



Self-Identity and Gender Differences

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Abstract

After reviewing the origins of the concepts of identity and self, departing from historical psychoanalytic proposals, a special focus is pointed to the complex process of identity construction in both genders, including core gender identity and gender role identity. Different ways of approaching sexual orientation and sexual behaviour are examined, introducing the concept of sexual fluidity and studying the importance of individual variations in those dimensions. The role of the others in the process of identity building is analysed, from the impact of others' sexuality to the influence of large group processes. Deposition phenomena and mechanisms of transgenerational transmission are debated. In the social context, special attention is paid to the imbrication of violence and sexuality, showing differences between men and women around that combination throughout history. Finally, a point is made regarding how social considerations on the respective value of men and women may have very real and deleterious impact, much beyond feelings or worthlessness or superiority.

9.1 Introduction

Identity is a concept that in its own way eludes us. Intuitively, we know what it is, but it is not easy to define, and it has nuances that are overwhelming to those who venture into its depths. Its richness covers the fields of Psychology, Biology, Sexuality, History, Sociology and—why not?—Economics and Politics. Without

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question, if we're talking about identities that are anomalous, Psychiatry should arrive on the scene in order to provide comprehension and meaning. To attempt to deepen all of these fields would surpass the limits of a text such as this one, which is why one certain selection would be necessary. In order to provide the reader with some orientation, we should say that we're planning to emphasise some particular aspects of the self-identity as it relates to gender, from a perspective that gives precedence to a psychological point of view, and specifically one in which psychoanalytic theory serves as a guide, not unique but certainly preferential.

There are not many references in Freudian writings relating to the concept of identity. It was Erikson [1] who established the key aspects of the concept, which we still consider relevant. Erik Erikson described identity as a global synthesis of functions of the self on one hand and on the other hand the consolidation of a sense of solidarity with the ideals of a group and group identity. He thus indicated that identity also implied the rejection of a series of unacceptable roles, in a manner in which this constructive process could have affirmative (this is how I am) and negative aspects (this isn't how I am) discerned from it.

Otto Kernberg [2] developed this vision of identity, broadening it, observing that the definition of the ego identity formulated originally by Erikson included the integration of the concept of self. For Kernberg, an approach from the theory of object relations extends this definition by adding the corresponding integration of the concepts of significant others. Westen [3, 4] had previously revised empirical and theoretical literature regarding identity and self, signalling the primary components of identity: a sense of continuity in time, an emotional commitment with a set of representations of the self that have been self-defined, relationships consisting of nuclear roles and values and ideal standards of the self and the development and acceptance of a *weltanschauung* that grants significance to life and a sort of acknowledgement from the significant others regarding our place in this world.

Identity is found continually under construction, and in this large process, the people with whom we establish relationships (the others) play a key part. In his famous concept of the "mirror stage", Lacan [5] describes the so-called imaginary dimension in the creation of the I. This is a period of child development in which the child sees himself through the eyes of his mother, and upon seeing this image, he builds his identity. In this complex process, the desires of the mother and the others are introduced, such as the need to reconcile our identity with those that others assign to us. To that end, we feel obligated to hide aspects about ourselves that may be fundamental, generating an identity and a presence that is always partial and at the same time a continuous longing to recover what we had felt obliged to hide. The pressure towards conformity, towards a more-or-less subtle accommodation of the far-removed desire, is in the deepest parts of our nature. Because of that, in a certain way, within each personal identity, we can find traces of the society to which that individual belongs, traces that indicate the pressures taken in so that the subject, in development, should occupy the space for growth available and nothing more. In this sense, Fromm [6] assures us that the development implies "mystification", a process that provides us with a costume in which we can present ourselves and with which we can relate with others.

Identity has made up a topic that is very current in psychoanalytic publications, even having full issues dedicated to this topic [e.g. 7]. Undoubtedly, this multiplicity in attention, in a world as heterogeneous as that of psychoanalysis, challenges us with definitions that are very different with regard to the concept of identity, which are sometimes difficult or impossible to integrate. The idea of identity that we deal with below, in this text, reflects a mode of thought regarding this term, which is characteristic of current psychoanalytic authors belonging to various theoretical schools, from the North American Ego Psychology, in the most contemporary version, up to the theory of object relations or relational or intersubjective lines of thought.

In order to clarify our position further, we will say that we consider identity to be an internal representation of our global person, which incorporates a significant temporal aspect: a vision of the past, which explains whence we came, including a social and familial narrative, a vision of the present which includes our place in the world and a vision of the future that includes our ideals and desires for tomorrow.

