

## Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in the Hypermodern Era: the Role of Delegation and Self-affirmation in Subjectivisation

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**ABSTRACT.** – When we talk about sexual identities, therapists usually have in mind a set of theories that inevitably combine the unspoken heterosexist assumptions of our western culture. This article aims to highlight how these automatic assumptions permeate some of the established constructs that have long been considered the fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory, leaving contemporary psychoanalysts in Italy with no key to a critical interpretation of sexual identities. Taking Michele Minolli's Ego-subject theory, we propose, as a possible starting point, to shift our attention away from the historical to go to the meta-theoretical level, taking care not to slide into the antithetical but equally ideological positions which characterize the current debate.

**Keywords:** Gender; gender identity; sexual identity; LGBTQ; Ego-subject theory; hyper-modernism.

### Sexual Identity within the parameters of contemporary epistemology

When we meet heterosexual men and women in clinical practice, it is highly likely that before long we ask ourselves why they chose *that* partner, with those specific characteristics, and take for granted that the expression of their femininity or masculinity falls within the conventional *range*. As for homosexual or bisexual men and women, the question that arises in the mind of the majority of therapists (perhaps we could say of all) is the *reason* for that sexual orientation, triggering a whole set of possible explanations, suppositions, and attempts, albeit unconscious, to make connections between the patient's history and their being homosexual/bisexual.

We never question heterosexuality simply because it is thought of as the

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expected outcome for the majority. *This is as it should be*. If it is true that human beings have been discussing love for millennia, over the last century different manifestations of sexual identities<sup>1</sup> have gradually become increasingly important both inside and outside the academic debate even in the face of the enormous social changes, requiring us to rethink and reconstruct our assumptions and our representations.

In this article we thematise these elements within a psychoanalytic framework aware that every time the experiential world is abstracted into categories, a partially arbitrary operation is carried out which fails to take account of the uniqueness of the human subject. The latter must instead be considered in its complexity and singularity, especially now that science is closely questioning the historical relationship of the generality of the laws of nature with the particularity of individual events. In fact, Ceruti writes: “evolutionary processes always depend on an unsolvable interaction between general mechanisms that operate as constraints – the “laws” - and variety, individuality, and the spatio-temporal singularity of events” (1986, p.17). We will use *the meta theoretical interpretation of Ego-subject theory* (Minolli, 2009; Minolli & Coin, 2006; 2007; Minolli, 2015) to consider the development of contemporary humans with respect to the issues dealt with.

As always there is a limit to using categories – put simply, the thing categorised does not exist in reality, just as in reality *homosexuals*, or *heterosexuals* or *men* or *women* do not exist - our whole way of seeing the world is subject to this limit, which, in language and in the representation of reality, tends towards dichotomy and contrast (Rorty, 1995). The examples are endless: above-below, black-white, light-dark, concave-convex, sun-moon. In the twilight hours, for example, when the sun and the moon are visible at one and the same time, you have a sense of wonder. You do not expect elements, which are thought to be mutually exclusive, to coexist, even for a short time. Similarly, masculine and feminine seem to define themselves in continuous opposition, *i.e.*, what is masculine is not feminine, and what is feminine is not masculine, and when these concepts overlap they often present serious definitory challenges with sometimes linguistically bizarre solutions.<sup>2</sup> However, as far as the specific concepts of gender and sexual orien-

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<sup>1</sup>We refer to five levels of sexual identity: sex assigned at birth, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and sexual orientation identity (for a detailed study, see P. Rigliano, *Sguardi sul genere*, pp. 126).

