Connections, Disconnections and Violations

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Abstract
After reviewing formulations from prior Stone Center Working Papers about the characteristics of growth-fostering relationships, this paper begins a description of nongrowth-promoting relationships, that is, relationships which lead to a sense of disconnection from other people. It traces the process by which these experiences of disconnection lead (in complicated ways) to what is labeled psychopathology. Experiences of disconnection inevitably do violence to the individual’s experience. Direct sexual and physical violence represent the extreme forms of the violations which occur in all unequal relationships.

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Over the last two decades women have created an extensive body of literature in psychology as well as other fields. However, a new, fully developed theory of women’s psychological development does not yet exist. Several of these writers have worked on modifications of existing theories such as Freudian, Jungian, object relations and others. Other writers have proposed that the close study of women’s experience leads to the creation of new values, categories and terms; and that these necessitate assumptions different from those which underlie prior theories, e.g., Belenky et al. (1986); Gilligan (1982, 1987); Jordan (1986, 1987); Miller (1976, 1986) and Surrey (1984, 1987). This paper is part of the attempt to carry on the latter kind of work.

I’ll begin by reviewing some of the Stone Center’s work on the centrality of the sense of connection in women’s lives, and then try to suggest how psychological troubles — or what are called “pathologies” — follow from the disconnections and violations that women experience.

Connections
Several groups of workers have suggested that if we study women’s experience closely without attempting to force our observations into prior categories, we find that an inner sense of connection to others is a central organizing feature of women’s development (Gilligan, 1986; Jordan, 1986, 1987; Miller, 1976, 1986 and Surrey, 1984, 1987). As I would summarize it briefly: women’s sense of self and of worth is grounded in the ability to make and maintain relationships (Miller, 1976). Most women find a sense of value and effectiveness if they experience all of their life activity as arising from a context of relationships and as leading on into a greater sense of connection rather than a sense of separation.
Once we take this observation seriously, however, we have to re-examine what we mean by relationships. What kinds of relationships exist or should exist? Again, if we stay close to women’s lives, and if we examine the kinds of connections in which women have been functioning, we find that a large part of women’s life activity can be described as “the active participation in the development of other people” (Miller, 1976), certainly that of children but also adults. This activity has been characterized by such terms as “nurturing”, “mothering”, “satisfying others’ needs” and the like. However, these words do not describe adequately the complex activity involved, that is: engaging with another person(s) in such a manner that you foster the psychological development of both (all) people involved in the interaction.

Another way to describe this activity is to say that traditionally, women have used their powers to increase the powers of others, i.e. to increase the other person(s)’ resources and strengths in many dimensions — emotional, intellectual, etc. (Miller, 1982).

Almost all theorists agree that people develop by interaction with other people. No one develops in isolation. In these interactions, if women or men are not acting in ways that foster others’ development, they inevitably are doing the reverse, that is, participating in interactions in ways that do not further other people’s development.

To talk of participating in psychological development is to talk about a form of activity which is essential for all societies. In general, this is essential activity which has been assigned to women. Thus, women have particular knowledge about it (but this knowledge has not entered into prior theories). From this knowledge, I believe we can begin to propose a form of development within relationships in which everyone interacts in ways that foster the psychological development of all of the people involved, that is, mutual psychological development.

Historically, our central formative relationships have not been founded on the basis of mutuality. This condition has led to many complicated ramifications. For example, growth-fostering interactions have been going mainly in one direction; women have been fostering other people’s growth. This is a societal situation, but our major theories reflect the societal situation. Criteria for maturity, for example, have not included characteristics such as the ability to engage in interactions which foster the development of all the people involved; nor do descriptions of development delineate how children would “learn” to engage in such relationships. Instead, psychological theories, in general, have focused on a line of development which is cast in terms of a series of psychological separations from others.

Thus, as we have not had a societal situation based on the search for full mutuality, we have not had theories about the kind of relationships which foster mutual development through childhood and adult life. Workers at the Stone Center have begun to sketch the outlines of such an approach. Surrey has proposed three underlying processes: mutual engagement (I would prefer the word “interest” or “attention”), mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (1984). Jordan has described some of the characteristics of mutuality as relationships develop over time (1986) and suggested the redefinition of knowledge of self (and other) and of desire which would follow from an “empathic-love” mode of development as contrasted with a “power-control” mode (1987). Kaplan has suggested that the basic human motive can be better understood as the motive to participate in connections, rather than the need for “gratification” by others, a premise basic to prevalent developmental theories (1984). (Cf. Fairbairn stated that the human being is basically “object-seeking” (1946), but he meant that the human being was seeking to obtain gratification from the “object”.)

**Mutual growth**

As Surrey suggests, then, the goal of development is the increasing ability to build and enlarge mutually enhancing relationships (1987). These are relationships which foster the continuing development of all the people involved in them. As the quality of the relationships grow, the individual grows. Each individual can develop a larger and more complex repertoire and can contribute to, and grow from, more complex relationships. The goal is not an increasing sense of separation but of enhanced connection — and, in turn, this connection leads to more growth.

But exactly how do connections lead to psychological development? And what do mutual engagement (or attention), mutual empathy and mutual empowerment look like? I don’t think that anyone has laid out a fully developed description yet, but we can begin with some proposals. To talk of these complicated topics briefly, I’ll use an example between two adults. [This example is taken from an earlier working paper (Miller, 1986).] I think the same basic features apply to children’s development, but an example from children’s development would require...