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### The Development of Women's Sense of Self

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

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# The Development of Women's Sense of Self

Jean Baker Miller, M.D.

## About the Author

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## Abstract

As now incorporated into psychological thought, the definition of the self reflects major trends in Western history. Current psychological definitions can be usefully understood in this light, especially in that they emphasize separation and individuation but may neglect the intricacies of human interconnection. The psychological characteristics that result from the latter life activity have not been incorporated into prevalent conceptions of the self, nor into the delineation of the processes of development. Data derived from the close examination of women can lead to new understanding of both women and men.

The concept of the self has been prominent in psychological theory, but perhaps this is so because it has been one of the central ideas in Western thought. While various writers use different definitions, the essential idea of "a self" seems to underlie the historical development of many Western notions about such vast issues as the "good life," justice, or freedom. Indeed, it seems entwined in the roots of several delineations of the fundamental human motive or the highest form of existence, as in Maslow's self-actualizing character.

As we have inherited it, the notion of "a self" does not appear to fit women's experience. Several recent writers have spoken to this point, for example, literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun (1979) and psychologist Carol Gilligan (1982). A question then arises, "Do only men have a self, and not women?" In working with women, the question is quite puzzling, but an examination of the very puzzle, itself, may cast new light on certain long-standing assumptions.

Modern American workers who write on early psychological development and, indeed, on the entire life span, from Erik Erikson (1950) to Daniel Levinson (1978), tend to see all of development as a process of separating one's self out from the matrix of others, "becoming one's own man," in Levinson's terms. Development of the self presumably is attained via a series of painful crises by which the individual accomplishes a sequence of allegedly essential separations from others and thereby achieves an inner sense of separated individuation. Few men ever attain such self-sufficiency, as every woman knows. They are usually supported by numbers of wives, mistresses, mothers, daughters, secretaries, nurses, and others (and groups of other men who are lower than they are in the socioeconomic hierarchy, if they are higher). Thus, there is reason to question whether this model accurately reflects men's lives. Its goals, however, are held out for all and are seen as the preconditions for mental health.

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Almost every modern psychiatrist who has tried to fit women into the prevalent models has had much more obvious difficulty, beginning with Freud, going through Erikson and others. Some haven't tried. In Erikson's scheme, for example, after the first stage, in which the aim is the development of basic trust, the aim of every other stage, until young adulthood, is some form of increased separation or self-development (1950). I'm not referring at this point to the process by which each aim is attained (although that is an intimately related point — see below), but the aim, itself, the goal. It is important to note that the aim is not something like developing greater capacity for emotional connection to others or for contributing to an interchange between people or for playing a part in the growth of others as well as one's self. When the individual arrives at the stage called "intimacy," he is supposed to be able to be intimate with another person(s), having spent all of his prior development geared to something very different.

Recently, a large amount of writing, which deplores men's incapacity to engage in intimacy, has come from the women's movement. But men have been making the same testimony. Almost all of modern literature, philosophy, and commentary in other forms portrays men's lack of a sense of community — indeed, even of the possibility of communicating with others.

Thus, the prevailing models may not describe well what occurs in men; in addition, there is a question about the value of these models even if it were possible to fulfill their requirements. These two questions are related, as I'll try to suggest. It is very important to note, however, that the prevalent models are powerful, because they have become prescriptions about what *should* happen. They affect men; they determine the actions of mental health professionals. They have affected women adversely in one way in the past. They are affecting women in another way now, if women seek "equal access" to them. Therefore, it behooves us to examine them carefully. It's important not to leap to the only models available.

### The beginnings

What are some of the questions which arise when we try to bring women's experience into the picture? We can take Erikson's theories as a starting point, not in order to attempt a thorough examination of them, but to use his formulations as a framework for consideration of a few of the many features in women's development.

