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# **Work in Progress**

## **Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality**

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.



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# Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D.

## About the Author

Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., is Associate Psychologist, Assistant Director of Training in Psychology at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts, and Instructor in Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. This paper was presented at a Stone Center Colloquium in May 1987.

## Abstract

Personal desire is seen typically as central to the development of the autonomous, self-determined Western adult. In a traditional pattern of development, the motivation for power and mastery and a belief in the primacy of individual desire form a triad of psychological traits which eventuate in disconnection and objectification of the other person in a relationship. The socialization of adolescent sexuality currently contributes to a different pattern of desire for boys and girls; it encourages sexual entitlement in boys and sexual accommodation and lack of clarity about desire in girls. Both of these orientations have a far-reaching and damaging impact on psychological development. In a relational model, desire, conceived of as arising in an empathic relationship, leads to enhancement of the relationship. Relational growth then becomes more fulfilling than individual satisfaction, and this leads to a new definition of desire.

*There are two great tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it.*

G. B. Shaw

This paper is about desire . . . how we know it and how we act on it. The notion of a contained and separate self, basic to most of Western psychology, contributes (in practice if not intent) to the idea that there can be clarity about the self separated out from context and that one can be aware of and true to one's values, desires, motives, feelings, and thoughts as if in a vacuum. Acting in a "self-determined" way out of this clarity is often what is meant by "individual freedom" or autonomy.

Pivotal to this individualistic picture of human beings is the pleasure principle (Freud, 1920/1953; Mill, 1861). This principle is profoundly engrained in Western psychology in both the Freudian and behavioristic traditions: attainment of satisfaction, motivated by desire, is the supreme goal of conduct and therefore serves to shape the self. In this tradition, "the self" is the personal history of gratifications and frustrations of desire and the projection of these into the future in the form of intention.

By contrast with this basic mode, I will examine some implications of a different view of the self that suggests other routes to attaining a sense of clarity in knowing ourselves (Jordan, 1984; Kaplan, 1987; Miller, 1986; Stiver, 1986; Surrey, 1984). I will look at the part desire plays in this process and I will illustrate it by discussing women's and men's expression of sexuality in adolescence.

I suggest we achieve a sense of personal integration through relatedness with others and that this integration, not a state of separate homeostasis of drives (Freud, 1920/1953), provides a sense of well-being. An intrinsic interest in and movement toward connection is a basic organizing and motivating force in psychological growth. This statement does not fit

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neatly into either a self-centered drive theory nor altruistic explanations of motivation. Further, a sense of uniqueness does not depend on separateness or comparative, hierarchical measuring. The espousal of self-containment, self-sufficiency, and self-assertion as a model for self-development contributes to the illusion of separateness and leads paradoxically to an experience of “self” as endangered and fragmented. When disconnected from you, I feel less confident that you will be responsive to my needs; a system of power, rights and entitlement then develops to try to ensure that my wants will be met.

### How do women want?

The question, “What do women want?” has been posed repeatedly, most notably by Freud (“Was will das Weib?” Jones, 1958, p. 421). Often there is an edge of impatience to it, as if to say, “When are these women going to get clear and tell us what they want!!!!?” Two responses occur to me. First, before we address the question *what* do women want, we might ask: “*How* do women want?” And related to this is: “Who is listening to what women want? And do the people who pose this question really want to hear?”

Several authors have addressed the nature of woman’s voice (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Belenky et al., 1986), and some have begun to explore further the importance of the listener to the quality of the voice that emerges (Miller, 1986). The expectation that someone will listen and make an effort to understand greatly enhances the clarity and sureness of the message presented.

A vignette from a psychotherapy session may capture this dynamic. Ann, an artist, started off her session talking about the importance of a friend’s responsiveness to one of her paintings in helping her to move forward with it. She then spoke of not liking to write in her journal anymore because it felt lonely, a dead-end. She was making a lot of sense, but I was preoccupied, . . . with this paper, as a matter of fact. She fell into more silences and disjointed utterances, and finally said, “I feel lost, like I’m in a fog today. I don’t know what I want to talk about.” More silence, as I ruminated about how to get this paper done and struggled with my own drifting, confused thoughts. I indicated things did not seem clear. Thankfully, she helped me by saying, “With you or me?” Suddenly, becoming clearer myself, I could tell her that I felt preoccupied and that I thought I had left her alone, as with her journal, in the session. I had been unable to be fully attentive, and we both now felt confused. With this, she looked relieved and talked about the

importance of my being more present, and about what she wanted from me; both of us came back into focus.

If the other person does not really wish to know my experience, or does not wish her/his experience known, I may become confused about my desires. This happens routinely to another woman, Cynthia: she approaches her husband with a concern; he impatiently lets her know he is much too busy for this; she withdraws and comes back later, upset now; he criticizes her “overemotionality;” she collapses in tears and feels confused about her original concern. The invalidation that Cynthia experiences is enormous. Cynthia’s lack of clarity then becomes *the condition* for the continuation of the relationship.

Thus, when I hear women patients struggling with a sense of inadequacy or despairing that they do not know what they want in important relationships, often with lovers or spouses, I explore the quality of the listening that the partner provides. Is the listener interested, curious? Is he or she empathically present?

If one person relies on empathy to know the other, there is often the expectation, not always conscious, that this will be mutual. If the other is not empathically attuned, disappointment and a sense of being unheard or invalidated results; one’s sense of clarity diminishes. Also, because of our own sensitivity to the impact of our wishes on others, women often experience our wants as tentative and unformed. Such tentativeness, in the service of interpersonal sensitivity, could be viewed as *facilitating* relationship, rather than as a personal inadequacy.