<sup>2</sup>New terms are created to define concepts that apparently cannot exist together. For example: *metrosexual*: “a linguistic cross between the words *metro* (*politano*) and (*hetero*) *sexual* - which indicates heterosexual men generally coming from metropolitan areas (*metro*) and characterised by behaviors similar to those stereotypically feminine, being heavy users of cosmetics, keep fit enthusiasts, practitioners of depilation and other aesthetic treatments”. Or, another example, the term *mammo*: “Father who performs the duties traditionally assigned to mum involving young children and family management”. (from the Hoepfi

tation are concerned, this is in fact only a *cosmetic* dichotomy since to us these opposites are mutually co-defined and in particular their co-definition revolves around the principle of hierarchy of social power.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, willingly or unwillingly, we place ourselves in a historical phase in which gender and sexual orientation represent concepts to which we cannot fail to resort, although like many other conceptual macro-categories they have been widely revisited in the hypermodern era (Lipovetsky, 2019).<sup>4</sup> The impact of postmodernist deconstruction has led to a revolutionary change in the questions asked. The basic question “What is gender?” has become “Does gender exist?” (Dimen, 2003). We no longer ask “How does gender work?” but “How is gender worked?” (Goldner, 2003), but we still move within conceptual coordinates which do not allow us to ignore the series of automatic and implicit interpretations of gender and orientation which inform our reading of the world and its phenomena. The question “What is gender?” belonged to modernity, whereas “Does gender exist?” belongs to post-modernity. The opportunity to broaden the horizon of possibility of subjects to be what they are initially sparked a crisis of conventional roles and definitions, and subsequently to see that male and female “emerge as internally differentiated, discontinuous, culturally determined and contingent in their historical dimension. The concept of gender, which came to prominence through the juxtaposition of masculinity and femininity, has undergone a transformation and now includes a wide range of possibilities” (Dimen, 2003).

The abbreviation LGBT+<sup>5</sup> is a fitting representation, albeit partial and pro-

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dictionary of the Italian language) so that apparently the sole term *dad* is in contrast with the dominant culture - hopefully in the future this term will also fall into decline.

<sup>3</sup>In Wren’s words (2014): “One term lends intelligibility to the other with each taking on meaning in a context of power inequalities. For example, homosexuality is not *opposed* to heterosexuality, but internal to it and defining of it (...). Femininity is not opposed to masculinity, nor black to white; they are pairs in a hierarchical relation and the valued member of the pair characterises itself primarily by denying the unwanted characteristics of the other” (p. 3).

<sup>4</sup>The transition that led to the possibility of conceiving sexual identities along a non-dichotomous continuum has taken place (in this regard, it should be noted that the most representative term is that, unfortunately inflated, of fluidity).

<sup>5</sup>LGBT + is composed of the initials of L for Lesbian, G for Gay, B for Bisexual and T for Transsexual / Transgender - to which the *plus* is added conventionally to indicate the many other sexual identities that require a collocation and definitive consistency but which, for simple brevity and functionality of the abbreviation, are not always explicit (see below).

Some more specific definitions: *Transsexuals* experience a condition of incongruity between assigned sex and experienced gender and, therefore, can adopt, in different shapes and sizes, a series of medical-surgical adjustments to conform to the elective gender; *Transgender* people, in the face of a similar incongruity, value more a non-dichotomous and binary view of the genres, therefore an experience of their own fluid genre that leads them to not consider

visional, of the outcome of the postmodernist deconstruction. This linguistic device aims to offer definitive space to everything that is non-heterosexual and cisgender<sup>6</sup> and which had been hitherto been relegated to a destiny of non-definition (or denial), or stigmatisation (initially moral and religious; subsequently pathological from a medical/psychiatric standpoint). Thus, if on the one hand the flourishing of specific acronyms and definitions risks saturating our minds and ideologically weighs down the debate on sexual identities,<sup>7</sup> on the other hand, it is understandable in the light of the need for the world to recognise other identities as equal and non-pathological existential possibilities. In the ongoing debate about gender issues, this abbreviation and other lesser-known ones<sup>8</sup> represent a historical necessity for self-affirmation, as part of the process of leaving a position in which one's existence and desires are devolved to the approval of the other (social).

Finding a *normal* collocation for non-heterosexual and cisgender identities has been a challenge. The problem is in the intrinsic fracturing and unhinging of *something* which underlies entrenched beliefs on what it is natural for a man or for a woman to be; on the naturalness of the fact of physical complementarity coinciding with psychic complementarity and, finally, on the heterosexual family as the foundation of the structure of western society (Foucault, 1976).

