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# **Work in Progress**

## **Work Inhibitions in Women**

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### ***Work in Progress***

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### **About the Speaker**

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### **Abstract**

*Work as an important source of identity and self-esteem is not easily integrated into women's lives, and women's experience with work-related issues differs, quantitatively and qualitatively, from that of men. As women discuss conflicts and distress about their jobs, several themes emerge. Most of these suggest formulations which probe beyond some of the explanations currently tendered in both the professional and popular literature. In women's struggles with work issues, a crucial underlying factor frequently turns out to be their psychological identification with and differentiation from their mothers. This factor has a very different configuration from men's work problems traceable to either fathers or mothers. Recognizing that our cultural definitions of job success typically are not congruent with qualities that women value for themselves, women often need validation in terms of their own standards and beliefs.*

**c. 1985, by Irene Stiver, Ph.D.**

Two studies illustrate some of the facets of women's work problems. In one, Ruth Moulton surveyed 200 psychoanalysts -- 150 men and 50 women (1977). They were asked the simple question, "Would you refuse an invitation to speak publicly?" Fifty percent of the women said they would refuse to speak, contrasted to 20 percent of the men. This seems particularly surprising because the subjects were women psychoanalysts who were presumably sophisticated and self-aware. In another study with latency-aged boys and girls, it was found that the brighter the boy, the better he expected to do in the future and the more he thought his good scores were a result of his competence (Crandall, 1962). In contrast, the brighter the girl, the less she was apt to think her good performance was a reflection of her own capacity, and she did not expect to do better in the future.

Despite such observations, women rarely come to therapy with a presenting problem around work. Men who have difficulties at work seem to see them as legitimate reasons for entering therapy. Women more typically come into therapy because of a concern about a personal relationship, and it is only as the therapy progresses that work issues come into focus.

When the work problems emerge, it is striking to see how frequently and pervasively women still experience conflict and varying degrees of

distress in their jobs. Some women experience so much anxiety about entering or re-entering the work arena that they do not try to get a job, even though they may have a strong interest in doing something which would use their talents and abilities. Other women, working out of economic necessity and feeling dissatisfied with their jobs, often feel hopeless about their ability to move into work which might be more meaningful. Then there are those women who do pursue work interests and prepare for a career but get stuck at some point and cannot go further -- for example, a graduate student who does well up to writing the doctoral dissertation and then becomes blocked and cannot complete her work or a woman in industry who reaches the middle management level and then sabotages her own chances to move ahead or does not take advantage of opportunities for advancement. Even women workers who are clearly successful, effective, and competent often feel privately that their horizons are limited significantly by the kinds of anxieties and difficulties they experience in their work situations.

I believe that some of the recent writing on this topic has given us fast explanations which have not probed many deeper realms. Some of these answers have even attained notoriety in the popular media, where they have taken on an almost slogan-like repetitiveness. The major effect has been, I believe, to make women feel worse. In this discussion, I will address several facets of women's work experience. In some instances, this means raising issues with the explanations currently offered in order to highlight the problems in these explanations. Perhaps we can move on to a more complex and appropriate exploration of work issues with which women struggle without reducing them to additions on the list of "problems women have."

Are women's problems about work different from men's -- and if so, how? What is immediately apparent is that for men, work has been a means of enhancing their experience of themselves as men, supporting their identities as men, and work has always been an important source of their self-esteem. The successful man is perceived as more masculine than the man who is less successful. Many women, on the other hand, experience considerable conflict between their sense of self at work and their sense of self in their personal lives. Typically for women, work has not been a source of self-esteem. But it is important to say here that these remarks refer to white women. Black women, for example, integrate work into their sense of self and self-esteem in a different way -- a way that also differs from the experience of Black men (Malson, 1983; Nelson, 1983).

To understand women's work in a full and appropriate way, we would have to understand the structure and forces of our economic, cultural, and occupational institutions. Many writers are illuminating these today. I will not attempt to review that large body of material but will limit this discussion to some of the problems women tend to bring to us as workers in the psychological field.

In the current literature about women and work such problems are discussed, but the suggested resolution usually involves helping women learn more about competitive situations called for at work--for example, how

to take more power, be more competitive, become more task-oriented, act more impersonal, develop more invulnerability to feedback, and think more analytically.

I question this strategy for resolution because I believe it contains some of the very problems with which women are struggling. Therefore, I shall begin by listing a number of areas that come up frequently when women talk about difficulties at work, describe them, and speculate about what might be behind them.

