# Work in Progress

## A Relational Perspective on Self Esteem

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

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# A Relational Perspective on Self Esteem

## Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

### About the Author

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### Abstract

*A relational perspective on self-esteem suggests that it is our ability to connect in an authentic way, to bring ourselves fully into relationship where we are responded to with authenticity and respect, that most impacts our sense of personal well-being. Rather than emphasizing a sense of being special, unique, or "better than," a relational model points to the basically contextual nature of our lives. In understanding a person's feelings of confidence, strength, regard, and respect, we must be alert to the context in which the person is presently situated and also the context in which the person has grown up.*

Abundant and distressing data suggests that women suffer from what is called poor self-esteem and that this lack of self-esteem profoundly affects their ability to function effectively in the world; specifically, this low self-esteem has been viewed as a powerful predisposing factor in the high incidence of depression in women. Research indicates that women suffer from major depression at twice the rate of men and that there are currently at least 7 million women in this country suffering with diagnosable depression (McGrath et al., 1990). A person's sense of competence or self-efficacy has also been shown to influence how well she can overcome other clinical problems such as anxiety and fear (Lewisohn et al., 1980). Furthermore, studies indicate that improved self-esteem in general may be psychotherapy's most important outcome (Zilbergeld, 1983).

I would like to reexamine the concept of self-esteem from a relational point of view, but first let me review some of the existing ideas about self-esteem.

## Traditional views of self-esteem

Traditional notions about self-esteem suggest that in addition to a self-concept which involves the images and beliefs we have about ourselves, we also evaluate ourselves; that is, we judge how well we meet certain ideals and standards we hold about ourselves. Self-esteem is often thought of as this evaluative component of the self. While much self evaluation is domain specific (e.g., I am good at biology, not physics; or I am a good tennis player, not a good skier), there is also a global sense of "I am a good/ valuable person or not a valuable person."

In our efforts to know our worth, we also compare ourselves to others, particularly in our highly competitive, individualistic society which encourages

such comparisons. For example, comparison with others is encouraged in families and school systems which emphasize competition and hierarchical evaluation of children. This path to achieving a sense of well-being is often distorted into feeling good only if one perceives oneself as "better than" someone else. It is as if feeling good about oneself in a competitively oriented, individualistic culture means "standing out" and being seen as superior to others.

Self-esteem as constructed in a "separate self" model thus represents the values of individualism: self versus other, self as safe in separation and superiority. A major imperative that shapes self-esteem in this culture is the effort to separate oneself from others and to see oneself as different and better than others (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). As early as four years of age, American children reveal a clear tendency to underestimate the commonality of their desirable behavior; this has been called the "false uniqueness effect" and it is one way of enhancing self-esteem (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Pressure to be different, unique, special, "better than" may be more characteristic of male standards of worth but this approach is at the core of many definitions of self-esteem in this culture. In contrast to this, in a relational model, trying to feel good about oneself emphasizes a person's capacity to form good connection and to be empathic, which involves a certain sense of commonality with the other person.

As Harter (1993) notes, "beginning in middle childhood, therefore, one adopts the cultural preoccupation with how individuals are different from one another—with competition, with who is the 'best', with who ascends to the top. Thus, how one measures up to one's peers, to societal standards, becomes the filter through which judgments about the self pass" (p. 94). One of the tragedies of self-esteem is that it is built on hierarchical comparisons—feeling better than someone else often depends on making someone else feel inferior. It also often involves an emphasis on dominance of one individual or one group over another. Membership in a privileged, dominant group is based on comparison with another so-called inferior group; feeling better in one's group is based on seeing the other group as "lesser than." Thus people compare by skin color, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, education, and so forth.

In this kind of a system, for example, female subordination becomes essential to the maintenance of male dominance and hence of male well-being and masculine self-esteem. This occurs often at an unconscious, sometimes subtle level. The socialization away from mutuality or equality in primary heterosexual relationships and nuclear families likely contributes to the poor self-esteem of girls and women and to the inflated self-esteem and sense of entitlement of boys and men. Schools and work settings which render girls and women invisible and inaudible also perpetuate this tendency for males to feel confident, entitled, and empowered and for females to feel disempowered and disregarded. The heterosexist imperative is also important to maintaining this power imbalance in the culture. Lesbians and gays, in addition to honoring their sexual preferences, also make a powerful political statement in their challenge to this paired, heterosexual context for maintaining existing imbalances in power and self-esteem between men and women.

