



Making Connections Symposium

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Empowering Relationships in Recovery?

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Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions Alcoholics Anonymous

- *"But it is from our twisted relations with family, friends and society at large that many of us have suffered the most ... the primary fact that we fail to recognise is our total inability to form a true partnership with another human being, either we insist on dominating the people we know or we depend on them to much. Always we tried to struggle to the top of the heap or to hide underneath it" (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous. Step 4: 53).....we had to be number one people to cover up our deep-lying inferiority" (Step Twelve: 123)*

'a very low self-esteem' together with a very 'big ego'.

Feminist Critiques Of Steps and Traditions

- Language used is sexist and simplistic (Walters, 1990)
- The Twelve Steps and Traditions were largely written by men, for men,
- Insight that those in addiction, both men and women, experience a profound imbalance in at the level of 'the self' is as true today as it was then.

- While Women more likely than men to have 'low self esteem, and to experience guilt, suicidal ideation, psychosexual disorders, eating disorders and post traumatic stress disorders',
- The assumption that in terms of their psychology **women are what men are not**, relies on an understanding of the self that is at best only telling half the story.

- Dichotomy
- men are viewed as being predisposed towards 'superiority'
- while women are psychologically predisposed towards 'passivity or inferiority'
- Implications for discussing the kind of relationships that will be developed in recovery.

- Getting the Balance Right
- On the contrary, from the perspective that underpins this paper, and based on Smith's theory of Strong Interaction, wherein as in systems theory, the person is viewed as a system, the imbalance that we have been discussing may be attributed to
- "an imbalance in what object relations theorist Heinz Kohut (1971) termed the deep structures of the nuclear self" (Smith, 1995:20).

- Smith
- Comparison between the dependent infant and the addictively predisposed adult.
- Infant finds in his attachment to his/her caregivers, powerful attractor states (strong attachments).
- Early attachments constitute addictive forms of relatedness- connections to external objects the infant cannot do without (1995 : 40)

Tendency towards an addictive attachment to objects is necessary and normal in infants, but a sure case of failed development or a disorder in the self in an adult (Smith, 1995: 40)

Again we read in Step Twelve:

- *" We had failed to see that though adult in years we were still behaving childishly, trying to turn everybody-friends, wives, husbands, even the world itself into protective parents" (Step Twelve: 115)*

In the original matrix, the self emerges in connection with the way caregivers meet or respond to the infant's two fundamental narcissistic needs.

- No Stimulation/Positive Feedback
- **Low self esteem** may result from deficits in the mirroring pole of this self
- No Calming/Negative feedback)
- The '**very big ego**' is the result of deficits in the idealised parental imago (Smith, 1995: 25-26).

- Both poles of the self, coexist within the same person and the task in to achieve and maintaing cohesion (Balance/homeostasis) at the level of the self.
- Cohesion is achieved when external regulation is replaced by internal self-regulation.

Addictive Attachments.

According to Smith, phenomena like

- *" substance abuse, eating disorders, uncontrolled gambling , promiscuity, fetishism and related 'behaviour disorders' should all be understood as variations on a common underlying attachment process- one involving the addictive substitution of external objects, substances or activities for regulatory structures of the self" (1995:40)*

- Miller's relational model
- primary motivation for women throughout life is to establish a strong sense of connection with others.
- Goffmans concept of dissociated vigilance "what appears to be a ground form of social life- a tendency to return, at every chance to a condition of attachment to others" (1995:69)

- Attachments can become addictive.
- Precedent in early infancy when addictive attachments initially arose as a result of defective (non optimal) caregiving.
- This is what Miller refers to as the first violation within a relationship, Miller (1986).

- Result
- Person lacks the internal structures to manage disintegration anxiety (control feelings) (ibid: 34) so they turn to external structures for regulation.
- In other words "*deficits of self structure leave the social actor dependent for regulation on people, places or things in the external environment*" (ibid:47)

- Self object transference is associated with deficits in the self, and manifests in the chronic tendency to use another person as a self-object, that is, as a caregiver or in the language of systems theory as an external regulator.
- People can and do form addictive attachments in both addiction and recovery.

