

REMOTE CONTROL: MOTHERS, SONS, AND SUBJECTIVITY

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I started thinking about remote control as a metaphor for aspects of male-female relationships while watching the comedian Jerry Seinfeld one night. In talking about the use of the remote control, Seinfeld said, “Women want to see what’s on TV, men want to see what *else* is on TV.” This use of the remote control seems to express an unarticulated truth about an aspect of gender experience, and it occurred to me that in some way it was a metaphor for the psychodynamics of connection. That is, in some way, women look for a connection to stick with and men need to keep moving and *not* get stuck in the muddy waters of attachment. Men are typically thought of as emotionally remote, and women are often thought of as controlling (just ask any husband or son). But it works the other way, too—men certainly can be controlling (ask any daughter or wife), and women, while appearing connected, can certainly relate from a self-state that is remote. So the metaphor works, superficially at least, with a number of variations. But at a deeper level, both remoteness and control are defenses used in the service of the regulation of self and other within the intersubjective field. They mediate attachment and protect subjective space and, I suggest, are inextricably bound to cultural prescriptions for masculinity and femininity.

Feminists entering psychoanalysis introduced gender into the discourse of infant research as well as the intersubjective space of the analytic couple (Benjamin, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1983).

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Prior to the 1970s, scholars studying infant and child development posited a genderless or unisex baby who follows a developmental trajectory with the mother being the primary caretaker. Where there was pathology, there was a failure by the caregiver to provide what was needed for healthy emotional development—often through either neglect or impingement (Winnicott, 1965). Development was described and analyzed from the perspective of the developing baby in relation to its much-needed object, the mother. In this literature, allusions are made to a mother-son dyad represented by two types of mother—the dominating/invasive/enmeshed mother or the withdrawn, neglectful or diminished mother. Mother is understood to be either providing through attunement what is needed or, more commonly, failing to do so, resulting in varying degrees of pathology for the boy. (Fairbairn, 1952). Aspects of Mother are internalized by the baby boy and join, along with internalized others, to form his intrapsychic world. From nineteenth-century Vienna and the birth of psychoanalysis to the contemporary psychoanalysis of today, mothers have always held a starring role in the constellations of psychic life.

As feminists entering the field in the mid-1970s, in the heyday of the women's liberation movement, we were struck by the lack of awareness of gender in developmental theory. Surely there were differences in being raised male or female. To our minds, it was obvious that roles were extremely circumscribed for girls growing to be women and for boys growing to be men, and there were differential consequences to those experiences. In other words, neither psychological development itself nor developmental theory could be gender-free, unisex, one size fits all. Despite her starring role, Mother was portrayed in some sense as unidimensional—flat, untextured—the withholding mother, the overindulging mother, and so on. We called attention to the lack of understanding of the mother as a complex subject with her own gendered psychology. On the one hand, Mother was seen to be the most influential person for the developing infant, while on the other hand, she remained an object, described from the point of view of her infant and essentially unknown. Again, it seemed obvious to us that so much more could be learned about the developing psyche of the infant when the mother became a three-dimensional subject.

In our first book, *Understanding Women*, Susie Orbach and I (1983) attempted to articulate the requirements of femininity that passed from one generation (the mother) to the next (the daughter). For example, deferring to others and curbing one's own initiative—both part and parcel of girls' experience—were examples of how the outside, patriarchal culture takes up residence in the internal world of the girl and later the woman. In the late seventies and early eighties, our work, along with the work of other