

*Please note: This electronic file you are receiving is intended for one-time use only. Reprints may be requested at a charge of \$1 per copy. All materials are copyright protected. No part of these files may be transmitted, distributed or reproduced in any other way without permission from the Wellesley Centers for Women. Please call the publication office at (781) 283-2510 to request additional copies.*

# **Work in Progress**

## **Self-in-Relation: A Theory of Women's Development**

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.



**Wellesley Centers for Women**  
**Wellesley College**  
Wellesley, MA 02481

**No. 13**  
1985

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

*Work in Progress* is a publication series based on the work of the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, and it includes papers presented in the Center's Colloquium Series. *Work in Progress* reflects the Center's commitment to sharing information with others who are interested in fostering psychological well-being, preventing emotional problems, and providing appropriate services to persons who suffer from psychological distress. The publication also reflects the Center's belief that it is important to exchange ideas while they are being developed. Many of the papers, therefore, are intended to stimulate discussion and dialogue, while others represent finished research reports.

For those papers which were part of the Colloquium Series, each document includes the substantive material presented by the lecturer, information about the speaker, and, where appropriate, a summary of the subsequent discussion session.

### **Jean Baker Miller Training Institute**

Founded in 1995, the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute bases its work on the Relational-Cultural Model of psychological development, which grew out of a collaborative process of theory building initiated by the scholars at the Stone Center. The Institute offers workshops, courses, professional trainings, publications, and ongoing projects which explore applications of the relational-cultural approach. At the heart of this work is the belief that the Relational-Cultural Model offers new and better ways of understanding the diversity and complexities of human experience.

### **The Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies**

Creation of the Robert S. and Grace W. Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies resulted from a generous gift to Wellesley College by Robert S. and Grace W. Stone, parents of a Wellesley graduate. The Center was dedicated in the fall of 1981, and its programs reflect the Stone family's interest in preventing psychological distress. With the creation of the Stone Center, Wellesley College has enlarged its long-established search for excellence. At Wellesley, the Center has the unique advantage of immersion in a community of scholars and teachers who can add the broad perspective of the humanities, sciences, and social sciences to the Center's psychological expertise.

The Stone Center is developing programs aimed toward the following goals: research in psychological development of people of all ages; service demonstration and research projects which will enhance psychological development of college students; service, research, and training in the prevention of psychological problems.

**Correspondence and inquiries about the publication series should be addressed to Wellesley Centers for Women Publications, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481-8259.**

© 1985, by Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.,

---

# Self-in-Relation: A Theory of Women's Development

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.

## **About the Author**

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D., is a Research Associate at the Stone Center, Wellesley College, and Director of Psychological Services of the Outpatient Clinic, McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts.

## **Abstract**

While most developmental theories emphasize the importance of disconnection from early relationships to achieve a separate and bounded sense of self, women's experience contradicts such theory and suggests that a new model of development is needed to account for the centrality and continuity of relationships throughout women's lives. This paper outlines the framework of such a model, postulating the "relational self" as the core self-structure in women, and describing the formative dynamics of this relational self-structure within the early mother-daughter relationship. Key structural and developmental aspects of this relationship are suggested, and the application of this model to clinical work is illustrated.

This paper was presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on November 16, 1983.

For the past two years in these Stone Center Colloquia we have been discussing important aspects of women's psychological development covering such diverse topics as women and power, empathy, work, anger, incest, and eating patterns, among others. Throughout many of these papers, there have been references to the idea that the "self" in women may be experienced in a way that is not addressed by current psychoanalytic and developmental theories. The construct of the "self-in-relation" has played an important part in our understanding of these diverse topics and has proved helpful in suggesting innovative programs and therapeutic interventions. I would like to focus more specifically on the central organizing construct of the "self-in-relation," to reflect on the ongoing exploration of this idea, and to elaborate on further aspects of it. I hope this will help lay the groundwork for further discussion during the current series. We at the Stone Center and this year's colloquia speakers hope that you will participate with us in exploring, advancing, and critiquing our theoretical formulations throughout the series.

The idea of self is prominent in current psychological theories describing childhood and adult development. The inquiry into the nature of the self as an organizing principle in human development has been a fundamental aspect of psychological, philosophical, and spiritual investigation. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt to review this extensive literature, for present purposes I will propose a working definition of self: a construct useful in describing the organization of a person's experience and construction of reality which illuminates the purpose and directionality of her/his behavior.

