

Work In Progress

The Meanings of “Dependency” in Female- Male Relationships

Irene P. Stiver

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The Meanings of "Dependency" in Female-Male Relationships

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Abstract

"Dependency" as a relational term has taken on pejorative connotations because of its long-standing identification as a feminine characteristic. Both women and men struggle with the expression of dependency needs, but their struggles emerge from different life experiences and different cultural expectations. Men's development of qualities which facilitate close relationships and intimacy conflicts with their sense of themselves as masculine, self-sufficient, and independent. Women are reared in a context that fosters closeness and intimacy with others, but the importance of relationships to them and their need to be engaged with others often are viewed negatively, as indicators of dependency. Women and men deny their needs to be taken care of, with men viewing expressions of their own neediness as a threat to their autonomy, and women experiencing their own needs as expressions of selfishness. A proposed new concept posits dependency as a context for healthy growth and a characteristic for assimilation into a positive self-image for all persons.

In this paper I will be examining the role of dependency in relationships between women and men. As the title indicates, this will involve exploring the meaning of the word "dependency," as a relational term. I hope to demonstrate how unclear its meaning is and how differently it has been used in different contexts. In particular, I would like to make the point that it is a term which has acquired such pejorative connotations, precisely because it has been considered for so long to be a feminine characteristic. I will then attempt to speculate about why women and men have trouble depending on each other and the modes they have taken to be gratified and to defend against the gratification of their needs. My focus will be on women and men in heterosexual relationships, although I believe many of the observations can be applied to women and men in their lives in general.

In considering women's and men's struggles around dependency, we see how each sex adapts differently and each fares better or worse in some settings than in others. The capabilities for working and loving, as Freud said, are the hallmark of mature adulthood. Yet women and men are both limited in different ways in the development of these capabilities. While men may have seemed to manage better at work and women seemed more expert about love, we shall see that conflicts around dependency interfere with the optimal functioning of both women and men in both work and love.

The differences in women's and men's experience

For women, their sense of femininity seems jeopardized by the expectations of how they ought to behave at work; for men, their sense of masculinity seems jeopardized by what is required to establish close interpersonal relationships. Women in work

situations experience considerable dissonance between the expression of such interpersonal qualities as nurturance, emotionality, and empathy and what they see as the qualities expected of them to succeed at work — namely drive, ambition, and competitiveness.

The conceptualization presented in recent writings on female development — that a woman's sense of self is a relational one and that her need to feel related to others is a crucial aspect of her identity (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1983,1984) — allows us to understand why women feel so threatened when there is the danger of alienation from both men and women, something they often experience in the work arena. At "home" and in other interpersonal settings, a woman's relational self seems to serve her better. To be attentive to the needs of others, to want to connect with others, to be expressive of feelings — all these presumably allow her to feel more comfortable with herself. We shall see, however, it is not quite this simple.

Men at work usually experience the demands to be competitive, to suppress emotions, and to maintain an impersonal attitude as syntonic with their sense of themselves as men. One needs to question how adaptive these qualities are, even in the working arena, since it is an interpersonal context; still the more successful a man is at work, the more manly he feels. The pressures to demonstrate self sufficiency and independence as signs of adulthood allow men to tolerate possible alienation from others in the course of competitive work situations. Paradoxically, men are more accepted, more admired, and less apt to become alienated, the more they succeed at work (Stiver, 1983).

At "home" however, men's capacity to develop, express, and own qualities which facilitate close relationships and intimacy appears to conflict with their sense of themselves as "masculine," self-sufficient, and independent. To acknowledge a need for others, to be open about one's feelings, and to be sensitive and empathetic with women are all apparently quite threatening to the sense of manliness for many men.

In a study of the images of violence that appear in stories written by college students about pictures on the Thematic Apperception Test, Pollack and Gilligan (1982) found statistically significant sex differences. Men see dangers more often in close personal affiliations than in achievement, and they construe danger to arise from intimacy. Women, on the other hand, perceive danger in impersonal, achievement situations and construe danger to derive from

competitive success.

The danger men describe in their stories on intimacy is a danger of entrapment or betrayal — being caught in a smothering relationship or humiliated by rejection and deceit. The danger women portray in tales of achievement is danger in isolation — fear that in standing out or being set apart by success, they will be left alone. As people draw closer in pictures, the images of violence in men's stories increase; as people move further apart, violence in women's stories increases. The authors conclude that men and women experience attachment and separation in different ways and that each sex perceives a danger which the other does not see: men in connection, women in separation.

In the book *Couples in Collusion*, Willi (1982) describes the different ways in which women and men present themselves as they enter couples therapy. The "prototypic" woman is usually one who initiates the therapy, since she feels so dissatisfied, then takes on the role of the plaintiff, accusing her husband of indifference, lack of understanding, and oppression. She complains about raising the children alone and presents a range of physical symptoms, moodiness, and suicidal ideation. She seems clearly quite emotionally upset and expresses disillusionment in her search for intimacy and togetherness.

Willi acknowledges that in current psychiatric circles she could easily be labeled as "hysterical." Her complaints would be considered excessive, devoid of objectivity, and often as evidence of regressive and infantile behavior. She might then be called immature and dependent.