In the first stage of life, Erikson says that the central goal is the infant's development of a sense of basic trust (1950). There is another important

dimension. Even at that early stage in all infants, but encouraged much more so in girls, the young child begins to be like and act like the main caretaker who, up until now, has usually been a woman — not to "identify" with that person as some static figure described only by gender, but with what that person *actually* is doing. I think that the infant begins to develop an internal representation of her/himself as a kind of being that, for the moment, I'll call by a hyphenated term — a *being-in-representation*. This is the beginning of a sense of "self" which reflects what is happening *between* people, as known by the relation between people. The infant picks up the feelings of the other person; that is, it has an early sense that "I feel what's going on in the other as well as what's going on in myself." Really, it's more complex, because it's "knowing" — feeling — what's going on in that emotional field between us. The child experiences a sense of comfort only as the other is also comfortable, or, a little more accurately, only as they are both engaged in an emotional relationship that is moving toward greater well-being, rather than toward the opposite, i.e., only as the interactions in the emotional field between the infant and the adult are moving toward a "better" progression of events.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the infant, actively exerting an effect on the relationship, begins to develop an internal sense of her/himself as one who changes the emotional interplay for both participants — for good or ill.

The beginnings of a mental construction of self are much more complicated than those suggested by such commonly used terms as fusion, merger, and the like for the mental constructions of the first stages of infancy, as drawn from Mahler (1975), object relations theorists, and others. New research on infant-caretaker interactions also indicates the inappropriateness of those terms (see, for example, Stern, 1980; Stechler & Kaplan, 1980; Klein, 1976).<sup>1</sup> This research suggests that these constructs are not likely to describe adequately the complex internal representations of the self and "the other" or, rather, the internal self-other relational patterns that the infant is likely to create even from the earliest age.

When we talk about a sense of self in this field, we have been referring to a "man-made" construct meant to describe an internal mental representation. The suggestion here is that from the moment of birth this internal representation is of a self which is in active interchange with other selves. Moreover, the kind of interaction has one central characteristic, and that is that people are attending to the infant — most importantly, attending to the infant's core of being, which means the infant's emotions — and the infant is responding in the same way, i.e., to the other person's

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emotions. The beginning of mental representations of the self, then, is of a self whose core — which is emotional — is attended to by the other(s), and who begins to attend to the emotions of the other(s). Part of this internal image of one's self includes feeling the other's emotions and *acting on* the emotions coming from the other as they interplay with one's own emotions. This means that the beginnings of the concept of self are not those of a static and lone self being ministered to by another (incidentally, this construct has a strongly suggestive male flavor), but much more of a self inseparable from a dynamic interaction. And the central character of that interaction is one of attending to each other's mental states and emotions.

This early "interacting sense of self" is present for infants of both sexes, but the culturally induced beliefs of the caretakers about girls and boys enter the scene from the moment of birth. These beliefs are, of course, internalized even in the woman caretaker, although more so in fathers, according to suggestions from some studies (e.g., Rubin, et al., 1974; Block, 1978; and others). Girls are encouraged to augment their abilities to "feel as the other feels" and to practice "learning about" the other(s). Boy infants are systematically diverted from it, to their deprivation and detriment in my opinion. (I also believe that this redounds to the detriment of the whole construction of societal structure and of our models of thinking.)

Out of this interplay of experience one certainly develops a sense of one's self, that is, an internal or mental representation of one's self. Moreover, one develops a sense of one's self as a person who attends to and responds to what is going on in the relationships between two or more people.

Much of the prevalent literature tends to suggest that because she is the same sex as the caretaker, the girl cannot develop an internal sense of self; that is, that boys develop a sense of self, because they separate themselves from the female caretaker. This is truly an incredible notion. First, it ignores all of the complexity of the interaction between caretaker and infant. It is as if there were no interaction because they are both of the same sex, i.e., female, an amazing negation of the very idea of girls and women.

