



The Right Spoon: Sexual Grounding Therapy Finds Paradise in Reality

by Nick Duffell

Talking about sex

Why should it be so hard to talk meaningfully about sex and gender - even amongst therapists? It is a big puzzle. Is it because the sex act is the last bastion of privacy, the most powerful stimulator and cause of excitement that we know, one which can even bring a president of the most powerful country on earth to his knees? Or is it because it is the primal act, the fount of our very existence, unknowable because it is linked to the mystery of life itself? And why is gender - an everyday reality: we are all men and women - still such a controversial subject?

My supposition is that the chief problem in getting to grips with sex and gender is how we *think* about these subjects. I like to remember the storyteller Michael Meade's warning that talking about gender inevitably evokes trouble: you invariably step on someone's hallowed ground. Gender is about difference, and difference is never easy. You cannot separate gender from the most intrinsic constituents of all life forms, nor from politics, education or society. You cannot have one-size-fits-all approach, and you cannot sidestep the nature-nurture dilemma.

While it is crucial to deconstruct the social inheritance of gender identities—what we in the London-based Centre for Gender Psychology call “unpacking our Image-makers”—it is equally vital to avoid the currently popular traps either of making sex and gender into consumer items of choice or falling into a mainstream/margin dialectic from which there is no resolution. Post-modernism has been crucial in unpacking the power dynamics but it easily becomes a dead-end street, or what contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber calls a ‘flatland’; for excessive relativism offers no values



serious novelists and journalists than almost anything you can find on the psychology shelves. For example, Erica Jong's runaway bestseller, *Fear of Flying* (1973) recounts precisely how a woman's inability to resolve her mother complex affects her sexuality and relationships,

and Nancy Friday's excellent research (1973,1977) speaks volumes about a daughter's identity inheritance and how mothers can bodily support their children as sexual beings.

Unmentionable Organs

Actually, thinking about sex and gender is not so difficult, I propose, if we can 're-member' our body's reality. If we really want to be empowered and authentic we need to *feel* our existence from an embodied starting place. In Western society, our thinking has been so usurped by Cartesian/Victorian dissociation that feeling has

become estranged from thinking, since for feeling we need the body. Our inheritance is the tendency to overvalue mental activity, objectifying our bodies into images while marginalizing our instinctual body reality. Sex and gender, however, arise from the body, and have the function of creating other bodies through activity of different genitals, which we don't really want to acknowledge.

Genitals are unique as bodily organs in how we treat them. In most spheres of life they are *unmentionable*, and while the genitals are still split off, taboo and thereby over-energised, it is hard to be related to as a person with a whole-body reality. We all know that what's repressed ends up running the show, that's how the whole therapeutic adventure started. The genitals remain taboo; and where something is taboo it means, paradoxically, that its function becomes excessively stimulating, exciting, dangerous even.

and thereby no guidance, neither for the young, nor for their teachers.

And Talking About Sex?

Well, one might argue that our society never stops talking about sex, that we are obsessed with it, that sexual imagery dominates our visual space, that children have never been so exposed to sex as they are now. While this may be true, meaningful and informed dialogue about sex is rare: church leaders and legislators founder on the rocky complications of sexual plasticity. Even therapists are confused: good education in sexuality, particularly on most humanistic training courses, has all but disappeared. Gender and sexuality easily get relegated to diversity issues requiring a sociological approach. I think our clients and our children get dropped by this. Many therapists refer clients on when sexual problems are presented, and yet Sexology remains like a dinosaur resting safely in the medical model, split off from the everyday emotional reality that it actually is in every family in the land.

Unhappily, there is very little in print of a didactic nature that makes grounded sense about sexuality. I suggest that you may be in better hands with some



The result is that there is chronic over-excitement about sex and genitals in our world. You only have to see what the internet reveals to those eager to see genitals in vivid video, or consider the ratings of the novel *50 Shades of Gray* to have living proof of this.