Further, a woman’s voice often will not be heard, even when it is quite clear, if the woman’s reality is not congruent with dominant societal values. Those in a minority position (women, blacks, lesbians, gay men) often do not experience receptivity in listeners from the dominant culture. This failure to hear can, at its worst, lead to profound invalidation resulting in depressive withdrawal and/or outrage. Relationship as dialogue challenges a clear subject-object split (Kaplan, 1987). The “how” of wanting for women is tied to the relational context in which we experience the wish.

### Clarity

Our self-awareness has varying degrees of clarity. Unlike the concept of identity (Erikson, 1968), the notion of clarity reduces our tendency to concretize “the self” as “body.” When people talk about merging or experiencing “loss of self,” they are likely talking about a decreasing clarity, distinctness, and focus about their experience: I cannot see myself

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clearly; my affect is not highly articulated or differentiated; intentions either become hazy or drop away altogether. An increase in clarity, sometimes expressed as “being more in one’s truth” or in one’s “real self,” is often accompanied by a sense of relief or “fit.” For instance, even when a person moves into a sharper, more distinct experience of sadness, s/he can experience relief, often moving from the more contaminated or complex state of depression. In a mutually empathic relationship each individual allows and assists the other to come with focused energy more fully into his or her own truth or reality and into relationship, what Jean Baker Miller calls “representing your own experience in relationship” (1986).

A woman whom I’ll call Susan is a highly successful, usually confident clinical psychologist. Yet she has difficulty in communicating her desires to her husband. “I get unclear about what I want. John feels so entitled that his wants are like *needs*. I felt terrible about something at work and wanted to talk to him. He was working on a paper; he said this work was life and death. Of course I said, ‘Fine, O. K.’ Besides, I wanted him to *want* to help me, to be with me. I didn’t want to have to convince him. I wound up feeling too needy.” Later, in discussing the ending of therapy, Susan commented, “I’m afraid I’ll be a non person when we terminate.” I asked, “How would that be?” and she responded, “Well, I connect with myself through connecting with you. I know myself partly through your knowing me.” With an empathic response, her own experience comes into focus, and without it she fears the sense of her own reality will blur.

## Two modes of knowing and relating

I would like now to delineate two modes of knowing and relating which influence our experience of relationship and, in turn, of desire: an objectifying/power/control mode and an empathic/love mode. These represent extremes, and all of us in this cultural tradition probably move to some extent in each of these ways.

### The objectifying/power/control mode

The objectifying/power/control mode is the dominant mode of Western culture, and its values are central to the socialization of males, in particular, in our society. Mastery and individual autonomy are the hallmarks of this developmental track. In operating out of a drive to satisfy my own need for power, when I want to know you, it is not really to understand or delight in your particular way of being; it is so that I

can better get you to comply with what I believe I want or need from you. Here we see the dilemma and paradox of viewing the other as separate self but treating the other as part of one’s need system. The need for you to comply with my desire fires fears of being dependent which conflict with the wish to appear autonomous; therefore, we disavow these needs or meet them covertly (Stiver, 1983) as in having a wife or mother whose role it is to take care of our desires.

A system of entitlement and belief in one’s “rights” supports this denial and need. My experience of being individually unique is transformed readily into “being better than” in order to justify and buttress my entitlement. The projection of objectification (I make you into an object, and you do the same to me) and the hostility accompanying a competitive spirit (I must be better than you, beat you, in order to demonstrate to myself and others that I deserve “to get”) lead us to believe it is a dog-eat-dog world. Domination is safety. Thus, power is an essential feature. Since life is seen as a zero-sum game in which my gain is your loss, getting and being loved or admired are primary, while giving or loving may seem draining or leading to a sense of dangerous vulnerability.

In this system, wanting to control the other relates to the emphasis on self-control. And isn’t control at the center of the overemphasis of the rational at the expense of the emotional (and contributing to the dichotomous split between the two)? Isn’t it the felt sense of feelings happening to us, being beyond our will, that leads to our devaluing and fearing them rather than seeing them as powerful sources of knowledge, expression, communication and growth? We are seduced by an illusion that thoughts are more subject to control and volition and, therefore, more trustworthy.

In the power mode, pride, which some think of as a sense of joy or satisfaction in one’s experiences, may instead be characterized by a comparative and possessive spirit: “Look what I did,” or “Look at what I have that sets me apart from and above you.” Fear then develops that someone else might take away that which we possess (either directly by taking away material goods or competitively by taking away the comparative advantage we enjoy in the possession of a “superior” trait). A need grows to buttress self and diminish others in order to perpetuate good feelings about the self. No wonder that pride is the first of the seven deadly sins! Pride, in this sense, can then constrict and separate, unlike joy or confidence which do not imply comparison or hierarchy. (*The Oxford*

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*English Dictionary's* first definition of *pride* is: "A high or overweening opinion of one's own qualities, attainments, or estate, which gives rise to a feeling and attitude of superiority over and contempt for others; inordinate self-esteem.")

The pathological variant of pride is arrogance, what, in psychological terms, we might call narcissistic encapsulation and entitlement. (Again, the *OED* suggests arrogance is "the assertion of unwarrantable claims in respect to one's own importance; the taking of too much upon oneself as one's right.") This is the ultimate defense against experiencing the need of the other and the fear of possible helplessness and isolation if the other does not provide.

The profoundly fragile and defensive nature of this posture creates severe limits to relating to others. A person functioning in this mode often seeks clarity in isolation. A patient described a very painful time following the death of her husband's mother. She knew that he was experiencing intense grief, but as she said, "He did not want his sadness and vulnerability known;" so he withdrew. She was empathic to both his sadness and his need not to acknowledge it but could not find a way to bring this understanding into their relationship. She began to doubt her own feelings and her wish to help him; perhaps she was just "projecting." Maybe she needed to "mother" him for her own needs, not for him. Both people felt increasingly isolated; my patient began to feel very confused and depressed as her husband clung to his separate and hidden experience of grief. What could have been a time of real closeness and growth for both of them and a strengthening of their relationship led instead to alienation, confusion, and stagnation.