## A relational model

Most approaches to understanding self-esteem are anchored in the model of "separate self" which informs Western psychology. This view of self emphasizes separation from others, boundedness, uniqueness, self definition, distinctness, and difference from others; control, mastery over nature, and power over others are highly prized. There is a premium not only on being unique but on freedom from being influenced by one's environment or other people. This is a decidedly non-mutual pattern.

The values and ideals a culture sets forth for individuals greatly affect the way self-esteem is experienced. In many nonWestern, Asian, and African cultures there is an imperative to fit in, to relate, to place relationships at the center of one's definition and sense of goodness. Thus in Japanese society, self assertion is seen as immature (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Similarly within Western cultures, there are often double standards for ideals of personhood: the male, dominant ideal and the female or marginalized ideal.

Central to a sense of "well-being in connection" is the capacity to participate in the creation of a lively, mutual, and empowering relationship with another person. This does not eliminate the very real sense of accomplishment that also arises in doing a task successfully or creating something new. But if one's sense of personhood is heavily invested in relationship and mutuality, then one's sense of self-worth might also be seen as largely

determined by the relational contexts in which one lives. Instead of concepts like "self-efficacy" (Bandura, 1977) or "learned optimism" (Seligman, 1990) or "mastery" (White, 1963) as the primary determinants of self-esteem, we might look for evidence of relational efficacy or relational confidence (Jordan, 1992); the capacity to participate in a growing, moving, changing relationship would lead to a sense of well-being, confidence, vitality, and belief in one's capacity to participate in future relationships in a positive way. Thus we move away from thinking of self-esteem as comparative, linear, a trait within the person. What we seek is a sense that we matter, that we can be in meaningful and respectful participation with others, that we can enhance others' lives, that we are connected, that we can emotionally move another person, and that we can be effective and can create positive results in both relationships and the nonhuman world.

Situations that create poor self-esteem, by contrast, are characterized by *relational nonresponsiveness*, a feeling that we are unable to create change or movement. We are unable to reach, touch, or affect the other person. We are unable to see our influence on others; they are not *open* to us. This means they cannot truly take in what we have to offer. And we are similarly shut down to being moved by them. There is no mutuality.

At its extreme, this leads to isolation, paralysis and self-doubt or self-blame (Miller, 1988). When we are blocked from having an impact, we often feel stymied, deadened, ineffectual, and alone. The other's nonresponsiveness can lead to demoralization or shame, which is partially an internalized expectation that the other can not possibly be empathically present with us. The combination of feeling alone but also paralyzed and self-blaming creates what others might call low self-esteem or vulnerability to depression. If we feel that our goals and aspirations don't matter, that the other person is not making an effort to understand where we're coming from, that we are unable to reach him or her, then we often feel disempowered, less worthwhile, and less effective. When someone trusts us enough to be open to our influence and when we can be open to being influenced, we are in a relationship characterized by mutuality and movement. Experiencing the capacity to create growth-enhancing relationships for both people is at the heart of a sense of relational being.

## Gender differences in self-esteem

These two different ways to conceptualize self-esteem—the traditional ("separate self") and the relational—may reflect gender differences in the way a sense of well-being is achieved and experienced. Using standard ways of assessing self-esteem, boys as a group enjoy a greater sense of self-esteem than do girls (Ruble et al., 1993). This is particularly striking from adolescence on. In general the qualities encouraged in boys are more valued in the culture than are the qualities encouraged in girls. Furthermore, there are messages that women's primary job is to take care of others' self esteem, to serve others' needs and, in particular, to attend to the well-being of the male ego. The imperative to take care of the male ego is so powerful that simply deciding *not* to do this is often perceived as dangerous and hostile.

