Self & Society, 2015
Vol. 43, No. 3, 219–225, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2015.1092325

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Models of the 'Self': gendered, non-gendered and trans-gendered

Deirdre Johnson*

Jungian Analyst, Supervisor and Psychotherapist in North-West London, UK

In this article I explore ideas about 'masculine' and 'feminine' in both Jung's and Assagioli's theories as these have influenced later Jungian and human potential thought. I describe what I think are the dangers of an 'essentialist' way of thinking, and how the polarization we ascribe to gender can be seen as a projection of a need for an 'either/or' model. The notion of 'trans-genderedness' can open up 'both/and' possibilities which allow for a greater versatility for both men and women. Perhaps both psychologies can suffer the shadow side of essentialism stemming from the bird's-eye view inherent in transpersonal views.

Keywords: Gender persona; transgender; masculinity; femininity; animus; anima; power; biological determinism; essentialism; contra-sexuality

Introduction

My very first introduction to the whole field of psychology/psychotherapy in my early 20s was sparked off by two pieces of reading. One was a simple sentence, I think from a Humanistic Psychology book, which went something like: 'The one thing that is true of every human being is that we have not reached even a tiny proportion of our full potential'. The second was reading a book on co-counselling. Co-counselling, or re-evaluative counselling, is a grass-roots model of personal change through reciprocal peer-to-peer counselling. One advantage this gives is that it is less subject to the danger of the abuse of the power dynamics. In the book I remember that in the second chapter, all the general pronouns, every 'he', 'his' and 'him', which were then taken to be universal, were replaced by 'she', 'her' or 'her'. Each chapter then continued to alternate in the use of the gender of the pronoun. This was the early 1970s, and the very first time I had seen the female pronoun used for the generic one. I had been so steeped in classical literature and classical thought that I could not then see that terms such as 'man' and 'mankind' for humankind were not neutral. I cannot begin to convey in words the extraordinary difference that this language made. For the very first time, I had an experience of a book as including *me* in a very real sense. I had previously had no idea at all how alienating the generic 'he', 'his', 'him' must have been for me, how excluded I must have felt as a woman; it was entirely unconscious then.

So two key themes: one around the extraordinary potential of the human being, and the other to do with issues of minorities, diversity and power, which I want to take as key to what is so valuable in both Jungian Analysis and aspects of Humanistic Psychology, and also to what can be so dangerous. I will draw on my trainings in

*Email: c/o aja@dircon.co.uk

Jungian Analysis and Psychosynthesis, and specifically on the two founders, respectively Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli.

Context

Both Jungian Analysis and Psychosynthesis posit the idea of the 'Self' or 'Higher Self' respectively as that which transcends the ego – the ego being both the sum total of conscious contents and the centre of functioning of our conscious mind. The Jungian 'Self' can be defined in terms of the total personality (re)discovered through the synthesis of various splits: the persona and the shadow, personal and collective, and the ego and contra-sexual opposite. Assagioli's idea of the 'Higher Self' was as something more distinct from the personal self as the centre of the 'Higher Unconscious'.

The problem of essentialism

1. *In Jung*

In Jung's theories it is the idea of the Self as consisting of the synthesis of the (gendered) ego and the *contra-sexual* elements that I want to look at here.

This internal figure (*imago*) of the opposite sex to one's self consists of:

(1) all the influences of formative figures of opposite-sex parents, teachers and so on in our personal history, and also
(2) the repository of all those aspects we deny in ourselves as belonging to the opposite sex. Plus –
(3) those aspects we project on to the opposite sex that we have not yet developed. Plus –
(4) the archetypal aspects of this *imago*.

The first three have to do with one's own personal complex – no problem here, but at the core of this personal (contra-sexual) complex is, according to Jung, the archetype of the animus or anima, (Jung, 1953) and this is where we can get into difficulties.

Jung (1959) defines archetypes as tendencies in the psyche to create images and symbols along certain prototypical lines and therefore *as not having content* as such (para. 142). Archetypes correlate to key stages in the human life cycle. However, unfortunately he does not always keep to his own definition, and at times describes particular traits (thus content) in an archetype as if these traits were themselves universal. A number of contemporary Jungians have critiqued this inconsistency of thought in him both for its male-centred and heterosexually-centred take.