Second, the prevalent literature has ignored the extraordinarily important character of the interaction — that of attending to and responding to the other. This is the essential feature of what comes to be called "caretaking." It is also the basis of all continuing psychological growth, i.e., all growth occurs within emotional connections, not separate from them. Current theories ignore, too, the likelihood that the early self is built on the model of this very process — as opposed to the very different kinds of interaction

which exist in the current world. The very notion of true caretaking precludes anything that would lead the infant to feel submerged, fused, or merged with the other. These are words which may describe some of the phenomena observed after *distortions* in caretaking have occurred, but they are unlikely to characterize the infant's prototypic sense of self.

Third, the current notions tend to ignore the very likelihood that the only possibility of having any sense of self at all is built on this core process. As suggested above, I believe that this is true for both sexes, but it is not allowed to flourish in boys. Instead, it begins to be discouraged early. For girls, it is encouraged, but complications are added at this and at each succeeding phase of development.

Surrey has suggested that this early mental representation of the self can be described as a more *encompassing* sense of self by contrast with the more *boundaried* or *limited* self that is encouraged in the boy from a very young age. She suggests, too, the term, *oscillating* sense of self as compared to the more *linear* current model; and that the *oscillation* would follow from the ongoing growth of empathy in the child as well as in the mother (Surrey, 1984; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1982.) Many implications follow. To mention just a few: Certain events in later life which are seen as detracting from the self, according to other models, are seen as satisfying, motivating, and empowering. For example, to feel "more related to another person(s)" does not mean to feel one's self threatened, but enhanced. It doesn't feel like a loss of part of one's self, but the prospect of a step toward more pleasure and effectiveness — because it is the way the girl or woman feels "things should be," the way she wants them to be. Being in relationship, picking up the feelings of the other, and attending to the "interaction between" becomes an accepted, "natural-seeming" way of being and acting. It is learned and assumed. It is not alien or threatening. Most important, it is desired, it is a *goal* — by contrast to a detraction or a means to some other end, such as one's own self-development. Thus, it forms a *motivation*.

We have come to think of this whole experience as so "foreign," I believe, because our cultural tradition has emphasized such a different direction. In the dominant and official culture, attending to the experience of others and of the relationships between people has not been the usual basis and *requirement* of all of life. It has been relegated to the alien and mysterious world of mothers and infancy — and misunderstood. Sometimes, when I've tried to talk about this, some psychiatrists have said, "Oh, I see what you mean. All right, I agree that women are more altruistic."

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That isn't what I mean. That's attempting to slot this description into the old categories. It suggests a "sacrifice" of parts of a kind of self which has developed in a different fashion. To engage in the kind of interaction I'm discussing is not a sacrifice; it is, in fact, a source of feeling better and more gratified, as well as more knowledgeable — about what's really happening. I believe it is closer to elementary human necessities from which our dominant culture has become unnecessarily removed.

Another implication relates to the topic of self-esteem or the sense of self-worth. The girl's sense of self-esteem is based in feeling that she is a part of relationships and is taking care of the relationships. This is very different from the components of self-esteem as usually described and, incidentally, as measured by most available scales. Another ramification involves the issue of competence or effectiveness. The girl and woman often feel a sense of effectiveness as arising out of emotional connections and as bound up with and feeding back into them. This is very different from a sense of effectiveness (or power) based on the sense of lone action and especially from acting against others or over others. This sense of effectiveness can develop further in the next and all subsequent ages, but it grows upon this base.

### Agency within community

To move quickly through the next ages of life, I'll sketch a few suggestions about each of them, leading here only as far as adolescence. Erikson speaks about the second stage of childhood as one in which the goal is autonomy (1950); others have spoken about separation and individuation. I would suggest, instead, that we could think of this as a period when the child has more abilities, more possibilities "to do," and more physical and mental resources to use. S/he also has an enlarged "point of view" on all events, as it were, i.e., a more developed sense of how s/he sees things. There is not, however, nor need there be, any increased separation. Instead, there are new configurations and new "understandings" in the relationship. Maintaining the relationship(s) with the main people in her/his life is still the most important thing.

