The Development of Women’s Sense of Self

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

About the Author
Jean Baker Miller, M.D., is the Director of Education at the Stone Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass.; Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine; author of Toward a New Psychology of Women; and editor of Psychoanalysis and Women.

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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 decries 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.

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). 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