

**Constructing emancipatory realities: towards a feminist voice  
in humanistic psychology.**

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As Walt Anderson describes, the field of psychology is buzzing with new ways of thinking about such concepts as "self" and "reality". Feminist theory and practice has, from the beginning, been in the thick of such arguments, and for good reason. When every "truth" system we've ever known, from oldest myth to modern medical science, has concluded women are biologically, intellectually and morally inferior, that we are on the one hand dangerous and on the other natural nurturers and homemakers, that we are unsuitable for public office, should be at once protected and subjugated, you bet feminists have a stake in conversations about "reality!"

Contemporary feminist ideas about the nature of female reality fall into at least three different streams. One, more common among American feminists, takes the view that there is an essential female nature which is determined by and manifest through the female body, with its possibility for multiple orgasms, its internal sex organs, and its capacity for pregnancy, birth and milk-nursing. This line of argument sees female nature violently repressed and compromised by patriarchal and misogynistic societies which have prevented women from fully knowing themselves, each other and their nature. Through practices, customs, taboos and restrictions that circumscribe every aspect of her life, she is pruned and doctored like a Bonzai tree so that by the time she is an adult she sees this as the natural state of affairs. She willingly

contributes to the perpetuation of the process by cooperating with the pruning of the next generation--her daughters. The radical version of this line of thinking, exemplified by Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology*, leads to a separatist position, where women would remove themselves from all institutions currently created in man's image, and, in order to rediscover their lost "sacred feminity," withdraw from all contact with men. They would create their own institutions, symbols, religions, mores, and forms of government that more faithfully reflect "essential feminine consciousness." Although not herself proposing separatism, Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade*, also argues for an essential female nature which results in matriarchal cultures being somehow more "nurturant" when compared to male "sword" nature.

An other major stream of theory comes from the French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Helene Cixous who draw on both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism to argue that even the deepest layers of our psyche, the symbols, the desires, the fundamental structure our of sense of self, what Daly argues is "Nature," are constructed by our minds as ways to account for what happens to women (because they have no phallus) in a misogynistic society. The third important stream is made up of poststructuralists like Chris Weedon, who argue there is no such thing as "feminine nature," that our biology is not our destiny but our consciousness, mediated through symbolic language, is derived from the culture we live in. If our culture feels that women are inferior then we will experience that as our nature. If our culture sees us as brood mares then we ourselves will highly prize our reproductive natures rather than our minds or our athleticism. This line of thinking, drawing on the deconstructionist thought of Derrida, as well as Lacan, Foucault,

Althusser and others, focuses on the way language creates experience rather than merely reporting upon it. For post-structuralists, if we prize our mothering it is not due to some biological imperative but because patriarchal societies require that we voluntarily accept such roles as child-rearing and domestic work and don't ask for payment for it. Ideologies of "femininity," what Betty Freidan termed "feminine mystique," arise which help solidify these work-roles into aspects of identity. These codes of conduct feel so basic to us that we experience real anxiety if we try to go against them, thus reinforcing the belief that it is against our "nature" to not want to mother or have sexual relations with men. When patriarchal interests shift, as in a war for example, and women are required to work in the armaments factories, we are subjected to new propaganda urging us to downplay motherhood and promoting a new ideology of "womanhood" that makes heroines out of Rosie riveters, and aviatrixes. When the thinned ranks of men come home from the battle-field the "cult of motherhood" is reintroduced to get women out the jobs the men need and to replace the population decimated by the war. This line of discussion sees our nature as "man-made" and points to how it shifts from discourse to discourse, from community to community and from era to era as evidence for the plasticity of "female nature".

There are, of course enormous implications for the therapist in these two different positions. If you believe that a woman's meaninglessness and emptiness -her depression-- stems from her alienation from some primordial femininity then your therapy will be geared towards separatism, casting off the artifices of "masculine consciousness" and reaffirming the "essential feminine." You will eschew

activities associated with the "masculine" and cleave to those that are womanist. You will see intuition, feeling, magic, sensuality, dance, poetry and mysticism as facilitating your client's recovery of her "divine female nature;" rationality, politics, education in established institutions, participation in established religions, law, heterosexual marriage, competition, business etc. etc. will be seen as taking her away from herSelf and, therefore, as a contributing factor in the depression.

Therapy informed by a post-structuralist or constructivist positions (not quite the same but close enough for the purpose of this discussion) necessitates a heightened commitment to rationality, it requires critical analysis of both the outer world of signs and language and inner subjectivity. It will involve consciousness raising activities to challenge even deeply felt identifications and pulling apart cherished psychic structures with the view to realigning them with female emancipatory interests. Such a therapy has to be essentially activist, requiring women to get involved in the social, economic and political structures of society in order to transform them from exploitative forms to emancipatory forms, and, in the crucible of our community conversations about reality, each of us becomes both a culture interpreter and a culture-maker.

Within the AHP community there has been a clear preference for the "essential feminine" version of feminist psychology. I would like to argue that this is a mistake, albeit one that is very easy to understand. The idea of ourselves as "goddesses" or "priestesses" is a deeply comforting antidote to the usual sense of insignificance experienced by most women in their daily lives. Nonetheless I think going in the direction of "goddess" type language and affirmations of some inborn,

biologically based "femininity" in fact only serves to perpetuate ways of thinking about human realities which themselves form the justification for many attitudes and social practices which have disenfranchised women for millenia. When we look dispassionately at the newly emergent "goddess" type stories one can hardly fail to recognize how derivative they are of myths about female nature which have been part of patriarchal societies since ancient times.

The constructivist position is a harder pill to swallow. Its arguments leave the question of biological contribution to consciousness veiled in mystery. It is not that our biology is irrelevant but that it serves as a lower boundary condition through which and upon which symbolic reality, both internal and social must perforce be constructed. The content of consciousness, of the unconscious, of experience, even of "self," is constructed from semantic and semiotic symbols we encounter in our interactive dialogue with the world. When, for example, in a moment of intense psychological disorganization, I saw hideous gargoyles and diaphanous sprites taunting me from the depths of the abyss, the constructionists would argue (and they would be right) that I had seen every one of those beings before on the pages of children's fairy-tale books, on the sides of Gothic churches and in art museums I had been taken to before I could talk. It is not to say the drama these demons were engaged in within my psyche had ever been seen before, but, in the way 26 characters, half a dozen or so punctuation marks and a space-bar can be organized into either King Lear or Dear Abby, I had drawn upon my learned symbols and their socially agreed upon meanings to understand an event that needed more expressive language than I ordinarily used.

Some people feel the post-structural position leads to despair. Derrida himself is oft quoted as saying he is in despair. I don't agree with them. Interestingly it is not the feminist post-structuralists who cry out in angst, but the white, European males! I feel, and read in the work of feminists post-structuralists, is an enormous sense of relief, hope and responsibility. Far from despair, the idea that each of us recreates reality with each encounter fills me with a wondrous sense of hope, empowerment and community connection. If there is no absolute truth "out there" by which to create pristine "expert systems" which can somehow solve our problems mathematically; if I am who I am because you are who you are; both of us who we are because they are who they are; if we accept that when we enter into dialogue we both change; if its true we co-create reality, which in turn creates us, then we are called to a new kind of community. If I can make culture I must act responsibly and if I can only ever be part of the creation I must act humbly. I'd take that over a Goddesses anyday!