Marriage in the 20th Century: A Feminist Perspective

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A defining feature of the 20th century in Western civilization was a profound change in the roles women play in both private and public life. The field of couple therapy was influenced by that change and, to a limited extent, participated in it. I will argue that the field has avoided fully embracing the principles of feminism that generated the social changes in gender and marital roles, settling instead for a more token acknowledgment that gender means something, without wanting to specify what that something is. In responding to the other articles in this issue, I make the case that the connection between gender and power in marriage needs to be more fully integrated, in the theory, research, and treatment of couples.

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Creatures of habit and routine that we are, it is occasionally useful to take a step back and try to get a broader view of things. The three major articles written for this issue attempt to provide that broader view to the topics of marriage, marital research and couple therapy. In doing so, the authors have examined a wealth of scholarship. They have discerned patterns and trends in what has been deemed real, meaningful, and desirable about couple relationships. Some of their conclusions are compelling; others are provocative. The ideas presented in this issue will certainly stimulate conversations among colleagues about future directions in couple therapy and research on couples, which was surely the central goal of the Editor for this special issue of the journal.

However, even broad views can miss important elements of a gestalt. As postmodernism argues, we see only what we are prepared to believe. I read these three articles prepared to believe most of what the authors had to say, but because of my own point of view within the field, I was also prepared to see things that the authors either did not see, or saw quite differently. Regarding the meaning of gender in couple relationships, particularly the linkage between power and gender, I think these articles demonstrate two kinds of errors. The first error, demonstrated by Gurman and Fraenkel, is to acknowledge that gender is relevant, but then to move rapidly from defining and exploring the problem to declaring it solved. The second error, demonstrated in the article by Gottman and Notarius, and in the one by Pinsof, is to see elements of the problem without fully recognizing it as a significant and coherent issue.

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GENDER AND COUPLE THERAPY

Gurman and Fraenkel define the current period (1986–present) of couple therapy as one of “Refinement, Extension, Diversification and Integration” (p. 220), noting that the synergistic forces of feminism, multiculturalism and postmodernism forced both theorists and practitioners of couple therapy to recognize the importance of context in determining what is believed to be real or true. Unfortunately, with respect to feminism, their article demonstrates little acknowledgment of either the refinement, extension, or integration of feminist thinking into couple therapy. The impact of feminism on the field has itself gone through several stages, only one of which is thoroughly addressed by Gurman and Fraenkel. The feminist critique of couple and family therapy was but the first stage of incorporating gender as a major organizing construct in the field. This stage can be traced back to the late 1970s (fully a decade after the current women’s movement began to challenge the meanings ascribed to gender in the broader culture) when Hare-Mustin (1978) first called family and couple therapists to account for being essentially conservative and homeostatic regarding the roles of women within marriage. Since then, the incorporation of gender into couple therapy has followed the same interwoven processes that resulted in gender becoming a major focus of change in society as a whole: critique, advocacy, resistance, reformation.

By the early 1980s the feminist critique was appearing in workshops on the programs of national conferences, and some senior women in the field organized the Women’s Project in Family Therapy (Walters, Carter, Papp & Silverstein, 1988). During the mid-1980s, two important invitational conferences were held in Connecticut (known as the Stonehenge conferences after the Inn where they took place). These conferences brought together a diverse group of 60 or so women family therapists who had begun to think, write, teach, and practice about how gender influenced the behavior of their clients, the way they construed clients’ problems, and the very practice of couple therapy. The reformation of couple therapy had begun.

