

INTRODUCTION



During the late sixties and early seventies, feminist writers began to show that traditional psychodynamic theories and forms of practice neglected or misunderstood many aspects of women's experience. Their work inspired us and our colleagues Judith Jordan and Janet Surrey to think about these issues more systematically. We began in 1977 to meet in our "Monday Night Group" and this book is a product of that group. It emerges out of the exchanges we have created together. At times our ideas flowed from the interactions among us, so that it would be inappropriate to say that any idea "belonged" to any one person; each idea became enlarged and transformed in interchange, was not what it was when it began, and is truly everyone's creation. Thus, this book represents all of us.

We are all clinicians with many years' experience who came together to try to better understand women's psychological development, the problems women encounter, and what to do about them. Our work grows out of this clinical background; all of us were trained in, and practiced, one or another form of psychodynamic psychotherapy.

We began by closely examining the experience of the women with whom we work. The more we examined, the more we found that traditional explanations could not suffice; and the more these explanations did not suffice, the more we realized that certain of the basic premises behind them could not hold up.

All psychological formulations rest on an underlying theory and set of assumptions although these are not always made explicit. This holds true for both popular and professional literature. When the underlying theory is not explicit, most formulations tend to accept the prevalent thinking in the field, which in turn usually reflects dominant cultural assumptions. Underlying theory can be difficult to identify; it is ubiquitous and, like all cultural assumptions, can seem "natural" or self-evident.

As formally trained therapists, we were all strongly influenced by traditional psychoanalytic concepts, concepts that reflect societal and cultural assumptions so deeply entrenched in all of us that we scarcely question their validity, we simply think of them as "the truth" about human development. For instance, psychoanalytic thinking has taken over without question the Western notion that becoming a self-sufficient individual is the goal of human psychological development. Our society has in turn readily taken up the psychoanalytic idea that a great many psychological (and social) problems have their origins in the early mother-infant relationship, specifically in the mother's failure to allow the child to become fully independent and self-sufficient.

The notion of separation as a goal has become the standard by which, we are told, we should define our ourselves as healthy human beings. Independence and self-sufficiency are considered the hallmarks of maturity; the key process in psychological development is said to be the growth of an inner sense of separation and individuation. Thus, for instance, we learn that children must begin very early

to separate from their parents, especially their mothers, in order to move successfully into adolescence and adulthood; adolescents must emotionally and psychologically separate from their parents to fulfill their own needs and grow.

But our experience has led us to a different emphasis for understanding psychological development. This book is about connections between people, about how we create them and how disconnections derail them throughout our lives. Just as disconnections restrict us and block psychological growth, connections — the experience of mutual engagement and empathy — provide the original and continuing sources of that growth. This book is also about our belief that an understanding of the powerful role of connections in human growth alters the entire basis of contemporary psychological theory and psychotherapy. As such, it reflects a major shift in our thinking about what creates pain and psychological problems and what fosters healing and growth. Most important, this book is about how the making of connections can transform all the institutions in our lives, from school to workplace to home.

Throughout this book, we will elaborate on what we mean by connections and disconnections. We will explore why relationships in our culture so often lead to the roadblocks of disconnection — to anxiety, isolation, and depression. And we will strive to make evident how these roadblocks can be turned into pathways of connection. We will explain, too, how connection, not separation, leads to strong, healthy people.

Although our work in the Monday Night Group and with other colleagues has focused on women, we have come to believe that the new premises we have arrived at lead us on to a new way of viewing all human development and its derailments. By trying to explore more deeply the parts of life that have been assigned to women traditionally, we discover aspects of everyone's life that have been neglected and devalued. Understanding and reframing these parts of life create a different picture for both women and men — it gives us a vision of how living can be transformed for all people. Thus in this book we will speak mainly about women, but we will point to the implications of this vision for everyone.

Since our work together began in 1977, we have been joined by a number of other people. In 1981, Alexandra Kaplan joined the Monday Night Group for several years until she became ill some years ago. In that year we also became associated with the Stone Center at Wellesley College. The center is dedicated to the prevention of psychological problems, the enhancement of psychological development, and the search for a more comprehensive understanding of human development. It seeks to pay particular attention to the experiences of women, children, and families across culturally diverse populations. Its mission is carried out through education, research, and community outreach.

At the Stone Center we have participated in a number of research and action programs based on the ideas we have been developing, including an educational program. Over the years the latter has included many presentations, workshops, seminars, and conferences and we (the authors and Judith Jordan and Janet Surrey) became known as "the theory group."¹ As a part of these research and educational endeavors many more people have joined us in this work. Thus our book also draws upon the contributions of a great many people throughout this country and abroad who have enlarged our understanding. The work covers numerous areas of psychological development, psychological problems, and various methods of treatment based on a relational model organized around the importance of growth-fostering connections in relationships. Much of it has been reported in the Stone Center Working Paper series and Project Reports, which number over eighty.² The early core working papers have been collected into a volume, *Women's Growth in Connection*; a second collection, *Women's Growth in Diversity*, was published in 1997.³

We are pleased to say that women of diverse cultural backgrounds are now creating an increasing proportion of this work. We recognize our own limitations in that much of our own experience has been with white women, albeit not all of them from the middle class. Therefore, we can still speak only from this partial perspective.

For a long time now, our group has had a strong commitment to demystifying psychological and psychotherapeutic language. We believe that the language commonly used in the field is not only mystifying but pejorative, denigrating, and distancing. Much of the subject matter it refers to is complex, but we believe that these topics can be discussed in more ordinary language. (This is a continuing struggle for us, and we ourselves may still fall into bad habits of language.)

We are clinicians, and most of what we have to say in this book grows out of our practice with people, some of it enlarged by psychological research. We have each been practicing for over forty years; Irene has taught psychology and psychotherapy for forty-five years, and Jean psychiatry and psychotherapy for thirty-six years. Though this may seem a limited perspective for proposing sweeping changes in the world, as we do in this book, we still want to make these proposals.

Clinical work allows us the privilege of sharing what really goes on in people's lives. We see what living in this world does to people and we think we see why. We also see how people can change and grow, and we see a way to a different kind of living. We believe this path emerges from an understanding of certain parts of the human potential that are essential and already exist in this world but have been suppressed and devalued. We believe that they can be brought to light and to life; however, in coming to full life they also have to be transformed. In this book we try to describe how this can happen.

We also describe how this understanding changes the way we do therapy. Our reframing of therapy centers around creating a new relationship in which both therapist and patient can form a connection that is authentic and growth-fostering for both people. In such a setting, patients can begin to represent themselves more fully and then bring more of themselves into other relationships in their lives and in the world.⁴

We hope that this book will provide some glimpses of how this relational approach can lead to changes in the larger world, and that others will see ways to extend this work.