The "prototypic" male is described as resistant to therapy, because he feels marital conflict should not be open to a third party. Also the man typically believes that voicing disputes in therapy only makes matters worse. He reacts defensively to the woman's complaints, controls his reactions, trivializes reproaches, and reduces points of argument to objective practical problems. Despite the woman's clear dissatisfaction, he is apparently content with the marriage and does not wish to make any changes.

Willi notes that the man's behavior and style of presenting himself in couples therapy does not seem as amenable to psychiatric diagnosis as does the woman's. There is no ready label of psychopathology in the man's presentation. Yet men have shorter life expectancy, a higher incidence of serious psychosomatic difficulties and alcoholism, and they make more successful suicide attempts (Willi, 1982; Pleck, 1981). One could, of course, interpret the

woman's behaviors as indications of strengths rather than of pathology. That is, she can be seen as putting more effort into the relationship by initiating couples therapy. She can ask for help, reveal weakness, and show more emotional openness. Finally, her reaction may reflect "feelings of desperation in the face of the emotional imperviousness of the man" (Willi, 1982).

Thus whether at "home" or abroad, women's "reality" or perception of the world based on a relational self identity is frequently considered as pathological, or, at best, immature, and it is demeaned and often misunderstood. The importance of relationships to women and their need to be engaged with others are often seen as indicators of "dependency." Men's "reality," or perception of the world based on a model of independence and autonomy, is considered to be more normative and mature. It is rarely devalued, although it is as often misunderstood by both women and men. I believe it is this difference in perspective — in the cognitive and affective modes of entering relationships — which makes the notion of "dependency" so problematic.

Defining dependency

One of the most difficult problems I had in writing this paper was to find a useful definition or some consensus about the meaning of the term *dependency*. Our own study group spent at least two long evening sessions struggling with this problem. We finally felt we were up against something both very elusive and highly value laden. A review of the literature is most confounding and more often infuriating than helpful. The most benign definition can be found in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1971): The adjective *dependent* is defined as "relying on or subject to something else for support"; the noun *dependent* is defined as "one who is sustained by another or relies on another for support." So far not very value laden, but not especially helpful.

In the most recent *Psychiatric Glossary* (1980), dependency needs are defined as "vital needs for mothering, love, affection, shelter, protection, security, food and warmth; may be a manifestation of regression when they appear openly in adults." This is quite an array of needs to begin with, but note also the implication that to need *anything* in adulthood is "regressive." In the psychoanalytic model, dependency needs have their origin in the oral stage, the stage of the earliest attachment to the mother. Dependency needs in that context are synonymous with oral needs. The Oral Personality is, in fact, considered to be a dependent personality who has a

fixation at this early stage and who consequently cannot move toward maturity. In clinical settings, patients who appear to be "dependent" on others (i.e. parents, spouses, therapists, etc.) often are described as "infantile," "helpless," and "feeling too needy." Again, the message is that such feelings belong to childhood. In the *Glossary of Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (Moore, 1968), dependency is not defined at all. I then looked up orality and found that "oral conflicts...manifest themselves in specific character traits and abnormalities," of which dependency is listed along with "demandingness" as well as "restlessness, impatience, and curiosity." Other characteristics used to describe the oral personality are passive, helpless, and needy — terms used frequently to describe the more normative female in our culture.

I could not find a clear or consistent differentiation between pathological dependency and normal dependency except for some "quantitative" criteria, (i.e., "too dependent" or "too needy") to describe more disturbed states. Essentially, the prevailing belief seems to be that dependency needs belong in childhood, and if these needs, whatever they are, are not satisfied in childhood, they continue to exert influences in a negative fashion, either in the form of counterdependent personalities (Post, 1982), or more directly in the form of clinging, demanding, helpless personalities. I am not addressing here more disturbed indications of personal relationships seen in those men and women who experience boundary confusion and who are terrified of loss of self in these relationships. These are less expressions of "dependency," I believe, than wishes to fuse and merge with the other, in those who lack a cohesive self.

I submit that the pathological expressions of dependency are more a function of the underlying rage about unmet needs than of the "dependency" itself. Those who are called "too dependent" are often those who ask for help in a way that makes it very difficult to respond because of the communication of underlying rage at both self and others. Whenever one is able to give a person the help he or she asks for, usually one experiences a sense of gratification and pleasure. When one feels, however, that no matter what one does, the other's discomfort is not allayed, one is apt to become angry and quickly label that person as "too dependent." To ask for help with underlying hostility, or with the conviction that one does not deserve anything, or with fear of refusal, typically will result in failure to get one's needs fulfilled. There are others who ask for help in various

guises but are unable to take or accept the support and help offered to them — a dynamic which also results in significant frustration and anger for both the person asking for help and the one attempting to respond. It is not the request for help, the turning to the other person, that is so problematic, but the ease and comfort with which one is able to identify what one wants and then ask for help. I believe both women and men have trouble with this.

Considering all of the above, one notes that the term *dependent* has been used to describe a need state (longing, oral needs), an affective state (feelings of helplessness, neediness), a personality trait (dependant, demanding), and even a personality type (passive-dependent, oral). Other literature (Seligman, 1974) refers to “dependent” behavior as “learned helplessness” and/or as a strategy to engage others to do things for one or to please others who presumably expect childlike, dependent behavior. Sometimes it refers to behavior which involves counting on or relying on more than one person in order to get a job done.

