

Book review for Nancy J. Chodorow, *Individualizing Gender and Sexuality: Theory and Practice*

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From its emergence as a key concept in the 1970's ([Oakley, 1972](#); [Rubin, 1975](#)) 'gender' has been a highly contested term attracting rich theorization. How we define and understand 'femininity' and 'masculinity', how gender comes to be, and how it is performed ([Butler, 1990](#)) remains crucial not only for theory, but also in popular culture and everyday narratives, for norms of psychological health and pathology as well as the so-called perversions.

The book consists of eleven "occasional" collected chapters, divided in two parts (theoretical and clinical), which Chodorow has been working on as a result of various invited presentations on the topics of gender, sexuality, women and power, family and bisexuality, among others. They were not conceived as a coherent whole, rather exist as stand-alone pieces; however, it is clear that there is a consistent thread in Chodorow's more recent work and this is the concept of "clinical individuality". By that term she argues that culture does not determine the personal meaning of gender or the particularity of any relationships. She specifically draws from her clinical work on mother-daughter relations demonstrating that the mother's unconscious fantasies about her daughter and vice versa all work to *particularize gender* within the individual and with a characteristic emotional tonality for that individual (p. xii). For Chodorow "each person's psyche is unique" (2012, p. 19). As part of the clinical section of the book, explorations of gender and sexuality are presented through the discussion of important social issues, such as the "glass ceiling" phenomena for women (capping their career trajectories through institutionalised sexism), terrorism, homosexuality, and the concept of time in relation to the "non-reproduction of mothering" or leaving it "too late" to have children (2012, p. 103). While some of the clinical examples read as rather abstract, grounding theory in case studies permits a deep engagement with the method and allows for the discernment of complex and individualized patterns.

Sociological arguments on gender and sexuality are commonly characterized by their positioning of gender in terms of external social structures. This position interprets the formation of one's gender as a result of the structures of society and culture, including specifically the institutions of family and (paid) work. The usual criticism of this approach concerns the problem with reducing the psyche to the social ([West & Zimmerman, 1987](#)).

It becomes challenging to theorise agency (or the self), the role of the unconscious, and of fantasy and subjectivity within a social determinist view (Oliver & Edwin, 2002).

Alternatively, classical psychoanalytic thought has notoriously offered an equally partial understanding on gender primarily grounded anatomical sex differences. In Freud's (in)famous terms, "biology is destiny". Thus, claims around the "universal" and "inevitable" features of the body that ostensibly determine one's gender identity do not leave much room for personal agency either. This view also lacks an adequate understanding of social structure. So we may ask: what makes a *woman* and a *man*?

In *Individualizing Gender and Sexuality*, Chodorow brings together psychoanalytic and sociological analyses to ponder the questions of gender and sexuality. As a result we witness an unusual encounter between two theoretical frameworks, known for their tense relationship (Dimen, 2011; Bueskens, 2014). Trying to answer questions on gender in a similarly deterministic theoretical binary of either/or will not work, claims Chodorow. She builds a convincing argument that gender requires as much pluralist theoretical understanding as the "clinical individual" him or herself. This is one of Chodorow's central messages: there are no universal truths, no singular theory, no absolute gender divides, no claims about *the* woman or *the* man, no *one* femininity or masculinity. The answer is always that there are many, and "each individual constructs his or her own particularized personal phantasy between gender and object choice" (2012, p. 163).

The opening chapter is highly personal. It captivates the reader who typically draws on personal experience to understand and guide their intellectual work. When Chodorow juxtaposes the theoretical with the clinical, the individual with their context, and external structures with internal stories, the reader is slowly introduced to the fields of sociology and psychoanalysis, and the theoretical becomes infused with the personal (Chapter 1). This acknowledgement of the author's personal history of family context, studies, psychoanalytical training, and the historical context of her work (the 1970's and second wave feminism) provides a rich backdrop on which the following chapters build. It is also a manifestation of Chodorow's clinical engagement and investment in her own and unique bottom-up lens of "listening to the patient and not for the manifestations of a particular theory in a client" (2012, p. 23).