9.2 Concept of Self

When reviewing psychoanalytic literature regarding the self, we reach a level of confusion about the term. Different authors utilise the same terms in order to indicate different realities. The concept of “I” overlaps with that of the self, or with that of the “ego”, or even with that of the person. The peculiar translation of Strachey doesn’t help in this process, which took the German “Ich”, seemingly under pressure from Ernest Jones, and instead of changing it to the English “I”, as in other languages, ended up being transformed into the peculiar “ego”, which has had so much success in Anglo-Saxon psychoanalytic literature and even in international popular literature. Even Freud utilises the term “ego” (Ich) in two ways: to refer to a part of the psychic apparatus in his structural theory of the mind and also in order to indicate the entire person or self. This equivalence between the person and the self continues to this day, from authors such as Meissner [8], a true exegete of the work of Freud, reaching levels of analysis of extreme complexity.

Meissner [8] points out some fundamental characteristics of the self, especially in its role as generator of structure.

- The self is equal to the person and, therefore, is a source of agency.
- The self includes the three components (id, ego, superego) as substructures.
- The self includes experiential and non-experiential dimensions.
- The self as agent is the source of all the actions of a person.
- The agency of the self is shared by the id, the ego and the superego.
- The relation of the self with the tripartite model is supraordinated.
- The intrasystemic and intersystemic conflicts reflect patterns in the diversification and interaction of the functions of the self.
- The concept of the self as a structure contrasts with that of the self as representation.

- The internationalisations are primarily modifications of the system of the self and may be ascribed secondarily to substructures or representations.

We can see that the concept of self varies according to schools of thought and authors. We can observe two fundamental manners by which to conceive of the self. One is as a substructure, considering the self as being equivalent to the I, or, rather, taking the self as a structure of a greater entity that contains within itself all of the parts of the psychic apparatus. In this sense, the concept of the self runs parallel to that of the I in the work of Freud, which alternated between the two usages described. On the other hand, there is a different usage, which we can consider to be greater today. This would be the use of the self as representation, equivalent to the global person, especially in the context of object relations. This is the more standard usage in contemporary psychoanalytic literature. Applebaum [9] considers the structure to be composed of “stable configurations of the self and the object”, developing thus the classic formulations of Kernberg [10].

In summation, we should say that in this text, we consider the self to be equivalent to the global person, following the extensive use of the concept indicated in the work of Meissner [8] as well as many other authors. To that end, the idea of the identity of the self (self-identity), in our case, reflects the very conception of our person in the most global sense, including one’s generic identity with all of the subtleties that we describe below.

We should also indicate that the confluence of the concepts of self-identity and gender lead us to different analyses. One is the examination of the process of acquisition of gender identity and of gender role identity. The other is a reflection regarding the different factors that affect the construction of self-identity in men and women. We will touch upon the first topic and will concentrate more on the second, which to our understanding has not been sufficiently dealt with in the literature and is of great interest.

9.3 Gender Identity and Gender Role Identity

What are we talking about, in natural terms, when we refer to gender identity?

1. What I am. This is the result of what my biological body affirms and the response that society provides in the face of it. It is important to highlight this aspect: contemporary research indicates that feedback from parents is vital for this initial identity construction relating to gender to take place. The body alone is not sufficient. To paraphrase Freud, we should say that Anatomy is, normally, destiny.
2. How I feel. Independently of the body, I can feel like a woman or a man or perhaps something intermediate between the two. Certainly, 1 and 2 tend to coincide, but that is not obligatory.
3. How I act. I represent a social role in front of the others, which includes a multitude of subtleties relating to attire, language, movement and interaction.

4. Whom I desire. Men and women exclusively, or fluently, one or the other, according to the moment...
5. Whom I select as a life partner. This can be a choice in line with the above or not.

Within this conceptual variety, two elements occupy a preferential position [11]. They are core gender identity, based on biological and constitutional aspects, and gender role identity, built on a foundation of social and collective provisions. We direct our reflections here towards those points particularly.

The concept of bisexuality in Freud occupies a very central position in his thought regarding human sexual development. The social and academic attitude towards this proposal has gone back and forth throughout the years. Many times it has even been vehemently rejected. Nowadays it has been accepted once again, in line with the increased attention currently paid to the very early relationship with parental figures, especially with the mother. The processes of identification and fusion with the mother are today considered key to generic identity formation, which for Stoller [12, 13] is firmly established before the age of 2, before any type of Oedipal eventuality. Authors such as Benjamin [14] draw attention to the limitations of the classic Freudian theory on the subject and propose a more integrated vision of the processes that constitute gender. For this author, the boy and girl want what they don't have, in addition to what they have, not instead of what they have. Logically, from this point of reflection, the classic lines of thinking regarding "fault", "injury", "envy" or even "castration" acquire different nuances.