The post-modern deconstructive driving force leaves the way open to a *new form* of dialogue on the themes of sexuality and gender, and by *new* we mean a *non-normative but critically oriented way*, to guide people's reflection on this nuclear aspect of their identity<sup>9</sup> as subjects and social subjects. In the building up and the breaking down process, at various points we find

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necessary forms of medical-surgical adaptation. *Asexual* people hold the view that human beings may not necessarily experience sexual / erotic attraction for other people. The term *intersex*, however, identifies a rather wide range of physiological conditions (genetic and non-genetic) that can occur in some people and which make it impossible at birth to make a clear M / F distinction. Finally, the term *Queer* in the Anglo-Saxon world is the generic adjective, initially derogatory, of "strange, eccentric" which identified people who, in various ways, differed from heterosexual cisgender binarism.

<sup>6</sup>The term *cisgender* refers to people whose gender identity is perceived as appropriate and attuned to anatomical sex, and therefore ideally placed at the opposite extreme of *transgender*.

<sup>7</sup>However, like any categorisation imposed through language, it re-proposes the limits and constraints from which it tries to escape, but, as we know, humans struggle to take seriously what is not categorised.

<sup>8</sup>Other acronyms have been proposed using letters corresponding to other identities. Here are some examples. Q for *Questioning* or the P for *Pansexuals* or the GNC microacronym for *Gender Non-Conforming*.

<sup>9</sup>The debate is still open on what is the sense of speaking about identity "in a world where borders are gradually fading, where science has clearly shown that there is no possibility of objective knowledge, but that the observer is always intrinsically implicated with

ourselves holding tiles and fragments. Today, women and men are having problems incorporating many of these *bricks*, even though the latter belong to them. However, in Dimen's words (2003) "the denial of multiplicity, not multiplicity in itself, is the problem. We are always at odds when it comes to gender, even when there is an "I" who feels the tension and has to decide what to do with it. For example, burdened as I am with the psycho-cultural weight of being a woman in the conventional sense, I feel lost and not normal because I don't conform to the usual, positive model of femininity, though it's unlikely I would be able to adhere to it".

The contemporary bid, which is confusing and tiring but potentially rewarding, involves, after the *pars destruens*, the re-assembling of the concepts of gender, this time more broadly, and not reducing them back again (Harris & Lewis, 2011).

However, this reasoned possibility stands against a background of distress that is triggered whenever we are deprived of part of our basic configuration. Looking past the specifics of gender issues we see "subjects deprived of a well-marked pathway, potentially alone in finding a definition of themselves, of finding roots in a solitary experience" (Coin, 2019). The distress of evoked, and in some contexts, concretely explicit fragmentation,<sup>10</sup> from an observation of feminist claims and LGBT movements, is in ever greater ferment and motion, and as a consequence, represents an opportunity for the subject to start with himself.

This distress is hardly surprising and is clearly legible in the dialectic between *delegation* and *self-affirmation* as a modality that has always characterised the evolution of the subject (Minolli, 2015). Minolli writes: "Delegating to society and culture characterises the way in which the Subject has pursued and pursues his own existence and his own flux. Social, religious, cultural or political authority are indispensable for self-realisation, as a way to assert one's existence or as necessary to acquire a sense of self. (...) This self-affirmation, seen as a tendency to perceive only oneself and to impose one's own way of being on others, cannot be a qualitative affirmation as it is based on the absolutization of the perception of one's existence, which, however, always hooks up to delegation" (p.17).

The drive towards affirmation of other sexual identities can generate distress and trigger extreme fear of perdition, loss, disintegration and dehumanisation.<sup>11</sup> In the debate between affirmation and delegation, on the one hand it

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the observed. Perhaps claiming one's own identity only responds to the need to build a device to satisfy safety and protection needs" (Schneider, 2018).

<sup>10</sup>The recent story of rampant apprehension regarding so-called *gender ideology* we think may be emblematic of this type of process. See Migliorini (2017) and Rigliano (2012).

