

GENDER BATTLES I HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED: THE EVOLUTION OF MY DEVELOPMENT AS A THERAPIST TREATING MEN AND COUPLES

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This narrative is a reflection on the cognitive and emotional process through which therapists attempt to develop empathy and understanding with clients in treatment. Developing empathy when clients and therapist differ significantly in terms of their cultural characteristics, such as gender, often presents particular challenges and opportunities in the course of treatment. These challenges and opportunities are examined in the context of the interrelationship between one female therapist's own personal and professional development.

“Being a woman is a terribly difficult task since it consists principally in dealing with men.” Joseph Conrad

A more relevant paraphrase to the above quote might be: *“Being a psycho-therapist is a terribly difficult task since it consists principally in dealing with persons of gender.”* Over the course of a long career as a clinical social worker, I have had many opportunities to work with a variety of adult clients—individuals, couples, families, and groups—as they struggle with painful relationship issues related to sexuality, emancipation, marriage, work, divorce, custody, and life. This work has led me to think about and experience the process of empathy—both its strengths and limitations—in new ways. Most recently, I have reflected about my understanding of the gender roles of the men and women clients I see in treatment. This narrative attempts to describe both the *inner process* of the therapist as well as the *external interactions* with clients regarding gender issues and conflicts. It also describes the evolution, which has occurred over the years, of my own personal and professional journey in understanding these issues.

A Cognitive and Affective Exercise in Empathy Development

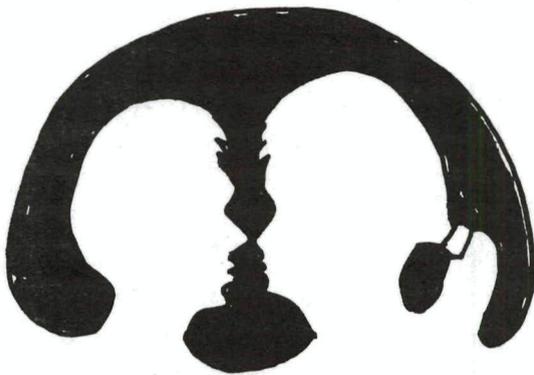
Sometimes I try to think about what it would be like to be a man. I consider what

it would be like to be taller, to have more muscle density, to shave my face, or, alternatively, to have “stuff” growing from it. I try to imagine what it would be like to feel sadness and believe I should not weep but only flex a muscle in my jaw. I wonder what would it be like to feel the burden, deep within my being, of whether my children had food and clothes and to be constantly worried about being adequate. I’d be scared, and I might not even know it; I certainly couldn’t say so if I did. I would have to compete about everything. I’d have to protect my turf or territory. I wonder whether I would be energized or exhausted by that constant effort.

I think about the song from the PBS children’s television program *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*, about “... some bodies being fancy on the inside and some on the outside.” If I were a man, I guess I would focus on “fancy on the outside,” like the two fiftyish men I once saw outside a newborn nursery. As they watched a *moments*-old newborn baby boy being diapered, one commented to the other, “He’s sure going to make the girls happy some day.” As a man, I wouldn’t (or couldn’t) ask for directions, and I’d be the one expected to lift heavy things and climb on ladders. As a man, I’d live in a culture that both sanctions male violence and prepares men to be sent to war, as psychiatrist Joan Shapiro (1992) has written. If I had been a man in military service, espe-

cially in wartime, I might be full of unspoken, unutterable sadness, confusion, and anger.

Mostly, though, I just try to imagine about how I would think and feel if I were a man. And, of course, there really is no way I can. Empathy can take one only so far.



