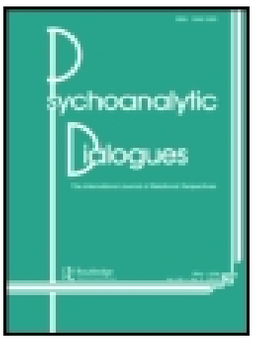

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Symposium on Gender

Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender

Virginia Goldner, Ph.D.

This article analyzes and critiques the construct of gender as a psychoanalytic and cultural category. Without succumbing to a nonpsychoanalytic notion of androgyny, the argument developed here challenges the assumption that an internally consistent gender identity is possible or even desirable. Beginning with the idea that, from an analytic perspective, the construct of "identity" is problematic and implausible, because it denotes and privileges a unified psychic world, the author develops a deconstructionist critique of our dominant gender-identity paradigm. It is argued that gender coherence, consistency, conformity, and identity are culturally mandated normative ideals that psychoanalysis has absorbed uncritically. These ideals, moreover, are said to create a universal pathogenic situation, insofar as the attempt to conform to their dictates requires the activation of a false-self system.

An alternative, "decentered" gender paradigm is then proposed, which conceives of gender as a "necessary fiction" that is used for magical ends in the psyche, the family, and the culture. From this perspective, gender identity is seen as a problem as well as a solution, a defensive inhibition as well as an accomplishment. It is suggested that as a goal for analytic treatment, the ability to tolerate the ambiguity and instability of gender categories is more appropriate than the goal of "achieving" a single, pure, sex-appropriate view of oneself.

CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOANALYTIC THINKING ABOUT GENDER has resulted in a profound critique of Freud's phallocentric theories of male and female development. While there is no simple consensus among the many competing perspectives now being developed, most

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are rooted in an empirically based, modern theory of gender identity development (e.g., Money and Ehrhardt, 1972; Stoller, 1975; Chodorow, 1978; Person and Ovesey, 1983; Fast, 1984; Benjamin, 1988; Coates, 1990). This collective body of work challenges Freud's view of women as the second, inadequate sex (his notion of femininity as "thwarted" masculinity). Indeed, in Stoller's upended version of Freud's gender theory, it is masculinity that is the makeshift construction, with femininity, not penis envy, representing "bedrock" (Stoller, 1975).

While Freud's ideas make gender crudely derivative of the anatomical difference between the sexes, contemporary gender-identity theorists utilize ego psychology and object relations theory to "people" the psychological space in which gender and sexual development coevolve. Thus, without sacrificing "the body," modern psychoanalytic theories of gender emphasize the particular and the symbolic over the generic givens of biology.

While these developments lift the psychoanalytic view of gender out of its biologism and either/or dichotomies gender identity theory remains a problematic solution to classical orthodoxy. As May (1986) has trenchantly argued, the very notion of identity, "can imply a sense of self too final, smooth, and conflict-free to do justice to our clinical (or personal) experience" (p. 181). Indeed, from a truly analytic perspective, the idea of a unified gender identity makes sense only as "a resistance in terms of treatment and an impoverishment in terms of character" (p. 188).

This essay takes up the challenge of May's critique and attempts to look "through" or beyond the construct of gender. Without succumbing to a naive, nonpsychoanalytic notion of androgyny, the arguments to be developed here challenge the presumption that an internally consistent gender identity is possible or even desirable. Instread, social and philosophical readings of gender derived from feminist theory, as well as revisionist psychoanalytic formulations, form the basis of a deconstructionist critique of our dominant gender-identity paradigm.

This perspective opposes the reification of gender as a coherent essence or "entity" and argues, instead, that gender is fundamentally and paradoxically indeterminant, both as a psychological experience and as a cultural category. Indeed, I will argue, in an elaboration of some earlier collaborative work (Goldner et al., 1990), that the "normal" process of "gendering" generates (psycho)logical paradoxes analogous to those Bateson and his coinvestigators (1956) considered to be characteristic of a double bind.

My argument is situated among many contemporary attempts, particularly, although not exclusively, by feminists, to lift Freud's radically disruptive method and beliefs ("I bring you the plague") out from their embeddedness in his naively misogynistic, normative presumptions. Indeed, the story of the transformation of psychoanalysis from an uncompromising, radical inquiry into human psychology and culture to a domesticated, medicalized "conformist psychology" has achieved the status of a cautionary tale.

At the same time, as a "postmodern tide of uncertainty" (Benjamin, this issue) undermines the intellectual status and truth claims of virtually all academic disciplines, there has been an extraordinary resurgence of scholarly interest in psychoanalysis as the discipline most practiced in the art of uncertainty. This is because the "analytic stance" fosters skepticism about the knower and the known by illuminating the motivational structures underlying ideas, actions, and systems of knowledge (including itself). Moreover, the analytic method of inquiry and interpretation defines itself in terms of the elaboration of multiply-layered meanings, as opposed to a "final truth."

Rescuing this subversive method and content from the normative, socially conformist uses to which psychoanalysis has been put has now become an intellectual cottage industry. Chodorow (1989), acknowledging her debt to Schafer's early classic, "Problems in Freud's Psychology of Women" (Schafer, 1974), captures the common strategy of these revisionist critics in a witty one-liner: "[T]here is a method to Freud's misogyny, and this method can be used against him" (p. 173). She continues:

> He goes wrong, when he undercuts his own psychoanalytic methodology and findings. . . . [P]sychoanalysis is founded on Freud's discoveries that there is nothing inevitable about the development of sexual object choice, mode, or aim. . . . The theory becomes coercive, when a functionalist teleology [conceptualizes] gender differentiation [as necessary] for the purposes of procreative [i.e., heterosexual] sex [pp. 172–173].

