Sexuality and Gender in our groups today

A shared workshop
by
Group Analytic Network London and Fitzrovia Group Analytic Practice

Someone in a therapy group said recently: 'Groups are good for sex - I have been much more adventurous lately'.

This is good news! It seems that the social and emotional intercourse that is possible in a group and that I as the group conductor will encourage, also frees up the capacity for intercourse, sexual or otherwise, outside of the group. This then is another point in favour - of the group as a place for ego training in action - as Foulkes has put it.

But before I talk about sex or sexuality, I want to start by saying a bit about gender, mostly because I want to clear my own thinking in regard to the term. What is gender and how does it affect each of us?

Recent research in Germany with the title 'Gender in the group, Gender of the group' (Gruppenpsychotherapie + Gruppendynamik; 50. Jahrgang, 3/2014; Göttingen:Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co KG) found that women interacted and were interacted with more frequently than men. However, the major part of interactions in a group was between men and women. The research interestingly concludes with the statement that group psychotherapy might be a gendered setting. Based on socialisation, it favours women with their more interdependent self-concept, in contrast to men’s more independent and power-related socialisation.

So group psychotherapy might be a gendered setting, and we could translate this into group analytic language by saying that the group can be perceived and can act as a maternal container. Experiences in this respect can be pre-
and postnatal, and here group analytic terms like matrix and womb have their origin. Male and female group members may well re-live their early relationship with their mothers in the group. So groups might be gendered, but people definitely are – or are they?

**Gender**, according to Wikipedia, is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex, i.e. the state of being male, female or what used to be called hermaphroditic, the condition of having ambiguous genitalia. This latter condition is today called intersex and is an extremely rare condition of less than 1% in the general population. However, gender also includes for all of us, not just our biological sex, but also sex-based social structures, gender roles and other social roles, as well as gender identity.

An understanding of gender, which encompasses biology, gender roles, social roles and social structures, as well as gender identity, is not a simple matter. Social roles and structures are different in different cultures; gender roles vary; and in addition, we are dealing today with a variety of different shades, colours and orientations in respect to gender. It is a complicated picture.

The world of psychotherapy for instance has changed greatly in the last twenty years in regard to gender and sexuality. Up and into the 1990ies it was still impossible to train as a psychoanalyst if you were gay, unless you kept it very secret. Today the attitude towards gender and sexuality has been transformed in Western societies. Heterosexuality is not anymore seen as the norm or as a mark of mental or emotional health, which it officially - and that also means legally - constituted before.

I thought it might be interesting in this context to remember a few historical facts:
- Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, ruled Britain from 117 to 138AD and was the first Roman Emperor to make it public that he was homosexual. He lived with his partner and publicly grieved when he died young.
Since then, it has taken another 2000 years to reach any further development in this area in Britain:
- Starting in 1956 the sexual defences act goes through various stages, but only in 2001 are the last two pieces of unequal law regarding gay male sex changed.
- In 2002 Same-sex couples are granted equal rights to adopt.
- In 2004 The Civil Partnership Act comes into being
- In 2007, on 30 April, the Equality Act regarding sexual orientation becomes law

There has been a major cultural change that has brought a more flexible and less rigid definition of gender and love relationships. Same sex relationships and civil partnership are now lawful, as well as transgendered identities. Lesbian couples are legally able to have children by donor insemination. Gay couples can adopt children, since it is fully accepted that men are able to provide good enough mothering too. The LGBT, that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has been given equal human rights. Society as a whole has undergone a major change of values. Our world is changing tremendously, and I want to give you an example for this: I know of the 2 years old male twins of a lesbian couple, who find it perfectly normal to have two mothers – one for each of them. They both adore their biological father and his gay partner. However, the fathers are splitting up now. There will be heartache and I imagine the twins will struggle with that loss. In addition they will also loose one of the four pairs of grandparents. The family situation surrounding these twins with 4 parents and 8 grandparents is something completely new, reflecting a major transformation of societal values.

But - 5 years ago in 2009 I was still asked by an applicant in an interview for a post at the IGA, if the applicant’s homosexuality would be of disadvantage. Obviously I said no. However, people are still afraid of discrimination today.
I/we need to learn to monitor and reflect on our prejudices and the tendency to stereotype each other in regard to gender roles. A mature attitude might recognise that rules are there to be broken, that gender might need bending and that prejudices need to be challenged. Some gender differences are biological, like endurance and stamina in women and physical strength and power in men. However, while we are all biologically driven, we are not gender driven - we can bend gender: There are male men and female men, male women and female women, and millions of subtle gradations between these two extremes.

I am very clear about the fact that I am not just a woman! If I was, I would have not developed my psychological thrust – something Freud judged as un-feminine, since he considered thrust healthy only in a man. If I was just a woman, I would not be where I am in my life, I would not be here. To give you another example: The neighbour of one of my friends called her last week an Honorary Male! When she - astonished - asked why, he answered: ‘You were parking your car like a man. Congratulations!’.

In contrast to the original ‘Freudian’ or patriarchal paradigm, both men and women have today much greater freedom, at least in the Western world. Moreover, it is now understood that a purely lopsided identification with one gender only would create psychological problems.

