

Female Relationality & the Idealized Self

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For nearly two decades writers on the psychology of women have questioned what they have taken to be the male bias in traditional definitions of psychological health and development. In 1970 Broverman et al. charted the terms of what was to become the new feminist critique: their findings showed that clinicians implicitly associated psychological maturity and health with stereotypical male characteristics, but identified normal female traits as the same as those they associated with psychological immaturity or dysfunctioning. The feminist agenda has since been to deconstruct this culturally rooted, professionally accepted equation. The following essay describes the new paradigm that has emerged from this feminist project, analyzes its elaboration in the work of the Stone Center at Wellesley College, and critiques the paradigm from the perspective of Karen Horney.

In 1976 Jean Baker Miller initiated the feminist reevaluation with her thesis that "women have developed the foundations of extremely valuable psychological qualities" (p. 26), but that gender inequality causes these qualities or strengths to go unrecognized or devalued. Among the strengths that Miller identified was "women's great desire for affiliation" (pp. 88-89). Although this female predilection has been a source of women's problems, it can also be, she argued, the basis for important social values. Indeed, Miller concluded her influential book with the hope that it is precisely the affiliative qualities that women have developed—traits that are "dysfunctional for success in the world as it is"—that may be those which are most needed for transforming the world into a more humane place (p. 124).

In 1978 Nancy Chodorow extended Miller's work by proposing that a female affiliative or relational self emerges from a structure of parenting in which mothers treat their sons and daughters differently. Daughters, who are treated as projections of the mother, never fully separate from her and thus come to define themselves as connected to or continuous with others. Boys, who are treated as more separate by their mothers, come to identify themselves as differentiated from others and possess more rigid ego boundaries than their sisters. Thus, "the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 169).

Like Miller, Chodorow was critical of the social systems that reflect the male psyche, in particular the alienated work world of capitalist societies (Chodorow, 1978, pp. 218-219). But unlike Miller, Chodorow's solution emphasized gender balance rather than a release of women's strengths upon a resisting world. In calling for men to participate equally in parenting, she advocated a realignment that would have "people of both genders with the positive capacities each has, but without the destructive extremes these currently tend toward" (p. 218). Chodorow's androgynous golden mean of individuated but affiliated mothers and fathers nurturing the next

generation of balanced children was nevertheless dependent primarily upon a change in male behavior. Assuming the public sphere changes for women initiated by the women's movement, Chodorow suggested that it is up to men to complete the rectification of the gender imbalance by engaging in the affiliative, nurturing activities of the private, domestic sphere (p. 218). Thus, like Miller's, Chodorow's solution was one that called for a universal valuing of those relational qualities traditionally identified with women.

Building on both Miller and Chodorow, Carol Gilligan (1982) expanded the theme to the redefinition of moral development. She grounded her work in a critique of Kohlberg's scale of six stages of moral judgment (Kohlberg, 1973), a measurement constructed from interviews with only males, but presumed to be universally applicable. Gilligan noted that females generally made it only to Kohlberg's third level, in which morality is perceived as interpersonal and goodness defined as helping others. She argued that girls and women fall short of the higher levels, where the application of rules and universal principles of justice prevail over concern for specific relationships, not because females are morally deficient but because the scale itself is male-biased and irrelevant to women's own hierarchy of values (Gilligan, 1982, pp. 18-19).

Gilligan proposed that women and girls engage in moral judgments according to a different set of imperatives—a "different voice"—from that which men and boys follow: "The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment" (p. 100).

Paralleling Chodorow, Gilligan (1982) advocated an integration of both male and female moral perspectives to create an androgynous whole that combines a morality of responsibility to others with a morality of rights and principles (p. 100). Like Miller, Gilligan viewed the devaluation of women's concern for relationships and care for others and the elevation of the male emphasis on individual achievement and autonomy to be "more a commentary on the society than a problem in women's development" (p. 171). Like both Miller and Chodorow, Gilligan proposed to correct the male bias in both psychological models and behavioral norms by valuing the traditional female traits of affiliating with and caring for others.

