



'Searching for the Right Spoon or Finding Paradise in Reality'

Nick Duffell

Gender is such a controversial subject. I like to remember Michael Meade's warning that talking about it inevitably evokes trouble. Gender is about difference, and difference is never easy. You cannot separate gender from politics, from society, nor from the most intrinsic constituents of all life forms. You cannot have one-size-fits-all approach, and you cannot sidestep the nature-nurture dilemma.

In a recent article in *Therapy Today*, I argued that the chief problem in getting to grips with sex and gender was how we think about these subjects. While it is crucial to deconstruct the social inheritance of Gender Identity - what we in the Centre for Gender Psychology call 'unpacking our Image-makers' - it is equally vital to avoid the currently popular traps either of making sex and gender into consumer items, or falling into a mainstream/margin dialectic from which there is no resolution.

Self & Society readers know that if we really want to be empowered and authentic we need to *feel* our existence. In Western society, our thinking has been so usurped by Cartesian/

Victorian splitting that feeling has become estranged from thinking, since for feeling we need the body. Perhaps, our chief inheritance is the tendency to overvalue mental activity and to marginalize our own bodies. Sex and gender, however, arise from the body, and have the design function of creating other bodies through activity of the genitals, which we don't really acknowledge.

Even in the 'enlightened' world of therapy, once you've dispensed with Freud, once you've safely returned Lacan to his Symbolic, and once you've finally closed your *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, you are still in better hands with novelists like Erica Jong, journalists like Nancy

Friday. For it is still very hard to be related to as a person with a whole-body reality, since the genitals are still unmentionable, still taboo. And we all know that what's repressed ends up running the show – that's how the whole therapeutic adventure started. The chronic overexcitement about sex and genitals in the world is the living proof of this, and will prove a mental legacy very hard to emerge from.

In the early days of our work, we also tried to avoid the unmentionable genitals, focusing on gender issues as a community and psychological issue, influenced by archetypal theorists. But it didn't really work. To meet the needs of our clients, we had to get more real and more involved, bodily. A major turning point for us was finding someone who thought clearly about sex and gender and included genitals in the therapeutic frame.

Sexual Grounding Therapy, developed by Willem Poppeliers, the Dutch developmental psychologist and body-psychotherapist, is built around the recognition that children to continue to need mirroring after infancy: as they develop, their needs change. The prime unmet need in the West is for *Genital Mirroring*, so that they can naturally evolve into whole sexual beings. This new body-oriented group therapy clearly appeals to parents and teachers, as well as therapists. Although it

is a cutting-edge discipline, both therapeutically and socially, it is known in Mexico, Holland, and Switzerland, but not in the UK.

Because participants sometimes work without clothes and involve the whole body, Poppeliers has remained shy of publicity, in order to serve safety and psychological integrity. So I thought readers might be interested to hear Willem say a little about how the genitals may be integrated psychotherapeutically, and how such an approach helps to evolve a psychology of gender and sex that is based in reality, rather than mental speculation. Below, in his unique style, Willem fields some questions from me about his work.



Willem Poppeliers

Nick Duffell (ND): *In a world where sex seems to be everywhere exploited, where teenage pregnancies and Aids are on the increase, and where relationships are increasingly short-lived, your Sexual Grounding Therapy has been said to create an 'Inner Condom'. Why is this, and what are you trying to achieve?*

Willem Poppeliers (WP): I can say something about this: Sexual Grounding Therapy aims to win back for future generations the nature-given right to full sexual expression, practised without the distortions and extreme hedonism placed on the genitals in today's world.

For me, losing natural sexuality has been the biggest cause of alienation and unhappiness in our world. In Sexual Grounding, we always put the child at the centre, and in its developmental frame. If you look to the outside world, when a child tries to express its sexual nature, people start to look from their *own adult* perspective and project their *thoughts* about sexual *intercourse*. These thoughts are full of their own disappointedness about not being a shame-free sexual person. And most sexual acting-out comes from not having been treated as whole person – right from the beginning – with genitals and sexuality, born from intercourse.

