

Thinking differently about gender

An interview

with

Rachel Hare-Mustin

Rachel Hare-Mustin's contributions to thinking around issues of gender have been enormously influential within the fields of psychology and family therapy. In this interview, which took place at her home in Westport, Massachusetts, Rachel speaks about the history of the feminist critique within the therapy realm as well as some of the present challenges in relation to understanding gender.

DCP: One of the defining aspects of your work seems to be an incredible clarity about taking care with which questions you are asking. Can I ask you about the history of your care and thoughtfulness around questions?

RHM: I've always been aware that a bad answer can spoil a good question and I'm conscious of this now during interviews! I suppose I have always been a skeptic. I also believe what the philosopher John Dewey once observed, that intellectual

progress usually occurs through the sheer abandonment of questions. We do not solve them: We get over them. When the questions we have been concerned about are no longer important to us and we go on to consider other questions, these are often the moments of significant breakthroughs.

DCP: Did your experiences of travel and of other cultures also influence the sorts of questions you went on to ask about women's lives in North America?

RHM: I did travel considerably when my children were small, and lived in the Philippines and in Africa. I think one of the potential advantages of travel is that when you are living in another culture, even though you are there as a visitor and may not understand all that is around you, the experience lets you look back at your own society and ask questions about its ways of living. During part of the time I lived in the Philippines, for example, people in the USA were building bomb shelters. I found it hard to relate to this and used to ask myself, 'Who are those people? What is that country in which people are building bomb shelters in their back yards?' The lives of North Americans at that time seemed in such stark contrast to the daily life we were living in the Philippines. These sorts of experiences raise many questions about privilege, about culture and ways of living.

DCP: Hearing you talk about these cultural differences reminds me of something you wrote in one of your early papers. I recall that you wrote about how assumptions about women's lives can change so dramatically over time within the same culture. You were referring to the North American context, in fact to this land where we are now. I remember you writing about how the phrase 'a woman's place is in the home' would have made no sense to people in earlier times in this district when the saying would instead have been 'a woman's place is in the mill'.

RHM: Yes, there was a time here when a woman's place was in the mill. For young women who grew up on farms in this region the prospect of going to work in the mill was generally very freeing. It allowed women to get away from the drudgery of the farm, and to live with other young women in dormitories instead of being isolated. Gradually this shifted, however, as mill owners began to make contracts with families rather than individual women. Whole families began working the mills and the money then went to the father of the family. By contemporary standards, this arrangement

would probably be seen as exploitative of the children. But for a considerable time in this region, the prospect for young women of going off to work in the mills was very freeing. There had always been acceptable ways for young men to escape their families – they could run away to sea, they could join the army, they could join the carnival or circus. But for a woman to leave, and occasionally you might have heard of a woman taking the children and leaving, she had to subsequently represent herself as a widow to appear respectable. Women led restricted lives.

DCP: These themes seem to resonate with your writings in the 1970s and 80s in which you highlighted how the concept of the family had been, and continues to be, highly restrictive for many North American women. Let me quote you here: 'Have not the family and the institutions that support it been the primary cause of maintaining women in the stereotypic sex role?'. I'd love to hear your thoughts about the complexities that the construct of family has posed for women in this country and how this relates to therapists...

RHM: I think there are still many ways in which dominant constructions of family life and women's place within families are problematic in this country. And family therapy, by and large, is still significantly influenced by the dominant discourses of family life. We rarely examine the discourses that state that couples ought to avoid divorce, parents should keep the kids in school, mothers should put the family first, fathers should be leaders. To some extent, women in families are still expected to give precedence to pleasing men and meeting other family members' needs. The major responsibility for how children turn out is still overwhelmingly placed on the mother. And even though today's girls have much more freedom than women of previous generations, their lives are still significantly shaped by the idea that they are not supposed to be aggressive but especially sensitive to relationships. These ideas come not only from those around them but also from various theorists of what is called cultural feminism. But these ideas are problematic, I believe, because they quickly create a standard prescribing how women should be – that women should be sensitive to relationships, women should be supportive of others, women should put others first, women should be good listeners. All these ideas need to be disrupted. Personally, I often interrupt people, ever since I read some research reporting that dominant people interrupt subordinate people, and men interrupt women. I became determined to break from this stereotype! I've had varying degrees of success in these attempts!