These works by Miller, Chodorow, and Gilligan have wielded considerable influence on the scholarship about women during the last decade. For example, they have inspired a spate of new studies, including books on women's cognitive development (Belenky et al., 1986), on educational philosophy (Noddings, 1984), and on theories of war (Elshtain, 1987). And the last three volumes of the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (1985-1987) have included 19 articles with 46 references to at least one of the works by Miller, Chodorow, or Gilligan. This subsequent work has filled in the new paradigm of women's psychology that challenges universal models of psychological functioning and development, exposes its male bias, and makes the argument that female characteristics have not only been neglected or devalued, but that they are positive human traits necessary for all people to cultivate.

The quality that has been singled out as most significant is the female relational disposition, variously defined in terms of women's need to affiliate with others, to take care of others, to

nurture or mother them, to empathize, to be connected, to relate. This is often contrasted with an opposing psychological makeup that is associated with traditional models of (male) development: the differentiated, individuated self whose maturational goals are autonomy and personal success (for example, Levinson, 1978). The problem of gender inequality is seen to be part of a larger problem in which some privileged groups (notably white, Western males) pursue their own individualistic goals at the expense of other groups (in particular, Third World, people of color, women and children). The solution is a democratization which promotes equal opportunity, equality, and justice; goals which given the conditions of domination require a cultivation of the very devalued traits assigned to women: care, cooperation, empathy, and sense of responsibility for others. The argument is that social and political conditions require that these traditional female traits be universalized as a new ethic of care and cooperation. Men need to learn them, and women need to stop doubting themselves and instead build on their relational strengths to transform the world into their own image (for example, Eisler, 1987).

The most systematic attempt to elaborate the new paradigm is occurring at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, which was originally under the directorship of Jean Baker Miller. A group of clinicians and researchers there has assumed the positive value of women's relationality and, through a series of working papers, has explored its implications for both clinical practice (Kaplan, 1984) and an understanding of women's psychology as it relates to such issues as power (J. B. Miller, 1982), work (Stiver, 1983), eating patterns (Surrey, 1984), and violence (Swift, 1987). Mostly, however, the work of the group is united by exploring and developing "the self-in-relation theory"¹ (see especially Surrey, 1985) of female and, by implication, human development.'

The Stone Center theory is grounded in an ethical vision in which the self is posited as containing two equally demanding but compatible needs, the need for recognition by and the need to understand the other (Surrey, 1983, p. 8). These needs are socially constructed desires, which are created out of the physical and social contexts of mother-child interaction. The realization of the compatible needs is a mutually empathetic relationship. According to Jordan (1983), empathy does not entail a permanent blurring or loss of the self in the other but is based upon a separate sense of oneself that is temporarily relaxed to allow for attunement to the other's meaning systems and feelings (Jordan, 1986, p. 2). Empathy occurs within the framework of intersubjectivity, the disposition to hold "the other's subjectivity as central to the interaction with that individual" (p. 2). In a relationship characterized by mutuality, self and other both express empathy and intersubjectivity, giving and taking in a way that affirms not only self and other individually but also "the larger relational unit" that transcends them (p. 2).

Indeed, maintaining the larger relational unit itself becomes the ultimate end, because it is the condition *sine qua non* that meets the needs of the self. For this reason the emphasis in the theoretical writings of the Stone Center is upon sustaining connection with the other. The self-in-relation abhors and dreads isolation, disconnection, and loss of the other, for this absence produces a fundamental loss of the self. Therefore, because maintaining the relationship is all-important, the two fundamental needs are not equally weighted: recognizing the other as a means of sustaining the relationship is implicitly given greater value than the desire for recognition. If connection is necessary for self-definition, then creating the conditions that keep the other connected becomes the primary personal agenda.