It is not just that boys enjoy higher self-esteem but, because gender clearly affects the way the self is defined and experienced, it follows that self-esteem would also be constructed differently for men and women. In terms of the goals that are valued and the ideals that are sought, one would expect men to feel better when they adhere to the "masculine" standards of independence, self-sufficiency, and separation from others while women would feel better about themselves when they adhere to the "feminine" ideals of sensitivity to and concern for others. There are indications that the tendency to construe the self as special and different from others (the "false uniqueness bias") is more pronounced among high self-esteem men and that for women this bias is both alien and anxiety-generating (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). It suggests a kind of separation from others and ascendancy over others which violates women's desire for joining and establishing a sense of commonality.

An important aspect of this gender difference in one's sense of well-being may be related to the tendency for girls to be more open to the experience of vulnerability (Miller, 1976) and to being influenced by others. Boys in general display a resistance to being influenced by others (Maccoby, 1990). Furthermore, they have a selective tendency to ignore failure feedback at the same time that they attune to success feedback (Josephs et al., 1992). Boys attribute their successes to their ability and their failure to unstable or external attributes. They tend to construct meaning systems that favor an image of themselves as "in control," independent, and able to overcome possible external obstacles. Girls attribute failure to internal

factors, blame themselves more for failure, and take less credit for success (Dweck and Reppucci, 1973; Seligman, 1990). Studies indicate that college women are more self-critical than men in response to failure (Carver and Ganellen, 1983). Girls have lower expectations and less sense of control and hopefulness about the future.

As Baumeister states (1991), "seeing things as they really are is associated with depression and low self-esteem" (p. 224). It is possible that women are actually more realistic in their evaluations of themselves (McIntosh, 1985). Women may hold fewer "positive illusions" of being in control and effective (Taylor and Brown, 1988) because there are so many cultural messages which basically indicate we are *not* in control of our lives. Thus the psychology of being an object for another's needs and of being a responsive caregiver suggests that women actually have less real control in the sense of "control over" their environment. Such control is unrealistic in most interpersonal frameworks, but particularly if one is not in a position of dominance where power over others is the primary way of organizing relationships. Women also generate fewer positive illusions of control based on active resistance to being influenced by others, a style more characteristic of men.

## A tendency to self-blame

Women are prone to the tendency to blame themselves in total rather than specific ways. When taught that they are less effective, and feel that they have less impact on their surroundings and should not be boastful, self-promoting or "own success," it is likely that women will turn disappointments inward.

In this pattern of shame and self-blame, one begins to avoid and to disconnect, unable to muster the hope for acceptance and love; connecting in an authentic way seems impossible (Jordan, 1989). This leads to withdrawal, isolation, and less and less opportunity for growth and new learning about self, other, and relationship. Those who lack *relational confidence*, then, become more cautious and keep more and more of their authentic responses, feelings, and thoughts out of the connection (Jordan, 1992). This often leads to a confirmation of their worst fears, as others subsequently experience interactions with them as less vital and more restricted; these other people in turn bring less of themselves to the interaction as well. This leads to a relational pattern of lessening energy and mutuality and ultimately to disengagement on both sides, a kind of spiraling disconnection. I believe

that for women this is often at the core of a lack of a sense of personal well-being and renders them vulnerable to being silenced and to the consequent depression and anxiety.

## The silencing of girls in school

The American myth is that we live in a culture in which rewards are meted out by merit, that if we are worthy and work hard we get ahead. Yet the rewards in both school and work settings are quite biased by sex and other non-achievement factors (Sadker, 1994). Recent research, mainly on white children, suggests that schools are especially supportive of boys' development. Girls are typically rendered invisible and inaudible by perfectly well-meaning teachers who, without awareness, fail to call on them, fail to give them feedback, fail to encourage them to try harder in certain areas, and fail to appreciate their intelligence, and by boys in their classes who interrupt them, don't listen to them, and who actively scorn them (Sadker, 1994). While these forces are already at work in elementary school, in middle school and high school girls suddenly find themselves in a much more male defined and organized world. Girls are also made to feel unattractive and undesirable, particularly if their intelligence shows. Thus girls often become silent achievers, still getting the best grades but rarely participating in classroom discussions or letting others know how well they are doing.