An overview of these definitions indicates a lack of understanding of dependency and considerable influence of value laden judgements. The prevailing assumption, despite inadequate definitions and data, is that women are more dependent than men. If men behave in a self sufficient and independent fashion, it is because they *are* independent. If women behave similarly, they must be covering up a basic dependency — that is, they must be counterdependent. As an aside, let me say that I know that both men and women clinicians are aware of those men who are so defended against any expression of their passive longings that they develop psychosomatic ailments and/or manifest exaggerated expression of independence and hyper-masculinity. Yet the term counterdependent is not typically used in describing such men. For women, then to be dependent and adult is usually understood to be immature, childish, and at best neurotic. In my clinical experience, I have not found women to be basically more dependent than men. Some women, however, have an investment in presenting themselves as “dependent.” While there are many reasons for such behavior, primarily it allows them to become engaged with others and it is the established mode of relating to men in the expectable direction. Men, we know, have their own investment in seeing women as being more dependent than they are. In a paper on female dependency, Lerner (1983) discusses how women’s display of passive-dependency often has a

protective and systems monitoring function. That is, in the family system, the under-functioning of one spouse can allow for the over-functioning of the other. Thus the helpless, dependent stance of one partner has an adaptive ego-bolstering effect on the other. For the woman to move out of this position is often perceived by others, and consequently by herself, as aggressive and hurtful. She may then hold on to or stay in the position of relative weakness in order for this most significant relationship to survive.

Men also need to be attached to others, to engage with others, and want to have their needs met, but they have considerable difficulty acknowledging their needs openly. Men are, in fact, often very threatened by their own needs for connection and attachment; while disowning them, they also project them as undesirable qualities onto women.

Mothers and sons

That men have more difficulties in acknowledging their vulnerability, their needs for others, and feelings of helplessness, has captured the attention of several theorists. Dinnerstein, in her interesting book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (Dinnerstein, 1976), takes the position that because the first important figure in every child’s life is a woman, special problems emerge for men and women. The man especially, however, in his efforts to achieve a different sexual identity, needs to repudiate powerful early experiences which encompass both exquisite joy in the early physical contact with mother, as well as terror and rage associated with her imperfections and his inevitable disappointments at not having all his needs met. The child then needs to disown his powerful yearnings to recapture the early moments of ecstasy with his mother, by seeing his mother and other women as outside of him and very different from him; he then projects onto them his terrors and rage associated with the earliest experiences of deprivation. As a consequence, women take on for him, unconsciously, powerful images of magical omnipotence and are seen as the source of ultimate gratification as well as of frustration and denial. According to Dinnerstein, the man struggles throughout his life to defend against temptation to give way to “voracious dependence” and to attain feelings of competence, autonomy and dignity. As a consequence, his relationships with women embrace “both worshipful and derogatory feelings, grateful and greedy, affectionate and hostile feelings.” Since the man attributes such great power to his mother, he must render all women powerless by keeping them in

a dependent position, and he defends against acknowledging his longings to recapture early experience.

Rochlin presents a somewhat different model, more consistent with psychoanalytic theory. In his book *The Masculine Dilemma* (Rochlin, 1980) his central thesis is that male development involves an energetic resistance to identification with the mother in the early years, and that, throughout a man's life, his masculinity is "precariously held and endlessly tested." Because of the close interactions between little boys and their mothers, a feminine identification develops. But soon little boys discover their mothers do not have a penis, and therefore, are devalued; boys must struggle against such dangerous identification. Instead they must identify with the man, the father (also seen as the aggressor), as a means of asserting their masculinity and as a means of establishing pride in their manliness. He states that the boy's incentive to establish his masculinity is at odds with a compelling identification with his mother; the unconscious solution the boy reaches is to defend against the identification with his mother by repression. With this precarious masculine identification, men must not allow any expression of what might be associated with femininity — for example, nurturance, sensitivity, open statements of needs, etc.

Both Dinnerstein's and Rochlin's theories suffer from oversimplification and reductionism. While each differs in what aspects of the early mother-son experiences are deemed so significant, they both assume a rather fixed and irreversible effect of these experiences on subsequent development, and both place the ultimate responsibility for the son's development onto the mother. Neither acknowledges the process of change nor the ongoing dynamics of the mother-son and father-son interactions.

Different developmental patterns of women and men

The "Self-in-Relation Theory" of female development (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1983, 1984) considers the mother's interactions with her children as part of a process of connectedness and differentiation. The theory states that female identity formation takes place in the context of an ongoing relationship, since mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like and continuous with themselves. This is the beginning of a particular bonding between mothers and daughters with expectations of mutual caretaking and mutual

empathic interactions and interdependency. Daughters can then experience more continuity with their past relationships, such as early dependency on their mothers and on others, without seeing it as a threat to their "growth" or "maturity." Surrey's paper on the development of self in women (1984) talks about the identification with mother as "mother," which contributes further to women playing a more nurturant role than men in most relationships and becoming highly sensitive and vigilant to the nuances in interpersonal interactions. The daughter then develops early the capacity to flow back and forth between being the receiver of supplies, with an acknowledgment of an attachment and connection with the mother, and being the mother herself in her interactions as caretaker with her mother and others. This serves as a precursor to women's fluidity, moving back and forth as needed, between the roles of givers and receivers of support. At the same time, women also experience their mothers as devalued often enough to contribute to their struggles to defend against their identification with them and their dependency on them. Despite this struggle, however, women typically continue to experience, consciously and unconsciously, strong connections with their mothers.