Some people, including some researchers, live uncomfortable with this complex reality and even reject it. It is certain that a good part of the population, possibly the majority of the population, displays a consistency between inner life, social role, desire and partner choice, but undoubtedly there is another group, perhaps bigger than we believe, that does not line up with this generality. For a while now homosexual men and women have also become a field of study, and every day we know more about their lives and their internal world as well as their relationships. However, we still know little about those who don't fall under that narrow definition of homosexuality. Those who show orientation or identities that are more complex tend to be considered outliers in the world of science and academia, set apart from normal studies. The result is a general loss: a loss, perhaps, for these people, who could see themselves more integrated into the social norms in which they live, and without question a loss for us, since the study of different lives can enormously enrich our comprehension of key phenomena such as identity, sexuality and gender.

Without question, the study of "different" sexualities and their construction is perceived as a danger within society in general. Sexuality, understood in the more broad sense of Stoller [15] as that which has to do with gender identity and desire, is a fundamental pillar of individual and collective identity. To establish other possible sexual identities would provoke a furious reaction in some and a more discreet rejection from almost everyone else. There is something intimate that breaks when we are faced with things that might be different, that we might desire other people or feel differently. It seems as though the acquisition of this generic identity,

especially masculine identity, were a laborious and fragile process that we should take care of and protect. The conduct of these extreme minorities that go from rejection to frank aggression to those who are different shows a major trace of tendencies and movements that affect society as a whole. Some set their attention on the social-political background of the gender roles, and the unequal distribution of power that they entail, considering social forces, expressed through certain individual attitudes, as the ultimate cause of the anxiety that is felt in the face of the possibility of there being differences. In our opinion, the anxiety has a deeper origin.

Damasio [16] describes the so-called extended self, which originates in the autobiographical conscience and thus comes from that identity continuity through time: I am who I was yesterday and who I was before then. We should say that gender identity and the disposition of our desire constitute aspects that are absolutely nuclear within this extended self. When the final certainties relating to gender are called into question, panic comes to the fore.

The situation regarding sexuality in contemporary psychoanalytic theory deserves reflection, even if it is brief. We should say that the central position that sexuality occupied within Psychoanalysis in its origins has changed greatly. Amazingly, in spite of the growing attention that biological matters awaken in many neighbouring disciplines such as cognitive theory, Psychoanalysis has moved away from what were its first signs of identity. The relational perspective, already present in the works of Erikson [17] and more intensely in the contributions of Klein [18] and his followers and still today more so in the relational theories of Mitchell [19], has in a way desexualised, the sexual encounter to the point of considering it as a simple variety of how humans connect with each other. Nonetheless, as Fonagy indicates in a review [20], the reality around us, which shows us the constant presence of sexual inhibitions and lack of satisfaction, conflicts and perversions, the tremendous intensity of guilt, jealousy and rage that are involved in sexuality, still reminds us the central role of sexual function. Possibly Kernberg [21], with his more integrated model that assigns a greater role to drives, is one of few contemporary theorists, together with Laplanche [22], who continue to consider sexuality as central in the internal world and human behaviour.

Nancy Chodorow [23] warns us of the necessity of valuing sexuality in an individual manner and of avoiding empty generalisations. She criticises overgeneralisation, universalism and essentialism and advocates for a consideration of the individual route, which each subject goes through, and of the thousand different ways of creating global and gender identity. She indicates to us, referring to the woman:

“It is apparent that gender, like selfhood, must be individually unique... There are many psychologies of women. Each woman creates her own psychological gender through emotionally and conflictually charged unconscious fantasies that help construct her inner world, that projectively imbue cultural conceptions, and that interpret her sexual anatomy. By making some unconscious fantasies and interpretations more salient than others, each woman creates her own prevalent animation of gender”. It is difficult to synthesise the description of such a complex process any better. We can possibly extend this reflection to the man as well.