Recently several authors have proposed that there are important sex differences in the experience and construction of the self. A central theme of *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976) is that

---

“women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliation and relationships” (p. 83). Miller discusses the necessity of developing new language and new concepts to describe women’s unique experiences and points to the problems which arise when the principles of male development are cast as universal principles of human development. Carol Gilligan (1982) has written further of the importance of women finding their own voice in order to describe “ourselves to ourselves,” and has indicated that women’s experiences of connectedness to others leads to enlarged conceptions of self, morality, and visions of relationship. It is essential to point out that the inquiry into the nature of women’s development is a step in the evolution of understanding human development. Women in Western society have been “carriers” of certain aspects of the human experience (Miller, 1976), and a full understanding of human development can be derived only from a thorough elucidation of both female and male experience.

Our conception of the self-in-relation involves the recognition that, for women, the primary experience of self is relational; that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships. To understand this basic assumption it is helpful to use as a contrast some current assumptions about male (often generalized to human) development. Currently, developmental theory stresses the importance of separation from the mother at early stages of childhood development (Mahler, Pine, & Berman, 1975), from the family at adolescence (Erikson, 1963), and from teachers and mentors in adulthood (Levinson, 1978) in order for the individual to form a distinct, separate identity. High value is placed on autonomy, self-reliance, independence, self-actualization, “listening to and following” one’s own unique dream, destiny, and fulfillment. Intimacy and generativity in adulthood (in Erikson’s terms) are seen as possible only after the “closure” of identity. In his theoretical framework, relational “trust” is established in early infancy and does not re-emerge as central until the end of adolescence. Our theory suggests, instead, that for women a different — and relational — pathway is primary and continuous, although its centrality may have been “hidden” and unacknowledged.

The values of individuation have permeated our cultural ideals as well as our clinical theories and practice. In psychological theory, the concepts and descriptions of relationship appear to be cast in this model, and much of current theory wrestles with the problem of developing a model of “object relations”

from a basic assumption of narcissism and human separateness. The notion of the self-in-relation makes an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development. Further, relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: i.e., the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence. The self-in-relation model assumes that other aspects of self (e.g., creativity, autonomy, assertion) develop within this primary context. That is, other aspects of self-development emerge in the context of relationship, and there is no inherent need to disconnect or to sacrifice relationship for self-development. This formulation implies that we must develop an adequate description of relational development in order to understand self-development.

### **Empathy as a crucial feature**

Recent theories on the early development of the self have emphasized the importance of empathy (Kohut, 1971; Winnicott, 1971). However, the interest in connections with others is much more prominent at all stages of life for women. Research and clinical observation show that most women have a greater ability for relatedness, emotional closeness, and emotional flexibility than do most men. The capacity for empathy, consistently found to be more developed in women, can be seen as the central organizing concept in women’s relational experience. Before discussing the development of the capacity for empathy, I want to emphasize that our definition of relationship involves an experience of mutual empathy. The ability to be in relationship appears to rest on the development of the capacity for empathy in both or all persons involved. Kohut (1971) has emphasized the importance of parental empathy and mirroring in the child’s early self-development, but almost no attention has been devoted to the topic of *teaching and learning empathy*. The “good enough mother” (Winnicott, 1971) capable of providing an empathic facilitating environment for the growing child does not suddenly appear with the birth of an infant. Much unrecognized learning must have taken place to allow the complex capacities for mothering to emerge in response to the changes of the growing child (Miller, 1976). The development of the capacity for empathy needs to be studied and elaborated carefully. For the present, we are postulating that the best realm available in which to study its origin is in the early mother-daughter relationship. Jordan (1983) has re-examined the concept of empathy in this light. She has shown that the ability to experience, comprehend, and respond to the inner state of another

---

person is a highly complex process, relying on a high level of psychological development and learning. Accurate empathy involves a balancing of affective arousal and cognitive structuring. It requires an ability to build on the experience of identification with the other person to form a cognitive assimilation of this experience as a basis for response. Such capacities imply highly developed emotional and cognitive operations requiring practice, modeling, and feedback in relationships.

Kohut (1971) has emphasized the profound importance to the developing child of the experience of empathy from the early parental figures, and also has described the role of empathy in reconstructive therapy. However, he does not describe the *origins* of the capacity for empathy, leaving it to be construed by many as a highly subjective, intuitive, perhaps innate phenomenon.

Instead, the concept of the relational self relies heavily on a new definition of empathy stressing the growth of this capacity as primary in women's development (Jordan, 1983). The self-in-relation theory begins to sketch a developmental model to account for the development of empathic competencies in women, beginning with the early mother-daughter relationship. The assumption is that the self is organized and developed through practice in relationships where the goal is the increasing development of mutually empathic relationships. It is important, however, to put this enlarged definition of empathy within the context of the other key structural elements which are important in the development of the self-in-relation.

