Separateness and Connectedness: Differences Between the Genders

Esther Lang-Takac and Zahava Osterweil

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

The theme of separateness and connectedness plays a central role in many schools of psychological thought. While traditional theories, such as those of Mahler in 1975 and Winnicott in 1965, conceptualize a universal development of separateness and connectedness, a number of recent theories such as those of Chodorow in 1978, Gilligan in 1982, Frankenstein in 1966, Bakan in 1966, and Gutmann in 1965, propose gender differences such that males are more separated and females are more connected. The present study examined the hypothesis that men are more separated (as measured by self-other differentiation and independence) and women are more connected (as measured by empathy and desire for intimacy). Thirty men and 30 women (Israelis of western origin) responded to self-report questionnaires. Males and females were found to differ with regard to all four variables examined, such that men are more differentiated and independent, and women are more empathic and desire higher intimacy. These results are consistent with those theories that propose that males are more separate and females are more connected. The results are relevant as to the nature of the constructs themselves. The relationships between the variables defining separateness and connectedness suggest that these constructs are complex and multifaceted.

“Each and every man is at the same time separate from his fellows and related to them. Such separateness and relatedness are mutually necessary postulates” (Laing, 1965, p. 26). This theme of separateness and connect-

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2To whom reprint requests should be addressed at School of Education, The Hebrew University Of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel.
edness plays a central role in many schools of psychological thought (e.g., psychoanalytic and especially object-relations theory, family/systems theory).

Mahler, Pine, and Bergman's (1975) theory of separation-individuation describes "the establishment of a sense of separateness from, and relation to, a world of reality" (p. 3). Winnicot (1965) conceptualizes the theme of separateness and connectedness as embodied in the development of the "capacity to be alone" and "basic ego relatedness." Mahler and Winnicot, as well as others who refer to this theme (e.g., Fairbain, 1954; Sullivan, 1969; Laing, 1965; Kohut, 1980), do not address the issue of gender differences. They conceptualize the development of separateness and connectedness as a universal process, one that does not differ for males and females.

In contrast, a number of recent theories propose gender differences in separateness and connectedness. Choderow (1974, 1978) presents a psychoanalytic theory that pivots on the hypothesis of gender differences in separateness and connectedness. She traces the different developments of males and females during the preoedipal and oedipal periods, culminating in the adult male orientation toward separateness and the female orientation toward connectedness. Gilligan (1982) accepts this theory of gender differences, and outlines the implications of these differences for men and women's conceptions of morality. While men's "morality of rights" emphasizes separateness, women's "morality of responsibility" focuses on connectedness.

Choderow and Gilligan reflect a recent development in psychological thought, the emergence of what has been termed "a new subfield of psychology"—the "psychology of women" (Miller, 1976, p. 86). Theorists in this field (Greer, 1970; Millet, 1970; Mitchell, 1974; Dinnerstein, 1976) agree that connectedness is a central and defining element in the development and personality of women as distinct from men.

Other writers also propose gender differences regarding separateness and connectedness-like constructs. Males are described as "agentic" (Bakan, 1966) "allocentric" (Gutmann, 1965), and "differentiated" (Frankenstein, 1966)—i.e., reflecting a persistent sense of self–other differentiation. Females are described as "communal" (Bakan, 1966) "autocentric" (Gutmann, 1965), and "united" (Frankenstein, 1966)—i.e., reflecting a blurring of self–other distinctions.

Family and systems theories (e.g., Hess & Handel, 1959; Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) also employ the constructs of separateness (and disengagement) and connectedness (and enmeshment). These constructs are applied to both the individual (family member) and the system (family), and are used in understanding, assessment, and intervention. While family/sys-