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Work in Progress

Women's Self Development in Late Adolescence

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Wellesley Centers for Women
Wellesley College
Wellesley, MA 02481

No.17
1985

Work in Progress

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Women's Self Development in Late Adolescence

Paper #1

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Paper #2

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About the Authors

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Abstract

Self-in-relation theory provides some new understandings of women's psychological development during the college years. Prevailing theories characterize adolescence as a time of "emotional disengagement" and "severing" from family bonds. By contrast, we see adolescence for women as one phase in an ongoing process of relational development. During this time, family relationships—especially mother-daughter relationships—undergo change, but this change occurs within a continuity of affective connection, not a lessening of connection. Conflict between the adolescent daughter and her parents plays an important role in the process of growth within relationship. While the college setting ideally might

promote development through connection, the existing orientation toward individual, competitive achievement leads instead to separation and isolation. This dynamic can impair women students' sense of well-being, even in the face of academic success, because their learning is cut off from those areas that have deepest meaning to them.

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Prevailing theoretical views portray late adolescence as part of a broader developmental framework—one that equates psychological maturation with increasing levels of autonomy, separation, and independence, and that stresses competitive achievement as an important basis for self-evaluation. Yet, observations and clinical experience at the Stone Center and elsewhere reveal that neither this general developmental pattern nor this description of late adolescence fits women's actual mode of growth (Miller, 1976; Jordan, Surrey, Kaplan, 1983; Josselson, 1980; Gilligan, 1982).

In this paper we will suggest some reinterpretations of the late adolescent developmental paradigms based on the model of the "self-in-relation" which is being developed at the Stone Center (Miller, 1984; Surrey, 1984). Within this model, women's core

self-structure emerges out of experience of a relational process. Beginning with the earliest mother-daughter interactions, this relational sense of self develops out of women's involvement in progressively complex relationships, characterized by mutual identifications, attention to the interplay between each other's emotions and caring about the process and activity of relationship. Note that in speaking of relationships, we are referring not just to actual relationships, but to important inner constructions of the relational process.

The dynamic of the early mother-child relationship initiates the development of the core relational self. This dynamic is characterized by a finely-tuned affective sensitivity and responsiveness of the mother to the child and vice versa. The child identifies not with a static image of the mother, but with an image of the mother as an active caretaker. From this, the earliest mental images of the self are of a self whose emotional core is responded to by the other and who responds back to the emotions of the other. Miller (1984) has noted that this "interacting sense of self" is probably present initially in all infants but is then discouraged from full evolution in boys, at least in this culture. In girls, however, it becomes the kernel around which additional dynamic images of the self are organized. As a result, for women the sense of self is refined, enhanced, and strengthened, not through a series of separations, but through the inner experiences of relationships marked by mutuality and affective connection. Being in relationship, empathically sharing with another and maintaining the well-being of relationships function as important motivations for action, as well as sources for self-esteem and self-affirmation.

As we turn to describing the development of the core relational self in late adolescence, we will focus on how the relational nature of the self shapes women's experiences of the situations facing them at this time. Although we will be drawing on experience with college women in this paper, we postulate that these formulations will hold up as well or better for other women of this age. We will be taking a somewhat arbitrary slice out of what we see as an ongoing, expanding, and fluctuating—process that ebbs and flows in response to life conditions. Development of the core relational self, as we see it, cannot be described within the confines of standard epigenetic theories. Such theories portray a picture of development as a discrete series of stages, each of which represents a developmental advance over previous stages (Freud, 1905; Erickson, 1950; Sullivan, 1953; Alexander, 1963). Evidence of continuing patterns from an earlier stage is

often considered a sign of regression or retarded development. By contrast, we are describing a much more fluid and interconnected process in which early modes of being become the base for a continuation and expansion of the relational self.

Themes in the literature on adolescence

In the literature on adolescence, the most prominent current models of growth pose a dichotomy between self-differentiation and interpersonal connection. It is as if these were mutually exclusive human processes (Benedek, 1979; Slaff, 1979; Gilligan, 1979, 1982). This view of development is buttressed by several broad themes embedded in the literature. One theme, stemming from early Freudian tenets, holds that a primary task of late adolescence is the consolidation of an autonomous identity, via a process of increasing disconnection from internal and external primary love objects (Freud, 1905; Deutsch, 1944, 1967; Blos, 1962, 1979; Galenson, 1976; Ritvo, 1976; Erickson, 1968). Deutsch and Blos are prominent amongst those who describe adolescence in terms of a "loosening of affectionate ties," "emotional disengagement," and "severing" of family bonds. And when talking about late adolescent girls, in particular, they stress a maturational demand to turn away from the early mother-daughter relationship.

A second theme is that of the "firmly-bounded" self. Blos was the first to posit a "second individuation" process, at the close of which the adolescent should have attained a distinctly separated self, with firm demarcations between self and others. Following from this, theorists have typically described as regressive and pathogenic the very same continuity of mother-daughter closeness and mutual identification that we believe enhances a daughter's maturation (Jones, 1935; Lampl de Groot, 1960; Deutsch, 1967; Blos, 1962; Easser, 1976; Ritvo, 1976; Ticho, 1976). From Deutsch on, theorists have focused on a threat to feminine development inherent—as they see it—in the "regressive pull" of the internalized preoedipal mother. Further, they emphasize the role of this pull in the pathogenesis of such problems as promiscuity, infantilism, or sexual inhibition.