Steps in my Personal and Professional Journey

These imaginings come from my work in providing “relationship” or couples therapy as well as individual psychotherapy with men. They are also part of my own maturation, or as I like to think of it, “trying to figure out some of the mysteries of the strange planet on which I live—which, by the way, is neither Mars nor Venus.” The steps in my evolutionary journey, as seen from the vantage point of today, were uneven and not always forward moving:

1. In the earliest stage of my development, I had little conscious awareness (read clueless) of the implications of gender differences. All I knew was that there were some of each and they were different but co-existed, kind of like cats and dogs. I expected to be treated the same as anyone else, and assumed men and women were pretty much the same in how they viewed themselves in the world. In other words, if I thought about it at all, I thought more about differences among *individuals* than between *genders*. I think I wasn't a very

good couples therapist during these years; in fact, part of this stage took place during my young adulthood before graduate education in social work.

2. Gradually, a different stage emerged through which I became more aware that men have been in charge of many significant aspects of my life (read power). For example, I was surprised to discover in the workplace how women can be disenfranchised by the flow of information controlled by male superiors. You know the drill—memos not received (or sent, for that matter), information not shared, input not solicited, decisions made unilaterally, feedback not accepted, and accountability conveniently on holiday. I once showed the administrator of a small psychiatric hospital a memo I'd written. The memo was notification of the layoff of a social worker on my staff. I'd begun the memo with “I'm saddened to tell you, etc.” The administrator responded, “I wouldn't say ‘saddened.’” In my thoughts I came back with, “I not only *would* say saddened, I *did* say it, and what's wrong with you that you don't feel sad about taking away someone's work!” Then I wondered to myself why I had shown it to the administrator at all, since it certainly wasn't his approval I was seeking. During this period, I'm not sure exactly how my practice was affected. These were the first occasions upon which I began to *think* of such matters. I began to chafe from this kind of treatment, on my own behalf and that of other women.

3. From this awareness, I developed a moderately assertive feminist bent (read polarized). During this stage, I once acidly commented to a revered male colleague, “All men are fascists—present company excluded!” This outburst was driven both by personal issues (an unraveling marriage) and professional issues (the need to fight the oppressive tactics in an agency headed by an exploitative man of questionable ethics).

At this professional juncture, I would not have been terribly empathic toward male clients. Fortunately, my work then was primarily administrative, so the harm I might have perpetrated was limited. It was, however, the period when I first became aware of the *mother bristle*, a concept I will elaborate later in this narrative. For now, I define it as the reaction of men to their perception of being treated by a woman in a controlling, maternal manner.

I experienced this reaction in a conversation with a staff member (man) and a psychiatric colleague (also a man), who had been having trouble with his knee. We stood talking, and at the end of the conversation, I commented to the psychiatrist that one of his shoes was untied. Immediately, the two men began talking, for my benefit, about how they “just didn’t know how they managed to get dressed in the morning without someone (a woman) to direct them.” I joked back, “Okay, go ahead and fall on your gimpy knee.” Something similar happened with a later group of colleagues, two women and a man. This time we talked about what had happened and identified how different the message sent was from that received. The women perceived themselves as trying to be considerate and helpful. The male point of view was, “I’m able to take care of these things by myself.” Although not clinical examples *per se*, these experiences become miniature laboratories in which male-female communication and interactions can be taken apart, understood, and applied to clinical interactions.

4. Most recently, I have been gentling my view of the other 50% of the world’s population (read more tolerant and curious). It has been during this time that many of the ideas discussed here have emerged. I’m trying to become more accepting of many aspects of life as I grow older. I’m still a feminist and feel impatience with the inequities women suffer. I wish I could say

I’m less reactive, but my recent response to a male colleague who used the term “schizophrenogenic” gives that the lie. (This outdated term implies that the genesis of schizophrenia lay with mothers giving “double bind” messages to their children, especially sons.) Also, I’ve concluded men are as befuddled about relationships as women are—but *differently*. And I get a chuckle over cogent observations, such as the bumper sticker I saw recently, which read: “Eve was framed.”