<sup>11</sup>The reference to the famous film *Hunger Games* (2012) is evocative: the film is

involves a process of authorisation to be and to become who we are; and, on the other hand, a tightening up of identity is taking place in well-known and historically consolidated systems.<sup>12</sup> A system of important concepts of cultural and social identity have been created around being a man or woman. They are the frame inside which the subject constructs, defines, puts into play and redefines his gender identity. This is only one example of the tensions involved in defining oneself where delegation to prefabricated social roles has been unsuccessful. In Dimen's words (2003) "the quiet, classic dichotomy between male and female thus gives way to postmodern uneasiness". That said, at least in Italy, several contradictions persist in contemporary visions of gender and sexuality, as if the modern and post-modern cohabited or coexisted. Because if it is true that "gender is not the identity or the essence of a person, surely it is a *core* experience that a subject makes of himself and which constitutes the complexity of his identity. This means that we cannot essentialise and define gender but neither can we dematerialise it." (Goldner & Dimen, 2003)

Thus, significant elements emerge that we as psychoanalysts should acknowledge: how have we responded to the processes and outcomes of post-modernism as specifically related to gender and sexual orientation? What can we say and to what extent can we contribute to our Subjects' contemporary need to be understood after the deconstruction of gender? What does it mean for contemporary subjects to take up their sexual identity in the current scenario? These questions are all the more revealing when *psychoanalysis itself comes into being and develops in a way that is innate and closely informed by the issue of sexuality which is the cornerstone around which the psychic develops*. In fact, on this particular theme we believe that psychoanalysis is called upon to think and provide valid theories on how humans become men and women, on how some of these humans are cisgender and others transgender, on how they position themselves in the vast and variable continuum of sexual orientations. Moreover, we believe the formulation of these hypotheses should take place within scientific epistemology, based on instruments other than the *method* of so-called *folk science*.<sup>13</sup> What we want to underline is that, even today, although we officially recognize that homosexual orienta-

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populated by characters whose gender expression and identity and whose sexual orientation are not clear or well defined and, not surprisingly, it is debatable whether they even belong to the human species.

<sup>12</sup>Politics is one of the areas where these are manifest. To take light-hearted, but emblematic example: a song composed from a speech by Giorgia Meloni, "I am Giorgia, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a Christian". became a social catchphrase in the days when this article was being written and likely to become the soundtrack of Gay pride 2020.

<sup>13</sup>It is interesting in this regard to quote the words of Jack Drescher (1988) "the most prestigious scientific journals dealing with human sexuality - namely the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (of *The International Academy of Sex Research*) and the *Journal of Sex Research* (of the *Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality*) - rarely report psychoanalytic references

tion has nothing to do with the pathological,<sup>14</sup> in the mind of therapists - even those most open to the myriad possibilities of human existence - there is a sort of centuries-old, automatic track that leads us to wonder about the *why* of non-heterosexual identities and to try to give an explanation, using our unspoken mindset<sup>15</sup> as a starting point. In so doing, we are guided by the simple but tenacious belief that *what is most common is natural*. Although technically we know that *natural* is simply everything living in nature, we tend to confuse the term with “what is culturally more predominant”. This is known as *naturalization of the cultural*, *i.e.*, the cognitive process by which cultural prescriptions and norms become so stratified and reified that they become coincident with the *natural*. It is as if these conceptual stratifications proceed via implicitly interconnected chains of ideas: for example, the term *natural* in our minds actually implies the concepts of *common*, *functional*, *healthy*, *just*. Psychoanalysis, just like other cognitive instruments, made the mistake – as yet uncorrected - of confusingly superimposing unspoken assumptions on these chains, creating a series of not insignificant epistemological, theoretical, and clinical problems (Minolli, 2003).

