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### A Fresh Look at: Gender

In choosing **Gender** as the topic for this issue, I was curious to see if it has the same resonance as it did 30 years ago. The articles in this issue demonstrate how far we have come, and where the issues still lie. **Nancy Amendt-Lyon** describes a paradigm change, in which the familiar labels of "victim" and "perpetrator" seem inadequate to describe the reality of relationships. **Arch Roberts** talks about gender as fluid and co-created, and **Trish Perry** discovers that her daughter's gender issues lie more at home than in the workplace. We share an appreciation of **Miriam Polster** for her revisioning of "heroism," and **Marianne Roy** describes gender dilemmas and strategies in her work with executive teams. Finally, **Stuart Simon** shares some thoughts about the impact of gender in the coaching relationship.

See below for new opportunities on our website to dialogue about these issues. I look forward to seeing you there!

– Cynthia Cook, Newsletter Editor

### A Paradigm Change

by Nancy Amendt-Lyon

In a lecture I held at the EAGT conference in Athens last September, I described several of the many aspects of gender that are often neglected when practicing Gestalt therapy and appealed for more gender-awareness in our training and practice, as well as for the theoretical description of our practical experience *with* men and women, *as* men and women! I emphasized the importance of allowing the many facets of gender differences to exist and to cultivate our awareness of them.

This may sound pretty trivial to some, but to me as a woman who spent her young adult life engaged in the Women's Rights Movement and the Anti-Vietnam-War/Student Movement, this thought comes close to a paradigm change. Those of us involved in the Women's Movement in the late 1960s – early 1970s were convinced that men and women are basically the same and can be raised, in the proper environment and with the right training, to do the same work – including such physical labor as coal mining – to have the same interests, and to excel in the same activities. If I may exaggerate in order to emphasize: At the time, all differences in the sexes were seen as an obstacle to be conquered, a stumbling block in the way of complete equality.

Now, as a woman well into middle age and with two adult children, I become increasingly aware that gender is an ongoing

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### Making Meaning of Gender

by Archie Roberts

"Gender" comes from the latin genus, which means "kind," "type," or "sort." In everyday life, when we encounter an "other," the first thing we notice about them is what "type" of other they are: male or female. This is the first and most fundamental assessment we make when encountering another human being. It's nearly instantaneous. Before anything else, we register "male" or "female."

This assessment of the other's sex activates the first and most fundamental cognitive schema, or "interpretive set," that will co-determine how we interact with that person: the way we use our bodies around them; what we will and won't say; the way we stand, sit, move; the way we use our voice... The assessment has immediate and global effects: it influences and "codes" everything about our subsequent behavior with that person. It's an overwhelmingly powerful determinant of experience.

This is one of the reasons many people become anxious in settings where this assessment is difficult (i.e. very darkened rooms, androgynous crowds, cross-dressing, etc). When we cannot make the assessment of sexual type, we are generally unsure of how to act, and even (especially) of how to interpret our own feelings (of, say, excitement, fear, joy, closeness, etc).

But sex, of course, is not gender. Sex is a biological characteristic; gender is a subjective assessment of one's own sexual

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### New on Our Website:

#### Leader's Blog by Nancy Hardaway

Last year I chose to share my personal experience of the leadership transition here at GISC through my **Leader's Log** in each issue of our newsletter, hoping it might give you an inside view and perhaps a sort of case study of transition. I enjoyed receiving your feedback.

This year, I'm going electronic and have a new blog created on our website where I will address topical issues. You can read it on our GISC home page at [www.gisc.org](http://www.gisc.org) and easily comment. I hope to hear from you.

*Click here: [Leader's Blog](#)*

#### Online Newsletter Forum by Cynthia Cook

Starting with this issue, you will be able to post your responses to our newsletter in an open online forum. Whether you have a reaction to an article, or thoughts or experiences of your own about the topic to share, we would love to hear from you.

To begin a conversation, I have posted some reflections on Gestalt and women's psychology. Feel free to read, respond, and let us know what is meaningful to you regarding the topic of Gender.

*Click here: [Newsletter Forum](#)*

**Thank You to Our 2007 Donors**

GISC is proud to thank the generosity of so many people who contributed to our annual campaign. As a non-profit, we exist only to benefit the public, and donations help to support our programs. You have touched us with your appreciation and confidence in the difference we are making in the world.