We frequently talk about gender identity or about sexual orientation as if we were talking about traces that, once fully formed at the end of adolescence, remained immovable forever. Recent works such as that of Lisa Diamond [24] put the concept of sexual fluency on the table. They use this term to refer to a characteristic pertaining to an unknown, but significant, number of women, who feel attraction towards different genders at different points in their lives, without identifying completely with one stable gender role. Diamond points to some facts demanding explanation: changes in sexual identity throughout time; the sensation that identity and orientation do not presuppose anything definitive with regard to the future; the fact that for a group of women, non-exclusive attractions are more often the norm than the exception; and the diminished importance of early experiences with regard to predicting future identity and orientation. This sexual fluency seems to affect women more than men. These might keep themselves more rigidly glued to their identity and choice of sexual object starting in adolescence. Nonetheless, as the author indicates, these groups of the population have not been sufficiently studied and have been considered anomalies, outliers, which distorted the vision of the whole. A specific study could lead us to reconsider this matter in the case of men as well.

9.4 Construction of Identity

The construction of a global identity within which gender identity occupies an important place deserves specific attention. Do men and women develop a different constructive process? Boys and girls depart from a psychobiological structure, which develops later within a familial and social context. The possible differences between men and women within this process have been explored insufficiently, but it seems clear that, given the existing differences relating to genetics, biology, psychology, experience, social relations, etc., there could be differences worth mentioning. The identity structure of an individual is always complex, made up of multiple layers, the product of successive significant interpersonal links throughout time.

Freud laid out a famous dictum, “Anatomy is destiny”, signalling the fundamental importance of all things biological at the hour of defining the identity of the individual, in general, and especially in the sexual realm. The structure of our body was for him the frame of identity, the scaffold upon which the perception that the individual has of himself and his place in the world would be construed. Throughout the years, different authors, inside and outside psychoanalysis, have called into question Freud’s dictum, ascribing more value to all that is acquired throughout one’s experiences, be they in the confines of the family or in society in general.

Possibly, the concept of identity and representation of the self are accepted as equivalent in the contemporary psychoanalytic world. Authors today often link this representation of the self with representations of the object, thus forming pairs of representations that are internalised and which would form the basis of that global identity. In this line, personal identity includes a vision of the object in relation to the self, and not just of the self alone. In other words, the internal presence of the

other is a fundamental element in our identity: those whom we know form a part of our own selves. Taking gender into account, we could consider that within the inner structure of each person is a representation of the other sex, and thus in some manner, the other sex forms part of the basic building blocks of our personality and of our global being. We have come close to the most-complex manner that individuals employ to construct their gender identity, their gender role and, finally, their desires. Obviously, each one of these aspects should play a relevant role in the construction of our self, of our global persona and, with that, of our identity in the broadest sense of the word. The man contains the woman, and the woman contains the man.

If we approach this from a vision of the self as the result of the incorporation to the internal world of internalised representations of object relations, it is clear that the image that we maintain of ourselves and that which others give back to us come to form part of this identity. There is no self without object; there is no representation of the self without representation of the other. How I feel leads to how I act, and this second part produces a reaction within the environment that simultaneously conditions the response of the former. There is a fluctuation of experiences and reactions that generate identity. As with the mother, in the period that Lacan calls the “mirror stage”, who gives the child the image that he seeks, the others are mirrors in front of which we pose. In them we seek something with which to build the representation of our self, which is to say our own identity.

It could be that this “other” of the opposite gender that each one of us has within has to do with the intense effect men and women have over each other with their mere presence. Popular wisdom is aware of this powerful force. When asked if she saw a possible relationship between religious people of different gender, Saint Teresa of Ávila affirmed: “between a saintly man and saintly woman...; a bolted and barred-up wall”. Phryne before the Areopagus, the mermaids charming sailors with their songs and the horrific stare of Medusa are but examples that demonstrate this influence, well known from the dawn of time.

Coming back to psychoanalytic literature, we see that Freud warns Jung in a letter: “The way these women manage to charm us with every conceivable psychic perfection until they have attained their purpose is one of nature’s great spectacles” (quoted in 20). In this ambivalent line that Freud was expressing to his favourite disciple, prior to their definitive break, we see that the Viennese genius acknowledges the difficulty that comes with seeing oneself liberated from the influence of the other sex, since only trained and vigilant clinicians could isolate themselves from that influence.

