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# The Development of Women's Sense of Self

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## About the Author

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## Abstract

As now incorporated into psychological thought, the definition of the self reflects major trends in Western history. Current psychological definitions can be usefully understood in this light, especially in that they emphasize separation and individuation but may neglect the intricacies of human interconnection. The psychological characteristics that result from the latter life activity have not been incorporated into prevalent conceptions of the self, nor into the delineation of the processes of development. Data derived from the close examination of women can lead to new understanding of both women and men.

The concept of the self has been prominent in psychological theory, but perhaps this is so because it has been one of the central ideas in Western thought. While various writers use different definitions, the essential idea of "a self" seems to underlie the historical development of many Western notions about such vast issues as the "good life," justice, or freedom. Indeed, it seems entwined in the roots of several delineations of the fundamental human motive or the highest form of existence, as in Maslow's self-actualizing character.

As we have inherited it, the notion of "a self" does not appear to fit women's experience. Several recent writers have spoken to this point, for example, literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun (1979) and psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982). A question then arises, "Do only men have a self, and not women?" In working with women, the question is quite puzzling, but an examination of the very puzzle, itself, may cast new light on certain long-standing assumptions.

Modern American workers who write on early psychological development and, indeed, on the entire life span, from Erik Erikson (1950) to Daniel Levinson (1978), tend to see all of development as a process of separating one's self out from the matrix of others, "becoming one's own man," in Levinson's terms. Development of the self presumably is attained via a series of painful crises by which the individual accomplishes a sequence of allegedly essential separations from others and thereby achieves an inner sense of separated individuation. Few men ever attain such self-sufficiency, as every woman knows. They are usually supported by numbers of wives, mistresses, mothers, daughters, secretaries, nurses, and others (and groups of other men who are lower than they are in the socioeconomic hierarchy, if they are higher). Thus, there is reason to question whether this model accurately reflects men's lives. Its goals, however, are held out for all and are seen as the preconditions for mental health.

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Almost every modern psychiatrist who has tried to fit women into the prevalent models has had much more obvious difficulty, beginning with Freud, going through Erikson and others. Some haven't tried. In Erikson's scheme, for example, after the first stage, in which the aim is the development of basic trust, the aim of every other stage, until young adulthood, is some form of increased separation or self-development (1950). I'm not referring at this point to the process by which each aim is attained (although that is an intimately related point — see below), but the aim, itself, the goal. It is important to note that the aim is not something like developing greater capacity for emotional connection to others or for contributing to an interchange between people or for playing a part in the growth of others as well as one's self. When the individual arrives at the stage called "intimacy," he is supposed to be able to be intimate with another person(s), having spent all of his prior development geared to something very different.

Recently, a large amount of writing, which deplores men's incapacity to engage in intimacy, has come from the women's movement. But men have been making the same testimony. Almost all of modern literature, philosophy, and commentary in other forms portrays men's lack of a sense of community — indeed, even of the possibility of communicating with others.

Thus, the prevailing models may not describe well what occurs in men; in addition, there is a question about the value of these models even if it were possible to fulfill their requirements. These two questions are related, as I'll try to suggest. It is very important to note, however, that the prevalent models are powerful, because they have become prescriptions about what *should* happen. They affect men; they determine the actions of mental health professionals. They have affected women adversely in one way in the past. They are affecting women in another way now, if women seek "equal access" to them. Therefore, it behooves us to examine them carefully. It's important not to leap to the only models available.

### The beginnings

What are some of the questions which arise when we try to bring women's experience into the picture? We can take Erikson's theories as a starting point, not in order to attempt a thorough examination of them, but to use his formulations as a framework for consideration of a few of the many features in women's development.

In the first stage of life, Erikson says that the central goal is the infant's development of a sense of basic trust (1950). There is another important

dimension. Even at that early stage in all infants, but encouraged much more so in girls, the young child begins to be like and act like the main caretaker who, up until now, has usually been a woman — not to "identify" with that person as some static figure described only by gender, but with what that person *actually* is doing. I think that the infant begins to develop an internal representation of her/himself as a kind of being that, for the moment, I'll call by a hyphenated term — a *being-in-relationship*. This is the beginning of a sense of "self" which reflects what is happening *between* people, as known by the relation between people. The infant picks up the feelings of the other person; that is, it has an early sense that "I feel what's going on in the other as well as what's going on in myself." Really, it's more complex, because it's "knowing" — feeling — what's going on in that emotional field between us. The child experiences a sense of comfort only as the other is also comfortable, or, a little more accurately, only as they are both engaged in an emotional relationship that is moving toward greater well-being, rather than toward the opposite, i.e., only as the interactions in the emotional field between the infant and the adult are moving toward a "better" progression of events.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the infant, actively exerting an effect on the relationship, begins to develop an internal sense of her/himself as one who changes the emotional interplay for both participants — for good or ill.

The beginnings of a mental construction of self are much more complicated than those suggested by such commonly used terms as fusion, merger, and the like for the mental constructions of the first stages of infancy, as drawn from Mahler (1975), object relations theorists, and others. New research on infant-care-taker interactions also indicates the inappropriateness of those terms (see, for example, Stern, 1980; Stechler & Kaplan, 1980; Klein, 1976).<sup>1</sup> This research suggests that these constructs are not likely to describe adequately the complex internal representations of the self and "the other" or, rather, the internal self-other relational patterns that the infant is likely to create even from the earliest age.

When we talk about a sense of self in this field, we have been referring to a "man-made" construct meant to describe an internal mental representation. The suggestion here is that from the moment of birth this internal representation is of a self which is in active interchange with other selves. Moreover, the kind of interaction has one central characteristic, and that is that people are attending to the infant — most importantly, attending to the infant's core of being, which means the infant's emotions — and the infant is responding in the same way, i.e., to the other person's