

**Giancarlo Fedeli**

## **SOME INSIGHTS INTO MY SEX-ROLE SOCIALISATION**

Sex roles and identity develop from the interaction of the self with significant others. This process begins at birth and continues throughout the life cycle.

In examining the development of my sexual identity the significant others are found both within the family and outside it. In my childhood and early adolescence, my family provided the role models and values with which I identified. In later adolescence and in adulthood, my role models changed to significant others outside the family; in the school and community. As my role models changed so did the values and norms attached to them.

I was born with Erb's palsy on my right arm and hand. This biological fact, caused by a difficult delivery in the home, has to be considered in examining the way in which the members of my family responded to me. My disabled arm also created certain limits to the range of possible activities that I could accomplish in expressing my sexual role. It further originally altered for my family their expectations from me of typical male sex linked behavior.

I was treated with special care by my family. With my father in business and travelling frequently and my brother ten years older and involved in outside activities, I became the focus of attention for my mother. Throughout my early childhood I spent practically all of my time with her. My mother would take me to various specialists for treatments on my arm. On nice days she would always take me to the park. Things were done for me and I was not directed towards the typical male sex role values of self-reliance, aggressiveness, and achievement. My role model became my mother, who was nurturant, responsible, obedient and dependent.

The dominant role that my mother played in my sex role socialization was not only a product of the reaction towards my disabled

arm but also part of the norms and values of the Italian middle class into which I was born.

My mother and father are traditional middle class Italians and I spent the first six years of my life in Rome, Italy. My father believed in the traditional Italian ideology that it is the role and function of the mother to bring up the children. This belief and the fact that my father was usually away from home made him inaccessible to me as a role model. My father's authority over my mother and the family existed in principle but in fact it was my mother who had the power in the family especially in terms of the children. My father was the breadwinner but in terms of running the household my mother reigned supreme.

The ten years age difference between my brother and me allowed for little contact with him as a role model. With my father in the army and away from home for most of the years before I was born, he had had my mother basically to himself. With my arrival and the attention that was given to me he understandably felt little attraction toward me. Also by that age he had his own group of friends and spent much time outside the house with them.

My relationship with my sister was much closer. She is four years younger than myself and even before she was born I took an active role in her life by suggesting a name for her. The values I had acquired from my mother as a role model I had the opportunity to play out with my sister. I helped to take care of her and felt a responsibility towards her. We spent a great deal of time together; even after we came to the United States and I started school I would come home and play teacher with her. The nurturant role I played with my sister was in agreement with the religious values taught by the church.

In my family a double standard existed in terms of religiosity. Religion was typically for the women. My father was critical and skeptical towards the church while my mother was a simple believer. I attended religious instruction and into early adolescence identified with my mother's values on religion. The Catholic church helped to reinforce the nurturant, dependent values. Aggression was contrary to the role model of Christ who turned the other cheek. Obediance to the commandments and precepts of the church and not self-reliance were the values of a good Catholic. The institution itself was female oriented as the widely used phrase, "holy mother church" demonstrates. Whereas my father's sexual identity was threatened by the church my identity was accorded greater significance by the values it preached.

The role distance I experienced between my father and me was reinforced by the militaristic values he personified. My father was the authority *de jure* in the family. He lived through the Fascist regime in Italy and internalized the values of the ideology. Fascism represented personal superiority, national pride, and obedience and submission to authority. These values expressed themselves in his authoritative role as husband and father.

Whenever my father was present I knew that I could not be expressive. He could not tolerate my crying and used power and the threat of physical punishment rather than explanation or reasoning to obtain unconditional authority. Affection between my father and myself was purely formal and ritualized. He symbolized to me the antithesis of the values I received from my mother.

The roles and values that existed during the first six years of my life in Italy were radically altered when my family moved to the United States. In the beginning, my family experienced a downward change in social class and status. The strictly defined roles that previously existed began to break down in the new culture. These first years were especially difficult for my mother and father. My father could not easily play his authoritative role and my mother began to assume more of the economic responsibility. Acculturation was easiest for me as I started attending school. I was in the first grade and within three months had reached the highest reading level in the class. Each day I would come home and practice what I had learned with my sister.

As I continued in school and especially during my adolescence I began to spend a great deal of time outside the family. At this time a certain amount of role conflict began to develop. There was a lack of mutual expectations between the culture at home and the culture outside. The nurturant, responsible, obedient, and dependent values I had learned at home were functional in the classroom but dysfunctional with my peer group. I began to challenge some of these values and my parents, being insecure in their traditional roles, would allow me a certain amount of independence. My earlier strong identification with the church diminished as I stopped attending religious instruction and mass every Sunday. I would at times heatedly argue with my parents about their political views.

Another example of role conflict began in junior high school when I was excused because of my crippled arm from physical education and sports, typical male sex role activities. This conflict was caused by inadequate resources to play the traditional male sex role. I attempted to resolve this conflict by directing competitiveness into scholarly activities. I excelled in my studies and asserted myself in the leadership of various extracurricular activities. My success in these areas brought out hostility from some of the other students in school. I especially feared the "hoods"; the tough lower class boys. My support at this time came from my teachers and the more scholarly students; all of whom tended to be female.

In high school there were two authority figures with whom I strongly identified. My English and drama teacher had a very sophisticated air about her. She appeared to be very intelligent and progressive in her values. She would encourage a certain amount of intimacy with certain of her students. Although her subjects were not my main interest, I became involved with her both in school and in outside activities. She would invite me to her home which was filled with books and one summer tutored me privately in French. These lessons took place both in her home and at the beach. As a role model she expressed the educated upper middle-class values of tolerance, individualism, equalitarianism, rationalism, and self determination.