We couldn't do it without you.

*Nancy Hardaway*

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**Miriam Polster: Gender Wisdom for Eve's Daughters - and Sons**

*by Miriam Iosupovici*

When I had the opportunity to reread *Eve's Daughters: The Forbidden Heroism of Women* after so many years, I "heard" Miriam's voice as I read the words. This was poignantly delightful, as I remembered her aphorism: reading was "listening with your eyes". Miriam's influence on my thinking and feeling about gender goes far beyond her cognitive complexity and extraordinary books, as important as those have been. This gender knowledge remains anchored on a sensate level.

In my memories of Miriam, I see her knitting, listening carefully with her eyes on my face – or the faces of others in the group – until a pattern emerged and her awareness was delivered with precision and gentle strength. I can smell her cooking while I hear her discuss theory with a fluidity that was dazzling. These brief descriptions inevitably do an injustice: there was always a sense of a woman supremely comfortable in her skin, powerfully connecting to women and men, seeing beyond the traditional limitations – and pleasures – of gender.

**Praising her work  
 I mumble to myself  
 "I can do it, too."**



Miriam honored the daily costs of being human – and the qualities of connectedness, nurturance and action – required of us all.

One can easily Google Miriam's name and



*Miriam Polster*

want more.

When *Eve's Daughters* was published (1992), many of us hungrily read her arguments for the reworking of a limited male paradigm of the solitary hero. Miriam's nuanced arguments and scholarship outlined characteristics of an expanded sense of the heroic, celebrated heroic action taken in daily life and in the collective actions of women working for reform and witness. We sent copies to friends, children, and partners and recommended the book to clients. More fully appreciating the women heroes in our lives, including ourselves, Miriam's works helped us rescue these examples from invisibility.

To many of us she was a role model, a mentor and a woman hero. She imparted a sense of possibility, encapsulated in a Japanese Haiku about knitting: Praising her work/I mumble to myself/"I can do it, too."

*Miriam Iosupovici, MSW was Miriam's client, trainee and supervisee from the early 70s. Although mostly retired, she continues in a limited private practice after an almost 25 year career at UCSD's Student Psychological and Counseling Services. She currently has two chapters in press (in Scott S. Fehr [ed], 2008: 101 Interventions in Group Psychotherapy, Haworth) developed from experiences at the Polster's Gestalt Community.*

find a wealth of information, meaningful tributes and reviews online. If perchance you do not know her work, I urge you to read anything she has written. I confidently predict you will

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## Making Meaning of Gender

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identity. And this is where things become interesting. Because, as Gestalt field theory shows, meaning is made--and understanding is found--not in supposedly "objective" assessments, but in the continual interplay of two people in dialogue. This means that my experience of your sexual identity and your experience of your sexual identity (as well as your experience of my sexual identity, and my experience of my sexual identity) are continually influencing and being influenced by each other.

In other words, gender--and everything that follows from it--is an enormously fluid construct. It's not determined by an individual's sex, but by an individual's experience--and an individual's experience is determined by his or her dialogue with others.

There is a rich body of work evolving out of Gestalt field theory that explores the ways in which gender is continually "constructed" through intersubjective dialogue (cf. "The Gendered Field," edited by Deb Ullman and published by GestaltPress in 1998). Objective biological characteristics are interesting in the laboratory, but in the messy world of day-to-day life (whether in business settings, or clinical consulting rooms) our subjective realities drive the action.

The meaning we make of one another's gender--and the actions we take as a result of that meaning--emerge from the complex interplay of biological and cultural forces that converge in social experience. In the end, we begin to see that "gender" is a rich and continually unfolding tapestry of perspectives--a fundamental force in determining our experience of the world, and how we choose to live and act in it.

*Archie Roberts, M.A. is a Gestalt Therapist working with individuals, couples, & systems, and has presented in Leadership in the 21st Century. He is also Adjunct Professor in the Graduate Program in Holistic Counseling at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI. You can reach him at archroberts@cox.net*

## Still Building Ground

*by Trish Perry*

When the possibility of writing a few thoughts about gender from a Gestalt perspective was first raised, I went totally blank...which in and of itself came as quite a surprise. As a child of the 60's, most of my career and much of my life, has been deeply entwined with gender issues. I ran my first "Assertiveness Training Course for Women" over 30 years ago. I attended "Consciousness Raising Groups" and talked endlessly, tearfully, furiously with female friends about inequities. I wrote my dissertation on the differences between mothers and fathers and how they defined conflict with their children. How on earth could I possibly go blank?