### **The empathic/love mode**

Empathy leads to an understanding of the other as subject, not object. The sameness and commonality of self and other is as central to our well-being as the differentiating features that allow us a sense of uniqueness (Jordan, 1984). Mutuality is sought. I look for a sense of connection and relational expansion rather than control, domination, or satisfaction of individual wants. You are experienced as having your own subjective needs, values, and intentions which may or may not be in harmony with mine. If they are not, the differences are acknowledged, and some work on areas of conflict is necessary. In this mode, understanding of the self and other is achieved through interaction, not through separation and abstraction. One is responsive and listening. Feelings are valued as a means of knowing, as a basis for

communication and action. Identification with the other is a source of clarity and joy rather than a reason to fear losing one's specialness.

The Oedipus complex (Freud, 1924/1953), based on an Hobbesian notion of competition, power, aggression, and possession of others as objects, is no longer accepted in this model as the central developmental milestone; rather, we can posit a continuous evolving relational elaboration with mutual empathy (Surrey, 1984) at its vital core.

Gilligan's notion of responsibility and caring is at the heart of the moral system here (Gilligan, 1982). Morality no longer centers on just containing basically self-serving interests, but includes the responsibility to care for others. It might also involve what Surrey refers to as "taking care of the relationship" (1984). Further, fostering another's growth sometimes demands protecting them and sometimes relies on stimulating them to do what is not immediately comfortable. (Historically, we have tended to overprotect girls, failing to help them to enlarge their experience, especially at adolescence; and we overstimulate boys, failing to honor their need for protection and recognition of fear.)

An interest and curiosity in the other person's history, circumstances, and full humanity expands the notion of empathy from a momentary state of knowing and experiencing with the other to an over-arching sense of presence with and openness to the other person's experience and general point of view, a kind of "contextual empathy." It is as if we can understand more fully the scope of the necessity of their particular organization of experience.

Joy often accompanies clarity and characterizes the empathy/love mode. We feel a sense of well-being, pleasure, and delight in knowing and being known. Joy seems "contactful" and outreaching and not comparative. Other pathways to a sense of self-worth that are not competitive are: confidence in self and others, gratitude, courage, clarity, relational capacity, and what Jean Baker Miller refers to as zest (1986); all of these attributes can increase our sense of connection in contrast with competitive comparison which decreases it. Unlike entitlement, confidence does not involve a "right" or a "claim" to something because of one's achievements or inherent worth. It is trust or faith in oneself and/or others, a clearly relational concept. Both joy and confidence stand in marked contrast to narcissistic pride as a basis for good feelings about oneself.

### **Traditional power models of desire**

Traditionally, *desire* is defined as, "The feeling or

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emotion which is directed to the attainment or possession of some object from which pleasure or satisfaction is expected; longing; craving." A secondary definition involves "physical or sensual appetite; lust" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The noun *want* often suggests that something is lacking or missing or that I experience a need for something more. I feel a longing, I perceive something to satisfy it, and I act to get it . . . here we have the presumed self-determining, autonomous, Western adult; and we also reinforce the subject-object split. Entitlement, a sense of having a *right* to gratification, supports active pursuit of the desired object. Pride often accompanies the attainment of the object.

### **Desire and the need to control**

Because the inability to "get what one wants" leads to apprehension in a system where self-sufficiency and self-determination are so highly prized, the experience of desire typically has become intertwined with the need to control and exert "mastery" over or "to own."

Translated into psychological theory, the extended period of infantile dependency, when the baby's motor and cognitive skills are inadequate to meet her or his own needs, is viewed often from the adult vantage point as a time of extreme helplessness and noxious vulnerability. The adult perception of this time has seemed to lead to a tremendous fear of being plunged back into such a state; therefore, the first order of business becomes the effort to control people from whom we need or want something, or to deny the needing altogether. Not to know what we want is sometimes a protection against the experience of helplessness as well.

In a power system, whatever I believe I need to satisfy my wants may readily become objectified; the other person's wholeness or subjectivity can become secondary to my desire. This is at the heart of an egoistic, individualistic system! And Western psychologies are almost without exception supportive of this image. Thus, in Kohut's system there is the implication that the self needs the illusion of control over the self-object in order to repair or supply structure lacking in the self (Basch, 1981?; Kohut, 1984). The self-object is to be manipulated much as the breast in Melanie Klein's system (Klein, 1948) or the libidinal object in the Freudian model.

Any system that emphasizes the ascendancy of individual desire as the legitimate basis for definition of self and interpersonal relationship is fraught with the possibility of creating violent relationships based on competition of need and the necessity for

establishing hierarchies of dominance, entitlement, and power. Typically, this is where questions of morality come in: In Kant's (1957) system, carried forward by Kohlberg's work (1964), an action is moral if it is done out of duty, based on reason, not on passion or feeling which are seen as undependable; i.e., these systems are based on the prior assumption of a power model. Thus, one arrives at an abstract rule, the categorical imperative, to contain the violence inherent in a system of power and hierarchy. In a subtle way, abstract rather than contextual morality is most needed in a system that rests on hierarchy and power; it follows the logic and language of distance and control. Where empathy, noncomparativeness, and mutuality prevail, an alternative path to moral action would emerge . . . involving empathic responsiveness and a sense of compassion in a context of caring for the well-being of others. Gilligan's (1982) morality of care and responsibility, however, is judged as inferior by those who espouse the morality of duty and abstract law.

