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In praise of gender confusion

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*Not being certain of your gender is less of a
problem than being too certain, argues Jungian
analyst Andrew Samuels*

Most people are wary now of anyone who seems too settled and sure in their gender identity and gender role. Think of the tycoon - so capable and dynamic, such a marvellous self-starter. Don't we know that, secretly, he is a sobbing little boy, dependent on others, maybe mainly female, for all his feelings of safeness and security? Or the Don Juan, talking incessantly of the women he has seduced, who turns out to have fantasies of being female himself and yearns to be seduced by another man. Or the woman who seems so fulfilled as a mother yet privately desires to express herself in ways other than maternity, to come into another kind of power, to protest at her cultural 'castration'.

So we have come to accept that behind excessive gender certainty lurk gender confusions like these. Yet many will probably consider that, as well as being suspicious of too much gender certainty, it is basically a good thing for everyone to be pretty certain about their gender, to know for sure that, in spite of all the problems with being a man or a woman, one is indeed a man or a woman.

As a therapist, I have come to see that quite another idea is needed to make sense of what people are experiencing in the muddled and mysterious world of late twentieth-century gender relations and gender politics.

Many of the people who come to see me for therapy are indeed manifestly and magnificently confused about their gender identity. Not only are they not at all sure how a man or woman is supposed to behave but they are not sure that, given

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what they know about their internal lives, a person who is truly a man or a woman could possibly feel or fantasize what it is that they themselves are feeling and fantasizing.

I noticed that, for these profound feelings of gender confusion to exist, there had to be an equally profound feeling of gender certainty in operation at some level. You cannot know the detail of your confusion without having an inkling about the certitude against which you are measuring your confusion. The client sobbing his little boy heart out knows very well that tycoons exist and evaluates himself negatively as a result. Indeed, we could even say: no gender certainty, no gender confusion!

What this means is that, to a very great degree, gender confusion is manufactured or constructed in people by the operations of gender certainty. If we agree that these certainties are part of socialisation, then it is hard to deny that the parallel confusions are equally artificial constructions and not deep personal wounds or failures.

Let me underscore the radical implications of what I am saying. We need to extend the by-now conventional insight that gender confusion lies behind gender certainty to see that *gender certainty lies behind gender confusion*. To the extent that gender confusion is usually taken as a mental health problem or a neurosis, we are making a colossal mistake here and even playing a most destructive con trick on those supposedly suffering from gender confusion. The problem is, in fact, gender certainty.

Let's look at how this works out specifically for men in Western countries today. The turgid idea that many men living in a feminism-affected culture feel confused about who they are *as men* takes on a rather different cast when looked at in the light of what I have been saying about gender confusion. Behind the apparent confusion and the pain that many men certainly feel lies the kind of unconscious gender certainty that we import from the culture by internalisation. From this angle, modern men are not at all confused - or, rather, feeling confused is simply not the main problem at depth. Their problem is being afflicted with a gender certainty that is no use to them, and maybe is actually harmful to their potential.

When men's movement leaders offer a certainty that seems to have been missing from the lives of men, they are unwittingly doing nothing more than bringing the unconscious gender certainty that was always there to the surface. As that certainty

came from the culture in the first place, there's nothing radical or scene-shifting about it at all.

The really interesting question is what to do with the feelings of gender confusion from which everyone suffers these days. On a personal level, we need to measure the confusion against the certainty. If we do this, we may find we are not as badly confused as we thought we were. It is not necessary to be confused about being gender-confused. You can evaluate your confusion and decide what to do with it.

I think there *is* a lot we can do with gender confusion. I can see that it all becomes easier to do in words if you replace 'confusion' with something that sounds a lot more positive like 'fluidity', 'flexibility', or even (hateful word) by supporting 'androgyny'. But, although I realise it is a hard sell and won't win votes, I want to stick up for the word 'confusion' because it is an experience-near word, capturing what I do indeed often feel about my gender identity and what many clients I see in therapy feel about theirs.

**'Gender is a story
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half public'**

So - what can be done with gender confusion? I think such confusion contributes something to social and political reform and change. Gender is a key element in modern politics because it sits halfway between the inner and the outer worlds. Gender is a story we tell about ourselves that is half private and half public. It is also something upon which most cultures have erected a welter of oppressive practices and regulations, mostly favouring men. Unfortunately, Tony Blair's new Labour Party may be turning back to a form of gender politics fuelled by the certitudinous 'family values' of the past.

But many men want to make a progressive contribution to gender politics and hence (as men) to the wider political scene. Perhaps they could do it in part on the basis of a frank reframing of how we evaluate the confusion-certainty spectrum in relation to being a man. It isn't necessary to refuse to be a man, or enter into spurious sociopolitical alliances with women that deny the existence of differing political agendas for the sexes. All that may be required in the first instance is a celebration of not knowing too well about who we are in terms of gender, not knowing too well what we are supposed to know very well indeed.

I can illustrate this from my workshops on male psychology. I ask people to do an exercise. I describe a rating scale running from zero to 10 that represents a

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continuum from 'old man' to 'new man'. Old man counts as zero; new man counts as 10. If the person is a man, he is asked to place himself on this scale; if a woman, she is asked to score the most significant man in her life, past or present.