If people are allowed to become whole persons, sexually, bodily, then I think a natural regulation of sexuality follows instead of repression or over-excitement. Then people express their sexuality out of *relationship*, out of intimacy, out of bodily function, and not simply out of charge or stimulation. You can say this is an *emotional* condom; it is an internal attitude change. If we don't have this, if we continue to leave relationship out of sexuality, then we don't protect ourselves, or our children. Now we have to create an inner condom, because we have to learn to protect ourselves.

But I think the best thing is that we learn how to change our attitude to sexuality. So Sexual Grounding Therapy is a means to give ground to sexuality by bringing explicitness into genitality so that we can integrate ourselves as whole genital persons. Internally it means that the genital-heart connection can be re-established and harmonised within the body.

ND: *I do understand that in the West we seem to be encouraged to become persons from the waist up, as it were, but what do you mean by 'explicitness to genitality'?*

WP: In Sexual Grounding Therapy we explicitly include the genitals, since they have been excluded in most therapies. I believe that repression and exclusion has caused over-excitement and danger to become projected on to this natural part of the body. So in Sexual Grounding we bring genitals and the whole body back to reality, because our species was born through sexual intercourse. Also, a human is not just a brain – the genitals, along with the heart, have an important role to play in the body's energetic system. If we leave out the genitals we cannot become grounded.

ND: *Our readers will be familiar with the word 'grounding' from Bioenergetics. Lowen's followers say, and I quote: 'Being grounded is to have a physically secure but flexible stance. Phenomenologically, this means to be connected to reality.' But can you explain what it being 'sexually grounded' means to you?*

WP: For me, being sexually grounded is being present in our hearts – physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually – creating a spiritual connection between present, past and future.

ND: *That is a beautiful vision, but how can we learn to live in our hearts, sexually?*

WP: This is a really practical question, and it is not for everybody so conscious. We get

distracted by our conditioned part of the brain. Imagine we have a lot of thoughts about sexuality and they consume energy - we invest energy in it and they consume energy - and very often that distracts from the relationship between heart and genitals. Body-psychotherapy has always been busy to reconnect people so that they stop only living in their heads.

In sexuality is our origin, our future, and also our roots. In a culture that has often excluded the reality of genitals, a child is alienated from his or her sexual nature, and loses its roots. It doesn't see a future. And if a child is not related to as a sexual being in its developmental frame, its present has no context, because its genitals are out of context.

ND: *How are genitals put 'in context'?*

WP: If you think of the body of the child developmentally, the outside world reacts on the development of the child through 4 parts: eyes, mouth, anus and genitals. [According to early developmental theorists - Freud, Reich, Erickson, Horney - the life-energy is arises in, and unfolds developmentally, through those body-centres which interface with the environment. ND.] When the child is focussed in the eyes, when it is just born, I think it is treated rather well by the parents; and also when the mouth is involved. But when the anus is involved, we change a little; it's more delicate. And when the genitals are involved it looks like the educators shift to a grown-up age.

ND: *Why is seeing the genitals from an adult perspective wrong for the child?*

WP: Because they put this developmental stage in their own *adult* frame - it is very strange. When the child has to be fed by the mother, the mother, takes a very small spoon. But when it comes to the genital stage, the mother does not have a small spoon, she has an adult spoon. Why is that possible? Where is the right spoon?

So in Sexual Grounding we like to see the child exactly in the stage where it is, and the parents from the outside world have to relate to that stage. Then it's safe and it's normal - genitals are normal, like the mouth, eyes and anus. We are very strict on that, because the child has to be safe and to be approached in the stage that it is.

To help people return to that safety, that wholeness, we emphasise professional work on the whole body, including genitals, not for enhancing sexual relating for pleasure and ecstasy, but to bring about full genital functioning throughout life, for becoming whole and mature and fulfilled.