Emma Watson, the original Hermione in Harry Potter, has become - as you may know - the UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. In her speech at a special event for the HeForShe campaign at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 20 September this year, she said: ‘Gender equality is not only a women’s issue, it is a human rights issue that requires all our participation.’ I find it amazing that such a young woman is able to speak publicly in this confident way. It shows that things have changed greatly.

In a group with 3 men and 3 women it may seem that we have what is called a gender balance. However, if one of the women is a lesbian and the only one at that, we actually have a singleton in our group, who might feel very isolated.
and not understood by any one. If some of the women are older and the men younger, mother transferences come into play. If it is the other way around, that is, if the men are older and the women younger, father transferences will play a role. In a therapy group, gender acquires meaning in that way and relates experience to history.

While group members consciously bring their problems and want help with them, they bring first and foremost their own bodies. People in the group also present their bodies in and to the group. Bodies reveal things, bodies tell stories. Each body is different and can often convey unconscious complexes and a history of awkwardness. In a group, bodies are sitting on chairs in a circle and are visible to every other person in the group. Everyone in the group, not only the conductor, can see your body; can see its shape and its state of comfort or dis-ease. Are you long and thin, short and fat; are you muscular or floppy; pear shaped or round? – All of this is visible to the group and in the group. People can see how you sit, when you take a breath, how you smile or pull a face, when you are in pain or when you start steaming with fury. Our bodies, not just our words, communicate in the group with each other. Fears of exposure have an emotional and a physical aspect.

For instance, I am aware that I have recently started to brace myself in the group by intertwining both arms in front of my body. All group members can see - if they dare to look - that I feel a need to protect myself or that I am in a belligerent mood. Have they noticed? I am sure they have, even if no-one has commented on it. What will they do with it? How will they react? I am sure each of them is aware of my new stance, even if their reactions may well be unconscious or even deliberately hidden.

Bodies are difficult. They arouse – more often than not – feelings of shame and inadequacy. We all struggle to adhere to the common ideal of beauty: lean, muscular and young. But it’s not me – and when I look around I can see that others also fail in that respect. Bodies are difficult, because their reactions to others arouse feelings. More often than not these feelings are difficult, especially in a group.
Gender and sexuality are both about bodies and both imply bodily experience. Gendered behaviour, however, can affect the body to such a degree that a person may choose to physically look and actively behave like belonging to the opposite gender. Gender bending can be fun and lustful play. There is pleasure in pretending you are not what you seem. But it also may have other reasons and we might want to disown the body we were born with. If there has been neglect and abuse feelings of shame and disgust can be especially strong, and they may well be lodged within the body.

…and then there is the choice of transgender and the whole issue of gender dysphoria – another complicated area, which I do not want to go into, however, I wanted at least to mention its existence.

Behind all of this is for me the question: How can we live within our bodies? How can we accept and own them?

This is so important, I believe, because our bodies are implicated in any sexual behaviour, that area of human experience, which is - or perhaps I need to say can be - about pleasure and ecstasy. Orgasm is – or perhaps I need to say can be - enlivening and satisfying; pleasure and joy can be nourishment for the soul. It seems to me that every human being has a right to this experience, but it is also an area that arouses extreme anxiety and pain, for many people. The anxiety can be so strong that physical contact may need to be avoided. Some of you may remember the example Frances reported at the last GanLondon workshop, where two young men experienced the actual physical contact between their mobile phones as sexually charged. I wondered if their experience implied satisfaction or orgasm. Would the experience of physical contact, of being in touch with their own bodies, for these two young men just have been too threatening and therefore they needed to avoid it?

When there are feelings of shame and inadequacy, bodily processes contract, and finally close down. Fear of exposure in a sexual encounter often goes
hand in hand with not wanting to show your body. When there is trust, you can open up and undress. The nature of intimacy in any given relationship is reflected in the relationship between the bodies involved.

As a group analyst, I notice when people change. It gave me real pleasure, when one of my group members transformed and changed from a pimply adolescent boy into an attractive young man. He had gotten himself a girlfriend and talked in the group – smiling from one ear to the other - about their sexual life. I felt as delighted as he was – while the other young men in the group expressed how envious this made them.

Sometimes a particular session can be pervaded by sexual feelings. For instance one of my female group members reported having been at a party, and flirting and dancing for hours ‘in a sexual way’, as she put it. The whole group could feel her arousal, everybody got hot under the collar, including the conductor. Groups are obviously a place, where you can put it!

It is not an easy journey to feel okay in one’s own skin, in one’s own body and with one’s own genitals – but it is the beginning of a journey towards loving oneself, which might eventually lead to be able to finally love another. If we are fully incarnated in our body and allowing it to function freely, our sexuality can blossom.
I am not sure if it is true, but I have heard, that the full experience of sexuality can only be achieved when the rest of the personality is well balanced and developed to a mature level, because the experience of pleasure may be frightening and overwhelming to an immature ego.

The excitement, risk and danger involved in this journey to a full experience of sexuality and pleasure may well include for men to allow themselves to feel more vulnerable and be more related; and for women to be more daring and trust their own strength.

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