These formulations about the firmness of self-boundaries and the repudiation of early maternal ties are now being questioned in relation to female adolescent development. Blos, for example, has acknowledged recently that "the adolescent girl tolerates...a far greater fluidity between the infantile attachments to both parents and her adult personality

consolidation” (Blos, 1980, p. 16). The girl, he states, “has never abandoned her preoedipal attachment to the mother as fully as the boy has. When blending these earliest attachments with oedipal passions, the girl’s range of empathy broadens and her fluid potential for identification unfolds, going far beyond anything available to the male” (Blos, 1980, p. 19).

Although he now sees that sustained early mother-daughter attachments do play a role in the unfolding of positive capabilities, Blos, nevertheless, continues to locate these attachments in the preoedipal phase of development and to stress the part they play in the dynamics of female adolescent symptomatology. Basically, he does not see the mother-daughter relationship as a base for a *positive* relational mode of development, which also has evolved over time and is no longer to be characterized as “preoedipal.” Thus, this relationship’s contribution is, on the whole, not well described, minimized, and devalued.

Finally, in the standard adolescent literature, conflict emerges as the key dynamic by which the “necessary” tasks of separation take place. To quote Blos: “...personality growth and psychological differentiation come about only through the elaboration of conflict and its transformation into adult personality structures” (Blos, 1980; p. 21). By contrast, we see conflict as one way of elaborating the continuity of connection to significant others. We would argue that the ability to engage in conflict, without losing touch with the more basic affirming aspects of these connections, is an important part of healthy development. The experience of conflict, then, must be understood as but one aspect of personality, which gains its meaning to the adolescent girl in terms of her inner relational self.

Conflict, connection, and relational growth

In this sense, we see conflict as one mode of intense and abiding engagement, not as the leading edge of separation and disconnection. Conflict is a necessary part of relationships, essential for the changes which must be made so that the relationship and each person in it can change and grow (Miller, 1976). The intense affective quality with which conflict is expressed can represent a means by which young women work out differences within relationship, moving into a relationship to confront differences, not away from it. Disconnection, or separation, would more accurately be characterized by indifference, withdrawal, diffidence or “false compliance.” Further, the capacity to engage parents

in conflict without disrupting the underlying qualities of care and commitment is an important step toward expressing this same stance within later adult relationships.

In our work, college women often demonstrate their wishes to keep conflict from distorting basic relational ties and to work out conflict within key relationships. One student, for example, had struggled throughout adolescence to be understood by her critical and anxious mother and to act so as to please her. This student was now considering a study trip abroad, a trip that she knew her mother would oppose. Her concern was with how she could go on this trip without it doing damage to her already fragile relationship with her mother. The issue was not how to manage the trip without her mother’s consent, because she did have the means to do that. What was important was that the decision be resolved within relationship. She knew that if she chose to take the trip against her mother’s wishes, her (the student’s) feelings of self-blame for upsetting her mother would far outweigh any personal gains that the trip might otherwise have offered. Thus, while this trip would have enhanced the student’s vocational skills and her growing capacity to act in the world, the more basic gains in self-esteem and competence were linked to her ability to take care of the relational aspects of the endeavor.

It is important to perceive and to give proper weight to the desire to “take care” of relationships—as a valuable motivation—and not to leap to the conclusion that this was a “regressive pull.” In addition, it is important to stress, again, that a large part of the young woman’s sense of self-worth is based in her ability to take care of relationships—a basically very valuable mode of living which has to be weighed along with other factors such as the gains in experience afforded by a trip abroad.

We have found in our clinical work that conflict between late adolescent daughters and their mothers is typically encapsulated around specific issues that can co-exist with the feeling that “my mother is my best friend,” a feeling reported by a number of women students. For example, in structured interviews done with students at Wellesley College, as part of a project exploring women’s development, the majority of women identified their mothers as the most important person in their lives.

At times, conflict serves as a test of these relationships. The adolescent daughter wonders: Can I remain emotionally connected to my parents as my own views and values grow to differ from theirs and

as I expand my own capabilities and relational involvements? In part, the adolescent is testing whether her parents can evolve in their relationships in keeping with her mode and tempo of growth. This suggests, though it is seldom explored in the literature, that successful resolution of adolescent/parent conflict requires flexibility in the parent as well as in the child (Fulmer et al., 1982). It may be that much of the conflict that emerges during this time results from the fact that the parents are fixed on earlier, more controlling modes of relationship, which contrast with the daughter's age-appropriate expansion of spheres of ability and competence.

The student described above, engaged in resolving conflict so as to minimize further damage to her relationship with her mother, had a number of close women friends and a steady boyfriend of several years' standing. From our clinical and educational experience with college women, we have found that there is generally a correlation between a daughter's fundamental core of connection with her parents, even in the face of conflict, and a healthy capacity for relationships with her peers. The consistent dynamic remains that of being in affective connection with the other, and establishing a basic mutuality of concern, even if that concern is expressed in conflicting ways.