But isn't the notion of "being in control" and self-sufficient illusory? In this system, aren't instances of instrumental efficacy highlighted as a means of supporting the myth? Isn't the dominant group (managers, executives) seen as being in possession of the power and control to effect predictable and controllable change, while those outside of the traditional power system are assigned to "the human arenas" in which the "lack of control," according to this system, is more obvious, that is, the "feeling realms," childcare, responsiveness to others. The people not in power are then blamed, as if the apparent lack of control in these situations indicates lesser ability, less moral dignity, less reasoning ability, less will, and lack of other so-called "higher virtues." (Who eats the apple, opens Pandora's box?)

Another dilemma exists in such a system when the subgroup, i.e., women, who have been "assigned" to the so-called "uncontrollable arenas," actively value relationship and feelings and encourage the importance of subjectivity and the enhancement of others (Miller, 1976). The need for acceptance (or even the "need for approval") and affiliation, which is supportive of connection, is seen as infantile, while the need for esteem, status, and self-sufficiency, which is supportive of narcissism, is seen as mature. Rather than feeling ashamed of our wish to please people and to get approval, as if it is a sign of some deficiency, we might see it as one aspect of facilitating connection, a positive motivation. The "need for approval" seems to rely on a wish to be liked, an affiliative wish to draw near to another person while the wish for status relies

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on a wish for position, i.e., power, which suggests movement into hierarchy and objectification. Thus, although the need for approval may at first appear to share the narcissism of the wish for status, it actually would seem to lead to more connection unlike status-determined relationships which are characterized by disconnection.

### **Desire with empathic awareness: A new model**

An alternative way of conceptualizing desire suggests that our wishes or wants are always contextually embedded and arise from that interactive context. Acting on our “felt needs” has an impact on another person and occurs within connection. Further, we care about that impact. If I want something from or with you, an empathic awareness of you will alter the experience of how and what I want. You are not just an object to me. In a mutual and empathic relationship both people can be enhanced by the expression and satisfaction of a desire. My becoming clear about my wants in part allows you to become clearer as well; together we create more clarity. Basically, the enhancement of the relationship may constitute a greater goal than individual gratification, and ironically may lead to greater individual fulfillment.

Our culture seems tragically lost in a system that views “real desire” as selfish by definition; any desire that takes into account another’s wishes or needs is suspect as illegitimate. One patient reported telling a former therapist about her hopes for her mother’s success with a new business venture. While acknowledging ambivalence toward her mother, she passionately cared for her mother’s well-being, although in this instance it meant her mother would no longer babysit for her children. The therapist confronted this wish as if the patient could not possibly want what was best for her mother if it introduced stress into her life. That the patient could anticipate the pleasure of a fuller relationship with her mother as her mother grew and could take joy in her mother’s joy was seen as defensive reaction-formation and self-sacrificing.

Energy put into relational growth, rather than into pleasure narrowly defined as *for the self*, is judged often as masochistic or self-sacrificing. But desire without appreciation of the other person’s experience and without attention to the consequences of one’s desire and actions for the other person becomes non-dialogic, power-based, and potentially abusive or violent.

Sexuality can serve as an example of the

complex meshing of interpersonal and personal desire. My sexual pleasure is a function of my own intense sensate experiences, joy in joining with and exploring your experience, excitement in having fun, pleasing you and knowing you want to please me, feeling “abandoned with you;” but there is a larger, synergistic sense of the pleasure of both, the mutual surrender to a larger union, a diminished self-consciousness, and decreased awareness of the other as a separate person. This is the heartbeat of passion. So the desire is not simply a desire of each self for its self-pleasure. But what is it *for*? Possibly, if it is for anything, desire is for the experience of joining toward and joining in something that thereby becomes greater than the separate selves.

Typically defined, desire may shape the self and thus limit the self. But desire, like affect and passion, can be thought of as “something larger” that directs us to connection rather than separation. It is when we try to own and “control” the desire that we diminish the sense of something larger than us moving through us; in so doing, we reduce our opportunity to move out of narcissism. Desire in the larger sense affirms connection and being “a part of” rather than “apart from.” It leads to *expansion* rather than *satisfaction*; the former suggests growth, life, and openness; the latter suggests stasis.

### **Systems in conflict: Sexual desire**

The shaping of sexual desire and expression in heterosexual relationships in adolescence will illustrate some of the difficulties that ensue when the two modes of organizing knowing and desire meet. By its nature intensely private, hidden, and not given to public exchange or articulation, sexuality tends to become more and more a part of core self-definition and less and less open to exchange and learning in relationship. Ironically, even in the sexual relationship itself there is reason to believe that many people, women especially, falsify their experience (according to the Hite report [1976] about 50% of women fake orgasm). Women do this in order to fit some fantasy of what should be . . . for the man and for their own definition of themselves as women (according to current standards—at other times, women were told other things about what their sexuality should be). Men likely distort their experience in different ways. Thus, an experience that could bring us intensely in touch with an integrated sense of self, other, and transcendence, the paradox of sexual abandon, leads to denial of one’s own experience and distancing from the other.

Before turning to some of my speculations about

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sexuality in adolescence, let me say that I feel tentative and questioning and that feels clearly, strangely appropriate. What I am about to describe is far from an exhaustive account of adolescent sexuality. I want to emphasize, too, that I am speculating about *adolescent* sexuality. I think there are major shifts in sexuality for many men and women as they mature.

At a deep private level, both boys and girls probably experience intense curiosity, excitement, and apprehension about sexual activity. However, the two modes of knowing, and especially managing anxiety and desire, become socialized differently by gender, particularly in adolescence. I'll address primarily the damaging and distorting consequences of these adolescent sexual rites of passage.