### **Self-doubts**

It is noteworthy how often women express enormous doubts about their abilities and their competence. Repeatedly, I am struck by the degree to which women still minimize and negate signs of their effectiveness, what they know, and what they can do. They minimize their intellectual worth and their inner ambitions, and they work hard to hide their abilities.

Occasionally, their intelligence and conviction overcome their discretion and they speak up, but begin to ruminate afterwards about whether they made fools of themselves. They worry whether they were too aggressive; should they have said that, should they have said this; perhaps they shouldn't have spoken so long or so little or so much. If somebody recognizes them for saying something worthwhile, they are gratified at the moment; then they begin to worry about how they fooled so-and-so, how they are phonies and frauds, and someday people will find them out. While women are often aware that they do this and are annoyed with themselves for doing it, they do believe that they are fooling people, or they don't know as much as other people think they know. And women typically also attribute their successes to chance events -- they say that they happened to be at the right place at the right time, or they were just lucky.

What I find particularly interesting is how much women resist changing such attitudes about themselves in the face of contrasting information and other dynamic interpretations (Applegarth, 1977).

When women talk about their sense of inadequacy, it often is in the context of how defective they feel. They usually overvalue men, undervalue women, and feel that they are lacking something. Responding psychoanalytically, we might say this is a reflection of penis envy or envy of men's power position, at least in the work situation. But such interpretations are no more effective in changing the women's attitudes than other kinds of interpretations.

We must ask, then, why women hold to the sense of themselves as inadequate, helpless, and not knowing very much.

In a recent book called, *The Cinderella Complex*, Colette Dowling (1981) angrily accuses women of using their helplessness and dependency, waiting for the strong man to come and rescue them. She also says that since he never will come, women must become "independent," "strong," and "self-reliant." Certainly there is some truth to the idea that our culture supports a woman's assuming a dependent role and presenting herself as helpless --

with the seductive promise that she will be taken care of, even though it typically is disappointing. This seductive fantasy may itself be so gratifying that women hold to a helpless position even though it is damaging to their self-esteem. I believe, however, that this formulation is deceptive and oversimplifies the meanings of women's "dependency."

In our culture we too readily equate a need to be related to other people with dependency. In the last colloquium on empathy and women's sense of self, an important formulation was emphasized and expanded. It holds that a woman's sense of self is a *relational* one (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1982; Surrey, 1983), and that a woman's need to feel related to others is a crucial aspect of her identity. I believe that women's attempts to form relationships are often mislabelled as expressions of dependency. But it is also true that assuming a dependent position has been the only mode available to many women, particularly in relating to men.

It is fascinating to note the degree to which the term *dependent* is used pejoratively in our culture, which I believe is related to the tendency to see dependency more often as a female than as a male characteristic. Yet it seems to me that both men and women are vulnerable to regressive pulls and seductive promises of being "taken care of." Women acknowledge it more, because it is more permissible. But, paradoxically, men live it out more in marriage, for emotional dependency needs are more often gratified by wives than by husbands. Women are better trained to be nurturant caretakers. In other words, the successful man gets cared for, and the successful woman is considered to be someone who can take care of herself.

### Assigning priorities

Another area I hear about when women talk about work is how one assigns priorities to tasks. Again, the literature tells us that women have all sorts of blind spots about recognizing opportunities and challenges. We learn that women rarely seek opportunities for advancement; indeed, they often experience such opportunities as burdensome obligations and feel resentful rather than grateful.

A good example of this kind of thinking is cited in *The Managerial Woman* by Hennig and Jardim (1977). In the authors' investigation of how women function in industry, they surveyed women in business settings and sat in on numerous meetings. In the book the following anecdote was offered to illustrate how women fail to recognize challenges that are right in front of them:

In a meeting where a young, up-and-coming woman executive presented an impressive plan, the Vice President of the organization responded very positively, saying, "I am going to meet with the President this weekend. Would you prepare a draft of this for me on Friday?" She replied, "Friday? I can't possibly present it on Friday; I have to go to a conference out of town."

"Then I won't object if you have it in my hands on Thursday."

"Thursday? I have all these visuals to prepare. I have to go out of

town early."

"Then I'll accept it on Wednesday."

"But I'm going on Tuesday, and I have to clear my desk, etc., etc..."

As they left the room she said to the authors, "Did you hear him? Drop everything! Put that first priority!" Then they explained to her that she had a great opportunity to be heard by the President, and she blew it. She said, "Oh my god, I never saw that!"