Although Stone Center psychologists routinely mention the importance of the need for "self-empathy" (Jordan, 1984, p. 9), self-growth (J. B. Miller, 1984, pp. 13-14), or personal empowerment (J. B. Miller, 1982, p. 5), they reject the idea of personal desire being met in the absence of relationship. They regard such an individualist concept of motive to be dangerous. According to Jordan (1987), "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" (p. 9). The idea of the dangerous individual desire is replaced with a basic relational desire that is by definition informed by "empathy, noncomparativeness, and mutuality ... involving empathetic responsiveness and a sense of compassion in a context of caring for the well-being of others" (Jordan, 1987, p. 9).

How is this deep motive for connection and compassion created? Following most developmental theories, the Stone Center psychologists attribute personality to the early patterns of parent-child, especially mother-child, interaction. According to Jean Baker Miller (1984), the infant, through the interaction with the caretaker, "begins to develop an internal representation of her/himself as a 'being-in-relationship.' This is the beginning of a sense of 'self' which reflects what is happening between people ... pick[ing] up the feelings of the other person.... The child experiences a sense of comfort only as the other is also comfortable" (p. 3). The emergent sense of self is one whose core is "attended to by the other(s); and who begins to attend to the emotions of the other(s) ... a self inseparable from dynamic interaction" (p. 4). Human growth is a process of engaging in "progressively complex relationships" (Kaplan and Klein, 1985, p. 3) rather than in separating from caretakers by pursuing goals of autonomy and power. Maturity is defined in terms of "relational competence" (Surrey, 1987, p. 8), "empathy" (Jordan, 1984, p. 3), "clarity in connection" (Jordan, 1987, p. 7), and the ability to create and sustain mutual intersubjectivity (Jordan, 1986, p. 2). This, then, is their maturational ideal: the true relational self, who reflects the earliest human interpersonal experience, realizing its "motive for connection" in mutually empathetic relationships. Relationship is, thus, both the context in which the self develops and the goal for which it strives.

Despite their emphasis on the essential importance of mutuality as the social realization of the self-in-relation, the Stone Center psychologists contend that this goal is rarely attained in adult male-female relationships. The obstacle, argues Miller, is the traditional gender system, which promotes the unrealistic goal of autonomy and "power-over" for men and devalues the truly human activity of relational connectedness and caring as female responsibility (J. B. Miller, 1982, p. 2). The cultural expectation that women, but not men, must care for others closes men off from their humanity, places a lopsided burden upon women, and makes male-female mutuality impossible (J. B. Miller, 1983, pp. 3-5). Men take for granted that women will be caring and empathetic, but they implicitly and explicitly devalue women and refuse to reciprocate. Women, on the other hand, are drawn to relating to the other and caring for him but are neither validated in this role nor given empathetic support and nurturing in response (Stiver, 1984, p. 8).

Like Chodorow, the Stone Center psychologists explain the psychological reproduction of these culturally based gender types as the consequence of the mother's response to sexual differences in her children. Mothers encourage relational dispositions in their daughters and discourage

them in their sons. However, unlike Chodorow, who advocates an androgynous balance of these traditional patterns of child rearing, the Stone Center psychologists contend that the mother-daughter pattern of interaction comes closest to promoting the growth of the healthy (i.e., relational) self and should, therefore, be considered the model for all parenting (Surrey, 1985, p. 43; 1987, p. 6).

The developmental theory of the self-in-relation is grounded in the assumption that all infants have an attentiveness to the feeling state of the mother or caretaker. According to Surrey (1985), this disposition is encouraged in daughters but not in sons, because of the mother's "ease with and interest in emotional sharing" with her daughter (p. 4; see also Surrey, 1983, p. 6; J. B. Miller, 1984, p. 4), which does not exist with the son. Consequently, the daughter's mother-attentiveness is reinforced, promoting in her "the basic sense of 'learning to listen,' to orient and attune to the other person through feelings" (Surrey, 1985, p. 4). The mother's continued response of listening, empathizing, and reinforcing the daughter's responses to her creates what Surrey calls the "open relationship" between mother and daughter. This interactive context helps to form the daughter's "increasing ability for mutual empathy" through which the mother and daughter "become highly responsive to the feeling states of the other." Surrey describes the development of this mutuality more fully:

Through the girl's awareness and identification with her mother as the 'mothering one' and through the mother's interest in being understood and cared for, the daughter as well as the mother become mobilized to care for, respond to or attend to the well-being and the development of the other. Moreover, they care for and take care of the relationship between them. This is the motivational dynamic of mutual empowerment, the inherent energizing force of real relationship. It becomes important for the girl to experience validation of her own developing empathetic competence. Thus, mothers empower their daughters by allowing them to feel successful at understanding and giving support at whatever level is appropriate at a particular period of development. In fact, part of learning to be a "good enough" daughter involves learning to be a "good enough" mother or "empathic relator" to one's mother and later to other important people. This ongoing process begins to allow for experience and practice-in "mothering" and "relational caretaking." (P. 5)

Thus, a girl develops a self-in-relation both through her mother's "ease" in responding to infant female attunement, and through her "expecting empathy and caretaking from [her] daughter" (Surrey, 1983, p. 9). This sense of self that emerges in the daughter is characterized by an "ongoing capacity to consider one's actions in light of other people's needs, feelings, and perceptions" (Surrey, 1987, p. 6). She comes to feel that "maintaining the relationship(s) with the main people in her ... life is still the most important thing" (J. B. Miller, 1984, p. 6). And her "self-esteem is based in feeling that she is a part of relationships and is taking care of relationships" (p. 5) through which she can express empathy, care, and "clarity in connection" with others (Jordan, 1987).

The popularity of the new paradigm, including the work of the Stone Center, reflects the failure of traditional psychologies to meet women's needs and reflect their visions. First, the new

approach places a positive value on women's characteristics by turning traditional psychologies upside down. Instead of arguing that women are just as capable or mature or healthy as men, based upon a yardstick derived from male experience, these authors assume a distinct female psychology that has its own unique merits. Whereas traditional psychology once thought of the female as *L'homme manqué*, the new women's psychology now posits the feminine relational traits as *humane superior*. Secondly, by presenting women's psychological traits as ethical dispositions within a worldwide context in which care, empathy, and cooperation are so apparently needed, these authors make a powerful argument for the feminization of social life and political structures. Finally, by identifying women's psychological traits as strengths, the writers on the new women's psychology offer individual women hope and a basis upon which to develop their self-worth and inner strength. Women can begin a therapeutic process by tapping resources they already have developed rather than engaging in perpetual self-criticism for not living up to (male-derived) maturational goals that are antithetical to their own deeply rooted dispositions.

However, despite its attempt to rescue the psychology of women from traditional distortions, I believe that the new paradigm inadvertently reproduces these distortions. This occurs through both abstracting traditionally female traits of care and empathy from the larger social contexts in which they are actually cultivated and idealizing those traits as normative for all human beings. The consequence is a narrowing of the idea of women's self-expression and a deepening of expectation that women should embrace these relational and empathetic behaviors. The consequence is a contemporary theoretical justification for traditionally idealized femininity.

This failure of the new paradigm is exemplified in the Stone Center's theoretical writings on female development. Recall that the self-in-relation emerges from a dynamic in which a mother expresses both an ease and interest in emotional sharing with her daughter and a need to be understood and cared for by her daughter. The mother's desire to be cared for is of particular significance because it is the source of the daughter's development of empathy as a permanent feature of her character. The daughter is encouraged to respond to her mother's needs and is rewarded for doing so by receiving in return both care and gratitude.

The Stone Center work celebrates the process through which a daughter learns to be "a 'good enough' mother or 'empathetic relator' to one's mother and later to other people" (Surrey, 1985, p. 5). What is missing from their account is an understanding of the fact that the needs of the infant or child and the needs of the adult are not of the same magnitude, and that the difference in age, capability, and maturation necessarily creates an imbalance in the relationship. Indeed, when one reads the Stone Center formulations of the mother-daughter relationship, one has little indication that this is an interaction between an adult and a child. Their descriptions of the dyad read more like interactions between peers, as if the mutual empathy that is posited as the ideal adult engagement is projected back onto the mother-daughter relationship.