We might think of this as something like a phase called "agency-in-community." These words are borrowed from Bakan (1966), but not used with his definitions. Instead, by *agency*, I am searching for a word again, a word that means "being active, using all of one's resources," but without the connotations of aggression, another large topic, but one that cannot be developed here (Miller, 1983). Here, again, what the "doing" is, is different from what has been described. Often for little girls, it's doing *for* — again, for the

mother (and others) — following the model of what the mother is doing (Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1982; Surrey, 1984). What the mother is still doing with little children is attending to their feelings and "doing for" them, although not totally. So the action, again, has a different character — it's doing for other(s) within a relationship, with the little girl using very increased powers and increased "opinions" about how and what she wants "to do," and an increased assertion of what she can do.

In her internal representation of herself, I would suggest that the girl is developing not a sense of separation, but a more developed sense of her own capacities and a sense of her greater capability to put her "views" into effect. That is, she has a sense of a larger scope of action — but still with an inner representation of a self that is doing this in relation to other selves. A larger scope of action is not equivalent to separation; it requires a *change* in her internal configuration of her sense of self and other, but not a separation.

The child can move on, not only to a larger, but a more articulated sense of herself *only because* of her actions and feelings in the relationship. These may be — inevitably are — actions and feelings different from the other person's. They are obviously not identical. The point is that she is attuned to the feelings of the other person, and her feelings are also in response to the other's feelings and, in turn, her feelings influence the other's, and the other's, hers. She has a wide range of feelings and actions, and they vary at different times with one or another in ascendancy, but they occur within the relational context.

Of course, the character of the relationship differs from that of infancy; new qualities come in. But this does not lead to a "separate" sense of self. It leads to a more complex sense of self in more complex relationships to other selves.

The whole notion of describing human interaction in geographic or spatial terms, along a scale of close or distant (i.e., separated) seems questionable. Surely it is the *quality* of the interaction that is the question — the interplay of "conceptualized feelings" (i.e., feelings *cum* concepts), the doing of good or bad to the other — in relation to the nature of each's needs. A growing child has the possibility to do more than s/he could do before. The caretaker who recognizes and supports this enlarged ability does not become more distant. S/he becomes one step *more caring* in one more way — i.e., *more related* — and the child does, too.

### Childhood

When we move to the next stage, which is based on the Oedipal stage, we may ask whether one reason

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that people, beginning with Freud, have had such trouble delineating this stage in girls is that it may not exist. There is no big crisis of “cutting off” anything, especially relationships. And there is no need to fulfill the goal of “identifying with an aggressor,” i.e., the threatening and dominant male figure. (Several theorists believe that all of society, culture, and thought is built on this Oedipal moment of identification with the aggressive father. It is interesting to think about the possibility that society need not be built on this base.) However, there is a message which may come in more forcefully at this time (though it begins earlier and continues later, too) that the girl should focus all of her attunement to the other person on the well-being and the growth and development of men. But, the relationship to the mother and to other women continues. A pronounced turning away from the mother and toward the father may occur because of particular conditions in particular families, especially when the mother, herself, encourages and models this way of being. Western culture has dictated that mothers should uphold the superior importance and the power of men. These forces begin to affect deeply the girl’s sense of herself and her relationship to her mother, and to complicate the relationship in many ways. However, the relationship to the mother and to other women continues, although it may be less obvious and be made to seem less important. There are ethnic, class, and historical variations in the degrees of influence of the mother or father within the family, but the greater importance, value, and power of the father — and the devaluation of the mother — seem to come through psychologically, in general.