As I read this account, my heart went out to the young woman, and I felt furious at the Vice President. Nobody asked the woman what her priorities might have been. The assumption was that she was some poor fool who hadn't seen something rather obvious in front of her. No one thought that maybe the President could hear about it a week later. It just seemed to be assumed that her advancement should come first and that nothing else mattered. One has to raise questions about that idea itself.

Is it as simple as the authors of *The Managerial Woman* suggest? Are women more naive in the working world? Have they not been trained sufficiently as competitors? And do they have blind spots about recognizing new possibilities? I think the answer lies elsewhere. In the first place, women continue to carry significant household responsibilities even when they are working -- and despite the changes in some households where men have assumed more domestic responsibilities. Also, women's involvement in the family tasks often is not understood sufficiently.

Family tasks are more than the sum of hours required to execute the tasks. We already have stressed the importance of relationships to women, and I believe that the emotional bonding, and the intensity of the bonding, with those "at home" involves significant emotional energy. Thus the "wrenching away" from home to work and from work to home takes more of a toll on women than men. Because of this struggle, women often develop a precarious balance between what they do at home and what they do at work. If anything occurs to threaten this balance -- for example, one more demand at work -- many women experience enormous anxiety and begin to feel they do not have things sufficiently under control. Every new obligation and every new task carries the potential of creating a disequilibrium in that balance.

Also, women are taught that they should do for others before themselves. Consequently, if they do something for their own advancement ahead of something for other people, they feel selfish and opportunistic—an uncomfortable self-image.

Another factor is that women's self-doubt and sense of inadequacy makes them much more timid about risk-taking and moving into new areas. This is important, because women can also feel resentful when they are bypassed and miss opportunities. These are only some of the factors that come to mind in response to the *Managerial Woman* vignette. There are others.

**"Professional" behavior**



Another thing one often hears when women talk about work is their concern that they behaved "unprofessionally," or they discuss other women who behave "unprofessionally." The men I talk to who are successful in work almost never worry about whether somebody did something that was unprofessional. Why are women continually stewing about that? And what do they mean when they say someone behaved "unprofessionally?" I think they mean that the person didn't behave "like a man." The fantasy is that men move through every work situation strong, confident, self-sufficient, and clearly not emotional, because to be emotional is the worst kind of unprofessionalism.

Recently a woman who has a high administrative position said to me, "I have to separate my professional from my personal opinions." When I asked why, she was startled and replied, "That's what men do." But is that what men do? I believe men do act on their "personal opinions" in work situations. I also believe that men and women differ on the type of personal concerns they allow to influence their decisions. I think what the woman meant goes something like this: "I have to separate my objective appraisal of employee performance from my opinion about whom I like and don't like. I can't make liking or not liking someone influence my job decisions." Men, however, give much more legitimacy for personal considerations entering into their decisions, and it feels all right to them when it involves issues of power, competitiveness, or even vindictiveness. I heard a man say recently when he was about to fire someone, "He does not accept my authority." Well, that's pretty personal -- hardly a measure of the person's competence -- yet he felt perfectly comfortable in thinking it was a perfectly good reason to fire an employee. I truly believe it would be very hard for a woman to allow a personal feeling such as that to influence how she made a decision.

Many bright women seem to think there is a set of polarized characteristics -- feminine on one end of the continuum, masculine on the other. Masculine characteristics are "good" at work, feminine are "bad," and they must be kept separate. To show too many feminine characteristics at work is a precursor to failure. It's the concern about being "unprofessional" -- if one's feelings somehow escape, one's head will stop working, or people will expect it to stop working.

In this connection, I think that one of the greatest fears a woman has -- the worst "unprofessionalism" -- is to cry on the job. I heard from a friend about a work situation where she was one of the few women in a meeting. She was feeling scapegoated, tears welled in her eyes (which made everybody nervous), and the man who was running the meeting ended it prematurely. As the participants were leaving, one man turned to her in a patronizing way and said, "Are you all right?" "I would have been a lot worse if I hadn't cried," she said. He was a little startled with that.

We must raise the questions about exactly which feelings are and which are not "allowed" in the work environment. Consider the nature of communication in our lives: When women communicate with a strong emotional tone, they often are called "hysterical," and the message is quickly

discarded. Yet the expression of feeling can be as much a communication as the content of what one says. I think this is something that is generally easy for women to do but hard for men to hear.