Given that there is now generalized agreement, even within important sectors of the psychoanalytic mainstream, that Freud's gender-conventionalized functionalism is not inherent to psychoanalysis but actually runs counter to it (Schafer, 1974; Person, 1983; Grossman and Kaplan, 1988; Kaplan, 1990), we might ask, as Person (1983) has done,

"why reformulations of female development seem to have lagged unduly [in the face of] considerable countervailing data and the serious critiques of early formulations" (p. 307).

While a fully comprehensive response to this critical question lies beyond the scope of this paper, a partial answer, imported from feminist theory, will provide a necessary conceptual bridge for my own contribution to a revised gender paradigm.

The feminist scholar de Lauretis (1990) has observed that in virtually all knowledge systems, "gender or sexual division is either not visible, in the manner of a blind spot, or taken for granted, in the manner of an a priori" (p. 130). She goes on, in a play on Rousseau's "social contract," to suggest the metaphor of a "heterosexual or Oedipal social contract": an implicit (unconscious) "agreement between modern epistemologies not to question the a priori of gender" (p. 148; Wittig, 1980).

While this view may read as rhetorical overstatement, it is a remarkable description of the silences in psychoanalysis. Given that psychoanalytic theory is preoccupied with sex and gender and that Freud was in an explicit debate about the character of femininity, not only with opponents from within but with the feminist ideas of his time, it is striking to consider how rarely, if at all, in the long and fitful history of these debates, any of the protagonists paused to question the universal polarity of gender categories.

Since Freud collapsed the distinctions between biological sex, sexuality, and gender, deriving, in sequence, heterosexuality and gender polarity from the anatomical difference, certain kinds of questions could not be asked of the theory because they could not be seen. As long as gender was derived from sexuality, which, while bisexual in essence, was "ordained by Nature" to express itself heterosexually, the terms of the debate were restricted to a revolt against the intolerable and implausible inferences about "femininity" that he derived from this schema.

Reasoning backward, we can say that there were three interrelated elements to Freud's thesis: the derogation of femininity, the normative dominance of heterosexuality, and the dichotomous, complementary division of gender. While the first was the focus of heated debates early on, and the second, although inadequately interrogated, was nonetheless always a subject of analytic interest and speculation, the third, the binary division of gender, remained, in De Lauretis's terms, "invisible."

Given the constraints the original model imposed on the critical tradition it provoked, it would make sense to assume that with the

emergence in the 1960s of a more complex gender-identity paradigm, one that untangled gender from sex and sexuality, the presumptive dichotomizing of gender would be made visible and, thus, subject to question. Yet, even now, within the American psychoanalytic mainstream, it remains practically impossible to find an explicit instance in which the a priori status of oppositional gender categories is questioned. (An exception that proves the rule is Person and Ovesey's [1983] one-line remark embedded in a footnote and repeated with similar brevity in a separate publication, "The question is really why only two gender possibilities exist" [p. 221].) Thus, within the terms of conventional psychoanalytic discourse, except for the Freudian retreat into evolutionary biologism, the questioning of gender as a binary system is still fundamentally repressed.

By contrast, it would not be an exaggeration to characterize feminist theory as obsessed with the question of gender polarities. Indeed, mapping the trajectory of ideas on this single issue from De Beauvoir (1949) to the current controversies would, of necessity, be a précis of the essential papers and moments in the intellectual history of the field.

For our purposes, the central argument is in the anthropologist Rubin's (1975) classic essay "The Traffic in Women." In this theoretical tour de force, Rubin constructs a system of analytic coordinates to describe what she calls the "sex/gender system: that set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into culturally sanctioned systems of sexual expression" (p. 159).

Her work is relevant here, because the thesis turns on an innovative reading of Freud and Claude Levi Strauss, whose "oeuvres," she argued,

> show a deep recognition of the place of sexuality in society, and . . . [although they] would not see the implicit critique their work could generate when subjected to a feminist eye, [their thinking reflects] upon the profound differences between the social experiences of men and women [pp. 159–160].

Since Rubin moves from analyzing the explicit content of the texts to deconstructing their interrelated, underlying logic and presuppositions, her "freely interpretive exegesis" (p. 159) potentiates critical ideas that are available but repressed under the strictures of Freud's biologism. For example, while Freud seems unconscious of his presumptive leap from

the necessity for procreative (i.e., heterosexual) sexuality to the oppositional status of gender, Rubin considers these "givens" as questions to be investigated.

> The idea that men and women are two mutually exclusive categories must arise out of something other than a nonexistent "natural" opposition. Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is *suppression of natural similarities* [italics added, pp. 179–180].

In an attempt to connect this arbitrary bifurcation of gender to the culturally normative dominance of heterosexuality, Rubin first deconstructs the conventional interpretation of the incest taboo. By emphasizing that its subject is the "prohibition against *some* heterosexual unions," she argues that this "presupposes a prior, less articulate taboo against *non*-heterosexual unions" (p. 180).

