Men’s Psychological Development: A Relational Perspective

Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D.

About the Author
Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D., is Clinical Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Assistant Attending Psychiatrist at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts. Under the pen-name of “Samuel Shem,” he is the author of the novels, The House of God and Fine, and of several plays. With Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D., he has co-authored Bill W. and Dr. Bob, a historical drama about the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Abstract
Current theories of male psychological development emphasize the primary importance of the “self” and fail to describe the whole of men’s experience in relationship. Men as well as women are motivated by a primary desire for connection, and it is less accurate and useful to think of “self” than “self-in-relation” as a process. As with women, the sources of men’s misery are in disconnections, violations, and dominances, and in participating in relationships which are not mutually empowering. However, the specifics of men’s development differ in several important ways.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on November 7, 1990.

© 1991, by Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D.
of my medical internship, to “illustrate how many emotions — fear, horror, sadness, isolation, and especially pain and hurt — are turned into aggressive actions, even sadism....In such a life course the participants are taught an angry denial of reality.” At the end of that paper, Jean wrote: “A truly respectful interchange based on the experience of both sexes can lead us along the path of an enlarging dialogue. And I believe that such dialogue is the only path to the survival of us all.”

It is in this spirit that I present this work.

As an example of what is often seen in men in relationship, let me read from my second novel, Fine. Dr. Fine is an analyst-in-training and is married to Stephanie, who is trying to become a stand-up comic: 

After a while she said: “Tell me, Fine, what are you feeling about us? I need to get in touch with you before I leave.”

Fine was full of feeling for his work and for his internal world, but was startled to find that he did not know what he was feeling for her, his wife. The harder he tried, the more he did not know. Damn, he thought, I’m blocking! “What do you think I’m feeling?”

“I’m not your patient, schmucko, I’m your wife! Just tell me, before I go, where you are with me, okay?”

More blank for her pressure, Fine said: “Don’t pressure me.”

“Wait — let’s not go down this path again — it’s so old: I ask, you see it as an attack rather than an invitation, you retreat; I ask again, you withdraw; I feel cut off and frantic, you get comatose and analyze — please not now — just tell me, simply — I mean with me now, about us — what you feel.”

The word hung on a hook in the air, dropped, balanced, tilted, fell. Fine sensed, in his wife, the same neediness he’d just sensed in his hysteric (patient). Yet without the luxury of analyzing it, he felt paralyzed. Her asking seemed a demand, and he could sense, in his silence, a chill and dead hollowness. He heard her, knew she cared, and wanted to respond — but could not. Had he terminated analysis prematurely? No, the problem is not me, but her — her neurotic hunger. Distracted by the cries of birds, Fine glanced away, looking out the window at the gulls diving for the garbage thrown from the Hull-Boston commuter ferry.

He felt locked into silence.

“You really don’t know how to relate, do you, Fine?”

“No,” he said, relieved, “I don’t. Men don’t have the capacity for empathy that women do.”

“You’re saying men don’t know how to relate?”

“Not nearly so well as women.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m expert on empathy — “

“Ha! Haha!” She exploded with laughter.

“You? You’re the least empathic person I know!”

“Yes,” he said, happily. “That’s why I’m expert — I can be totally objective about it.”

“That’s a cop-out, Fine! Some men have empathy, believe me, I know. Men find a way to relate, when they see that their lives depend on it.”

Current theories of male development

Most current theories of male development are about a “self,” not a “self-in-relation.” Up until recently, most theories of human development have been fashioned by men, and gender-blended. Yet in using a relational model of connections, disconnects, and violations to examine male development, it becomes clear that men themselves are fashioned by an event that is profoundly different from that fashioning women: the disconnection from the relationship with mother, in the name of becoming a man.

Let me comment briefly on current theories of development. Freud suggests that men and women come into the world as isolated selves, with the primary drives of sex and aggression, and that we go through stages of development one after the other like a train crossing Austria, stopping at the right station at the right time. The withdrawal from and renunciation of mother is framed in the heroic Oedipal stage, primary for establishing a solid, independent, gender, and sexual identity. Through some tricky theoretical contortions, fear of castration gets twisted into strong male superego. There is talk of “the pre-Oedipal mother,” which says something about where the value is placed; if we must use such terms, why “the pre-Oedipal mother” rather than “the post-Jocastal son”? Identification with father comes through competition, fear, and renunciation, not through a wish to connect. It sets the stage for hierarchy — that is, patriarchy — for dominance, entitlement, ownership of women, and