Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality

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About the Author

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Abstract

Personal desire is seen typically as central to the development of the autonomous, self-determined Western adult. In a traditional pattern of development, the motivation for power and mastery and a belief in the primacy of individual desire form a triad of psychological traits which eventuate in disconnection and objectification of the other person in a relationship. The socialization of adolescent sexuality currently contributes to a different pattern of desire for boys and girls; it encourages sexual entitlement in boys and sexual accommodation and lack of clarity about desire in girls. Both of these orientations have a far-reaching and damaging impact on psychological development. In a relational model, desire, conceived of as arising in an empathic relationship, leads to enhancement of the relationship. Relational growth then becomes more fulfilling than individual satisfaction, and this leads to a new definition of desire.

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> *There are two great tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it.*
>
> G. B. Shaw

This paper is about desire . . . how we know it and how we act on it. The notion of a contained and separate self, basic to most of Western psychology, contributes (in practice if not intent) to the idea that there can be clarity about the self separated out from context and that one can be aware of and true to one's values, desires, motives, feelings, and thoughts as if in a vacuum. Acting in a "self-determined" way out of this clarity is often what is meant by "individual freedom" or autonomy.

Pivotal to this individualistic picture of human beings is the pleasure principle (Freud, 1920/1953; Mill, 1861). This principle is profoundly engrained in Western psychology in both the Freudian and behavioristic traditions: attainment of satisfaction, motivated by desire, is the supreme goal of conduct and therefore serves to shape the self. In this tradition, "the self" *is* the personal history of gratifications and frustrations of desire and the projection of these into the future in the form of intention.

By contrast with this basic mode, I will examine some implications of a different view of the self that suggests other routes to attaining a sense of clarity in knowing ourselves (Jordan, 1984; Kaplan, 1987; Miller, 1986; Stiver, 1986; Surrey, 1984). I will look at the part desire plays in this process and I will illustrate it by discussing women's and men's expression of sexuality in adolescence.

I suggest we achieve a sense of personal integration through relatedness with others and that this integration, not a state of separate homeostasis of drives (Freud, 1920/1953), provides a sense of well-being. An intrinsic interest in and movement toward connection is a basic organizing and motivating force in psychological growth. This statement does not fit neatly into either a self-centered drive theory nor altruistic explanations of motivation. Further, a sense of uniqueness does not depend on separateness or comparative, hierarchical measuring. The espousal of self-containment, self-sufficiency, and self-assertion as a model for self-development contributes to the illusion of separateness and leads paradoxically to an experience of "self" as endangered and fragmented. When disconnected from you, I feel less confident that you will be responsive to my needs; a system of power, rights and entitlement then develops to try to ensure that my wants will be met.

How do women want?

The question, "What do women want?" has been posed repeatedly, most notably by Freud ("Was will das Weib?" Jones, 1958, p. 421). Often there is an edge of impatience to it, as if to say, "When are these women going to get clear and tell us what they want!!!?" Two responses occur to me. First, before we address the question *what* do women want, we might ask: "*How* do women want?" And related to this is: "Who is listening to what women want? And do the people who pose this question really want to hear?"

Several authors have addressed the nature of woman's voice (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al., 1986), and some have begun to explore further the importance of the listener to the quality of the voice that emerges (Miller, 1986). The expectation that someone will listen and make an effort to understand greatly enhances the clarity and sureness of the message presented.

A vignette from a psychotherapy session may capture this dynamic. Ann, an artist, started off her session talking about the importance of a friend's responsiveness to one of her paintings in helping her to move forward with it. She then spoke of not liking to write in her journal anymore because it felt lonely, a dead-end. She was making a lot of sense, but I was preoccupied, . . . with this paper, as a matter of fact. She fell into more silences and disjointed utterances, and finally said, "I feel lost, like I'm in a fog today. I don't know what I want to talk about." More silence, as I ruminated about how to get this paper done and struggled with my own drifting, confused thoughts. I indicated things did not seem clear. Thankfully, she helped me by saying, "With you or me?" Suddenly, becoming clearer myself, I could tell her that I felt preoccupied and that I thought I had left her alone, as with her journal, in the session. I had been unable to be fully attentive, and we both now felt confused. With this, she looked relieved and talked about the importance of my being more present, and about what she wanted from me; both of us came back into focus.

If the other person does not really wish to know my experience, or does not wish her/his experience known, I may become confused about my desires. This happens routinely to another woman, Cynthia: she approaches her husband with a concern; he impatiently lets her know he is much too busy for this; she withdraws and comes back later, upset now; he criticizes her "overemotionality;" she collapses in tears and feels confused about her original concern. The invalidation that Cynthia experiences is enormous. Cynthia's lack of clarity then becomes *the condition for* the continuation of the relationship.

Thus, when I hear women patients struggling with a sense of inadequacy or despairing that they do not know what they want in important relationships, often with lovers or spouses, I explore the quality of the listening that the partner provides. Is the listener interested, curious? Is he or she empathically present?

If one person relies on empathy to know the other, there is often the expectation, not always conscious, that this will be mutual. If the other is not empathically attuned, disappointment and a sense of being unheard or invalidated results; one's sense of clarity diminishes. Also, because of our own sensitivity to the impact of our wishes on others, women often experience our wants as tentative and unformed. Such tentativeness, in the service of interpersonal sensitivity, could be viewed as *facilitating* relationship, rather than as a personal inadequacy.

Further, a woman's voice often will not be heard, even when it is quite clear, if the woman's reality is not congruent with dominant societal values. Those in a minority position (women, blacks, lesbians, gay men) often do not experience receptivity in listeners from the dominant culture. This failure to hear can, at its worst, lead to profound invalidation resulting in depressive withdrawal and/or outrage. Relationship as dialogue challenges a clear subject-object split (Kaplan, 1987). The "how" of wanting for women is tied to the relational context in which we experience the wish.

Clarity

Our self-awareness has varying degrees of clarity. Unlike the concept of identity (Erikson, 1968), the notion of clarity reduces our tendency to concretize "the self" as "body." When people talk about merging or experiencing "loss of self," they are likely talking about a decreasing clarity, distinctness, and focus about their experience: I cannot see myself