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# Empathy Revisited

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## **Empathy: Evolving Theoretical Perspectives**

**Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.**

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the evolution of the Stone Center perspective on women's development. Through the study of language, evolving theoretical concepts are explored, especially concepts of mutual empathy, movement in relationship, the importance of the mother-daughter relationship, and relationships as the ground of action and power.*

**I find it a challenge to look back over the past eight years to consider both the consistent themes and the changing ideas that have characterized our evolving theoretical perspective — ideas you may have shared with us at former colloquia or through the *Work in Progress* series.**

**In 1979, inspired by Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976/1987) we, a group of five women clinicians (Judy Jordan, Sandy Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, and I), began meeting regularly to study women's psychological development with an emphasis on our own experiences working with women. Over the years we, along with other women, have shared our thinking at Stone Center colloquia and have published over 40 *Work in Progress* papers.**

**Since the ideas have been evolving, early papers and language may be inconsistent with later work, and these discrepancies may be confusing. We have not always directed this evolution consciously, and I think it may be interesting to see how we have moved.**

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Also, such retrospection may help clarify our current thinking and may suggest future directions.

I believe the issue of language is very significant. We need to search continually for truly representative language which reflects dynamic relational processes. As part of this ongoing process, I'd like to share with you a critique of our language and invite you to join in this search.

Whom do I mean by "we"? I mean the larger "we" to refer to the wide community of women in many fields attempting to reframe thinking and to realize new paradigms for describing our struggles for psychological development with authenticity, often in oppressive structures (Gilligan, 1982; Belenky, et al., 1986). The small "we" refers to our study group. We have not written collectively; rather, we work relationally and collaboratively. Energized and moved through group interaction, each of us struggles with our own process of growth and way of understanding.

As Jean Baker Miller wrote in the foreword to the second edition of *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, "At times, our ideas flow from the interactions among us; an idea becomes enlarged and transformed in interchange so that it is not what it was when it began and is truly everyone's creation" (1987, p. xxxiii). Yet I am impressed with the differences in the tone, style, language, and particular lines of development in each one's work.

This "we" needs further elaboration. Although we have differences, we share certain limitations in our perspectives. We are all traditionally trained, white, middle-class, professional, and heterosexual. It is important that we name our potential biases and invite women of other experiences to join us in building this theoretical perspective.

Tonight I will attempt a brief, retrospective analysis using my own work as a base and specifically looking critically at my first paper, "The Relational Self in Women," which was published in the *Work in Progress*, "Women and Empathy" (Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1982).

### **Empathy: From unidirectional to mutual**

In 1982 I began as follows:

Dr. Jordan has given us a powerful statement illuminating the central importance of empathy in human development. She challenges us to describe the complex developmental processes which underlie its emergence and may hamper or inhibit its development....Further, I will propose

some aspects of a new model of self-development based on this capacity for relationship — defining the basic core self-structure in women as "self-in-relation," and describing its origin in the mother-daughter relationship. (p. 6)

Consider the starting points for this paper: the centrality of empathy in fostering *human* development, not simply in therapy and not just for women; the recognition of the profound power and value of empathy; the need to account for the developmental evolution of this capacity (not relegating it to early or "primitive" forms of connection); the importance placed on the connections between people in promoting psychological growth. These are still basic themes of our work.

What has changed is the reframing of empathy to a *mutual, active, and interactive process*, involving what some of us have called *mutual empathy*. We still have much disagreement and discomfort with this term. In this first paper I discussed the two-directional aspects of relationships for women, suggesting that the need to understand, the *motive or intent* to be empathic, was of equal importance as the *need for empathy* (Surrey, 1982). While appreciating the contributions of Kohut, Winnicott, Rogers, and others to the study of unidirectional empathy, I added the new dimension of a *motive to be empathic with others*. I described this motive as originating typically in the mother-daughter relationship, with mothers often teaching or facilitating the development of empathy in daughters.

As this theme has developed, we have proposed the notion of the *development of mutually empathic relationships* as a goal of development. Note here that the goal of *self-development* has been replaced by the development of a certain kind of relationship. This concept of mutual empathy also has served as a way of describing the *qualities of mutual relationships* that foster growth in *both or all* participants.

Further, what may have seemed more like a model of reciprocity, equality, or two-directional empathy has now developed into a more interactional, "mutuality" model, stressing the capacity of both or all persons *to be present and moving with the other(s)* in creating a relational dynamic and shaping a relational context (Jordan, 1986; Kaplan, 1988; Stiver, 1985). Mutual empathy is not so much a matter of reciprocity — "I give to you, and then you give to me" — an equal-time doctrine — but rather a quality of relationality, a movement or dynamic of relationship. In 1985 Jean Baker Miller described the psychological