It is like a wildfire that needs to be contained, a live current that needs to be earthed; otherwise it leads inexorably towards a heartless void. When I look at the world around me I see our children burning up in this fire, particularly in Britain, which according to UNICEF (2007) has the least happy youngsters and the highest incidents of unwanted teenage pregnancy, to say nothing of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the developed world. I am not surprised when I look at British culture: I see parental approaches to their adolescent offspring which are very hesitant ; people seem to think that guiding them sexually is either about having a ‘big talk’ or leaving

them well alone. Sex education in schools, in Britain at least, is even worse: it is all about fear and disease. Teenagers don’t know what is right but they do know what is wrong; they recognise such approaches as bogus and do not feel guided, do not feel held. I suspect it will prove a legacy very hard to emerge from, unless therapists take the lead in thinking clearly about sexuality and how to help *grounding* it.

Sexual Mirroring

In the early days of our work with couples and sexuality, my wife, Helena Løvendal-Duffell, and I, influenced by archetypal theorists, also tried to avoid the unmentionable genitals, focusing on gender as a social issue and sex as a psychological one. But it didn’t work. To meet our clients, we had to get more real and more involved bodily. A major turning point for us was finding someone who thought clearly about sex and gender and included genitals in the therapeutic frame. For this we

had to go to Holland to meet Willem Poppeliers, a Dutch developmental psychologist and body-psychotherapist whose somatic work derives from Willem Reich through Bioenergetics, but whose feeling for the body is unique, as is his keen observation of animal behaviour.

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Willem Poppeliers



Poppeliers' thinking about sexuality made bodily sense and his somatic exercises were designed to promote what he calls "Cellular learning." His *Sexual Grounding Therapy* (SGT) is built around the understanding that our reproductive potential is our prime nature, that sexuality is at the heart of human existence, the ground of our being. Sexuality cannot be understood without a developmental context nor disconnected from its reproductive function. He sees the human body as a field with energetic centres in the brain, the heart and the genitals; living involves both expressing and regulating the energetic flow between centres, intra- and inter-personally, with the heart as the chief mediator.

But what struck me, as an Englishman, as most unique and significant about Poppeliers' work is how he centres his theories around a profound understanding of children's needs. Critical to his vision is his claim that children continue to need mirroring *beyond* infancy. In Britain, Attachment Therapy is currently undergoing a welcome renaissance, but later developmental needs, especially those of puberty, are not well understood, as I know very well from my other speciality: 25 years pioneering therapy with adults who were sent away to boarding schools as children.

Poppeliers has a clear and precise theoretical framework for the ongoing needs of human beings in sexuality. He stresses children need to be recognised, regulated and responded to, so that their own sexual energy and excitement can become integrated and grounded as a source of

fulfilment rather than of disturbance over their entire developmental lifespan. As they develop, children's needs change, and at puberty their development into sexual beings is so important and its understanding so lacking in our post-industrial civilisation that we tend to abandon our young people. Certainly the British case (confirmed by the *UNICEF* report) would seem to bear this out.

Poppeliers' emphasis on the mirroring needs of the four year-old and the child in puberty is, I think, key. According to Theo Royers, who is researching the academic connections between Poppeliers' new body-psychotherapy and classical positions, *mirroring* is exactly the function that the parent who knows how to appropriately respond to her child sexually

employs:

Stern suggests that by mirroring the parent is helping to create something within the child that was only dimly or partially there until his/her reflecting acted somehow to solidify its existence (1985).

In SGT the parental functions in grounding sexuality are identical, but vary at different ages. At the earlier developmental age, 3-5, sometimes called *the Oedipal Period*, children become occupied with being like or unlike Mom or Dad, exploring their gender identity and their genitals, playing games of Mommies and Daddies and doctors and nurses. They have an inbuilt need to be seen in their differences as growing persons with genitals and the parent's response to them is crucial. Frequently, such needs are met with parental shaming. Naming



the preoccupation with genitals as 'dirty' may be a precise repetition of the parents' own experience; it is a sure way of installing life-long insecurity in the child. Poppeliers sees the obstruction or corruption of original innocence and curiosity accounting for the West's obsession and over-excitement with witnessing genitals and sex acts. Here is Willem in his unique style, in his own words:

For me, losing natural sexuality has been the biggest cause of alienation and unhappiness in our world. In Sexual Grounding Therapy, we always put the child at the centre and in its developmental frame. If you look to the outside world, when a child tries to express its sexual nature, people start to look from their own adult perspective and project their thoughts about sexual intercourse. These thoughts are full of their own disappointedness about not being a shame-free sexual person. And most sexual acting-out comes from not having been treated as a whole person right from the beginning with genitals and sexuality, born from intercourse.

