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A PERSPECTIVE ON THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST'S RESPONSE TO THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

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The women's movement¹ constitutes one of the most powerful sociological phenomena of modern times. Like any important movement, it has elicited reactions from every stratum within our society. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the response to the women's movement on the part of women, men, and man-woman relationships. It will then describe in detail an actual clinical case in which the issues involved were directly related to the concerns addressed by the women's movement, and it will offer a recommended attitudinal stance on the part of the psychotherapist to such concerns.

What we observe on the political-sociological level is a process of polarization between "pro" and "anti" women's movement factions. The notion that many, if not most, women are simply and straightforwardly interested in their liberation, and that most, if not all, men are simply and straightforwardly resistant to women's liberation, is grossly oversimplified and, in fact, incorrect to a substantial degree. And yet, as with any political movement, the fact that there are conflicting forces results in people feeling the need to adopt more and more one-sided points of view, so as to maximize the pressure on the other side to yield ground. Thus the picture that is portrayed is one of forces of good doing battle against forces of evil, the definitions of what is good and evil being determined by the biases of the portrayer. This polarization process mitigates against dealing with the issues raised by the women's movement in a reasoned and dispassionate way. Instead, the debate becomes vitriolic and rationality gives way to irrationality. The more balanced view of men and women which is described below might allow for a more sober dealing with the issues at hand, which would undoubtedly be to everyone's benefit.

Responses of Women

Though the differences between and amongst the various proponents of the women's movement are substantial, there is a theme which can be seen as common to most, if not all, of the advocates of the movement. This theme can be simply stated as an assertion that women deserve equality of opportunity and reward within our society, and that they should be more assertive in attempting to secure these rights and opportunities for themselves. This stance constitutes a challenge to the more dependent social

¹The phrase "women's movement" has come to be associated with many individual points of view and a number of political organizations. As used here, it refers to a broad sociological development which includes the various perspectives advanced about the re-definition of women's roles along social-sexual and economic-professional lines.

and sexual roles which women have traditionally filled within our society. Because discussion of the movement has been so prominent in the mass media, virtually all women are aware of this basic thrust of the women's movement, and have had some response to it. The following are some impressions of the variety of responses on the part of women.

Many women have responded to the movement with strong feelings of identification, a sense that their plight has finally been recognized, and even a resolve to join forces to overthrow the forces of oppression. Many women have felt oppressed in important ways, and have experienced the women's movement as an articulation of feelings that they have harbored within themselves for much of their lives. At least in part as a result of the movement, many women have made significant strides toward liberating themselves in their personal and professional lives.

However, to stop at this point would be to draw much too simplistic a picture of something which is considerably more complicated. Many women have been more or less content with their "traditional" lifestyles. Some of these women experience the women's movement as threatening. They have felt attacked for choices they have made which have never been questioned before, either by themselves or others. Furthermore, some feel that the liberation of women threatens a lifestyle which provides them with fully satisfactory gratifications. Many of these women react in a variety of defensive ways to the women's movement. One form that this is taking is opposition on the part of many women to the Equal Rights Amendment. On a more individual basis, some women respond with anger (sometimes just felt, sometimes expressed as well) to proponents of the women's movement, while others essentially attempt to ignore the thrust of the movement. Still other women experience considerable self-doubt in response to the challenge they perceive as implicit in the movement - some respond by attempting to conform to what they perceive to be the new standards, while others cling all the more rigidly to their accustomed ways.

Up to this point, the different kinds of responses that women can exhibit have been described as occurring in different people. What makes things much more complicated is that different responses very often are experienced by the same individual, so that there are not only conflicts between individuals but also conflicts within individuals. More specifically, it is not at all unusual for a woman to feel that the women's movement represents an important aspect of her yearnings for independence and self-sufficiency, but at the same time to be threatened by the possibility that she will no longer be able to behave in some of the ways in which she has been quite comfortable.

An important operating assumption is that all people (men and women) have yearnings for both autonomy and dependency. Some people manage to suppress their dependency yearnings, so that they seem to be wholeheartedly for their liberation and independence. A more accurate way to view these people is to understand that their dependency yearnings have been sublimated, and are being expressed in some other form. Given this perspective, the women's movement can be seen as articulating one side of a two-sided coin. It strikes a responsive chord in that side of women which desires independence and self-sufficiency, but it elicits resistance from that side of women which

desires to be dependent. Thus, ambivalence may be the best word to characterize the response of most women to the women's movement.

