

Embedded Women: The Freudian Legacy and women's self-image and morality in the work of Gilligan and Brown"

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In describing Shakespeare, Keats admiringly referred to his "capacity for being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (cited in Luepnitz, 1988:190). This paper is about uncertainties, mysteries and doubts which puzzle me about the transition girls make from self-assured creatures, to self-silencing women. Here I consider the Freudian legacy which underpins Gilligan's (1982) work on morality and Brown and Gilligan's (1992) work on girls' and women's development.

Centre-stage in a girl's identity transitions is the legacy of the mother-daughter relationship. It is never so difficult to separate our identity from our father; "our being was never so fused/confused with his" (Luepnitz, 1988). While maturity for boys is to be "other than mother" ie separate from her with whom they first identified, for girls, identification/identity/love are all of a bundle. Nowhere is this more important than in the formation of the superego. The Oedipus complex is brought to an end by castration anxiety for boys, begun by the castration complex by girls (Freud, 1925, Mitchell, 1974). Girls can't fear castration since, according to Freud, it is a *fait accompli*. However, girls can feel bad about not having a dangly bit "at once recognizing it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ" (Freud, 1925:335). Though, to Freud's credit, he says they not only spy at once the fleshly appendage, but its significance as well. So, the girl's envy of the penis, or what the bearer of such a thing is entitled to in a given cultural epoch, leads her to turn from the mother to the father as love object. For Freud, this is the beginning of the Oedipus complex proper. Since she can't be threatened with castration to renounce her incestuous oedipal longings, it is "no longer feeling the want of or actually losing the object itself, but of losing the object's love" which can coerce her to renounce her polymorphous ways and become a creature of culture (moral, anxious, guilty, and, though to a lesser extent than boys according to Freud, capable of sublimation). Because renunciation of incestuous longing is for boys due to fear of loss of love **and** fear of loss of dangly bit, while for girls only the former is operative, Freud concluded women have a different superego. This leads him to his hesitant, much quoted, often misquoted, statement which is the point of departure for Carol Gilligan's work, and which I will quote in full:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women - that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility - all of these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their superego which we have inferred above." (Freud, 1925:342)

He goes on to note "We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the denials of the feminists..." (p. 342).

Yet Karen Horney (1926) notes that the attributes ascribed to women might be less accurate as a reflection of the characteristics of women, than as "a deposit of the desires and disappointments of men" (citing Delius, p326), noting that " the very standards by which mankind has estimated the values of male and female nature are not neutral, arising out of the difference of the sexes, but in themselves essentially masculine" (citing Georg Simmel, p325). She notes that, in looking at sexual difference, we need to free ourselves of the masculine mode of thought, the 'infection by which occurred in early childhood'.

A question I will pursue, though not necessarily answer in full, how completely has Gilligan been able to do this? What is the extent of the Freudian legacy in her 1982 work Gilligan and her more recent book, Brown and Gilligan (1992). Gilligan notes that as the garden of Eden shows, if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble. And of course Freud did, and is. He was blind in 1925 to the role of the woman's pre-Oedipal attachment to the mother, blind to autonomous conceptions of female sexuality (though he had Horney (1926) Lamp-de-Groot (1933) and even Jones (1933) trying to tell him otherwise. He didn't even entertain the possibility of womb envy (pointed out to him by Horney, 1926) leading men to build bridges, to leave immortal cultural products; sublimating their desires to do it the real way. You would have expected such an argument to be entertained by a man so brave in speculation and inference, even if it were only briefly entertained to be dismissed. His commentators, the 'feminists' do receive some consideration in his 1931 paper, but nowhere does he address the implications of finding in the same person both first love object and one's figure for identification, one's gender role model. Attachment and identity are intertwined for women in a way which they are not for boys. I will return to this point below.

So one does wonder how accurately Freud portrays women at all? Is the "dark continent" he describes them to be due to the mote troubling his mind's eye? A blind spot in that old dream of symmetry as Luce Irigaray (1985) suggests? Do the limitations of his portrayal signify his blindness and uncertainty on the subject? And is his partial portrayal it due to his culturally mediated desires and disappointments?

While contemporary feminists in Freud's time replied to his suggestions concerning the psychological consequences of anatomical differences by establishing a different basis for women's sexuality other than the "lack and loss" of a dangly bit; in this way challenging his suggestion that women had a different superego. Gilligan, in a different voice, says a subversive 'Yes' to Freud's allegation of women having a different superego. A different "level" on the masculine scale, lower indeed if, like Kohlberg, you accept that women are to be placed on a scale derived from the study of male subjects. But if, like Gilligan, you accept that women's insights fall through the net of moral systems a la Kohlberg, then women's morality is perhaps "other" rather than lesser than that of men. And this otherness is based on a different developmental history of attachment and identity formation, not the conveniently constructed product of masculine projection (a 'deposit of desires and disappointments') which characterises the 'other' outlined by Freud, and his cited 'critics of every epoch'.