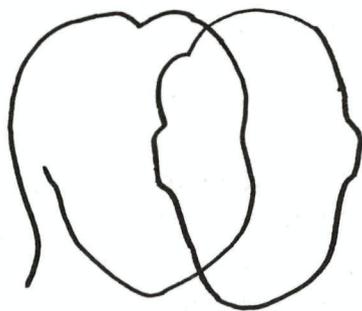
Application to My Work with Clients

What meaning does my own journey and these attempts at empathy imaginings lend to work with couples and individual men? Early in my career, my contact with couples was largely around helping them parent more effectively. I was fortunate in having solid instruction in a theoretical understanding of the development of “couplehood” (Solomon, 1973), but had limited opportunity for practice application in strictly marital therapy. One major difference between my understanding then and now is that I recognize I don’t know as much and am not as empathic as I used to think I was—simply because I can’t be. I’m as limited by my own gender as the men over whom I felt smugly superior to during the third phase above. Earlier, if inklings of these issues ever crept through my conscious awareness, I reacted defensively and felt uncomfortable. After all, I was an experienced therapist and supervisor who talked, thought, and taught about self-awareness—that should handle it, right? Wrong!

Some of the things I have tried to do differently with couples and the men I currently see in treatment are:

1. *Acknowledge my own limitations.* It seems relieving to couples when I speak of the inherent limitation I bring as a female therapist. Sometimes the limitation seems to

favor the man, sometimes the woman, but no matter which way it goes, it seems too important not to acknowledge it. Sometimes I can serve as a sort of translator. For example, I have begun to speak to women about the heartfelt meaning for men in being the provider for the family. Perhaps it is a vestige of the role of the hunter who fed his family by bringing home the prey. But I know that when I was a single working parent, earning and providing did not touch my identity in the powerful way I've heard men describe. I knew I had to carry out the responsibility, and it was sometimes pleasant and energizing, sometimes not. I never thought about it in the way a male client did, who told his wife repeatedly that he shows his love for her every day by going to his work. When I was threatened by a possible layoff, and later when I actually was downsized, I felt mad and scared and unappreciated. I wondered if I was disliked, and thought of mistakes I'd made, but never did it occur to me to question my adequacy *as a female*. Even though I really don't understand this from my own experience, I've heard about it from men and read enough about its importance to be convinced. So I can say, "You know, this is one of those 'guy things' in which your husband expresses something in a way that



makes sense to him."

2. *Educate clients about possible biological bases for gender differences.* In contrast to the earlier views I held during phase three of my development (when I

attributed the differences between men and women to socialization or acculturation only), I now have a greater appreciation for the contributions of biology. The advent of new information from neuro-imaging techniques like MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and PET (positron emission tomography) gets us closer to understanding the apparent differences in the ways men's and women's brains work. Researchers now can look at gender differences using these techniques: see, for example, the work of Rubin and Raquel Gur and their colleagues (Erwin, Gur, Gur, Skolnick, Mawhinney-Hee, & Smailis, 1992; Gur, Skolnick, & Gur, 1994; Shtasel, Gur, Gallacher, Heimberg, & Gur, 1992) and George, Ketter, Parekh, Herscovitch, & Post (1996). It becomes possible to refer to those differences in behavior that are "guy things" and "girl things" in a psychoeducational way. For example, women might be reassured to know there *may* be a demonstrable, physiological, perhaps evolutionary, basis for the way men can compartmentalize their focus in a way that women don't understand, because they don't experience it. Because we women can, and often need to, attend to more than one task simultaneously, we often are both puzzled and infuriated by men's single-mindedness. A common response is to believe the man in her life is ignoring her "on purpose," assuming his behavior is conscious and deliberately hurtful.

Similarly, both men and women may find it helpful to know that the way they respond to children also may have physiological roots; e.g., female brains are thought to be twice as sensitive to sound as those of males. Therefore, a father may not be aware of the noises made by children as quickly or attentively as a woman might; this, in combination, with his single-minded focus on the task at hand, *may* make it seem that he is uncaring or inattentive. Part

of this type of educational work in therapy helps couples *depathologize* the different behavior they observe in their partners. The final word isn't in on whether these findings show innate differences between genders or whether the differences represent adaptation to socialization factors. Nonetheless, the information about physiological brain differences gives me an alternative way to think about gender-related behaviors. It also helps me understand how it is that sensitive, caring women raised the men who have difficulty with perceiving and responding to feelings in themselves and their partners.