***We are caught by surprise by things like the "Hillary moment"***

Fifteen years ago, 7 or 8 women friends and our 18-22 year old daughters met for a day to talk about gender issues, theirs and ours. They told us that they were overwhelmed by the burden of living with

all the choices and expectations we had for them. They felt that they had to do everything, succeed at everything, and still have a life. They were not falling all over us with thanks for the doors we had opened.

Something has shifted, but I don't know if it's in me, in the world, or both. The ground has changed; the figures have changed. I asked my oldest daughter (who is in the process of developing a collaborative leadership model as she and two male colleagues take over her father's construction business) how she thought about gender.

She asked me what I meant. I said: "You know, women having a voice, being respected in the workplace, having a sense of their power, being listened to." Not a problem. She feels she has more power as a woman in her industry. Then she paused. "Actually, I have more gender issues at home." As a mother of a 2 year old and a full time worker, she struggles with balance,

judgment by other mothers, getting stuck doing it all. Maybe the ground hasn't changed completely.

As for me, in talking with one small cohort of 60-something women who are looking at the "next phase", we are still talking endlessly, albeit somewhat less furiously and tearfully, about our choices. We find we are less tolerant of victim stories (our own and others) and, on occasion, still getting annoyingly stuck in them. We are caught by surprise by things like the "Hillary moment" and feel all our efforts at change were for naught. But then I listen to my daughter, and I think some things have changed.

What I have realized as I've mused, is that this is a preamble. I need to hear more, from daughters and cohorts and women at all ages in between. It seems to me this is about cycles, cycles of change in individual women, life cycles of women of similar ages, cultural cycles in our work and communities. It is about the ground we have built and are building, and the figures that are still fixed and those that have broken apart....like my blankness.

*Trish Perry is an independent consultant, specializing in promoting dialog in educational, health care, and human service nonprofits, and is a coach in our Cape and Islands Non-profit Leadership Program. You can reach her at [pldperry@comcast.net](mailto:pldperry@comcast.net)*

## Coming Up at GISC:

February 21 - 23: **Introduction to the Cape Cod Model (Atlanta)** with Penny Backman & Joe Melnick

February 28 - March 4: **Applying the Cape Cod Model to Coaching** with Donna Colombel & Stuart Simon

March 14 - 16: **Women in the Working World** with Nancy Hardaway & Marianne Roy

April 5 - 6: **Difficult Topics, Successful Conversations: An Approach to Intimacy for Couples (Boston Area)** with Stuart Simon & Sharona Halpern

April 10 - 12: **Skills for Influential Leadership: An Overview** with Nancy Hardaway, Marianne Roy, Michael Walsh & John Wipfler

April 13 - 15: **Introduction to the Cape Cod Model** with Carol Brockmon & Stuart Simon

April 25 - 27: **The Tuning Effect** with Mel Bucholtz

***"...people believe that men and women should behave in ways that are gender-consistent; the prescriptive nature of gender stereotypes prevents change by making it difficult for women and men to go against norms that enable them to "fit in" for fear of social rejection and of all the negative consequences it might entail."***

## Establishing Credibility: Interview with Marianne Roy by Cynthia Cook

I spoke recently with Marianne Roy, an executive coach who will be teaching **Women in the Working World**, about her experience of gender issues in her work.

PERCENT OF ALL MANAGEMENT & PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS HELD BY WOMEN IN 2005: 50.6

PERCENT OF FORTUNE 500 CEOs WHO WERE WOMEN IN 2006: 1.8

PERCENT BY WHICH WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN FORTUNE 500 COMPANIES INCREASED BETWEEN 2002 AND 2005: 0.7

Source: Catalyst

GISC: What comes to mind when I ask you about gender in the workplace?

MR: I'll give you a recent example: I was part of a leadership team in which I was peers with this other fellow, same age as me, whose expectation was that I would defer to him, and he would become quite nasty if I didn't. He would say things like, "you don't know what you're talking about," he wouldn't listen to me.

