
Self-in-Relation: A Theory of Women's Development

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About the Author

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Abstract

While most developmental theories emphasize the importance of disconnection from early relationships to achieve a separate and bounded sense of self, women's experience contradicts such theory and suggests that a new model of development is needed to account for the centrality and continuity of relationships throughout women's lives. This paper outlines the framework of such a model, postulating the "relational self" as the core self-structure in women, and describing the formative dynamics of this relational self-structure within the early mother-daughter relationship. Key structural and developmental aspects of this relationship are suggested, and the application of this model to clinical work is illustrated.

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For the past two years in these Stone Center Colloquia we have been discussing important aspects of women's psychological development covering such diverse topics as women and power, empathy, work, anger, incest, and eating patterns, among others. Throughout many of these papers, there have been references to the idea that the "self" in women may be experienced in a way that is not addressed by current psychoanalytic and developmental theories. The construct of the "self-in-relation" has played an important part in our understanding of these diverse topics and has proved helpful in suggesting innovative programs and therapeutic interventions. I would like to focus more specifically on the central organizing construct of the "self-in-relation," to reflect on the ongoing exploration of this idea, and to elaborate on further aspects of it. I hope this will help lay the groundwork for further discussion during the current series. We at the Stone Center and this year's colloquia speakers hope that you will participate with us in exploring, advancing, and critiquing our theoretical formulations throughout the series.

The idea of self is prominent in current psychological theories describing childhood and adult development. The inquiry into the nature of the self as an organizing principle in human development has been a fundamental aspect of psychological, philosophical, and spiritual investigation. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to review this extensive literature, for present purposes I will propose a working definition of self: a construct useful in describing the organization of a person's experience and construction of reality which illuminates the purpose and directionality of her/his behavior.

Recently several authors have proposed that there are important sex differences in the experience and construction of the self. A central theme of *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976) is that

“women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships” (p. 83). Miller discusses the necessity of developing new language and new concepts to describe women’s unique experiences and points to the problems which arise when the principles of male development are cast as universal principles of human development. Carol Gilligan (1982) has written further of the importance of women finding their own voice in order to describe “ourselves to ourselves,” and has indicated that women’s experiences of connectedness to others leads to enlarged conceptions of self, morality, and visions of relationship. It is essential to point out that the inquiry into the nature of women’s development is a step in the evolution of understanding human development. Women in Western society have been “carriers” of certain aspects of the human experience (Miller, 1976), and a full understanding of human development can be derived only from a thorough elucidation of both female and male experience.

Our conception of the self-in-relation involves the recognition that, for women, the primary experience of self is relational; that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships. To understand this basic assumption it is helpful to use as a contrast some current assumptions about male (often generalized to human) development. Currently, developmental theory stresses the importance of separation from the mother at early stages of childhood development (Mahler, Pine, & Berman, 1975), from the family at adolescence (Erikson, 1963), and from teachers and mentors in adulthood (Levinson, 1978) in order for the individual to form a distinct, separate identity. High value is placed on autonomy, self-reliance, independence, self-actualization, “listening to and following” one’s own unique dream, destiny, and fulfillment. Intimacy and generativity in adulthood (in Erikson’s terms) are seen as possible only after the “closure” of identity. In his theoretical framework, relational “trust” is established in early infancy and does not re-emerge as central until the end of adolescence. Our theory suggests, instead, that for women a different — and relational — pathway is primary and continuous, although its centrality may have been “hidden” and unacknowledged.

The values of individuation have permeated our cultural ideals as well as our clinical theories and practice. In psychological theory, the concepts and descriptions of relationship appear to be cast in this model, and much of current theory wrestles with the problem of developing a model of “object relations”

from a basic assumption of narcissism and human separateness. The notion of the self-in-relation makes an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development. Further, relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: i.e., the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence. The self-in-relation model assumes that other aspects of self (e.g., creativity, autonomy, assertion) develop within this primary context. That is, other aspects of self-development emerge in the context of relationship, and there is no inherent need to disconnect or to sacrifice relationship for self-development. This formulation implies that we must develop an adequate description of relational development in order to understand self-development.

Empathy as a crucial feature

Recent theories on the early development of the self have emphasized the importance of empathy (Kohut, 1971; Winnicott, 1971). However, the interest in connections with others is much more prominent at all stages of life for women. Research and clinical observation show that most women have a greater ability for relatedness, emotional closeness, and emotional flexibility than do most men. The capacity for empathy, consistently found to be more developed in women, can be seen as the central organizing concept in women’s relational experience. Before discussing the development of the capacity for empathy, I want to emphasize that our definition of relationship involves an experience of mutual empathy. The ability to be in relationship appears to rest on the development of the capacity for empathy in both or all persons involved. Kohut (1971) has emphasized the importance of parental empathy and mirroring in the child’s early self-development, but almost no attention has been devoted to the topic of *teaching and learning empathy*. The “good enough mother” (Winnicott, 1971) capable of providing an empathic facilitating environment for the growing child does not suddenly appear with the birth of an infant. Much unrecognized learning must have taken place to allow the complex capacities for mothering to emerge in response to the changes of the growing child (Miller, 1976). The development of the capacity for empathy needs to be studied and elaborated carefully. For the present, we are postulating that the best realm available in which to study its origin is in the early mother-daughter relationship. Jordan (1983) has re-examined the concept of empathy in this light. She has shown that the ability to experience, comprehend, and respond to the inner state of another