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Women in the German present

In my presentation I deal with the life of women today from two aspects which follow in a moment. But first I would like to make two preliminary remarks.

For the German culture of remembering it is important to connect with the here and now of the present, which means attempting to build bridges between yesterday and today, just as we do in psychoanalytical work. The young generation now living in Germany is the fourth since the Third Reich. My paper concerns the third generation, whose lives have been shaped in so many different ways by that time. My second comment concerns Margarete Mitscherlich. Her model, her function as a forerunner, played a significant part in my life, as it did for many women born after the war. She heightened our awareness of the significance of certain features of German maternal identification for our becoming familiar with our own feminine identity.

For a long time there was a danger for us in the DPV of drifting apart from one another: on one side there was a conceptual, internal, theoretical debate about femininity, insofar as it took place at all, and on the other an endeavour on the part of prominent women, including Margarete Mitscherlich – otherwise for a long time more or less without analysts – to fight for change on the outside, in the so-called reality of rigidified structures for women.

Their pioneering, for Germany, involvement in the women's movement contributed to the fact that analysts today – male as well as female – make connections between psychoanalytic knowledge and the socio-cultural reality of women. However, in international comparisons our awareness, which is only now becoming more differentiated, still lags behind in terms of unmet demands for equal rights, which the great majority of women (over 70%; 56% of men) now no longer believe in or do not regard as legitimate (Spiegel 2006).

It is, though, open-mindedness at a verbal level only: in reality too many men want to live as their fathers traditionally lived, which means women living as their mothers did. The consequences are falling birth rates, a rise in low-wage jobs for women, illegal work etc etc.

I would like to look at two groups of women – one smaller, the other much larger – which occupy a special place in the scenario I have just described.

'A daughter the rest of her life'

I would like to use the title of Nancy Kulish's 'A daughter the rest of her life' (2006) to refer to a special group of women in Germany – from the middle-classes, often academics, members (many of them passive) of the women's movement – for whom the birth of a daughter had promised a particular, identifiably feminine future which they themselves, conditioned by the post-war years and through no fault of their own born after the war, had renounced in respect of their own development. This created a paradoxical attachment situation for daughters: on the one hand doing everything better and differently than the mother, while at the same time remaining her delegate.

Carmen was 26 when she came to me, after several attempts at treatment in which she, here too at one with her mother, absolutely wanted time and again have a woman as therapist. Her most severe symptoms were what she experienced as a shameful inability to set limits in relationships with men, and her fear of loss. She had the feeling that she was a failure in the attempt to have and to maintain a steady partnership. Thanks to her smart and confident appearance she made conquests quite easily, which she and the mother were proud of. But after the first moves and quick sexual adventures she experienced a sense of inferiority each time, an uncertainty about the quality of the connection, which for her was depressing and which turned into wounding attacks and jealous scenes. Fear, helplessness, physical symptoms, but above all alcohol abuse and intense promiscuity were the consequences every time.¹

She was an eagerly wanted child, the first girl, of liberal parents of the 68er generation. It was astonishing, and on the other hand not, that the mother, an academic, completely gave up the professional activities that she had so single-mindedly pursued and whose successful outcome she and her future husband had been so proud of. But she wanted an 'ideal family': a conflict-free, sincerely loving concentration on the ties of family, tinged with a profound longing for normality, that was exclusively fixed on the development of the children.² Later another boy came into the world, which put severe strains on the family; hopes for the future now rested even more strongly on Carmen. A mockingly contemptuous attitude of the father towards the unemployed mother, who was 'only a housewife', became apparent in Carmen's adolescence (the mother no longer returned to her old profession) and this was like a hairline crack in the family harmony. He unsettled Carmen. The connection to the mother as an almost passionately beloved ideal changed direction to a connection based on feelings of guilt, which finally turned increasingly into disappointed loyalty and made inwardly apparent the longing for help from the distant father – his work required him to live in another city – to whom she now felt so very similar.

Between us too there developed a quality of mutual identification and idealisation similar to that she had had with the mother, and which for us was for some time completely egosyntonic.

She succeeded in making extremely rapid progress in all areas, apparently without effort, and above all in the choice of a suitable man. In her initial dream the mother appeared in a desert, where she (Carmen) was wandering, sick, the mother building her up with: 'We can do it!'

This corresponded to her transference phantasy of being able to reach me, as her security, from anywhere in the universe. Here I am only concerned with the maternal determination, which also shaped the initial situation of our relationship. I am leaving all other psychodynamic considerations to one side in this discussion, such as, for example, her obvious lack of self-reflection, her split-off rage and her tendency to act out.