If we consider the construction of identity as construction of the self, we should pay logical attention to Kohut in particular, founder of the Self Psychology School [25]. Kohut indicates how the construction of the identity, parallel to the development of narcissism, implies the relationship with three types of objects that cover different necessities. He would call those objects “self-objects”. The self-object of idealisation would be that which allows the child in development to cast an admiring stare towards a powerful and capable person. The mirroring self-object would be that which gives the child back a valuable image of himself. Lastly, the twin object would correspond to a peer, an equal with which the relation would be built

based on symmetry. The connection with objects of these characteristics allows the subject's self to develop soundly, reaching the necessary intensity with regard to his ambitions, ideals and goals. It is interesting that Kohut does not pay much attention to the differences between men and women in this journey. It is possible that in setting aside Freudian structural theory and, in so doing, taking away the importance of the drives, he downplayed the study of sexuality. Consequently, gender and desire do not represent for him an area of special interest. Characters in Kohut's theoretical narrative seem strangely asexual.

Spitz [26] describes a series of stages that are essential in the development of the human infant which he calls "organisers" and which have steps that are indispensable for understanding the development of the child's identity. The first is the social smile, which presupposes the acknowledgement of oneself as a member of the human species. The child does not smile at objects or at animals, only at humans, and thus, to smile is to belong to the human race, to be a part of us. It happens at the second or third month. The second organiser of Spitz is anxiety in the face of strangers, which allows for fundamentally connected figures to be differentiated (those who do not cause anxiety) from the rest (those who cause anxiety). This occurs at 8 months. Lastly, the third organiser is the NO, which appears in the second year. This is the simplest way to distinguish oneself: I am not you. In adolescence the NO appears again, with a force that did not exist at 2 years of age. The process of the construction of gender identity is concluded at around 3 years of age. Nonetheless, the process of the construction of the identity in general continues until the end of adolescence. Mahler [27] with his proposal regarding the initial process of separation/individuation, and Blos [28] through his approach to adolescence as the second period of separation/individuation, completes the proposals that are essential in this context.

Volkan [29] describes in detail the process of "intergenerational transmission" which he explains as a set of ideals and fears that pass from one generation to the next, having a powerful effect even in the span of decades and centuries. Standing out in this process is the phenomenon of "deposition" which overlaps with that of projective identification. The mother "deposits" within the child her dreams, hopes and fears and the way in which the child can escape this destiny written out for him. There is also a gender problem present here in the sense that the dreams of the mother relating to the social tribe (large group) to which she belongs refer especially to the values placed on the masculine figure in the society in which they live. The heroes are, in particular, men, and the stories relating to them are transmitted by the mother in particular. Collective identity, the feeling of belonging to the big group of the nation or homeland, has to do with processes of generational transmission and thus with deposition phenomena in which the mother, with her inevitably sexualised and sexualising vision, plays a primordial role.

The obvious influence of the environment does not impede in any way the valuing of the importance of genetics in the construction of identity. The field of Epigenetics [30] shows us how the environment is capable of powerfully influencing the expression of genetic material, offering thus a bridge that helps us to understand how early interpersonal connections are capable of acting over the chains of nucleotides and generating different proteins.

Emilce Dio Bleichmar, in her extraordinary text “The Spontaneous Feminism of Hysteria” [31], reveals how hysteria represents, in our culture, the largest exponent of the profoundly conflictive dimension of feminine sexuality. In the face of the devaluation of her gender, the woman, in our culture, tries out vicarious forms of narcissisation, adding certain phallic-like traits to her femininity or addressing a man who tells her who she is. Thus, the infantile/dependent personality or rather the hysterical personality and the phallic/narcissistic personality make up a psychopathological type whose pivot is the acceptance or rejection of stereotypes relating to gender roles. Among ourselves, the sexual enjoyment of the women who freely desires and obtains sexual satisfaction poses a transgression. This “spontaneous feminism” of the hysteria constitutes a form of reaction in the face of the devaluation of the feminine gender role among us. The hysterical conduct can thus be a manifestation of distancing of the women from the positions of power still in force.

Those who surround us serve a key function in the construction and development of our identity. The others act as a mirror and as a counterpoint, signalling what we lack and also what value we hold. Without question, the others contribute to the generation within ourselves of a sensation of pertinence to a group, they show us who is the other, and likewise they help us to build the experience of otherness. In a game of projections and introjections, such as is the relationship between the mother and baby, we build an individual identity that is still collective, in the mirror of those who are other. However, we must not forget that the image that we are given back by others undoubtedly contains aspects that do not belong to us, and therefore there is always something that is ours in the vision that we have of others and something of ours in that of theirs. Kristeva [32] bluntly affirms that only the acceptance of one’s own otherness, of the strangeness that inhabits within us, can lead us to more human levels of relationships with others who surround us. Our internal world is certainly a world, conceived of diverse parts that blend together in different harmonies in order to create an interior landscape that mimics the variety and conflict of the external world.