Again, I'll illustrate with a vignette: Recently, I was talking to a male colleague about something I considered to be extremely important. I needed his support, and I was talking with a good deal of feeling. He minimized what I said and downplayed its importance. I couldn't agree, and I was getting more and more exasperated. He kept saying, "Well, it's really not that important," or "Let's wait and see." Finally, in a kind of apathetic way, I said quietly, "Well, there's this, this, and that...", enumerating the points again, but this time without any feeling. He said, "Oh, why didn't you say that before -- instead of coming on like a witch on a broom!" At first I was hurt, then I thought further -- I tried to tell him something and let him know it was important, but he couldn't hear me. My intense expression of feeling made him too anxious to hear the message, yet I felt that my feelings were just as important to the communication as the words! The point is that women are made to feel they need to curtail such feelings, as though one cannot harmonize cognitive effectiveness with affect (Jordan, 1983). But one can be strong about convictions and emotionally expressive; can be involved in tasks, master them, and be concerned about people; can be analytic in problem solving and be intuitive. None of these qualities have to be polarized.

### **Competition**

Another troublesome area for women is competition. We know that, compared to men, women are more likely to avoid competitive situations, less likely to acknowledge competitive wishes, and not likely to do as well in competition. Again, the assumption is that to be as competitive as men is a good thing -- it's the American way! And, again, the writings on women and work say that women should learn to be more competitive and become more skilled at it. I found only two exceptions to that position -- specifically, in Jean Baker Miller's book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), and Helen Block Lewis' book, *Psychic War in Men and Women* (1976). Those are the only writings I know that address the value of "feminine" characteristics in work situations.

For several reasons, it is difficult for women to be competitive. First of all, when a woman is openly competitive, she frequently experiences herself as aggressive and destructive. Fearful that others will perceive her that way, she feels that the worst thing she can be called is a "castrating woman." But it goes deeper than labels other people give. Women are trained to be concerned about other people and to be empathic, so that it is very hard to enjoy vanquishing a rival if one is at the same time empathic with that rival.

There's another problem around competition that is more complicated for women than for men: With whom do you compete? Interestingly, although women are not given the permission to compete the way men are, women are allowed -- and even encouraged and groomed -- to compete with

other women for men. Men struggle in competing with men -- perhaps a symbolic competition with their fathers over their mothers, in which success may carry fear of retaliation, guilt, and anxiety. Accordingly, some men have difficulties with work and fears of success.

For women there are many more complications. When they compete with men, several problems arise immediately. First is the danger of being considered unfeminine, aggressive, and destructive -- and potentially being called "castrating." Second, because some women need to idealize men and see them as stronger and more powerful for the sake of the "rescue fantasy," it is too threatening to "do better" than the man one wants to idealize. Yet when women compete with women, they also are competing with the very people they want for support. Also, they are competing symbolically with their mothers, and that raises other complications, in terms of guilt and anxiety, which are different from those of men with their fathers and mothers.

### **Separation from mother**

Perhaps the most important area I want to address is the issue of identification with and separation from mother as women move toward work and a career. For many reasons work issues highlight the ways women identify with their mothers. For many women these issues reveal their struggle against identification with mothers who are seen as devalued, and the women often feel alone and lost.

I will give you two examples: One woman, a physician, told me that, as a resident, during rounds, she made a rather dramatic correct diagnosis. People were surprised and impressed by her ability to do this. Clearly, she had made quite a coup. She was exhilarated, yet she suddenly experienced enormous anxiety, had to retreat to her office, and felt acutely alone and isolated. Another woman who had recently returned to her career in her forties was timid in work situations, but began to speak up more and more. At one conference where she expressed her thoughts more fully, her contributions were appreciated, and she felt encouraged and pleased. But that night she had a nightmare in which she was lying in bed, helpless and immobilized, calling out desperately for her mother. Her mother had died about two years earlier.

In order to understand such problems, I believe it is necessary to explore differences between the types of attachment men and women develop with their mothers and the ways they mature and change that relationship. Current theory speaks of this process in terms of "separation." It says that little girls in growing up are not encouraged toward separate strivings, nor are they encouraged to achieve a separate identity from their mothers, as little boys are. A paper by Janet Surrey discusses the ways mothers bond with their daughters and how they teach their daughters mothering behavior with some expectation of mutual caretaking and mutual empathic interactions (1983). It is not surprising, then, that girls continue to experience a strong attachment to their mothers, with a much deeper sense that they must be *like* their mothers and truly take care of their mothers *psychologically*, with all that

implies. Women, consequently, have different kinds of problems than men do in separation from their mothers.

