

The Gender Dilemma...

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Why think about gender?

CAT places the client at the centre of the therapy, and the reformulation; there is a clear theoretical model, but people are neither slotted into diagnostic criteria, nor assumed to have innately driven inner worlds or experiences. The issue remains though, of how we deal with difference; differences between clients' experiences, and between therapists and clients. Gender is a key issue of difference, which has been powerfully discussed and utilised in psychotherapy (particularly psychoanalytic) theory. However, little has been written about gender in the CAT literature.

There are many other issues of difference that will be just as important and I do not wish to minimise these – in fact, I hope that some of this thinking will be transferable to other differences which result in inequality and issues of privilege.

Don't be hysterical... The relationship between gender and psychotherapy

Gender, sex and sexuality are central in much of psychoanalytic theory. Freud (1925) acknowledged that males and females have different inner experiences, and developmental paths. Although he seemed to assume that these differences are innate, and that relationships with parents of either sex follow prescriptive and normative patterns, he also grappled with the question of whether sex/gender and sexuality are binary concepts, or whether a psychological perspective might see masculinity (which might equate with activity) and femininity (passivity) in different measures in different people or at different moments.



Can CAT find the middle ground between EITHER prescriptive norms and assumptions, OR ignorance of the differences that sex and gender make to the people we become and the kinds of problems we are faced with?



Freud was, of course, influenced by the culture of his times, but nonetheless this is a culture that has influenced us all, and it is clear and explicit in his writings that the female is seen as inferior, or problematic, with something missing. Freud's assumptions that our psychology is driven by innate desires and predetermined pathways – with an ultimate goal of 'mature' heterosexual partnership – is also problematic. These kinds of issues have led to a wealth of feminist critique of psychoanalytic theory. For example, Nancy Chodorow (1994) suggests that Freud seems to equate gender identity with sexuality, as if the identity of a woman is mainly determined by her sexual function. Chodorow goes on to say that what psychoanalytic theory actually explains is how women are seen in the male psyche.

A full discussion of the gender dilemma must also consider post-modern approaches to feminism, including queer theory in which Judith Butler (1990) describes gender as a culturally constructed identity, not limited to a biologically determined sex.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) has far less focus on sex and sexuality than more traditional approaches, although this is probably at least in part related to

the fact that it is described more as a practical treatment approach than a developmental model. CBT tends to cluster patients into diagnostic groups, and whilst there is an acknowledgement that there are differences between how often men and women present with particular problems, there is not much focus on why this might be. Some authors (Hankin and Abramson, 2001; Hyde, Mezulis & Abramson, 2008) have attempted to address this using stress-vulnerability models that describe how cognitive vulnerabilities (derived from both genetics and the environment) lead to differing attributions of negative life events. These models acknowledge the difference in experiences of males and females, and the role of this in impacting both on vulnerability to, and the types, frequencies and severity of negative life events that are faced.

It seems important to acknowledge these differences, and incorporate understandings of power and oppression into our therapy; acknowledging that 'negative thoughts' are not random, but are rooted in lived experience, and rather than being dysfunctional or maladaptive have probably served a purpose in helping someone make sense of their world or survive adversity.