

Is the “principle of perfect equality” between the two sexes sufficiently implemented? – The example of female patients with eating disorders

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In 1867, J. S. Mill proposed a principle of perfect equality “admitting no power or privilege” to one of the two sexes. Men and women differ not only in basic aspects of their normal biological function but also in societal opportunities. Although in terms of legal implementation of equal opportunities a lot has been achieved, there are still multiple examples of inequality such as sex ratios in professional careers. Top-down strategies, e. g. gender mainstreaming, do not work efficiently. What is it that prevents women from exercising their options to an adequate degree? Starting from case vignettes of women in inpatient psychotherapy suffering from eating disorders we propose the hypothesis that especially in well educated young women the unconscious attachment to patriarchal family patterns may interfere with their conscious belief that they are equal to men in the right “to pursue happiness”. Strong affective bonds to a father hiding inner confusions about his sex role behind an authoritarian educational style may drive the contrast between conscious and unconscious beliefs to a pathogenic conflict contributing to symptom development. We discuss our thesis on the background of the theory of habitus formulated by P. Bourdieu and feministic informed psychoanalytic theories in order to understand the impact of deeply ingrained affective, cognitive and behavioral patterns contributing to the persistence of more submissive attitudes so often still prevailing in females. We feel it a genuine task of medicine to be aware of gender-specific patterns and to help female patients develop their potentials.