### **The mother-daughter relationship as the model of relationships**

The model of self-in-relation assumes a developmental pathway. We can explore the mother-daughter relationship as the earliest model of this kind of relationship, that is, the foundation of the core self-structure necessary for empathic development. The model presented here is not necessarily totally specific to the nuclear mother-daughter relationship of early childhood. It is not limited to this relationship only. Indeed, we believe any fruitful relationship must include the fundamental elements presented here, at least to some degree. However, we will use the mother-daughter relationship as the relationship which is probably nearest to the "purest" example. As Freud recognized, this aspect of women's psychology has not been well understood, although it has been receiving more attention in recent years (Chodorow,

1978). The mother-daughter relationship represents only the beginning of a process which can be developed through important relationships with other significant people in childhood, and throughout life if relational contexts are available.

I will focus here on three crucial structural aspects of the mother-daughter relationship. The first is the girl's ongoing interest and emotional desire to be connected to her mother. All children have a deep fascination with early adult figures in their lives. The attention to and interest in people is a primary part of their construction of reality. However, the attention to the exploration of the feeling states of the parent, especially the mother, is probably reinforced more in girls. A patient of mine described her three-year-old daughter's frequent questioning of her: "What are you feeling, Mommy?" She would respond very carefully and thoughtfully to this question and would also examine in therapy why the daughter might be asking. She was puzzled that she hardly recalled such an interaction with her five-year-old son. This early attentiveness to feeling states and the mother's corresponding ease with and interest in emotional sharing may form the basic sense of "learning to listen," to orient and attune to the other person through feelings, the origin of the capacity for empathy, and the beginning practice of relational development. A male colleague of mine described his childhood experience as "learning not to listen, to shut out my mother's voice so that I would not be distracted from pursuing my own interests." For boys, then, "separation" means not only a simple physical but an emotional disconnection, often with the goal of not being bound or "controlled" by mother's feeling states and needs.

For girls, "being present with" psychologically is experienced as self-enhancing, whereas for boys it may come to be experienced as invasive, engulfing, or threatening. "Being with" means "being seen" and "feeling seen" by the other and "seeing the other" and sensing the other "feeling seen," which is the experience of mutual empathy. Usually this open connection not only is allowed, but encouraged between mothers and daughters. This may be the origin of the process of "seeing through the eyes of the other." In clinical situations, we may see partial failures to differentiate or develop in this process, which can leave the girl feeling unclear about "whose feelings belong to whom" and a tendency to experience the feelings of the other as her own, especially if she does not have the adequate opportunities for exploration and clarification. However, when these opportunities are available, it is

---

through this process of describing and exploring feelings that one begins to “know the other” and the “self.”

The ability of the mother to listen and respond, empathize, or “mirror” the child’s feelings has been well described by Winnicott (1971), Kohut (1971), and others; and it has been seen as the beginning of the development of the experience of the self. Here, we are describing the girl’s open relationship with the mother and the mother’s open relationship with the daughter as the beginning stage for the development of self-in-relation. The second key aspect of this relationship is the child’s increasing ability for mutual empathy, developed in a matrix of emotional connectedness. The mother’s easier emotional openness with the daughter than with the son, and her sense of identification with this style of personal learning and exploration probably leave the daughter feeling more emotionally connected, understood, and recognized. This sense of connection forms the framework necessary for the process of differentiation and clarification which will follow. The key factor here is the idea that the mutual sharing process fosters a sense of mutual understanding and connection. For boys, the emphasis on early emotional separation and the forming of an identity through the assertion of difference fosters a basic relational stance of disconnection and disidentification. Girls, then, develop the expectation that they can facilitate the growth of a sense of self through psychological connection and expect that the mutual sharing of experience will lead to psychological growth.

Again, mothers are likely to appreciate the enhancement of their own self-awareness through this process of mutual empathy because it complements their own relational stance. Mothers often report a profound deepening of self-awareness in their ongoing experience of relating to a growing child. They report learning in tandem about themselves and their daughters through their relational connection in infancy and all through life. I am impressed with the number of mothers who are finally able to allow themselves to seek therapy after their daughters have begun therapy.

Related to this last example is the last key formative factor which can be called “mutual empowerment.” The emotional and cognitive connections based on shared understanding develop over time into a mutual process in which both mothers and daughters become highly responsive to the feeling states of each other. Through the girl’s awareness and identification with her mother as the “mothering one” and through the mother’s interest in being understood

and cared for, the daughter as well as the mother becomes mobilized to care for, respond to, or attend to the well-being and development of the other.