ND: *Can you say more about professional work that includes the genitals? Why should this be necessary?*

WP: It is hard to transmit to people that you can work on the body, on the *whole* body in psychotherapy. In medical healthcare, they can. If you have a disease on your genitals, they don't say its taboo. I think it's coming, but it is very slow. It has to be protected; it has to be open, direct, not with a secret agenda. It has to be open and

natural in the frame of the developmental stages. And it has to be professional.

And there have to be norms, and that's why Sexual Grounding therapists have to agree to very precise ethical guidelines. The norms for me are connected with the development stages – the most natural way - and we know that already. When we can really reflect our own sexual development we can feel on the body level what was wrong and what was right. So if we put this whole genital relationship in a fundamental, natural way, there comes laws or rules, natural rules. And it is far more easy for society to transform these rules into more cultivated ones, if based on nature.

ND: *But society doesn't seem to know how. Doesn't society have a vested interest in people being hooked on sexuality but estranged from their true sexual nature?*

WP: If you look to society as a commercial thing, economically, yes. Imagine that the whole commercialisation of sexuality drops out. Would we like that? Do we *want* to have another life, or do we adapt to it because of the economics? I don't know. But when you are not exploitable anymore, I think society is not glad with you. Sexual Grounding likes to stick to nature more, because our point of view is, can we give the children back their sexually grounded nature? Now they are lost very often, lost.

When you put future perspective in sexual intercourse, it changes. If you say to your partner 'I want to die with you' it has impact. But we don't say that any more. We create eternity, by reproduction, but we are afraid to relate. We

say 'I only want to see you for only one year'. This does not fit. It has all to do with lack of fulfilment. And fulfilment is strong when you put past and future perspective into sexuality.

ND: This is a whole new dimension – challenging and positive - but society is not there yet, so don't you think we need still to take the lid off about sexuality? For example, liberating people to have sex when and where they want, or legalising prostitution?

WP: One thing always strikes me very much, that people who are in the prostitute business don't want their children to follow them into it. Why? There is left something which is difficult for them. I believe when you can find original sexuality back, I mean through the developmental ages, that prostitution wouldn't exist without criticising itself, without a conscience.

ND: *Are you saying that it's a symbol of social illness?*

WP: No, Sexual Grounding doesn't like to mention illness, or even to criticise society so much. Maybe it is more about frustration - because prostitution is not only when it is for money, you can find it in the family – you see it on a broad scale. Because when you look to relationships, we use intimacy to *learn* to relate. But Sexual Grounding turns it the other way round and says: you take *relationship* to start to learn to be intimate. And it becomes clear why this is so, when you look to the child in its developmental frame. When you look to reality, the little child was in the cold, genitally. It tries to relate, about what it was feeling in the body, but the approach of the educators was not adequate.

So the whole energy to relation from the beginning was missing, and that's why we use sexuality to *learn to relate*, because we really want to learn to relate.

ND: *What happens if you repress your sexuality, how does it affect your life and what are the consequences for society?*

WP: There are two questions here. First the personal: when you prevent the body from expressing, the body suffers. And I dare to add that if you make a decision to use it *only* for pleasure, there is no fulfilment. There is discharge and charge, and that's nice. Wonderful - we like it. But we are not fulfilled. We have to repeat it all the time, and it doesn't last long. We have to do it five, six times a week or three times a day. Why all this repetition? I think it has to do with unfulfilment. If you take the body seriously, and you start to regulate this charge, the whole body becomes involved, and you start to behave differently. More senses start to come into the communication. I remember myself that I start to say very nice words to my wife instead of just trying to get her into bed! So when you have that included and you start to have intercourse, it's different, it lasts longer. It is not easy for us, because our charge and discharge is often conditioned by society.

Now to society. Society has economic advantages when you change relationships. I don't want to blame the things here, but we have to look to reality; so society is not a good teacher, in *that* sense. The price is that we are not fulfilled and we repeat. If you take the internet now, sometimes it starts to become

obsessed. And I think that, naturally, it was not meant; sexuality was not meant to be obsessional.