Two events in the last decades illustrate that strange fluctuation in identity which affects both genders: on the one hand, the development of feminist proposals that seek a different place for women in the twentieth-century society—a place that isn’t the traditional one for the wife/mother or lover, in order to recover in some way the place of the warrior woman, in the broadest sense of the term—and on the other hand the woman capable of thinking and acting freely and at the same time expressing her aggressive drive, to struggle, to compete and, why not, to win over the man who travels at her side. This appearance, for some, accompanies previous and parallel changes that occurred within the role of the man and the view that he had of the woman. The twentieth-century man becomes more misogynistic, more contemptuous of the woman, searches more for his identity through the rejection of all things feminine that may reside in him, including, of course, any satisfaction derived from submission. Many point out the abundance today of men that become “weak” fathers, devoid of authority and power. Clinically, we appreciate how often those “weak” fathers seem to enjoy a narcissistic satisfaction through identifying with the

exciting life of their adolescent offsprings [33]. In a socially tragic evolution, the questioning of father's authority comes together with the questioning of authority per se. Mothers today neither share authority with fathers nor victoriously take it from them. Authority dilutes into disappearance in Western societies, and the void left by this often "weak" father has not been filled by anyone. It appears that women begin to reach the summit of power and authority at the moment it becomes an empty shell.

The fading away of all personal authorities affects not only father figures but all authority figures in general. When we try to confront authority, we find smoke and mirrors; there is no person opposing us with arguments, and we are dragged by the faceless logic of today's power.

At the same time, in an almost parallel fashion to the feminist movement are proposals, especially literary ones, that talk about the attractive side of submission and the surrender on the part of women who freely choose that path among many others. From the Story of O up to Fifty Shades of Grey, there is a whole tradition of narratives that are openly masochistic and which in some way demonstrate a sensitive part of the woman and the entire social body. At a moment of almost complete liberty of thought and narration in the developed world, some women, and men, observe in fascinated fashion how the duality of sadomasochism seems to offer new modes of thought regarding parts of our desires that were previously unmentionable. Jean Paulhan, the prestigious Parisian man of letters and lover of Anne Desclos, the secret author (even for him) of the Story of O, indicates with what we can guess is a certain relief that masochistic fantasies express a true feminine desire to be submissive and dominated. Philosopher Manon Garcia in her book *On ne nait pas soumise, on le devient* [34] thinks submission is not a moral fault, but a destiny towards which women are endlessly invited. She points out that the real enemy of an egalitarian agreement between sexes is women's consent to their own submission. However, some authors such as Anita Phillips [35] observe that, as always, there are things that hide beneath the surface. The young woman who chooses to be submissive may be in search of something that goes beyond what her fascinated or proud partner may provide her. The submission of herself seems to open unknown doors and allows for the exploration of new inner worlds, and in this journey of discovery, the partner who exercises dominance can be merely a useful tool. Stoller [36] warns us that the simple search of pathology in sadomasochism presupposes a view that is too restrictive and which loses the importance of nuances related to the identity and personality of the protagonists.

9.5 Social Aspects of Self-Identity

Psychosocial identity is compounded of social and personal components, the shape of which can vary from context to context [11]. Surroundings beyond one's family, spanning the entire society, exert a continuous influence in the construction and development of identity. Society as a whole is in constant change, and because of that, this influence varies throughout different times and places.

Our Western society has changed its ways and the ways in which it organises itself in recent decades, bringing about notable changes in the roles expected of individuals according to gender. In general there has been a massive incorporation of women into the workplace, at a different pace and intensity, depending on the specific countries, of course, and this has obviously changed the aspects of the family, economics, health, education and politics in the entire society. Speaking on our contemporary welfare society, sociologist Javier Elzo [37] says: “the mother has had to leave the house; the father still hasn’t returned”. The new role that women have has been accompanied by an apparent sense of anxiety in their masculine counterparts, unsure of their role in this new society and going back and forth between indifference and hostile rejection, even voluntary over-involvement in the new order. The answers to questions such as “who am I?” or “what is my role?” are more complex than ever before, for everyone, for women who are developing a professional career without abandoning the traditional position of taking care of their own and for men who add to their usual role an attitude of caregiving, which has never in history been a role of theirs.