Unfortunately I do not have space here to go into this in depth. But briefly, Jung (1950) saw the negative (i.e. dominant) anima in the man as 'fickle, capricious, moody, uncontrolled and emotional', and the negative, or dominant, animus in the woman as being 'obstinate, harping on principles, laying down the law, dogmatic, world-reforming, theoretic, word-mongering, argumentative, and domineering' (para. 223). This description might indeed have come from Jung's observations of actual men and women in his time, but these would have been observations of men and women in a society which greatly prescribed what roles either sex, but especially women, were

allowed to take. In other words, the context (e.g. time and place) affects how the archetypes *appear*.

2. *In Assagioli*

In his Psychosynthesis theory, Assagioli also talks of the masculine and feminine. In his paper 'The Balancing and Synthesis of the Opposites' (1972), he takes as his *hypothesis* that polarity is inherent throughout the cosmos. However, he claims this as a universal *fact*. Unfortunately, of course, we cannot know for certain whether the polarities are objectively observable or a projection of the polarizing human psyche on to the observable universe.

Writing of sexual reproduction of certain species (not all reproduction is, of course, sexual), he asserts:

> The positive pole is represented by the masculine element, the negative by the feminine element. This does not mean that the former is active and the latter passive. Both are active, but in a different way, the masculine element being the dynamic, initiating pole, while the feminine element is the receptive, 'gestative' elaborative pole. (Assagioli, 1972, p. 2)

But continuing from this accurate observation of sexual reproduction he unconsciously slips in a sleight of hand which we must pay attention to, because it is very common in both Psychosynthesis and Jungian psychology. In this thinking there is a hidden move from *biological* observation of behaviours to an idea of Essential masculine or feminine traits in the *psyche* of the human being. This sleight of hand has been termed 'biological determinism'. Secondly, there is a move from observed particulars of certain categories of people at a certain time and in a certain place to a generalization that soon creeps into speaking about all such categories of people in all places and at all times. Susan Rowland (2002) has rightly described this sleight of hand as 'essentialist' thinking when critiquing Jung for the same confusion of thought – 'essentialism' being used as a term to point out that in this way of thinking is the idea that a thing can be defined by its essence independently of context, such as time and place.

So Assagioli posits a polarity which is both gendered and prescribed: masculine = dynamic and feminine = receptive. Note that for Jung it was Logos/Eros respectively; for Freud, active/passive; for Winnicott, being/doing; for some post-Jungians it is focused functioning versus diffused functioning – and so on. Given that the claims are that this is a universal difference and therefore applicable to all sexes and at all times and in all places, it is remarkable how very varied these universal truths are!

How are these models dangerous?

The problem with essentialist thinking (as above) is that by talking in terms of universals, it turns something that is *descriptive* into something that is *prescriptive*. An example: if we observe that in the twenty-first-century United Kingdom, more men than women are engineers, we might be merely noting an unremarkable sociological fact in the UK. However, if we deduce from this that (all) men (always and everywhere) are better at engineering than (all) women, this is clearly a false assumption.

I also think we should make no bones about it, but when we talk about 'the Feminine' or the 'Feminine Principle', or likewise the 'Masculine' or the 'Masculine Principle', and wax lyrical about gendered polarities such as active/passive etc., we are in great danger of slipping into exactly that.

Yet there *is* an important place for a thorough description of present or even general (non-biological) differences between the sexes: for example, British female Members of Parliament have agitated about the late hours of parliamentary meetings which discriminate against those who have the major care of children, but this is very different from the sort of prescriptive thinking which might suggest that women should not be trying to have such jobs in the first place!

The sociological studies that note gender roles, or even characteristics, are very valuable, but psychological theorizing which (unconsciously) *prescribes* gender roles is very dangerous. Description must not become prescription.

