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## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EROTICISM, GENDER, AND INTERPERSONAL BONDING: A CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION OF SEXUAL HOLONIC MAPPING

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*In this article, we describe a systemic model of human sexuality as comprised of four holons or subsystems corresponding to eroticism, gender, interpersonal bonding, and reproduction. We further apply this model to an actual case of couples therapy, mapping conflicts and difficulties among the various holons for both members of the couple. Augmenting this mapping function with illustrative questions for prompting the client's own exploration of sexual meanings extends its use from assessment to intervention, in a way that is compatible with constructivist, narrative, and social constructionist understandings of human functioning.*

Viewed through a constructivist lens, human sexuality represents a dynamic and evolving feature of embodied individuals who are embedded in both local and more widely distributed social contexts. This perspective on the construction of sexuality is congruent with a broader “epigenetic systems” model that views human meaning and action as the emergent outcome of a series of hierarchically embedded systems and subsystems (Mascolo, Craig-Bray, & Neimeyer, 1997). In biology, epigenesis stands in contrast to theories that view an organism’s structures, behaviors, or capacities as either essential and inborn, or as the simple and predictable result of maturational unfolding. Instead, new structures are seen as emerging through the interaction of a multileveled organism-environment system, in which the functioning of each constituent feature is shaped through transactions of more basic levels

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and higher-order ones. As applied to human beings, epigenesis implies that meaning and action emerge from a similarly multilayered system of systems, which include biogenetic, personal-agentive, dyadic-relational, and social-cultural levels. *Biogenetic* systems refer to all systems below the level of the organism-as-agent (genetic, cellular, and organ systems). The *personal-agentive* level refers to the individual's personality, having a bounded degree of choice in determining his or her own course of development. *Dyadic-relational* systems emerge out of coactions between two or more individuals (e.g., family systems), which are further nested within larger *social-linguistic* systems of cultural patterns, institutions, discourses, and beliefs. In this integrative model, all psychologically significant structures and symptoms emerge from the complex interaction of all levels of this comprehensive system, rather than from a given level considered in isolation (Neimeyer & Bridges, 2003).

As presented by Zumaya, Bridges, and Rubio (1999), the mapping of sexual "holons" represents a clinical assessment strategy that spans all four levels of the epigenetic model, ranging from basic biological issues (e.g., reproduction), through personal-agentive practices and meanings (e.g., erotic preferences), to dyadic-relational phenomena (e.g., interpersonal bonding) and broad social-linguistic factors (e.g., gender roles). Moreover, the use of this assessment with both members of a couple further magnifies its relational relevance, offering a schema within which both intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts can be mapped. The purpose of this brief article is to illustrate the use of the holonic model in the clinical context by first describing its features, and then applying them to the case of a lesbian couple seeking counseling for tensions arising within their intimate relationship.

A *holon* can be defined as a part of a larger system that has sufficient internal complexity to be considered a system in and by itself (Koestler, 1990). In terms of the holonic sexual model (Zumaya, Bridges, & Rubio, 1999), these include systems of *reproduction*, concerned with the significance of procreation; *eroticism*, pertaining to sexual pleasure, identity, and attraction; *interpersonal bonding*, the capacity for love and attachment; and *gender*, one's identification with cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity (see Figure 1). By dividing sexuality into holons and inquiring about their unique significance to the client(s), both the therapist and the client(s) are able to obtain a more complete picture of the many interrelated meanings associated with sexuality and how they mesh or conflict with each other. Although it would be possible to use a holonic structure for assessing sexual difficulties from within many different theoretical orientations, a postmodern/constructivist theoretical position is ideally situated to make use of holonic mappings (Zumaya,