Currently, it is as if homosexuality may be considered not a disorder, more a possible development of human sexuality, but at the same time, and more subtly, that it is not a completely normal sexual orientation. Or we could put it this way: when referring to non-heterosexual orientation, “It is not a disorder”, or the *negative* way of looking at it seems to prevail over

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in bibliographies. A rare exception can be found in historical articles, where psychoanalysis is usually put in a bad light. The reverse is also true, *i.e.* it is rare to find articles in psychoanalytic journals that cite contemporary scientific literature on sexuality and in the PEP-WEB, a *database* of more than 50 international psychoanalytic journals published integrally since the 1920s, an equally disconcerting conglomeration of unproven personal opinions on homosexuality and gender identity within clinical cases can be examined”.

<sup>14</sup>We are aware this is a *generous* viewpoint, since theoretical and clinical interventions by those who define homosexual orientation as a structural psychic pathology are still widespread. Here we touch on the thorny issue of reparative therapies and curative approaches to homosexuality, which are opposed to all the official statements in our scientific and academic references (American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; American Psychological Association Division 44/Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns Guidelines Revision Task Force 2012; Associazione Italiana di Psicologia, 2010; Consiglio Nazionale dell’Ordine degli Psicologi, 2011, 2013; see also Cochran et al., 2014; Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Herek, 2016; King, 2015; Lingiardi & Luci, 2006; Lingiardi & Nardelli, 2014; Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Rigliano, Ciliberto, & Ferrari, 2012; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Spitzer, 2012).

<sup>15</sup>In this regard, the research work carried out through the APO questionnaire - Attitudes of Psychologists to Homosexuality carried out at some Italian regional centres is interesting. See: Lingiardi & Nardelli, 2011; Lingiardi, Nardelli, & Tripodi, 2013; Lingiardi, Taurino, Tripodi, Laquale, & Nardelli, 2013; Lingiardi, Tripodi, & Nardelli 2014; Lingiardi, Nardelli, & Bussole LGBT Association, 2018.

“It is a normal sexual orientation on a par with a heterosexual one”, or the *positive* way of looking at it. Needless to say, this implication has huge repercussions particularly on more specifically clinical expectations and attitudes leading therapists to different, decisive, subtle distinctions in their approach to heterosexual, homo-, or bi-sexual patients (Chodorow, 2006).

### Implicit theoretical psychoanalytic thinking and sexual identity

If we turn our attention to Psychoanalysis and to what it can tell us, we soon realize that there is a single, main construct that has been designed to account for the human being in his sexual-identity-being, namely the *Oedipus complex*. We do not intend to dwell on this founding theoretical construct of Psychoanalysis, but we want to underline how the *Oedipus complex* is believed to account for a very wide range of elements: from how gender identity is created and how the heterosexual identity develops as a mature and functional outcome of sexuality, to how to achieve a sufficiently balanced functioning of the psyche with the solicitation of the ideal and the superego, to enable it to occupy its role in society. In other words, the *Oedipus complex* informs us how male and female humans become men and women capable of reproduction within caring relationships, and capable of developing a moral sense and responsibility of their own, from which they can then take their place in the world.

Therefore, Psychoanalysis develops from the assumption that “sexuality, as described in the writings of Freud (Freud, 1905/1953, 1924/1961, 1925/1961, 1931/1961, 1933/1964) has and must have, in its functional variant, a heterosexual and cisgender outcome” (Dimen & Goldner, 2005) and the *Oedipus Complex represents the conceptual tool on which this assumption is based and by which this assumption is explained*. In this sense it represents a sort of *tautological instrument*, which is considered more than ever insufficient today both from an epistemological point of view and from a heuristic point of view (Chodorow, 2006). In the words of Dimen and Goldner (2005): “The Oedipal narrative, as classically told, is useful but is, after all, a story - and only one, at that - of how a person becomes heterosexual, not only of how a person becomes sexually and psychically mature” (p. 106).