Extending the reach of the construct of "taboo," Rubin now makes a conceptual bridge between the normative oppositional categories of gender and sexuality:

> The division of labor by sex can . . . be seen as a taboo against sexual arrangements other than those containing at least one man and one woman, thereby [enforcing the primacy] of heterosexual [bonding]. . . . Gender is [therefore] not only an identification with one sex, but also entails that sexual desire be directed [at the "opposite" sex]. . . . [Thus] gender can be seen as a socially imposed division of the sexes, a taboo which exaggerates the . . . differences between the sexes. . . . Male and female it creates them, and it creates them heterosexual [p. 178].

Thus, the binary system of gender and the obligatory status of heterosexuality are linked, not as the inevitable consequences of evolutionary imperatives but as complementary psychocultural processes that require and imply each other.

From this perspective, the analytic construct of "gender identity" reads not only as a psychic defense, as May has so cogently argued, but as a socially instituted normative ideal. The cultural matrix that sustains the illusion of two coherent gender identities prohibits and pathologizes any

gender-incongruent act, state, impulse, or mood, as well as any "identity structure" in which gender or sexuality is not congruent with biological sex. Thus, those gender and sexual identities that fail to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities (Butler, 1990).

The social regulation of this cultural insistence on gender polarity has been documented in a remarkable study of medical decision-making practices in cases of "intersexed" infants: babies born neither male nor female (Kessler, 1990). Based on interviews with surgeons and endocrinologists, Kessler's study documents the technological applications of a rigid gender ideology designed to ensure physical conformity with the two-gender system and with heterosexual practices.

Despite the formal sophistication with which these physicians discuss gender and genital ambiguity (all were steeped in Money's gender-identity theories), Kessler's close and subtle interviews reveal that "even in the face of apparently incontrovertible physical evidence to the contrary, they held an incorrigible belief in, and insistence upon, female and male as the only 'natural' options" (p. 4). Moreover, cultural assumptions about (hetero)-sexuality—the importance of a "good-sized" penis or a vagina large enough to receive the "average" penis—seemed to constitute the dominant criteria for gender assignment. In the opinion of one team of clinicians, for example, the most serious mistake in gender assignment is to create "an individual unable to engage in genital [heterosexual] sex" (p. 20).

Remarkably, despite their professional knowledge that the medical task was to *construct* anatomically consistent gender where it did not exist (as in the quote above), Kessler shows how the language and imagery that the doctors used suggested an implicit fantasy that they were *uncovering* a gender that was anatomically "hidden." This magical distortion translates into the notion that it is not the gender of the child that is ambiguous, but the genitals, as in the statement that "the [baby's genital] development isn't complete, so we'll need to do a blood test to determine what the *actual* sex is" (p. 16). This medicalistic ideology promotes the fantasy that "the real gender will be determined/proven by elaborate testing and the bad (i.e., confusing) genitals will be repaired and completed" (p. 16). Hence, a technocratic illusion masks the cultural mandate that informs the "medical mission": "to keep individual concrete genders as clear and uncontaminated as the notions of female and male are in the abstract" (p. 23).

Kessler's analysis of the primitive fantasy structure underlying these highly esteemed medical practices is a particularly convincing illustration of the ways in which the construction of gender and of gender difference is a social practice that permeates contemporary cultural life. Indeed, the "rule" of the two-gender system can be construed as a universal principle, manifesting itself in the individual psyche, the symbolic framework, and the social practices of a society (Young, 1984). In this sense, gender can be understood as a basic metaphysical category that, as Rubin demonstrates, prescribes an artificial division of the world into masculine and feminine.

For our purposes, therefore, we might think of gender as a transcendent analytic category whose truth, though false, remains central to thought; indeed, it constructs the very analytic categories we would use to *de*construct it. Because psychoanalysis has been slow to recognize the epistemological paradox of gender, it has been slow to recognize how it remains trapped in its circularity.

Thus, it is not surprising, given the cultural taboo against gender similarity, and the dread of the collapse of gender difference, that classical psychoanalysis organized itself in terms of gender dichotomies and that even its modernizers retain a belief in the necessity of the gender divide. For example, in a recent collection of psychoanalytic essays whose stated purpose was "to present the best current psychoanalytic thinking on male psychology . . . in which psychoanalytic theory itself [would] be reassessed and reformulated" (Fogel, Lane, and Liebert, p. 5), the following assertion is to be found in the introductory chapter: "The inevitability and universal importance of the sexual distinction . . . and the necessity for every man to come to terms with [it] . . . [is] central here" (p. 120).

Thus, it appears that American psychoanalysts still subscribe to the cultural rule of a binary gender system. Yet interestingly, they do not explicitly argue for it on psychoanalytic grounds. Indeed, if the chapters in this collection are any guide, the two-gender system is taken as a priori in De Lauretis's sense, and the promised analytic "reformulations" of gender theory begin "after the fact" [sic], with discussions of its complex meanings, psychic consequences, and "stages of development."

By contrast, in France even such creative revisionists of Freud's gender theories as Chasseguet-Smirgel and Joyce McDougall virtually take the position that the elimination of gender differences would lead to psycho-

sis (Baruch and Serrano, 1988). The French analysts' insistence on gender as a psychologically essential opposition can be derived from their idea that the recognition and acceptance of gender difference are necessary to preserve the distinction between self and other (Dimen, in Baruch and Serrano, 1988) and, more generally, to maintain *all* necessary separations and distinctions. Arguing, for example, that perversion is the attempt to "homogenize" difference, Chasseguet-Smirgel (1983) writes, "The man who does not respect the law of differentiation challenges God, [by] creat[ing] new combinations of new shapes and new kinds" (p. 298).