This pattern represents a contrast to those women students who are disengaged and affectively separated from their parents. This disengagement often has its beginnings early in life, highlighted by the daughter's increasing sense of estrangement from her family, and resulting in a growing emotional distance between them. Rather than conflict, there is a paucity of emotional connection with the daughter taking pains to minimize contact with her parents. These women who "have nothing to say" to their parents are, by and large, the most inhibited and constricted in their movement toward evolving new and intimate relationships with their peers, and are most uncertain of their own capacities as relational beings. As one of these students put it, "I have no idea how to go about making friends here." For this student, emotional separation from the family occurred in the context of an *absence* of conflict, and resulted in a significant lowering of self-esteem and general well-being. In clinical work with women who are disengaged in this way, it is still important to see how much the lack of a growth-promoting relational context has hurt them and to help them work toward developing such a context - rather than seeking only more separation (Miller, 1984).

For healthy development of college-age women,

then, a basic sense of affective connection with one's parents remains the core out of which a positive sense of relational self-esteem emerges. Students able to become affectively connected to others remain in internal dialogue with their parents' beliefs and values, regardless of their ultimate degree of acceptance of them. Mother at times serves as a model of caring and concern, or as the base for a form of "practicing" (Mahler, 1972) involving differentiation of self within a basically connected context. The relational *process* between parents and daughter becomes a formative model in the daughter's evolving relational self.

The college setting

In a residential college setting, late adolescence can be seen as a time of rapid evolution of a student's relational matrix, with a sudden and developmentally arbitrary break in daily contact with parents and home. The adolescent is confronted with a dual relational task: maintaining a continuity of relationship with family under conditions of distance and less commonality of experience, and evolving ways of finding people in the new network (students, faculty, staff) to supplant some of the relational roles previously filled by parents and long-time friends.

The context in which these dual tasks occur is significant. College is defined as a time for academic pursuits, almost always seen as competitive success as measured against one's peers (Sassen, 1980). And yet the college years are also times of rapid consolidation of female friendships and intensification of sexual relationships. Within self-in-relation theory the task for the college woman is to build on parental and peer relationships so as to enhance her sense of self as a competent and able being, thus becoming empowered toward the fullest utilization of her abilities.

While empowerment emerging out of relationships is also a developmental aim during the high school years, the situation then is quite different. The high school girl remains in proximity with her parents and close friends of many years' standing. These relational ties can be strengthened by, as well as supportive of, her achievements. In other words, actions and strivings during the high school years can serve to enhance rather than threaten most relationships. Further, parental approval of her accomplishments can leave a daughter with the sense of giving to her parents and of being in a situation of mutual affirmation that is a central component of her self-image. (There are other, countervailing forces during adolescence, but they will not be discussed

now because the main focus here is on the change in conditions with the move to college (Miller, 1984; Gilligan, 1982).

However, much of this is altered when the daughter goes to college. Parents often intensify their concerns about their daughter's level of achievement and choice of a major, applying increased pressure on her to do well and provide for her own economic future. A number of students in recent years have sought counseling out of concern, in part, with the conflicts between following a course of study consistent with their own wishes, or pursuing a course which is more in keeping with parental pressure. Inevitably, their question is not "what to major in" but how to fulfill their own aspirations without damaging their ties with their families. Distance from parents and the absence of the mutuality of daily experience often intensifies this dilemma and its subsequent burden on the student.

The academic setting may create conditions that lessen the student's capacity to grow intellectually through mutually supportive and validating relational connections. To the extent that schools emphasize grades and competitive endeavors, students come to feel that learning is a private matter, that sharing of ideas may lessen their competitive stance vis a vis others, and even that sharing their academic status with friends may disrupt feelings of trust and support. This can have several results. For one, it increases students' isolation from others, curtailing their opportunities for relational enhancement, especially relational enhancement as it is intertwined with intellectual growth and empowerment. For another, the college environment tends to segment student's experiences into the "personal" topics of interest and of real meaning to them versus the "academic" topics that are the focus of their classroom studies. This division can result in a narrow approach to learning, cut off from students' broadest realms of curiosity and inquiry which are in fact the wellsprings from which the deepest learning occurs. This explains why many women students feel invalidated even in the face of academic success and diminished in self-esteem to the extent that their successes have cut them off from avenues of relational growth. For example, Locksley and Douvan (1979) have documented that adolescent girls with high GPAs show more depression and more psychosomatic symptoms than do a similar group of boys, or girls with lower GPAs. We think the basic contradiction between the heavy pressure for individual, competitive achievement and women's motivations for action within a relational context may

underlie these kinds of findings.

Relationships with faculty members also can contribute to this process. Faculty members can be a source of personal validation for students in their work, such that academic studies become an integral part of human connections. This does occur, but unfortunately it is too often limited only to a few very successful students. For others, steps they may take to reach out for connection to faculty members can be seen by teachers as signs of the students' dependency, or neediness rather than as legitimate seeking of connection. Thus, students feel that their own academic work neither brings them closer to the adults in their college setting nor contributes in any mutual way to the intellectual development of individual faculty members.