The dynamic of the mother-son relationship follows another developmental path. Mothers experience their sons as different from them and are under both inner and outer pressures to affirm this difference. The cultural expectations of how boys should be are internalized by many mothers; they believe that, in order to help their sons develop a strong masculine identification, they need to encourage aggressive behaviors and separate strivings. Thus sons have fewer opportunities than daughters to learn how to move back and forth in the giving and receiving dynamic of healthy interpersonal connections. However, a mother's sense that she must help her son achieve individuation and independence through pushing him away from her, conflicts often with her natural inclination to maintain the attachment while affirming the differences between them. While the mother consequently feels very torn, the pressures to conform to social expectations are usually strongly supported by the father. I believe it is extremely important for fathers that their sons conform very early to a stereotypic notion of masculinity. Any signs of strong attachments to mother, fearfulness, or of not being aggressive or active enough, etc., usually evoke in the father fear that his son is a "sissy" (Miller, 1983). He typically

reacts by treating his son with ridicule and contempt and becomes angry at the mother for presumably encouraging such unmanly behavior. Fathers' attitudes and behavior toward their sons then reinforce the pressures on the mother to push the little boy toward separation, and on the little boy to negate *his* wishes to maintain more open and continuous contact with his mother.

Adult development

In reviewing the studies which have explored the process of becoming an adult, it is interesting that the major efforts to date have been about male development—for example, investigations by Levinson (1978) and Vaillant (1978). While both of these authors, in different ways, talk about the importance of interpersonal relationships for men and discuss their effect on overall growth, their studies are organized largely around the career development of men in their samples. For Levinson, the relationships with women are often seen as subordinate to the man's occupational growth:

“(for the man) in entering the adult world...occupations and marriage and the family are the components most likely to be given central importance. One task is to choose and follow an occupational direction that permits him to define important parts of himself. A related task is to form a marital relationship with a wife who supports his aspirations and is ready and able to join him on his journey.”

Later he talks about how a man's energy is directed toward forming a dream and gratifying this dream. The “dream” is largely organized around achievement and acclaim in the eyes of the world. Finally, in the later state of “settling down,” which Levinson refers to as “Becoming One's Own Man,” the man's effort is to be more independent and self sufficient, and less subject to the control of others; he notes these goals are to be found at all stages of adulthood but represent the culmination of the “settling down” phase. Vaillant (1978) studied the lives of a sample of men over a 30-year period after they graduated from a highly competitive liberal arts college. He reviewed the lives of these men from the point of view of exploring ego defenses, or modes of adaptation, and established a hierarchy of defenses to help define adult mental health. Vaillant does recognize that close, loving relationships as children affect the capacity for love as adults but his emphasis is again mainly on the career development of these men and the importance of gaining recognition by

society. While concern with others is of interest, it often takes the form of the more abstract societal concerns than that of intimate interpersonal relationships. It is important to note that there is not yet a well known long-term follow up study of women's journey into and through adulthood. Carol Gilligan's work on moral development in women, however, demonstrates how powerfully “the relational self” shapes the development of moral judgments for women (1982).

In my own clinical experience, I am impressed over and over again with the differences between women's and men's experiences of work and love. Women with careers do not keep their lives at work and interpersonal connections outside of work very separate. When they talk about their work, it is typically in the context of personal relationships, past and present. Men, when talking about their work, seem more apt to split off thoughts, feelings and concerns associated with their personal relationships outside of work, both past and present. In reading Theodore Reik's book *Sex in Man and Woman*, published in 1960, I came across this curious paragraph:

A woman who cooks and cleans and brings up children, shops, dresses and undresses is rarely, in her thoughts and her emotional life, separated from her husband and lover. Almost everything she does or wants to do has some reference to him. A man in his laboratory or office rarely thinks of his wife while he works; she is psychologically as distant from his thoughts as if she lived on a far away island to which he sometimes transmitted his thoughts and feelings in moments of lessening attention during his work. He feels consciously or unconsciously as if this were the wrong thing to do, as if he had gone astray when he thinks of his wife or mistress while he works. What woman would have a guilt feeling when she, during her occupation as typist, secretary, nurse, etc., would sometimes think of her beloved man? And what man would not have sometimes a guilt feeling in the analogous situation?

While I think Dr. Reik was onto something, I don't think he appreciated the implications of his observations. That is, women do keep connected with the important people in their lives by more continuity of thoughts, and men, as a rule, are able to split off and shut out more effectively their personal connections with people outside of work. Again this illustrates the degree to which women function in the

context of relationships — much more than most men. Reik's depreciation of women's emphasis on relationships reflects a general point of view in our culture — which values single-mindedness, "objectivity," task-orientation, etc., without considering the importance of meaning and context. There is then a significant asymmetry in the developmental process which women and men follow as they move from their earliest relationships to their mothers and fathers, through adolescence into adulthood. Men try to move from attachment to separation, to individuation and autonomy, with the goal of independence as the traditional sign of maturity and mental health. Women move from attachment to continued connection, always developing in the context of relationships; they experience the goal of "independence" as lonely and isolating.