In latency, or the period which according to Erikson has “industry” as its goal (1950), there is increasing evidence that girls are not very latent. What girls may do is learn to hide more, if we’re talking about sexuality, as Freud was when he initiated the use of the term. But certainly if we’re talking about relationships, this is the time when girls are very intensely involved in all of their relationships, especially with other girls. Many girls are very interested in men and boys, too, but the boys are often either not interested or actively deprecating and destructive to girls. The boys are out learning “industry,” which others have talked about as “learning the rules of the game and how to play them” (Gilligan, 1982). Most of these, incidentally, seem directly traceable to war games. In a study on this period, Luria describes the events in a grade school playground (1981). She talks about the boys’ learning not only how to be “warlike” and to win out over others, but how to cheat and get away with it. If she asks the girls what they are doing, they often say, “Nothing.” The girls are hanging

around the edges of the playground, “just talking.” What are they talking about? They are talking about the issues in their families and how to solve them. In discussing their families, the girls are, of course, very involved in an emotional interaction with each other. Surrey has pointed out that the vast amount of psychological development which occurs within the relationships between girls at this time has been one of the major neglected areas in psychological study (1984).

## Adolescence

Now, adolescence. Adolescence has been seen as a time when the individual has greatly increased capacities. Traditionally, psychologists have *divided* them in several ways: for example, sexual capacities, aggressive capacities (which I will call for the moment, *agentic*, the ability to act), and cognitive capacities, with the development of formal thought which does expand the universe greatly. However, many studies still indicate that this is a time when girls begin to “contract” rather than expand. Clara Thompson noted this long ago (1942). She said that, for boys, adolescence was seen as a period of opening up, but for girls, it’s a time for shutting down. In his terms, Freud said this too. Freud believed that girls now had to learn for good that they were not to use actively all of themselves and all of their life forces from a base centered in their own bodies and in their own psychological constructions. For Freud, this meant, of course, the derivatives of their sexual drive. Instead, these forces are to be turned now to the use of others — men, in the first instance, and to the service of the next generation, childbearing. That is, girls had to resolve their psycho-logical issues by becoming passive and masochistic — i.e., to accomplish the necessary submission to men and to “sacrifice” themselves for children.

Freud’s observations may have reflected much of what happened — and still happens. That is, in regard to sexuality, most girls still learn that their own sexual perceptions, sensations, and impulses are not supposed to arise from themselves, but are to be brought forth by and for men. Thus, girls still tend to experience their physical and sexual stirrings as wrong, bad, evil, dirty, and the like. This is to say that part of what has been going on in the girl’s earlier internal representations of herself has included several problematic parts. One of these involves bodily and sexual experience. This situation can lead to an attempt to deal with this experience by turning to passivity and submission. The girl picks up the strong message that her own perceptions about her bodily and sexual feelings are not acceptable. They acquire connotations of badness and evil. They become parts

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of her self which are shameful and wrong. She has sought to bring these parts of herself into relationships with others all along, but has had difficulty in doing so. She still seeks to act on these desires within relationships with others. But she meets opposition. In the face of this, the solution of “doing it for others” can seem to offer a ready answer. The problem is that this solution is one which attempts to leave her, and her sense of herself with all of her own psychological constructions, out of the relationship.

In heterosexual relationships, if the girl or young woman tries to have her own perceptions, to follow her own desires, and to bring them into sexual experience with boys, she still is destined for conflict. Despite all of the recent talk, the girl’s attempt to act on the basis of her own sexuality still leads to conflict with her potential male partners. It will lead, also, to internal conflict with certain components of her sense of self. One is the part that says she should — and that she wants to — be attuned to others, which leads to a conflict if the other is behaving in ways which are excluding her perceptions and desires from the relationship. Another is the part that has made sexuality an unacceptable aspect of her internal sense of self and therefore prevents her from bringing a large part of herself into the relationship.

It is similar in regard to *agency*, that is, the girl’s whole capacity to perceive and to use her powers in all ways. Women were not supposed to do this, and have incorporated the idea that to do so is wrong and shameful. The girl has learned and done many things, until now, within a relationship. However, because of societal influences, she has also incorporated a sense, again to varying degrees, that she is not fully and freely to use all of her powers. At adolescence, however, she receives this as a much stronger message.

Thus, her sense of self as an active agent — in the context of acting within a relationship and for the relationship — has been altered to some degree all along by a sense of a self who must defer to others’ needs or desires. However, at adolescence she experiences a much more intense pressure to do so. Her sense of self as developed so far now faces a more serious conflict with the external forces she confronts.