Mothers, in turn, often feel the need to continue their role as mothers. It has been an integral part of their female identity, and they often can continue to play the role more comfortably with daughters than with sons. While mothers feel they need to help their sons to separate and develop more independence, they can fulfill their needs for more direct interpersonal connectedness through maintaining attachments with their daughters. The more positive aspects of the mother-daughter bond, however, are countered by the mother's tendency to project feelings of inadequacy onto her daughter. While this may give the mother more license to hold on to the daughter and to "mother," it contributes to the highly ambivalent aspects of mother-daughter interrelations. Thus, mothers may express their ambivalence by holding on to their daughters at the same time they are quite critical of them. Also mothers can become competitive and fearful, as well as gratified, as they see their daughters move forward in a positive and competent fashion. And daughters, as one often hears in psychotherapy with women, often struggle to defend against their identification with their mothers, whom they see as critical, devalued, and unhappy. Yet these same women fear betraying their mothers and experience considerable guilt if they move ahead and demonstrate "differences" from their mothers. In attempting to break this bond, the women may feel that the only alternative is complete independence, which is again an attempt to identify with the more valued masculine goal. But the woman is left feeling absolutely alone in the world, without any support and with a significant sense of loss in disconnecting from her mother. A woman's attempts to resolve this dilemma by looking for a strong man who will take care of her results frequently in considerable disappointment. In other words, efforts to gain vicarious gratification through identification with the powerful man only leaves a woman with longstanding resentments and low self-esteem.

Another area highly relevant to the issue of women and work is the conflict women face between having children and having a career. It is such a complex topic, however, that it would require a separate paper even to begin exploring all the pertinent issues. It is clear that women face harsh difficulties in this area, and I don't think one can overemphasize the degree of anguish women experience in their struggle to resolve the conflict. They sometimes tend to minimize the struggle, because it seems so impossible; sometimes they overstate one side of the conflict and understate the other.

### **Fear of success**

The influence of the notion that success jeopardizes women's femininity and attractiveness to men cannot be overestimated, but it also merits re-examination. Again and again, women report the feeling that a successful woman alienates herself from both women and men. And single women often feel that the more successful they get, the narrower will be their choice of acceptable men.

The literature suggests that women who have very supportive fathers typically are more successful (Henning & Jardim, 1977). But in my clinical experience, when the chips are down, and there is a struggle between personal and professional lives, these fathers suddenly stop being very supportive. Here's an example: A woman whom I was seeing in therapy was very successful in her work, and her father had always been supportive, encouraging her to pursue her career and taking pride in her success. She had earned an important promotion in her job with increased obligations and responsibilities, so she was bringing work home on evenings and weekends. She also had trouble with her marriage -- the original reason for her coming into therapy a year earlier. After the promotion, the marriage had become more troublesome, and she finally talked to her parents about her marital difficulties. Her father became enraged. He told her that the recent promotion had been too much, that she was putting work ahead of her family, and her husband should come first. Further, if she stopped all this nonsense and put her energies in her marriage and not in her work, things would be different. She was devastated. Her father's reaction was unexpected, and it confirmed her belief that her personal life was compromised by her getting ahead in her career.

The notion that "fear of success" jeopardizes women's personal lives is part of the thesis put forth by Matina Horner (1972). Working with high achievement women, she talked about the anticipation of success in competitive activity which was countered by the anticipation of negative consequences -- for example, social rejection, disapproval, not being liked, and loss of femininity.

I will conclude by raising some important questions about this thesis when it is used to explain why women eschew success.

Women certainly do have difficulties with success. I believe, however, that "fear of success" is primarily the fear of not being related to another person, since success for women often carries with it a threat to feeling connected with others. But we need to ask these questions: Is success, as defined by our culture, such an admirable goal? And is the way of reaching that success something that women should emulate? I will describe two clinical vignettes that point up some problems inherent in those questions:

Susan is a woman of 35, divorced, with two young children, who during the process of psychotherapy completed the requirements for a bachelor's degree which she had postponed for more than ten years. It was around that time, too, that she was able to divorce her alcoholic husband and apply for graduate school. After finishing a master's degree, she was encouraged by faculty to pursue a doctorate at a much more prestigious university. She did this with some trepidation, still feeling unsure of her ability to juggle the responsibility of running a one-parent home and becoming part of a very competitive program. Nonetheless, she entered the program and began a strenuous course of study. During this time she also became involved with a man who was already an established professional in the field. He, too, was divorced with two children. Since his wife had custody of the children, he

lived alone in a bachelor-type existence, hard working and ambitious. This relationship was especially significant, for it was her first truly intimate relationship with a man.

