

Men and the Fear of the Feminine

Werner Kierski

In my work with men (and in my process of self-discovery) I have often experienced feelings that I found hard to put into words. As my understanding of these experiences became clearer I was able to see that I was dealing with the male fear of the feminine. I discovered that men are strongly affected by the fear of the feminine and that this fear is an intense mechanism that helps to avoid feelings, which are not sanctioned to be masculine. Within this masculine value-system, non-masculine experiences are regarded as feminine.

The consequences of not understanding and appropriately addressing a male client's fear of the feminine can be:

- Entrapment in gender stereotypes, which prohibits men from developing their full potential.
- Psychotherapy as a method of self-realisation may fail male clients.
- Men are ultimately held back from fully realising their own soul and spirituality.

If the fear of the feminine and its effects become integrated into

mainstream psychotherapy it may have a fundamental effect on the further development of psychotherapeutic paradigms in terms of client relationships, training, supervision, research and policy making.

History of the fear of the feminine

The past 75 years have seen a number of publications and clinical studies dealing with this often overlooked phenomenon. However, there is a need for a new synthesis of this currently available information. As part of a major research project I have

begun to summarise this information and have integrated it into work carried out amongst some thirty men with a variety of professional backgrounds.

The definition of the fear of the feminine that I wish to present here is comprised of four aspects, relating to internal and external triggers. These four aspects of the male fear of the feminine are:

- A man's hidden internal aspects and emotions that are regarded as stereotypical feminine qualities, such as vulnerability, intimacy, uncertainty;
- The hidden internal masculine aspects of women, regarded as stereotypical masculine qualities, such as anger, rage or violence;
- Fear of the actual capacities of women, such as career success or intellectual ability - the area where men compete with women for resources;
- The devouring mother, from whom separation and individuation is difficult, a threat which may affect all later relationships with women.

As I present these four aspects, I need to point out that more discussions and research need to take place in order to define more precisely the fear of the feminine. My definition presented here is still provisional, especially because the nature of this fear is somewhat multi-faceted. By this, I mean that this fear is an experience that men seek to avoid altogether because it does

not sit comfortably with a masculine need to feel in control.

But once a painful feeling is activated the fear of the feminine functions like barrier, preventing men from actually feeling even more helpless, out of control or dependent. The fear of the feminine can be experienced as a feeling (such as discomfort) yet it can also be a defence to stop emotional discomfort from becoming stronger.

Since the early 1930s a number of therapists have pointed at the important place of the fear of the feminine within the male psyche. Amongst these was Karen Horney with her essay 'The Dread of Women' and Alfred Neumann with his paper 'The Fear of the Feminine.' One of the most recent contributors is Chris Blazina through his article 'The fear of the feminine in the western psyche and the task of masculine disidentification.'

These generations of therapists theorised that essentially the fear of the feminine is so deep-seated that it must be understood in order to understand male psychology at all. Therefore, not understanding it, especially in a therapy setting, amounts to a failure of helping male clients.

Manhood is an elusive goal

The search for manhood is full of trials and tribulations for a man and it is elusive, as the anthropologist David Gilmore points out: men seldom know if they have actually achieved manhood. This is leaving men vulnerable to high anxiety levels, which must be hidden from the outside world.

The avoidance of certain experiences is often how a man learns to know about his masculinity. This desperate search and avoidance is leading to what Alan White, Europe's first professor for male health, has called 'strict policing of gender boundaries.'

The fear of the feminine in men has been recognised in many fields. Understandably so, because if the fear of the feminine indeed helps to define what is masculine then it should be recognisable elsewhere.

The film analyst Tania Modleski has identified the fear of the feminine in the work of Alfred Hitchcock, pointing out his films 'Frenzy' and 'Rebecca' as particular examples. The ethnologist Dorothee Pielow refers to Lilith, Adam's first wife, as a symbol of a devouring and demonic female that lives deep with the male unconscious.

In the mythology of Tibetan Buddhism, it is woven into descriptions of spiritual worlds in which the true disciples are born out of lotus flowers instead of mothers. It is found in the yearning of men wanting to marry or have sex with virgins, a desire still popular in many non-Western cultures and vividly told in Arthur Golden's popular 'Memoirs of a Geisha.'