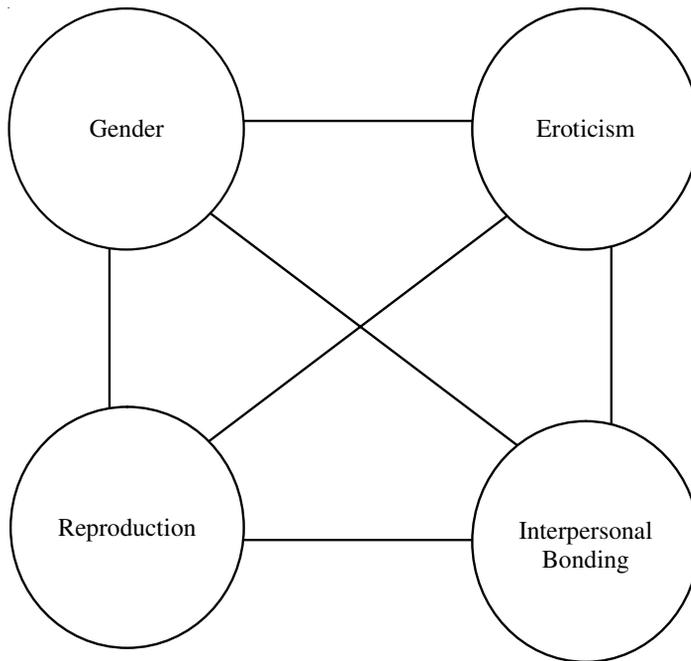


FIGURE 1. Sexual holonic map.

Bridges, & Rubio, 1999). Because postmodern theory is concerned with personal and interpersonal meaning making, the temptation to reduce sexual difficulties to a single causal factor (e.g., hormonal factors or physiology) is minimized. The nonreductionistic stance of postmodern psychotherapy allows for the division of sexual meanings into component parts (individual holons) without losing sight of how they fit within the larger schema of the client's sexual meaning making processes (holonic mapping). Furthermore, although the individual holons in themselves can prove useful in the understanding of sexual meanings, it is their ability to combine and conflict that produces the most revealing picture of the sexual lives of both individuals and couples.

Thus, through inquiry, creation of sexually related ladders (Neimeyer, Anderson & Stockton, 2001) and other constructivist techniques (Neimeyer & Bridges, 2003), holonic maps are created and sexual meanings are more clearly understood. In the map itself, the holons can be represented in different sizes relative to their importance to the clients, and lines of connection are drawn between the holons to represent their degree of connection to the other holons (and potentially to the holons of their partners). As the map is created, it is the client, and not

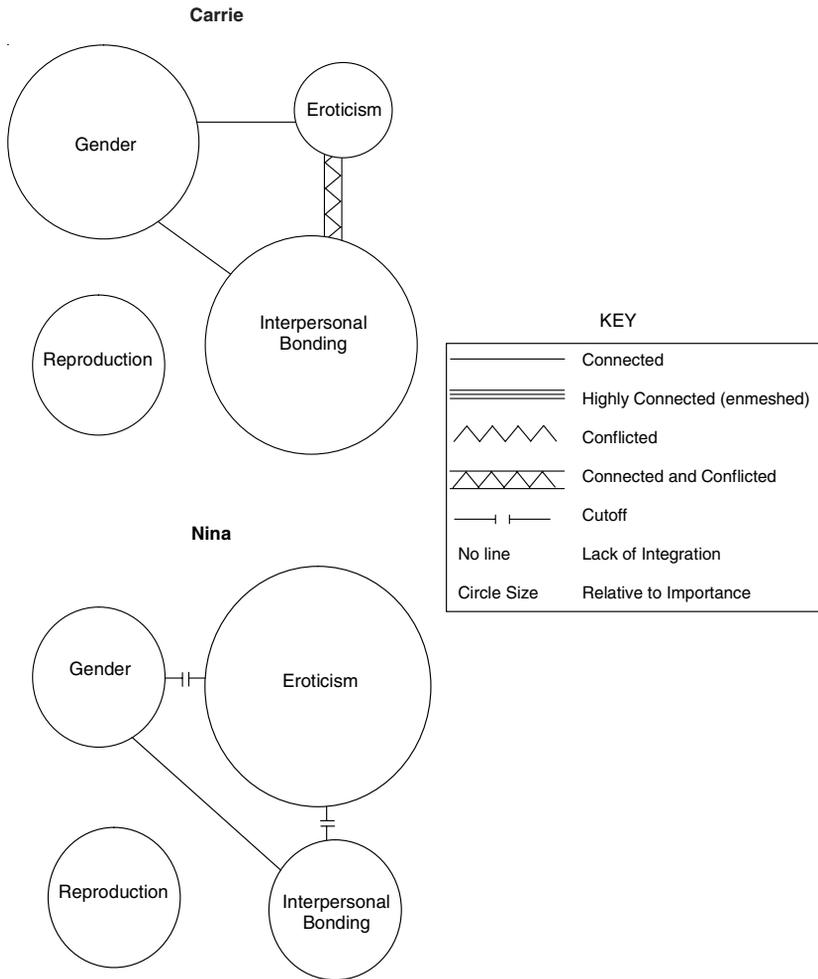
the therapist, who intuitively determines both the size of the holons and their connections. A brief case example illustrating sexual holonic mapping follows, with a depiction of the holonic map for this couple in Figure 2 and sample questions for further holonic exploration in therapy (derived from Bridges & Neimeyer, 2003) provided in Table 1.