Since it is not immediately self-evident, from our American way of thinking, that closing or denying the gender gap is tantamount to a sacrilegious or psychotic denial of all forms of difference, the French position makes it easier to see the way in which the gender dichotomy can be made to "carry" other profound polarities. Indeed, many feminist scholars have called attention to the way in which oppositions such as self and other, as well as culture and nature, mind and body, reason and unreason, subject and object, and, of course, active and passive, are coded in gender terms, with masculinity appropriating the first term, which is highly valued, while femininity is left to absorb the devalued, complementary pole, as in Freud's blunt aphorism, "What we call strong and active is male, what is weak and passive, female."

This uncritical, unformulated relationship to what Foucault (1980) has called the "regulatory practices of culture" accounts for the contradictory readings of gender in Freud's work. While critics demonstrate how the theory is riddled with abstract, gendered dichotomies that betray phallic idealization and the derogation of femininity, critical admirers find the theory riddled with radical ambivalences about normative assumptions, which surface in his idea that gender and sexuality cannot be taken as givens but must be seen as complex accomplishments that are inherently fragmentary and labile, like all other mental structures (Grossman and Kaplan, 1988; Kaplan, 1990; Harris, 1991).

My essay attempts to extend and deepen these radical trends in the analytic canon by proposing a way to formulate gender that does not succumb to, but reflects on, the problem of reification. This perspective is informed by the contemporary critical tradition of feminist postmodernism. As a consequence, my thinking insists upon the deconstructive commitments of psychoanalysis and emphasizes a funda-

mental skepticism toward "essences" and stable meanings and an analytic rather than submissive posture with regard to the ideological pressures of gender coherence, consistency, conformity, and identity.

Indeed, I argue that consolidating a stable gender identity is a developmental accomplishment that *requires* the activation of pathological processes, insofar as any gender-incongruent thought, act, impulse, mood, or trait would have to be disowned, displaced, (mis)placed (as in projective identification), split off, or, as Dimen suggests (this issue), renamed via symbolic slippage. In this regard, a critical appropriation of Fast's (1984) work would emphasize her reference to the intense feelings of narcissistic injury and loss that accompany the child's realization that she or he must "abandon" gender-discrepant self-representations and would argue, as May (1986) does, that such losses are never abandoned but are merely sent underground via a panoply of defensive operations.

From this perspective, it could be argued that even our most advanced conceptualizations of gender-identity formation and of gender pathologies remain compromised by a subtle kind of "naturalism" insofar as they implicitly support the fiction that there is a psychic safe haven from a universal pathogenic situation. If there is a developmental, theoretical, or cultural goal toward which to aspire, why should it be the "hegemony of one, consciously coherent, sex-appropriate view of oneself" (May, 1986, p. 183), as opposed to the capacity to "tolerate the ambiguity and instability of these profoundly personal and ideologically charged categories of experience" (Harris, 1991, p. 83).

By not questioning the cultural rule that gender is a binary system and by conceiving of gender as an "identity structure," the theory, despite itself, "carries," rather than critiques, the underlying "essentialism" of gender categories (as in the universal acceptance of Stoller's metaphor of a "gender core").

It has already been argued that the construct of "identity," in any form, is problematic because it denotes and privileges a unity of experience. The issue, however, is not merely that "unity" is an implausible analytic category but that any schematic rendering of gender acquisition masks the extent to which the illusion of a singular, personal identity is *established* via gender designations. In our two-gender system, "persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler, 1990, p. 16). Since gender is a psychic and cultural designation of the self that

"cleanses" itself of opposing tendencies, it is, by definition, a universal, false-self system generated in compliance with the rule of the two-gender system.

Given the cultural ubiquity and hierarchical ordering of the dichotomous categories male and female, we might, then, conceptualize gender (in an elaboration of Person and Ovesey's (1983) ego-psychological construct of "gender role identity") as an idealized "presence" and prohibition in the mind, to which each of us maintains a dynamically motivated, constantly shifting relationship. In this sense, a gender experience is not necessarily a *self-state*, but a complex, evaluatively structured self-*representation*, which is then measured against an idealized, abstract, dichotomous gender category. The dominant psychic metaphor shaping this evaluative process concretizes gender as if it were a substance of which one could have "too much" or "too little" (every man's anxiety that he is not "man enough" or, reciprocally, a woman's fear that she is "too manly").

This primitive, narcissistic reification effectively obscures the cultural practices and relational arrangements that construct and "enforce" dichotomous genders. Moreover, as our discussion of Rubin's work has shown, these very practices and the ideology that supports them can serve to promote another illusion: the presumption that sexual desire is *normally* (not normatively) heterosexual, as if it were brought "into being" as Butler (1990) suggests, through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. In other words, the internal coherence of reciprocal genders requires and implies a stable and oppositional heterosexuality, and, in reverse, a coherent heterosexuality requires and implies oppositional, binary genders (Butler, 1990).