Some practical applications

Self-in-relation theory suggests some of the pathways by which the college environment may contribute to the relatively high incidence of depression and bulimia currently found in college-aged women in this country (Weissman and Klerman, 1979; Stangler and Printz, 1980; Wechsler et al., 1981; Halmi, et al., 1981; Halmi, 1983; Pope, et al., 1984). In particular, college can exacerbate certain dynamics that have been identified as key aspects of clinical depression in women, including low self-esteem, vulnerability to loss and inhibition of assertive action, and of anger (Kaplan, 1984). Women students tend to be cut off from key relational sources of self-esteem, while they identify with a college ethic which often devalues these sources. Instead, as they struggle toward the more valued goals of independent endeavor and competitive achievement, they believe that they are doing what they "should be doing," but somehow they find themselves feeling worse and worse.

The experience of one young woman, Ann, offers an example. Ann was a 19-year-old junior on leave from a small, previously all male, elite college. Throughout her childhood, her parents had shared her view of herself as "self-confident" and "self-motivated." As a result, they refrained from offering her what they saw as unnecessary and unwanted support, guidance and encouragement. Ann had felt alienated and misunderstood because of their lack of involvement, but during her high school years she had close friends to whom she could turn for the validation and support that was missing at home.

Her situation changed dramatically in college.

Ann lost the sense of mutual understanding with her old friends, while the norms of her college impeded her ability to seek new relationships as a source of self-affirmation. She felt she “had to focus on work...I couldn’t have feelings or need people ...It was easier to be distant from people than feel the pain of what I needed but didn’t think I could get.” In this context, Ann developed feelings of shame and confusion. She then blamed herself for these feelings, leading to further loss of self-esteem and culminating in the depression that precipitated her year’s leave and brought her to therapy.

Contrary to the traditional emphasis in psychotherapy with adolescents on separation from the family, the major task here was to allow a new parent-daughter dynamic of closeness to develop, involving open sharing of each other’s needs and fears, as well as open acknowledgement of differences. On the basis of feeling her relational needs validated in the therapy, Ann was able, in a family meeting, to express to her parents that her wish for “continued guidance” from them represented a need for recognition, not a “dependent need for them to give her the answers.” Ann’s mother responded by sharing her feeling that Ann was the family member by whom she always had felt most understood. Ann, deeply moved, smiled through her tears and expressed her sense of affirmation at hearing this. This exchange was a turning point for Ann’s establishing mutually rewarding affective connections with her family and subsequently with new friends. Concomitant with her seeking new ways of being with others, Ann began to experience a renewed sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

This student’s experience is a good illustration of how emotional difficulties can develop when young women’s basic relational needs are not given recognition and avenues for development, or are misinterpreted as dependent behaviors. We can see that the college setting can include conditions which undermine women’s optimal mode of growth and which promote pathology. Ameliorating these conditions would require a fundamental examination of the assumptions upon which all educational institutions are based—assumptions that devalue relational paths to learning and growth. Such an examination could, in turn, lead to new programs designed to promote a relational path of self-development.

Late adolescence is an important period in the development of women’s core relational self-structure. Charting the course of development during this phase

involves identifying and describing the paths by which the young woman’s relational self grows in complexity, flexibility, sensitivity, and adaptability. The many planes along which this growth occurs include 1) an increased potential for entering into mutually empathic relationships characterized by being able to share one’s own affective states and to respond to the affect of others; 2) relational flexibility, or the capacity to permit relationships to change and evolve; 3) an ability and willingness to work through relational conflict while continuing to value the core of emotional connection; 4) the capacity to feel more empowered as a result of one’s inner sense of relational connection to others, particularly to mothers. As illustrated further in the following paper, the relationship between a late adolescent daughter and her mother is often characterized not by disengagement, but by qualities of mutual empathy, understanding, acceptance and forgiveness. This ongoing, albeit changing, engagement between mother and daughter is a crucial aspect of women’s self-development during late adolescence.

Thus, the late adolescent woman does not develop “out of” the relational stage, but rather adds on lines of development which enlarge her inner sense as a relational being. This process occurs within a desire for continuity of core emotional connection to family members.

Daughters and Mothers: College Women Look at Their Relationships

Nancy A. Gleason, M.S.W.

About the Author

Nancy Gleason is a social worker on the staff of the Counseling Service of the Stone Center, where she also coordinates the group program. She is active with the Massachusetts Academy of Psychiatric Social Work and has a clinical practice that includes working with the elderly. Three students, Helen Payne ('84), Marilyn Mahaney ('86) and Diana Spaulding ('87), worked on the project and the research. Their contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Abstract

Many college women see their relationships with their mothers as ongoing and evolving. While they anticipate changes as they mature, and ask their mothers to adapt to these changes, they speak of their mothers as their best friends. They speak of the relationship with their mothers as the most important relationship they have, and they expect that to continue. They state that they are growing within this relationship and not at the expense of other relationships. These findings come from a group of college women exploring their own relationships in a Search-Research group and are confirmed by the results of a survey of Wellesley College students which members of the group conducted.