Seriously though, these ideas about how women should be within families remain very powerful and influential, and they continue to inform ways of working in the field of family therapy. What's more, there are issues about gender relations in families that family therapists simply do not address. For example, I'm aware that most research shows that fathers, more than mothers, reinforce gender stereotypes. Fathers want their sons to be conventionally masculine, athletic and achieving, and they want their daughters to be 'little ladies'. I don't think family therapists or psychologists are particularly aware of the influence of fathers. Nor do they address it in any meaningful way.

DCP: When you speak of psychology and of family therapy, I'd be interested to hear about your relationship with both these fields and how you see them as having grappled with issues of gender and feminism. Could you speak a little about the history of your engagement with these fields?

RHM: I am a psychologist by profession and yet I have always struggled with the ways in which the field of psychology has traditionally been very individually oriented. Even though there are fields within psychology like community psychology or social psychology, what psychology is essentially able to measure is individual behaviour. Consequently, this has been its primary focus. In the 1970s I was deeply interested in looking at women's lives within families from a feminist perspective. Psychology at this time was engaging with feminist ideas but talking only about individual women. To illustrate this, I was involved in a project in the early 1970s on counselling women which led to one of the first publications on this topic. Every chapter in that book, except for my chapter about women and the family, focused on women as individuals in some setting or stage of development. This continual focus on the individual within psychology is what drew me towards family therapy, which at the time was talking about how people live within families and in a broader social context. Ironically though, despite this focus on the social context of people's lives, family therapy in the 1970s was ignoring feminism. It took the field of family therapy a long time to consider gender issues, stereotypes, hierarchies and questions of dominance and subordination within families. Indeed, some family therapists still seem to be oblivious to these issues.

DCP: Do you think there were particular ideas within the field of family therapy that contributed to making issues of gender less visible?

RHM: The ways in which some people engaged with systemic thinking made it very easy to talk about systems as if all parts of the system were somewhat interchangeable. Assumptions of equality were made, that everybody was interacting from positions of comparable power, that all parts of the system were equal. While structural family therapy recognised an age hierarchy in families, sex and gender roles, as described by the influential social theorist, Talcott Parsons, were seen to be equal, opposite and complementary. Parsons genuinely believed that if sex roles were disrupted this would weaken the structure and function of the family, and the family would fall apart. It was genuinely believed that what a family required was a father, who was the male leader, and a mother who was the social and emotional facilitator. If you blurred these roles it was thought that this would inevitably create conflict. These beliefs, as you can imagine, shaped certain approaches to therapy.

DCP: In 1975 you then came to write the paper "A Feminist Approach to Family Therapy?" which proved to be enormously influential. What were you doing at the time you wrote this article? Were you seeing women and families in therapy?

RHM: I was mostly seeing families. It was a time in family therapy where there was a strong belief in seeing family members all together. For instance, we would never see children individually, only in the context of the broader family. I was also very involved with professional ethics in psychology. A number of us were very concerned about how the typical pattern of male therapist and female patient imposed on a woman the same dominant discourses that may have caused her problems. We were also trying to get professional associations, like the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, to stipulate that for a therapist to have sex with a patient was unethical, and there should be sanctions against it.

DCP: As you were seeing families in the context of this relatively new and continually developing field of family therapy, what were some of the complexities that led you to write that paper?

RHM: I found it curious that family therapists were constantly talking about the social context of people's lives and yet were not considering issues of gender. I guess we were like fish struggling to discover water. Family therapists weren't thinking about the meanings of gender and power. Instead, many of us were thinking about how we could intervene in schools, and other agencies. When a family came in to see us we were interested in all the visible elements of the broader system that were impacting upon the family, such as schools, housing services, health care services etc. This is what we understood to be the social context of people's lives. If we developed a support system in the family's neighbourhood it was felt that this was taking care of the broader context of their lives. We couldn't see the influence of gender bias and its pervasiveness all around us.

One of the things I found most offensive in some family therapy in those times was the stereotyping of women that occurred in family sessions. Typically when a family came to therapy, it was the woman who had made the appointment, who had brought her reluctant husband and kids and who would describe what was occurring. In order to engage the husband, often the therapist would put the mother down or marginalise her in some way by labeling her a complainer. The explanations that would be offered to trainee therapists watching the sessions would involve an analysis that would locate the problems the family was dealing with as interactive. The sorts of inquiry that therapists were making would be orientated around the question, 'What is the woman doing to make this poor man function as he does? How is the mother's nagging affecting the husband?' Even if you believed in this interactive analysis, there was seldom any attempt to understand the woman's experiences and what might be influencing her to act in the ways that she was. The analysis was seldom two-way.