ND: *You talk a lot about the role of parents, and I know many people are confused about sexuality within parenting, and you talk about putting the child at the centre. So if children see their parents having intercourse, is it OK for them, do they see it as a natural thing?*

WP: That depends. When you are open, you know that, emotionally, and relationally, and especially concerning genital charge, you can be very strong. And that is too much for the child. The child can only understand, when it is according to *their own* energetic state; but we don't take that into account. I think that naturally the body will tell. Why should you involve the child in this strong energy? For instance, when we are very angry with each other, you do not bring the child in. Energetically, naturally we know the road. So I think that naturally the body will regulate this.

And secondly, the child is not busy with intercourse the way we are. So in this question is a projective part, and that's OK, but we have to get this projection out, and that relates to what I said before about the 'small spoon'. If remember being with our parents, and then the child comes in, we know exactly the road, and the child feels himself recognized.

ND: *You say that a vital part of sexual development for this child is 'learning and experiencing the deep feelings of masculinity and femininity'. What is the relevance of this today when all roles are changing?*

Every child has both sides, because it is connected to both parents. You cannot ask a child 'who do you love most?' because it gets a conflict. So both the masculine and feminine parts have to be recognized. They can be recognized, if we stop the war, the war between the sexes. So if we can *exchange* energy in the relationship, we are busy with both parts. So the man is busy with masculinity and femininity, and the woman is busy with it too, and that makes the balance, and the child feels complete.

ND: People today, particularly in the therapy world, tend to look on masculinity and femininity as social constructions, and gender identity to some extent as a matter of choice. Your work prefers to re-establish parents as authors of what you call 'Masculine and Feminine Streams'. Can you explain that and say how this existential nature of sexuality you refer to works?

WP: In Sexual Grounding Therapy, the most important direction for participants is recognising Father and Mother as sexual creatures, as sexual *sources*. If you can really realise - with your *whole* body - that father and mother are the source of sexuality for you, and that their genitals play an very important role via intercourse, and the whole emotional range around it, things become different. Then you look to your neighbour and you see that you both only come from such intercourse. It is not easy, and we prefer not to do it - to look at someone and realise that this person comes from intercourse. I think it is like seeing through the eyes of Hieronymus Bosch! If we do it, mostly we start to laugh.

But here are our roots, and here is where the distortion comes. It looks like we cannot accept that totally, that this behaviour and these emotions and this whole charge have to do with my existence in the world, and it is directly connected with *being in* the world.

Our cells know it, but the cortex denies it, and when you do that your heart goes out. Your heart jumps in again, when you start to realise it again and say to yourself, wait a minute I have to really look to my life. So then you take all these sources, your cortex, your heart and your genitals. So recognising father and mother as sexual creatures is a very fundamental thing.

ND: *With all this emphasis on the procreative side of sexuality isn't Sexual Grounding Therapy a heterosexist theory?*

Not at all. I don't make any difference between homo and hetero-sexuality - only between masculinity and femininity. That comes from both sexes - born from the reproduction between a mother and a father. And if it comes from both, it is liberating. But if you go for reproduction, you go to the other sex - it's natural. You don't go for *reproduction* to a partner of the same sex. You may have *wishes* in that direction, but your *body* knows what sexuality is. In this we are very realistic. We have a lot of people in our groups who live with people of the same sex. It is not a problem. The species seems like it is evolving anyway, towards a kind of bisexuality, which is another way of living our sources.

ND: *Lastly, although you work with body-psychotherapy, your ideas seem to have a*

transpersonal dimension. You say that for a child to be grounded throughout the Oedipal period and puberty is like 'finding paradise in reality'. Isn't this somewhat idealistic?

WP: This is not idealistic, it is reality. It is *realistic*. It comes from life. If you find paradise in reality, you stop your idealism, because it has no function anymore.

A new website www.sexual-grounding-therapy.co.uk has just been launched specifically for the UK. Details of a one-off week with Willem Poppeliers this summer may be found there.

Nick Duffell can be contacted via www.genderpsychology.com

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