Couple construction and couple relationship in various Western femininity paradigms

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Abstract

There is international consensus that social representations change in time, at a social as well as individual level. The paper is based on a theory that I have previously developed and applied to different fields of individual and social life, stating that three paradigms can be identified in Occidental cultural history regarding masculinity and femininity stereotypes. The objective is to outline gender paradigm impact upon expectations in romance and couple construction. Analysis of social changes and tendencies, and of cultural products is employed. In psychotherapy, the client’s paradigm can be diagnosed, before directing self-development along the lines of emotional evolution.

Keywords: emotional development; gender roles; gender interaction; masculinity; femininity

1. Introduction

Two different paradigm shifts (therefore three paradigms) have taken place in Occidental cultural history regarding social scenarios and representations of masculinity and femininity (Archip, 2013). Each of these paradigms has put its mark on the general perspective upon romance and the construction of a couple. The objective of this paper is to outline those influences and to analyze the three different European conceptions regarding gender interaction in romantic relationships. Eric Berne, the founder of Transactional Analysis, mentioned <love> on the list of modalities to change one’s life script, but never explained his assertion. As Freud’s hypotheses of equilibrium between masculinity and femininity in any couple applies to communities as well – and thus explains away many recent social changes and tendencies –, so can cultural tendencies point to difficulties encountered by the individual, as well as offer directions to surmount them. As we speak of societies based on masculine or feminine values, we

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may speak of historical and ontological stages emphasizing either masculinity or femininity, following one another in a most natural continuity.

2. Impact upon romance and couple construction.

What use can the present theory be put to? It may coordinate perspectives of a couple, a family, a team or any kind of relationship. In psychotherapy, the client’s paradigm can be diagnosed, before directing self-development along the lines of emotional evolution.

1. In short, the first historical paradigm was the one idealizing manhood as mankind and masculinity as prototypically human. Given that women were conceived of as lesser human beings than men – not as intelligent, powerful, significant and competent in any way – it comes as no surprise that in this historical stage women were regarded as mere possessions, almost on a par with a house or a horse or a cattle herd (as a consequence, polygamy was also acceptable in many traditional societies). Therefore, any woman wanting to marry needed to bring value to her appointed husband by means of as large a dowry as possible besides her own feminine virtues (according to popular customs ranging from ancient Europe to present-day tribal Africa).

Both men and women were perceived as being endowed with mostly strengths, but – since strengths were masculine by definition – women were believed to have less and lesser strengths than men. Feminine virtues of this stage are, in regard to coupling, the capacity to procreate – unlike which the raising and education of the child after bearing it were not questionable, therefore they are not to be listed on the list of virtues –, reliability as a docile wife (which includes fidelity, essential in order to guarantee genetic offspring and considered to be a woman’s honor whose absence would be heavily punished in traditional societies such as the Arab ones), and, most importantly, a socially acceptable status that renders her appointable to marry her selected husband.

Even the two roles of husband and wife are, as their names indicate, very different; they are not two equal partners or companions or collaborators or even lovers, as they would be in the next historical stages.

Tradition and its customs functioned (more or less) perfectly so as to guarantee social order (which paralleled natural cosmic order in its perfection), therefore wedding rituals were very important to follow. A couple’s most prized virtues were its safety and security, as well as the enforcement of proper, traditional, natural discipline that guaranteed marital harmony.

A paradigmatic cultural product for the perspective upon the construction of a couple in the first paradigm is the musical film *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), about a tradition-driven society taken over by outside influences, where girls are not supposed to fall in love, but rather accept the husband appointed by their parents after careful consideration according to traditional customs like religious affiliation, social status and past relations between families. Two prototypical story lines about the rejection of the first paradigm by the more advanced second one are *Romeo and Juliet*, but also *Tristan and Iseult*.

2. In the second historical stage, continuous exploration of masculine strengths made it inevitable that masculine weaknesses would surface (Archip & Sava, 2013) – and hit hard in the face of culture, much as the overwhelmed men would hit hard in the face of anyone who happened to be around, in their desperate attempts to use force and other masculine skills in order to impose social order at larger and larger scales. By opposition, women are considered to be endowed with all the strengths that men find themselves lacking in, including fragile beauty as an exterior proof of inner harmony and purity – therefore a woman’s much appreciated function is also decorative in this stage (the most famous example at hand is empress Sisi or Elisabeth of Austria) – in contrast to the old belief that a man is supposed to be a mere bit more handsome than the devil.

Fitting such a violent, totalitarian period, infatuation is discovered as an uncontrollable, magical force that overwhemls one (magical in the sense that it does not obey rules and regulations, as Bizet’s opera *Carmen* points out): one cannot choose whom one falls in love with, or, in a popular phrase reused in the popular motion picture *Meet Joe Black*, lightning strikes, therefore eloping often happened. As infatuation conquered man, man attempted to conquer woman, with whom he would expect to reciprocally complete as two halves of the same initial whole (the Platonic myth of the Androgyne as a complete trust in cosmic order once social order began to show signs of shattering), therefore love at first sight and dying for love made sense, as well as declarations of love such as professing not being able to live without the other or the love of one’s life / one’s soul mate (in future
papers I intend to analyze wedding customs and beliefs about love, but also the betterment of the second and first paradigms by the more advanced third one in *Meet Joe Black*.