Society hopes and fears different things regarding the conduct of boys and girls. Parents and adults in general are attentively watching both and react in a different way. Concern over sissy behaviour in a boy far outweighs concern over tomboy activity in a girl [11]. There is a conviction that is implicit within society, in the sense that masculine identity is more fragile and carries with it more risks than the feminine identity, because of which it is considered necessary to understand and provide a continuity with regard to the conduct and attitudes of masculine children, in order to avoid anomalies in future gender identity. It is as if that masculine identity required constant validation from the environment and particularly from women within that environment. As they have done time and again, poets depict these complex problems with great precision: “... it is said that a man is not a man/unless he hears his name/come from the lips of a woman/this could be true...”. It is fascinating to witness how the personal value of the man seems linked to the mere idea of being one. Thus, it is the others, especially the women, who give or take away value from the individual. In women, gender identity seems to be not so linked to personal value. Feminine gender identity is provided as a given and does not depend as much on confirmation from third parties such as is the case with men. To summarise, we would say that the woman needs confirmation of her worth, not of who she is. The man, on the other hand, needs to have who he is confirmed, because that is where his value lies.

Sexuality, especially adult sexuality represented by a couple that enjoy that union, always makes the social group uneasy. This group, submitting to primitive forces, observes the couple with mistrust and promotes the disengagement of men and women in order to return to that primitive and infantile sexuality pertaining to large groups. The couple has to constantly protect itself from that pernicious influence, knowing that the struggle has no end. Large groups, in which aggression has taken force and therefore functioning is even more primitive, do not tolerate mature sexuality among their ranks, and they make moves to articulate rules that regulate the sexuality of the couples, looking upon love and happy desire with hostile envy

[38]. From this we get that two human qualities that any totalitarian system will try to stamp out are doubt and personal intimacy, for both threaten the total control of individuals by the state [39]. In his novel in 1984, Orwell [40] describes how Big Brother watches and regulates love and hunts down the protagonist couple that has escaped its control. In one startling scene, the police savagely torture the male protagonist, and in his desperation, he tries to provide the information that would stop the pain. But there are no questions, and therefore he finds no answer. This goes on until a terrifying conviction overcomes him; he shouts, asking that she be the one who is tortured so that he might be spared. We can imagine the smile on the torturer in having achieved his objective: there is no bond that resists the state; love and sex are at the service of the group and do not exist without it.

Throughout history the same discovery is repeatedly found: the enormous difficulty in combining aggression and sexuality in woman. However, we find a long tradition of mixing violence and sexuality in men. The rape and capture of the enemy's women is a historical act sustained throughout cultures and time periods, from remote antiquity up to today. Sudan, Rwanda and Bosnia are recent scenarios in which violence against women and forced sexuality become another aspect of combat. It's a part that covers various ends, as with any other war act, from the sowing of terror within the enemy to the punishment of the enemy for his actions or even for the victor to humiliate him, leaving him with offspring that will perpetuate the humiliation. Also, the possibility of an animalistic and irresponsible sexuality that would never be allowed within the group may make up another part of the spoils of war. This is why, for the man, there is no difficulty in combining his roles as lover, father and warrior. Together with this terrible custom, which is well known, we find a historic footprint of another means for fusing eroticism and militarism. The homosexual link between men who fight together, more or less disguised and/or sublimated, forms a long tradition. The military fraternity shows a discreet path for the comrades to express affection, desexualised at first, that tends to be considered "purer" than the affection between a man and a woman. A classic example that has stayed in the collective memory is that of the so-called Sacred Band [41], the elite unit of the Theban infantry in the fourth century BC which remained undefeated through 40 years up to its complete annihilation by Philip II of Macedon in the Battle of Chaeronea. This combat group was, in accordance with tradition, composed of a 150 couples, of lover and beloved who fought and died together. The history of this undefeated phalanx who contrast with the famous 300 Spartans who, guided by Leonidas, contained the Persians in the Battle of Thermopylae has inspired poets and narrators throughout the centuries, turning the love, sexual or not, between warriors as something not only acceptable but sublime. The permanence of this legendary group in historic memory tells us, without question, about the fascination that the combination of violence and sexuality in men has instilled in our culture.