Girls are perfectly capable of active, excited discourse but this seems to occur with predictability only when there are not boys around (Sadker, 1994). Separate-sex schools appear to facilitate girls' active participation in classroom dialogue while mixed-sex classes can lead to the silencing of girls and women.

The tendency to value boys more is also reflected among classmates in schools and becomes internalized by both boys and girls. In response to the question, "Suppose you woke up tomorrow and found you were a member of the opposite sex, how would your life be different?" (Sadker, 1994, p. 83), girls were curious and intrigued, many saying "people will listen to what I have to say and will take me seriously." For boys, the response to becoming female is often one of disgust and humiliation. In its extreme, 16 percent of the boys responded "If I were a girl, I would kill myself." This is particularly disturbing when we realize that in adolescence girls increasingly turn to boys to gain a sense of approval.

In adolescence girls and boys move into mixed-sex groups, or the male sex becomes the

referent group for judging one's adequacy. Girls move from a context where there is typically concern, mutuality, and a sense of being tuned in to each other to a situation where the other assumes an adversarial position, not wanting to be influenced, where competition, dominance, and hierarchy matter. Until adolescence, girls and boys typically gravitate to same-sex groups; there are strong preferences for same-sex playmates, both individually and in groups. Girls in particular demonstrate a sensitivity to the sex of the person they are interacting with. When playing with girls, girls are often active and engaged but when paired with boys, very often the girls are observed to withdraw, allowing the boys to monopolize toys. Furthermore "rough and tumble" play, so prevalent in boy-boy interactions, seems aversive to most girls.

One factor I would like to underline is that girls find it difficult to influence boys. Studies have indicated that between the ages of 3 1/2 and 5 1/2 children show a dramatic increase in their efforts to influence other people (Maccoby, 1990). The ways girls and boys attempt to influence others differ: girls tend to make suggestions, whereas boys make more direct demands. Furthermore, and very importantly, in the two years just prior to school, boys become less and less responsive to polite suggestions. Girls' ways of influencing are still effective with each other and with adults, but progressively fail to have an impact on boys. Eleanor Maccoby (1990), in her classic review of these patterns, suggests that "girls find it aversive to try to interact with someone who is unresponsive and that they begin to avoid such partners" (p. 343). Gender-segregated play groups become powerful socializing environments, with boys and girls learning very different styles of interaction and play; boys are more likely to interrupt one another, refuse to comply with others' demands, call out other children's names, and threaten or boast. All girl groups are more likely to express agreement and pause to give another girl a chance to speak (Maccoby, 1990).

Girls in elementary school are often described as energetic, confident, and positive (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). In adolescence, however, they move into what Lynn Brown and Carol Gilligan observe as massive self-doubt. Brown and Gilligan believe that girls in adolescence typically begin to be silenced, that they cease "knowing what they know" in order to remain in relationships. That is, that in order to stay connected they have to move out of authenticity. They have to follow the boys' rules, the dominant rules.

## Adolescence: Special dilemmas for girls' sense of well-being

Until adolescence, the differences in rates of depression and self-esteem are not noteworthy, but in adolescence white boys begin to display a real advantage in the traditional studies of self-esteem and white girls experience a significant drop in self-esteem. The AAUW study (1992) indicates that between the ages of 9 and 15 white girls experience a 13 point drop in self-esteem. In high school only African American girls showed a growth in self-worth, a very important finding that warrants much more attention.

There are a strong set of gender "shoulds" that come into play in adolescence: a girl should be nice, noncompetitive, popular with boys, attractive in a stereotypical feminine way, and more interested in the other than in herself. With their developing cognitive abilities which make it possible for adolescents to conjecture, hypothesize, and anticipate, very often there also comes an acute self-consciousness. For girls this self-consciousness is powerfully focused on the body and on fulfilling stereotypical images of becoming a woman. Both research and anecdotal reports indicate the prevalence and painfulness of this self consciousness: don't be too smart; be attractive but not *too* attractive; develop a thin and beautiful body; don't brag; don't rock the boat; be socially pleasing; make other people feel comfortable; be sexy but don't be sexual; help the boy feel like a man.