Thus, by not questioning the rule of dichotomous genders, psychoanalysis still glosses the question of compulsory heterosexuality. Although in contemporary theorizing, gender, sex, and sexuality are conceptualized as separate developmental lines that reciprocally influence each other at multiple levels of reorganization (Coates, 1990), Freud's slippery slope of inferences still shadows current theory. We now recognize that sexual fantasies and acts reflect, express, and can be used to consolidate (or defy) gender identity (Ovesey and Person, 1973; Stoller, 1975; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1983; Ross, 1986; Goldner, 1989; Bassin, 1990). We have yet, however, to consider if and how gender conformity "props up" and privileges heterosexual object choice. Minus

this critical edge, psychoanalytic theorizing does not constitute a challenge to the culturally obligatory status of heterosexuality; indeed, by its omissions it can be said to aid in its legitimation.

Toward a Decentered Gender Paradigm

In the balance of this essay, I argue that dichotomous gender categories, precisely because they are essentialized, mutually exclusive, and unequally valued, can be used for magical ends in the psyche, in the family, and, as we have already seen, in the culture to "carry," solve, or exploit existential oppositions and dilemmas. By examining the use of gender in the relational dynamics of family life and in the psychic representation of those dynamics as internalized "self-object" ties, I hope to make a further contribution to a psychodynamic and critical reading of gender.

In the family, gender can set the terms of relationships, alliances, and coalitions, just as in the internal world, gender can function magically to split off mental states and to establish, regain, or deny attachments. Looking first at the denial of attachment, think, for example, of Greenson's (1968) now familiar construct of "disidentification" and of Abelin's (1980) formulation of preoedipal triangulation. In Greenson's somewhat sketchy account, masculine gender identity required both a disidentification from the "security-giving" mother and the establishment of a new identification with the "less-accessible" father. Abelin's complex and suggestive use of Mahler's work postulated a psychic mechanism for this process. In his view, the male toddler imitates his father's perceived gender in sensorimotor fashion, and enacts the masculinity that would distinguish and separate him from mother.

Psychoanalytic feminists have critically reworked Greenson's and Abelin's material and emphasized the psychic and cultural consequences of their implicit endorsements of maternal repudiation. For our purposes, however, what is important is the explication of the defensive use of gender as a difference marker. In all these formulations, the "normal" boy (with mother's help) solves the separation crisis of rapprochement by *exaggerating* the importance and meaning of the sex difference between mother and son. By exploiting a negative identification ("I am not like my mother, I am not female"), the boy constructs an identity out of a "not-me" experience of difference, and thus, in Benjamin's (1988) terms,

he invents a magical solution to the profound human crisis of interdependence: a strategy for separating without feelings of loss.

At the other end of the spectrum, we can look at Coates's (1990) profoundly moving and theoretically elegant work with gender-identity–disordered boys. Following Greenson, she suggests that such boys utilize the *denial* of gender difference to "solve" the problem of severe separation anxiety. They confuse being like mommy with having her available and invent the magical solution of cross-gender behavior, as if by imitating mommy they can reclaim her presence.

In a third variant on this theme, Chodorow (1978) discusses the identificatory dilemmas boys face with regard to their fathers. Calling attention to the cultural prohibitions and social practices that keep fathers distant from their children, she speculates that boys utilize their common gender to make a bond with father symbolically, since they are deprived of a real relationship with him. In other words, in Greenson's terms, instead of "being with" father, the boy must settle for "being like" him. In place of a paternal relationship, he can substitute only a paternal identification.

Chodorow considers the substitution of gender identification for the real experience of a relationship to be a fairly universal consequence of the asymmetrical parenting characteristic of what she calls "patriarchal, father-absent families." To this extent, what she describes as "positional" as opposed to "personal" identification is a virtually normative aspect of male identity formation. Since father is typically only marginally present, the boy identifies with an image or abstraction, such as the father's social role or "position," or, as I argue, he forms an identificatory relationship with the symbolic category of "masculinity."

This passionate transference to, and false-self identification with, the phallic imagery of masculinity eventuates in a familiar "hypermasculine" stance, a version of manhood that Ross (1986) eloquently critiques as "a screen, a sheath, an artificially aggressivized, brittle, cardboard creation . . . [pointing toward] the unavailability early on of the father as a *libidinal* object and figure for internalization and identification" (p. 54).

These examples provide dramatic illustrations of the ways in which gender can be used as a vehicle to establish, maintain, or deny, crucial attachments. Thus, gender can be said to provide a deus ex machina for the relational dilemmas of development.

Conceptualizing gender in these terms highlights the ways in which personhood, gender identity, and relationship structures develop to-

gether, coevolving and codetermining each other. From such a relational perspective, it is not useful to think of gender as being "acquired" by the child at all; rather, the symbolic structure of gender shapes and organizes the conflict-laden layering of internalized self-representations and object ties that become the child.

Beyond a Two-Person Psychology

This narrative of development, while not succumbing to the problems of reification inherent in the idea of a "self" that "acquires" a singular gender, is still, however, insufficient for our purposes. Since we have established that gender is not a substance, entity, or identity but a set of (polar) relations, a theory that is not systematic about the relational matrix that constructs, polarizes, and contains gender is ultimately hobbled. Since gender develops in and through relationships with gendered others, especially parents and siblings, its meaning and dynamics must be located, minimally, in a three- or four-person psychology that can make room for the interplay between different minds, each with an independent center of gravity.