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Drs. Kaplan and Klein have provided a framework for a relational model of the psychological development of women in late adolescence, specifically in the college years. My paper offers an example of this model as it describes a specific project designed to explore and elucidate the relationships college-aged women have and aspire to with their mothers.

In the fall of 1983, the Stone Center offered Wellesley students the opportunity to join a Search-Research Group (which I will describe shortly) entitled simply "Daughters and Mothers." The preliminary sign-up yielded thirty students—demonstrating far more interest than any other topic for these groups before or since. Because of the numbers, we divided into two groups. I will report on the work of one of these groups.

After defining the Search-Research Group, I will describe the three phases of the work of this particular group—first the exploration by the members of their own relationships with their mothers, then the expansions of that inquiry through a survey of other students and finally the compilation and analysis of the results of the survey.

Search-Research groups

The Search-Research Group is a unique concept originated by the Stone Center (and especially Janet Surrey) in 1981 to "foster conditions whereby women's experiences and learning styles can be validated and translated into active learning projects." At least three such groups have been offered each year, covering such topics as eating

patterns, the experience of minority women, procrastination, relating to men, women and sports, and living with alcohol. Meeting weekly in a group, students explore and learn about the subject as they learn about themselves. Each member becomes her own expert. The group, itself, lends support to this process of exploration, sharing affectively and cognitively in the relational setting. The “leader” essentially sustains the process and is a learner with the others.

Following the “search” phase, those interested students continue with a “research” or action phase of their choosing. The personal interest becomes an academic pursuit and a bridge is formed between subjective, experiential learning, and objective, academic discipline. Thus, for example, the first “Eating Patterns and Weight Control” group did a survey of student attitudes and behavior while the second developed and negotiated with the college a healthy eating program (which continues to this day).

The Search

In the Daughters and Mothers Search-Research Group the themes that emerged included the qualities the students valued in the relationship such as closeness, friendship, trust, and the wish for approval. Daughters perceived their mothers’ pain in “letting go.” They wondered if patterns were repeated from generation to generation and some talked with their mothers about their experiences as daughters. Fighting and arguments were mentioned infrequently as were extended rifts. Changes in the relationship over time were noted in the past and anticipated for the future but these changes reflected different needs mother and daughter might have for each other rather than disruptions. Some members discussed their awareness that their mothers needed them and three students came together in their discovery of the supportive role each maintained with her mother around the need to care for another member of the family who was ill. They were concerned with the effect of stress on communication in the family but were aware, too, of a healing process which not only brought people back together but seemed to strengthen the bond.

At the end of most meetings, we stopped for five minutes to write. These writings constitute an informal journal of the group. In one meeting, for example, people talked about an underlying understanding with their mothers they called it “reading between the lines”—which seemed to help them know how to act within the relationship without

threatening it. One student wrote of that session, “I had never realized before how little my mother and I actually fought. Stress usually found an outlet in some other way; we often would sit down with a cup of tea and talk about it.”

The most frequently repeated theme in these writings was the expectation that the relationship would continue and, in all likelihood, would grow. Roles might change, as might the quality of their “friendship.” Issues creating strain between parent and child might differ, but the basic affiliation would be expected to continue. One daughter wrote, “In the next five or ten years I am quite sure that I will be depending on her for advice and support as I define my goals in life and begin to establish myself either in a career or possibly in a marriage. I want to stay close to her, as I always have been, but I know that I have to develop a certain distance from her as a mother. Of course she will always be my mother, but if our relationship grows to incorporate two adults instead of one child and one adult, I will be satisfied. A fine balance exists between a concerned mother, who can be resented by a child/adult (me) for interfering, and a concerned friend who lets that person know that she is there if needed. I don’t want to lose the strong emotional bond with my mom, but I do want us to be close as friends—and I think she knows this.”

Members expressed the wish, in different ways, that their mothers would forgive their actions when necessary in their love, acceptance, and approval of the daughter. “There is a real need still, and I can’t rationalize it away, to tell my parents. I don’t usually want their advice but I need to know that they still like or accept me.” Another wrote “The issue of testing the unconditional love that a mother and father give seems to be very important to me right now. I want them to know that I can handle this (difficult situation) on my own, yet somehow I still need them to approve. I feel as if I have violated their trust in not sharing this large part of my life—and I guess what I am afraid of is that they will feel betrayed. Their acceptance of my ability to deal with my own problems means even more to me than their acceptance of (my actions).” Another expressed the concern about her mother “knowing that she will always love me, but will she like me?” Still another reported that for her “approval is important—I like that reassuring feeling I get when I say something, and they say, ‘Darling, we trust you’.” Students wrote that they often feel apologetic or embarrassed for wanting approval. If autonomy is the goal, searching for approval would appear regressive.

There was no suggestion here, however, that regression was occurring.

The daughter may be aware of ways in which her mother adapts to her growth, usually without discussion. "As I've grown up and become more mature, I've found that my mother has been surprisingly accepting, so much so that I haven't realized until later that I've changed, that she's noticed and that she misses me." These daughters do not feel smothered or trapped by their mothers—struggling to get free and go their own ways.

