RETHINKING GENDER AND THERAPY
The changing identities of women

Edited by
Susannah Izzard
and
Nicola Barden

Open University Press
Buckingham · Philadelphia
Rethinking gender and therapy: inner world, outer world, and the developing identity of women / edited by Susannah Izzard and Nicola Barden.

ISBN 0 335 20606 9 (pb) 0 335 20607 7 (hb)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rethinking gender and therapy : inner world, outer world, and the developing identity of women / edited by Susannah Izzard and Nicola Barden.

    p. cm.
    Includes bibliographical references and index.
    ISBN 0–335–20607–7 (hb) - ISBN 0–335–20606–9 (pbk.)
    BF173 .R449 2001
    155.3'33–dc21 2001021074

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Biddles Limited, Guildford and King's Lynn
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We wish to thank Michael Jacobs in particular for his editorial skill, his clear guidance in dilemmas and his encouragement at every turn. We also wish to thank the contributors to this book for what they have offered to us and to the readership.

Susannah would like to thank: Paul, whose love and support remains independent of what I achieve or do, and whose containing presence in my life makes thought and adventuring possible; Nicola – my relationship with her is a source of joy and an agent of challenge and change; my female friends, for enriching my experience of myself as a woman and as a woman-in-relationship; my patients and students, for teaching me more than I know, about the world and a person’s place in it; and my father, whose interest in and capacity to learn about things outside his experience is impressive, and for reading and responding to my chapter.

Nicola is grateful to those colleagues, clients and friends who have persistently required and enabled me to think differently about gender; to Susannah, for fulfilling this and more as both friend and colleague; to my family, for never expecting less of girls; and especially to Caro, for her consistent love, generous support, and for always adding spice to life.
Introduction

Susannah Izzard and Nicola Barden

What is most important is not whether the feminine is defined by society or endemic to the person but whether or not women themselves determine the content and the conclusions of those definitions.

(Chittister 1998: 3)

Books on women abound in the libraries of sociological and psychological texts. There are books on women as client groups, as sociological phenomena, books on the specific issues that they face or represent in culture and society. There are psychoanalytic books on the female psyche, attempting to rework and resolve the tradition of women as the second sex, the ‘other’, the deviation from the norm which is male.

What we have set out to do in this book is to bring together the psychoanalytic and the sociological, the internal and the external, by seeking to explore the interplay between the two. How does the way a woman is regarded by society affect how she experiences herself in relation to that society, and how does that experience in turn impact on her conception of her own identity, how she regards herself? We know that we need to ‘belong’, to feel we ‘fit’ - whether we are men or women - so we wished to explore what it is that is presented to women as ‘that into which they must fit’ in order to feel that they are recognizably Female. We also wished to think about what happens to a woman’s identity when she feels outside of that ‘fit’ - when she cannot see herself mirrored in the images that society presents to her of ‘Woman’. How does our society constrain women into or release them from narrow definitions and what part does psychoanalytic theory and practice play in such constraining or releasing?

Our thinking about the book was to include particular stages during a woman’s life and particular aspects of her life in the world, and to ask
various authors to address the above questions. Each contributor to this book has done this in her own way, and the resulting diversity of approaches is something we have come to value.

The scene is set by Chapter 1, ‘The development of gender identity’, with a discussion by Nicola Barden of the nature of gender identity and how this develops within the growing girl. She raises the possibility that perhaps the wrong question about gender is being asked in that the question about how the two genders are shaped or maintained avoids a more fundamental one. This question is about whether the only way to construe gender is via the model of two opposing poles. This model, she suggests, constrains both men and women, forcing them to place themselves on either side of a divide, which is in essence restrictive and does not permit a variety of expression in either gender. Barden suggests that the different debate may be about whether the gender divisions are seen as functional only, which then opens up the possibility of a multiform distribution of gender-based potentials whereby women (and men) are given the freedom to express their gendered selves in an infinite variety of ways.

In ‘When do I know I’m a girl?’ Susan Vas Dias looks at the beginnings of conscious gender identity by considering the development of the baby girl. Through clearly differentiating between the infant’s own experience of themselves as gendered, and the external world’s assumptions about that experience, Vas Dias emphasizes the importance of questioning the assumptive base that can underlie analytic interpretations of the infant’s experience of gender. She draws out the role of the attachment world in shaping gender identity and places this alongside the biological and neurological development that is taking place in the first two years of life. In calling attention to the crucial distinction between the infant’s actual sense of their own gender, and the observer’s expectations of this, she demonstrates the importance of leaving space for authentic gender identity to develop as part of the ‘Who am I?’ question that the infant brings in relation to the world.

