

## EMPATHY AND SELF BOUNDARIES

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### **About the Author**

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### **Abstract**

*Empathy, here described as a complex cognitive and affective process, is central to the development of relational capacities and therefore to the sense of self in women. Theoretical models in which the autonomous, individuated self and firm, impermeable boundaries are seen as hallmarks of growth are questioned. The importance of self-boundary flexibility to empathic attunement is described. The idea of self-empathy, in which the observing self extends empathic attunement to the experiencing (object) self, is introduced as a useful therapeutic construct.*

Developmental and clinical theory have generally emphasized the growth of the autonomous, individuated self in such a way that early developmental milestones are typically characterized by greater separation from mother, increasing sense of boundedness, self-control, self as origin of action and intention and increasing use of logical, abstract thought. Likely this particular bias, if we can call it that, derives from several influences: 1) The modeling of psychology as a science on Newtonian physics which emphasized notions of discrete, separate entities acting on each other in measurable ways; 2) the emphasis in western, democratic countries on the sanctity and freedom of the individual; 3) a culture which perceives its task as a weaning of the helpless, dependent infant toward greater self-sufficiency and independence (unlike Japanese culture which views the infant as initially independent, in need of shaping toward dependency); and 4) a study of the psyche which grew from an understanding of pathology in which the ego was seen as needing to protect itself from assaults both by internal impulses and external demands. Freud commented that "Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli," (Freud, S., 1920, p. 27). In traditional psychoanalytic theory, the individual is seen as growing from an undifferentiated, then embedded and symbiotic phase into an individuated, separate state. Mahler's (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman, 1975) theory of separation-individuation details the hypothetical normal development of an increasingly individuated and separate self. Early studies of schizophrenia (Freeman, Cameron, McKhie,

1958) which emphasized the pathological disruption of boundaries between self and other in psychotic decompensations reinforced the notion that healthier, more mature modes of functioning were predicated on greater separation of self and other. Landis points out in his review of ego boundary research that "In most discussion in the literature, firmer boundaries, even extremely impermeable ones, are seen as positive and adaptive, and "open," "weak" boundaries are usually viewed as indications of serious defect." (Landis, 1970, p. 17).

George Klein (1976) was one of the first analytic theorists to point to an imbalance in much of self theory. He posited two major lines of development of the self: "One is an autonomous unit, distinct from others as a locus of action and decision. The second aspect is one's self construed as a necessary part of a unit transcending one's autonomous actions. 'We' identities are also part of the self. Like any biological 'organ' or 'part,' the organism is...and must feel itself to be...both separate and a part of an entity beyond itself" (Klein, 1976, p. 178). More recently, systems theorists have applied the ideas of "a set of interacting units with relationships among them" to development (Miller, 1978, p. 16). Stern (1980) has referred to the "self with the other." Stechler and Kaplan (1980) have written about the coexistence of affiliative and autonomous tendencies, Pollack (1982) has studied "we-ness" in children and their parents, Kohut (1982) and Miller (1976) and Surrey (1983) have posited the special importance of what might be called a "relational self" in women. Concomitantly, Newtonian physics has given way to the "new physics" and quantum theory which emphasizes flow, waves, and interconnections. Instead of emphasis on static structure and discrete, bounded objects existing separately in space, then, we are seeing a growing appreciation of process, relationship, and interaction. In developmental and clinical theory, this is mirrored in growing attention to the line of development of interpersonal connection and relationship rather than a view of the self as developing away from, or independent of, relationship. Too often, however, relational issues have been phrased in regressive terms such as merged, symbiotic, or undifferentiated, suggesting that intense interpersonal connection involves a movement into more primitive functioning. If there is not appreciation for the development of more complex, differentiated patterns of connection and intimacy, then the relational aspect of self definition will continue to be inadequately understood and devalued.

It is against this backdrop of developmental bias that I find the study of empathy most stimulating and relevant. Empathy is central to an understanding of that aspect of the self which involves we-ness, transcendence of the separate, disconnected self. It is, in fact, the process through which one's experienced sense of basic connection and similarity to other humans is established. Heinz Kohut has described empathy as "a fundamental mode of human relatedness, the recognition of the self in the other; it is the accepting, confirming and understanding human echo" (Kohut, 1978, pp 704, 705). Without empathy, there is no intimacy, no real