Sex differences in styles of relating

Given these different lines of development, how can we understand the ways in which women and men attempt to establish relationships with each other? What strategies do they use to try to get their needs gratified? How do both sexes sabotage their efforts at gratification through significant disavowals of important aspects of themselves?

I would like to begin this part of the discussion with an examination of the common assumptions that (1) women are more dependent than men; and (2) women experience these dependency needs as more syntonic than do men. If one reviews female-male relationships, it is apparent that men are usually better taken care of than women. Wives, as caretakers and nurturers, readily respond to their husband's physical and emotional needs. They cook their meals, clean their homes, do their laundry and attend to their emotional needs by listening to them at the end of the day, etc. This is so much within the realm of the traditional wife's "job description" that the man does not usually need to *ask* for these things, but rather has learned to expect them. He, in turn, is supposed to provide or take care of the woman's need for economic security and sometimes other more "physical" aspects of household maintenance. The fact that men are bigger and often stronger than many women contributes to the view of them also as protectors against dangers from the outside world.

This has been the traditional view. We know there are many variations on this theme, and we have seen significant changes in this pattern over the past decade. We also know that women are not necessarily

protected but sometimes are at great risk in their own homes (Carmen, Russo, Miller, 1981; Herman, 1984). Still, in many marriages, it is the woman who plays the caretaking and nurturant role more than does the man—especially around the gratification of emotional needs. There are some data about depression in women and men as a function of their marital state which support the hypotheses that, in marriage, men are better taken care of than women, and that women experience considerable underlying anger and despair as a consequence. Studies on depression consistently show that women become depressed more frequently than men (Radloff, 1975; Weissman, Klerman, 1977). However, among the single and widowed, men are more likely than women to become depressed (Briscoe, Smith, 1973). Women are more likely than men to become depressed during their marriage. Men are more likely than women to become depressed during marital separation (Radloff, 1975).

I believe that women and men both deny their needs to be taken care of, but for different reasons. On the one hand, men experience the acknowledgment of neediness as threatening to their sense of manliness; to need others is experienced as endangering their autonomy and independence. On the other hand, women experience their needs as expressions of selfishness; they feel they have to take care of others before attending to their own needs. A lifetime of training to put others ahead of themselves and to be sensitive to others' emotional states has not helped women to identify their inner need states nor to feel entitled to pursue their gratification.

Responding to the needs of others does allow women some vicarious gratification. Through identifying with those whom they care for, they can experience indirectly some sense of gratification and fulfillment. There are, however, significant and unfortunate consequences of this strategy. Vicarious satisfaction is never a substitute for direct gratification, so that deep feelings of deprivation must emerge; but, in addition, it often involves the woman projecting her needs onto others, which interferes with her ability to differentiate appropriately her needs from those of others. To be attentive to the needs of others without feeling the right to ask also that others respond to her would inevitably lead to feelings of envy and deep resentment. Considering how difficult it is for women to own and express their anger (Miller, 1983), a typical consequence is a sense of powerlessness and despair about their ability to have any impact on others. But even more important is the effect on a woman's self esteem, if she feels less entitled than everyone else to

ask that others respond to her, and if she feels her anger is both unfeminine and dangerous. In a paper on intimacy, Miller (1981) presents an analysis of one family to illustrate how the wife/mother's depression was a consequence of her feeling second-rate and unworthy after years of suppressing both the examination and expression of her feelings and needs. A growing awareness of her dissatisfaction with her marriage only made her feel "selfish and horrible." These feelings served to maintain her in a more helpless and, therefore, dependent position, even though she was, in fact, responding effectively to other's needs more than her own.

"Dependency" as a female style of relating

Earlier I mentioned the tendency for some women to present themselves as helpless and dependent as a way of engaging with others; but these are also expressions of how they feel about themselves. Women's low self-esteem comes from many sources: To put others first carries the message that one is less worthy. In addition, women do not usually have the opportunity or training to develop many of the skills needed to deal with the world, including more assertive modes of negotiation with others outside of the home. These "worldly skills" are valued in our culture much above the many skills involved in household management and childrearing, and other areas requiring empathic, sensitive interactions. Thus many women feel inadequate and lack confidence in their ability to cope without a man to help manage their lives. Often it is striking to note the incongruity between the profound lack of self confidence expressed by some women and the objective signs of their effectiveness and competence.

One woman I see in therapy has returned to school after her children have grown; she is studying engineering and getting high grades. She also received a brown belt in karate, which she took up after she had been raped. She is personally very attractive, charming, and sociable, and she has a wide network of friends. As she struggles about deciding whether to divorce her husband, from whom she is separated, she worries about whether she will be able to manage. Her husband, she says, always said, "I'll take care of it..." to a notice about insurance, a legal issue, trouble with the car. She is afraid she cannot manage these things herself. This same husband whom she feels will "take care of everything" also was physically abusive to her.

While women hold to this image of themselves as helpless and dependent, they are also deeply

ashamed of it. They often feel there is something wrong with them that they cannot manage alone and are guilty about burdening their husbands. Yet if one looks at the dynamics of many marital relationships where the wife experiences herself as "too dependent" on her husband, the husband is very much in collusion, supporting that dependency at the same time he grumbles about it.