- Power Over or Empowerment?
- The forces of self object transference (strong interaction) are at work in such attachments and often result in one person gaining control over another.
- This form of control may properly be called power.

- A powerful example of strong interaction (under the influence of forces of self object transference)
- Evidence that partners were engaging in intentional unprotected sex.
- This can be considered to be a negotiated activity taken to defend the security of relationships and shared destiny with partners, regardless of their HIV status ((Rhodes and Cusick, 2000: 332).

- Women more than men appeared to rationalise unprotected sex and saving ones relationship rather than one's body took priority.
- This is an addictive form of relatedness and as Smith would argue, a sure case of failed development in an adult.
- As Smith points out "there is something in these desperately strong attachments resembling the abstinence syndrome students of substance abuse have observed in heroin addicts; each partners attachment to the other feeds on the fear of a traumatic withdrawal process" 1995:147)

It is also the very antithesis of the healthy connection that Miller (1986) advocates in her relational model.

Socio- cultural environment.

- Smith points out that the socio-cultural environment too, can undermine the person's capacity to regulate the self, a point that was not lost on the early members of AA:

- Step Three examines the kind of results that people in society were getting as a result of self sufficiency:
- *" everywhere we see people filled with anger and fear. Society breaking up into warring fragments. Interests groups imposing their will on the rest and everywhere the same thing is being done on an individual basis...the philosophy of self sufficiency is not paying off. Plainly it is a bone crushing juggernaut whose final achievement is ruin" (1991: 37)*

- In Tradition One we read:
- *“having scanned the structural landscape it was deemed to be evident that individual personalities were destroying whole peoples. The struggle for wealth, power and prestige were tearing humanity apart” (1991: 130-131).*

Individual/Cultural System

Glimpse of the cultural conditions which were considered by the fledgling members of AA to impede their recovery.

- Imbalance at the level of the individual, an imbalance that was amplified and compounded by the cultural system of which they were a part.
- Crucial for empowering relationships in recovery

- Danger of characterising women in recovery as 'being what men are not' in psychological terms.
- I now wish to discuss the danger of constructing 'masculinity as being what femininity is not' based on the arguments from biology,
- How this has impacted on both women and men in recovery.

- **Constructing Masculinity in Opposition to Femininity.**
- Connell, (2005)
- Boys and girls not different emotionally.
- Essentialist notions challenged in Sociology and particularly in the work of Connell (1987; 2001; 2005).

Women?

- Covington points out that women are more likely to be trauma survivors having been subjected to sexual, physical and emotional abuse.
- As a result, it is often the case that they have been raised to suppress their feelings and to keep silent (2002 : 10).

Men?

- Men too, in a cultural system that deems it 'unnatural' and 'unmasculine' for men to express their emotions have consistently had to repress their feelings.
- Rather die than express their feelings for fear of how others would perceive them (Cleary- Death Rather Than Disclosure).

- Cultural System
- encourages the suppression of emotions on the one hand and the repression of emotions on the other, has failed both men and women.
- Both find themselves in the kind of abusive environments documented by Covington in which they learned to keep silent (2002:10)
- and the environments without trust identified by Smith and which are like those where infants discover high levels of stranger anxiety (1995:88)

- **Gender Socialisation Theories**
- Gender roles are learned through agencies of socialisation such as the family, the school, the church, peers, the media etc.
- Children gradually internalise the social norms and expectations which are seen to correspond with their sex.
- From this perspective, gender differences are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced.

Violence against Women

- It has been documented that "*women substance abusers are more likely than male substance abusers to enter dependent relationships dominated by their partner*"(2003:43).
- It has been further documented that "*substance abusing men are often violent toward women and children; substance abusing women are particularly vulnerable targets for violence; and childhood and current abuse increase a woman's risk of substance abuse* (Miller quoted in Covington, 2002: 6)

Masculinity and Femininity in a Late Modern Society

- I suggest that this phenomenon can be explained in part by an exploration of what it means to be Masculine and Feminine in a late modern society.

- Swain
- Body has role to play in the construction of masculinity and is a sites of masculinity formation.
- Sport, which is a gender segregated and male dominated, a recreation involving bodies in ritualised combat,
- Boys deliberately cultivated aggressive macho forms of behaviour as a way of establishing their masculine authority.