Feminists began not only to critique but to advocate—for gender-focused courses in training curricula, for a feminist-oriented journal of family and couple therapy, for inclusion of gender as a category of social analysis as meaningful as the category of generation (Goldner, 1988). Like all social revolutions, the transformation that feminists were advocating for the field was not universally applauded. From the beginning of the critique there was resistance, which took the form of assertions that to apply feminist principles to the practice of couple therapy was itself a form of sexism and, further, that it was a violation of the ideal of therapeutic neutrality. Carefully and persistently feminists challenged the premise that therapeutic neutrality was possible, making the case that neutrality is implicitly supportive of the status quo, which in a sexist society, means that neutrality is an inherently pro-sexist position (Hare-Mustin, 1980). A number of authors drew attention to the issue of wife battering as an example of a situation in which therapeutic neutrality could be particularly devastating, leaving a battered woman to draw the conclusion that she was as responsible for her victimization as her partner (Almeida, 1993; Bograd, 1984). Slowly, the zeitgeist of the field began to change, and by the late 1980s, family therapists were generally accepting the idea that gender ought to be considered as a factor in trying to understand the constraints that prevent couples from solving their problems.
In the past decade or so, the writing about gender and couple therapy has shifted away from critique and toward the specification of exactly how gender influences the ways that men and women experience their problems and conceptualize their appropriate roles within their relationships. What began as a critique evolved into an exploration of how feminist principles could be applied to the theories and practices of couple therapy. This has proved to be a complex and arduous process. Feminists could easily agree that women are disadvantaged by the structure of heterosexual marriage, and that couple therapy has done little to address that disadvantage; but specifying how to redress gender inequities in marriage and other committed relationships has proven to be a thornier problem, about which there is still no universal agreement. Nonetheless, a fair number of writers have been offering suggestions about how to apply feminist principles to the practices of couple therapy in order to transform those relationships rather than just help them to fit better into the prevailing paradigm of marriage (for example, Goodrich, 1991; Goodrich, Rampage, Ellman & Halstead, 1988; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1996, 1998; Larson, Hammond, & Harper, 1998; Rabin, 1996; Rampage, 1995, 1998).

As an intellectual project in family and couple therapy, feminist revisionism in the past decade has lost the momentum described by Sprenkle (1990) in his review of family therapy in the 1980s. Several factors have contributed to this. A number of early voices have left the field, retired, or moved on to other projects. Practitioners who were never comfortable with close scrutiny of gender as a therapeutic variable have been eager to define the problem as solved. Therapists, as well as clients, have been willing to accept the tiniest token of change—he talks to her for a few minutes a day, she opens her own checking account—as an adequate response to gender inequities in marriage. Gender has been subsumed under the larger umbrella of diversity. The economics of the field have pushed practitioners in the direction of concrete, behavioral solutions to only those problems that can easily be described on a symptom checklist. Finally, couple therapy has not been immune from the backlash against feminism that Susan Faludi (1991) documented in other domains of society.

**Feminism versus Genderism**

Current discourse in couple therapy has largely replaced feminism with a less politically charged interest in gender effects (Philpot & Brooks, 1995; Snyder, 1992). As a consequence of this transformation, participation has expanded from a small group composed almost entirely of female feminists to include both men and women, many of whom would not characterize themselves as feminist, but are nonetheless interested in the ways that gender influences how clients construe their problems, and how they enact solutions to those problems. The broadening base of therapists interested in gender issues has had multiple effects. On the one hand, it has legitimized gender as a clinical issue. It would be difficult in the year 2002 to find a therapist willing to assert that gender has no impact in psychotherapy. On the other hand, the broader acceptance of gender as a legitimate variable in therapy has considerably diluted the original focus of the critique, i.e. that heterosexual marriage is a relationship in which power counts heavily, and in which power is most often distributed unevenly, in a way that favors husbands over wives. Many of the practitioners who currently write about gender prefer to identify themselves as "non-sexist" or "gender sensitive" rather than feminist. In general terms, these labels seem to indicate a belief that gender has some
consequence in male-female relationships, but also an unwillingness to view such relationships as having significant power dimensions. Consequently, gender issues in couple therapy, though more widely accepted as relevant, have often been removed from the political or power context in which feminists placed them.

This state of affairs falls considerably short of where feminists were hoping couple therapy would be at the start of the new millennium, and certainly far from the integration that Gurman and Fraenkel so optimistically report. If gender differences do not reflect an underlying social construct, such as power, then they must be either coincidental, biologically determined, or a matter of personal preference. None of these hypotheses explain why large numbers of women, but very few men, have been persistently, passionately, urgently pressing for changes in these arrangements for the past four decades. Women have pressed for the change because women have borne the weight of the inequities woven into the very fabric of heterosexual marriage. Shifting the burdens of marriage into something more closely resembling parity is what feminism is about, and that task is far from accomplished. Without an analysis of power at its very core, “gendersensitive” or “non-sexist” therapy is mere pretense or (worse yet) trite, essentialist pap on the order of *Men are from Mars—Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1994).

**RESEARCH FINDINGS ON GENDER AND COUPLES**

Gottman and Notarius describe in great detail (perhaps too great to be appreciated by the nonresearcher) the vast array of research studies that have investigated a myriad of questions about how marriage works and why it so often does not. The work of couple therapists has been greatly enhanced in the last decade by the availability of research data describing in considerable detail what kinds of couple transactions are associated with greater satisfaction in the relationship and, conversely, what kinds of transactions lead to deterioration and divorce.

