

Beyond victimization

The following essay is in response to:

BOUND BY LOVE: The Sweet Trap of Daughterhood by Lucy Gilbert and Paula Webster (Beacon Press) \$13.50

Susanne P. Schad-Somers

Bound by Love is the kind of book that could give feminism a bad name. It treats halftruths, falsehoods and opinions as if they were facts. The authors disregard serious empirical research on the topics under discussion and their unwillingness to give credit to previous feminist scholarship borders on insult.

Although distorting social reality and social science research, the book nevertheless contains occasional kernels of truth worth considering. Its central thesis is this: The traditional definitions of femininity are essentially grownup versions of "the good little girl" or "daddy's girl." Such women are sweet, compliant, spunky without being aggressive, considerate, sensitive and servile. A good little girl is one who thinks of others first. Mothers raise their daughters in their own image in order to help them to survive in a world as they know it.

"Reproduction of the pernicious gender system is deeply necessary for the emotional survival of most mothers, which makes it irresistible to most daughters." This situation, the authors insist, is compounded because most mothers, having been poorly mothered themselves, depend on their daughters for mothering, thereby interfering with full self-object differentiation. In other words, they raise daughters incapable of exercising enough autonomy to choose their own path in life. The authors further argue that even if the mother consciously intends to raise a daughter who has all the qualities that she herself lacks, unconsciously she will undermine her own agenda.

If this pattern were indeed to be true, things would be pretty grim for all of us. While the psychological mechanisms described by the authors do in fact occur they are hardly a universal rule nor are they the whole story. It is true that traditional sex-role prescriptions for



SUMMER DAYS, 1866

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women have encouraged among other things passivity, dependency, submissiveness, altruism and lack of competitiveness, traits that in my opinion facilitate a masochistic stance, which is in fact more prevalent among women than it is among men. This does not mean, however, as Gilbert and Webster imply, that women have a monopoly on masochism.

When we look at the psychological determinants of sexism we have to differentiate between three separate issues: Core gender identity, sex-role stereotyping, and problems of separation and individuation. Each has to be examined separately before we can understand their complex interrelationships which determine what kind of males or females we grow up to be.

• Gender research has shown that for male to acquire a core gender identity — the irrefutable knowledge that he is male — he must identify with his first and most important other, namely his mother. This is an extraordinarily hard struggle since his normal infantile dependency needs present an everpresent pull back towards the original symbiosis and corresponding identification with the female. If, in addition, the mother has conflictual and/or hostile attitudes towards masculinity, the separation can become a herculean task. Once more or less accomplished, it is a vital — if not the most vital — part of the male's identity. The achievement feels too hard-won to relinquish and it never loses a certain amount of tenuousness.

The little girl, in contrast, has it infinitely easier because she simply identifies with mother,

her first love object. A core gender identity is handed to her in the normal course of events which explains, among other things, why female transsexuals are infinitely less common than are males. In other words, the acquisition of a female core gender identity is a natural given while the male one is painfully acquired.

• While gender identity tells us what gender we belong to, sex-role stereotyping informs us what that means in terms of our identity and our interactions with others. Sex-role stereotyping (different traits and interpersonal patterns encouraged in males and females) derives its staying power from two sources: one, mothers and fathers are indeed inclined to raise their sons and daughters in their own image and two: children naturally tend to identify with the parent of the same sex unless circumstances discourage such an identification. Unfortunately, women who have a low opinion of themselves as females — and our society has seen to it that many women do in fact devalue themselves — will pass on this lack of self-esteem to their daughters. Unless fathers take an active interest in their daughters' intellectual and emotional development, growing up to be a successful female in our society is a very difficult job indeed.

• Both sexes also have to separate from mother, a process which Margret Mahler has so aptly termed the "psychological birth of the human infant." This means the toddler becoming his or her little person. In order to separate and individuate we all need a sense of mastery, a feeling that we are capable of taking

care of ourselves. It is in this area where sex-role stereotyping is so troublesome for girls because typically mothers tend to indulge symbiotic behavior in their daughters and discourage it in their sons. Moreover, the boy, still consolidating his core gender identity and his male role, feels an extra push to tie his own shoelaces, and to assert his otherness as a male.

Since there is no such thing as a perfect mother — or one that has been perfectly mothered herself — all of us, men and women alike have to struggle with the conflict of wanting to remain merged with our parents and with our wish for autonomy. The symbiosis is tempting, but only in a truly pathological family does temptation turn into a trap and even the best of traps is rarely foolproof. After all, not all abused children be it physical or emotional, turn into abusive parents.

On the other hand, each time a female deviates from her stance as a victimized but "good little girl" she relinquishes part of her bond with her parents and she risks estrangement from her peers. And it is fairly easy to understand why it is harder, psychologically, for women to succeed in the real world than it is for men. No argument here. However, it seems to me that the truly intriguing and important questions now arise from the fact that so many women have succeeded in spite of it all. Put differently, given the fact that in terms of social power the cards were heavily stacked against women, why have we nevertheless succeeded in the course of 10 years to substantially change the role of women in our society?

According to the school of cultural and psychological determinism, which views us essentially as passive recipients of the external forces that shape us, this was not supposed to happen. And yet it did happen. History is full of instances of oppressed people resisting and rising above their oppressors. In times of war and revolution women notoriously have cast aside their "femininity," defended their young, withstood torture and im-

prisonment and rebuilt their habitats. What we may need then, is a psychology of courage and the recognition that the human animal seems to be a much more resilient creature than is commonly believed and prepared us for the social changes we have seen in the last 10 years. Change, of course, requires a series of existential and thus lonely choices, each of which feels a little like stepping into an abyss and you have to do it over and over again for the process is never complete. In order to do this we simply have to want whatever that achievement or change represents enough to give it all we have. It has to be dearer to us than all the secondary gains of masochistic suffering put together. In this process friendships and peer support are essential. For those of us who did not have the "good enough mother," psychotherapy may be helpful. No supports, however, are a substitute for the basic courage to stand on our own two feet, to forego the dreams of revenge for those who have wronged us and our hopes for the all-good mother to finally take care of us as our real mothers never did nor could. Even the best therapist cannot supply that "courage to be." We need the guts to jump over our own shadow and to learn that waiting for the all-good mother disguised as the "prince" or the "queen," is a monumental waste of time. Some choose to do this, others do not.

What I am suggesting is that in 1982 it would be of greater importance for feminist research to explore the anatomy of human courage than to give us yet another victimized wail which only serves the purpose of giving excuses for not getting on with life.

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