Distinction between sex and gender

Recent advances in social and religious anthropology (since Jung's and Assagioli's times) have shown that certain traits might be deemed masculine in one group and feminine in a different group. For example, among the Inuit peoples sewing is exclusively men's work. In fact, as Young-Eisendrath (1997) asserts, there is no single trait that is consistently defined as belonging to one gender only.

Writers such as Ethel Spector Person (2005), Susan Rowland (2002), Andrew Samuels (1989) and Polly Young-Eisendrath (1997) have used the distinction between sex and gender to clarify thinking around these issues. Sex is *a matter of embodiment*, *of structural and functional properties of the human body*. Gender is *constructed both from within and without*, that is, by the individual on their own account and by the culture in which they find themselves. But is gender *entirely* a construct? Those from the transgender community, among others, question this. The most nuanced definition I have come across is Susan McKenzie's: she sees gender as an emergent category of mind involving a coming together of biological, cultural, relational, neuropsychological and developmental factors (McKenzie, 2006).

This is a highly complex definition which includes constructed elements and also naturally given ones, such as biological factors. As an example, a woman's physiological capacity for child bearing, giving birth and breast-feeding is unique to her sex, and will therefore impinge on her construction of gender. Biological factors would also include hormonal influences, which have been the subject of more recent research.

Young-Eisendrath (1997) observed that 'all societies have only two gender clubs, so gender creates both a division among human beings and a division within the psyche, between what is called "self" and what is regarded as its "opposite"' (p. 27). We might qualify this with the examples such as the Kathoeys or 'ladyboys' in Thailand and the *hijras* in India. Indeed, the Supreme Court in India in April of last year (BBC News, 2014) joined Nepal and Bangladesh in ruling to recognize transgender people as a third gender. Yet we know from the treatment of transgender individuals that there can be extremes of aggressive feeling directed against those who 'transgress' these divisions. The hatred and animosity reflect how determinedly many people try to enforce artificial gender divisions and even gender stereotypes.

In general, however, whatever is left out of our self-identified gender is considered to be Other. Young-Eisendrath claims that the core archetype is that of the Other (the

not-self). I would like to argue therefore for what I could describe as a journey towards the experience of a *trans-gendered Self* ***via*** *the experience of gender*. Allow me to explain. I have again and again come across how the experience of falling in love can be a pivotal experience in touching on the transcendent, and have written about this elsewhere (Johnson, 2010). In the experience of falling in love, the encounter with the Other is potentially hugely transformative. But it is, I suggest, a peculiarly 'Erotic Other'. The figure of the Inner Lover or Beloved, the soul-mate, one's lost other half, may haunt us in our longings and drive us to both wonderful and terrifying extremes. Jung's exploration of what is taking place here is, I think, hugely helpful both for a person's spiritual development and for their outer love relationships. But that Erotic Other is not necessarily coincident with the Contra-sexual Other. This is so *only for heterosexuals.*

The hamper metaphor

We could use an image of two giant boxes. Let us follow the awful convention and imagine a blue one marked 'For Boys and Men', the other, a pink one, marked 'For Girls and Women'. The definition of traits as being 'masculine' or 'feminine' suggests two mutually exclusive categories. So if we take a trait such as courage, these definitions force us to choose which box we put it in. A man who seems fearful is therefore labelled 'pussy' (note additionally, an insult). At least in terms of our *less conscious* assumptions, the tendency is to think that what we put in the male box cannot then be in the female one. You can see that in this game, one cannot really have a trait considered as masculine in the feminine box, or, again, another considered as feminine in the masculine box. Nor indeed can one trait (e.g. courage) be in both boxes! It is either/or.

However, I want to argue that if we look at the tendency to gender polarization as a *projection of the human psyche*, then the idea of the balance and synthesis of the opposites becomes something different, and something potentially extremely fruitful.

What if the 'blue' box, say, contains not *masculine* traits as such, but those traits that we, both male and female, either as individuals or collectively, tend to polarize with the *label* of being masculine? What happens if we refuse to be forced into this mutual exclusivity? What if traits can belong to both 'clubs' – even if their context in the 'club' alters them in some way? What if we challenge the very colouring of the boxes themselves? Then something exciting happens.