The question is how she will deal with this conflict. As with sexuality, I believe that the major tendency is for the girl to opt for the relationship, both in her overt actions and also in an alteration of her internal sense of self. She will tend to want most to retain the self that wants to be a being-in-relationship, but she will begin to lose touch with the definition of herself as a more active *being-within-relationships*. If one part has to go, and until now it did, most girls lose more of the sense that they can bring their agency and

sexuality, as they experience it, into the relationship.

To restate some of these points, at adolescence the girl is seeking fulfillment of two very important needs: to use herself and all of her capacities, including the sexual, but seeking to do so within a context that will fulfill her great desire to be a being-in-relationship. This wish to do so has developed all through earlier ages. She wishes that the other person(s) will be able to enter into a relationship in this fashion. I believe that the boy really has the same needs, at bottom. However, he has been much more preoccupied with trying to develop “himself” and a sense of his independent identity. The culture has made the very heavy demand that he be so preoccupied. It has been doing so all along, but it does so at adolescence in an even more forceful way. He has also picked up the idea that the girl should adapt to him, and he has not been encouraged to continue developing the sense that he is primarily a boy-in-relationship with a primary responsibility for others and a desire to concentrate on the relationship between him and others.

Thus, girls are not seeking the *kind* of identity that has been prescribed for boys, but a different kind in which one is a being-in-relation, developing all of one’s self in increasingly complex ways, in increasingly complex relationships.

The model of a being-in-relationship which women are seeking is not easy to attain in present conditions. As I’ve tried to suggest, it is a very valuable model and, I believe, a model more related to reality, the reality of the human condition. In the current situation, however, it still tends to mean for women the old kind of relationship with the suppression of the full participation of women’s way of seeing and acting. This has been the historical pattern, certainly. For most women it is still the case. Even so, the woman’s struggle continues into later life, but many more factors now complicate it.

### Practical implications

The practical implications are many. To suggest just a few, women probably do talk about relationships more often, and this is often misinterpreted as dependency. It’s very important to listen carefully to what women are saying. Often it is not about wanting or needing to be dependent *or* independent, but about wanting to be in relationship with others, and again, to really comprehend the other; to understand the other’s feelings; to contribute to the other, wanting the *nature* of the relationship to be one in which the other person is engaged in this way (see Stiver, 1984; Surrey, 1984; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1982). Thus, very often I’ve heard women described as dependent who are taking care of (and still developing psychologically from



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taking care of) about six other people. Sometimes they are doing so within a framework which contains many factors of realistic dependency, i.e., economic dependency or social dependency. Sometimes they have to adopt the psychological framework of the other because that is what their partners expect or demand. But that is better described as the condition of a subordinate (Miller, 1976), which is still the social condition. This distinction is important.

It's not because of relationships, per se, that women are suppressed or oppressed. The issue is the *nature* of the relationships. In fact, without the recognition of the importance of relationships to women, we do not help women to find a path that leads them to growth and development. Some psychologists fall into a tendency to encourage "independence" or "separation," which is not what many women want. In the past, mental health professionals encouraged dependency with submission. The point is that the construction of concepts on that axis is inappropriate and misleading.

Perhaps I can illustrate these points by referring briefly to parts of my therapeutic work with one young woman, Ms. D. Ms. D., a twenty-three-year-old woman, had been depressed and had felt worthless in an extreme way since about the age of thirteen. She was clearly very intelligent and also had a profound quality of thought. She was exceptionally physically attractive.

She did not know where all of the troubles were coming from, nor connect their onset with any specific events. She saw her father as a sort of nice guy; he was light, humorous, and the parent she liked. By contrast, she perceived her mother as a difficult, agitated, "screaming" person — someone no one would want to be like or even to be around. This is one description of parents that therapists hear frequently.

There was one thing that seemed related to the trouble beginning at age thirteen, although Ms. D. didn't make this connection initially. The main part of her relationship with her father appeared to center around her tagging along with him in what seemed his major interest, football. From about age twelve or thirteen, he didn't let her tag along anymore, and didn't let her play with him and her brothers and the other boys around. This also is one fairly common occurrence.