This is the time when romance is invented as a “social sentiment. It was created at the beginning of the last millennium by troubadours. It is also when Europe’s great cathedrals construction began” (Popescu, 2011). Men idealized women as fragile, pure perfections and held them in Platonic love or *amour courtois*, but reality would also strike often and that would be the end of the <honeymoon>.

By opposition, in first paradigm societies (such as African ones) being in love is considered to be next to being sick, since one cannot think or sleep or concentrate properly, has no appetite, makes mistakes while working or during other activities and generally acts as if in a modified state of consciousness – therefore one is left alone to <get well>.

Characteristic cultural products for the perspective upon romance of the second paradigm are Thomas Hardy’s literary work *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, where the two main characters love one another only to discover that they do not truly know each other, but had merely been infatuated with the projected image of their idealized love; and American vocal group Backstreet Boys’ popular song *Incomplete* with its main line “without you all I’m going to be is incomplete”. An iconic popular song about the rejection of the first paradigm by the second one is *Nobody’s wife* – while an illustrative rejection of the second paradigm from the [historically] more advanced third one is *I Don’t Need a Man* with its illustrative lyrics: “I don't need a ring around my finger / To make me feel complete” (Scherzinger, et al., 2005).

3. I believe that the most attractive feature of this paper is not the prophecy regarding the fourth paradigm, but the elucidations that ensue, such as the clear-cut analysis of the present-day third stage as naturally following the two previous paradigms and their respective characteristics. As this grows to happen, love stories are accepted to actually be difficult and confusing, while men and women feel encouraged to settle for a less-than-perfect love (as portrayed in the motion picture *As good as it gets*), as opposed to the happy-ever-after version of the previous stages.

Tiredness of a past order that failed to deliver, as well as of trying to enforce an artificial order that never materialized as planned, manifests itself as *ennui* (boredom) and lethargy, an overall feeling of absurdity and lack of meaning, followed by attempts to overcome them by present-oriented hedonism. The search for <Mr. Right> is replaced by the search for <Mr. Right-now> and, as anomic replaces former regulations, experimenting and experiencing bring about social scenarios such as <friends with benefits>, swinging, <work husbands and wives>, surrogate mothers or sperm-donor fathers and so on.

Social discord and revolutions include the feminist movement, which renders women independent, successful and capable of competing with men, professionally as well as within the couple (Smiley, 2010). Therefore, hunting of the first stage and dueling of the second stage (rivalry over a clear-cut objective) now turn into generalized social competition, while tyranny of stage two turns into the tyranny of the image: the publicity age emphasizes the overall importance of public appearance – an image is no longer admired for what it represents, but is admired in and for itself.

This third stage sees the rise of means of mass and global communication, given that the family or the couple are not *a priori* a part of the community – as in the first paradigm they used to be an element in the greater whole –; nor are they solitary and concerned with their own interests, as in the second paradigm; but they are now invited to join the community and also to accommodate the community.

If science was characteristic for the first rational paradigm and technology was representative for the second mechanical one, communication and language gather all interest nowadays (language philosophy, body language, sign language etc.). Without communication technology and its wide-spreading, common technology such as household appliances would not be allowed to exist, much as the latter would be meaningless and frustration-generating without the former – because the latter allows for more spare time to be spent with the former, namely with constructing common global social representations in a new, technologically advanced, socially redefined, far-from-natural context.

Given that feminine weaknesses need to be accepted in this stage before feminine strengths can be socially explored in the final stage (Archip, 2014), typical states such as envy and corruption generalize, leading to cheating,
but also to feminine possessiveness and belittlement en revanche for the first stage, in drolleries such as: “I have finally found the man who matches the dress of my life”.

On the other hand, equality of men and women determine marriage to be seen as a partnership: “Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction” (Saint-Exupery, Airman’s Odyssey), while choosing the right partner implies criteria such as “Whose phone calls or visits are never unwanted or too long?”, “Who would you most like to have in your life to ward off moments of loneliness?”, “When you travel...who would make your travels more enjoyable?” “When you're in pain...who would you most like to comfort you?” “When something wonderful happens in your life, a promotion at work, a successful refinancing...who do you want to share the news with?” (Sherman-Palladino, 2000–2007). The age for marriage socially validated by public opinion as adequate is, as a statistical tendency, lower than the adequate age for the birth of a first child, with more educated subjects indicating an older age than less educated ones. (Rada, & Tarcea, 2010, pp. 79-81)

Representative cultural products for the perspective upon relationships of the third paradigm are films like Ensemble, c'est tout (Hunting and Gathering / Zusammen ist man weniger allein) and Meet Joe Black, as well as television series such as Friends, Melrose Place, or Grey's Anatomy, the last of which offers the following explanation: “…what they do these days. Men and women live together without being […] men and women. It’s a neutral thing. […] Nothing sexual.” (Rhimes, 2005). We see here that the crash of rules and identities also applies to human sexuality, which is separated from the rest of human functions so as not to be the basis for identitary definitions and for the social division in men and women anymore.