Triggers of the Fear of the Feminine

The fear of the feminine has internal and external triggers. The internal triggers comprise

those feelings, either conscious but most often unconscious that from a man's perspective are deemed non-masculine. Blazina has summarised these as vulnerable and emotionally



Werner Kierski

dependent experiences. For instance, feeling uncertain, being afraid, not knowing what to do, loneliness, wanting to be supported, being depressed, all are deemed non-manly and therefore feminine.

Internal triggers are feelings that arise in response to inner processes, such as thoughts, sensual and physical sensations, memories, moods and dreams that can make a man feel exposed, threatened, uncertain or in need for support or closeness. No one must know of these experiences, they must be kept away from others, and if possible from oneself too.

Once internal triggers are activated the fear of the feminine acts as a barrier to stop these feelings from getting stronger. The fear of the feminine thus functions like an intra-psychic defence enabling a man to

repress or split off these feelings. Men who avoid experiencing and expressing such qualities, therefore, are in congruence with male role expectations and are doing well.

The external triggers of the fear of the feminine are defined as qualities traditionally regarded as masculine. They also have the potential to cause feelings that threaten a man's inner normality and lead the man to an uncomfortable experience of himself, from which his fear of the feminine tries to protect him. If men experience women to be successful in areas in which men are successful, they can feel vulnerable, out of control and less potent.

Men do invest considerable efforts to keep the fear of the feminine secret from themselves. They go to great lengths to shield themselves from this and tend to project their fear onto women whom they then seek to control. Men who do not fit conventional gender role expectations, such as gay men are equally the subjects for becoming the screen for projections of split off feelings.

A most recent display of it was the furore when Sweden faced Saudi Arabia in a football friendly this year. Female Swedish football fans wanting to attend the game were forbidden from watching it in the Saudi football stadium, as women are not allowed to mix with men in public places. After deliberation, the Saudi football association took exception and allowed the Swedish women to attend by being kept out of sight of men.

Male problems not fully understood

There are many specific therapeutic indications where feelings, caused by internal or external triggers of the fear of the feminine, are insufficiently addressed, if at all. Depression, largely undiagnosed in men, is one such area. This is even more serious since the World Health Organisation has forecast that depression will become the second most common illness globally, consuming vast resources in health care.

Christine Heifner has found that men experience depression quite differently from women and are not receiving adequate psychotherapeutic support. This creates higher levels of substance abuse, suicide, family distress, and violence. Heifner's results have been reinforced by other experts who found that men are diagnosed with depression less frequently than women yet commit suicide two to four times more often.

One of my clients, a former officer in an Elite army unit was pressed to seeing me by his new girlfriend. The girlfriend thought he needed therapy because he had been abused by his former wife. When I met G, he was keen to tell me all about his military knowledge and about his children. He would answer my questions faithfully and factually, yet try to avoid his deeper feelings. Maybe I asked too many or too direct questions, or maybe I did not know enough about affirming his masculinity whilst at the same time effectively exploring his fears. He declared he had no more time to see me

anymore and ended our work after three sessions.

I believe G was trapped between a very traditional male value system that seeks to assert effective control over difficult processes and feelings, and his experience of powerlessness in relation to his abusive wife (and possibly other women too). It is significant that it was his new partner who contacted me in the first place. He went through the motions of a few sessions and avoided addressing his feelings.

Violent behaviour can mask depression and reflects a man's attempt to control feelings that must not become visible as these may otherwise threaten his sense of masculine stability. Suicide can be an attempt to control depressive feelings and keep feelings regarded as feminine at bay. Suicide is an irrevocable solution, yet from the perspective of the fear of the feminine a successful one.

Suicide is the last step in a long line of male specific risk-taking behaviour that leads to injuries and is a contributor to the statistically lower life expectancy of men. It does look like that concerns for one's own health and safety are subjected to the imperative of maintaining gender-conform behaviour.

Male specific defences need to be understood

I have worked with many men who have been tortured. These men live with multiple and chronic trauma. One of the most devastating blocks to recovery from the unspeakable treatment is shame and self-loathing. It is

shame about having been overwhelmed by fear and pain.

Many survivors of torture cannot forgive themselves for having been so powerless: thus, they cannot fully recover and remain in a cycle of depression and many other severe psychological symptoms.

The burden of gender role expectations

Unfortunately, no society has much to show when it comes to relaxing gender role expectations, both for men and women. This prevails through all cultures; although there may be a few pockets with an appearance of relaxed gender role expectations. For example, some pop musicians give themselves a somewhat androgynous image and there are films showing men that cry.

