Women's Self Development in Late Adolescence

Paper #1
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Paper #2
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Abstract
Self-in-relation theory provides some new understandings of women’s psychological development during the college years. Prevailing theories characterize adolescence as a time of “emotional disengagement” and “severing” from family bonds. By contrast, we see adolescence for women as one phase in an ongoing process of relational development. During this time, family relationships—especially mother-daughter relationships—undergo change, but this change occurs within a continuity of affective connection, not a lessening of connection. Conflict between the adolescent daughter and her parents plays an important role in the process of growth within relationship. While the college setting ideally might promote development through connection, the existing orientation toward individual, competitive achievement leads instead to separation and isolation. This dynamic can impair women students’ sense of well-being, even in the face of academic success, because their learning is cut off from those areas that have deepest meaning to them.

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Prevailing theoretical views portray late adolescence as part of a broader developmental framework—one that equates psychological maturation with increasing levels of autonomy, separation, and independence, and that stresses competitive achievement as an important basis for self-evaluation. Yet, observations and clinical experience at the Stone Center and elsewhere reveal that neither this general developmental pattern nor this description of late adolescence fits women’s actual mode of growth (Miller, 1976; Jordan, Surrey, Kaplan, 1983; Josselson, 1980; Gilligan, 1982).

In this paper we will suggest some reinterpretations of the late adolescent developmental paradigms based on the model of the “self-in-relation” which is being developed at the Stone Center (Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984). Within this model, women’s core
self-structure emerges out of experience of a relational process. Beginning with the earliest mother-daughter interactions, this relational sense of self develops out of women’s involvement in progressively complex relationships, characterized by mutual identifications, attention to the interplay between each other’s emotions and caring about the process and activity of relationship. Note that in speaking of relationships, we are referring not just to actual relationships, but to important inner constructions of the relational process.

The dynamic of the early mother-child relationship initiates the development of the core relational self. This dynamic is characterized by a finely-tuned affective sensitivity and responsiveness of the mother to the child and vice versa. The child identifies not with a static image of the mother, but with an image of the mother as an active caretaker. From this, the earliest mental images of the self are of a self whose emotional core is responded to by the other and who responds back to the emotions of the other. Miller (1984) has noted that this “interacting sense of self” is probably present initially in all infants but is then discouraged from full evolution in boys, at least in this culture. In girls, however, it becomes the kernel around which additional dynamic images of the self are organized. As a result, for women the sense of self is refined, enhanced, and strengthened, not through a series of separations, but through the inner experiences of relationships marked by mutuality and affective connection. Being in relationship, empathically sharing with another and maintaining the well-being of relationships function as important motivations for action, as well as sources for self-esteem and self-affirmation.

As we turn to describing the development of the core relational self in late adolescence, we will focus on how the relational nature of the self shapes women’s experiences of the situations facing them at this time. Although we will be drawing on experience with college women in this paper, we postulate that these formulations will hold up as well or better for other women of this age. We will be taking a somewhat arbitrary slice out of what we see as an ongoing, expanding, and fluctuating—process that ebbs and flows in response to life conditions. Development of the core relational self, as we see it, cannot be described within the confines of standard epigenetic theories. Such theories portray a picture of development as a discrete series of stages, each of which represents a developmental advance over previous stages (Freud, 1905; Erickson, 1950; Sullivan, 1953; Alexander, 1963). Evidence of continuing patterns from an earlier stage is often considered a sign of regression or retarded development. By contrast, we are describing a much more fluid and interconnected process in which early modes of being become the base for a continuation and expansion of the relational self.

Themes in the literature on adolescence

In the literature on adolescence, the most prominent current models of growth pose a dichotomy between self-differentiation and interpersonal connection. It is as if these were mutually exclusive human processes (Benedek, 1979; Slaff, 1979; Gilligan, 1979, 1982). This view of development is buttressed by several broad themes embedded in the literature. One theme, stemming from early Freudian tenets, holds that a primary task of late adolescence is the consolidation of an autonomous identity, via a process of increasing disconnection from internal and external primary love objects (Freud, 1905; Deutsch, 1944, 1967; Blos, 1962, 1979; Galenson, 1976; Ritvo, 1976; Erickson, 1968). Deutsch and Blos are prominent amongst those who describe adolescence in terms of a “loosening of affectionate ties,” “emotional disengagement,” and “severing” of family bonds. And when talking about late adolescent girls, in particular, they stress a maturational demand to turn away from the early mother-daughter relationship.

A second theme is that of the “firmly-bounded” self. Blos was the first to posit a “second individuation” process, at the close of which the adolescent should have attained a distinctly separated self, with firm demarcations between self and others. Following from this, theorists have typically described as regressive and pathogenic the very same continuity of mother-daughter closeness and mutual identification that we believe enhances a daughter’s maturation (Jones, 1935; Lampl de Groot, 1960; Deutsch, 1967; Blos, 1962; Easser, 1976; Ritvo, 1976; Ticho, 1976). From Deutsch on, theorists have focused on a threat to feminine development inherent—as they see it—in the “regressive pull” of the internalized preoedipal mother. Further, they emphasize the role of this pull in the pathogenesis of such problems as promiscuity, infantilism, or sexual inhibition.

These formulations about the firmness of self-boundaries and the repudiation of early maternal ties are now being questioned in relation to female adolescent development. Blos, for example, has acknowledged recently that “the adolescent girl tolerates...a far greater fluidity between the infantile attachments to both parents and her adult personality