She had two brothers, two and four years younger, to whom she felt very devoted. She had always been very sympathetic to them, felt she understood them, did a great many things for them, and always had, from young childhood.

Something else began around age thirteen: many boys began to pursue her, some clearly making a

straightforward dash for sex; others seeming to seek her ability to hear their needs, to understand them, to be responsive, sympathetic, to help them, all of which she did. In neither case, however, were the boys interested in her feelings and concerns if she tried to bring these into the relationship. By the time of therapy, she had lost much of her ability to do so.

I will highlight in abbreviated fashion some of the features which emerged in therapy. Ms. D. came to see that she had developed in many ways, even with all that was bad and lacking in her life. She had related to others in a way that fostered their development. She did this and did it with pleasure and willingness, but she, herself, was not given much sense of self-worth and self-validation for the doing of it. No one recognized it fully or gave her much affirmation for it. Thus, for one thing, she missed a huge portion of a basis for self-esteem which she could and should have had. Second, almost no one did this for her, that is, wanted to know and to respond to her needs and desires as she perceived and felt them.

Only after a while in therapy did she see that she, indeed, had worked at bolstering her father (which she felt was her task) and her brothers; most important, she connected some of this to the "life's work" that had preoccupied her mother all along. She could see, for instance, that a great part of her mother's "ranting and raving," as she called it, resulted from the attempt to "shore up" her father and help her more valued brothers. Her father always had been shaky in his work, and there was a lot to do in the effort to help him "succeed." Her mother had been trying to do that. A large part of her mother's behavior was, however, both a cry for help at her felt obligation to accomplish an impossibility, and a "protest" against having to accomplish that impossibility. Late in therapy, Ms. D. could begin to feel a sense of connection to her mother in the recognition that they both had been engaged in that task. Both had gained little sense of value from it. Simultaneously, her mother had not been able to value her daughter as she had not been able to value herself.

After this recognition, Ms. D. was able to alter some of her resentment toward her mother, although acknowledging the ways that her mother failed her. Later, too, she came to see her father as someone who had never been prepared or able to hear her concerns or to be responsive to her. She was able to perceive this only after she had first become able even to *think* of seeking this kind of interaction with him. When she tried to bring her own needs into discussions with him, she perceived his inability to relate to her in this way. It was not like football.

Ms. D. had to confront her anger. She had a

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great deal of anger at both her father and her mother, for different reasons. It took a long time, but she became more able to allow herself her anger, as she also became able to see how much she had really contributed to others' development. That is, she had first to feel some sense of value before she could tolerate a view of herself as a person with anger (see Miller, 1983). Then, the understanding and redirection of her anger further relieved her sense of worthlessness. Very importantly, she came to see that she would not have had so much anger if she, indeed, had not had her own set of perceptions, expectations, wishes, desires, and judgments, that is, the sense of self that she had thought she never had. She was angry because of the violation of the self she really had. She, like many people, particularly women, had said originally that she had no sense of self at all; she was able to discover one and then to go on to build on it.

Her biggest problem in a way remains: how to be the kind of self she wants to be, a being-in-relation-ship, now able to value the very valuable parts of herself, along with her own perceptions and desires — and to find others who will be with her in that way. She still encounters situations, particularly but not only, with men, in which she feels annihilated as a person. I think she is experiencing situations which are common to all of us.

### Richer models

To generalize from this example, then, the model of self-development as it has been defined so far does not help us to understand or to help women well. Many women perceive the prospects held out by this model as threatening, for good reason. I think their perception reflects at bottom a fear of forfeiting relationships. By contrast, men's fears occur in different forms. Indeed, most men see the prospect of self-development as not only desirable, but a basic definition of what they must do in life. Moreover, seeking to understand women opens paths to enlargement of a model of "a self" to one which encompasses more truthfully the range of human necessities and possibilities.

