

Gender Sensitivity in Couple Therapy

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The importance of sensitivity to gender has gained increasing credibility in the field of couple therapy (Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lyness, 2003; McGolderick, Anderson, Walsh, 1989; Hare-Mustin, 1987). When adopting this ethos, gender sensitive therapists strive to take into account the differences in behavior, attitude, and socialization that males and females experience in regard to power, status, position, and privilege within couple and family relationships (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). This article discusses the central therapeutic issues involved in addressing gender differences between partners in heterosexual relationships.

Challenging Gender Bias

Emphasis on gender sensitivity was initially aimed at challenging sexist stereotypes and redressing the marginalization that women experience in marital and family life (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Popular books by Gilligan (1982), Tannen (1990), and Gray (1992) also helped promote the idea that there are major psychological differences based on gender, and that these gender differences need to be taken into account when addressing couple and family conflicts.

In their efforts to be gender sensitive, couple therapists may have unwittingly propagated alpha biasing (Roberto, 1992) where the psychological and relational differences between males and females are exaggerated. The original intent was to counteract any beta biasing, i.e., to avoid minimizing or neglecting any real differences between males and females (Hare-Mustin, 1987). The unintended consequence may have been to accentuate false generalizations and stereotypes about the relevance of gender in explaining psychological and relational differences between the sexes.

Recent research findings confirm this unintended consequence and show that alpha biasing is more prevalent in the literature, i.e., that gender differences tend to be over-inflated and that men and women are actually much more alike than different. A case in point is a comprehensive review by Hyde (2005) of 46 meta-analyses of gender differences. Her review indicated marginal or no significant differences between the sexes on a wide array of characteristics such as verbal ability, personality traits, moral reasoning, helping behavior, interpersonal communication, and self-esteem.

An emblematic example of this alpha biasing is Gilligan's (1982) claim that women speak in a different moral "voice" than men. According to this model, women speak in a voice of caring, whereas men speak in a voice of justice. Hyde argues that that this model presents an exaggerated picture of gender differences that is not supported by the research literature (Jaffe & Hyde, 2000; Thoma, 1986; Walker, 1984). Moreover, she contends that this claim has the consequence of stereotyping women as caring and nurturing and men as lacking in these qualities. She further argues that taking this position tends to encourage men to believe that it is not in their nature to be nurturing in family relationships. Conversely, she raises the concern that women who violate the stereotype of being caring and nurturing may be more likely to be treated and judged harshly as a result of this labeling.

Identifying Genuine Differences

While Hyde's study found minimal differences between males and females on a wide variety of psychological and relational characteristics, her meta-analysis did identify large and significant gender differences in three crucial areas: upper body strength, sexual behavior, and aggression. These differences are not only statistically significant ones, but they are enduring and play a major role in many

of the conflicts that couples and family members routinely experience (Brooks, 1992; Philpot et al., 1997).

Although these differences in upper body strength, sexual behavior, and physical aggression are statistically significant, it is important to keep in mind that they still form two distinct bell curves, one for males and one for females that overlap in varying degrees. In other words, while males and females are on average likely to differ significantly on these three characteristics, any given member of one sex may still be relatively the same as another member of the opposite sex on any of them. Keeping this important caveat in mind, consider how males and females often differ with respect to these three important characteristics.

Strength & Aggression. Males in general have greater muscle mass than females, and have greater muscle mass in comparison to their total body mass. Males also convert more of their caloric intake into muscle, while females convert more of their intake to fat (Jansen et al., 2000). As a consequence, males are generally physically stronger than females. Gross measures of strength indicate a 40-50% difference in upper body strength between the sexes (Miller et al., 1993). The greater upper body strength of males is an evolutionary trait that is associated among other things with the tendency to be more physically aggressive than females (Card et al., 2008; Sell, Home, & Pond, 2012).

At the most violent levels of physical aggression, males—particularly young males—commit the vast majority of crimes such as murder, rape, armed robbery, and aggravated assault (Daly & Wilson, 1988). At the more typical levels of physical aggression, males are more likely than females to engage in shoving, hitting, and kicking others as well using weapons to threaten and/or harm others (Archer, 2004). Over the course of childhood, gender differences in the preferred mode of aggression become more pronounced. Around age eleven, girls begin to engage in significantly more verbal aggression than boys, while boys start to surpass girls in physical aggression (Lagerspetz & Bjorkqvist, 1994).