Moreover, they care for and *take care of the relationship* between them. This is the motivational dynamic of mutual empowerment, the inherent energizing force of real relationship. It becomes important for the girl to experience validation of her own developing empathic competence. Thus, mothers help to empower their daughters by allowing them to feel successful at understanding and giving support at whatever level is appropriate at a particular period of development. In fact, part of learning to be a “good enough” daughter involves learning to be a “good enough” mother or “empathic relator” to one’s mother and later to other important people. This ongoing process begins to allow for experience and practice in “mothering” and “relational caretaking.”

The development of a positive sense of knowing how to perceive, respond, and relate to the needs and feelings of the other person is an important aspect of woman’s self-development. The sense of mutual empowerment leaves both mother and daughter feeling effective and motivated to respond to the other. Each can feel pleasure in her own as well as the other’s competence. Thus, each can be empowered in the relationship, and this sense of competence begins to be transferred to other relationships. Out of this empowerment as a “relator,” comes the empowerment to act, in general — and act as a “related being.” Thus, through this mutual sensitivity, caring, and empowerment, mothers are already teaching “mothering, caring, relational practices” to girl children. By mothering, of course, I do not mean what has been seen traditionally as one-dimensional mothering but rather a mode in which all of life activity is carried on in a context of attentiveness and responsivity to the other as an intrinsic ongoing aspect of one’s own experience, what we call the self-in-relation. We can postulate that as the early mother-daughter relationship grows over the life cycle, it forms the precursors of women’s style of learning, of pleasure, and of self-enhancement — in relatedness.

Another way to view this reciprocity is to see it as the source of mutual self-esteem. A good relationship is highly valued by both mother and daughter and becomes a fundamental component of women’s sense of self-worth. This, too, continues to evolve through other relationships throughout the life cycle. Self-esteem, then, is related to the degree of emotional sharing, openness, and a shared sense of understanding and regard. This sense may be nearly impossible to achieve totally, especially in a culture

---

which stresses separation as an ideal, and in which validation of the need for relationship may become distorted and hidden. For women, guilt and shame often become tied to the experience of failure in mutual empathy. That is, women suffer if they feel they have not participated in relationships in this way — with their mothers and/or with other people later. However, if other growth-promoting situations can be made available, these failures can become the challenges to further relational growth. A sense of self-worth becomes intricately involved in “good enough” understanding and caring for the other, and in a sense of mutual concern for the well-being of each other. This is a key factor in women’s self-esteem, though it is often overlooked. It is rarely mentioned as a component of self-esteem in men. Accordingly, very few clinical or research indices of self-esteem deal with this significant aspect. It is important to note that the dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship have been so clinically cast in problematic and negative terms that it becomes difficult to suspend judgement and to see the underlying structures with clarity. It seems easier to focus on the clinical problems rather than on the growth-promoting structures of the relationship.

Another important aspect to emphasize is the point that the development of accurate empathy involves a complex process of interactive validation of the differences between the self and the other. It includes, too, the recognition of the other as a growing individual with changing needs and newly developing competencies. Within the early mother-daughter relationship, the daughter is encouraged to learn to take the role of the mother (or we could say the “provider,” the “listener,” or “surround”), as well as the daughter (the “receiver,” the “speaker,” or the “figure”), depending on the needs of the situation or the individual at any given time. We have called this the “oscillating mother-daughter introject.”

Through this process, the capacity to learn to “see” the other and to “make oneself known” to the other highlights one’s own self-knowledge and fosters growth in the other and in the self. Thus, mutual “care taking” is a fundamental aspect of learning. Moreover, it is directly related to energizing and mobilizing in response to one’s new understanding, which is the basis of empowerment. Clearly, in problematic situations both the mother and the daughter can become overinvolved in feeling responsible and overprotective toward the other. However, this model suggests that a healthy degree of reciprocity and role flexibility are essential for women’s growth. The dynamics of such reciprocity

establish in women the capacity to move from one perspective to another as the needs of a relational situation arise. This can be termed more generally the “oscillating self-structure.” If empathy implies the ability to become “ground” to the “figure” of the other, mutual empathy involves alternations and fluctuations of figure-ground experiences basic to relational growth and learning. It is essential to note that learning takes place through these alternations and fluctuations.