In my clinical practice, I have been struck by the difference in the fears that men and women typically express about their sexuality. When men recall adolescent sexuality, they remember being anxious to have their first sexual intercourse; they remember the pressure to lose their "virginity." Less acceptable was the general anxiety, confusion, and total urgency about sexuality; as one man said, "I just wanted to get it over with and hoped I wouldn't be too humiliated." Another man poignantly said, "After I had sex the first time, I said to myself, 'Okay, now I can die.'"

### **The boys' experience**

In our society there are few rituals for entry into manhood; first heterosexual intercourse appears to be used as one of the primary signs of this transition. Fears of not being a man or not appearing like a man to one's peer group become very prominent. They can lead to treating the partner as a means to the end of accomplishing an important intrapsychic and social identity task: "I am now a man; I am now accepted into the club of those boys/men who have 'done it.'" The social task of "scoring," the need to disavow fear and disown the wish to please the partner, often leads to alienation from the wish to be known and loved in a sexual relationship. The wish to be known and loved becomes a secret, often hidden from the boy himself.

One patient spoke enthusiastically of telling his older brother and his brother's friends about "getting to third base" when he was ten; their disbelief in his "accomplishment" and his pride in their awe stood out as the most significant part of this story to him. But the objectification of the other can also be part of the objectification of the penis and the corresponding anxieties about "its" performance. Will "it" stay soft and fail to be willed to erection when I want "it" to or "it should?" Will "it come" too soon? On the other hand, will "it" become erect when it isn't appropriate,

and will I be embarrassed by "it?"

Sexuality then becomes subsumed into a system of achievement, competition, mastery, and performance (other men have bigger and better erections, are better lovers, have had more lovers). Satisfying the other becomes another way to perform, not an empathic attunement to the other's body and inner experience. Ironically, attention to one's own internal world also becomes narrowed and compartmentalized. If one is comfortable with disclosure and vulnerability, sexual intimacy, literally becoming naked physically and psychologically with one another, can provide the most incredible arena for exploration, discovery of self and other, and pleasure. Attempts to achieve status and gender identity through early sexual performance, however, encourage self-protection, separateness, and egocentric preoccupation. There is another powerful irony: The sought after orgasm promises loss of control and loss of a sense of separateness, states quite at odds with those traits towards which males are socialized.

Further, the need to "conquer" or even "use" the other may involve an aspect of what is described as the male's active need to "dis-identify" (Greenson, 1968) with the mother or escape the clutches of the "engulfing mother." Desire for sexual intercourse brings the boy into contact with a need for another human being, specifically female, as masturbation and homosexual activity do not qualify for the rite of passage to manhood in our culture. Because he needs the girl so much and this need conflicts with the pressure to be manly and super-independent, he must strongly repudiate this need. As a result, the girl is treated as a "sex object." Thus, the emphasis on power and independence does not allow the boy initially to experience the centrality of the relationship, the wholeness of the other, or vulnerability in his sexual explorations.

### **The girls' experience**

For women remembering adolescent sexuality, the most frequent fears I have heard have to do with not being loved, being "used," and "being left." The fear of pregnancy is related to these in the sense of struggling with some sense of responsibility for limiting sexual involvement because of the possible consequences for the woman/girl and perhaps a child.

Unlike the boys', the girls' confirmation of gender identity occurs dramatically with the appearance of the first menses. *Becoming a Woman* is the title of the pamphlet which the Kotex company has distributed to thousands of pubescent girls in high

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school hygiene classes over the years. Note the title is not *Menstruation* or *Reproductive Facts*, etc. A clear, definable event marks the movement from girl to woman.

Theorists often talk about the explosion of sexual impulses in adolescence, the powerfully reorganizing function of these changes, the peremptory quality of genital sensations pushing for discharge. While acknowledging the wide range of adolescent sexual experience, I have rarely heard women talk about their experience in this way.

Most women, in speaking about early sexual experiences or their first sexual intercourse, talk about the importance of the relationship and about the boy's initiative and excitement. Many women felt they "gave in" sexually in order to please the boyfriend or to maintain the relationship. I am not suggesting that girls don't become powerfully aroused in the early adolescent explorations of kissing and fondling . . . and women are clearly capable of powerful, intense orgasms. However, the push for intercourse, specifically, rarely seems to come from the girl; she is interested in closeness, tenderness, being loved. In answer to the question: "What is it about sex that gives you the greatest pleasure?" Hite reports many of the women spoke more about emotional intimacy, tenderness, sharing deep feelings with a loved one, and other intense relational experiences than about orgasm per se (1976). This evidence does not discount the real physical pleasure of sexual intercourse, of opening deeply to another, and the wonderful abandon of orgasm, but it does say that the relational context in which these acts and responses occur provides the meaning and joy.

Intercourse alone does not produce orgasmic release as reliably for women as for men, because clitoral stimulation occurs less satisfactorily from intercourse alone (of the 30% of women who achieve orgasm during intercourse, clitoral stimulation is quite important; and "for most women, having orgasm during intercourse, as a result of intercourse alone, is the exceptional experience, not the usual one" [Hite, 1976, p. 229]). What happens, then, to our sense of reality when a centrally preoccupying, interpersonal experience for both sexes is defined largely in terms of the experience of one sex?

What does it mean that "sex" is generally accepted as meaning sexual intercourse, when that may be the primary route to pleasure for one sex but not the other (particularly in adolescence)? And what does it mean that sexual orgasm is defined as the most important thing happening in that exchange? These are the kinds of constructions of reality that lead to a

profound sense of disempowerment and disenfranchisement for women. And further, what are the consequences when a part of the developmental pathway for one sex (becoming a man in part through objectification of the other as sex object) directly conflicts with the primary needs of the other sex (the need not to be used, and to be empathically validated and "emotionally held")?