We must now ask whether the students who chose to participate in this group had unusually strong attachment to their mothers. Was their commitment to the relationship atypical? Did the culture of the group encourage positive statements contrary to actual feelings? As one student wrote, "One of the things that I most enjoy about this Search-Research Group is that I always seem to leave feeling very good about my family." Might it have been otherwise? The results of the research should shed some light on these questions.

The Research

Three students chose to continue on to the research phase, making a commitment to creating a survey, disseminating it, and tabulating the results—a major undertaking in one semester while carrying a full academic course load. In designing the survey, the students decided to focus on whether the mother-daughter relationship changed during the daughter's college years. We wondered whether entering students would experience intensification of early adolescent issues, leading to a need for some distance, that would abate into more comfortable relationships as the students aged or, conversely, that leaving home more recently would intensify the wish for closeness. With this in mind, we chose to survey one hundred freshmen and one hundred juniors selected by random sample.

In order to measure closeness in the relationship as it currently exists, we asked about frequency and duration of telephone contact and about subject matter discussed. We asked whether mother and daughter missed each other when separated. We asked about unspoken sensing of each other's moods. Then we asked respondents to look ahead five years after college and portray their idealized relationship with their mothers in terms of identification, closeness, roles, and values. Finally, we asked respondents to answer two open-ended questions—"What is especially important to you in your relationship with

your mother?" and "How would you like to change the relationship you have with your mother?"

Ninety-seven of the 200 surveys, or nearly 50%, were returned, including 52 juniors and 45 freshmen. This constituted a statistically representative sample of these two classes and slightly less than 5% of the total student body. To our surprise, no statistically significant differences were found between freshmen and juniors. Juniors call home as often, discuss the same subjects and seem to be as close to their mothers as the freshmen.

The typical student talks with her mother once a week for between 15 and 30 minutes. Calls are initiated equally by mother and daughter. The daughter talks about daily happenings (her own and her mother's), about family members and about academics. In these phone conversations, she rarely talks about disagreements, intimate relationships, sex or, surprisingly, money. She tells her mother more about her life than her mother reveals of hers. She feels closer to her mother than to her father, her siblings or to anyone but her best friend. (But the relationship with her mother does not appear to interfere with that with her best friend.) When at Wellesley, she misses her mother at least occasionally and worries about her as well. She is also likely to be glad to be away. However, as she describes it, her mother misses her considerably more, is rarely glad to have her away and is more likely to worry about her than the reverse. We really do not know whether this is an accurate perception on the daughter's part or the expression of her sense of her mother's involvement with her as she has moved away from home.

Response to the question about sensing moods without being told was striking. Sixty-five students, more than two-thirds of the respondents, report that they often sense their mothers' moods. Only one student never does. Fifty-seven, or slightly less than two-thirds, believe that their mothers often sense their daughters' unspoken moods as opposed to three who never do. It is not clear if this is merely the familiarity of spending years together or a particular alliance in this dyad.

Looking ahead five years after graduation, few students anticipate asking their mothers to help them to raise their children while most anticipate caring for their mothers if needed. Most expect to understand their mothers better when they, too, are mothering. They do not, however, expect to discuss any more or less their personal concerns with her, to be more honest with her or to fight more openly with her than they do now. In sum, these relationships are ongoing,

changing perhaps, but not ending or even diminishing.

The Comments

The two open-ended questions—"What is especially important to you in your relationship with your mother?" and "How would you like to change the relationship you have with your mother?"—repeatedly elicited the themes we have noted already.

Of the 80 who described what was especially important to them, 69 used strongly positive terms, with relational words like "closeness," "trust," "acceptance," "caring," "love," "openness," "confiding," "sharing," "enjoyment," "support," "friend;" and such phrases as "We can talk about anything," "there when I need her," "We respect each other." Responses ranged from effusive—"She is very understanding and extremely special. We enjoy each other's company. We share great times, wonderful memories... we communicate," to more cautious—"The fact that she cares so much about me. Although it's hard for me to open up to her, I know she's always ready to listen to me and help me if I ask her to. She is extremely respectful of me as an individual. She doesn't try to manage my life. She's not at all detached from me."

Only one student described no caring for her mother - "I don't really have a relationship with my mother. I haven't lived with her since I was 15..." The remaining 10 presented less comfort, more distance or more tension with their mothers. "I feel that we both attempt to understand one another even though we totally disagree with each other. We also try to refrain from putting too many expectations on the other." Another wrote, "I wish I could understand her better (and she, me) but she is from such a different background and we are so different. I wish I could accept her more for what she is because I know she loves me and is not perfect." One said that what was important to her was "confidence—brutal honesty at times; harsh; ultimate forgiveness after extended periods of torture. Stability, someone who knows me. No explanations necessary. She knows me."

The second question—"How would you like to change the relationship?"—13 chose not to answer and 18 stated that there was nothing they wished to change. They liked the relationship as it was. The responses of 2 suggested serious difficulties which created problems in the relationship.