The basic elements of the core self in women can be summarized as: 1) an interest in, and attention to, the other person(s) which form the base for the emotional connection and the ability to empathize with the other(s); 2) the expectation of a mutual empathic process where the sharing of experience leads to a heightened development of self and other; and 3) the expectation of interaction and relationship as a process of mutual sensitivity and mutual responsibility which provides the stimulus for the growth of empowerment and self-knowledge. Thus, the self develops in the context of relationships, rather than as an isolated or separated autonomous individual. We are emphasizing the importance of a two-way interactional model, where it becomes as important to understand as to be understood, to empower as well as to be empowered.

To put it another way, all of us probably feel the need to feel understood or “recognized” by others. It is equally paramount, but not yet emphasized, that women all through their lives feel the need to “understand” the other — indeed desire this as an essential part of their own growth and development, as an essential part of self-worth, and of the ability to act, or empowerment.

Thus, the hyphenated expression “self-in-relation” implies an evolutionary process of development through relationship. Such language is used to differentiate this notion from a static self construct and to describe an experiential process implying openness, flexibility, and change.

Perhaps this is like evolving from a language of three-dimensional space and Newtonian physics to four-dimensional space and the Theory of Relativity. It is important to maintain the vision that although the sex differences we are describing may at times be quite subtle, and individually and culturally relative, they may represent a difference that results in enormous consequences in areas of critical human interactions.

The idea of the self-in-relation is not in any way to idealize women’s altruism or relational capacities. In fact, the vicissitudes of such development in this culture need to be elaborated carefully in order to

---

truly understand the problems women encounter. This theory is an attempt to develop a model which better fits our experience and to create more relevant and realistic self-images so that we can be more constructive in developing clinical, educational, and social strategies for fostering women's development by focusing and building on women's specific strengths.

### **Pathways of development**

While it is difficult to find appropriate words to describe the pathway of relational development, we have used the construction "relationship-differentiation" as a contrast to the idea of separation-individuation. By differentiation we do not mean to suggest as a developmental goal the assertion of difference or separateness. The word is used here to describe a process more like embryological development. By differentiation we are referring to a process which encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity, and articulation within the context of human relationship. What this new model emphasizes is that the direction of growth is not toward greater degrees of autonomy or individuation and the breaking of early emotional ties, but toward a process of growth within relationship, where both or all people involved are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection and to foster, adapt, and change with the growth of the other. This is the basic model inherent in parenting, but we are broadening this to include a more generalized dynamic of mutual, interactional growth within relationship. It is not through separation, but through more highly articulated and expanded relational experience that individual development takes place. For example, the adolescent does not necessarily want to "separate" from her parents, but to change the form and content of the relationship in a way that affirms her own developmental changes and allows new relationships to develop and take priority. If this important need to continue the relationship, but also to change in relationship, is not honored, both daughters and mothers will feel shame and diminished self-worth. Many common societal and clinical descriptions make them feel "unable to separate" when that is not what they want or need. The ability to move and change in relationship clearly depends on the capacities and willingness of all people involved to change and grow, that is, not just the child. Since this growth is interactional, it is often difficult to see who "leads" or "initiates" this process.

What may distinguish the human species from other animals in this regard is the interconnection of

generations over the life cycle, rather than the complete separation of the young from the parents. The mother-daughter relationship has been seen to represent this cyclic involvement of each generation in caring for the other (for example, in the myth of Ceres and Persephone). Clearly, continuity of relationship necessitates mutual growth, commitment, and responsiveness to the changing and evolving needs of all persons involved. It is likely that the problems of adolescence, for example, may have as much to do with parental difficulties in changing as with the adolescent herself.

At present, I would like to propose one more notion to describe this line of development; it is "relationship-authenticity." This describes the ongoing challenge to feel emotionally "real," connected, vital, clear, and purposeful in relationship. It necessitates risk, conflict, expression of a full range of affect, including anger and other difficult emotions, and the willingness to challenge old images, levels of closeness and distance, and patterns of relationship. This is the challenge of relationship which provides the energy for growth — the need to be seen and recognized for who one is and the need to see and understand the other with ongoing authenticity.