An additional piece of this movement into a more heterosexual world is the emphasis on the girl becoming what the boy wants; and boys want attractive, compliant, sexually pleasing partners. Thus, girls become increasingly self-conscious about their bodies and their appearance as this somewhat uncontrollable personal factor becomes the most important thing in determining their appeal to the opposite sex.

The issue of attractiveness becomes excruciatingly powerful in adolescence. Very specifically, studies show that girls self-esteem is powerfully affected by their body image (Algood-Merten, Lewinsohn and Hops, 1990; Harter, 1993). For girls, the perception of physical attractiveness declines systematically with grade level. The picture that is conveyed is that girls in adolescence feel increasingly unattractive, ineffective, and bad about themselves.

### Conflicting styles: The need for responsiveness versus the need to resist influence

Furthermore, after years of relative gender segregation, in adolescence these two very different styles of experiencing self, other, and relationship are suddenly brought together. Great pain and consternation in this "meeting" often ensue. The boys, organized around separation and very importantly around the sense of "I will not be influenced by you," meet the girls who are organized around relationship. Girls feel alive and good about themselves when they are in a relationship where there is mutual initiative and responsiveness, where they can touch others emotionally. Until recently the dilemma of this meeting has been resolved by seeing the female way as less good than the male way. The emphasis on separation, boundedness, and self-sufficiency as the supreme values have cast women as deficient in their need for connection and in their openness to emotional responsiveness. A sense of differentness and "wrongness" becomes exaggerated for women in mixed-sex situations.

The women's rules tending toward mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, of encouraging the other to express herself, often operant in their same-sex groups are suddenly missing. Men tend to use the same interactive styles in mixed-sex groups that they had used in same-sex groups: dominance, competition, hierarchy. Men, then tend to "take over" mixed-sex interactions. They listen less to other people, particularly if that other person is a woman. The resistance to influence by others is particularly strong for men when other men are present, as if this is part of their demonstration to other men that they are dominant and in control (Maccoby, 1990).

Women in mixed groups sometimes adapt by becoming more like men but they also continue to encourage others to speak, talk less, smile more, and give nonverbal signs of attentiveness (Maccoby, 1990). There is also evidence that men become more instrumental and women attend more to the emotional and social cohesion issues in a group.

In trying to understand the experience of loss of feelings of confidence, energy, hope, and effectiveness that girls seem to suffer from so dramatically in adolescence, in particular, I think a relational/contextual model can shed some very important light. Our feelings of well-being are determined in interactions; in order to understand how girls come to feel so disempowered, we should pay attention to relational images and patterns rather than to so-called personality traits or character structure. If we take a relational point of view, the girl does not become silent because of some internal forces or shifts. Rather, there is an active silencing process that occurs throughout the girl's life which undergoes a dramatic shift in adolescence when girls move from primarily same-sex relationships and referent groups into a social world that emphasizes heterosexuality and the importance of being in relationship with a boy. The quality of our (everyone's) speaking depends on the quality of the other's listening. Girls, speaking in emotional and connection-seeking voices, look for resonance; boys, seeking to establish positions of dominance, resist being influenced, particularly by girls with their emotionally- laden messages. Research indicates that both men and women listen more carefully to men than women (Maccoby, 1990). The literal speaking and listening and the quality of attention, initiative, and response that occurs in any given interaction or series of interactions leads to either a sense of aliveness and well-being or deadness and poor self-esteem. In mixed-sex groups, girls are not encouraged into voice.

By looking at the voice only (as words coming from within one person or traits inside a person), we stay in a one person metaphor of self. I am suggesting that in understanding a person's feelings of confidence, strength, regard, and respect, we must be very alert to the context in which the person is presently situated and also the contexts in which they have been functioning. Voice is a relational construct. Feeling worthwhile—enjoying a sense of respect and regard—is also a relational construct. We have a need for resonance, responsiveness, a need to be able to create growth-enhancing relationships together. Failing to appreciate the primary relatedness of our sense of well-being leads to distortions in understanding, a tendency to make intrapsychic and characterological that which is deeply relational and contextual.