The case of Diane is illustrative. She said in one therapy session that she was quite upset because her fear of driving her car alone for long distances was confronting her again. It was another sign of her inadequacy. Her husband some years ago had registered her car in another state, where they have a summer home. This arrangement required that the car be taken there periodically for inspection. The time had come again and, in this instance, he could not go and told her she had to do it herself. She was very reluctant and fearful, but too ashamed to admit it. After discussing it in therapy, she realized that she did not want her car registered out of state and instead wanted to take care of her own car and assume responsibility for it herself. She went home and told her husband just that. He said, "Great! It's been a nuisance for me! You take care of your own car now, but if anything goes wrong with your car," he admonished, "it's all your concern now." In other words, all or nothing. Nevertheless, she agreed. The following morning he got up very early and, without consulting her, left to re-register her car in the other state. While in the past she would have seen this as his making a sacrifice again to take care of her and put up with her neurotic symptoms, she had to recognize this time that he needed to keep her in a dependent position.

This last example points to the miscommunications between women and men when each sex has trouble examining, identifying, and expressing her and his needs. Women's skills at listening and empathizing allow them to respond readily to other's emotional needs. Men, since they have less experience in close personal relationships, are not apt to be sensitive to women's need states, whether spoken or unspoken. Thus the frequent lament: "What do women *want*?" or "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" Typically, men try to be helpful through adopting the more active mode — to *do* rather than to listen. It is easier for men to give material things and sometimes physical care which requires specific and concrete activity. Indeed, men can be very caretaking in these physical and material ways. Men also feel very threatened by the woman's

expression of painful feelings, since they need to ward them off in themselves; thus the man often reacts with impatience and anger — which communicates again to the woman that her needs are not legitimate and that she is not worthy. Women, in turn, feel deeply frustrated when they know they are not getting what they need — that is, to be listened to, understood, affirmed — yet feel guilty because they are not at all clear that it is reasonable to want something different from what they are getting. Certainly when women feel deprived in all quarters, they are more apt to focus on their needs for physical and material signs of caring.

I believe that often the “demanding woman” who puts such emphasis on wanting more and more material goods, may be “settling” for these when she is not even aware of how much her emotional needs are unrecognized and unattended. The underlying rage at unmet needs contributes to her pathological dependency on “things” over more personal concerns.

Rubin (1976) reports that working class women, in response to what they value most in their husbands, will say, “He’s a steady worker, he doesn’t drink, he doesn’t hit me,” while middle class women focus on issues of intimacy, caring, and communication. Yet one finds that one of the major factors contributing to depression in working class women is the *absence* of an intimate and confiding relationship with a husband or boyfriend (Brown and Harris, 1978).

Men’s self-esteem threatened by “dependency”

Let us now examine some of the strategies men use to gain gratification of their needs and the frustration they encounter in the process. While men also deny their needs, we know that, as a rule, they are better taken care of than women. As long as the man experiences the caretaking as a “given,” he does not have to acknowledge his own neediness nor the extent of his dependence on his wife. When events occur, such as the arrival of children, which disrupt these expectations, then the man is confronted with changes in the care and attention previously experienced. It is not uncommon to hear of a husband’s jealousy of the attention his wife directs toward a new baby, although again it is rarely acknowledged as such by the man. The more typical reaction is for the husband to become angry and either withdraw and detach from the family and/or to become more aggressively demanding, usually around issues displaced from the original needs.

An interesting study found that upper middle class fathers often were critical of their sons, devalued

and ridiculed them, called them names like “little dumbo” and “peanut head,” despite consciously expressed loving feelings toward them (Gleason, 1975). I believe that these fathers were very envious and resentful of their sons, who as children can openly show their needs for their mothers. One might speculate that these fathers find their own needs to be cared for as so alien to their sense of manliness that they hate that part of themselves and must disown it — so much so that when their sons express such needs, they are treated with contempt.

While women’s denial of their needs has its source in a fear that they are too selfish or not worthy, for men the denial of their needs has its source in maintaining their self-esteem as based on a manly image in the eyes of the world — namely, other men. Thus it is extremely important for men to hide any sign of their neediness or vulnerability from others. The difference between the ways women and men respond to the breakup of a relationship is significant. The more typical response for women is to become sad and to isolate themselves as an expression of how alone and abandoned they feel; at the same time they also reach out very often to other women for support, revealing their pain to them. While men also experience such painful feelings at the end of an intimate relationship, they are rarely as apparent. Instead, they quickly move into brief sexual liaisons with different women in order to make the statement to the world that they are not feeling rejected, or humiliated about the breakup. A male client reported after a recent breakup, “I no longer have to run around showing all my friends that I don’t give a damn.” As a consequence of therapy, he was able to acknowledge his sadness and to recognize that he had no emotional energy at that moment to connect with anyone else.

This brings us to the sexual arena, one in which men express their needs more openly. Our culture does allow men to be more explicit about their sexual needs since they appear as “rights” divorced from emotional neediness. As long as men can experience their sexual needs as simply needs for physical release, they can feel entitled to expect women to be there for them sexually and not feel that this betrays any weakness in them. In listening to male clients talk about their sexual needs, one is often struck by how much their search for intimacy is primarily through the sexual experience. For many men, one of the few settings in which they can give expression to their needs to be given to and cared for and can experience deep feelings, and still feel manly, is in the bedroom.