¹ In the course of the analysis she discovered similar vicious circles of successful living and humiliating inferiority in her exclusively male-dominated professional life.

² This kind of longing for normality, which affects family life in particular, was often found among us in Germany at that time. It was an understandable expression of what is today called a post-traumatic stress reaction after the war; a reaction which also included the extremely sudden shame, which was experienced as catastrophic – and the feelings of inferiority when faced with events which called into question this longing for an idyllic life.

The subject of difference between us, of irreconcilable realities – the process of becoming aware of otherness – has become central in our relationship. Instead of reacting by putting herself down, fitting in with others, or by experiencing panicky fear, she could begin to protest openly: to risk a new form of more mature interaction, which also stabilised her partnership and led to a more stable connection with him and to pregnancy. But even after years of analysis she cannot think of it coming to an end.

Johanna is a completely different variety of German woman: at the start of treatment she was 40 years old and in no way wanted a woman as therapist. I know her from supervision.

She was born into severely deprived social circumstances with an adipose housewife mother, a part-time farmer father who drank to excess, and two older sisters who never managed to break away from home.

Although she was very intelligent she had only the elementary school-leaving certificate, but nevertheless reached a supervisory position in a company. She married a customs officer with a good job, but sexuality very quickly died out and both sons were born through IVF.

Around her I thought of Ethel Person's (2003) description of the power motive for women – an almost biological power which all people, but especially women, can own and which the women of our time in particular have: the ability to take their own life in their hands, even in adverse circumstances; to want to write their own histories and 'pull themselves out of the bog by their own hair'. An ability that immediately impressed me in Johanna's case in the light of the dismal, under-stimulated relationships of her early childhood. Recognition was missing and so she remained alone. After the work of bringing up the children, which fell exclusively on her, was over, she increasingly neglected herself and developed painful somatoform disorders, concentrated around the mouth area as a dysmorphophobic phantasy of losing the power of speech.

This was the daughter's transference on to a father, which in the treatment she was able to awaken into life in her intellectual hunger.

The most significant determinant of her transference relationship was from the start her envy. This was directed at those who had a better situation in life, whether through birth, external appearance or privileges gained through early paternal encouragement, and to whom she felt extremely inferior. In the treatment, her envy touched on the analyst's daughter, his wife, women doctors, but above all other patients.

Its presence led to extremely primitive fits of rage in the practice and to intense scenes of jealousy during the sessions. As much as this envy was understandable as social envy, it was also an expression of an intense longing for a phallic father who would embrace her as a daughter – as she supposed happened with other women – and who could free her from her phantasy of parthenogenesis. An image of development in which the father/man would by his potency rescue her from merging with her adipose, primitive, devalued mother and make it possible for her to find the way to a feminine creativity which was genuinely her own. Her whole life she had not been able to touch herself in the genital area, not only because she was disgusted by it but because she had detected there a lack whose origin was unknown. By not touching her body she had avoided experiencing her missing life.

Very slowly she could make use of the opportunity provided by the protecting father in the person of the analyst for her own development (high-school leaving certificate, higher education, discovery of her own sexuality, new partner). Today she no longer needs the aggressions of other women, aggressions which are intensified by projective identifications, dreaded but also combated. She has developed a broader understanding of herself and her path in life, which is coupled with deep gratitude for what has become possible for her through the analysis.

Johanna also made it clear to me that penis envy in its socially reactive dimension is not at all an occurrence of no concern to women today, belonging to the theoretical concepts of the last century with their extreme forms of social discrimination against women.³ In fact there is among us a large group of women who live, at a symbolic level, as if they were still in the Middle Ages. This group includes women from immigrant families (which are increasing particularly sharply in German cities: 70% in Frankfurt, for example) with whom Margarete Mitscherlich – still! – wants to get especially involved.

That Johanna can find no suitable job, and above all no suitably paid job connects, by the way, with what was said at the start about the situation of women: in Germany much greater public awareness of this is certainly necessary. Added to this is the fact that there are no measures to support the training of 2 million young women under 30, and that today's political independence of the German Länder, or states, in matters of education and culture permits little hope of change.

To summarise, my paper has dealt with the life stories of two daughters of today and with their socio-cultural situations, which are polar opposites. Psychoanalytical understanding must be aware of the challenge of the counter-transference, paying especial attention to gender differences, and must base empathy for these women on as broad an experience of life as possible.

Literature

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³ I would like to add that according to my clinical observation, a kind of shift in the focus on feminine envy can be seen when we are working: today it is based more on envy between women, feminine rivalry – for the moment irrespective of whether or not we want to retain the expressions 'penis envy' and 'castration anxiety' for this.