### Sexual entitlement

Sexual desire and passion are often described as "being carried away" by a compelling force. For the male adolescent especially, the intensification of sexual impulses at the same time that he wants to be, or is told he should be, more "in charge" of his own life, poses a real integrative dilemma. Hence, sexual desire becomes infused with a sense of sexual entitlement. The pressure for genital release, combined with the need to establish manhood, may then be experienced as peremptory ("I need to get laid"). Rather than experience it simply as being "taken over" by the feelings, boys and men often transform it into taking over the other. The inner urgency is directly communicated outward. He wants to "fuck" the woman, to *do to* the other. The other side of this appears in the expression "to get laid," perhaps expressing (in a covert manner) the split-off desire to have one's striving, autonomous self laid to rest. It also expresses indirectly the wish to be cared for and cared about.

Both boys and girls learn to believe in the compelling and entitled quality of male sexuality. A patient, Diana, was sexually abused several times at age eight by a brother twelve years older. When she finally summoned the courage to tell her mother, who she knew favored this brother, mother said, "What do you expect when you parade around in your underwear!" This is another variant of all the horrible instances of blaming the rape victim for "asking for it" . . . and even women are taught to think this way. A less extreme but frequent example was reported by another patient: "My mother told me, 'If you get a boy too excited, it's your responsibility to stop him. They can't control themselves.'" Both women had incorporated the message society gives: Male sexuality is powerful and entitled to expression. The man cannot be expected to take responsibility for his actions in the face of these impulses. Herman (1987) cites data that indicates that this rationalization is acted out with frequency: 22% of men in a normal college sample admitted to having had intercourse with "unwilling partners," and 9.2% admitted using

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force to have intercourse.

The adolescent girl, then, must learn that she is in danger of becoming an object of this “peremptory urge,” that she may need protection from it or need to learn to protect herself; managing the other’s desire at the expense of her own becomes the developmental task. There is the further implication that the male ego, identified with masculine potency, is fragile, and the girl must protect this as well. Quite a balancing act! Female sexuality is seen as more subtle and malleable. What a complicated, familiar picture: Not only responding to, but also managing another’s desire for sexual gratification, not being true to her own wishes, possibly for non-orgasmic physical and emotional intimacy or orgasmic non-intercourse, the girl then faces the possibility of the ultimate accommodation to other in the form of pregnancy (literally giving over one’s body to another’s growth). The message is reinforced heavily in adolescence: To be female is to learn to accommodate to another’s wishes. In a mutually empathic relationship, this might take the form of increasing delight for both. But when accommodation meets entitlement, the accommodating person may feel invalidated; as one patient put it, “I’m the one who doesn’t count.”

### **Women’s desire**

But what about the girl’s own sexual desire? Irigaray said, “Women’s desire would not speak the same language as man’s” (1985, p. 25). But how can we learn this language? Recent writers, in demythologizing and discovering the special nature of the female orgasm have helped to relieve the sense of inadequacy many women felt at not experiencing their fullest sexual release through sexual intercourse alone. But I suspect we know next to nothing about the nature of the development of female sexuality. The picture of adolescent sexuality is still heavily colored by the male experience. Although many suggest the female experience would be the same as the male’s if the overlay of excessive social restrictions were lifted, I think not.

Much self-awareness grows from attunement to our bodies, our responses, our feelings; the validation of our responses by others helps form and crystallize this self-knowledge. Being “talked out of” one’s experience of body sensation is invalidation at a profound level. In sexual joining, defined as it was in the past (as sexual intercourse, male orgasm), the woman could not expect to be known or have her own experience validated; rather it was often seen (by both the woman and society at large) as deficient or faulty. Ashamed of their “deficiency,” many women denied

their own experience, adopted male norms or, not surprisingly, withdrew interest in sexuality and lost further touch with their desire. Thus, it is difficult for women to say, “I want this.”

When discussing sexuality, I often ask women if they can tell their partner what they want or what pleases them; few can. Some, depressively, have given up trying; some are enraged at the men who don’t seem to know what the women want; some try, and feel unheard or judged because their experience does not fit the stereotype of the male model. Some are content in giving their partners pleasure, and this may be an important part of their general investment in relationship. When I ask about expressing what they want, I do not mean simply “touch me here or there;” I mean finding a way to convey what is most important to them in intimate, sexual relating. Men, also, are rarely able to address that for which they truly yearn.

While grateful for the latest technical information about female sexual responses (Masters and Johnson, 1966), I wonder if the female sexual experience has not simply been molded recently to fit the goal-oriented adolescent male sexual experience. The pleasure of orgasm is intense and dramatic. Orgasms are quantifiable. The danger inherent in this kind of sexuality is the objectification of the other and ultimately of the self. Entitlement to gratification highlights objectification of the other . . . and at its extreme leads to sexual violation. Performance anxiety captures the consequences of objectification of self . . . and at its extreme, leads to sexual inhibition.

### **So, what do people want?**

Ironically, it would seem that adoption of a primarily pleasure principle notion of sexuality makes for violation of everyone involved. It places desire (in the power/control sense), gratification, and self-satisfaction at the center of an interpersonal experience which promises transcendence of separate self, relational connection, and deep knowing of the other and self.

By openly exploring the true nature of their desire in relationship and sharing interest in the presence of the other, there is some possibility for both men and women to come to know their own wholeness. Without this, men become crippled by their disavowal of need and vulnerability, and women are disempowered by their lack of clarity of desire and their difficulty affirming the importance of relationship to them. In full sexual expressiveness, desire is not limited by the need to perform or control; it involves surrender to the powerful feelings evoked

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by the other person and allowing oneself to be carried along by the feelings which belong to both and go beyond both.

Honoring each other's realities and desires, not in technique but in the deepest sense of recognizing each other's truth, is at the heart of sexuality. In particular, two different individuals can enjoy and take responsibility for having an impact on the other, rejoice in pleasing one another, can explore differentness and discover sameness, can be sensitive, tender, exciting, receptive, active . . . in short, explore a wide range of interactions. Or they can be invalidated, alienated from self and other, and unable to transcend egocentrism. Sexuality offers us the opportunity to learn to move gracefully between desire focused in intense body experience and desire infused with concern for the other.