Yes, says Gilligan, women do think differently about morality. She elucidates an ethics of care, distinguished from ethics based on rights which shows how women's morality is embedded in specific concerns for social relations, embedded in a particular culture and a particular historical epoch. She outlines a socially embedded ethics which makes no claims to universality, rather emphasising standards which are relative to each individual and her situation. Moral crises are portrayed as a failure of relationships for the women she studied. She shows the ease with which women take the needs of others into account in ethical decisions, yet how difficult it is for a woman to include herself as a person with needs in that equation. She shows how frequently women label their decisions as 'selfish' when they have merely taken seriously their own needs as well.

While Gilligan (1982) has been criticized for portraying these differences in morality as **essential** differences - an inherent and inevitably developing feature of the nature of women - in a later book Brown and Gilligan (1992) say they make no claims as to the origin of these differences, but that they are 'probably social'. This is a crucial issue for me because what fascinates me is how these differences come about. It is here that I find Meeting at the Crossroads naggingly incomplete. Brown and Gilligan cite Freud heavily (even the title refers to Oedipus' killing of the father in Sophocles' play) yet they do not really engage with the theory, don't feed their empirical findings back to that theory or any other. Rather, they leave us with a charming, puzzling descriptive phenomenology of the progressive silencing of feisty seven year old girls until at 12 and 13 years old their predominant comment is "I don't know". Each girl opts for a nice-girl persona in contrasting the fiercely authentic little girls they each were, prepared to struggle and fight to maintain their connection with their view of reality, to have that view heard, to maintain their strong, open, bare-all connections with each other; and to blow the whistle on adults and contemporaries who opted for

an easier route. What happened to these 'whistle-blowers in the relational world' who would "... speak out about what feels bad or wrong in relationships, not without awareness, even fear, that they will be hurt, excluded, ridiculed for doing so" (p.52)? By 11, "they take themselves out of relationship for the sake of relationship" (p.106).

Brown and Gilligan cite the "second wave of repression" which Freud (1905) suggested characterised women at puberty. Yet the processes they describe are nothing like repression. The girls speak of an active, knowing silencing of themselves, burying the jewels of their own truths in the face of a largely unsupportive adult female audience who have forgotten theirs and are no help to these young women charting their course to maturity. Yet there is a strong theoretical link to Freud, since it is fear of loss of love which is portrayed as promoting this active silencing of the self: the fear of the secrets passed behind their backs; the threat of gaining an undesirable reputation and of losing the 'love' of their 'friends'.

Brown and Gilligan (1992) reveal in their quotations, the marvellous texture of some of the young girls' insights. Seven year old Neeti contrasts *empathy* - feeling another's feelings, with *responsive relationship* - responding to another's feelings with feelings of one's own. By 12 she gives up the evidence of her own experience - suffering in an idealized relationship rather than speaking out, quite consciously modelling herself as a perfectly nice, caring girl. At the same time, however, she is struggling to "give voice to, to name, even to know her thoughts and feelings" (p39). This loss of voice is seen as a struggle of self-authorization (it's OK to be powerful, ambivalent...) and as a move from real to idealized relationships: "...Speaking what she feels and thinks in her relationships, once so simple and genuine for her, becomes so fraught with difficulty and danger". (p41). Neeti struggles to hold on to her experience, to know what she knows, to speak in her own voice and to bring her knowledge into the world in which she lives - in the face of authorities, conventions and relational conflicts...

What forms the woman's superego is the fear of loss of love - Freud took us that far. Contemporary feminist, psychoanalytic writers must explore the power of threatened loss of love to undermine a woman's sense of identity and worth, (see Jack, 1991). I suggest that it has that power because of that bundle of huge emotions associated with our bond to the mother. As first 'love object' and first model for identification, there is for women a fusing of attachment with identity formation.

But how is the timing of the self-silencing to be explained? Do Brown and Gilligan really want to invoke the fresh wave of repression at puberty which recalls the first turning from the mother, devaluing her/our kind, because she brought us into the world so ill-equipped...lacking a dangly bit; a "mutilation" we perceive ourselves as sharing, and which we re-experience as a wound to our narcissism, developing 'like a scar, a sense of inferiority' (Freud, 1925:253)? Can it really be this that leads the onset of self-silencing? Yet what other explanatory model do Brown and Gilligan (1992) suggest? They certainly show **that** it happens, but how it happens is a mystery. Is it that those upon whom we have modelled ourselves at this time of life convey tacit messages, derived from, and reinforced loudly, clearly and, at times, explicitly from society, that success and ease as a woman come with duplicity, with the very inauthenticity we struggled against as young girls? That it is not truly repression involved is substantiated by a comment made by Brown and Gilligan that the young women "...remain on the lookout for others by whom they can be safely seen and with whom they can safely speak" (p. 108). While further theoretical work in this area seems timely and fruitful, Brown and Gilligan certainly leave us with an action message. Gradually the psychologists realized their need to use their "authority and power to make it easier for girls and women's voices to be heard...to encourage political resistance, the insistence on knowing what one knows and the willingness to be outspoken rather than collude in the silencing and avoidance of conflict that fosters the corrosive suffering of psychological resistance...the fear that one's experience, if spoken will endanger relationships and threaten survival" (p. 41).

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