Despite the fact that Psychoanalysis has re-discussed over the years, often profitably, the normative and historically bound quality of its thought,<sup>16</sup> it remains equally true, from our point of view, that when we as

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<sup>16</sup>It is well known that it was in particular the birth and development of feminist thought that led to a review of some basic psychoanalytic concepts related to sexuality, gender and sexual orientation. The bibliography in this regard is extensive, among others, see: Benjamin, J. (1984); Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1976); Schafer, R. (1977).



psychoanalysts - both in theory and in clinical practice - face questions relating to sexual identity, we often find ourselves without solid responses to draw on and therefore, the only instrument available to us in our theoretical baggage, revisited or in less literal form, is still *Oedipal thought as an interpretation of psychic functioning deriving from relationships with the mother and father who exemplify, respectively and reciprocally, the gender identity to aim for and the object of sexual and emotional interest to turn to*. In the simplicity of our daily lives, everything that on a psychoanalytic level is expressed, for example, when considering male homosexuality to be the result of “a castrating mother and an absent father”, translates into numerous examples on the family level, such as studying parent-child relationships (mother and son or father and daughter), and reading into the research and development of the bond, stereotypes and roles that have different roots from those in play at the moment of interaction.<sup>17</sup>

When we talk about the lack of solid responses to draw on in terms of knowledge of the development of sexual identities, we do not imply that no valid evolutionary and psychological theories of high scientific and clinical value have been produced over time. Rather, *solidity* means a theoretical corpus capable of unhinging a sort of implicit conceptual automatism, which is the *automatic return to Oedipus*, meaning *unconscious*,<sup>18</sup> and strongly characterized by cultural stereotypy.<sup>19</sup> Reference to Bowlbian actualise what has been said (Bowlby, 1989). The wealth of their contribution to understanding our functioning is not in doubt, but despite this, to therapists, Oedipus still has no rivals as the instrument to draw on to explain sexual identity, and this is due to the fact that Oedipus seems to be the *pseudo-scientific representative of heteronormativity*.

Oedipus has this power because for generations we have described early relationships between parents and children, and their relative triangulation – the prevailing western family type - on the basis of this

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<sup>17</sup>See the typical example of the explanatory and meta-communicative comments of adults about the boy who “wants to be his mother’s man”, or the girl who “wants to be her father’s princess”.

<sup>18</sup>In the words of Minolli (2015) “it is difficult to be explicit in describing the background of one’s theories because in general it is not conscious” (p. 33).

<sup>19</sup>One of the areas on which this aspect is played out most clearly is, for example, that of the confusion between the level of gender identity and that of sexual orientation. The Oedipal vision of gender and orientation development is based on defining what is masculine as what is not feminine, and attracted by the feminine, and vice versa, on defining what is feminine as what it is not masculine, and attracted to the masculine, in continuity with the model of heterosexual complementarity. To date, it is evident that the network of possibilities of what is male and female, and of the dynamics of attraction between the genres, is much wider than this simple map. See: Corbett, K. (2001); De Simone, G. (2007).

metaphor. Not only has it become a good metaphor for explaining family dynamics, for relating the fantasy world in childhood, or the influence of desire between parents and children, but it also shows how relationships between male/female children and mom, and male/female children and dad, work. At the present time, we believe that the *Oedipus complex* is certainly not the cornerstone of human development and psychopathology (Corbett, 2008), but we understand the importance of *psychic grounding* in early interactions and fantasies, and of desires and expectations that emerge in interactions between parents and children, with or without verbalization. Parents' investment in their children (Minolli, 2015) is charged with all this; it is the quality of the gaze that rests on them. We can assume that something in this gaze provides an answer to the gender issue. Maleness and femaleness passes "*from culture through* parents to children, or, put another way; it precedes parents and children" (Corbett, 2008), *but* through the specificity of those parents, the child incarnates it and owns it, and each child does so in their own particular way. We are not disputing the possible descriptive and metaphorical value of Oedipus, but rather its degeneration *from a metaphor into an instrument of saturation and standardization of explanations of reality*, an error that makes it even more urgent for psychoanalysts to ask themselves how they should develop scientifically-based knowledge, and also what profound changes are necessary for our discipline. There are many theories, all different, each one focusing on a specific datum, or highlighting certain variables. Perhaps a meta-theoretical approach which focuses on the process of the subject and goes beyond the specific content of each period in history is the new way forward.