In summary, in this rather far-ranging paper, I have tried to question a model of desire which rests on the need to control, own, or use another as an object of gratification. Western stereotypes of maturity assume the existence of a "clear" sense of separate self. This self is supposed to be based on awareness of one's desires and on effective strategies to master the environment. And one is to master the environment in order to meet one's needs self-sufficiently. I have suggested an alternative model, based on a clear awareness of the interpersonal nature of desire, contextual desire, which is informed by empathic knowing of the other. A sense of clarity for women often involves trying to integrate an appreciation of one's own reality and a concern about the other's well-being. The pleasure in *being part of* (rather than *apart from*) and building something larger than ourselves is suspect in an individualistic culture, but I think it is vital to women's reality; further, understanding women's reality can lead to new understanding of everyone's reality.

### Discussion Summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held so that students and visitors can exchange ideas with each other and with the speaker. Portions of the discussion are edited and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker's ideas. In this session, Drs. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver joined Jordan in leading the discussion.

**Jordan:** While you're thinking of some comments, I'll mention a cartoon I saw in the *Boston Globe* this week about research on the differences in the way men and women speak. The cartoon shows a large imposing man with a very pointed nose and prominent teeth; there is an exclamation point coming

out of his mouth. Facing him is a very thin and fragile looking woman who is hanging upside down; there is a question mark coming out of her mouth. The study reported that in couples the woman gave more active encouragement to her husband to talk about himself, while the husband listened less well and was less likely to actively bring her out about herself and her own topics. I think the exclamation point versus the question mark captures succinctly the difference between the power mode and the empathic mode.

**Stiver:** Let us begin by congratulating Judy on many things, but especially for talking about female sexuality in a very different way, particularly, Judy's many points about the lack of clarity in women's experience of their sexuality. I think this is in part because there has not been an arena or safe place for women to feel heard without feeling they have exposed themselves as deficient and devalued. There has been a fear of not living up to some set of expectations about being a woman and being a certain kind of woman. We still know very little precisely because women have not been able to truly share their experiences in the way Judy has suggested we might.

**Question:** Have you had any experience with lesbian adolescents and have you found any differences there?

**Jordan:** It is a very good question. I specifically chose the heterosexual arena because I think that's where the most painful distortions and the clash between these two systems (power and empathy modes) occur. I do not have enough specific information on the experience of adolescent lesbians. My sense is that most women experience a lot of the pressures during adolescence which I've described here, whether they eventually go on to recognize a lesbian or heterosexual orientation. Being talked out of your experience is common to both groups in adolescence. I would be very interested in learning more about this.

**Question:** Do you think things are changing for the next generation? I have a daughter who's sixteen, and I see her interacting with her boyfriend, and it certainly seems very different from the way it was when I was her age. They do a lot of talking and seem genuinely caring. There doesn't seem to me a lot of macho, tough stuff going on.

**Jordan:** I hope there's been some change. But I have the feeling that things change ideationally so much faster than they change in our hearts. I think the socialization around the sexual rites of passage is so powerful that it's hard for boys not to be deeply affected by it. Later, many men actually experience

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profound changes in their sexuality . . . sometimes as they get involved with women who can help them become more fully present and caring in their sexuality.

**Stiver:** It can be more complicated. There is a difference between closeness between men and women at all ages, which certainly we know is very possible, and the whole empathic mode Judy is discussing. Judy is saying that we really know very little about sexuality because of the mode in which it has been cast. We know so little about women's sexual experience, maybe men's too, but we certainly read much more about men's sexual experience. I think that the notion of clarity about experience is what is at stake. Without feeling one has a voice and an opportunity to explore, one feels in danger of exposing oneself; this keeps clarity from emerging. We wind up misunderstanding a great deal about female sexuality.

**Question:** I recently came across a book, written by a woman in 1986, that contains an essay called, "On Not Liking Sex." I have several female clients who are concerned about their level of satisfaction with their sexuality, and everyone that I have told about this article got all excited and ran out to get this book because they feel at last someone is speaking to them. One of the observations the author makes is that she finds sexuality okay; she enjoys participating in it, but she is not really interested in "undertaking" it. When she gets into it, it's okay, but she is not interested in initiating it. I've heard this from a lot of my women clients.

**Jordan:** It certainly fits with what a lot of women report about their adolescent sexual experiences; it's rare that they're initiators of genital sexuality. But another point you make is how much people are looking for some fresh discussion of sexuality, something that resonates with their experience. What I feel is most important about this paper tonight is not that I'm saying women's sexuality is this or that. More crucial is that both men and women begin to feel some freedom to start talking about what they are *actually experiencing with one another sexually*. I think that everybody feels hemmed in by all their fantasies of "what is expected of me," "what do I expect of him." The freedom to explore and *find out* . . . that's the important thing. When you have a literature that doesn't make room for that kind of exploration and it is difficult to talk about with others, you begin to feel all alone with these feelings. Many women who share a lot with close friends don't talk about their sexual experiences; and there is often

the sense that "sex is better for her," "something's wrong with me." We're beginning to open up our discussion of actual sexual experience, and it's wonderful because this is a very important part of life.

**Question:** There is some recent writing that men who are "into" power are very attentive at the beginning of the relationship, and once they know they "have" the woman, married or whatever, the attention stops. This is very distressing for the woman.

**Miller:** Yes, I've heard women say that. Perhaps it's that the woman believes the attention indicates a real interest in her experience, but it isn't. Perhaps it's part of the technique of how you conquer or acquire as Judy described that.

