Discussion of “Gender Dynamics in Group Therapy” by Lucy Holmes

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Understanding the communication—or lack thereof—between the sexes will forever engage our collective passions. Holmes, a clinical psychologist, examines the dynamics between the men and women in a psychotherapy group and the effect the gender of the leader has on those dynamics. She addresses frequently occurring difficulties experienced in mixed-gender groups, which are relevant to any group leader, and also provides a vivid description of the group process. Holmes is a very seasoned group psychotherapist with many years of clinical experience, and her insights are well worth reporting. However, her account, while stimulating and suggestive, relies exclusively on the theories of classical psychoanalysis and does not take advantage of recent work in social psychology, gender studies, and neuroscience. It is therefore limited in its ability to explain the complexity of gender relationships in the modern world. With all due respect for its monumental cultural impact, classical psychoanalysis, in my opinion, does not have an unlimited shelf life as the sole explanatory model for psychological phenomena.

In the first part of the article, Holmes focuses on the difficulties that arise when male group members dominate the discourse in group meetings by fighting with each other. She refers to these competitive, verbally aggressive “brawls” as “antler rattling.” The female members of the same group observe these hostile exchanges in a depressed and helpless state. This leads to a state of affairs “in which men do all the talking and women sit in silence.” In such a situation, it takes considerable skill on the part of the therapist to help the group move beyond “sexist resistance” and stereotypical gender behavior. Holmes recognizes that men and women, with their complementary points of view, talents, and strengths, can be helpful to each

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other. But it is particularly challenging to integrate group members who have regressed to a state of primitive rage or depressive helplessness and to encourage them to rise above this impasse. Holmes succeeds in overcoming gender conflict by drawing on the special capacities of each gender subgroup: Instead of dispensing individual psychotherapy or paying attention to the unruly males, she encourages the women to speak up and thereby harnesses the combined forces of the entire group, effectively recruiting group members to help each other.

Holmes goes on to examine the effect the gender of the group leader has on the interaction between male and female participants. Her formulation draws heavily from Freudian analysis and metapsychology. Group members relate differently to a father than to a mother, and hence a male group leader has an effect different from a female group leader. Male group leaders, who Holmes sees as representing the all-powerful father, are easily subject to unconscious patricidal rage, akin to the dynamics of the primitive horde. By contrast, a female group leader might stimulate feelings of primitive hunger and wishes for symbiotic closeness, which could result in making the therapist feel depleted, like a "mother with too many children and not enough milk."

Holmes's primary references are to the theories of classical psychoanalysis, which have a long tradition and are of significant historical value. The paradigms of Freud, Balint, Blos, and Lacan center around the oedipal conflict, penis envy, symbiosis in the early mother–child dyad, and subsequent cannibalistic rage at the preoedipal mother. However, with regard to the definition of sexuality and gender, much scholarly work has been accomplished in psychoanalysis, developmental theory, social science, and neuroscience. Moreover, our better understanding of contextual factors, such as age, social class, employment, ethnic background, women's liberation, feminism, the emancipatory struggle of gays and lesbians, gender bending, and cultural diversity, is conspicuously absent. Holmes's most recent references are to the female psychoanalysts Mahler and Gilligan, who offer complementary, more flexible and dynamic views of psychosexual development, focusing on attachment and relationships.

Many theoretical paradigms could be used to analyze this particular mixed-gender group scenario. Of course, as a clinician, I sympathize with the author's desire to employ the collected works of powerful male psychoanalysts in the face of a passive-aggressive attempt at a hostile takeover by the male members of the group. But I find it ironic that Holmes, as a female psychotherapist, would rely on a theoretical model so devaluing of women.

Freud was influenced by the neurologists and pathologists of the nineteenth century, who observed that the brain size of women was smaller than that of men and therefore assumed that women were of lesser mental capacity. Contemporary neuroscience provides a rich matrix of research and observation on gender differences. It turns out that men and women have the same number of brain cells and are of equal intellectual and emotional aptitude, although there are gender-specific cognitive and affective differences negating the likelihood of a so-called unisex brain (Brizendine, 2006). To date, there are no ongoing controversies about how much biological hardwiring influences gender-stereotypical behavior and how much this behavior results from learning and gender socialization.

The concept of penis envy has also been subjected to deconstruction, for example, by the psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (1994). In Chodorow's analysis, Freud judged female sexual development as measured against the male norm. He theorized that girls suffered from penis envy because they looked at themselves as castrated males. Defined as mutilated creatures by patriarchal discourse, women were saddled with a lifelong sense of inferiority. Their only hope to restore the so-called missing organ and to satisfy the desperate wish for a penis, according to Freudian theory, was to incorporate a man's penis and have a baby. By contrast, the potent generative maternal powers of women received scant press from early psychoanalysts.

We may theorize that it is Holmes's own straightforwardly heterosexual, binary gender concept that initially prevents her group from moving beyond playground conflict. Holmes does not provide any social background information on the group participants. Who are these women, so easily intimidated by the verbally assertive men? She makes the women sound like little girls baking mud pies, while the boys are throwing sand. Could it be that this particular formulation is a self-fulfilling prophecy? Does the conceptualization of women as helpless and men as overtly aggressive promote patients' regression into these simplified stereotyped roles?

The interaction of the men and women in Holmes's psychotherapy group could better be illuminated by the findings of social psychology research on gender and gender-role socialization. Every society defines a set of behaviors for a person of a specific sex that is appropriate within a given culture and historical time. Western societies have achieved a higher degree of gender equality, yet differences between men and women still can be found in the way we "dress, sit, walk, talk, work, and play" (Lerner, 1988, p. 17). It comes as no surprise that the reaction of the participants in the mixed-gender group is shaped by elements of convention and tradition, which are themselves determined by the given social context. Gender is an organizing category in all aspects of our lives. Even though women have joined the workforce in droves and constitute the breadwinners or cobreadwinners in 43% of all households (Shriver & Center for American Progress, 2009), discrimination against women is still widespread.

Social science research over the past 20 years has shown that gender has multiple dimensions and takes a wide range of forms in real life (Tiefer & Kring, 1995, p. 26). Gender roles are not fixed but are constantly changing and need to be negotiated between individuals. Group psychotherapy sessions are a unique social laboratory, allowing group leaders to keep the finger on the pulse of current gender dynamics.
REFERENCES