While this way of formulating psychic processes has become increasingly central to the relational perspective in psychoanalysis, it is typically conceptualized dyadically, as in the characterization of the analytic situation as "a field of intersection between two subjectivities" (Stolorow, 1988). This realm of experience and theory has also, however, been mapped by systems thinkers such as Gregory Bateson, R. D. Laing, and Jay Haley, whose work, beginning in the late fifties, can be said to have anticipated many of the central concerns of relational theory. In the discussion to follow, I import and adapt ideas from the systemic tradition because its radical emphasis on the relational matrix and its early and enduring contributions to the "perspectivist epistemological paradigm" that Hoffman (1991) and others have argued for can be useful to the philosophical elaboration of relational theory.

Bateson, for example, captured the radical potential of the relational perspective with his idea that a relationship is the product of a "double description." Using the analogy of binocular vision, he argued that the two parties to an interaction could be conceived as two eyes, each giving a monocular view of the process, but together making a binocular view, which, in keeping with the visual analogy, would make it possible to see

"in depth." Condensing this idea in what would now be called "social constructivist" terms (Gergen, 1985; Hoffman, 1991), Bateson said, "The double view *is* the relationship" (Bateson, 1979).

While the binocular metaphor is, by design, an evocation of the nature of subjectivity in a two-person system, Bateson was always thinking about more complex relational patterns, in particular, about the superimposition of "view upon alternative view." Indeed, anticipating contemporary postmodern theories of knowledge, he argued that the combination of such multiple perspectives was necessary for any "increment of knowing."

Laing (1972a) was also, early on, developing a theoretical vocabulary for an intersubjective view of mind and relationships. Like Bateson, he argued that a "spiral of reciprocal perspectives" constituted the core of the interpersonal process, which, he suggested, was then internalized "as a whole" rather than as isolated elements ("What is internalized are not objects as such, but patterns of relationship"):

> The family as a *system* is internalized. . . . Relations between elements and sets of elements [such as] persons, things, or part-objects are internalized, not elements in isolation. . . . Mother and father may be merged as a sort of fused parental matrix [in relation to self], or be broken down into segments that transect the usual personal partitions. . . . Members of a family may feel more or less "in" or "out" of any part or whole of the family, according to how they feel themselves to have the family inside them, and to be inside the set of relations characterizing the "internal family" of other family members. . . . The family [is thus] an introjected object . . . which may be felt to be alive, dying or dead . . . a protective or destructive container. [It is also] an introjected set of relations . . . with partitions the self is in, together with others who have it in them [pp. 2–4].

Theorizing gender as it is mediated through the enactment and internalization of family relations that have been so richly described can clearly produce "an increment of knowing," as in the following:

> The internal group may condition . . . a person's relationship to him [or her] self. Triadic relations are collapsed into self-self relations. An adult feels like a child trying to reconcile two "sides" of him [or her] self that pull in opposite directions, experienced perhaps as good or bad, male or female. . . . [He or she] tries to put ideas together but an internal third party intervenes, and so on [Laing, 1972a, p. 8].

These ideas not only are compatible with contemporary relational formulations of internalization (May, 1986; Aron, 1991; Mitchell, 1991), but they add important layers of complexity to the two-person psychology of intersubjective theory because they offer a framework to describe the kaleidescopic, coalitional patterns of family relationships that provide the passionate context for the development of mind and gender.

Insofar as gender relations are power relations, contextualizing gender in this fashion can illuminate the mechanisms by which gender not only organizes mind and relationships but organizes them hierarchically (with men and masculinity in the elevated position). Interestingly, although Laing and his contemporaries were "gender blind" in their theoretical and clinical formulations, Laing's interest in relational contexts and their internalization was animated by existential and ethical concerns very similar to those informing Benjamin's (1988, 1990) feminist work. Her morally profound, psychoanalytic emphasis on the psychological necessity for mutual recognition, such that "where objects were, subjects must be," is foreshadowed in this passage from Laing (1965).

> [I]n order to recognize persons and not simply objects, one must realize that the other human being is not only another object in space, but another center of orientation to the objective world. It is just this recognition of each other as *different* centers of orientation; that is, as persons, that is in such short supply [p. 203].

While Laing was not thinking about objectification as a gendered phenomenon, his work, like that of Bateson and Haley, can be used to deconstruct the intimate politics of gender, in much the same way as revisionist readings of Freud and Levi Strauss have been used to rework gender theory in psychoanalysis.

For example, Bateson's aphorism that "every message is both a report and a command" is useful here because it emphasizes how communication controls. By deconstructing the "influential" aspects of a communicative process and attending especially to whether these control mechanisms are conscious, acknowledged, denied, or mystified, one can decode the processes that are set in motion by the inevitable pursuit of power and recognition between men and women, boys and girls.

This kind of "naming" is crucial for the development of what Levenson (1983) calls "semiotic competence," the ability to know "what's going on around here." In a cogent distillation of an analytic process organized

around answering this question, Levenson, acknowledging his debt to Bateson, writes, "We go from asking what has been done to the patient to asking what has been the communicational nexus of which he [sic] was a part" (p. 161).

While Levenson's clinical approach to this question hinges on an innovative reworking of the meaning and technical implementation of transference/countertransference material, another way of addressing these issues is to be found in the technique of "circular questioning," a clinical translation of Bateson's notion of double description. Although this form of interviewing is not necessarily assimilable to the analytic situation, it illustrates how an emphasis on the perception of pattern can clarify the relational politics of gender and promote therapeutic change.