### Interventions
#### Social interventions

Appreciating the importance of context and relationship on our sense of well-being or self-esteem leads us to propose not only individual approaches to "problems with self-esteem" but also more broad contextual interventions. Attention must be brought to both the way entitlement and privilege operate in many relationships and how they are differentially encouraged in males and females. And, furthermore, the invisibility of the rules that encourage existing

power patterns must be challenged; just as whites must become aware of and explore their obvious white privilege and its consequences for people of color, so men must come to terms with patterns of dominance and male privilege (McIntosh, 1990).

In order to learn how to challenge some of the existing pressures, we need to look more closely at the experiences of women who have either chosen to, or have been forced to, achieve a measure of freedom from some of the major constraints of white, heterosexual, middle-class relational patterns. bell hooks speaks of the black woman's "oppositional gaze" (1992), the ability to observe the social world critically and oppose ideas that are disempowering. Tracy Robinson and Janie Ward (1991), writing about African-American women, speak about transforming the "resistance for survival" to the "resistance for liberation." They point to the importance of African-American women acknowledging the problems of, and demanding change in, an environment that oppresses them, thus transforming self-directed anger into striving for justice.

One approach to helping women and other marginalized groups is to foster awareness of the specific expectations and standards of their particular cultural group that might be at odds with, and devalued by, the dominant group. Shaming and silencing strategies of the dominant group can be countered with this consciousness and the support of others who share this awareness.

Another important step in intervention at a social level would be to increase awareness about the differential treatment that girls and boys are accorded in school. This would involve finding a non-shaming way to help raise consciousness in teachers, parents, and students about the subtle and blatant ways in which boys in the classroom are treated with more respect, given more time to develop their opinions, and are seen as more intelligent than girls.

## Working with individuals in therapy

In helping the individual move toward a greater sense of respect we need to try to move out of traditional patterns of therapy which were born in and reflect the emphasis on separate self. The goal in therapy is not to improve someone's "happiness," or raise self-esteem in the sense of setting oneself above others. Rather, it is to increase relational resilience, relational flexibility, the capacity for mutuality, relational confidence and efficacy, and the development of relational awareness. Increased creative engagement in work—making a contribution to the community—also leads to a greater sense of personal value or worth. People need help in moving out of paralyzing self-consciousness, away from a primary focus on the intrapsychic, and toward developing more awareness of relational images. Too often with the traditional understandings of self-esteem there has been a connotation that "I *have* low self-esteem or high self-esteem; that it is inside me and that it should be something I regulate internally. There's something wrong with me if I need to turn to others to get support or to feel good. Furthermore, I have to *prove* myself to others, to prove that I deserve attention or good feedback. I have to stand out, not just be ordinary. I have to be admired and special." We suggest instead that it is natural and necessary to turn to others for a sense of well-being, not to be admired or "mirrored," but simply to *feel connected*. The connection itself is not predicated on being special but simply on the presence of two people capable of engagement and moving toward mutuality.

In relational therapy we take this first step by letting the person know that we are actively engaged with her. We are there to rework relational patterns, images, and schemas to open up expanding possibilities of how we can be with other people. If we do not engage and also find a way to engage in *new* ways, we are doomed to repeat old, well-worn, and sterile patterns of being in the world.

In the practice of relational therapy we shift away from a model of neutrality and distancing in which the therapist is not to be too influenced or impacted by the client, and definitely should not reveal the impact the client makes. This therapeutic stance resonates with the preoccupation of boys and men not to be influenced by others. But this can be crazy-making for the person who feels he or she cannot have an impact on other people or for the person who feels she has too much impact (negative) on others. A relational model suggests that the therapist needs to participate in an authentic way, open to being moved and affected by the client. We let the person see that they matter, that they influence us. The message is "I am responsive to you," "you matter." In addition to allowing the person some access to our affect, *always* modulated by concern for his or her well-being, we also share our thinking about how we arrive at certain ways of understanding what is brought to us. This is in opposition to traditional wisdom that says: "Don't let the person see that she has an impact on you which will make her feel you are weak and can't handle her; she will have to take care of you." The old model is a very one-directional

notion of caring, suggesting that there can't be mutual caring and that caring or help only flows from the powerful, non-influenceable one to the weak other. I believe these prescriptions for therapy are profoundly biased by male gender norms of separation and non-influenceability.