The blurring of differences in age, need, and authority between mother and daughter serves to deflect attention from the unique needs of the child and to legitimate the mother's right to have her needs met by her daughter. The Stone Center writers do not question what they describe as "the mother's interest in being understood and cared for" by her daughter (Surrey, 1985, p. 5). Instead, they accept it as a given. This assumption, however, has buried within it a belief that has

a profound consequence for explaining the mother-daughter relationship. This belief is that mothers should be able to gratify their needs for care and understanding through interacting with their daughters. Instead of questioning this prerogative or placing it in the context of cultural values that foster it, the Stone Center psychologists reproduce it uncritically, implying that it is "natural" or unproblematic. However, by doing so, they close off the possibility for interpreting it as a parent's use of her child, a practice which others (e.g., A. Miller, 1981, 1983, 1984) have argued has harmful developmental consequences. Thus, by projecting the model of ideal adult mutuality back on the mother-daughter relationship—a projection which presumes the right of the mother to have her needs met by her daughter -- the Stone Center theory mystifies both the real power difference between mother and daughter (which permits a mother to impose her needs) and the possible detrimental consequences of this imposition for the daughter's development.

One of the sources of this mystification is the abstraction of the mother-daughter relationship from the wider cultural contexts in which it is actually embedded. The Stone Center writers do describe a cultural context, but they limit discussion of its consequences to adult male-female relationships. According to Jean Baker Miller (1983), traditional gender arrangements are so deeply rooted in male domination and female subordination that mutual empathy between women and men is impossible (pp. 4-5). The Stone Center psychologists provide numerous examples from clinical practice of women struggling with the absence of reciprocal empathy and understanding in their relationships with men (e.g., Jordan, 1984, p. 7; 1986, pp. 8-10; J. B. Miller, 1986, p. 4). Yet, except for incidental comments that the absence could lead to a mother's overidentification with her children (J. B. Miller, 1972; Stiver, 1986), these writers provide no systematic analysis of the implications of their critique of the gender system for their theory of the mother-daughter relationship.

If they had placed their model of the mother-daughter relationship in the context of the gender system that they criticize, the Stone Center theorists might have interpreted differently their assumption of a mother's need for care and understanding from her daughter. They might have identified the likelihood that a woman who cannot find mutual empathy or care and understanding in her relationships with an adult man might indeed turn to her daughter to meet those needs, not because it is "natural" or "given," but because the mother, too, has internalized the belief that only females are to care for others. This is the cultural devaluation of both women and the socially necessary need for care that, according to Miller, pervades our society (J. B. Miller, 1976). A mother's acting on that belief in her relationship with her daughter is not a failure of mothers per se, but an understandable expression of the wider system of values.

Reinterpreted from the perspective of the gendered context of the mother's need for care, the Stone Center model of the mother-daughter bond assumes a different meaning. A mother who turns to her daughter in order to meet her own needs does not create the conditions for the blossoming of the self but instead confounds her own needs for care and recognition with her responsibilities as a caretaker. By turning to her daughter to provide adult mutuality, a mother can, in effect, create a nurturing reversal, seeking care from one who is too young to give it.

This is precisely the kind of contradictory and needy behavior that Karen Horney (1937) argued fosters basic anxiety in a child and results in the child's developing defensive strategies to create a sense of safety (pp. 85-86). From the standpoint of Horney's work, the caring, empathetic

qualities that the mother seeks from her daughter and that the daughter offers in return, are not the expressions of an essentially human, relational self, but the protective devices of one who feels that she must display these behaviors in order to gain her mother's love and acceptance.