Giuliana Galli-Carminati [42] and other researchers of feminine identity approach the concept of "woman warrior", considering it the third pole of the female archetype. This would be a pole that throughout time will be left lacking all sexual and identity-related nuance before finally disappearing to the benefit of the two

other mythological female figures: the mother/wife and the lover. The authors, performing a brief historical analysis, demonstrate that in some of the most ancient civilisations, the figures of warrior goddesses occupied a distinguished place in the religious pantheon. In the majority of the cases, these warrior females could not maintain a complete sense of sexuality: or they were virgins in the current sense of the word (Greece), or they were limited to sexual relations without end up as mothers or wives (Sumer). In Semitic cultures in particular, those from which our Western culture derive, the view was rather misogynist, placing the woman in positions that are socially valued less and therefore taking her away from violent action. It would be tempting to venture a possible relationship between this strict separation of sexuality and violence in the Greco-Roman culture and the historical difficulty of the Christian civilisation in accepting a passionate and happy sexuality that goes beyond the reproductive. The myths of the Amazons, the Gorgon or the Furies, free and virgin, indicate to us how starting in antiquity the absence of sexuality was considered key in achieving a life free from submission to man. The warrior woman, independent and capable, had to pay a price, and this was her own sexuality, and she renounced to couple life as well as maternity. The reappearance among our cultural myths of feminine figures (cinema, comics, TV series, etc.) who are independent and capable of violence continues to demonstrate these ancestral parameters, as if we still lived in classic antiquity: the sexuality of these heroines is partial or absent. It continues to be impossible to integrate loving passion, maternity and violence within the same feminine figure.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of serial killers have been men could shed some light for us too, regarding identities and genders. It might be said that in the internal world of women, there is no possibility for a representation of the self that is charged with such meanness. The intense antisocial traits that are accompanied by the total lack of compassion that characterises psychopaths seem to characterise women less, perhaps through pressure and expectations that are social, cultural, genetic, hormonal, etc. Of course, there are some women capable of carrying out very violent and ruthless acts, but they are very rare outliers in a masculine world. In general, their participation in extreme sadistic acts is usually in the role of companion or assistants to the men who carry out the initiative in these crimes, either luring the victim into a trap or collaborating in the very torture and related assignments [43]. Remember the role of the young attractive woman who accompanies the magician in her role of distracting the public and helping the master in executing his tricks. Lest we forget, anyway, that it is precisely this diversion of the audience's attention that allows the performer to carry out his final surprise.

The impact of the social attitudes and views towards individuals according to their gender is not limited to the internal world of the protagonists and in favour of the development of identities that are more or less conflicted. Sometimes this effect has a vitally transcendent aspect, literally. The winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, Amartya Sen, has analysed a worrying phenomenon [44–46]. In 1992, Sen published in the *British Journal of Medicine* a brief paper of great impact: “The Missing Women”. It analysed how in some Asian countries such as India, China, Korea and others the small preponderance of women vs. men which can be found in

the rest of the world simply did not exist. These countries were “lacking” in many women, with an estimated number of many million women. In order to counteract the argument of some regarding the determinant importance of poverty in this phenomenon, Sen referred to the comparison of countries that were similarly poor in Africa, confirming that in those the proportion of women compared to men in the general population was similar to France or England and much different to the populations of the Asian countries indicated. The reason for this tragedy was, for Sen, the disparity in healthcare for girls compared to boys, which was related to a clear preference within these social groups for men instead of women. Already in his first analysis, Sen indicated the general education of the population and in particular of the women and girls as one of the fundamental ways to overcome this scourge. After returning to the problem, years later, Sen finds that medical attention to boys and girls has been partially balanced out in many of these countries. Nonetheless, the proportion of men and women has continued in the same vein. One new test of the data reveal a reality not perceived before: the medical technology allowed for many of those Asian countries to now come to know the gender of the babies before birth and brought about selective abortion of female fetuses. In this way, even though healthcare had been balanced for both sexes, the number of births of women decreased, and the end result was the reassertion of previous proportions and, thus, the absence of many women. In a recent review of this reality [46], Sen shows that in some of these social groups, the level of education of the population has risen clearly, and many women have obtained access to levels of training that are much greater than that of their mothers. These women are now more capable of providing the same care to their daughters and sons, although these are the women who access that technology and opt to selectively abort according to the gender of the baby prior to birth. Undoubtedly, there is a very important social aspect at the hour of acquiring an identity and, of course, at the hour of assigning value to that identity. The reality of the “missing women” obliges us to face this absence of value in persons of the female sex in different social groups. The lack of value that undoubtedly is also transferred by women in the group, women who can’t escape those general values in which they are immersed and from which their lives, family and work, ideals and desires are forged.

We men and women weave the web of oppression. Every knot we tie submits us inexorably to the influence of forces beyond ourselves, which make up our identity, as individuals, as men and as women.

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