These values which I internalized soon had the opportunity to be expressed in a heterogeneous complex urban center. My earliest acquaintance with New York City took place during the last years of high school. I was a part of a group of students who were attracted to each other by some of the values expressed by my English teacher. We would occasionally go to Greenwich Village to drink and listen to folk music.

In my last year of high school I became acquainted with our new guidance counselor. He was quite unique in our school system and expressed the modern values that my English teacher held. He lived on Park Avenue in New York City, was well dressed, and drove to school in a Rolls-Royce. He would also encourage a certain amount of intimacy with some of the students. I was attracted to him as a role model because his values appeared to be sophisticated, intelligent, equalitarian, and individual. I experienced these values as the antithesis of the traditional values I had learned from my family and which I was determined to change.

As the year ended, my guidance counsellor invited me to his apartment. He was a bachelor and I began to be aware that not everyone led the traditional life of marriage and family. On another occasion he took me to an area of Greenwich Village with which I was not familiar. We ate in a restaurant where I noticed many men and women sitting with their own sex. Afterwards, that evening, he pointed out a bar in the area which he thought I would enjoy.

In these encounters with my guidance counsellor homosexuality was never explicitly mentioned. However, I was intrigued by the places he showed me and knew that I would satisfy my curiosity by returning to them. There was something unique and exciting in sharing intimacy and confidence with an authority role model.

In analyzing the development of my conscious homosexual sex role and identity, the relationship with my guidance counsellor was the first step in a process of resocialization. Through my contact with him as a role model I developed homosexual motives and interests. It is important to note that I had not as yet consciously labelled myself homosexual. I had simply developed an interest which led me to have my first sexual encounter with another man.

A few weeks after my initial discovery of the area in the village that my guidance counsellor had taken me to I returned to the bar that had been pointed out. Soon after having entered, I noticed someone looking and smiling at me. I walked over to him and he asked me to go home with him. I found my first overt homosexual experience gratifying and this act became the second step in my resocialization process.

I began to learn as much as I could about homosexuality. I read whatever literature was available to me on the subject. During this period I experienced a certain amount of cognitive dissonance about my new homosexual experience. This conflict was resolved to a great extent by changing my traditional values; many of which I had already rejected from my family. As a result of this change in values and the reduction of cognitive dissonance, I experienced a subjective change in sexual identity. I labeled myself homosexual. This self-labelling process is the third step in my sexual resocialization.

Had my sexual experience been solitary, my identity might not have lasted. It needed support from significant others to adhere. This support came from my learning about the existence and structure of the homosexual sub-culture. I began to associate with other homosexuals. I spent a weekend at Fire Island and returned to the bar I had first visited. From the people I met I learned other places to meet partners as well as the technique used to pick them up (cruising). I learned to enjoy new sexual practices. My movement into the organized homosexual sub-culture is the fourth and continuing step in my sexual resocialization.

This fourth step is continuous because the homosexual sub-culture is not static. It has gone and will continue to go through a series of changes in values and structure. These changes are analogous to and reflect the changes of the larger society of which it is a part. Homosexuals, like other minority groups in our society, are overtly organizing. They are asking for full legal and social recognition. Young men and women in the larger urban centers can be seen holding hands in public; expressing their affection towards each other openly. Men and women who hold positions of esteem are "coming out of the closet" and thereby becoming role models for the more reticent homosexuals.

These changes in the homosexual community have an effect on my sexual role and identity. I feel I have moved away from a covert existence in the direction of outward assertion of my homosexual preference. This is not a simple transition as the traditional values I acquired from my family still have an underlying pull on my identity. However, as the homosexual movement and my identification with it increases in recognition, I will experience less role conflict.

This paper has been an attempt to examine the factors that have played a role in my sex role socialization. I have analyzed some of the social-psychological dynamics that existed in my family during my childhood and adolescence. My family has been the primary agent of socialization. The concepts of masculinity and femininity, the authority relationships, and the degree of sex typing in my home all contributed to my sex role and identity.

As I grew older my family became less important to my sexual identity and significant others in the community became my

role models. I experienced my mature sexual role and identity as having occurred through a sociological process of progressively increasing commitments to the set of norms and institutions that comprise the homosexual sub-culture. This sociological process constitutes a secondary agent of socialization or a re-socialization of my sexual identity.

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**Maggy Sundborn**

### **“COMPARISON OF GESTALT AND REICHIAN SCHOOLS OF PSYCHOTHERAPY”**

Reichian therapy is based, as the name implies, on the work of **Wilhelm Reich**, and Gestalt therapy was 'founded' by **Fritz Perls**: both men - Reich and Perls - were influenced very greatly by **Freud**, being trained psychoanalysts. Reich was born in 1897 and died in 1957; his most influential work relevant to psychotherapy was published in the (1) 1920s and '30s. Fritz Perls was born in 1893 and died in 1970. His significant innovative contributions - the theories and techniques of Gestalt therapy were published during the late (2) '40s and following decades. Most writers, for example Dreyfuss (3) and Feinstein, (4) Magda Denes-Radomisli, (5) Back and the Polsters (6) describe Reich as being one of the four major influences on Perls, the others being Goldstein, Moreno and Freud. This is non-reciprocal and no commentator describes Perls as an influencer of Reich.

Perls' appreciation of Reich is expressed clearly in his first book "Ego Hunger and Aggression" - for instance in the preface he praises (2) "Reich's bringing down to earth the psychology of resistances" as a monumental discovery made since Freud. In all of his later writings Perls presents many of Reich's theories unacknowledged, in paraphrase, and at time talks (2) scathingly of Reich's work. In his posthumously published book "The Gestalt Approach" Perls strongly misrepresents Reichian theory when he describes it as one of the (2) "conventional therapies based on the theory that what the patient lacks is understanding of the whys of his behaviour, that these can be understood only if we dig deep enough into the past."