Popular one-liners and witticisms also reflect cultural attitudes to femininity, masculinity and coupling, such as the regression of refusing to pass from the second to the third paradigm in the following last line: “To whom do I get to bring flowers if we get married and stay together all the time?”.

4. The conclusion of the fourth paradigm is something that still seems to us at best ideal and quasi-impossible, at worst downright contradictory: a permanent, yet absolutely free love. John Welwood speaks about “The transforming potential of a conscious relationship where both partners appreciate their relationship as a vehicle for cultivating their capacities and for awakening from the prison of their past, […] a conscious intimate relationship […]. By forcing us to see how we continually use unconscious patterns with those whom we love, this intimate relationship gives us the opportunity to wake up from those patterns. […] Love makes you want to expand and connect, it helps you see what keeps you contracted and isolated” (Welwood, 2006, pp. 272-277). It is the possibility of personal and spiritual growth through love, as Berne (1972) had anticipated.

3. Elucidations

Coupling, which belongs to the first paradigm, as well as lifelong romances, of the second paradigm, are mannish things – coupling, because exclusivity is a masculine type of coping with life, which in this case grants genetic offspring; lifelong romances, because long time is, like huge space, mannish and has to do with putting one’s mark on something, while the idea of romance implies conquering someone and getting access to the unknown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine strengths</th>
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<th>Feminine weaknesses</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coupling: forming a unity</td>
<td>Lifelong romances: absolutism</td>
<td>Open relationships: pluralism</td>
<td>Relations ~ Martin Buber’s I and you: integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewives, maternity, the &quot;oven&quot;</td>
<td>The Virgin ideal, the angel woman (fairy)</td>
<td>The sexual goddess</td>
<td>Woman as a person, as a human being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs: tradition is accepted and followed</td>
<td>Conveniences: tradition is imposed</td>
<td>Melancholy: traditionalism</td>
<td>Tradition is recognized as tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lust</td>
<td>Falling in love / infatuation</td>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming a couple is about obeying, taking responsibility and following the rules</td>
<td>Forming a couple is about falling in love and wanting to become one</td>
<td>Forming a couple is about collaborating</td>
<td>Forming a couple is about expanding one’s consciousness</td>
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<td>Love’s childhood [coupling by rules and canons, obeying the authority]</td>
<td>Love’s adolescence [declaring one’s love “love lasts for three years”]</td>
<td>Love’s maturity [the transition from 2-3 = a transition from infatuation to attachment]</td>
<td>Love’s wisdom [maybe Ecclesiastes: &quot;Love is long-suffering, etc.&quot;]</td>
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A woman that is both beautiful and intelligent seems to be a contradicatio ex qui terminorum (contradiction in terms or impossibility) not by nature, but by concept: beauty is an essential characteristic of women in the second paradigm, while intelligence is in the third.

Hunting – in the woods or in the sexual field – is very different in the present stage from what it used to be back in the first or second stages: it used to be a means to provide for one’s existence, and then a means to prove one’s strengths, whereas now it is a sport or a distraction.

Attachment belongs to the third stage because it always forms between two partners, as director Van Sant (1997) illustrates in the flatulent dead-wife scene of Good Will Hunting. Love stories are histories of moments and of details regarding mutually accepted imperfections (Liiceanu, 2002). In contrast, lust belongs to the first stage because the couple’s union is based on natural energies that can bind and consolidate – erotic energy of the attraction between the sexes, which also gives the motivation to strengthen the couple into what today we call attachment, but cannot be properly called by this name, because the husband and the wife have not gone through the infatuation stage and hence have not grown out of it; it is not an attachment to the person, but to the relationship: “she is the mother of my children”, “we have been married for 20 years” etc. Those married couples could live together for decades, without knowing each other deeply, or without mutually seeing their naked bodies – or their thoughts, or their most important feelings…

If this is the case, then how come cheating appears as paradigmatic for the third stage? Because cheating is about attachment being cheated by lust: most cheaters do not want their loved ones to know, do not plan to leave their partner – that is why they cheat instead of leaving the partner – and, when caught, they will first attempt to make up for their admitted <mistake> and to remain together – it is as if lust has not been able to conciliate with attachment, yet. Detailed communication, mutual understanding, and ongoing collaboration end up killing much of lust – therefore cheating occurs, as a means by which lust is satisfied without breaking the couple.

Third stage’s desire, as opposed to first stage’s lust, defines attractiveness as passive-aggressive (ab)use of sexual power. It is not natural, nor authentic, but very artificially constructed, plastic-made and over-bid, as many of the items it uses. But what is not authentic in it? In an era of the image, it is a desire of the image more than of the object, of social power and social relations rather than of the person and his or her body and being.

4. Conclusion

By the impact they have had upon culture as a whole as well as everyday life of men and women, the four paradigms can be alternatively defined as meaning systems, modes of expression or lifestyles.

References