3. *Be aware of gender differences in the recognition and articulation of emotions.* One of the thorniest problems for female therapists and women in relationships is the apparent ability of women to register others' emotions more accurately than do men. According to Hagan (1996), "Brain imaging studies found that women could detect more accurately than men whether faces flashed on a screen were happy or sad. Apparently, women's brains don't have to work as hard to recognize emotions" (p. 2E). Female partners often feel uncared for when men don't acknowledge their feelings. Similarly, Dr. Shapiro (1992) writes that men truly don't comprehend, or even see, women's feelings. This is so partly because of their acculturation as soldiers and also due to their need to be, at all costs, *not female*. Any characteristic or behavior seen as female or feminine is anathema to men. They distance by dissociating themselves from such things.

Recently a thirty-something man working on relationship issues wryly commented that he tries to please his girlfriend: "I even go to chick flicks with her." He meant the kind of movie seen as appealing mostly to women because of themes that explore family, relationships, and love. Because women spend so much

time thinking about those themes, they are drawn to such films. Men can see these films without losing face by acting as if they are only doing so *for* their wives or girlfriends, a distinction that apparently avoids any *feminine threats* to masculine identity. And truly, men seem genuinely puzzled about what these film stories are about. Well I remember the lunchtime discussions at work when the movie "The Piano" was in theaters. The men had been good sports and taken their women partners to see the movie. While the women rhapsodized about its romanticism and eroticism, not only didn't the men understand why women liked it so much, they couldn't figure out what it was about. Instead of feeling hurt and assuming men "just don't get it," women may benefit from taking a more neutral, understanding stance, perhaps teaching men how to understand emotions or establishing "prompts" between them that are easy for men to read.

Teaching men about feelings is very



much part of my role as a therapist with couples and men. I do this by interpreting and translating. I might see a man struggling to identify his feelings, especially after his wife has rattled off her well-articulated version. I would say something like, "Let me see if I can reflect what I think may be happening—and then you tell me if I have it right." After I summarize what I think his experience has been, I ask if I have come

close to the mark. Men often say, "That's exactly it." With women I would be more likely to ask brief clarifying questions because most of the time they will tell me a great deal about their feelings. I wonder if this works because men can save face; they are not exposed as being inept at something. This is modeling for both partners—for him to hear something about how to articulate emotions, and for her to see how she might give him prompts. It may seem unfair that women have to do this extra work in their primary relationship, but that seems to be the way things are.

The following case example of men's difficulty understanding women's feelings illustrates this point. Ken (not his actual name), a successful engineer with a Fortune 500 company, was in an accelerated graduate program as well. It was his behavioral response to the combination of full-time work, his studies, and his family that had brought him to seek treatment. In the course of our work together, he related the following incident: his all-male study group planned a camping and fishing trip during the summer break. To finalize the plans, they met at one of the men's homes for a get-together with their wives, who, of course, prepared food for the event. Ken and his colleagues were amazed that the wives thought they were included in the camping trip. However, this had never been the men's intent. The wives were equally amazed. Some were outraged, others hurt, but all felt ill-used by "catering" a get-together where spouses would be planning an event from which they were excluded. When I asked Ken what he thought it would be like to be in his wife's place, he easily saw "what was wrong with this picture." He said he would take his new understanding back to the other men. It had not occurred to a single one of them to anticipate the outcome of their plans. I had to subdue my initial internal response of

"How could you not figure this out? After all, your jobs and your studies must constantly require you to anticipate possible outcomes of courses of action." However, the skills men learn in their instrumental or task roles in the world of work apparently don't translate into the world of relationships and the tasks of intimacy. As a woman and as a therapist, I still have times when I just can't believe men don't *know* about feelings, and I have to consciously remember and adjust for the fact that not everyone is like me—especially men.