## CASE EXAMPLE

### Background

Carrie (28) and Nina (24) sought counseling from a college counseling center because of difficulties with communication in their 6-month-old relationship. Carrie was a graduate student in engineering who had been “out” to her friends and family members for over 10 years. She stated that she had a very clear sense of her lesbian identity and was active in the Lesbian, Gay, & Bisexual (LGB) student group on campus. Nina was pursuing her Masters in Fine Art (MFA) in sculpture and had identified herself as bisexual during her sophomore year in college. Nina reported that she did not talk about her identity much because she “was who she was,” and didn’t feel a need to be “political.” The couple had met in the Fall semester during a joint project between the engineering and the art departments on the “Form and Function of Bridges.” They both reported an immediate attraction and agreed that the first three months of their relationship had been “amazing,” they “talked all the time,” “agreed to disagree” if there was an argument, enjoyed each other’s friends, and felt that the “sex was great.” However, at the beginning of the Spring semester, Nina started a demanding sculpture project and began to “shut down” sexually. She reported that she just did not feel sexual when she was working, although Carrie stated that she felt rejected after this sudden shift in their relationship. The couple reported that they had “talked and talked and were getting nowhere.” Thus, they decided to seek professional help with the situation to save what they both saw as a promising relationship.

Often when a couple presents with difficulties in their sexual relationship, well meaning therapists will first explore biological factors that might be interfering with their desire, satisfaction or “performance” —especially with the current trend towards the medicalization of sexuality. Although this certainly is a relevant domain to evaluate, too often couples will leave therapy with a pill rather than a enriched understanding of their difficulties or movement towards a reconstruction of their sexual meanings. Moreover, even though most sex therapists acknowledge that sexuality consists of more than biology, the



**FIGURE 2.** Holonic sexual maps for a distressed lesbian couple.

psychological and interpersonal aspects are too often seen as simple counterparts to the biological ones. Furthermore, specific models to guide exploration of vaguer psychological or interpersonal meanings are rare. Because neither Carrie nor Nina had complaints that were biological in nature, it became apparent that there were both psychological and interpersonal issues at play. At this point, the therapist (SKB) worked with the clients to create a mapping of their sexual meanings.

**TABLE 1.** Questions for exploring individual sexual holons and overall holonic structures

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**Gender holon:** The way we see ourselves as feminine or masculine within society and all of the implications this has for our lives.

- How does your personal conception of your gender identity shape your preferred way of relating sexually? What aspects of your gender identity do you value?
- What forms of sexual interaction would fit with your preferred gender role? What forms of interaction would not fit? How have you seen these changing across time?
- Are the gender roles adopted by you and your partner compatible, complementary, or conflictual in their implications for your sexual relationship? How flexible or firm are your respective roles in the relationship? Are there any ways you would like to see this change?

