omission attitudes (not to take care of tasks that then women have to assume),
- To abuse the feminine capacity of looking after others,
- Make women responsible for the vitality of relationships,
- Control the relationship with distancing strategies,

- Lack of availability and lack of recognition that leave women with a hunger for affection.

Men, in their socialization, learn unconsciously to exert power upon women (they do not listen, their own desires come first, they treat the female body like an object). But times are changing and little by little more men are sensitive to those issues.

Effects of gender on women

Women are the ones who most suffer from the impact of the patriarchal system.

Feminine subjectivity is based on several ideals:

- To exist for the others: This means taking care of domestic tasks and taking care of others. Women adopt roles of housewife, mother, wife and ideal ways of being: receptive, nurturing contained, and available.
- Romantic love: Here the relationship becomes the first and main objective and even today it is deeply ingrained in women's psyches. The ideal for a woman is to belong to a man and often, to give priority to his projects before hers. Women grow up with the idea that love is central in their lives. When love goes away and they have not developed other resources, they get depressed. Love is more important than sex and we must not discount the role of religion that condemns the search for pleasure, specifically for women.
- High level of expectations placed on bonds and in taking care of others: This makes it difficult for women to find meaning through other experiences and places them in a vulnerable position and with excessive dependence on outer recognition. This dedication to look after relationships prevents her from dedicating herself to her professional objectives. It also means a lack of economic resources, which is linked to an economical and affective dependency. She often gets stuck in

relationships that make her feel she is needed but that frustrate her, as they are not reciprocal.

- Idealization of a beauty stereotype: Women are led to believe that body beauty and youth are the necessary ingredients to be feminine, get the love of a man and be very happy. Body image then gets highly valued over intrapsychic aspects. Models and actresses are presented as a type of women who have everything: success, beauty, money and love. For most women, the impossibility of reaching this ideal provokes symptoms of inadequacy, anguish and uneasiness. As writer **Fatima Mernisi** says, the ideal of slimness and youth has become the burka for western women. To most women, slimness is associated with perfection and happiness. The difficulty for women to reach these ideals gets translated into body and emotional disorders. Often, doctors address these problems with pills and women are the ones who take more medicines (anti-depressants, tranquillizers, analgesics) than men. Instead of understanding it as one of the consequences of the system, it is read as a sign of weakness and inferiority and women feel very guilty. As we can see, the effects of gender on women's bodies are devastating. Both women and men suffer the effects of those ideals and the impossibility to attain them produces different symptoms in men and women's bodies.

New social trends

We are immersed in a period of change and transition.. At the same time that we live with the old stereotypes, these stereotypes are evolving. We do not talk about the family anymore but about families, which take their space in the social weaving. This proves that a new paradigm with new values is needed. The emphasis is not in the fact that a family is hetero or homosexual but in the quality of their bonding and the latest research points in this direction.

Masculine and feminine fade as rigid categories, which define opposite universes.

Father as the main authority figure and as the main provider is declining. Women going to work modify family relationships and allow some men to be more present in domestic tasks and emotionally available for their children.

Evidently, as in every process of change, transitions are not easy. Women have double working hours, some men resist losing their privileges and children relate to all kinds of gadgets and machines instead of people.

We have left behind the indissolubility of attachments for unstable relationships, or “liquid love” says **Irene Loyácomo**, an Argentinian psychoanalyst. Liquid love refers to relationships based on immediate satisfaction. Affective relationships cease to be forever, they become something you use, then throw away and substitute another one.

My experience as a therapist

In these twenty-three years of practice I have noticed some points I’d like to comment on regarding differences between men and women and how gender affects them.

My work with women patients

Requests for therapy have come mainly from women. It should not surprise us if we consider that women are the ones who most suffer the effects of the system. They are the ones who show more discomfort, the ones who evidence the suffering more in their bodies. There are some patterns that I see as a result of the gender system which have been constant and repetitive in many cases:

- A lack of self-esteem, of trust in their capacities.
- Ambivalence between the fear to be seen, to have a place in the world and the wish to be creative, to hold their projects and make them known.