In this variant of what Sullivan would have called a "detailed inquiry," the questions themselves are designed to "decenter the subject" by orienting the respondent toward seeing himself or herself in a relational context and toward seeing that context from the perspectives of the other interacting participants. For example, the therapist might ask, "How would your mother have characterized your father's relationship with your brother, if she had felt free to speak with you about it?" Such a question is structured so that one cannot *not* give a relational description as an answer. Moreover, the inquiry insists on the recognition of the mother's subjectivity, since even if she did not have a *voice* in the family conversation, the question constructs her as having a *mind*, which can then be "voiced" by the patient in an act of empathic imagination. At such a moment, mother must be granted an "otherness that survives" the infantocentric categories of "not-me" or "part of me."

In Levenson's terms, this way of thinking "widens the patient's perspective" and makes "him better equipped . . . to live in the real world [as opposed to] the neat, contained, nursery world of hermeneutic doctrine" (p. 164).

Gender as a Paradoxical Injunction

From the systemic, relational perspective we have been developing, the gendering process can now be conceptualized as immanent in the communicative matrix of family relations. As the psychologist Jerome Bruner puts it:

> It is in the act of relating oneself to others . . . initially in the microculture of the family . . . via the process of communication, that

> the self is formed in a fashion to relate to the demands of one's culture. . . . It is in the negotiation of intended meaning that the self is formed [Bruner, in Levenson, 1983, p. 37].

Since the "self" that culture "forms" is gendered, we might refine Bruner's thesis to focus on the specific "negotiations of intended meanings" that produce and maintain discrete, polarized genders. In other words, can we articulate the processes whereby "gender premises" (ideas about how to be male or female) are not only being internalized but also being enacted as part of the family drama?

As has been argued earlier, the either/or structure of the gender paradigm can provide an ideological and psychic frame for splitting, both in the internal world and in the relational matrix of the family. Thus, by exploiting and amplifying gender distinctions, we can organize, simplify, and rationalize relational conflicts and dilemmas in terms of gender categories and hierarchies.

Just as gender dichotomies dictate that one psychic state cannot include the other, gender categories also "lend themselves" to divisive family processes that dictate that one kind of love must preclude another. As a consequence, relationships come to be defined as mutually exclusive, so that complex attachments must be renounced for a Hobson's choice of loyalties organized in terms of gender.

These relationship patterns and the injunctions that surround them are always "in negotiation," since establishing how relationships are to be defined and who is to control their definition is central to the interpersonal process (Haley, 1963). Such "negotiations," which are rarely explicit and never "final," are embedded in a communicative exchange of messages that convey, by implication, how each person wishes to define the terms of the relationships in which he or she participates.

Although every relational arrangement, along with the metacommunicative context of meanings and injunctions that surrounds it, is a unique subculture, it is also a product of culture, and in that sense, it is socially patterned and symbolically structured in terms of normative gender categories. Thus, fundamental expectations about how spouses, parents, and children should feel and behave toward one another are shaped by cultural fantasies about masculinity and femininity. For example, who should be in charge, and of what? Who should be taken care of, and when? How are power and privilege to be distributed? Which relationships should have primacy over others (for example, should

mother put husband or children "first"?), and Who should decide who should decide?

In difficult and ambiguous relationships, people cannot reach agreement on a mutual definition of their respective positions with regard to such issues, and as a consequence, every exchange becomes a "politicized" medium through which their struggle for control of the relationship is enacted. Even in stable relationships, however, definitional agreements are problematic because conventionalized gender assumptions dictate psychic terms that simultaneously require compliance and provoke resistance: men can never be "needy," women must never put themselves "first," masculinity is to be elevated and envied, femininity is to be devalued and repudiated, "male" and "female" must remain uncontaminated oppositional categories, and so on.

Since these gender injunctions can neither be carried out nor openly defied, all intimate relationships take on a peculiar, paradoxical cast. For example, if father "teaches" mother how to be his equal, he is actually retaining, rather than sharing, control of the relationship. Similarly, if mother induces father to take care of her by being "needy," she may appear to be his subordinate; but since she has induced him to submit to *her* definition of the relationship, she is actually in the superior position.

These paradoxical gender configurations are also enacted between the generations, as children take up their positions in the family drama. For example, one woman's story reads: "Mom didn't stand up to Dad, and she was always silently angry and depressed. But whenever I was argumentative, she would say I was 'too masculine' and no man would ever want me." From a man's story, here is the message that he felt *his* mother was sending: "Be strong like your father so that you will be able to protect women like me from men like him." From a powerful father to his favored, outspoken daughter: "The reason I have to beat your mother is that she 'makes me do it' [by having a mind of her own]." From father to son: "Men should not have to talk to make their wishes known, so be aware that your mother is the vehicle through which I speak, although she disagrees with me" (Goldner, 1985; Goldner et al., 1990).

The contradictions inherent in the conflicting logic of these gender constructions generate paradoxes at all levels of psychic and familial organization. Not only does the child absorb these mystifying presentations of filial gender arrangements, but since these descriptions are "commands" as well as "reports," they create an injunctive context that is double-binding. In other words, at some level the child is being given an

implicit paradoxical instruction, one that if correctly executed, is disobeyed.