4. *Address intimacy vs. independence.* Another dilemma occurring between men and women is the "consultation/consideration" versus "permission" matter. Deborah Tannen (1990), in her book *You Just Don't Understand*, sets it out as follows:

When Josh's old high school chum . . . announced he'd be in town the following month, Josh invited him to stay for the weekend . . . He informed Linda that they were going to have a houseguest, and that he and his chum would go out together the first night to shoot the breeze like old times. Linda was upset. She was going to be away on business the week before, and the Friday night . . . would be her first night home. But what upset her the most was that Josh had made these plans on his own and informed her of them, rather than discussing them with her before extending the invitation. Linda would never make plans, for a weekend or an evening, without first checking with Josh. She can't understand why he doesn't show her the same courtesy and consideration. . . when she protests, Josh says, "I can't say to my friend, 'I have to ask my wife for permission!'" To Josh, checking with his wife . . . implies that he is not independent, not free to act on his own. To Linda, checking with her husband has nothing to do with permission. She assumes that spouses discuss their plans with each other because their lives are intertwined (pp. 26-27).

Dr. Tannen describes this as an issue of intimacy versus independence, noting all of us have longings for both. My own view is that there is a constant tension between autonomy and connection, both within ourselves and between ourself and anyone else with whom we have a relationship. The closer and more important the relationship, the more prominent the tension can become, especially if one partner is in the autonomy mode and the other is wishing for connection. In odd contrast to Josh's independence, it's not unusual to hear from wives, "He said he wasn't going to *let me drive so far by myself*" (italics mine). The activity under discussion varies, and let's be clear that we're not talking about the kind of controllingness that can lead to verbal or physical abuse. These statements come from well-meaning husbands with genuine concern for their wives' well-being. My response as a woman falls on the independent side: "I can drive that far by myself just fine, thank you." Bringing this response to the therapy room would be a disservice to both partners. It seems more helpful to reframe the interaction so that the husband understands how much his wife values her competence, and the wife can view his comment in a more positive light, as protective of her because of his love for her. This seems to be part of what men perceive (although not necessarily consciously) as their duty. Perhaps it belongs under the umbrella of taking care of his family by both providing for and protecting them; it's his job.

5. *Address infantilization.* In my observations, men are more sensitive than women about being treated in a way they perceive as infantilizing, especially by partners. I've come to label this in my head as *mother bristle*, and when I used this term recently with a couple, they nodded and smiled, understanding perfectly what I

was conveying.

The discussion was about the wife having asked the husband, "Did you already take the trash out?" The husband's response was: "You sound just like my mother -always on my case about something." In fact, she was asking if she could go ahead and mop the floor if no more mess would get spilled on it. I believe it is this fear of infantilization that makes it so hard for some men to tolerate empathy. I can only conclude that there is something very complicated for a man about being nurtured and disciplined by a woman, acculturated not to identify with the nurturer (remember the *not-female* dictum), and then having to choose someone of the nurturer's gender as the primary partner in adult life. In this context, less experienced female therapists quickly learn that empathic comments to male patients are best delivered with the volume turned down low. To do otherwise is to overwhelm some men and invite their defensiveness.

6. *Understand gender differences and sexuality.* How to understand the different meaning sexual intimacy has for women and men, as well as the different physiologies involved? Most of us have heard the saying, "Men make love to have sex, and women have sex to make love," or one of its several variations. A chance comment by a male colleague in a recent discussion about this paper has given me a startlingly new way to think about this. He spoke of men experiencing emotional connection after physiological release during sex, whereas women talk about needing connection first. Wow! I'm going to have to think about that one, and unlike other gender topics, it will be hard to find a way to talk about it with male friends and colleagues. I doubt if the next staff meeting or case consultation will be a format for inquiry. Perhaps in this, as in so many areas, I will be instructed by clients. This idea as

to when emotional connection occurs seems but one of the strange mismatches that plague men and women in their physical relationship, along with the well-known differing ages at which sexual interest peaks in women versus men. Who designed this cockamamie system anyhow? Women speak of wanting non-sexual touch that helps them be sexual at other times. Trouble is, men sometimes become aroused by this kind of touch—maybe for them that’s “the beginning of the beginning” of their emotional connections. Although not a sex therapist, I’ve had some success in working with couples and individual women by presenting the idea that sexuality is a gift they can offer their partners. Similarly, I have reframed a husband’s very frequent expressions of interest in sex as very flattering and validating to them: “You’re the one he is attracted to, you’re the one he thinks is gorgeous and desirable.” This approach can sidestep some of the “if he cared, he would . . .” statements women clients bring to therapy.

Psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, in their 1999 book, *Raising Cain*, present what to me, as a female, is another startling notion about men and sexuality. In their chapter “Romancing the Stone,” they remind us that nearly all boys masturbate, starting as early as eleven years of age. Despite braggadocio that would suggest otherwise, boys usually don’t have their first experience with intercourse until much later. “A boy’s experience with masturbation means that he begins to build up a library of sexual memories in his head long before he has any *partnered* sexual experience in adolescence [italics mine] . . . What people might not realize when they justly criticize men for *objectifying* sex—viewing sex as something you do rather than part of a relationship—is that the first experience of objectification of sexuality in a boy’s life comes from this experience of

his own body, having this penis that makes its own demands” (pp. 204-205)

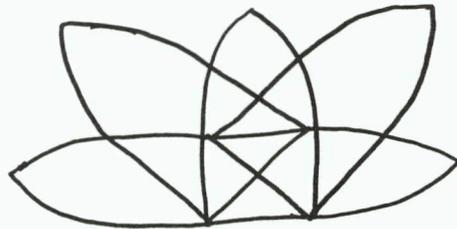
7. *Use metaphors: O. Henry’s short story of the “Gift of the Magi.”* One day in a therapy session with a couple, I asked them if they recalled the O. Henry story, “Gift of the Magi.” Initially they didn’t, but as I sketched it briefly in five or six sentences, they began to nod as they recalled it. Nearly everyone recalls it at least vaguely from high school English. The story is of a recently married couple living in turn-of-the-century New York City. They are poor, and Christmas is coming. Each wants to give the other the perfect gift. As they open their gifts, they discover that the wife has cut and sold her hair to buy a fob for the watch he inherited. He has pawned the watch in order to buy tortoise shell combs for her beautiful long hair. I now frequently bring up this story with couples because it is a succinct operational definition of empathy between a couple. Because it’s a story, the couple may be able to reflect on it more easily; it isn’t about them and the injuries each has suffered from the other. I find metaphors very helpful because they make the complicated relatively more simple. If a metaphor is effective, it will come up again with clients. So it can become a kind of shorthand. If I referred to “the gift” in working with one couple, all three of us knew we were referring to their sexual relationship. Further, if I use a metaphor and check with clients for agreement/understanding, I know we have established some commonality of understanding despite differences in age, culture, experience, and gender.

Conclusion

So I can’t really imagine what it would be like to be a man. I doubt I would relish a man’s roles and responsibilities. My ongoing internal musings about gender roles continue to be stimulated by chance com-

ments and stories from friends, family members, and colleagues—little bits and pieces from here and there. For example, recently a therapist told of having a “fear-based” response to seeing a young child harshly disciplined. Or the story told about three- and five-year-old boys who were having a discussion about birthday cakes. The younger one said he wanted a Barbie cake on his birthday. When told they were for girls, he persisted until the five-year-old firmly told him he couldn’t have a Barbie cake because that would make him become a girl. In addition, there always are further examples of *mother bristle* to observe. Although the bits and pieces haven’t settled into a totally clear picture, I continue to collect and reflect upon such incidents.

I like most of the men I meet, and truly treasure a few. Men are generally fascinating, confusing, intelligent, attractive, ex-



perating, creative, and oh so different! I’ve learned a great deal about the world and about myself from men. And in writing this narrative, I’ve learned even more about men. One can hope that greater awareness of the nuances of men’s experience makes for a more sensitive therapist. As a human, I abhor the things our culture does to and expects from men. When I hear that part of the male experience, I feel sad and want to say, “I’m so sorry. No one should have to endure such things.”

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