This wasn't therapy that I thought was worth doing and I would say so at the time. In fact I became known for saying things like: 'If we neglect the conditions of women and other marginalised groups our therapy may not be worth doing, and therapy that is not worth doing, is not worth doing well.' This didn't necessarily endear me to everybody, but basically I believed the family therapy field was very sexist. I didn't regularly go to family therapy conferences, in fact I knew very few people in the field. I felt that essentially what had been happening in the family therapy field was that feminist ideas were being ignored, so I took the plunge. That must be almost twenty-five years ago and the article on a feminist approach seems rather dated to me now.

DCP: It was certainly a very influential paper at the time and it wasn't as if your ideas stagnate! You went on to refine your thinking in relation to ways of understanding gender. And some of your more recent writings have carved out new ways of understanding gender and the question of gender difference. There's a most beautiful line in the introduction to the book 'Making a Difference' which you co-authored, in which you write: 'Gender is an invention of human societies, a feat of imagination and industry'. Could you speak about the possibilities that are opened by thinking in these ways?

RHM: I do think that gender is a creative invention and a quite remarkable accomplishment. I think it is quite a feat to be able to get people to believe that they're destined for a particular way of behaving depending upon reproductive differences that affect a small part of their lives. The industry operates in the vast number of ways by reinforcing gendered meanings in every sphere of existence. By labourious efforts we transform children into adults who epitomise stereotyped masculinity and femininity. We create the social arrangements that sustain differences in men's and women's behaviours, such as the demands of office or kitchen. We create the meaning of gender itself. Consider the postures that women and men adopt, the ways women and men are supposed to appear. For example, the ways and places in which women and men can walk vary. By and large it's still true that public space belongs to men and that women have to be very careful in public space. Women have to walk in certain ways and in certain places or else they will be constantly reminded of their subordination by men's verbal remarks and physical approaches. The ways in which stereotypes of gender are repeatedly reinforced, the ways in which we ourselves participate in reinforcing them means that over time they are taken for granted. It becomes difficult to move outside of these gender stereotypes and to see how we are part of them and contributing to them. To resist reproducing the industry that creates and maintains the construction of gendered language and gendered identities can be fatiguing. Feminist theory acknowledges all of this in its phrase "the personal is political". Our experiences have political meaning. They are not neutral. Gender values and politics infuse the ways in which we create our lives.

DCP: This seems to lead us on to your work in relation to questions of difference and the ways in which people construe gender differences? Why did you feel this was an important area to be writing and thinking about?

RHM: Well, as I was just saying, the ways in which we think about gender have significant consequences. Part of why I became interested in focusing on the question of difference was in response to what is often called cultural feminism. Since the early 1980s, various feminist writers have articulated what they considered to be certain characteristics of women's ways of being – for instance, it has been said that women have a certain “voice” with which they speak, significantly different from that of men, and that women are sensitive to relationships in ways that men are not.

And yet, there is considerable evidence that these categorisations do not hold up in all contexts. One example occurs when women enter corporate organisations. Studies have shown that women entering the corporate world assume that there are particular rules to follow, and that their success depends on figuring out what these rules are so they can operate by them. Men, in contrast, know that the corporate world depends on relationships. They spend considerable energy hanging out with their colleagues, stopping off after work for drinks, playing squash or golf with each other. The theories of cultural feminism have tended to regard differences between men and women as essential and universal differences. While it has been useful to give a positive meaning to feminine stereotypes, at the same time such theories are not very different from a restatement of Parsons's sex role prescriptions that I spoke about earlier. When gender is talked about in terms of gender differences, it is likely that the conversation will turn to either assertions of gender equality, as in “equal and opposite”, or assertions of gender difference as deficiency. The emphasis on gender differences obscures questions of hierarchy, dominance, power, and privilege.

Perhaps another reason that I was drawn to ask questions about theories of difference had to do with the ways in which psychology had focused so much energy on looking at individual differences. Western science and knowledge have been based on comparing and contrasting – ‘Let's show how this is different from that’. In scientific methodology there are two types of errors. The error of the first kind occurs when you assume your data show a significant difference when they do not. I call this Alpha Bias. The other error occurs when your data fail to demonstrate a significant difference when one does exist. I refer to this as Beta Bias.

Discussions about gender have seemed to be endless explorations about difference. Some argued that there were large differences between women and men, thus tending towards Alpha Bias. Others argued that there were minimal differences, thus tending towards Beta Bias. And yet the problem of either maximising or minimising the difference between the genders is that both positions accept the male as the standard of comparison. Woman is either different from or alike the male. The male remains in the privileged position that is used for the comparison. What's more, both within psychology and within feminism the ways in which difference has been the focus of inquiry seems to actually promote difference, further difference, and reify difference as the only way in which to think about gender.