While actually referencing many studies that have found gender differences to be relevant, Gottman and Notarius offer no general hypothesis about what it is about gender that is relevant for marital satisfaction. The fact that gender differences identified by research do not support the existence of completely universal and non-overlapping categories of maleness and femaleness in the way Parsons (and others) imagined, does not mean that no gender differences exist, or that what differences do exist are arbitrary or meaningless. Gender identity (as contrasted to biologically determined sexual identity) may be socially constructed, but that does not mean that it is trivial or ephemeral. Instead, it may mean that our understanding of gender needs to be refined by addressing more subtle questions, such as “What are the conditions under which couples manifest behaviors, cognitions, and affect that are associated with stereotypic gender roles?” and, “What are the relative costs for men and women who conform to those roles?”

Actually, the gender-related findings noted by Gottman and Notarius do seem to fall into a coherent pattern. The findings include the following: “balance in husband-wife power was related to marital quality” (p. 174); “egalitarian couples had the highest . . . marital satisfaction” (p. 174); “men display a more coercive style in resolving marital conflict, while women display a more affiliative style” (p. 174); “the escalation sequence of men rejecting influence from their wives predicted subsequent divorce” (p. 175); “Across couple types, marital satisfaction was associated with interactions confirming equality between partners” (p. 176); “there is a precipitous drop in marital
quality within one year after the birth of the first child; people revert to stereotypic gender roles; ... fathers withdraw into work; and marital conversation and sex sharply decrease" (p. 172); "There is extensive literature that indicates, for men, marriage offers health-buffering effects... and that women are more likely to experience health-related problems if the marriage is distressed" (p. 189); "The power dimension of violence suggests a systematic use of violence to intimidate and control the abused wife" (p. 101); "husbands who had less power were more physically abusive toward their wives" (p. 101). A reasonable conclusion to draw from these findings is that marriages in which the principle of equality between partners animates their everyday transactions are more satisfying (and less dangerous) than relationships in which partners struggle for power, or in which too much control is vested in one person.

Furthermore, equality cannot be taken for granted. Even those young couples who establish routines that equitably distribute the burdens and rewards of being in a committed relationship find that the arrival of children creates formidable pressures to fall back into more stereotypic, and far less satisfying patterns. That this pressure is related to gender is strongly suggested by research finding that long-term gay and lesbian relationships are less marked by traditional gender roles than heterosexual couples (Cardell, Finn, & Maracek, 1981; Harry, 1984).

THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND OTHER PAIR-BONDS

In his article, Pinsof suggests that merely trying to perfect our methods of couple therapy in the hope that this will somehow improve the sturdiness of the institution of marriage is tantamount to changing the arrangement of deck chairs on the Titanic—an intervention doomed to fail, because it is aimed at the wrong problem. Certainly there is room for improvement in how we help couples solve their problems. But Pinsof says that it is society’s very definition of marriage (and our implicit support for that definition) that constrains us from more effective interventions. He points out a host of emerging realities about couple relationships. Most of us are all too familiar with the statistics he cites about the divorce rate in this country hovering at 50%. But not only are couples ending their marriages in higher frequencies than ever, in increasing numbers they are also entering into coupled relationships that exist outside the structure of traditional marriage. Young couples who cohabitate prior to marrying; older couples who cohabitate rather than marry and give up Social Security benefits; gay, lesbian, and trans-gendered couples who are restricted from marrying by archaic and discriminatory state laws—these and other groups form an increasing proportion of the people in this society who choose to affiliate as couples, but are not legally married. Furthermore, a significant number of children will be born to or adopted by such couples, and their lives will be deeply impacted by the success their parents have in maintaining a viable and stable relationship. Instead of decrying these various forms of coupling for undermining marriage as an institution, Pinsof invites us to recognize that they represent legitimate variations of pair-bonding, and to think of how we as therapists can support and strengthen the relationships that they encompass.

Expanding the definition of what constitutes “legitimate” coupling—rather than trying to get couples to fit themselves into the one constraining and archaic form available—has great merit. If couples are choosing not to marry, or not to stay married, we should consider the possibility that it is the institution, rather than the
people, that needs to be changed. Certainly making it possible for gay couples who want to marry to do so would be a simple and straightforward social intervention that would end a legal unfairness that impairs the ability of gay couples to form stable unions and provide the security of two legal parents for their children.