**Erotic holon:** Our appetite for sexual excitement, attraction, pleasure, and orgasm.

- To whom do you find yourself attracted? On what is this attraction based (i.e., sex, gender, personality factors, appearance, etc.)?
- In what ways do you experience sexual excitement?
- What forms of sexual activity give you pleasure? Are there forms of sexual expression that you avoid? Does this change over time? If so, how?
- What meanings or fantasies enhance or intensify your excitement and erotic potential? What meanings inhibit it?
- How compatible are your erotic preferences with those of your partner? Which aspects of your erotic preferences are most difficult to speak about? Which are most easily misunderstood?

**Reproduction holon:** The human potential to create or foster the development of individuals who are physically similar, but not identical, to those who have nurtured them.

- What role, if any, does having or raising children play in your identity as a person? Has this changed over time, and if so, how?
- How compatible are your hopes or wishes concerning the desirability or timing of reproduction with those of your partner? How might such wishes be negotiated?

**Interpersonal Bonding holon:** Our capacity to develop intense feelings in regard to the presence or absence, availability or unavailability of another specific human being.

- To whom are you drawn to emotionally? What influences this emotional attraction (i.e., sex, gender, personality factors, etc.)?
  - To what extent do you seek versus retreat from meaningful attachment relationships? How are these forms of drawing close or distancing expressed in words or actions?
  - Do you experience the emotional bond with your partner as secure or insecure, comfortable or anxious? What forms of interaction between you contribute to each of these outcomes?
  - Is the form of closeness sought by both of you similar or dissimilar? How might you signal your need for greater connection or space in a way that is constructive for you both?
-

## Mapping of Holonic Structures

Although the figure used to illustrate a holonic sexual map depicts the holons as symmetrical circles, uniformly placed in corners, equidistant from each other (Figure 1), it can be useful to allow the client to vary the size and configuration of the holons to represent their relative importance. The questions offered in Table 1, among others developed in conjunction with the unique concerns of the client, help the client to decide the importance of each holon (Bridges & Neimeyer, 2003). The subjective salience of the holons is symbolized by their size, whereas the character of the connecting lines is an indication of how the holons combine or interact (see Figure 2). With Carrie and Nina, the therapist began by asking them several standard sexual assessment questions regarding how they learned about sexuality, when they first came to recognize themselves as sexual beings, who in their lives were supportive (or intolerant) of their sexual orientation, and how they expressed their feelings of sexual desire. As a picture of their sexual mapping began to emerge, it became apparent that neither of these women had spent much time exploring their thoughts, feelings, or beliefs about sexuality. Instead, both women tended to adhere to the "mystery" explanation of sexuality, that sex is a wonderful and mysterious aspect of loving relationships that would be, if not ruined, then at least contaminated by overt discussion and analytical processing. Consequently the therapist assigned both partners the task of creating a sexual self-characterization sketch; an adaptation of Kelly's (1955/1991) original method. These sketches encouraged the clients to look carefully at their own sexuality fostering subsequent therapeutic processing that helped them to create holonic maps of their sexuality that were authentic, albeit somewhat difficult for each to reveal to her partner.

Through the use of inquiry into their individual holonic meanings and the creation of a complete sexual holonic map, the therapist (SKB) helped to elicit a clearer picture of both the individual and couple sexual meanings implicated in the relational problem. Carrie felt a strong connection to her lesbian identity (gender holon), and although she intellectually understood that a person could be attracted to both women and men, she felt emotionally threatened by Nina's attraction to "just about anybody." She reported that when their sexual life was "going strong" she felt connected to Nina and had no concerns about her leaving, yet without the presence of sex, she felt like "just another person" in Nina's life and couldn't see why Nina would stay with her. Thus, having sex with Nina became vitally important because that was the only way she could ensure that Nina would stay. Indeed, on further reflection Carrie realized

