

Colloquium Series Presentation: Review of Jill Gentile, PhD

“Between the Familiar and the Stranger: *Attachment, Agency and Desire*”

On March 4, 2011, Jill Gentile, PhD, gave a presentation at the NYU Kimmel Center on the ‘familiar’ and ‘the stranger’ in relation to how attachment theory informs our psychoanalytic practice. Dr. Gentile, who is a faculty member and Supervisor at Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis, is a graduate of the Institute for the Psychoanalytic Study of Subjectivity in New York. Dr. Gentile has taught classes in gender and sexuality, personal agency, and comparative intersubjectivity, and has published articles in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, *the International Journal of Psychoanalysis* and *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*.

Dr. Gentile began her talk with the question, “Why have we established a clinical practice in which patients seek out ‘strangers’ to engage in the most intimate conversation of our lives?” Dr. Gentile aimed to answer throughout her presentation, starting with a review of Bowlby’s attachment theory, and emphasizing that attachment is a “way for us to ensure survival.”

Dr. Gentile developed the idea that we must reconcile the familiar and the strange by making a connection between attachment theory’s emphasis on the primacy of an attachment relation and the emphasis within relational psychoanalysis on the “desire to know and be known.” This process of mutual discovery, according to Dr. Gentile, is essential if we are to change our insecure relationships to secure ones. In order to do this, she asserted, we must be aware that we have ‘wants’, and also come to discover that our attachment figure wants us, as well. She clarified that the ‘wants’ and ‘desires’ of the familiar and the stranger are not just ‘wants’ or ‘desires’ but, in some fundamental way, also a ‘need’. Developing a relationship in which we feel desired (wanted) requires that we feel safe enough to expose our desire to these attachment figures, and thereby foster connection and/or intimacy in relationships, according to Dr. Gentile.

Dr. Gentile elaborated that desires and wants are communicated between patient and analyst and infant and caretaker, within an evolving space of sameness and difference, that of the familiar and the stranger. This is the so-

called “third space” in which we as analysts observe how our patients manage separation and reunion. We foment an environment of intimacy and develop a ‘relationship’ as our patients ebb and flow in this encounter between insecure and secure, desire and retreat. In this third space, according to Dr. Gentile, they may be more curious about us, become aware of their feelings towards us, and take increasing notice of us in the room. Some of our patients may communicate that they are approaching this encounter with us as both familiar and strange by referring to the analytic relationship as “weird” and “strange”, as if to tell us it is too threatening - becoming more intimate despite (and because) it is becoming more strange.

In the therapeutic dyad, asserted Dr. Gentile, we work towards helping our patients develop self-agency in which they can develop secure attachments with others who are located between the familiar and the stranger. Dr. Gentile posits that we cannot attain secure attachment without taking the risk to expose that we “want” -- in this sense, security of attachment requires (and also contributes to) a beginning sense of agency. In response to this fear and potential risk of getting hurt, perhaps being rejected or feeling unwanted, the ebb/flow of getting close and retreating gets played out in the therapeutic dyad. In helping our patients navigate the symbolic third space, they can become more confident in moving towards taking the risk towards having the secure relationships so many of them desire. This process helps our patients to reclaim ‘original love.’ Beyond that, according to Dr. Gentile, it creates the possibility of reconciling our love of the stranger with our love of the familiar and, thereby, reconciling erotic desire with security of attachment.

At the end of her presentation, a lively discussion ensued, affirming the relevance of how attachment theory informs and guides our work with patients.

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