Since people feel pain and confusion when they are put in the wrong for acting in ways they have understood to be right, such a message is inherently damaging. As Laing (1976) has argued, this kind of communicative context is pathogenic not necessarily because it activates psychic conflict but because it generates confusion, muddle, or doubt, often unrecognized as such. Without realizing it, or understanding why, a person may feel intensely, but vaguely, in an untenable position. Think of the metaphor of the tourniquet that is always liable to be tightened by a further twist in response to an attempt to wriggle free.

Moreover, with regard to gender injunctions, the child is being put in an untenable position merely because of his or her *sex*. Since it is the arbitrary fact of the child's sex, not anything particular to the child's "person," that prompts the parent to demand or expect compliance and understanding, gender is being infused with powerful, polarizing, relational meanings that the child, perforce, internalizes into his or her identity structure. Indeed, in my view, it is these overdetermined, internally contradictory, deeply embedded relationship premises that are always at risk of collapsing under their own weight that constitute the pathogenic, wobbly "bedrock" of gender.

Psychoanalytically speaking, we can say that these "gender-saturated" (Dimen, this issue) relational paradoxes are internalized as mutually contradictory self–object ties, which generate psychic splits with gendered connotations. This split internal world is the outcome of contradictory parental injunctions organized around gender, such that different parts of the self or ways of being are prohibited by one parent, while being encouraged by the other.

Since complying with contradictory gender injunctions and reifications is tied to sustaining the child's primary object relations, the child must accommodate to these impossible terms by performing acts of internal "violence" on the self. In so doing, the relational complexity of the internal world fragments, and ambivalence devolves into splitting and false self operations.

As Laing (1972b) has written:

> If [parental] attributions are inconsistent or mutually exclusive . . . [one will] not be able to be father's child and mother's child simulta-

> neously. . . . To try to "fit in" with two dissonant definitions at once, [one] will feel . . . without knowing why, suffocated, oppressed, stifled, hemmed in [pp. 87–88].

For example, for the boy to follow his mother's injunction that he grow up to be "strong like his father in order to protect women like mother from men like father," he would have to construct a hypermasculine, "false self" out of loyalty to mother's need to defeat father. But such an "identity" requires *identifying* with father, a process that, as Benjamin (this issue) points out, is not merely an internal process but is a kind of relationship itself. Thus, in identifying with father, the boy is expressing paternal "object love," which, in this polarized family, would constitute a betrayal of his mother. Moreover, even if father is unavailable to the boy, he will still, in Ross's (1986) terms, identify with father's phallic narcissism. In other words, he will, by default, identify with what I would call the symbolic category of masculinity. Since such an identification includes the incorporation of male misogyny, the boy would have to deny his own femininity and therefore repudiate his identification with his mother. Thus, in being a loyal son to mother, by attempting to "protect" her as she has instructed him, the boy will have, in fact, become a traitor to her cause.

The effect of having to accommodate to conflicting, polarized messages has been powerfully described and evoked by Nachmani (1987) in his description of the family history of female incest survivors:

> Their parental introjects, and later their parental object representations, were multiply split experiences. . . . There was much false-self compliance . . . as part of their ordinary family experience, long before the incestuous relationship began. . . . If a child has to act and feel one way with one parent, and another way with another parent, mystifications, confusions, and a conspicuous lack of validated constancies, will undermine . . . [psychic] development. . . . What the child calls anger or tenderness toward mommy has rules and conditions which do not apply when it has similar experiences with daddy. Self experiences vary considerably from parent to parent, validations are lacking consistency, and [as a result, psychic integration] does not occur [pp. 626–627].

Although this description of relational splitting and its consequences is taken from the developmental history of abused women, I think it can be generalized to capture the psychic consequences of gender development in a two-gender system, in which only one sex "mothers." By arguing that gender itself is pathogenic, I am, finally, arguing against a deeply embedded foundational premise of psychoanalytic ideology. In this regard, I do believe that psychoanalysis, with its complex and subtle methodology for the deconstruction of symptoms, has been used to inscribe the "dividing practices" that Foucault (1980) has described, rather than to undermine them, as Freud originally intended.

If we were, however, to shift our social location, the radical insights and attitudes of psychoanalysis could be used to critique the subtly coercive processes that dictate gender conformity. For example, now that "gender-identity disorder" has achieved the status of a diagnosis, Coates's work could provide the criteria for the conceptualization of a more universal pathogenic syndrome, a "gender paradigm"; in which splitting is a central feature. From this perspective, normative masculinity, with its repudiation of femininity, would be viewed as psychically problematic if not eventually "diagnosed." Similarly, Ovesey and Person's (1973) elegant deconstruction of the psychic conflicts and symptom strategies that underlie the gender and sexual "psychopathology" of homosexuals could be as effectively applied to "normal" and normative heterosexual and gender configurations.

Once gender comes to be read as a problem, not only a solution, and as a defensive inhibition, not only an accomplishment, the dilemmas of masculinity and femininity can, once again, provide the dramatic raison d'être for psychoanalysis as a critical tradition. Such a tradition could promote resistance to the normative construction of gender polarities and hierarchies by documenting how the exploitation of gender distinctions in the inevitable struggle for power in society and in domestic life produces untenable relationship binds and unbridgeable psychic splits, which damage the human spirit in all of us and in the next generation.

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