### **Definition of relationship**

Finally, I would like to offer a working definition of "relationship," especially to distinguish it from other common terms such as "attachment." By relationship I mean an experience of emotional and cognitive intersubjectivity: the ongoing intrinsic inner awareness and responsiveness to the continuous existence of the other or others, and the expectation of mutuality in this regard. We might term this "Subject Relations Theory" to distinguish it from "Object Relations Theory" where the "object," based on the construction of the separate self, may not be experienced fully as a subject with her/his own comprehensive personal construction of continuous reality. Nor is this definition of relationship equivalent to other concepts such as "extension of ego boundaries" or "mutuality" defined as "separate but equal coexistence" where the needs and satisfactions of the other become as important as one's own (as defined by Sullivan and Freud). Being in relationship also involves the capacity to identify with a unit larger than the single self and a sense of motivation to care for this new unit. This is the real problem for "separate self" theorists: to define how separate selves interact and coexist. "Attachment" implies a state of emotional connection where the presence of the "object" becomes related to a sense of well-being,

---

security, and need gratification. "Separation" implies a process of "internalizing" the attachment, and lessening the "need" for the other or the relationship. Our definition of relationship does not imply continuous physical or emotional contact, nor does it imply a contractual, externally defined pattern of relationship, nor a lessening of the importance of relationships as the child grows. One way of looking at this developmental differentiation is to say that the infant has her/his own characteristics which influence the quality of its relationships, but also has less flexibility and a more limited way of relating initially; for example, she/he can't be left alone physically for too long a period, and the like. But the infant grows toward a much greater range and flexibility in relating. The caretaker is not only an "object" to which an infant attaches, but a subject with her/his own qualities which immediately begin to influence the relationship and heavily to determine its course. They *both* will proceed to become further defined as people as they change *because* of the relationship. Optimally, they both will grow toward more relatedness, not less; toward better relatedness, not separation. And better relatedness means more flexibility, scope, and choice for all individuals and for the relationship, itself.

Our definition of relationship implies a sense of knowing oneself and others through a process of mutual relational interaction and continuity of "emotional-cognitive dialogue" over time and space. It also connotes a way of being in the world as part of a unit larger than the individual, where the "whole" is experienced as greater than the sum of the parts. The relationship or the new relational unit (e.g., couple, family, friendship, network, or work group) comes to have a unique existence beyond the individuals, to be attended to, cared about, and nurtured. In this model, the self gains vitality and enhancement in relationship and is not reduced or threatened by connections. Thus, the ongoing process of intersubjective relationship obviously does not involve continuous physical connection but does involve a continuous psychological connection. It is important to stress that the emotional-cognitive presence of the other forms a basic component of one's "self-experiences." The process and dialogue of relationship, the interaction, interconnection, and readiness to respond is maintained on a psychological level. This sense of continuity is a basic aspect of the mother-child relationship. For example, mothers often report this as a major difference between them and their husbands in child care. Although the man may be highly committed to caring for the child, it is the woman who

experiences the unceasing continuity of awareness. I am postulating here this experience of continuity — the holding of the other as part of the self — as a component of all real relationships.

Communication in this model becomes interaction and dialogue rather than debate. In working with a particular couple I was struck by the difference between the man and woman in their description of the communication process. When she spoke of her own needs and perceptions, she wanted him to listen actively, playing a part in the developing movement of ideas to a stage of increased focus and clarity. He was ready for *debate*. "When I argue and debate with her, it is because I treat her like an equal who knows what she feels and can *argue* effectively on her own position." She found that his position created confusion, disorganization, and a feeling of disconnection, rather than *fostering* her idea of communication. She was asking from him what she feels she does for him — going "with him" on his line of thinking at that time, temporarily taking herself "out of the picture." Each had much difficulty understanding the other's model of relationship.

The relational line of development, then, suggests that relationship *and* identity develop in *synchrony*. For the growing child, the direction of such relational development might be described as moving from an early emotional responsivity to conscious adult responsibility. As Gilligan (1982) has suggested, the morality of responsibility in women involves the growing development of a mature and thoughtful consideration of the interests of all persons involved in any moral choice. A new concept and word "response/ability" seems to apply more aptly to women's self-development and form of action and empowerment than does "agency" or "autonomy."

Inherent in this model is the vision of women's development as moving from a relationship of caretaking to one of consideration, caring, and empowering; that is, moving from the early definition of the mother-daughter relationship toward more comprehensive and flexible adult forms of relationship. The pathway of development includes both the outer "real" relationship and the inner sense of relationship. The capacity to "become one's own mother," that is, the internalizing of the attentive, listening, caring relationship to oneself (as illustrated in what Jordan (1983) calls self-empathy) again does not occur in isolation but within relationship. Much of our work in therapy involves the relational process of helping the woman client to make known her own experience and to bring her experience into her own relational context. This also means encouraging the

---

woman to seek out new models and to develop and explore new forms of relationships, networks, and community. The development of new and diverse forms of relationship (beyond the nuclear mother-daughter dyad or the immediate family) is essential for woman's full development, especially in arenas such as the workplace and the larger social, economic, and political scene. Moreover, the presence of women who value and model relational growth can bring new energy and structure into these arenas.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude by illustrating the usefulness of this model in clinical practice. For purposes of brevity and also to illustrate the earlier discussion, these examples will focus primarily on the mother-daughter relationship in adult women. I will not detail all of the other relationships which also play a role.