**Comment:** What strikes me about what you're saying is that I think we men have talked about sexuality as an exploration of physical space. When we talk about empathic relationships we usually think about it in terms of emotional space. And what I've heard you do tonight, so beautifully, is talk about the extension of that into physical space. It also strikes me that much of male sexuality is very much like a suspension bridge in which the orgasm is actually the whole big end. In fact, where there is empathic exploration of the physical and psychological space, orgasms are events on the landscape, and they're by no means central. They are things to which one comes and one continues beyond in the empathic exploration. They're delightful events but not the whole landscape.

**Stiver:** I would like to follow that up because there is another common observation about the difference between male and female sexuality. It is the woman's wish for *continued connection* after orgasm and the man's *withdrawal* from connection after orgasm. I think this is part of the dissatisfaction many women feel . . . the orgasm is not the end goal, but is really a way of becoming more connected and, as Jean says, the more connected we become, the more connected we want to be. That kind of yearning to continue the connection is powerful. If there is an abrupt ending of an intense connection, that is sometimes worse than no connection at all, as we know.

**Question:** I do a lot of work with couples. One of the problems I come across is how to help men become more motivated to become empathic and connected, not just sexually but in all ways. I find myself at a loss as to how to convince somebody that this is a worthwhile thing to put energy into.

**Jordan:** That's difficult. Often the first thing

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that you need to do is to try to help the man stop the *doing*, because so often men feel they *must* jump in to “solve a problem” or to “fix it,” particularly if the woman in the couple is having a lot of feelings. Then you need to explore with both of them what they want when they express distress. The man may begin to see that *listening well* is terribly important, and it isn’t a catastrophe if he can’t “fix it” or if he feels a bit helpless with the feelings.

Increased tolerance for one’s feelings and interest and curiosity in all feelings and in the other person’s inner experience, and deepening awareness of the joy of feeling connected . . . all are central to growth in relationships. I believe the joy of connection provides a great sense of well-being, and once experienced, is intrinsically rewarding, and hence, motivating.

**Miller:** I think we’ve all been influenced by the power mode; we’ve all lived under its sway. It often leads us to not want to know the other person’s feelings and even to be afraid to know them . . . and our own feelings, too. But sometimes, I think if we feel we’re even making a step toward what you’ve described, we feel a lot better . . . long before we’ve reached anything like full tolerance or curiosity for our own and the other person’s experience. Sometimes, in couples work, I’ve seen men begin to enjoy this whole new “mode.” It’s almost like a new unknown world. It’s hard for women and men but in different ways for each, for the reasons you’ve described in the paper.

**Comment:** That issue makes me think about my own children and children I have taught. So much of what you’re talking about can be approached through literature. There is so much in literature to help us raise children to be attentive to how people become clear about what they need, through what you call intersubjectivity, through the joining of two people who become clear about each individual’s wants, but also paradoxically whole. So much of what you talk about can be seen in Shakespeare, Flannery O’Connor . . . even *Charlotte’s Web* . . . Wilbur became whole through his love.

**Comment:** This is a problem of monumental proportions. As a man I can say it’s our male problem, and it didn’t start ten years ago. We have a large number of men who have been conditioned in the way you describe. I work with couples a lot. I think you are right. Women are more connected. If the woman in the couple wants to grow she has to confront these issues a little at a time. So many men still devalue women in many areas . . . in the sexual area, around finances, and others. What works is if the woman confronts the man, and he gets uncomfortable but

gradually gets brought into the feeling world.

**Question:** I want to ask something about language. You talked about males describing their penis as “it.” Are there males who do not describe their penis as an object? And are there women who describe their sexuality in objective ways?

**Jordan:** I may have overstated the objectification process for men. What I was trying to get at was the particular aspect of the male sexual rite of passage by which in adolescence he objectifies the girl and his own body. For many men this does not persist into adult sexuality. I’m also sure that, particularly since there has been so much emphasis on the female orgasm, many women get quite caught in a similar kind of goal-oriented sexuality. I don’t think it is either/or.

**Comment:** In working with a lot of teenagers, I hear girls talking about their bodies in a detached way. They “it-ify” their bodies . . . they believe the media -- that the only way to get close and to have tenderness or even to hold someone’s hand is to first have intercourse. This is a profound reversal of the sequencing of getting to know anybody intimately, sexually. They cannot take a stand apart from the current dictates. In their wonderful desires for closeness and tenderness and the kind of thing you’re talking about, they collude with the cultural image that holds for them an elusive hint of that kind of closeness through an objectification of their bodies, and I think that’s gotten worse in the last twenty years.

**Jordan:** That worries me a lot, and I think I also see it. It may be a part of a larger cultural phenomenon which is the “quick fix” gratification culture we live in. You look at the advertising and the way we are encouraged to believe that something quick, physical, and easy is going to make it (anything) better; and sexual intercourse is going to bring intimacy. Something very important is going to be lost if that trend continues.

**Miller:** How can we say to these girls, “Come on, don’t fall into this”? As you point out, it is particularly at that age that the girl wants so much to make connections. And then there is this awful paradox: You make the connection by first making yourself an object because it seems the only way.

**Comment:** It seems to me one of the problems with sexuality in our culture is that it is linked with touch, and as we grow up, touch gets so distorted. Part of the objectification is that there is no way we can continue, as we do with children, to explore the environment through touch. In adolescence you want to be close to someone and where do you learn how to

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do that? Particularly around touch. The family doesn't do it, T.V. is sexualizing everything, and violence is the norm. There's little opportunity to learn how.

**Jordan:** That's another important point. We've begun on many points tonight. There's a lot more to be explored. I want to thank everyone for a stimulating discussion. The spirit of openness and curiosity here is what we all need to more fully understand desire and our experience of relationship and sexuality.

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