The prime unmet need in the West is for a healthy *Sexual* or *Genital Mirroring*, as Poppeliers calls it, so that children can be guided to naturally evolve into whole sexual beings. The easiest mistake for parents to make is to confuse an adult perspective of sexuality with, or project it onto, a child's context. As adults we need to bear this skillfully in mind, as we must as therapists, when we regress a client. Willem explains:



When the child has to be fed, the mother takes a very small spoon. But when it comes to the genital stage, the mother does not have a small spoon; she has an adult spoon. Why is that possible? Where is the right spoon? So in Sexual Grounding we like to see the child exactly in the stage where it is, and the parents from the outside world have to relate to that stage. Then it's safe and it's normal; genitals are normal, like the mouth, eyes and anus. We are very strict on that because the child has to be safe and to be approached in the stage that it is. To help people return to that safety, that wholeness, we emphasise professional work on the whole body, including genitals, not for enhancing sexual relating for pleasure and ecstasy, but to bring about full genital functioning throughout life, for

becoming whole and mature and fulfilled.

The affective channels along which sexuality flows in the *Revelation Stage* belong to what SGT calls *Relationship Functions*. These include: *Innocence*, as sexuality arises in the polymorphous context of early childhood; *Curiosity*, about difference and the origins of life, which means the reality of the genitals; *Excitement* as the sexual energy begins to flow and express itself. *Regulation* is next, for sexuality needs to be put into context of the relational status between people rather than exploited or repressed. An example would be that a father sees an adolescent daughter as needing his appropriate sexual support and not to be involved in sexual acts with him or avoided.

The Relationship Functions are spontaneous in their arising but require guidance and support for developmental health. This involves the presence of loving and shame-healed adults in their lives, who are able to “put the child in the centre of the frame.” Originally these should be parents, but educators and therapists can “do the job,” as Willem says, including repair work, if they have informed and healed themselves.

Sexual Grounding Therapy in Action

Willem is optimistic that original innocence can be healed and regained through the application of SGT. He is currently exploring scientific and health-care approaches, including a Dutch University with a view to conducting a MRI scanner control programme to monitor results as part of research on Hypersexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) on women.

Clinically, SGT is currently practised as a body-oriented group therapy only. For the sake of safety, there is rigorous application screening, mostly drawing from the therapeutic community, but also parents and teachers. However, it remains extremely controversial since Willem attempts to re-establish the genitals as part of the knowable body, and that jars for many in the therapy world, too. And yet, this is not so disconnected from new approaches to Attachment and Mentalization therapies. Willem suggests:

According to Fonagy, sexual feelings and fantasies mostly are not recognized and mirrored by

the parents. It looks like, out of the perspective of SGT, that adult integration of the genital existence experience in the whole body-system as a total mental image of ourselves did not take place. We now are busy to find possibilities of doing scientific research on this.

Although it is a cutting-edge discipline, both therapeutically and socially, it is practised in Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland, Hungary, Ukraine, and Mexico, where it was known as ‘Inner Condom’. Poppeliers explains this as “an internal attitude change to your own sexual feelings and actions. If we continue to leave relationship out of sexuality, then we don’t protect ourselves, or our children.” However, in the UK and the US, where much more tentative attitudes to sexuality prevail, it is still not well known. Because participants sometimes work without clothes and involve the entire body, Willem has remained shy of publicity, in order to serve discretion and psychological integrity, as he explains:

It is hard to transmit to people that you can work on the body, on the whole body in psychotherapy. In medical healthcare, they can. If you have a disease on your genitals, they don’t say its taboo. I think it’s coming, but it is very slow. It has to be protected; it has to be open, direct, not with a secret agenda. It has to be open and natural in the frame of the developmental stages. And it has to be professional. And there have to be norms, and that’s why Sexual Grounding therapists have to agree to very precise ethical guidelines. The norms for me are

connected with the development stages, the most natural way, and we know that already. When we can really reflect our own sexual development we can feel on the body level what was wrong and what was right. So if we put this whole genital relationship in a fundamental, natural way, there comes laws or rules, natural rules. And it is far more easy for society to transform these rules into more cultivated ones, if based on nature.