Versatility

In general, a greater degree of realized human potential, psychologically speaking, would imply versatility – having more resources available to us from either box, which can then be drawn on to meet the circumstances of the moment. This versatility begins with thinking 'outside the box' or (here) boxes! We can think of it, in this particular instance, as 'gender integration' or, perhaps more accurately, 'gender role integration'. As such, it is an experience beyond or, in that sense, 'trans'-gender.

We can begin to see, therefore, how gender, i.e. *ideas about* masculinity and femininity, function as *metaphor*. In other words, we can use the opposite sex to our own as a hook on which to hang those aspects that we experience as unfamiliar, while claiming for our own sex those qualities we experience as familiar.

So not only our biology but also our upbringing will affect how we see ourselves as a boy or a girl, and later a woman or a man. This effect will operate both consciously and unconsciously. Since ascribed gender roles for women have been (and, to varying degrees in different cultures, still are) more limiting, we might assume that women have to play more limited roles than men. However, both sexes are limited in their choice of roles to play. In Jungian terms, roles relate to the persona, here the *gender persona*, and the persona is in conflict, to a greater or lesser extent, with the autonomous individual, but especially with this contra-sexual opposite.

Conclusion

Jungian psychology and the humanistic psychologies share an understanding of the human psyche as having what might be termed a spiritual or transcendent dimension. Perhaps it is precisely because spirituality often favours a 'bird's-eye' view of things over an 'on the ground' one that there is a *greater* danger of misleading generalizations (from 'essentialist' thinking). Those of us in these psychologies might be in greater danger of this universalizing tendency. This could be a part of our collective shadow.

The issue here is of a key polarity, that of *oneness* and *multiplicity*, the paradox of the one and the many: emphasis on oneness tending to see universal similarities, and emphasis on multiplicity as a focus on difference/diversity.

But again we do not have to have an either/or. As Jungians or humanistic psychotherapists or theorists, our 'unique selling point' is the recognition of the transpersonal potential in an individual. Yet we need to be acutely aware of how oppressive to all sorts of minority groups can be our desire to universalize, and we must keep in mind *both* aspects, both the multiplicity and unity, of what we could call the 'Self'.

Poetically put: the transcendent or the Real manifests in *both* oneness and in diversity. Both in what we share with others, and in what we have uniquely.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Deirdre Johnson qualified with the Association of Jungian Analysts (member of the IAAP) after a previous qualification in Psychosynthesis psychotherapy. She has had a practice for over 30 years, and trains and gives talks for CPD or at conferences in the UK and abroad. Her book on relationship, *Love: Bondage or Liberation?*, is published by Karnac Books.

References

Assagioli, R. (1972). The balancing and synthesis of the opposites. New York: Psychosynthesis Research Foundation, *29*, 2–8. Retrieved from http://www.psykosyntese.dk/a-166-print/.

BBC News. (2014, April 15). India court recognises transgender people as third gender. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-27031180.

Johnson, D. (2010). *Love: bondage or liberation?* London: Karnac Books.

Jung, C. G. (1950). Concerning rebirth. In *Collected works*, Vol. 9, Part 1. London: Routledge.
Jung, C. G. (1953). Anima and animus. In *Collected work*s, Vol. 7 (paras 296–340). London: Routledge.
Jung, C. G. (1959). Concerning the archetypes, with special reference to the anima concept. In *Collected works*, Vol. 9, Part 1 (paras 111–147). London: Routledge.
McKenzie, S. (2006). Queering gender: Anima/animus and the paradigm of emergence. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, *51*, 401–421.
Person, E. (2005). A new look at core gender and gender role identity in women. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, *53*, 1045–1058.
Rowland, S. (2002). *Jung: A feminist revision*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Samuels, A. (1989). Beyond the feminine principle. In his *The plural psyche* (pp. 66–76). London: Routledge.
Young-Eisendrath, P. (1997). Gender, contrasexuality, and Self. In her *Gender and desire*: *Uncursing Pandora* (pp. 25–58). Texas: A & M University Press.