Naively, I thought at first that this would be a straightforward business and we would just zip around the room with people saying 6, 1, 2, 8 and so on. But it never happens like that.

Many people insist on giving multiple answers. A man will say that he sees himself as a 2 *and* a 9. Sometimes this gets expressed more precisely: 'When I'm with a woman I'm more likely to be a 9, right at the new man end, but when I'm with men I find myself a 2 or a 3.'

Another man said: 'I would say I'm a 2. I consider myself traditional, but I'm trying to modify myself.' The number of participants of both sexes who mention words like *modify, change, improve*, is very high. Another man said: 'When I thought about it, I thought five. This isn't out of not wanting to choose, but out of confusion - the struggle, uncertainty and confusion of being a man.'

Many women mock the exercise but I've found what they say quite revealing. One woman said: 'I think my husband is a 2 but *he* thinks he's an 8.' Another woman said: 'I've been married for 33 years. My husband started as a 3 and after bringing up the children together, which was terribly important to him, I think he's become a... 4!'

We need to access what is involved in gender confusion and gender certainty in a new language of fleshy images that speak more directly to people's experience. My eight-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter have been teaching me their theory of gender confusion and this has helped me to write about its positive aspects, and to distinguish what I am interested in (which is self-image at depth) from the more conventional, journalistic level at which men are simply regarded as mixed up because of what women have managed to achieve.

According to my children, there are four main categories which a person cannot escape: boy-boy, boy-girl, girl-girl and girl-boy. The categories are all considered absolutely equal and are very sophisticated in that anatomy is regarded as important but not decisive. (How hard to get that degree of realistic flexibility into academic discourse!) So my daughter can often refer to herself as a girl-girl while my son oscillates between being a boy-girl and a girl-boy. However, one day, my daughter may function as a boy-boy or as a girl-boy. Context is centrally

important - it does depend on whom they are with. My children's system also helps us to get beyond a simplistic heterosexual-homosexual divide. As many adult boy-girls are heterosexual as are homosexual and the certitudes upon which homophobia rests are subverted in this way of speaking.

The point I am making is that the celebration of confusion embodied by these children may be a more effective, interesting and radical way to enter gender politics than either (a) the suspiciousness and judgmentalism of the therapist; or (b) the nostalgia-fuelled return to certainty we see in some aspects of the men's movement; or (c) the advocacy of an ersatz merger of men's sociopolitical interests with those of women. Gender confusion unsettles all the main alternatives on offer. Let's see how this works out in relation to men.

Nowadays, in the West, men are incessantly being seen as 'the problem'. This new stance reverses the trend of centuries in which women - the other sex, the second sex, the dark sex, the sex which is not one - have been the problem men set themselves to solve. Men are often depicted as sexually abusing, domestically violent, planet-despoiling creatures. There is little doubt that the point is a valid one. But, at the same time, a completely different set of images has arisen suggesting a breed of men who support the rights of women and children, and who are ecologically aware and non-violent.

So we are faced with a split in our collective image of men. Conventionally, psychotherapists tell us that such splits come about when something (such as gender confusion) causes unbearable anxiety. I think that immense collective cultural anxiety is actually being caused by the false certitude of masculinity itself - what I call 'the male deal'. It is the male deal which lies behind the deeply problematic gender certainty I mentioned earlier. And it is the male deal which grounds our culture's assumptions about religion, science - and politics.

In the male deal, the little boy, at around three or four years old or earlier, strikes a bargain with the social world in which he lives. If he will turn away from soft things, feminine things, maternal things, from the world of play wherein failure doesn't matter, then the world will reward his gender certainty by giving him all the goodies in its possession - all the women he can eat. In return for the gift of political power, he promises to be a good provider and to keep unruly and subversive women and children in their places. He also promises not to deviate from this function by loving other men too much (that is, becoming gay). Homophobia is really a political defence of the family of capitalism.

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The question I want to pose is whether or not we can reframe the collective confusion about the male deal as an opportunity to rethink a number of things: the deal itself and its damaging as well as pleasurable effects on men; the nature of male authority and its roots in Western attitudes to work; the possibility of women and men facing the difficult economic times ahead as partners as well as adversaries.

Given that men control the sources of economic and political power, including the production of ideas and images of sexual difference, then, if men are on the move at some level, adding male political power to the ideals of male change could be decisive. In other words, we could be confronted with a social movement as significant as feminism but with the crucial difference that men are fortified with possession of all the resources from which women have been excluded.

Nothing is more suspect than the complaint, fuelled by 'victim envy', that society now favours women over men. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to end on the certitudinous note of male power. Taken as a whole, men certainly have power. But many black men, men who are physically challenged, men living in homelessness and poverty, young men dying in pointless wars or rotting in prison cells, and men whose countries have been invaded or occupied, might well dispute that they really do have power. Perhaps there's nothing other than gender confusion. Perhaps there isn't a monolith called 'men' after all. As a woman in one of the workshops said of her husband: 'Well, if you take 1-5 and put it on one side and if you take 6-10 and put it on the other side - *he's in the abyss.*'