In one session, she reported that over the past weekend her ex-husband had taken the children, and for the first time in a long time she had unlimited free time to catch up on her work. However, she and the man with whom she was involved typically spent weekends together, since the weekdays were so busy for each of them. She knew he expected them to relax and enjoy each other. He had quite an unencumbered week devoted entirely to work, but she had gone to class, run errands, visited her daughter's school, stopped in on her mother who was ill, helped out a friend in distress, etc. She wanted to tell him that she couldn't spend all the weekend playing, but felt this would seem selfish and too ambitious. Still, she mustered her courage and did tell him. His reaction was surprising. "Of course," he said, "work would always come first with me." He was very accommodating, helping her use much of the weekend to do her work.

The other case is somewhat different: About one year after Joanne had terminated therapy, she returned to see me about a crisis at work that had caused her considerable anxiety and obsessive preoccupation. She had an executive position with a company she had been with twelve years, and she supervised a large staff. I knew she had given birth to a baby six months earlier, because she sent me an announcement, but she spoke only of the issues at work. She was troubled by the hostility she felt from the junior staff, and she thought it centered on her having recently been given more responsibility in the company. There was so much upheaval that she feared the corporation president would see her as unable to do her job effectively. She expressed considerable anger at members of the junior staff, whom she felt had always been her friends, and she was quite upset at the thought that they disliked her now. After two sessions of talking about this, I noted that she had hardly said anything about her new son. Even she was startled by how little she had mentioned him, since she had intense feelings about him and about dividing her time between home and work. What soon emerged was that the complaints from her staff were that she had become aloof and uncaring -- in sharp contrast to her style before her son's birth. She became aware that she had considerable difficulty leaving her baby to come to work, as well as proving she could combine motherhood and a career. At home she had almost handed over the care of her son to a housekeeper and to her husband. At work she curtailed her nurturing, sensitive feelings toward her staff in order to prove her ability to continue her career after having the child.

These two women illustrate different facets of the problems addressed here: Susan wanted to be responsive to the man in her life and at the same time to be able to put herself forward without feeling she was hurting or harming him -- a common dilemma for women. To act for herself made her feel she was being selfish and destructive to the other person. Although she was relieved at his response, she felt she could not fully accept that value for herself, and one would have to question whether this made her a less

effective person than the man. Joanne felt she had to suppress her concerns for others to prove that she was effective, and, in fact, became less sensitive to her staff and less effective as a consequence.

So what is the goal for women? Is it to become president of the corporation and climb the ladder of success at any cost? Is it to relinquish the values women truly cherish if they interfere with achieving higher status? It seems to me there might be other goals: to achieve freedom to pursue work interests; to use talents and power to develop other people's abilities for getting the job done; to be affirmed as an effective person and still maintain relatedness to others, with all the richness and complexities that relatedness encompasses. Women need to feel entitled to pursue their work interests without feeling held back by beliefs that the needs of others are inherently always more important and valid, and without feeling selfish and destructive. In the end such feelings add to women's resentment and interfere with their ability to respond effectively to the needs of others.

A paper by Lois Hoffman (1972) says, "Driving a point home, winning an argument, beating others in competition, and attending to the task at hand without being sidetracked by concern with rapport are all hurdles women have difficulty jumping, no matter how innately intelligent they may be" (1972). Is this what we have to accept? Or are there alternate ways for women to deal with work situations and gain gratification without experiencing so much guilt, shame, frustration, and alienation?

Doing psychotherapy with women and work issues has taught me that it is important to validate the intrinsic conflict between success, as defined in our culture, and the qualities that women value for themselves. It is crucial to help women see how deeply they have internalized assumptions, attitudes, and stereotypes of what is better, worse, valued, and not valued, based on a masculine model of success -- which may sometimes be destructive and often inhumane.

Women need help to feel it is indeed important that they affirm their more person-directed, empathic qualities. If these interfere with attaining higher status and more power, the basic problem is not in the woman. And women need to be encouraged to pursue their career interests and realize their intellectual and creative potential. If they perceive this as selfish, the basic problem, again, is not in the woman. My hope is that women can learn to experience these conflicting attributes as less alien to their sense of themselves both as women and as competent, effective human beings. There are reasons for these conflicts. They seem to be inherent in just being a woman today and, therefore, are all part of women's sense of self. Let us continue to explore these struggles, rather than to accept them or to offer simplistic solutions which continue to devalue women.