The mutuality in therapy I am advocating is not about "hanging out" together, being just another friend, being "the same," giving up all the necessary role constraints of being a therapist, particularly the primary responsibility for safeguarding the client's well-being and safety. But safety in a relational model depends on creating good, responsive, and safe connection, not disconnection.

We want to help shift self-judgments, critical self-evaluation, and self-blame into self-empathy, self-inquiry, and an *interest* in one's participation in past and current relationships. Related to the development of relational awareness is self-empathy: bringing the care, attention, and concern that we provide for others to bear on our relationships with ourselves. Self-empathy is developed not in the service of separation or putting yourself above or "higher than" the other, but in the service of increasing a sense of acceptance and respect for one's experience so that increasingly authentic connection with others can occur. This self-empathy, in turn, contributes to increasing empathy with the other person.

We need to lessen self-blame through validation and by increasing relational awareness. With increasing awareness of the relationship, clients move out of the automatic attribution of blame to the self or other and think more in terms of the relational patterns that create certain difficulties. This includes raising consciousness about entitlement, privilege, and personal and social biases.

Appreciating how context-sensitive we are, we can begin to look at how we are able to be most authentic and productive and hopeful in what contexts. Therapists help people focus on the question: "What 'works', where and how?" Very importantly, we help people identify the contexts and relationships that disempower versus those that empower; subtle attention can be paid to the differences and toward assisting people in finding ways to become engaged in relationships that are most respectful, validating, and creative.

The desire to have an impact, to move people, to become engaged in relationship is not the same as trying to impress people, or to manage self-presentation in order to receive approval or accolades. In the management of images and self-presentation in

order to gain praise or rewards, one, in fact, moves into inauthentic, deadening exchanges that do not deeply nourish or challenge either person. So to say that self-esteem is contextual is not to say simply that we count on others to "mirror" or praise us (which is certainly a part of some relationships), but that we want to be able to connect in a deep, meaningful way. The narcissistic need for being elevated above or admired usual arises when the sense of connection is disrupted (Jordan, 1987).

I also believe that we gain a sense of self-respect in feeling that we have something worthwhile to give to others, and that we can engage in meaningful connection with them. Therefore it may be important to encourage people in therapy to participate in creating social change by using what they have learned in their suffering to help others. In developing an appreciation of the influence of context and social messages on women's sense of themselves, we also can give the message that some of these conditions can be changed. Often women choose to transform their own pain around certain issues (e.g. sexual or physical abuse) by giving to others who suffer from similar pain or engaging in social action to transform the conditions which generate the suffering (Herman, 1992).

## Conclusion

How can we productively take our place in the world of other people, with confidence, hope, a sense of meaning and purpose and not get caught seeking to set ourselves above or separate from the other people? How can we help women to develop the courage to stand for their values and bring a passion to their work and relationships, always with responsiveness and empathy for the other people involved?

Therapists are faced not just with trying to assist the individual girl or woman who struggles with problems of low self-esteem and the possible depression that follows, but we must pay attention to the larger cultural patterns that create and sustain this loss of confidence for girls and women. In addition to engendering enormous personal suffering, this pattern of undermining a group's sense of positive energy drains enormous creative energy from the society. We must be careful not to attend only to the internal factors, then, that contribute to problems in self-esteem or depression; this seems particularly clear when we have data that so strongly points to the prevalence of depression and demoralization for so many women.

We also must pay attention to the differences between diverse groups of women, to the strengths and the particularities of their relational pathways. It is important to have confidence in our ability to create growth-enhancing relationship and relationships that support instrumental skills and creative productivity. A personal sense of worth or confidence ideally is not just feeling good about oneself but also involves a sense that one has something to contribute to others and that one is engaged in creating meaningful relationships. Self-confidence or self-esteem, as an expression of independent, detached feelings of well-being, does not seem to fit women's experience, just as self-sufficiency does not seem to be a reasonable goal of human development.

## Discussion Summary

*A discussion is held after each Colloquium presentation. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session, Drs. Wendy Rosen, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey and Maureen Walker joined Dr. Jordan in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** When my stepdaughter was 10 or 11 she was totally scapegoated by girls in her class. Since then I've heard that this happens to lots of other girls. People who work with girls that age say it's typical. This is right at the time that self-esteem plummets. It had an enormous impact on her. Could you comment on this?