Therefore, starting from what we know, we can say that sexual identity is the result of a complex process involving the interdependent recursive emergence of various levels and bio-psycho-social variables. In fact, the complex trait of sexual and emotional behavior has a *genetic* component, although taken alone it is *not decisive, being in interaction* with the environment, experiences, and stimuli.<sup>20</sup>

In the light of the general consensus that sexual identity develops in the multifactorial context of genetics, environment, relationships, and society, we know that there are still aspects we are unaware of and there is much more to understand, but that it is the subject's complexity and process that must be kept in mind rather than the content of the moment, and this may be the only means of not consigning the multiplicity of sexual identities to the aimless drifting of postmodern fluidity or to the s(t)olidity of former categories.

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<sup>20</sup>cfr.: Lingiard & Baiocco (2015); Ganna, et al. (2019).

## Temporary, final reflections

To put forward our thoughts we use some approaches developed with the meta-theory of Michele Minolli's Ego-subject in mind (2009; 2015), "a theory of the human being, or the Ego-subject, which aims to lend consistency and effectiveness to the analyst's clinical work; a psychoanalytic theory free from debts of belonging and gratitude to the founders' concepts and theories, and those of their successors in orthodoxy, because dedicated to defining a new perspective and new epistemologies suited to the times - the times of individualism - which puts individuals at the centre in the search for a reason for and a solution to their suffering". (Dettori, 2015)

Let us start with the idea that the human being is *a living, self-eco-organized system*, with reflected consciousness which lives and develops in a process which is the process of life (Minolli, 2009), and consider the *echo* within which the subject moves. Undoubtedly, culture and society have an effect on the subject, just as do the relationships in which humans are immersed from an early age and through which they grow and develop. In other words, culture influences parents, who, however, have their own take on the various possibilities existing in the external world according to who they are. Therefore, it is parents, or the child's carers, who initially represent the principle level of encounter with the other. In the development of the human being *it is the other who begins to give a name to who we are and what we do*, who reinforces us in action and behavior, who observes us with a complex gaze which is, for the focus of this work, also a *gender gaze*, or a gaze that reveals something to us about our being a boy or girl.

"Do you want a boy or a girl?" This is what couples are often asked when they announce they are expecting a baby. Parents have desires about the sex of their children even before they are born. They have an idea of what being male and female can mean and what behaviours the image corresponds to. The image is, however, rarely sufficiently broad-ranging to contain all the possibilities of a child.

Indeed, observing the interactions between parents and young children, it is evident that parents' expectations are boundless, so obvious or subtle, spoken aloud or in the secrecy of their hearts, that it is difficult to imagine in what extraordinary way growing children can assume their own ability to be and become, coherent with what they feel they are, and with what they can be, coherent with their own desires, aspirations, limits, moving beyond their designated configuration and beyond the gaze that rested on them.

Alongside the set of desires and expectations that parents have about their children even before they are born, are the ones related to gender identity and sexual orientation. As far as orientation is concerned, homosexuality is still inevitably out of line with the expectations of parents and most of society in relation to something very profound and important. As society

evolves the lot of homosexuality is witnessing changes, but for various reasons, even today, the fact of homosexuality remains particularly significant.<sup>21</sup>

It is significant that we also know that subjects' lives cannot consist of complying with external expectations concerning sexual identity or any other defining aspect of themselves. *Having the authority to be what you are cannot be charged to the other*. It is human beings who in their own way and as far as possible internalize the good or not so good things that comes from outside. An "echo" is there because we are continually engaged in a relationship with the outside, but the outside is always "governed by the the Ego-subject's configuration of the moment" (Minolli, 2015, p. 88).

It can certainly happen that we may not be confirmed in our being, indeed, our very existence may not be authorised as still happens in some contexts related to sexual identity. But when are we really confirmed in our own being?