There the man can be at his macho and phallic best, while also allowing himself to be entitled to gratification of his needs for closeness and connection. We know that for some men the regressive pull is so enticing and so frightening that they need to split off entirely their tender and loving feelings. Men do report in therapy their yearnings to recapture the ecstatic experience of being enveloped by a woman, while at the same time feeling sexual and powerful.

A more complicated picture emerges when one examines how the woman reacts to any indications, explicit or implicit, of the man's need for her. As long as the woman feels her needs are not being met, she will, unconsciously at least, be resentful and hostile toward any expression of the man's neediness. I believe that is part of the reason why women sometimes resist responding to the man's needs in the sexual arena; it is because at some level they recognize the underlying meanings of his yearnings for nurturance — and resent them. But also as long as women experience their own neediness as shameful, they will have difficulty tolerating signs of dependency in men. The wish for the man to give them the strength they feel they lack is part of the woman's propensity to idealize the man, attribute great power to him, and to feel disappointment when he deviates from the ideal. Interestingly, I have also found that women who realize that their needs to see men as so strong and powerful are unreasonable also are apt to accept more open signs of the man's vulnerability. They feel contemptuous, however, of the man who covers up his vulnerability with transparent bravado as, for example, in the sexual arena.

Yet both women and men want to be needed by the people they care about. A woman experiences the need to be needed as part of her identity. Her self-esteem is enhanced when she experiences herself as a "giving" wife and mother. A man also wants very much to experience himself as a good husband and father and feels frustrated when the efforts he makes at trying to please are not appreciated.

In the final analysis, of course, in heterosexual relationships both women and men need each other; each sex suffers from shutting off and denying the needs and longings to be cared about. Each sex experiences anger and disappointment when these needs are not met. Women sacrifice the identification of their needs and acting on them because they do not want to be selfish. Men sacrifice the identification of their needs and acting on them because they depend so much on gaining the respect of other men and defend themselves against humiliation and rejection.

Each is cheated as a consequence.

A new view of dependency

In concluding, I will attempt a different definition of dependency from the ones we have heard — a definition which takes into account that "to depend" involves an interpersonal dynamic. I would like to define dependency as: *A process of counting on other people to provide help in coping physically and emotionally with the experiences and tasks encountered in the world, when one has not sufficient skill, confidence, energy and/or time.* I have defined it as a process to stress that it is not static, but changes with opportunities, circumstances, and inner struggles. While the meaning of "physical" help may be more apparent — for example, actual physical support, economic support, feeding, caretaking of an ill or otherwise helpless person, etc. — the meaning of "emotional" help requires further elaboration. I believe that what each of us requires emotionally from others is to feel affirmed and validated in one's feelings and perceptions. This notion of dependency would allow for experiencing one's self *as being enhanced and empowered through the very process of counting on others for help.* In these terms, dependency would be seen as normal and growth-promoting.

When, however, turning to others for help maintains one in a more static place, or worse, pulls one back to a position in which one feels awful about oneself and/or desperate about getting anything from the other, pathological expressions of dependency emerge. Typically, such expressions of dependency are a function of a number of conditions — for example, an interpersonal dynamic in which one person needs to keep the other in a subordinate position, or relationships which mirror or reactivate early histories of severe deprivation and abuse.

One can see "healthy" dependency then, as offering a context for growth and development. The more one feels one can count on others and be heard, understood, and validated, the more one feels worthy, and the more solid is one's sense of self. Women have long played the role of listening and affirming with men, their children, and their friends. However, as long as they do not feel they have the right to want this for themselves, and as long as they feel their needs are not reciprocated, they will unconsciously sabotage their efforts to support those they love and resent demands made on them. Men, in turn, need more opportunities for emotional experiences in relationships so that they can become more empathic and begin to acknowledge their vulnerabilities and not feel ashamed of them.

In my therapeutic work with women, my focus is to help them not only to attend to and identify what is important to them, but also, even more crucially, to value their needs and inner feelings — what Jordan (1983), in her paper on empathy, refers to as “self-empathy.” As women can feel more free to express and communicate what they need from others, they will be less likely to become depressed and more able to respond in a less ambivalent fashion to men’s expressions of dependency on them.

In my clinical experience with men, they show considerable relief when they realize that I recognize and appreciate their manliness because, and not despite, their growing capacity to reveal and express their fears, their sadness, and their loving feelings. Another intervention that can be very helpful for men is a couples group. In that setting a man can learn about himself in a relational context. He can feel validated by the other men in the group while at the same time learn from the women something about their inner feelings and their capacity to relate to others. In this larger group context, the man does not have to deal with the dangers he often experiences in the dyad of husband-wife interactions — in which issues of power and control often preclude the possibilities of being able to hear what the other person is saying or respond to the feelings expressed. Only if women and men can learn to accept and value their dependency on each other and assimilate it with positive self images will they be able to reach higher levels of adaptation and maturity.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held so that students and visitors can exchange ideas with each other and with the speaker. Questions, responses, and highlights of the discussion are selected, summarized, edited and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker’s ideas. In this session Dr. Alexandra Kaplan and Dr. Janet Surrey of the Stone Center joined Dr. Stiver in leading the discussion.