### **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 Drs. Jean Baker Miller, Alexandra Kaplan, and Janet Surrey of the Stone Center joined Stiver in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** I have seen a number of women accept responsibility for jobs that just aren't doable. These usually are jobs that represent a peripheral goal -- not a central goal -- of the organization. The woman thinks it is important, figures somebody has to do it, and she tries. The organization doesn't really commit resources to it, so she gets stuck with limited accomplishments and no advancement.

**Stiver:** Yes, I'm sure that happens. I believe such situations are those in which a stated goal or task is seen as something the organization "should do" and the woman "might do," but it's not really valued. Sometimes the reality of minimal value for the job only becomes evident later, when the woman discovers that even promised resources are not committed and there is no support in the system.

**Question:** In a situation like that, who judges the accomplishments? A woman is expected to perform on not just one, but on a multitude of tasks—for example, a woman is expected to be nurturing for people at work, in addition to doing all the things called for in her job. In contrast, a man in the same situation is usually the one who defines the tasks and, therefore, is able to limit duties to those areas in which he knows he is effective.

**Stiver:** Yes, and further, there is a danger of women devaluing the tasks they are given because they devalue themselves. The more women can really value what they offer through their unique qualities, the more opportunity there is for at least respecting the tasks they are doing. But it is easy to fall into that trap of seeing one's own talents and one's own tasks as unimportant.

**Question:** As a working mother, I think that the society we developed through the 1970s has not "bought" mothering as a valuable way to spend time. In other words, a woman who has children is successful only if she combines mothering with a career commitment outside the home. The mother you talked about might have been better off staying home nurturing her baby, then returning to work when she felt successful as a mother. But, in response to others, she limited her own choices and required herself to continue working.

**Stiver:** Yes, she thought that staying home and devoting herself to full-time mothering would be devalued. But I believe she was also very invested in her work and consequently felt very torn.

**Question:** Aren't you speaking about a woman defining what success is for her -- and then pursuing activities that are congruent with that definition?

**Stiver:** Right. The assumption that one has to fit oneself into a model because it's there doesn't make sense. A person needs to mold her own life and, perhaps, may need to try to make changes in the systems around her. And this often involves another formidable task -- that is, to educate men to examine some of their values.

**Question:** Could you comment a little further on the example you cited



from Margaret Hennig's book? I didn't understand. Did you feel that the woman in the case mishandled the situation—that she should have dropped everything on her desk?

**Stiver:** No, I didn't think she mishandled it; I simply don't know. I got upset because nobody bothered to ask her what her unfinished work was. It never occurred to them to question the priorities. When she said she had to clear her desk, no one bothered to say, "What else do you have to do?" Everyone bought the idea that it was urgent to talk to the President immediately; they decided that here was an opportunity that she should go after immediately. Perhaps the plan would have worked as well if the Vice President talked to him two weeks later, but no one raised the question.

**Question:** I was struck by your concept of women's entitlement to pursue their own work interests, unfettered by obligations to take care of everyone else first. How does therapy help to fulfill that in women? It seems to be such a core issue, and we seem to be so far away from its resolution.

**Stiver:** When a woman feels that she must attend to everyone else's needs before pursuing her own work, I think she is buying into what others have told her all her life -- that is, it is selfish to put yourself first, and also destructive to the other person. In the example, I gave, the woman felt she couldn't say to her man friend that she really had to work, fearing that she would hurt him. But if you repeatedly give up and sacrifice work interests and activities for another person, eventually the resentments increase to the point that you're incapable of doing much for that person. There has to be an integration of several aspects of the situation -- that is, remaining responsive to other people's valid needs, but not always assuming your own needs aren't valid, and not consistently giving up rights for the sake of another person's needs.

**Kaplan:** What does it mean for a woman who is sensitive to others to function in a work environment which, in many ways, may be fundamentally alien to who she is? What a fundamental challenge that is to the sense of self! If she acts on the basis of who she is -- genuinely concerned for other people's feelings -- she will be punished. And if she can't be who she really is, then she has to doubt everything about herself, including the parts that are skillful and able. So I wonder if she becomes a little bit inhibited in both areas -- work activities as well as relational matters. After all, if she can't be herself, then she always is monitoring what she does. Doesn't that really reduce her effectiveness in general? What if she let herself be herself? And what if we just let ourselves be who we are?

**Question:** But think of Dr. Stiver's example of speaking affectively to her male colleague. He didn't hear, didn't understand.