Thirty-eight, nearly two-thirds of the remaining, stated in one way or another that they would like more closeness, greater openness, trust, or friendship. The direction of their interest is in more relationship, not

less. "I wish I could talk a bit more freely and openly with her, although we do get along very well." "I would like to be able to discuss more personal types of things with her, such as my sexual relationship."

In contrast, only 6 explicitly desired less involvement with their mothers. "She sometimes leans too heavily on me. She forgets that I get upset about family problems and that it makes me feel even worse now that I am away." (This student also liked the fact that her mother "treats me as an equal, respects my opinion and asks my advice.") "I have been very close with my mother—to an extent that it has affected my personal growth. I/we have to become more autonomous." Another would like her mother to back off. "I wish that my mother would become more independent and have more of 'a life of her own'." She is bright and creative but has put her own interests aside to raise her children. I feel that as soon as she re-establishes her independence, she'll be able to accept mine." Finally, "I would like to be completely independent of her so that I can make my own mistakes and then ask her about stuff, rather than having her try to prevent me always. I appreciate it sometimes afterwards, but the times I don't tend to seem more prominent in my mind."

Most describe the changes they would like as a responsibility shared by mother and daughter. "Not having my little quirks bother her so much" expresses the student's wish that her mother would be more accepting. Another would like to "be somewhat more open about my innermost feelings, emotional, sexual, etc." More students place the burden of change on their mothers' attitudes but a number are ready to risk being more open as a route to greater closeness.

Drs. Kaplan and Klein see conflict between mothers and daughters as compatible with the closeness described above and suggest that dealing with conflict serves to maintain the engagement between the two. While we did not explore this issue specifically, our results suggest that the daughters want to resolve conflict and will work to achieve resolution, but that expressing anger or arguing does not feel like a means to that end. Those few who specifically refer to open expression of conflict see it as a threat to the relationship. Five state they are grateful that it is *not* a problem. "I enjoy her company and we hardly ever fight." And, "We rarely fight and that's important to me."

Eight who complain about anger or fighting would like to argue less. "Less fighting and more mutual comprehension," wrote one. Another gives more insight into the process. "I wish we could have

a greater tolerance for each other's fallibilities and weaknesses. We can make each other very angry at times for not fulfilling our internal standards for each other. Because of this, we are reluctant to confide our problems at times and to trust each other." These daughters are not backing away from their mothers but are seeking other ways to resolve conflicts. Resolution then is sought within the context of the relationship.

Summary

We have heard the voices of college women not in pain—voices that we who are therapists don't often hear. These women may have concerns they wish to negotiate with their mothers, but at the same time their energies are directed toward growth within the relationships with their mothers. In this study this pattern does not change between freshman and junior years, nor do the daughters anticipate any lessening of the ties. Changes are sought in the quality of the relationship as the daughter matures and sees herself as adult. She looks to mutual adjustment between them as her mother accepts her maturity; maturity alters the balance but not the closeness. No suggestion was made by any student that her relationship with her mother interfered with her forming other relationships. As she sees herself maturing and her relational network expanding, the daughter feels her interest pulling her toward her mother.

At the same time, these daughters want to be loved, approved of, trusted, and supported. They want to talk more, not less, and about intimate topics, including sex. And they want their mothers to do likewise.

We asked a few minutes ago, after reporting on the statements of the group members in the search phase, if these statements were atypical, representing a self-selected group with unusually positive feeling about their mothers or reflecting a culture in the group that encouraged positive statements. The answer seems clear, at least for a significant segment of young college women. The results of the survey are strikingly consistent with and confirming of the statements of the members of the group. We still cannot be certain, however, that those who did not return the survey may have a different outlook.

While not addressing the above question, another way to examine these results would be to repeat the study with women in coed colleges and women not in college. We don't know whether women who choose Wellesley College are more closely identified with their mothers, or at least more

comfortable with their womanhood. We might ask whether Wellesley women, because they have achieved academic success, have less need to compete with or deny the attachment to their mothers. Within the scope of this group and this study, we have strong evidence of a model of development in which the closeness of the mother is enriching and empowering, where mutuality enhances the relationship and where striving for "independence" is strikingly absent.

The following quotation, written by one of the students in the group, describes the evolutionary process of growth and change in the relationship through adolescence:

"Perhaps the best way to summarize my feelings about my mother is to use an analogy a religion professor told me about religion. He said that true faith in a religion is to listen to the tenets, and agree with them. Then, gradually you realize that you doubt some of the tenets, so you come to disagree with the tenets. Somehow, after a period of questioning, you come to believe the tenets in a new way. Then a new level of belief is reached. This growing process occurs throughout your life. So, too, I can feel this with my mother. When I was young, I never questioned what she said to me. Perhaps when I began college, I began to doubt what she said and then the arguments began. Gradually, I answered the questions about values and thought processes I had raised, and came to believe in her in a new way. It's not that I don't believe in my mother anymore; it's just that she doesn't always know how I feel about everything and I don't always agree with her philosophy. Deep down, there is a lot of trust in one another."

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. In this session, Janet Surrey, Ph.D., joined the presenters in leading the discussion.