Dominant or Hegemonic Masculinity

- Aspired to especially among the working class and often among those who are in addiction/recovery
- This is particularly the case in disempowered communities, where these individuals trade on this image and indeed will often wear their aggression as a badge of honor.
- These are the kind of individuals who we find over represented in the criminal justice system and also is over represented in the drug culture.

Masculinity exerts its influence by being able to define what is the norm

- As all masculinities are constructed in contrast to being feminine: femininity located on lowest rung of hierarchy.
- Aggression in some cultures or subcultures is highly prized and as masculinity is constructed in contrast to femininity it is often women and children who bear the brunt.

Sexuality

- Covington points out that the topic of sexuality is often neglected in addiction treatment. She goes on to argue that:
"women often enter treatment with arrested sexual development due to substance abuse. Many often struggle with sexual dysfunction, shame, fear and trauma that must be addressed if they are to avoid relapse"
(2002:13).

Smith

Sexuality constitutes a site of Strong interaction.

The field of sexuality also has the power to reproduce a gender order that is saturated in unequal power relations.

- For example, prostitution, sexual abuse, violence against women and human trafficking are all spin offs of these unequal power relations.

- Once again
- Dichotomy has been constructed between men and women in an effort to explain the differential experiences that both men and women have in relation to sexuality.

Key term here is constructed.

- Boys and men engage in a number of body practices as sites of masculinity formation.
- One such practice is **sexuality**.

- Adolescence is popularly understood as a time when hormones go crazy and sexual experience is often a claim to masculine honour and indeed some claim 'a right to sexual pleasure'(Totten,2000)
- Evidence to suggest that some girlfriends believe in male entitlement, rigid gender divisions and the natural subservience of women to man's desire(Totten,2000)

Historically, the central sexual norm cross culturally seems to have been that 'sex is a man's pleasure and a woman's duty' (Rainwater, quoted in Edwards, 1972).

- Fifty Shades of Grey, that such views are not as outdated as we would like to think (Fetishism in Smiths terms, 1995:54)
- It is ironic that while this film glamorises the world of S and M wherein the woman is the slave to Christian the master, the real and very seedy world of Alternative sex practices is being exposed in the courts of Ireland as we speak.

- Will the normalisation of such practices impact on sexual behaviour and relationships into the future.?
- Is this another instance whereby deficits in the deep structures of the nuclear may be amplified by the cultural system and vice versa and once again it would appear that women are suffering as a result.

- Once again by portraying man as what woman is not, the different attitudes towards the sexual activities of men and women formed a double standard, which has long existed and whose residues still linger on today (Barret- Ducrocq (1992) quoted in Giddens, 2009).

- However, 'natural difference' in the behaviour of both men and women are often grounded in data on *animal behaviour* rather than in anthropological or historical evidence about human behaviour
- On the contrary, human sexual behaviour is more than biological. It is meaningful and *symbolic* and reflects who we are and the emotions we are experiencing.

- Moreover, both Men and Women have the power to challenge, reject or modify the social expectations surrounding sex roles.
- Adopting this approach, we can see that human beings are not simply passive recipients of 'gender programming' as some theorists would have us believe.
- On the contrary, through their daily practices boys and girls, men and women, have the capacity to challenge and transform the gender order in a given society.

- While Miller challenges the assumption that separation is the route to intimacy arguing that it is connection and not separation that is the guiding principle of growth for women,
- she also concedes that temporary separation is often required to allow women to heal and points out that a single-sex group is preferable in the early stages of recovery and for sexual abuse survivors.

- I, too, argue that it is connection rather than separation that is the principle of growth for both men and women in recovery.
- However I have argued that the culturally induced practice of constructing men to be what women are not has had a devastating effect on both men and women in society.

- Indeed, I would go as far as to argue that men should also avail of single sex meetings wherein he can explore the ways in which his behaviour has fed into a cultural system that is now working against him.

- However because we are dealing with empowering relationships in recovery, and a relationship cannot be fixed by one person alone, eventually they will have to realise that they are more similar than culture would have us believe.
- They might then be in a position to repair the damage that has been done by tearing each other apart.