Responses of Men

Men have traditionally occupied a privileged place within our society. They have been the ones who have commanded the most respect; they have occupied virtually all the positions of authority because they have been seen as the only ones capable of sustaining the pressures and performing adequately in positions of responsibility. In the context of man-woman relationships, they have usually been the decision-makers on major questions, again because they have been seen as the ones with the more sober and balanced judgment, and greater ability to think dispassionately and do what is most appropriate. The most simplistic view, which undoubtedly has a large element of truth embedded within it, is that men have simply enjoyed their position within our society, and that they want to maintain the status quo. It is certainly true that men have enjoyed the trappings of respect and authority, and feel resistant to losing these things. Some men have been the beneficiaries of this status simply because they are men, and feel threatened by a system which bases its rewards on merit to a greater degree. These are amongst the men who have felt most threatened by the women's movement. There is no question about the fact that many men have felt some combination of fear and resentment toward the women's movement, and have responded in a variety of resistant ways to the efforts of women to achieve true equality.

Again, however, to stop here would constitute a gross oversimplification of the situation as it really exists. Many men welcome the fact that the women with whom they are acquainted, both personally and professionally, have begun the process of becoming more equal partners in their relationships. As they see it, this has served to remove some of the burden that is inherent in decision-making power. Thus, the prospect of more substantial contributions from women has been a welcome one.

As with women, these different reactions amongst men are not only differences between and amongst them, but conflicts within them as well. More specifically, many men feel both attracted to, and threatened by, the women's movement. The extent to which they feel each side of this conflict differs enormously amongst individuals, but typically both sides are present to some degree. Once again, as with women, it may be that one or the other side is more or less completely suppressed (and again given expression in some other sublimated form), but for the most part what we see is ambivalence.

Responses of Man-Woman Relationships

Because the women's movement has had some kind of impact on virtually all individuals in our society, it has necessarily affected virtually all relationships, as any influence on one or both partners in a relationship has some impact on the relationship itself. Relationships respond to the impact of the women's movement in a great variety of ways. Some relationships undergo major changes and end up with both partners more satisfied

with their respective roles. In other relationships one partner insists on changing, and the other harbors ongoing resentment. In still others new roles are tried and eventually rejected, and the status quo ante is re-established. Finally, there are some relationships that cannot bear the strains inevitable in role re-definition, and they break asunder. What is important to note is that virtually all relationships have dealt in some way with the basic thrust of the women's movement.

The most obvious way in which feelings related to the women's movement enter into the psychotherapy setting is in the form of couples therapy. However, the impact of the women's movement on the therapeutic experience is by no means confined to couples therapy. The case described below is an individual psychotherapy relationship with a female patient in which the women's movement played a central role:

Fran is a 45 year old married woman and mother of four children. She has been married to Chuck, who is a prominent surgeon, for 24 years. Fran married a year before graduating from college, and had become pregnant by the time she did graduate. She had devoted herself entirely to raising her four children, and had not been formally employed at any time during her marriage.

As her youngest child began applying to colleges, she began to think about what she wanted to do with herself when her day-to-day parenting responsibilities ended. At least in part as a result of some reading she had done about the women's movement, she decided that what she really wanted was a sense of professional identity. She chose the area of social work, and applied to the few schools that were available within driving distance of her home. She was admitted to one of the programs to which she applied, and began her quest for professional identity at the same time that her youngest child began college.

Graduate school was an eye-opening experience for Fran. She came to know a much wider cross-section of people, and to learn more about how other couples interacted - both colleagues and their spouses and patient-couples presenting for services at the clinic with which her graduate school was affiliated. Secondly, she did quite well in graduate school and began to receive praise for her work. Finally, she continued to be exposed to the women's liberation perspective, and it became more and more persuasive to her as time went on. The combination of these influences helped her to look at her marriage in a way that she had never allowed herself to do before. What she saw disturbed her sufficiently to bring her into therapy by the middle of her second semester of training.

Fran had come to appreciate that her marriage was based on her essentially complete subjugation to her husband. Neither her needs nor her interests were respected by Chuck. She was seen as neither bright enough to contribute to important decision-

making, nor important enough to have her interests attended to. This became more salient for Fran after becoming a graduate student, because she was very excited about all the things she was learning and experiencing, and anxious to share them with Chuck, and yet she found him as unreceptive to discussing her life as ever. Fran made it clear that Chuck was completely unreceptive to the possibility of couples therapy, and so an individual therapy contract was established.

Initially, therapy consisted of helping Fran to get in touch with, ventilate, and become accepting of the resentment toward Chuck she had been building up for so long. This took a good deal of work because of Fran's fear of her own rage and the repression that had resulted.

Fran found this phase of therapy very relieving, and it would have been easy (for both of us) to stop at this point. However, as we began looking at how Fran's relationship with Chuck had evolved into its present form, both of us realized that there was more work to be done. It became increasingly clear to us that the responsibility for the relationship being unsatisfactory in such a basic way was in fact shared by Fran and Chuck. In many ways it was comfortable for Chuck to have a dependent and subservient wife, but this was equally true for Fran. She had come to rely on him to take care of her in most important ways, and she was quite pleased with the job he had done. In fact, she had actively colluded from the start in the relationship evolving in the way it did. Coming to appreciate this led to two important consequences for Fran.