I have been interested in looking at these explorations from a meta level and believe that if we want to reformulate meanings of gender then we must move beyond the question of difference.

DCP: When you speak of moving beyond difference, what do you think this could make possible?

RHM: I'm not exactly sure that I know where moving beyond these explorations of difference will actually take us. But there are ways to inquire about certain issues that have always been important to feminist thinking without evoking gender difference. One way of going beyond gender is to investigate whether particular attitudes and behaviours, rather than being intrinsically connected to maleness and femaleness, or even to masculinity and femininity, may instead be connected to men's and women's relative position in the power hierarchy. Or to their assigned roles in family life. For example, rather than studying women's speech, it might be illuminating to study the speech patterns of individuals in subordinate positions, and then take the findings of this research and use them in ways that will benefit women's lives (as well as men's lives) and the lives of those in subordinate positions. Or, we might inquire as to the circumstances that result in people developing the capacity we call "intuition", and what intuition makes possible and what it limits. With this kind of question, we might discover that the reasons that women have treasured and developed what is known as intuition have more to do with how access to certain types of knowledge is distributed within a culture than with gender, per se. Hopefully, through these sorts of inquiries we would broaden the terms of what are acceptable behaviours for women and for men.

These are examples of what is meant by 'going beyond gender' as the major category in our inquiries. However, there is a tension in whether to remain grounded in gender or go beyond it. I am aware that to completely 'de-gender' our questions could risk betraying our history. Certain ideas, perspectives and actions are historically associated with women (or men). Our inquiries need to be grounded in this history at the same time that they go beyond it. I am not interested in denying our past, just in learning to view it in a new way. I believe it is possible to go beyond gender difference in our inquiries and to utilise these inquiries in ways that benefit women's and men's lives. I believe this is a feminist pursuit.

I think there are other tensions that we also need to be aware of in this postmodern moment. For instance, how can we embrace what is made possible by postmodern inquiry without removing the intellectual grounds for feminist outrage over the treatment of women? Similarly, how can we retain the feminist emphasis on examining the material conditions of women's daily lives along with the postmodern focus on language and meaning?

DCP: Looking back now, if you were speaking to the younger generation of women making their way in the field of therapy and psychology, what do you think has been achieved by feminist pursuits within these fields over the last twenty-five years?

RHM: I think the feminist critique has had a very significant influence on the fields of family therapy and psychology. Looking back, there have been considerable changes in how people understand women's lives, as well as men's lives, and the issues of gender. There are numerous ongoing legacies of the feminist critique. One is making public what has been private, including the on-going creative work that is happening around issues of violence. Feminist inquiry has continually encouraged people to think outside of traditional boundaries, not only in relation to women's lives, but also in relation to the experiences of other marginalised groups. Finding ways to address issues of marginalisation in relation to race and culture and class seem crucial directions for the field to be considering.

There are many other issues too. One involves how we as feminists can contribute to the validation of alternative lifestyles, such as how we can make space for ways of being gendered that don't always equate with heterosexual pairings.

And another is an old issue that is still contentious here in North America – the issue of divorce. The question of how long people should stay in unhappy and destructive marriages is still attracting considerable interest in the therapy field. Various studies about the effects on children of their parents staying or leaving unhappy marriages are being discussed. There seems to be an increasing re-engagement in the family therapy field with theories of attachment, although I should add that there have been incisive critiques of the inadequacies of attachment theory by feminists and those with multi-cultural perspectives. There is always a need to challenge the popular culture that preserves the stereotypes of the past.

When you ask me to look back, I do believe the feminist critique and other social change efforts have achieved a great deal, but there is always much more to be done. When I was a child there were still lynchings in this country. The World War came and lifted this country out of the Depression. When my children were born after the war, I became involved in protests of nuclear testing. We had become aware of the effects of strontium 90 on mothers' milk and the dangerous health consequences of nuclear testing in this country and around the world. Then I was involved in the civil rights movement as this country tried to come to terms with its past. And then the Vietnam War protests where we saw how the mobilisation of many concerned people could change the direction of a country. The feminist movement of the last 35 years, which inspired much of the work I have described here, came to life in many ways out of these other social movements.

There will always be questions that we have to move beyond, and other inquiries that we have to begin. There will always be issues where we need the courage to challenge the status quo and the dominant discourses. There will always be many contexts in which, according to the Quaker maxim, we need to be 'speak truth to power'.