From this perspective, the empathetic qualities of the self-in-relation actually constitute a defensive structure. Hence, I suggest that the self-in-relation is not the authentic self that the Stone Center theorists presume it to be, but the idealized self that Horney associated with self-effacement and living according to others' expectations (Horney, 1937, pp. 119-120; 1950, p. 168). According to this interpretation, the self-in-relation finds acceptance from others through displaying the altruistic qualities of "unselfishness, goodness, generosity, humility, saintliness, nobility, sympathy" that she believes will win her love (Horney, 1950, p. 222). These are the shoulds of her defensive system: doing for others, caring for them, making their needs the sources of her motives, complying with others' demands for recognition. Because her safety lies in appearing empathetic, the self-in-relation needs others to need her as a way of bolstering her self-esteem (Horney, 1937, pp. 109-112). She also needs them to reflect back to her that she is, indeed, her idealized self (Horney, 1945, p. 16). Thus, what Surrey (1987) celebrates as the "motive for connection" (p. 9) is, in effect, a compulsion for confirmation that the self-in-relation is, indeed, empathetic, caring, lovable. As Horney observed, the individual who needs others to mirror herself in this way abhors isolation. She believes that she "is worth as much as ... [she] is liked, needed, wanted or loved" (Horney, 1950, p. 227). Alone, she is cut off from this validation, and therefore, she pursues the company of others with an urgency that makes it feel like the one thing needful in life (p. 229; see J. B. Miller, 1984, p. 6).

From the perspective of Horney's theory, the idealized empathetic self is not only a strategic persona that seeks protective gratitude and admiring confirmation from others; it is also an inexorable inner critic that condemns actual behavior for failing to live up to the proud "shoulds" comprising the ideal (Horney, 1950, pp. 111-112). Failure to be caring enough or sensitive to others' feelings can incur the wrath of the idealized self-image, fostering a compulsion to live up to the shoulds. Nevertheless, one who is dominated by the idealized self cannot escape its wrath. The combination of defensive perfectionism and inevitable shortcomings serves to make anger against the self a permanent feature of character (Horney, 1951). But anger is felt not only because one fails to achieve the ideal, but also because one is forced to repress desires for individual self-fulfillment that violate the relational ideal. The idealized relational self, therefore, perpetuates self-criticism and anger as ongoing intrapsychic processes.

Because the self-in-relation theory idealizes the relational, caring qualities, it obscures the ways in which these idealized qualities themselves create oppressive demands and foster inner rage. Ironically, many of the clinical examples presented in the Stone Center works-in-progress series are of angry or depressed women (e.g., J.B. Miller, 1983; Jordan, 1987, p. 17; Surrey, 1985, p. 13). And usually, the clinical advice is to encourage these women to develop greater "self-empathy" or to meet their own needs (e.g., Stiver, 1983, pp. 9-10; 1984, p. 10; Surrey, 1984, p. 4; 1985, pp. 11-12; Jordan, 1984, p. 9). But because empathy for the other is assumed to be a benign need rather than a compulsive demand, the inner anger that can be generated by that demand is never adequately addressed.

The self-in-relation theory, like the paradigm it elaborates, attempts to rescue the psychology of women from traditional distortions by inverting the values ascribed to stereotypically male and female traits. But its solution—hoisting the banner of care and relationality above individual achievement and autonomy—creates another danger for women. As I have argued elsewhere (Westkott, 1986), the expectation that women should be caring and empathetic expresses a deeper cultural belief that men's needs take precedence over women's. The female relational ideal is grounded in, and serves to perpetuate, a context of male privilege. The new paradigm acknowledges this system of male prerogative in adult relationships but fails to understand its deep influence on women's character development. Thus, by celebrating relationality as if its development were free of the effects of female subservience, the new psychology unwittingly advocates an oppressive ideal for women.

Notes

1. The Stone Center Group has more recently moved away from using the term "self-in-relation" in favor of the term "connection." Nevertheless, the more recent work continues to build on the earlier theoretical writings on the self-in-relation that posited the development of a core female sense of self connected to or related to others. See, for example, Miller (1988).

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