He had a very hierarchical point of view, and the belief that women are not as smart as men. We were part of a three-person core team that met with a larger team that was mostly men. At one point in the larger meeting he was joking with a senior VP and said, "We'll let the men take care of that." The senior VP chuckled and nodded as though agreeing, yes, this situation is going to take a guy to handle it.

GISC: How did you address this?

MR: I talked with him afterwards, and I also talked with that senior VP and told him what that had felt like for me. He got it, and immediately apologized.

GISC: It seems that you relied on your ability to relate person to person, telling him your experience, instead of judging or criticizing.

MR: I tend to work in male-dominated industries, and in that setting I also find that my gender supports me. It is more okay as a woman to address relationships. As long as I am speaking with a CEO one-on-one, I can say things to him that a guy couldn't.

GISC: I notice you said "the CEO...he." Is that your experience?

MR: Just looking at the organizations that I have worked with in the past year, by no means has there been gender balance. Out of the nine CEO teams, only two had female CEOs. In the teams of eight to ten people

there were not more than one or two women in each group, and only one African American woman out of all nine groups.

GISC: Do you have a strategy for this situation?

MR: I have learned a lot from Sonia regarding gender, and also size, since I am small,

so there is a very deliberate style that I have adopted. I always dress a notch above. If an off-site meeting is supposed to be business casual and everyone else is there in khakis, I will wear dress pants, and maybe a blazer. When I arrive for a meeting I go out of my way to introduce myself to everyone in the room. When I am leading a group I will make sure to establish my credibility.

GISC: How do you do that?

MR: I will make sure that I meet with the CEO several times before the meeting to make sure he is comfortable with who I am, and I connect with him right away at the meeting.

GISC: So it has to do with establishing a relationship.

MR: I am making sure the person knows that I am technically competent and that I have their best interests in mind. In the room I make myself "bigger" than I am – a big presence.

GISC: Do you find that male and female leaders bring different issues to coaching?

MR: The two women CEOs I worked with this past year question their competence a lot more than the men, no matter how much they have achieved. They personalize it when something goes wrong. My coaching with them has been to help them take a step back and realize it's about the business, it's not about you.

GISC: In a way, the challenge of finding the right relational balance.

MR: Women are caught in a damned if you, damned if you don't position – you're either too soft or you're a bitch.

There was a woman I coached who was an attorney in an Executive VP role who was very direct with conflict and really rubbed people the wrong way. She would name

the elephant in the room. During a retreat I facilitated for them I observed how she carried the conflict for the group. It made her a lightning rod. She was tiny and wiry, very much a "type A" personality, yet she was described as flighty. A guy would not have been described that way.

GISC: Not relational enough?

MR: She unintentionally disrespected the hierarchy and was forced out. It was painful to watch and not surprising. The CEO could be hot-headed and had quite a temper, he would rip her up one side and down the other. I don't know how she took it. She would cower and be so sensitive. I worked with her a lot around finding her voice to say the way you are speaking to me is inappropriate. It took her two years to be able to say that. I think it would have taken a man about two months.

Marianne Roy, M.Ed., is principal of an Organization Effectiveness consulting firm located in Londonderry, NH, and has over 17 years experience as both an internal and external consultant. She will be teaching **Women in the Working World** at GISC on March 14 - 16.

## Thoughts on Gender & Coaching by Stuart Simon

We asked Stuart Simon to share some thoughts on the impact of gender in the coaching relationship. Here is his response.

There are any number of ways that gender can play into the coaching relationship, so this is not a full answer, but there are a couple of things that come to mind. If I am a man coaching another man, there are both dangers – potential costs – and benefits. There may be ways in which I understand how he operates in the world, which can generate some quick and genuine empathy. The downside of this is that I am prone to assumptions.

One drawback of being a man coaching a woman is that women work in a generally male-dominated world, and I may be perceived as one more hierarchical presence, and therefore mistrusted. The upside is that, if I can establish trust, I can be a kind of translator and give her insight into how men view things.

Stuart Simon, LICSW is a Gestalt therapist with over 30 years experience as a therapist, consultant, trainer and coach. He is a member of the core faculty of GISC's Cape Cod Training Program, and is teaching **Applying the Cape Cod Model to Coaching** on February 28 - March 4, 2008.

## A Paradigm Change

*cont. from Page 1*

process, and I warm to the thought that men and women can be equal despite their being different. Different and equal!