For Ms. D. there had been problems in relationships, especially in having directed a large portion of her life to relationships which benefitted others, primarily. However, to have overlooked their value, and her value in them, would have robbed Ms. D. of the major source of her strength and her potential for greater strengths.

The features I've suggested are present even in many highly accomplished women, and women who, like Ms. D., don't care for families in the concrete sense. There is a small group of women today who

seek a sense of self similar to that which has been advocated for men. But even many of these women express many of the same themes. They are often the relatively advantaged women who feel very pressured to advance in careers. They often find that their desires to live and work in a context of mutually enhancing relationships conflict with male norms. There is pressure to believe that the latter are better and to devalue the relational desires in themselves.

Important evidence is emerging from other parts of the psychological field. Notably, Gilligan's work in developmental psychology suggests that women's sense of self and of morality revolves around issues of responsibility for, care of, and inclusion of other people (1982). It is embedded in a compelling appreciation of context and an insistent unwillingness to make abstractions which violate their grasp of the complexities of the connections between people. Women were previously seen as deficient or at a low level of development as a consequence of their encompassing these realms of context and of psychological connection. These features are found even in accomplished a group as current women Harvard students. In other studies, McClelland finds that women tend to define power as having the strength to care for and give to others (1979), which is very different from the way men have defined power.

As always, the artists said it long ago. It's interesting to note that in much of literature the man is in search of his self, as in many examples: *David Copperfield*, *Portrait of an Artist*, and many others. Women express desires, but they have tended to cast them in the overarching terms of wanting to make deep connection with another/others and usually to enhance another, as in G. Eliot's *Middlemarch* or C. Bronte's *Villette*.

In the overall, then, the concept of a "self" as it has come down to us, has encouraged a complex series of processes leading to a sense of psychological separation from others. From this there usually follows a quest for power over others and power over natural forces, including one's own body. This would seem to be inevitable if one cannot be grounded in *faith* in the kind of interconnections I've tried to suggest. Have such definitions of a separated self become conceivable *only* because half of the species has been assigned to the realms of life which involve such necessities as attending to the complex particularities of building the day-to-day emotional connections with others? This means, in effect, primary attention to participating in and fostering the development of other people — and even direct concentration on the sustenance of the sheer physical life of others. Simultaneously, these realms relegated to women have been granted less

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value. They have not been incorporated into our perceptions as sources of growth, satisfaction, and empowerment. It then becomes difficult to conceive of them as the wellsprings of true inner motivation and development. But they are.

Another way to put this, perhaps, is to say that women's actual practice in the real world and the complex processes which those practices entail have not been drawn upon, nor elaborated on, as a basis of culture, knowledge, theory, or public policy. They then come to sound almost unreal or idealistic, but they are real; they are going on every day. If they were not, none of us would have lived and developed at all. But they've been split off from official definitions of reality.

An underlying question may be, "Has our tradition made it difficult to conceive of the possibility that freedom and maximum use of our resources — our initiative, our intellect, our powers — can occur within a context that requires simultaneous responsibility for the care and growth of others and of the natural world — that we cannot hope that this will develop *after* the person develops first as a separated 'self,' as currently defined?" Thus, I believe that the search for the more appropriate study of women in women's own terms can lead us all not only to understanding women, certainly valid in itself, but to clues to a deeper grasp of the *necessities* for all human development, and simultaneously to a greater realization of the realities of the vast untapped human capacities. This is not an easy thing to do, because our whole system of thought, our categories, the eyes by which we see and the ears by which we hear have been trained in a system removed from this activity.

We've all been laboring under only one implicit model of the nature of human nature and of human development. Much richer models are possible. Glimpses of them have always been struggling to emerge, through the artists and the poets, and in some of the hopes and dreams of all of us. Now, perhaps, we can work at learning about them in this field.

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<sup>1</sup>These points have been made in various ways by many theorists, such as M. Klein, H. S. Sullivan, and several others. The features which they emphasize, however, are different.

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