
The Meanings of "Dependency" in Female-Male Relationships

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About the Author

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Abstract

"Dependency" as a relational term has taken on pejorative connotations because of its long-standing identification as a feminine characteristic. Both women and men struggle with the expression of dependency needs, but their struggles emerge from different life experiences and different cultural expectations. Men's development of qualities which facilitate close relationships and intimacy conflicts with their sense of themselves as masculine, self-sufficient, and independent. Women are reared in a context that fosters closeness and intimacy with others, but the importance of relationships to them and their need to be engaged with others often are viewed negatively, as indicators of dependency. Women and men deny their needs to be taken care of, with men viewing expressions of their own neediness as a threat to their autonomy, and women experiencing their own needs as expressions of selfishness. A proposed new concept posits dependency as a context for healthy growth and a characteristic for assimilation into a positive self-image for all persons.

In this paper I will be examining the role of dependency in relationships between women and men. As the title indicates, this will involve exploring the meaning of the word "dependency," as a relational term. I hope to demonstrate how unclear its meaning is and how differently it has been used in different contexts. In particular, I would like to make the point that it is a term which has acquired such pejorative connotations, precisely because it has been considered for so long to be a feminine characteristic. I will then attempt to speculate about why women and men have trouble depending on each other and the modes they have taken to be gratified and to defend against the gratification of their needs. My focus will be on women and men in heterosexual relationships, although I believe many of the observations can be applied to women and men in their lives in general.

In considering women's and men's struggles around dependency, we see how each sex adapts differently and each fares better or worse in some settings than in others. The capabilities for working and loving, as Freud said, are the hallmark of mature adulthood. Yet women and men are both limited in different ways in the development of these capabilities. While men may have seemed to manage better at work and women seemed more expert about love, we shall see that conflicts around dependency interfere with the optimal functioning of both women and men in both work and love.

The differences in women's and men's experience

For women, their sense of femininity seems jeopardized by the expectations of how they ought to behave at work; for men, their sense of masculinity seems jeopardized by what is required to establish close interpersonal relationships. Women in work

situations experience considerable dissonance between the expression of such interpersonal qualities as nurturance, emotionality, and empathy and what they see as the qualities expected of them to succeed at work — namely drive, ambition, and competitiveness.

The conceptualization presented in recent writings on female development — that a woman's sense of self is a relational one and that her need to feel related to others is a crucial aspect of her identity (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1983,1984) — allows us to understand why women feel so threatened when there is the danger of alienation from both men and women, something they often experience in the work arena. At "home" and in other interpersonal settings, a woman's relational self seems to serve her better. To be attentive to the needs of others, to want to connect with others, to be expressive of feelings — all these presumably allow her to feel more comfortable with herself. We shall see, however, it is not quite this simple.

Men at work usually experience the demands to be competitive, to suppress emotions, and to maintain an impersonal attitude as syntonic with their sense of themselves as men. One needs to question how adaptive these qualities are, even in the working arena, since it is an interpersonal context; still the more successful a man is at work, the more manly he feels. The pressures to demonstrate self sufficiency and independence as signs of adulthood allow men to tolerate possible alienation from others in the course of competitive work situations. Paradoxically, men are more accepted, more admired, and less apt to become alienated, the more they succeed at work (Stiver, 1983).

At "home" however, men's capacity to develop, express, and own qualities which facilitate close relationships and intimacy appears to conflict with their sense of themselves as "masculine," self-sufficient, and independent. To acknowledge a need for others, to be open about one's feelings, and to be sensitive and empathetic with women are all apparently quite threatening to the sense of manliness for many men.

In a study of the images of violence that appear in stories written by college students about pictures on the Thematic Apperception Test, Pollack and Gilligan (1982) found statistically significant sex differences. Men see dangers more often in close personal affiliations than in achievement, and they construe danger to arise from intimacy. Women, on the other hand, perceive danger in impersonal, achievement situations and construe danger to derive from

competitive success.

The danger men describe in their stories on intimacy is a danger of entrapment or betrayal — being caught in a smothering relationship or humiliated by rejection and deceit. The danger women portray in tales of achievement is danger in isolation — fear that in standing out or being set apart by success, they will be left alone. As people draw closer in pictures, the images of violence in men's stories increase; as people move further apart, violence in women's stories increases. The authors conclude that men and women experience attachment and separation in different ways and that each sex perceives a danger which the other does not see: men in connection, women in separation.

In the book *Couples in Collusion*, Willi (1982) describes the different ways in which women and men present themselves as they enter couples therapy. The "prototypic" woman is usually one who initiates the therapy, since she feels so dissatisfied, then takes on the role of the plaintiff, accusing her husband of indifference, lack of understanding, and oppression. She complains about raising the children alone and presents a range of physical symptoms, moodiness, and suicidal ideation. She seems clearly quite emotionally upset and expresses disillusionment in her search for intimacy and togetherness.

Willi acknowledges that in current psychiatric circles she could easily be labeled as "hysterical." Her complaints would be considered excessive, devoid of objectivity, and often as evidence of regressive and infantile behavior. She might then be called immature and dependent.

The "prototypic" male is described as resistant to therapy, because he feels marital conflict should not be open to a third party. Also the man typically believes that voicing disputes in therapy only makes matters worse. He reacts defensively to the woman's complaints, controls his reactions, trivializes reproaches, and reduces points of argument to objective practical problems. Despite the woman's clear dissatisfaction, he is apparently content with the marriage and does not wish to make any changes.

Willi notes that the man's behavior and style of presenting himself in couples therapy does not seem as amenable to psychiatric diagnosis as does the woman's. There is no ready label of psychopathology in the man's presentation. Yet men have shorter life expectancy, a higher incidence of serious psychosomatic difficulties and alcoholism, and they make more successful suicide attempts (Willi, 1982; Pleck, 1981). One could, of course, interpret the