### 1) The relational self: Stages of growth

A thirty-three-year-old woman (I will call her Elizabeth) whom I have been seeing for five years in therapy, had originally come for help in choosing a career. At that time she was involved in a highly parentified sexual relationship with her boss, a man twenty years older. She was his administrative assistant. Seeing herself as extremely inadequate intellectually, she had never completed college. The first two years of our work involved her return to college, then entrance into graduate school in a prestigious MBA program. This accomplishment involved a shift in her self-image to one which was very different from her mother's image of her as dependent and intellectually limited. Relinquishing this internalized self-image produced anxiety because it felt like the abandonment of her mother. In fact, it did lead to a temporary dislocation in the relationship with her mother, as her mother could not accommodate psychologically to her daughter's enormous growth and increasing success in the business world.

Here we see how significant changes in self and in self-image create the need for shifts in both the inner and the outer relationship to mother. In this instance, in order to change during this first period of therapy, Elizabeth had to focus her primary sense of herself in other relationships. At this time, the main relationship which allowed for growth was the relationship with the therapist, and her development proceeded in this new relational context. Further, she began to develop mutually empathic and supportive relationships with women friends in graduate school.

This was the first time in her life she had healthy, growth-enhancing peer relationships with women, and much time in therapy was spent on encouraging the development of these relational ties and helping Elizabeth to grow in her relational capacities with peers.

Following graduation from business school, Elizabeth ended her relationship with her former lover who was unable to adapt to and encourage her new sense of self. She quickly became quite successful in her work and focused intensely on developing her business career. She then became sexually involved with a man who ostensibly did not want to be in a "serious, committed relationship." This began a new era of relational development. She began to experience herself as split into two selves. The first was assertive, active, and confident in her work, where she felt great satisfaction with her working relationships with colleagues and clients. As soon as she came home and was with her lover, she experienced herself as "another person," weak, passive, stupid, and childlike, wanting constant affection and reassurance. She kept trying to end the relationship and was continually terminating and then reinvolving herself in it. During this period of therapy, we again worked on developing new images and models of self-in-representation.

It appeared that his new relationship elicited the fear of re-experiencing her early relationship with her mother. This pattern was reinvoked by the intense dyadic intimacy of this sexual relationship. She needed the relational context and support from the therapist to grow and develop into new modes of dyadic relationship beyond that which had been possible for her and her mother when she was a child. Elizabeth struggled with learning to bring her more highly developed relational skills to this intense sexual relationship, and now has been able to reclaim this aspect of her relational self in a more mature way. She is able to value and act appropriately on her own relational needs. This has meant a clear, steady, open, and active description of her needs for more commitment and mutuality in the relationship. It has meant relinquishing her need to be in constant control of her feelings, learning to ride with and accept her own frustrations, and negotiating over time to reach mutually acceptable compromises. The relationship has become very satisfactory to both, and they have married.

During this period of re-establishing herself in an intimate, heterosexual relationship, Elizabeth's relationship with her mother has changed. Having recently accepted her daughter's new career status

---

with great pride, her mother has now been helpful in discussing Elizabeth's developing relationship with her husband. Elizabeth has come to feel that she can learn from her mother in this area, and her mother, also, has begun to work toward changes in her own marriage, based on her interaction with her daughter. The relationship has never been more enjoyable to each and both are experiencing greater satisfaction in their marital relationships. It is important to note the corresponding growth and mutuality in the relationship with her mother as Elizabeth has grown to establish a new form of relationship with her husband.

There is often this back and forth transfer process where new leaning in current relationships leads to development, whenever possible, in older more long-standing parental or sibling relationships which are even more challenging to the maintenance of adult self-images. What is important to note is the emphasis on encouraging development in new relationships based on the new self-images which emerge in the therapeutic relationship. There is a focus on relational learning and an attention to the transfer process, as inner development is revealed through growth in relationship.