Greenberg et al. (2015) identify a number of physiological and psychological factors related to this difference in physical aggression. First, males secrete higher levels of testosterone than females and this hormone is correlated with aggressive behavior (Macoby & Jackson, 1974). Second, given that one of the most common factors for triggering aggression is the perception of others' actions as provocative (Geen, 2001; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001), males are more likely than females to interpret other people's actions as intended to provoke them, e.g., as in insulting their characters and reputations (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Dodge & Coie, 1987). Third, when physical aggression takes place, the greater upper body strength of males is more likely to cause physical harm (Sell, Home, & Pond, 2012).

Greenberg et al. (2015) emphasize there are also important differences in the socialization of males and females that contribute to their different attitudes about physical aggression. Young boys are more likely than girls to be taught that physical aggression is acceptable (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kukiainen, 1992; Huesmann, Dubow, & Boxer, 2009). Compared to men, women are also more likely to view physical aggression as inappropriate. As a result, women tend to inhibit their aggressive impulses more than men (Brock & Buss, 1964; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Wyer, Weatherley, & Terrell, 1965).

Sexuality. Not surprisingly, the other major difference between men and women is in their sexuality. Although there is considerable variation within each gender, men on average have higher sex drives and more permissive attitudes about sex than women do. Greenberg et al. (2015) summarize the relevant research findings about this gender difference as follows:

- Men experience sexual desire more frequently than women, and are more motivated to seek out sexual activity (Regan & Atkins, 2006; Vohs, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2004).

- Men are more likely than women to say they would enjoy casual sex outside the context of a committed relationship, whereas women prefer to engage in sexual activities as part of an emotionally intimate relationship (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Reich, 2006).
- Once in a romantic relationship, men want to begin having sex sooner than women do; they want sex more often; and they are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the amount of sex they have (Sprecher, 2002).

These and other research findings indicate that men on average are more driven by sex than women. Like with aggression, these differences are not just the result of biological differences, but also reflect differences in the socialization of males and females that contribute to their different attitudes about sexuality. As Weeks and Gambecia (2015) note, these differences are rooted in the growing up experiences of children where they often learn that sex is for males and affection is for females, resulting in girls being more socialized to give sex to get affection and boys being more socialized to give affection to get sex.

Practicing Gender Sensitivity

Given the significant differences in their physical strength, aggression, and sexuality, men and women will tend to relate to one another differently when seeking intimacy and experiencing conflict with one another. They will also tend to have different emotional reactions to the conflicts in their intimate relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and will more likely experience conflicts around their different needs for intimacy (Gottman & Silver, 2012). More specifically, when seeking intimacy, women will tend to want more emotional connection and men will tend to desire more sexual connection (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003). In addition, when frustrated with each other, men will likely struggle more with controlling their anger and emotionally distancing themselves, whereas women will likely be more challenged with managing their fears and regulating their emotional pursuit (Love, 2001). Of course, gender is one among many factors that influence how members of the opposite sex experience intimacy and conflict in their relationships. Sensitivity requires that therapists take into account gender differences in an unbiased manner and work with their clients to manage these differences as effectively as possible.

One important aspect of gender sensitivity involves helping family members better understand the false gender stereotyping they have internalized and address the ways in which these stereotypes work against maintaining closeness in intimate relationships (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013). For example, if a husband believes he must appear strong and confident to his wife, he will likely be inhibited in sharing his fears and insecurities with her. The task of the couple therapist in this situation is to help the spouses realize they do not have to be bound by gender-driven beliefs and can choose less restrictive options that enable more open communication and problem solving (Knudson-Martin & Laughlin, 2004).

A much more complex challenge in practicing gender sensitivity is for couple therapists to address the actual gender differences between family members. This primarily entails normalizing non-pathological differences in aggression and sexuality while helping family members work toward mutual accommodation. This does not mean legitimizing these differences, but it does involve helping family members to genuinely understand them and to express their underlying needs to remain connected with one another as they work to preserve and enhance their relationships.

To facilitate this accommodation, couple therapists try to remain as systemically oriented as possible and focus on gender only when it appears to be playing an influential role in relational dynamics. For example, in working with a couple experiencing gridlocked conflict, a gender sensitive therapist might help the husband to understand that his emotional distancing with his wife is likely linked to the more aggressive impulses males typically experience in disputes with their wives (Gottman & Levenson,

1992). A gender sensitive therapist might also assist the more emotionally engaging wife to take advantage of her typically less aggressive reactivity by encouraging her to call for temporary breaks when the disputes with her husband become too heated (Gottman, 1999).

It is important to note that gender sensitive therapists would only offer the above interpretations based on their detailed knowledge of the couple with the intent of promoting more understanding and equality in family relationships. The ultimate purpose of such interventions should be to empower family members to recognize genuine gender differences and to help them move beyond false stereotypes in a manner that enables them to have more choices about how they are close and resolve their differences (Good, Gilbert, & Scher, 1990).

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