In ‘Adolescence: possibilities and limitations, experience and expression’, Moira Walker explores the confusions and agonies, the excitement and adventure of the female adolescent’s experience. She discusses the culture-related nature of the experience of adolescence and the prevalence of a male bias in much psychoanalytic writing about this stage of psychosocial development. In particular this bias has resulted in a separation of identity from intimacy, whereas research suggests that young women experience their capacity for intimacy as closely related to, and a determinant of, their identity. Walker describes adolescence as a time of heightened psychological risk for girls, and due to the very specific images promoted by the group, a time of marginalization for many.
In ‘Women’s friendships: theory and therapy’, Chess Denman draws on Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) and her own revised sociological analysis of relationships to explore the nature of women’s friendships among lesbian and straight women. She makes use of the notion of ‘reciprocal roles’ offered by CAT. This suggests that as girls are socialized in ways that encourage intimacy, disclosure and trust, they will develop reciprocal role templates in friendships that feature these things, but may find that they are impoverished as regards their capacity to take up a constructive role in relation to aggression and assertion. CAT sees the establishment of these reciprocal roles as being culturally determined, and Denman suggests that much of our social behaviour is governed by large structures that limit freedom.

Eileen Aird in ‘Women and work’ explores the division between the private and public worlds of work, and the employed woman’s conflicts over power and authority. She suggests that there is often a clash between ‘feminine’ modes of communication and caring, and the male dominated culture of the world of paid work, and explores the impact of this clash on the woman’s psyche. She argues that the distinction between domestic and public economy creates a false division in the female psyche, leaving women with the task of managing as internal a conflict that is actually a manifestation of external gender divides.

Marie Maguire, in ‘Women and intimacy’, looks at the issues that face women as they seek to form or sustain intimate relationships, and argues that psychoanalytic theory is polarized between mother- and father-centred perspectives. She suggests that we need to link Object Relations’ insights about mother–daughter identification with a feminist Freudian Oedipal perspective if we are to understand women’s conflicts about intimacy and independence. She illustrates how traditional analytic understandings of sexual object choice have obscured more fundamental questions about the nature of women’s experiences of intimacy with both men and women.

In ‘Nine-tenths of the pleasure: sexual expression and the female body’, Geraldine Shipton discusses women’s sexual pleasure and how it is expressed against a background of shifting attitudes to the body, sexuality and gender. She highlights the fact that there is no pre-cultural female body or sexuality, but a socially constructed metaphor. The woman’s sexual use of her own body is explored, and Shipton discusses how this is affected by the conscious and unconscious knowledge the girl has of her own and her mother’s body. This is further influenced by the experience of being a girl in a world where the feminine body is shaped not only by anatomy but by the predominating power structures.

In ‘Creating space: women without children’ Susannah Izzard explores the impact on the woman’s identity of not having children. Viewed by
society as a ‘lack’, a woman without a child is seen as at best to be pitied, at worst to be judged. Izzard explores the roots of pronatalism, and suggests a way of thinking about adult female identity that is independent from the assumption that motherhood is an essential aspect of womanhood. Women without children are a challenge to the bipolar division of the sexes, and must pioneer a pathway in which they can experience themselves and be experienced as fully female while not fulfilling conventional expectations.

In Chapter 9 Joan Raphael-Leff explores the emotional experience of women who are mothers in the new millennium. She suggests that far from being ‘normal, natural and instinctive’, each woman’s experience of maternity is a compromise formation between the maternal situation itself and the often conflicting facets of her own past, present and future aspirations. Raphael-Leff draws attention to the power of the mother’s internal identifications and unresolved infantile experience. She also suggests that there are differing ‘orientations’ towards the baby that produce different styles of mothering and therefore different causes of maternal distress.

In ‘An awfully big adventure: ageing, identity and gender’, June Blythe Ellis suggests that the significance of ageing for women’s identity has been neglected. She examines how ways of framing women biologically have resulted in the societal view of older women as invisible. Ellis argues that restrictive and prejudiced perspectives on the ageing woman can be challenged by an exploration of the diverse experience of women in mid-life and beyond, which demands the inclusion of notions of freedom and development in our understanding of this life stage. Ellis suggests that Jungian theory, cleansed of its sexist bias, may provide a basis for understanding women’s identity in later life.

There are many unwritten chapters in this book: preschool children; girls in education; women and religious experience. There are analytic themes that clearly need further exploration, such as the crucial issue of Oedipal configurations in the formation of gender identity. Perhaps there is a sense in which the book can only be a beginning, as more and more aspects of women’s lives come to mind that require this sort of analysis. The task of reflecting on the interrelationship of inner and outer, of psychoanalytic thought and sociological analysis belongs to each therapist, analyst or counselor, and is the work of each unique couple in the therapeutic encounter. It is our hope that these chapters will encourage further thought, and a more fruitful discourse between the two areas of experience.

All case examples in the chapters are either from the authors’ own experiences, or are fictionalized abstractions from one or more cases. In each instance they are intended to serve an illustrative rather than
evidential function. Where individual clients are discussed, names and personal details have been changed.

Reference