## 2) Fostering growth in relationship: Allowing new self-images

Another example of working in this model involves helping the women client to accept new self-images derived from new relationships including, but not exclusively, her relationship with the therapist. Judith, a thirty-five-year-old, extremely attractive, vital and spirited, single woman originally sought help because she was unable to develop a "good relationship" with a man, which she thought she desperately wanted. Although she had a wide circle of good female and male friends, played the flute professionally, taught music to young children, and was spunky and independent, she felt extremely depressed and guilty over her "selfishness" (defined as "liking things her way") and her "sexuality" (she was quite interested and enthusiastic about sex). She showed me letters from her southern Presbyterian mother which emphasized the need for her to be less selfish, independent, and emotionally intense so that a man would want to marry her. In a deep sense, Judith felt her mother was right, although she also felt quite angry and rebellious. A great deal of time in therapy was spent allowing Judith to be able to admit that she enjoyed her life, although she missed having an ongoing steady relationship with a man. She felt that to admit to feeling good about herself or to accept her

own life meant that she would forever forfeit the possibility of marriage. She literally had a massive anxiety attack following a session during which she expressed a positive feeling about herself.

Part of the therapy has involved an active effort on Judith's part to develop relationships with women who were also trying to establish new life styles. I encouraged Judith to seek out older women with whom she could identify, including some of her musician friends. In this particular instance, Judith's mother was unable to "change with" or accommodate to the daughter's changing self-image. We worked in therapy on the sense of disconnection, despair, and anger at her mother; and Judith has experienced much anxiety, sadness, and grief over this felt loss. However, when Judith finally was able to state that she enjoyed her life, and accepted the possibility of a single life style, she soon developed an intense relationship with a man with whom she is currently involved. Now a new phase of relational development has begun.

## Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium lecture, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. In this session, Drs. Jean Baker Miller and Alexandra G. Kaplan joined Dr. Surrey in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** In your second clinical example of the woman you called Judith, it seemed that she had to free herself from the mother and establish herself on her own before she could establish a new relationship with a man. Is that what you said?

**Surrey:** I was emphasizing that she had to re-establish herself in new relationships, not in isolation. This then led to shifts in her relationship with her mother, both in her inner image of the past relationship and in her real current relationship. She had to go through a period of anxiety, loss, and grief before she could re-establish herself in her relationship to her mother. What is important is that the therapist could validate her fear and grief as she let go of her old self-images. It is important also that the therapist validate her need for new relationships and her work on developing these, as well as the work on reconstructing a new pattern of relationship with her mother. The words "freeing herself" suggests a process of emancipation or separation. I am suggesting therapeutic work within a context of changing the relationship and the self-images embedded in the old form of relationship. I find that it makes a big difference to women if we can see the goal of change as that of changing relationships — and the image of ourselves in relationships — rather than

---

becoming “alone” or independent. Change is not easy, but I believe this is a more valid definition of what the change is about.

**Question:** Can you hypothesize further along to when the mother becomes old and becomes “dependent” on the daughter?

**Surrey:** I think that is inherent in the model. There is an intergenerational shift over the life cycle. The early mother-daughter introject, if you will, or this “oscillation” or ability to take both roles is what allows for the continuity of care and commitment to that care.

**Miller:** I would like to expand on that. This is a model of development based on a central premise of the connections between people and the continuity of care. That has not been the prevalent model, at least in psychology and in other theories of human nature. It usually has been women who care for the elderly and the sick, as well as for children. The broader extension is that we do not have a society based on continuity of care, but this *could* be a model for all of living. It is more characteristic for women at this time, but women cannot carry out this way of living fully because the dominant societal structures do not provide for it well — indeed they impede it. They are based on a different model.

**Question:** In your example of the couple who saw the process of relationship in two different ways (where she wanted him to be in dialogue, and he was ready for debate), how could she show him what she needs and teach him how to do this?

**Surrey:** Maybe men in the audience can speak on this.

**Comment:** I don’t think it’s right or necessary for the responsibility of teaching this to be on women. It’s the man who needs to learn. I think what’s most helpful is for him to see a male therapist who understands what you’ve been talking about and who teaches almost didactically at times. Male groups are very important. There, men can go through this process together, to begin to understand why women do have such close friendships and men often do not.

**Surrey:** Another model we recommend is couples’ groups. Here men can see the differences and interactions played out in another couple.

**Kaplan:** This can take the process out of a dyadic power struggle which sometimes is so prominent that it precludes learning.

**Surrey:** The more we can articulate these different models, the more we can defuse the anger and confusion about the differences and begin to listen to and learn from each other.

## References

- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The Reproduction of mothering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jordan, J., Surrey, J., & Kaplan, A. (1983). Women and empathy. *Work in Progress*, No. 2. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Levinson, D. (1978). *The Season of a man’s life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kohut, H. (1971). *Analysis of the self*. New York: International University Press.
- Mahler, M., Pine, F., & Berman, A. (1975). *The Psychological birth of the human infant: Symbiosis and individuation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Miller, J. B. (1976). *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. New York: Basic Books.