In the above-mentioned lecture, entitled "The Battle of the Sexes: Gender differences in Gestalt therapy", I emphasized that awareness of one's own sexuality contributes to effective therapeutic results. Moreover, differences in sexual preferences, the obviously different transference-counter-transference constellations possible between men and women as therapists and patients, and the different forms that abuse may take in therapeutic relationships were also described.

Research findings confirm my own experience as a therapist and supervisor that concrete sexual abuse in therapy is predominantly committed by male therapists, although recent statistics show an increase in female therapist/male patient and same-sex therapist-patient sex, both male and female. On the other hand, the sexual abuse of patients committed by female therapists tends to take on the form of sexualized, narcissistic abuse. Thus, the manifestation of sexual abuse varies according to one's gender. Most important is the open discussion of these issues in therapy training, for nothing prevents the abuse of patients as well as being able to acknowledge and identify with one's own sexuality.

Another thought that I have recently had relates to the common practice of thinking in terms of male "perpetrators" and female "victims" when we speak of violence between the sexes. Some thirty-odd years of professional practice, including the supervision of many women's counseling centers and women's shelters, have led me to the "heretical" realization that we are more often than not neglecting the complex couple's dynamics and the social context of violence, especially domestic violence, when we single out one "guilty" party. It is extremely important to treat each case of family violence in its uniqueness and to comprehend not only the physical injuries,

but also the narcissistic blows and denigrations, between the two persons comprising the couple. In short, let's focus on the context of violence and the relational aspects, for instrumental violence and narcissistic injury influence each other mutually.

From experience I know how flabbergasted women working in women's shelters are when they find out that precisely those women who fear their partners' brutality sneak out of the safe shelter at night for a secret rendez-vous with these men! And how incomprehensible it seems that a sizeable percentage of the women seeking

***Our approach to gender issues would do well to become more dialogical & less idealizing/demonizing***

refuge in women's shelters decide to return to their wife-beating husbands, despite viable alternatives for them and their children. Women working in these shelters are also shocked when they realize that the battered women, in turn, are hitting their children.

These enigmas and many more must give us food for thought that the separation of the gender world into female victims and male perpetrators does not do justice to the way relationships work! Our approach to gender issues would do well to become more dialogical and less idealizing/demonizing, thus empowering both parties to accept responsibility for their feelings and actions.

In keeping with the principles of the Gestalt approach, I find it important to focus on the uniqueness of individuals and couples, and to keep an open, dialogue-oriented mind when exploring their dynamics. I am fully aware that pathological jealousy and other disorders lead men to commit violent crimes against their wives. This "clinical" population must be dealt with appropriately and it would be misleading to project

this potential onto the general population. On the other hand, in dealing with many cases of couples therapy and battered women in shelters, we are confronted with very complex sado-masochistic relationships that are being fiercely upheld by both parties! If we remain in denial about this, then we are missing the chance to intervene adequately.

I have been preoccupied with the horrific cases of infanticide that have recently made headlines in the news. The murder of newborns and infants is nearly impossible to comprehend, but many people cannot seem to understand that not only men commit these murders, but that, statistically speaking, a mother is more likely to murder her own child. This opens the locks to a dam that holds back all our most dreadful nightmares: the unconditional love of a mother may be an illusion! Thanks to news reports on cases of infanticide, the possibility that the archaic bond between mother and child is based on a weak foundation is now open to debate.

Many will struggle with the credibility of these reports, because they are in disbelief and reluctant to face the shattering facts. How can a mother intentionally kill her own child? As with pathologically violent men who comprise a "clinical population", here we have pathology in women, and we would do well to distinguish between the "clinical" cases of violence committed by men and women, and the outbursts that get rough or turn violent within the relational context of a couple in the rest of the population.

For the moment, I think that these thoughts on gender are provocative enough!

*Nancy Amendt-Lyon, Dr. phil., M.A., Psychotherapist & Supervisor; trained in Gestalt therapy, Group psychoanalysis & Psycho-drama; editorial boards of Gestalttherapie, Gestalt Review & Studies in Gestalt Therapy: Dialogical Bridges; co-editor of "Creative License: The Art of Gestalt Therapy" (Springer); President of the OEVG (Austrian Assoc. for Gestalt Therapy; [www.oevg-gestalt.at](http://www.oevg-gestalt.at))*



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**Next Newsletter: Building Collaboration**