Instead, Willem has focused his efforts on training a small group of therapists and establishing a foundation which ensures the highest ethical standards amongst accredited practitioners. In fact, much of what he teaches is adaptable to ‘regular’ therapy: Helena and I, for example, have conducted hundreds of clinical ‘takes’ of sexual ‘re-parenting’ which have been widely applicable and extremely effective. This can involve something as simple as having a parent figure support a participant in the role of an adolescent; perhaps noticing and appropriately approving of their growing sexuality; perhaps standing by his/her role-spouse to show that this is where the parent’s sexuality is anchored, thereby freeing the child to grow up and become a sexual being supported by and seen in their development by parents who believe in sexuality rooted in relationship.

In energetic terms, the embodiment of such a belief in sexuality rooted in relationship can be experienced as a lack of dis-connect and sometimes as a ‘streaming’ (in Reichian terms) between the energetic centres of

the brain, the heart, and the genitals. The heart's involvement in sexuality in SGT is key: as the source of deep affect, of values and meaning, as well as the regulator of the body's own autonomic nervous system, the heart's central position in sexual identity and expression goes beyond the over-stimulation of the consumer culture and changes everything. Here is one brief example of the kind of SGT group work situation that promotes such a 're-remembering', 're-connecting' outcome involving touch and grounding.

After a warm-up, participants work in pairs: worker and helper. The one who wants to work on reconnecting lies down on a mattress and imagines which parent he would need most at this moment. The helper 'becomes' this one. After deep relaxation, the helper/ parent places her hands on the diaphragm of the worker. When the worker is ready, he begins to move the helper's hands towards his heart and his genitals for support. The helper maintains eye contact, relaxed deep breathing and sensitivity to her own internal connectedness as a loving, sexual parent. The worker reflects on all he

wants to ask his 'parent' about the connection between his heart and his genitals and asks her to speak those things he is longing to hear. The helper gently makes these statements, exactly the way the worker always wanted to hear, and the worker allows them to affectively pervade and influence his body system. When the worker is ready, he begins to move the helper's hands away from his heart and his genitals and senses his own internal connectedness and that of the relationship. The exercise will take at least half an hour. The pair thank each other, reflect, make notes and share, then change roles.

Some Inevitable Objections

Some who hear about SGT suggest that it puts too much emphasis on good parenting, whereas traditionally therapy, following 'reality,' has focussed on parental lacks. But, as he nears the age of seventy, Willem is increasingly sure of the value of the deep sources of our sexual information and the gift from our parents.

In Sexual Grounding Therapy the most important direction for

participants is recognising Father and Mother as sexual creatures, as sexual sources. If you can really realise - with your whole body - that father and mother are the source of sexuality for you, and that their genitals play a very important role via intercourse, and the whole emotional range around it, things become different. Then you look to your neighbour and you see that you both come from such intercourse. It is not easy, and we prefer not to do it—to look at someone and realise that this person comes from intercourse. I think it is like seeing through the eyes of Hieronymus Bosch! If we do it, mostly we start to laugh.

But here are our roots, and here is where the distortion comes. Our cells know it, but the cortex, influenced by the outside, denies it, and when you do that your heart goes out. Your heart jumps in again when you start to realise it again and say to yourself, "Wait a minute I have to really look to my life." So then you take all these sources, your cortex, your heart and your genitals. So recognising father and mother as sexual creatures is a very fundamental thing.

Some criticise SGT for its apparent idealism and essentialism, to suggest that for a child to be grounded throughout the Oedipal period and puberty is like "finding paradise in reality." Here is Willem's pragmatic reply:

This is not idealistic, it is reality. It is realistic. It comes from life. If you find paradise in reality, you stop your idealism, because it has no function anymore.



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