Question: Would you comment on the long developmental period of dependency that humans have — as compared to other creatures in this world — and what it means for adult dependency?

Stiver: I don’t see that as a problem, although many theorists have. The point is that if we think of the relational theory I spoke of, there is always a context of relationship in the human condition. I see the extended childhood dependence as a greater opportunity for developing an enhancing and empowering connection among people.

Question: How can women be protected against being “bent out of shape” by the male marketplace? I don’t want to be like men, but you have to be like them to get anywhere. Is anything happening to change that?

Stiver: I think the major sources of help for women have been networks of support — women helping women, recognizing and valuing their particular qualities. Women can support each other to try to establish the adaptive qualities of “womanly” characteristics in the work arena, and not buy into the assumption that “manly” qualities are necessarily more adaptive.

Question: I frequently run across the concept that paying attention to your own needs amounts to selfishness. Then most women say, “That’s not me; I can’t be that way.” How do you go about countering that idea?

Stiver: That issue is inbred, deep, and hard to change. If you learn that you shouldn’t ask for anything or bring up your own needs, then you also stop paying attention to what you need. The ultimate result is that you don’t even know what you need or want! So the first step is deliberately becoming more aware of one’s inner life and needs. Then it’s possible to examine the irrationality of the situation. If you are constantly being so unselfish, resentment is bound to build, and I think that’s the underlying problem. I would focus on helping women begin to feel that at least they can try to *identify* what they want, and that’s hard for women to do.

Surrey: Becoming attuned to oneself doesn’t just happen, and in a relationship people don’t come with a list of needs. They negotiate, hopefully with each other, and they become skillful in attending to their own and their partner’s needs within a relationship.

Comment: I feel like I’m constantly asking how much I can depend on others, and how much do I need just to do things by myself. It’s an excruciatingly difficult balance to maintain.

Stiver: Often we get trapped by not being clear what we want from another person. In almost all situations, we need someone to be there so that we feel affirmed or validated. With just that, I think we can do a lot without having the other person do it for us. And there are many times when we can do something but still would prefer some help — depending on our energy or fatigue or emotional needs. In other words, you don’t always depend on other people simply because you can’t do something alone, but sometimes you simply want and enjoy the involvement of that other person. Nevertheless, I really think that the most

important thing is to feel that you are being understood. If that is clear, then I think it's much easier to sort out what one needs to do with other people. We almost have distorted the term *dependency* to something bad, so that it's "better" to do things independently. But that's not real — we like to do things with other people, and sometimes we need the support of other people even if we can do a task ourselves.

Kaplan: We can try a little linguistic trick to emphasize that point: We can ask ourselves, "How much am I *able* to turn to other people? And how much do I *need* to do this by myself?"

Question: First, how can women build their self esteem — working on their own or within a relationship? Second, do you have suggestions about ways in which men can develop more empathic skills — skills for establishing intimate relationships?

Stiver: Frankly, I think self esteem can only develop in relationships. I find it hard to imagine working alone and convincing myself to feel better about myself. I really think self esteem depends on being validated and affirmed in connection with others. Since women can establish relationships more easily than men, they often have more strands in their lives. They have their close relationships with women friends as well as their relationships with the men in their lives, so I think they tend to use other resources (other friends) when they don't feel their needs are gratified in relationships with men. About the issue of men's learning empathic skills, some of it depends on how motivated they are. And also it's a question of how much pain the men experience by *not* having those particular skills. Many say that the men who are quite involved in child care early in their infant's lives begin to learn empathic skills naturally.

Question: How would your definition of dependency relate to a diagnostic category?

Stiver: Frankly, I would like to think that dependency is part of normal growth and development; therefore, I would not want to see it within the realm of implied pathology through diagnosis. Granted, like anything else, adaptive aspects of our functioning can reach pathological proportions if things go awry in the process of growth and development. But ordinarily I see dependency, in the definition I gave, as not only normal and healthy, but as absolutely necessary for growth and development.

Question: Could you say something about dependency in old age? Some of my older friends are almost militant about being independent. Also I find a

lot of my friends my age saying they will *never* be dependent on their children. I feel that dependency of the elderly upon the middle aged group is just as natural as dependency of the young, but our culture seems to have forbidden the natural dependency for people as they age.

Stiver: Again, the term *dependent* is so pejorative! Being dependent is a process; everyone needs physical and emotional support at different times and to different degrees in their lives. And when people say, "I don't want to depend on my children," I would translate that to mean, "I don't want to be controlled by my children," or, "I don't want to be devalued by my children because I am not capable of doing all the things I did earlier." I think it's an attitude with a value-laden quality rather than a statement of not wanting to be connected with other people. I can't imagine that older people want to be isolated, but they want to maintain their self-respect, and so they sometimes fight hard not to acknowledge some of their needs.

Question: How does dependency relate to possessiveness and jealousy in relationships?

Stiver: Often jealousy and possessiveness emerge from "pathological dependency"— when one feels so much anger and terror about not getting needs met that the attachment has a desperate quality. "Clutching" the other person reflects more hostility than need, because the expectation is that one's needs will *not* be gratified. Another variation is when one person wants exclusivity and is terrified of losing the other. It also embodies an unhealthy dependency in which one is stuck in a static, limiting relationship rather than an enhancing, empowering, and expansive one.

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