

Colloquium Series Presentation: Review of Sue Kolod, PhD
“The Hormonal Body and Its Influence on the Psyche”

On December 3, 2010, Sue Kolod, Ph.D. gave a presentation at NYU’s Kimmel Center that addressed the impact of the hormonal body on the psyche and considered the influence of the menstrual cycle on a woman's sense of self. Dr. Kolod is a faculty member and supervisor at Manhattan Institute for Psychoanalysis, as well as a faculty member, Training and Supervising Analyst, and Chair of the Council Of Fellows, at the William Alanson White Institute.

Dr. Kolod began by stating that historically, the psychoanalytic literature has largely ignored the impact of the menstrual cycle on a woman's psyche due to sexism as well as concern over ways in which the hormonal body has been used to support a negative view of women. She provided a thorough and fascinating look at psychoanalytic thinking about the female experience and the hormonal body beginning with the classical literature and moving onto the writings of Helene Deutsch and Karen Horney. Dr. Kolod then discussed the work of Therese Benedek, who conducted meticulous research that demonstrated the impact of woman’s hormonal cycle on her psyche, and Katharina Dalton who was a pioneering researcher in the area of premenstrual syndrome. She then addressed the resistance of second wave feminism to acknowledging the impact of the hormonal cycle on women’s thoughts, feelings and self-experiences.

Dr. Kolod believes that women experience several different self-states during the course of their menstrual cycle. She presented two clinical vignettes to illustrate how inquiry into these self-states can move the treatment forward.

The first clinical vignette that she presented was of a patient, identified as Rose, who reported how, over the previous week, she had felt depressed, angry, irritable and generally did not feel “like herself.” The patient reported going into a panic after an argument with her boyfriend which began when he became bored and left her at the planetarium to finish looking at the exhibit. After a while, he called her, asked when she was coming out and awhile later, when she did come outside he had already left. Rose was angry, but unable to explain why she had gone into a panic about the relationship, believing in that moment that he no longer wanted to be with her. Rose became critical of her boyfriend, which led to more arguing. Rose found herself unable to explain why she had reacted so strongly, particularly when she had not even communicated her panic or worry to her boyfriend. Eventually, Rose was able to recognize that she was creating problems where there were none. Rose expressed that whole experience made her feel a “little crazy”. A few days later, Rose reported that she got her period and almost immediately “felt like myself again”, and reconnected with her confident, energetic, secure self which she had become dissociated from in her premenstrual phase.

Dr. Kolod used this example as a way of demonstrating the impact that the cyclical hormonal cycle that adult women experience can have a significant impact on their self-experience. Referencing Philip Bromberg’s concept of self-states, Dr. Kolod discussed the significance and importance of analyst and patient recognizing and attending to the different and distinct self-states a woman may experience during her pre and post menstrual phases. These self-state may be quite dissociated from each other. Dr. Kolod emphasized the importance for analytic work of

recognizing and exploring the experiences of multiple self-states in order to help the patient recognize and give voice to all aspects of her experience.

Dr. Kolod presented a second clinical vignette about Amy, who during her premenstrual phase was able to view her troubled relationship with her husband more realistically, rather than trivialize the difficulties and behavior of her husband in their relationship, as she did much of the time. Dr. Kolod and Amy came to understand that her premenstrual self-state provided a “window of opportunity” to address issues not usually available for examination. Over several years, by helping Amy to see that her premenstrual thoughts were valid, she was able to eventually come to the realization that she wanted to leave her husband.

Dr. Kolod’s presentation was followed by a lively discussion in which audience members further explored thoughts about the experiences of women in and out of the consulting room.

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