that this conflictual conjunction between eroticism and bonding was present—to her dismay—in previous relationships as well, such that she only felt securely connected to her partner when they were passionately involved. Carrie felt very uncomfortable with the realization that she was “using sex” as a means to keep the relationship rather than as a form of mutual pleasure between them. However, Nina seemed relieved that it was Carrie’s concerns about her bisexuality, as well as Carrie’s conflictual association of sex and closeness, that were causing difficulties, rather than solely Nina’s lack of sexual desire. This seemed to make more sense to her and she was able to reassure Carrie about her commitment to her and the relationship. In addition to avoiding sexual contact, Nina had also been avoiding most physical contact (especially cuddling) because she was afraid it would lead to a sexual advance by Carrie, which she would refuse, and that would lead to an all-night, tearful, angry talk session. In exploring the significance of eroticism and excitement in her life, Nina realized that she needed to be excited when she was working, and felt that if she had sex before she went to the studio then she would be unproductive, which she attributed to fatigue.

## Conflicts and Therapeutic Implications

In this case, the gender and the interpersonal bonding holons were central for Carrie, while the erotic holon played an important but subordinate role in securing her connection to Nina. In contrast, for Nina, the role of the erotic holon was central to many different aspects of her life—including her work as an artist—although it was more loosely tethered to a particular gender identity or her sense of interpersonal bonding with Carrie (see Figure 2). When issues of reproduction were raised by the therapist, both women smiled and agreed that was “a long way down the road,” suggesting compatibility in the meanings each attributed to that domain in their present lives.

## Interventions and Creative Solutions

Clarifying the sexual meanings of both women, and sharing with them the mapping of their holonic structures, helped them to get a clearer understanding of themselves and their partner and gave them a structure for communicating about their sexual meanings. Through the use of sexual laddering (not described here because of space considerations), it became apparent that Nina did her best sculpting work when she was “really turned on” and she would use her sexual excitement to create her best work. Nina and Carrie explored the

possibility of finding a way to be physically and emotionally close to keep their connection strong (thereby reducing Carrie's feelings of vulnerability), while at the same time not detracting from Nina's creative work. Several flirtatious nighttime visits to Nina's sculpting studio seemed to be fruitful for them both.

In sum, for this couple that did not inherently possess language for elucidating the initially mysterious meanings associated with either their own sexuality or their sexual relationship, creating holonic maps and sharing them with each other helped them to understand more fully the dynamics within their relationship. This is not to say that cognitive understanding is sufficient for improving all distressed sexual relationships. Both members of a couple need to commit themselves not only to attempting to understand the sexual constructs of their partner, but also to express empathy for the emotional pain and joy that may accompany the emergence of these same constructs.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As the other contributions to this special issue of the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* demonstrate, constructivist, narrative, and social constructionist scholarship can make a multifaceted contribution to our understanding of human sexualities in general, and of the construction of sexual identity in particular. In keeping with the spirit of these perspectives, a holonic model of sexual identity recognizes its emergence from a complex of factors that range from the concretely biological and embodied to the abstractly cultural and linguistic. Accordingly, the mapping of sexual holons concerned with eroticism, interpersonal bonding, gender, and reproduction can provide a useful framework for directing therapeutic interventions for individuals or couples experiencing conflict in these domains. Taken together with facilitative questions like those suggested in Table 1, such mapping provides a convenient and visually clarifying representation of issues arising for clients struggling with features of their sexual identity and relationships, one that can be shared with clients or used by therapists to chart problematic configurations and their transformation across therapy.

Although the visual depiction of the general holonic map suggests uniformity in the size and distribution of the holons, it is vital to emphasize that we are in no way suggesting that an "ideal" or "perfectly symmetrical" structure should be the outcome goal of holonic sex therapy. Rather, the mapping should represent the true contours of sexual meaning making, with all the curves and variations representative of a natural topography. In this way we hope that sexual holonic mapping might

offer a simple but elegant heuristic device to assist therapists in assessing and addressing a domain of human activity that is too often neglected.

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