- The inner tear between their wish to have a family and not to give up their working projects.
- The difficulty in recognising their own desires, as they were brought up to attend to the desires of others first.
- The difficulty finding a place of their own in the world so that having a place does not have to be exclusively through a relationship with a man.
- Feelings of body inadequacy. The need to work in the direction of having contact with the body more based on health, vitality, aliveness and spontaneity rather than on the beauty stereotype.
- Difficulty connecting with their own sexuality and the pleasure to enjoy it.
- Difficulty feeling a movement of their own, Lack of permission to move freely and explore the world.

My main interest has been to support women so that they could make contact with their bodies, their desires, their voice, their movement, their capacity to set up boundaries and to say no to relationships or situations that damage them. I give support so that they can take their own risks, to discern about their sexual desires and sexual choice and to help them open their body and emotional blockages, which had been structured in their childhood experiences.

I support the fact that a woman can live herself as subject of her own life and does not have to live it through others (partner, children).

I work to find in which ways her gender beliefs have limited her so she can open new paths.

Bioenergetic Analysis has been a powerful and precious tool to support all these processes, both in group sessions and in individual sessions. I have found that women, at some stage, often benefit by being in a therapy group with other women where they can find different models and ways to be a woman different from their mothers.

My work with male patients

I've tried to be attentive to how each one has been affected and limited by the prevailing model of masculinity and I have also found certain patterns:

- The difficulty to be in contact with their feelings. They are socialized to be much more in their heads than women, though we cannot generalize, only talk about repetitive patterns. Men fear to feel needy, weak, and impotent. They fear to lose control of their head.
- Fear of intimacy, disguised as being autonomous, fleeing attitude in relationships.
- Disconnectedness between feelings and sexuality.
- Difficulty to not only care for his own needs but to take the other's needs into account.
- Difficulty to connect with his own body, further than the stereotype of a strong powerful body. The body is often lived as a machine, a tool used to have a professional or a sexual achievement.
- Work is the main concern, sometimes, addiction to it.
- Difficulty to sustain uncertainty, to sustain the idea of process more than the final result.
- Difficulty to give up their privileged position and to open a more shared space, where they can listen, negotiate, leave space for the other. I must say that, little by little, men become aware of the high price they have to pay for this limiting stereotype of masculinity.

Our responsibility as bioenergetic analysts

What can we do as bioenergetic analysts to be open to the new types of family and to different sexual choices? How can we become sensitive to gender dynamics? I think we should move towards interrelatedness, the relational body dynamics that become present in our encounter with our clients and see the profound healing effects it can have. I have had good teachers who have taught me a way to make body energy dynamics and

interrelatedness work together. I will mention some of them, such as Jean Marc Guillerme and the work of Virginia and Bob Hilton and Bob Lewis, who have found a way to enrich bioenergetics with these new approaches. They have taught me how important it is to be really present for the client and not only be aware of body dynamics.

I think it is crucial that we, as bioenergetic analysts, are sensitive and have the information and the necessary training on the issue of gender, sexual choices and new types of families, so that we can support our male and female patients when they explore the impact of those issues in their story and subjectivity.

We should reflect upon our beliefs concerning gender inequalities, about the roles and tasks distribution and about who cares for relationships. We need to revise our beliefs concerning power attitudes, domination and submission and how we can identify these patterns in affective relationships, first in our lives, then in our patients' lives. We need to be sensitive to the different ways gender affects women and men.

Bioenergetic Analysis needs to drink in these new approaches. We need to find a way to incorporate this knowledge to our valuable knowledge about energy, body and relational dynamics that we own as bioenergetic analysts. We need to emphasize more the impact of interrelatedness between therapist and client and the profound healing effects it can have. We should add these concepts to our practice, supervision and most important, to our training programs so that in our work we can feel open towards our clients, no matter what their sexual, affective choices are.

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