**Stiver:** He did, finally.

**Question:** But you had to educate him, and that is important. That process of educating someone is draining and time consuming, and it is not the same thing as nurturing.

**Stiver:** Your own awareness plays a part. If I had not been thinking about these things and working on these concepts, I don't think I would have

bothered. I would have said to myself, "Forget it." But because I had been so immersed in the topic and it was fairly recent, I pursued it, because I felt a conviction about it. That made the difference. That's why discussions of this sort are useful. because once you start feeling that something makes sense, then you can pursue it with the kind of confidence that carries a different message from the one that is laced with doubts and questions.

**Question:** At least you have the satisfaction that you did it, and that's where your success is. You have done everything you could do, and you made the attempt. To communicate effectively you must know who is the receiver, send the message appropriately, then add to it when you feel you are on the same wavelength. If the other person responds or if the situation changes, that's terrific. But whatever happens, you know that you have done what is right for you.

**Miller:** I think that the first way Dr. Stiver tried to communicate may have reflected the way she really is -- and the way a lot of women are. In other words, the affect is part and parcel of the thought. When the thought is uttered, something goes wrong, for a lot of men cannot receive an affect-laden message. But, because of conditioning, when something goes wrong, a woman tends to think, "I'm wrong." So many of us get lost at that point. Dr. Stiver, having maximum skills and experience, was able to say to herself, "If I stop the affect and say it with a flat tone, this man will be able to listen." That takes tremendous skill! Bear in mind how really complex a task it is, and how many times along the way women are likely to make the interpretation, "Something is wrong with me."

**Question:** Why do we immediately draw back? Is it because it is an ineffective way to communicate? Or is it because of our conditioning? I frequently find myself guilty of this. I immediately assume that this other person is well within his rights to totally disregard what I was saying. Next, I think things like, "That went wrong, because it was coming across as hysterical."

**Surrey:** I think that we are talking about bringing together the skills of affective and cognitive functioning in communication. Somehow they can be integrated by being able to have one inform the other and not have to split them apart. It's true that an overemotional expression can take away from a highly integrated cognitive framework. But I believe the implication of all this is that there is a possibility to use both and not have to split them -- that is, to not have to split what has been traditionally male or female.

**Question:** Did you ever find yourself put off by somebody else's emotional presentation? I know I have a tendency to feel that way. And even we will say "hysterical woman" about someone else.

**Stiver:** We are all very vulnerable to being influenced by that point of view.

**Question:** The dilemma for women is not just being rational versus showing feeling. The question also involves what feelings we show and to whom. Where I work I am regularly surprised that men are neither upset by, afraid of, nor mad at women who express their emotions, as long as they

don't express anger. I believe that women can get away with showing a great deal of feeling -- as long as it is positive, loving, nurturing, caring, and admiring. But we shouldn't be negative or frightening toward men. Dr. Stiver, maybe your co-worker couldn't hear you because you were angry.

**Stiver:** Perhaps he assumed my intensity was an expression of anger; I don't know. That was not what I was feeling. I was feeling that the issue was a very important one.

**Kaplan:** When you need to convince someone, you need affect and feeling as well as facts. I think men are too quick to say, "No, don't bring in all that. It's too hard for us to take in what you are saying."

**Question:** Everybody seems to be saying that Dr. Stiver's colleague wasn't in touch with his own affect. His message was, "When you come on so strong I can't hear the content of what you are saying." That was a cue to slow down and get to the points more deliberately and calmly. I think it would make sense for someone to give a response that goes this way: "I hear your emotional words, and I recognize that you feel strongly about the matter. Now can you give me the reason you have come to this conclusion?" Sometimes its easy -- for a man or a woman -- to come on so emotionally that it is hard for another individual to listen and understand the ideas.

**Question:** I think it is not so dichotomous -- it is not only women who experience this problem. Men are sorely inhibited from expressing their feelings at work. The men that I associate with in different settings struggle with the very same problem. How much can they show their feelings when they are dealing with a work-related kind of situation? I think that a lot of men feel that they have to suppress emotional responses (which they consider to be feminine characteristics) both in their work setting and at home. I think that the problem is more universal than has been reflected here.

**Stiver:** I agree. I think it would be much better if such expression were more permissible for both men and women. The point that I wanted to make is that affect is not necessarily a bad thing to express in a work situation, and also that certain men are allowed certain affects, but not others, at work. It would be helpful for both men and women to be freer to express feelings and not feel inhibited. Again, it may be women who can open up this issue for serious examination.

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