**Jordan:** When I consulted in a school system I remember that around 5th grade there would be cliques of girls that would exclude other girls. At this time girls may begin to be affected by the larger cultural push for competition between girls for the attention of boys. There may also be a way that girls are pressured to let go of some of the same-sex bonds. It can be a time of great pain.

**Stiver:** We always have to see the girls in the larger culture. There are glimmers of what's to come. Women struggle with this. Some identify with those who have more power and who have scapegoated them. We see that in divisiveness between groups of adult women. Women's relationships with each other are wounded by the larger context.

**Question:** Do you have any thoughts on why African-American girls don't suffer such a drop of self-esteem in adolescence?

**Walker:** Judy mentioned the term relational flexibility which I think is a very important idea regarding what young African-American women are taught. We are taught a lot about caring for others.

Traditional notions of self-esteem emphasize being admired. I think what needs to be explored more is the isolation of admiration and what happens when people are taught to be admired rather than how to remain in authentic relationship with other people. The other thing we need to think about is the impact of being traumatized by a larger society. Much of what we talk about with regard to self-esteem has been typically explained in terms of what happens interpersonally or what happens within a family context. But we have to examine a lot about what goes on in a society that is race biased and what that means for relationships with same race people and different race people.

**Question:** You seem to be talking about a shift from drive theory to relational theory. How is that playing out politically in terms of psychiatry? How do biological psychiatry and relational approaches relate to one another? Is there a shift in thinking among many of the more traditional thinkers? Are there men who are part of the shift?

**Jordan:** In both psychology and psychiatry there has been increasing appreciation of the primacy of relatedness and connection in people's lives and in the therapeutic work. At the same time biological psychiatry has never been stronger, and managed care, which I think encourages a certain technological, "fix-it" approach, is encroaching on practitioners trying to use dynamic approaches in working with patients. Still, I feel hope because there has been a great deal of interest among men and women practitioners in relational work. But as with a lot of progress, with feminism and other shifts that challenge existing power bases, there is always backlash and devaluing of new approaches.

**Rosen:** The only way we're going to get further into the meaning of a relational theory of theory is if we scrutinize the whole structure of psychotherapy itself. That is one of the hardest things to do. It puts the therapist out there in the open. There are two people who are moving and being moved and affecting and being affected.

**Question:** I want to get back to the idea of being bicultural. There is clearly a benefit to living biculturally or being in opposition or resistance to an oppressive dominant culture, but there's also a cost. Can you speak to both sides?

**Walker:** It's about negotiating the balance. Beverly Greene talks about selective affirmation where I find out that this part of myself is accepted here and this part is accepted there and that is what I will show. But there can also be a sense of fragmentation and no

cohesive sense of self.  The more one has to hold parts of one's self out of relationship, in whatever context, there is a great danger of not being known to yourself. I am simply what I do in this context . . . and this is not connected to the sense of who I am.  We have to really watch and negotiate that.

       **Jordan:**  I think making the need for bicultural consciousness more explicit is helpful.  The costs are greater when it cannot be named.

       **Comment:**  In order to make an impact on girls in schools it is important that we make sure that women are represented in textbooks and curricula.  In my institution, three out of 168 books used by the English department are written by women.  Parents and communities have power to urge the schools to examine what they're offering and to try to find ways to expose young girls and boys to the great women in history that are left out.  By seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum in every discipline girls can start to feel better about themselves and the women they're to become.

       **Comment:**  We are taught as girls to be very relational.  There isn't going to be a change in our self-esteem unless we change the images of girls and women that boys grow up with.  As long as girls grow up alongside of boys and boys grow up putting down women, girls will take that information in.  We have to pay attention to changing things for young boys.

       **Comment:**  Society needs to see that reality. Boys lose out by not having the relational skills . . . and not having fuller relationships with wives and children . . . we need to equalize it so men and women can grow together.

       **Surrey:**  Some men, at later points in life, say they do value relationships.  Boys need men to speak out about that.

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