Yet, what really matters are the unspoken, intangible and often elusive messages and values that men receive, not the spoken ones. These messages really define what is regarded as a successful man.

The lack of progress in the rigidity of gender roles over thousands of years has been documented through David Buss's global research into how both men and women select their mates. For example, men who do not seek to acquire wealth and status and instead allow their vulnerability to be seen may have diminished chances successfully to attract a suitable mate.

Buss's findings do challenge the views of the early analysts who

believed that the fear of the feminine merely relates to mother-experiences and to the men's inability to deal with separation from mother. The findings illustrate that the fear of the feminine is not just a phenomenon related to the client's inner world; the evidence confirms that the fear of the feminine is also a social regulating mechanism that ensures men stay in their prescribed tracks to ensure that evolutionary programmes are being maintained over and over again. Hence, I incorporated this dynamic in the definition of the external triggers.

James O'Neil, started to investigate and measure the experience of men in relation to how much they comply to traditional gender roles and to how much they are in conflict with this role. O'Neil has illustrated the close relationship between gender role expectations, fear of the feminine, violence, negative attitudes towards psychotherapy and restricted expression of emotions in therapy.

However, it has to be recognised that not all published material about how best to work with men in psychotherapy are without problems. Some authors judge men for the way in which they actually express themselves and unfavourably compare this to how women express themselves in sessions. John Rowan for example suggested that psychotherapy is used to correct men's wrong masculine beliefs, thus risking stigmatising male clients and further activating the fear of the feminine within a psychotherapeutic context.

Male specific expression of emotions and feelings

The complaint by psychotherapists that men are emotionally inexpressive in sessions (and thus are labelled to be suffering from alexithymia) can be looked at, amongst others, in terms of language disadvantage and gender role expectations. Some people therefore warn that the language of therapy is not the language of men. Research also asks for a proper understanding of the place that masculine defences have within therapy.

My research into the topic has yielded interesting results confirming existing data. In the public invitation to participate in a study, it was made explicitly clear that the research topic was the fear of the feminine. Mostly men in their late 30s and older responded. Just two men aged 30 or lower participated. The average age was mid-40s, which confirms Berger and Levant's findings about market differences in gender role attitudes in younger men. The challenge with younger men is they are more likely to engage in violence and drug abuse and other problem behaviour and are unlikely to seek therapy.

Understanding of male clients needs to be developed further

The conclusion of the information presented thus far points at the urgency to create a coherent framework of male psychotherapy that is free from convenient generalisations. Still, in the meantime we need to continue working with the fear of

the feminine in men, even without a reliable framework. But how? A question, which reminds me of Bob Dylan's lyrics '*How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?*'

Taking all this into account we need to understand further:

- Which language should we use with male clients, which images to evoke, which interventions to make?
- What underlying assumptions should we hold in the field between client and therapist and how should we work with transference and counter-transference?

- How are we to encourage a man to deal with his problems without exposing him as a frightened individual who is afraid of his own emotions?

- What else is happening in the male/male and male/female dyads in counselling, apart from issues around parental projection and sexual transference and counter-transference?

The inclusion of male psychology, and especially the fear of the feminine, requires an open mind. It equally requires curiosity to fill the gaps in our knowledge. Clients, supervisees, trainees, colleagues, men and women alike will benefit from it.

Further reading

Horney, Karen. 1932. *The Dread of Woman*. International Journal of Psycho-Analysis 13, republished in: *Female Sexuality*. Rebus Press 1999.

Neumann, Erich. 1994. *The Fear of the Feminine*. Princetown University Press

Blazina, Chris. 1997. The fear of the feminine in the Western psyche and the masculine task of disidentification. *The Journal of Men's Studies*

Heifner, Christine. 1997. *The Male Experience of Depression*. Perspectives in Psychiatric Care.

Buss, David M. 1994. *The Evolution of Desire*. Basic Books.

Wong, Y.J., Rochlen, A.B., 2005. *Demystifying Men's Emotional Behaviour*. Psychology of Men and Masculinity. APA.

Werner Kierski is a counsellor and psychotherapist. He has a particular interest in working with men and their specific issues. He runs a private practise in North London and also supplies counselling services to people in organisational contexts. In addition, Werner is a commercial and academic researcher, using mostly qualitative methods. Werner is also planning to create a European research forum for male psychology and is still looking for interested professionals to get involved.