Chodorow revisits *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Chapter 4) reflecting on its broad and paradigm shifting impact in diverse disciplinary fields including psychology, ethics, sociology and psychoanalytic studies. In her revision she reflects on her earlier perspective as a daughter and how this changed by becoming a mother herself (surprisingly, Chodorow was not a mother when she wrote *The Reproduction of Mothering*).

In her critical examination of Freud's, "Three essays on the theory of sexuality" (1905) (Chapter 2), she notes the contradictions in Freud's theory while nonetheless paying her intellectual respects to Freud. Such problematic claims include his default male norm, prioritising the body over the mind (what she calls Freud's "obsession with the body"), and the unresolved claims about the infant's first relational object (what comes first the breast or self?). This last contradiction poses a substantial question for theorisations of the

libido, specifically, the divide between the libido as an object- or a pleasure-seeker. Such theoretical division serves to inform beliefs about what kinds of unconscious fantasies constitute psychic reality, how we begin to relate to others and what meanings we find in these relationships.

In a systematic deconstruction of Freud's views on sexual aberrations, on infantile sexuality and object choice, Chodorow returns to comment on how post-modern and radical Freud actually was. For example, she points out that Freud never stated that heterosexuality is preferential or total, but rather that "...all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious" (1905, p. 26). Thus, while he does imply that there is a "normal" femininity and masculinity tied to the resolution of the Oedipus complex, he also argues that sexuality and gender can follow multiple pathways – homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual etc. This too is "normal".

The notion of normative femininity is elaborated in Chodorow's interpretation of Kleinian concepts -the breast, reparation, splitting, projection, introjection, projective identification, and femininity in both sexes – all ostensibly non-gendered terms, but particularly relevant, contends Chodorow, to our understanding of gender (Chapter 3). Unlike Freud's phallocentric views, Klein's breast- and mother-centered theory provides a primary femininity theory (and it is no surprise that it took a woman analyst to generate such a theory). We now see a femininity complex in boys who envy *their* lack of reproductive organs (i.e., wombs) and also an account of envy and idealization of the other gender that applies to both girls' and boys' gendered identity formation. However, the risk again is in a prescriptive theory of *the* girl, *the* woman, *the* way to be feminine. Individual gender requires an interpretation of the *personal* experience of particular kinds of mothers or fathers and of a *personally meaningful* appropriation of culture.

However, culture, Chodorow argues, does not predetermine the personal meaning of gender (Chapter 10). As a matter of fact, the argument is flipped to its opposite: the inner world shapes the outer. Remaining truthful to her theoretical pluralism, Chodorow cautiously continues her exploration of gender and sexuality formation to elucidate a whole unconscious realm. She presents a topography-like map of the multiple components that influence sexuality, such as personal fantasies filtered through maternal and paternal characteristics of the internal world, and conscious and unconscious meanings of what it is to be female or male, erotization, fantasies and sexual behaviours and practices, affective tonality (or the importance one places on sexuality), and, again, how highly individual object choice is. All of these components brought together *animate* one's sexuality and gender identity. I find this complex layering to be the key strong point of the book.

In a brilliant theoretical, historical and epistemological discussion of the complexity and contradictions around "psychoanalytical gender" (Chapter 6), Chodorow rather convincingly positions herself as "overly modernist" (mostly because she contests the prioritisation of language and the concept of the "symbolic" pervasive in Lacan and later postmodern theory). However, arguably her work is postmodern in its emphasis on

multiplicity, de-centering of universal truths and destabilization of normative gender and sexual identity. To this end, Chodorow challenges both psychoanalytic and sociological orthodoxies, from within and in doing so offers a lesson in staying with the discomfort of our own experiences of gender and sexuality. As part of any book review, the reviewer is expected to provide an opinion concerning why to read this book or who should read it. To this, I say: it is a dense text, be warned, all gender novices! It will provoke questions. It will push you in a critical almost archaeological search for texts that matter (to you). It may illuminate some prejudice and essentialist notions you have harboured, even unconsciously, regarding what it means to be the gender you identify with. In many ways, this book is an invitation into an exploration on gender. Bon voyage!

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