Comment: The notion of separation in psychoanalytic theory is partly that one gives up one's infantile images of parents and replaces them with more adult images, and that one has to get away from one's real parents to do that. What is fascinating to me about these papers is that these young women are revising their parental images in the context of staying with the *real* relationship, and the next step is how that happens. You might want to go beyond looking at the actual relationship and explore what happens within each student.

Kaplan: That's a very, very important point, and I think that's the work not just for us here, but also that many of you can do in your work. I think some of the examples in our paper give some indication of what happens within the students, although we didn't spell out all of the details.

Question: I was very struck by the findings in your survey and I wondered if you asked whether the women's parents were together as a couple. My experience has been it's a much more complicated process when the parents split up.

Gleason: We didn't ask that question, but it would have been useful. We did ask whether the respondents' mothers were living and all answered affirmatively. We also asked if the daughters were living with their natural mothers, and three were not.

Klein: In the survey I mentioned, in which many students considered their mothers to be their best friends, the parents were almost all in intact first marriages. We did structured interviews with women from several Search-Research Groups and a great majority of those young women named their mothers as the most important persons in their lives so far.

Comment: It seems to me that one difficulty with generalizability from the study is that you didn't have a large rate of return. You could make an argument that the process was not random.

Kaplan: This is really an hypothesis-generating study. It has the limitations of any self-report questionnaire study, i.e., those who didn't return it may differ systematically from those who did. It raised intriguing issues, and suggests the kinds of questions which can be pursued with more rigorous research methods.

Question: I wonder if there is any research on mothers raising daughters to be narcissistic extensions of the self, and how the daughters work that through.

Klein: I'm not sure whether you're talking about normal, everyday narcissism—like me showing you my daughter's picture tonight here—that may be a narcissistic extension of myself, but it's not an extreme. There are situations when it is extreme, and it becomes a more difficult task for the daughter to develop her sense of herself.

Comment: But not even in the extreme. I think it is one of the central issues of daughters working to individuate when mothers have strong ideas about what daughters should be like, based on their own ideas. That's where I think a lot of conflict comes in. We need to look at how the daughter tries to maintain her relationship with the mother without insulting or hurting the mother and yet establishing herself as an

individual.

Surrey: It seems to me very important to ask *how* to work on that. Certainly we work to make the differentiations. I would also think about looking at the mother's experiences and her relationships, how much she had a pattern of relationship where differentiation was able to take place. It is important especially to look at the mother's relationship with her mother. This helps particularly to limit mother-blaming by looking at the mother in her own context.

Comment: As a child I was very close to my parents and then I went to a very competitive school and I remember feeling very strange. I didn't always want to be independent in the way the college encouraged in its competitive atmosphere. It really meant so much to me to hear what you had to say tonight.

Question: I keep wondering when the world and colleges within it will notice that competition is inherently destructive, even for our planet. This notion of relationship has just got to start happening. Even women's colleges are continuing to function as competitive institutions. Where does the hope lie in making this change, especially at women's colleges?

Comment: The topic of cooperation and competition is being discussed here. A lot of us are realizing that competition is destructive. Some students are working to make collaborative work possible.

Kaplan: It's important to put this into context, to remember that the mode of academia in general is competitive, for students and for faculty. What you're speaking about would include a major reformation in academia which would throw a whole different cast on the meaning, purpose, and outcome of a college education.

Surrey: This whole issue extends not only to graduate school and the workplace, but also back to kindergarten and earlier. We need to let our imaginations go. We need to stop learning *how not* to work together.

Question: Have you tried any of these ideas here—or even brainstormed about them?

Gleason: You just heard one example about a student campuswide discussion about cooperation and competition and now a lot of people are talking about it. What will happen remains to be seen, but people are talking and that can be a first step.

Question: I'm very curious about how many students in the survey were daughters of Wellesley alumnae. It sounded very warm and wonderful.

Gleason: We didn't ask that specifically, so we

can't answer that. You can ask those students who organized the survey who are here.

Comment: I think it worries me that we may not be able to generalize to families where the mothers and daughters have very different backgrounds and values.

Klein: I think what may not be generalizable is the quality of overall positiveness and warmth, but what is generalizable is the importance of relationships as a basis for defining one's beliefs and understandings of who one is.

Comment: I'm the mother of a Wellesley student and I found myself sitting here shaking my head, yes, yes, and I'm not at all being modest. My only suggestion would be that during Wintersession you try to run a mother-daughter group for daughters and mothers. Or, turn the tables completely and send the mothers here for a week and the daughters home.

Comment: You might also want to look at how these issues relate to young men.

Kaplan: That's another important point because it's fundamental to all our work. In speaking about women we are not implying that these issues are unique to women. This is one of the fundamental perspectives that underlie everything we are doing. Issues that are exemplified by women tend to be devalued and ignored, but they exist for everyone. By beginning with women as the point of inquiry, you will then have a route into human "truths" but "truths" that often don't emerge as well when men or male parameters are the only foci of study.

Comment: I'm heartened to hear you say that, because I've been thinking about my college years and I, as a man, can identify somewhat with this process in terms of my thinking a lot about my relationship with my father, writing a lot to him, trying to revitalize that relationship. I think the way I thought about it was that individuation and affiliation went hand-in-hand.

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