But more is needed than merely an expansion of the definitions of who can marry and what constitutes "legitimate" coupling. In analyzing the reasons for the rapid increase in the divorce rate during the third quarter of the 20th century, Pinsos cites correlational data linking escalating divorce rates, greater availability of effective contraceptives, and increased participation in the paid work force by women. He stops short, however, of following these data to their most obvious conclusion: having once achieved control over their own reproduction, and freedom from economic dependence on their husbands, many, many women concluded that there was not a good enough reason left to stay married. The increase in the divorce rate has largely been driven by women who refuse to stay in marriages they regard as oppressive, in which they carry more of the burden but receive less of the benefit than their husbands.

The divorce rate rose at the end of the last century at precisely the same time that women's expectations for their own lives rose. This general rise in expectations has had profound implications for what women want of their partners. As women have come to expect themselves to manage both paid work and family work they expect their husbands, in turn, to increase their participation in both the routine tasks of family and home, and the emotional tasks of maintaining a close and satisfying partner relationship. In other words, women have been hoping to change the very institution of marriage. It may be, in large part, this very hope that accounts for the continued popularity of marriage in the face of the bleak statistics about divorce. Had these hopes been entirely disappointed, the divorce rate would still be climbing. But slowly, unevenly, and sometimes reluctantly many men have adapted their expectations of marriage to be more compatible with the changes women have made in their lives. Many husbands have learned to provide practical care to their own offspring, to change diapers, and to juggle work and doctor's visits when children are sick. To a considerably smaller extent, they have agreed to do housework. They do accept that marriage to a woman who assumes she is your equal partner means having to collaborate on almost every decision you make, from whether to take a job in a different city to whose turn it is to do dishes.

Taking a historical view of even a few hundred years makes it apparent that the institution of marriage has undergone more change in the past 40 years than in the previous millennium. Even now, the changes are more informal than formal, and they are far from universal. The fact that these changes have been disruptive, that there has been resistance, and that some marriages have not had the resilience to survive, does not prove that the changes have been bad. In general, the most oppressive constraints of marriage (inflexible gender-determined roles, unequal distribution of privilege and responsibilities) have yielded somewhat to the wider trends toward democracy, equality, fairness, and flexibility taking place on every level of this society. Still, in many marriages (particularly once children arrive, thus accounting for lower rates of marital satisfaction from that point on), these changes are more theoretical than practiced. Until the normative practices of marriage consistently support the goal of maximizing both partners' satisfaction through collaboration and cooperation,
the divorce rate is unlikely to abate significantly.

CONCLUSION

There is no reason to suppose that we are now situated at the endpoint in the evolution of couple relationships, couple therapy, or research on couples. Therefore we must be circumspect in asserting what we believe to be true, knowing that our understanding is as informed by the context of our times, as have all the understandings handed down to us. The authors of these three articles have provided a useful guide to comprehending how we have come to know what we know about couple therapy and research on marriage. They point us to a number of possible changes in what we might deem to be true about these topics in the future.

One change that feminists are still hoping to achieve is to define explicitly marriage and other adult pair-bonding relationships as relationships of equals. Were family therapy fully to embrace this goal, then we would routinely help couples recognize and untangle the conundrums they create whenever the balance of that equality is disturbed. We would challenge every assertion of privilege based on gender.

Thanks largely to the success of the movement toward gender equality in this society, those obstacles to true equality in partner relationships that yet remain are often subtle, sometimes even unintended. They exist not so much in the explicit beliefs that couples have about fairness and equality, but because the vast majority of adults in this society believe in these principles as a matter of course. Rather, the obstacles to gender equality that remain are mostly hidden in the assumptions our clients make about themselves and each other, and implicit in the habits of behavior in which they engage without reflection. Therefore, our work must deconstruct the biases of those assumptions, and invite reflection on the unintended consequences of behavioral habits that are inconsistent with the values of respect, fairness, and equality. We must accept as axiomatic that gender and power remain closely linked, and be attentive to even the smallest transaction between the men and women we see in couple therapy if it links privilege and gender.

We do not, any of us, have the luxury of standing outside the social transformation taking place around the meaning of gender. As therapists we too make assumptions and have habits informed by gender, and those assumptions and habits come with us into the consultation room. It is incumbent on us, because of the unique role we play in the lives of the couples we see as clients, to examine those assumptions carefully, to consider the implications of those habits rather than consoling ourselves that they are coincidental or inconsequential. The more our assumptions and practices are consistent with the very same values of respect, fairness and equality that we seek to promote in the relationships of our clients, the more likely it is that we will be truly useful to them.

REFERENCES


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