First, she was able to do some very useful exploring of the fear she had of becoming a more independent, autonomous person. Her active pursuit of a professional identity at this point in her life indicated that her desire for a greater degree of autonomy and personal identity was powerful, but at the same time she was frightened and resistant. At times she felt impulses to give it all up and return to the comfort of being a housewife; these impulses never became strong enough for her to act on, but they were very much a part of her. Her ability to acknowledge and accept these feelings made her a more integrated person.

Secondly, Fran's ability to appreciate her ambivalence, and her contribution to the problems within her marriage, allowed her to see her husband in a more complete, and therefore more accurate, way. Her feelings of resentment remained unabated, but she was also able to see the ways Chuck was unhappy with the status quo. Chuck found Fran's passivity very frustrating, and in fact he had lost a great deal of the investment he originally had in the marriage. There was certainly a large part of him that was resistant to Fran's becoming a more equal entity within the relationship, but in fact he was ambivalent too, as he also wanted a more active and substantial marital partner.

Fran's ability to come to appreciate all this resulted in her taking some of the responsibility for the way the relationship had evolved, and therefore for moving it forward. The alternative would have been for her to simply blame Chuck in a way that would undoubtedly have been counter-productive. As a result, the relationship has been slowly evolving, albeit in a fitful and painful way for both Fran and Chuck, into one that is at least somewhat more gratifying for both of them.

Implications for therapy

The foregoing perspective on the responses of women, men, and man-woman relationships to the women's movement implies a particular stance on the part of the therapist which maximizes the useful work that can be accomplished within the therapeutic setting. Ideally, psychotherapy involves an individual coming to know and accept all of his/her varying and potentially conflicting parts, and in light of this knowledge and acceptance, to choose a particular behavioral course which is most likely to yield the outcomes desired. In order for an individual to do the kind of exploration necessary to come to know and accept oneself more fully, he/she must come to experience a feeling of safety within the therapeutic setting. For this to occur, the therapist must be perceived as accepting of all of the various sides of the patient. Because of the power of the transference, it becomes much harder, if not impossible, for a person to explore all his/her varying sides if he/she has the sense that the therapist approves of some parts of him/her and not others. Disapproval from the therapist is difficult for virtually all psychotherapy patients. Therefore, the tendency for a patient who discerns a judgmental attitude on the part of the therapist will invariably be to produce material which the patient believes will elicit the therapist's approval.

At the same time, it is clear that therapists have prejudices and biases, simply because they are human. It is the point of view of many "feminist therapists" that pro-feminist points of view are desirable for therapists to impart to their patients, and in fact that patients, especially women patients, should only seek out the services of therapists with a pro-feminist point of view. It has become fashionable to assert that it is impossible for a therapist to be completely neutral, and that therefore the therapist should openly communicate his/her values and openly attempt to inculcate them in the patient. The point of view being described here is that this is a most undesirable stance for a therapist to choose. Because one's biases cannot be completely overcome does not mean that they should be allowed to flagrantly intrude on the therapeutic process. Self-conscious attention to the dangers of one's personal point of view intruding on the therapeutic process can minimize the extent to which this happens.

The question must be asked: what happens to a woman's dependency yearnings when she is dealing with a therapist touting a feminist point of view? The answer must be that they are more often than not given short shrift, either because the patient is fearful that she will encourage the therapist's wrath, or because the therapist does not want to acknowledge

that there is resistance within the individual whom she sees as oppressed and needful of liberation.

A second question must also be asked: namely, what happens to the resistances to the women's movement that exist within many men in the context of therapy with a so-called "feminist therapist?" The answer must again be that these aspects of men's feelings cannot receive the kind of attention that they merit. Male patients are clearly just as vulnerable to the pain that inevitably accompanies rejection by a therapist as are female patients, and so it is virtually impossible for a male patient who knows that his therapist is an advocate of the feminist perspective to feel safe in exploring his fears and resistances vis a vis women's liberation.

The task of therapy is quite distinct from the task of politics. In politics it is the role of advocates to rally people around their cause and to attempt to bring about whatever social change they believe in. In therapy the goal is to help an individual to find for himself/herself what he/she wants to be. Confusion of these two enterprises is highly dangerous. Taking advantage of the role of therapist to advocate a particular way of living constitutes an abuse of the power the therapist has by virtue of the transference. This is not to impugn the intentions of the feminist therapists. It is simply to assert that any effort to bring about social change, no matter how benign and positive that change may be, does not belong under the rubric of psychotherapy. Unless it is genuinely acceptable to therapists for their patients to adopt very different life choices than they themselves have made, they do not belong in psychotherapists' offices. Therapists must make clear distinctions between political activity and therapeutic activity. The blurring of this boundary constitutes a very dangerous new development in the area of psychotherapy.