It is clear that we need attachments to the other, and that they are essential for the self-eco-organization in which we move in the world. It is also clear that from the other - first from parents, then from friends, the social environment, partners, and children - we seek this recognition. But very often we stop there and attach meaning to our existence because it is approved, and because we are seen and recognized. But what about when this does not happen? And sooner or later it won't. What happens then? Can the Ego-subject<sup>22</sup> remove the other's proxy to authorize its existence? Can the Ego-subject pursue a *consistency* (Minolli, 2015) or quality of its own which can inform the subject's process of authorizing himself to exist for what he is? Consistency does not mean reaching goals and is a quality that does not concern any *a priori* defined behaviour. This is not another historical request for how one should live to be happy. It is the attitude of subjects who can "face the world making themselves be the starting point in their life whatever it turns out to be, irrespective of positive or negative events" (Minolli 2015, p. 10), and opens the way to the creation of a genuine, authentic, active, creative, and curious relationship with themselves.

This self-appropriation is not a simple thing, and it goes against the tide of a reality that is constantly reminding us that we will feel good if we conform to an ideal (for example, heterosexuality), or that sends us messages about something or someone outside ourselves which will give us consis-

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<sup>21</sup>It would be, and will be, interesting to investigate what expectations homosexual parents have regarding the identity and sexual orientation of their children. Unlike straight parents, they may not take for granted one orientation with respect to another and have different fantasies about it

<sup>22</sup>For a discussion of the term Ego-subject and the reason for the name, see the works of Minolli (2009; 2015).

tency and make us happy, whether it be the couple, a job, love, a child; or, the opposite idea – the other side of the same coin - that only we can make ourselves happy by denying the ontological meaning that our attachment to the other has on our existence. How do we stay in the debate, without resorting to a repudiation of the other in a ruthless affirmation of oneself, or without delegating our happiness to the other?

We need to find new codes and linguistic means of telling a subject that they *can only be that particular woman and that particular man, that they possess within themselves the different possibilities of becoming within their own existential trajectories* and that they can go out and walk on their own two feet taking on board what they are, and searching for a non-delegating or absolutist way to exist. In Minolli's words (2015) "the possibility of having alternatives is at the qualitative level. (...) the Ego-subject can bring out different perspectives on his or her existence starting with himself, under specific, real conditions. In practice, quality lies in taking control of one's life through an active attitude that goes against a passive endurance of one's historical configuration throughout the course of one's life" (p. 88).

In this process of appropriation, we inevitably engage with the two macro interlocutors of our configuration, *i.e.*, the *social* and the *parental*. As a result of this inevitable encounter, subjects seek out their own existence, and authorize themselves to go beyond the standard configuration. *As psychotherapists we have a duty not to be a third macro-interlocutor* and, therefore, we do not correspond or tune in to what is in the social or in the genitorial. On issues of sexual identity, for example, our level of reflection does not necessarily need to be focused on encouraging or promoting a fluid culture rather than returning to defined categories; nor should we run the risk of no longer questioning ourselves about gender roles, for example: making good and hard-won rights into existential duties, with the risk that if the 1900s analyst believed it was a woman's duty to do certain things, now we believe it is a woman's duty to do certain other things.

Endeavouring to not take up that position, either in terms of normativity or in terms of expectations; endeavouring to position yourself in another place away from the snare of delegation or affirmation; having a welcoming attitude towards these two extremes that does not continually break down because of the content of one or the other, or the specific content of the age, is a position which in the opinion of the writer can safeguard patients from the best ethics of any historical period.

Finally, Minolli said (2015): "In reality, each Ego-subject is unique and individual because the genetic and environmental event that brings it into existence is unique and individual. The specific configuration received and destined to leave its mark throughout a life makes each Ego-subject an unrepeatable specimen of *Homo sapiens* (...) A uniqueness that is difficult to assume since culture and the prevailing mentality discourages diversity.

A diversity that is more of an asset, given that four eyes see better than two, and millions of different eyes see better than one”.

Part of that diversity means taking on board that we are gay, women, men, mothers, single, bisexual, divorced, have this body, choose these clothes, or, that we can say our name and surname without feeling the weight. If we take this on board then we might be able to imagine that if everyone related to themselves and accepted that they were in a process, the process of life, the world would be an extraordinary place.

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