

Women and Empathy: Implications for Psychological Development and Psychotherapy

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Introduction

As described by object relation theorists and self psychologists, empathy is an affective intuitive process involving a temporary breach of ego boundaries and regressive, symbiotic merger. The quality of this empathic bond is likened to the quality of the empathic connection between infant and mother. In both contexts, empathy appears to have mysterious, hidden qualities and to be associated with a temporary loss of a more mature functioning.

The purpose of these papers is to begin an alternative description of the experience of empathy based on new theoretical understandings of women's development. Our concept challenges the assumed link between affective processes and loss of identity. Instead, we propose that empathy involves both affective *and* cognitive functioning and is a far more complex, developmentally advanced and interactive process than is implied by those theories which associate empathy with regression, symbiosis and merger of ego boundaries.

In the spirit of this working paper series, we would like to share these ideas while they are evolving. Judith Jordan began a re-examination of the concept of empathy. Her work stimulated the other authors to expand topics on which they had been working—Janet Surrey's examination of the mother-daughter relationship as the primary model of psychological development, and Alexandra Kaplan's examination of the therapeutic process. Thus, the papers offer formulations on these major topics in addition to empathy itself.

We do not all agree on certain points, even on some fundamental assumptions. These differences extend to our use of terminology. We are struggling to find words which will more adequately describe the phenomena we are studying.

Our differences are part of an ongoing interchange. We hope that they capture some of the quality of our continuing dialog, and, in doing so, carry forward the intent of these working papers.

Empathy and the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

Abstract

Empathy involves both affective arousal and cognitive structuring; flexibility of ego boundaries is essential to the process of empathy. Generally females are more empathic than males because of socialization experiences, early childhood identification, and sex-role identification -- all shaped by prevailing cultural mores. Having the same gender nurturing figure significantly influences the quality of empathy that develops in females. In this culture, the special quality of attachment and identification between mother and daughter fosters the development of empathy.

Most clinical and developmental theory reflects concepts of ego strength which emphasize capacity for delay, objectivity, and firm ego boundaries. Individuation, separation, and objectivity generally are considered indicators of increasing maturity and development (Gilligan, 1977). In fact, these may be potentially adaptive qualities for a typical male milieu, but not necessarily for a typical female milieu. The "average expectable environment" seems to differ for males and females, presenting different interpersonal demands and leading to different adaptive capacities (Carson, 1971). In David Balkan's (1966) terms, our society tends to overemphasize the *agentic* ethic (self-protective, assertive, individualistic, pushing toward achievement) at the expense of the *communal* ethic (being at one with other organisms, characterized by contact or union). The study of empathy may provide one means for examining the relative development of agentic and communal qualities in an individual such that any action for the self would contain a consideration of the effect of this action on others.

Describing empathy

Schafer (1959) defines empathy as "the inner experience of sharing in and comprehending the momentary psychological state of another person." Empathy often has been construed as a mysterious, contagion-like, and primitive phenomenon or has been dismissed as a vague and unknowable subjective state. Empathy, however, is a complex process, relying on a high level of psychological development and ego strength. (Indeed, it may provide a good index of both, and a developmental study using empathy as an indicator of ego strength would be most interesting.) In order to empathize, one must have a well-differentiated sense of self in addition to an appreciation of and sensitivity to the differentness as well as the sameness of another person.

Empathy always involves affective surrender and cognitive structuring, and, in order for empathy to occur, ego boundaries must be flexible. Experientially, empathy begins with the basic capacity and motivation for human relatedness which allows perception of the other's affective cues, verbal and nonverbal. This is followed by a surrender to affective arousal in oneself -- as if the perceived affective cues were one's own -- thus producing a temporary identification with the other's emotional state. Finally, there occurs a resolution period in which one regains a sense of separate self that understands what has just happened. For empathy to be effective, there must be a balance of the affective and cognitive, the subjective and objective. Ego boundary flexibility is important since there is an "as if," trying-out quality to the experience in which one places oneself in the other's shoes or looks through the other's eyes. There is a momentary overlap of self and other representations as distinctions blur experientially. If either relaxation or restructuring of ego boundaries is impaired, empathy will suffer.

Given the balance between affect and cognition that must exist for accurate empathy to develop, one might expect differential patterns of strengths and weaknesses in empathic ability for males and females. On the one hand, if self boundaries are too rigid, there will be little impact of the other's affective state on one's own self. In that case any attempt at understanding the other will be a distanced, intellectual effort to reconstruct what is going on, or a projection of one's own state onto the other. On the other hand, if self boundaries are excessively diffuse, the self-other differentiation may be lost, opening the way for uncontained merging or use of the other as a narcissistic extension of self. In both cases the opportunity for a genuine sense of understanding and being understood—that is, of essential human connectedness—is sacrificed.