The Contribution of Alice Miller to Feminist Therapy and Theory

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Among feminist therapists, the work of Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller is highly praised and frequently recommended to clients. Therapists and clients alike appear to respond strongly and with deep relief to her three books, The Drama of the Gifted Child (1981), For Your Own Good (1983), and Thou Shalt Not Be Aware (1984). Popular psychology books dealing with addiction and codependency often quote her and sometimes even use her work as a theoretical basis for treatment (e.g., Bradshaw, 1988a, 1988b; Friel & Friel, 1988). However, despite Miller’s wide appeal and impact, she has not received the attention she deserves in the professional literature. Her work often has been rejected by peers (e.g., Miller, 1983, p. xii; 1984, pp. 174-78, 396) and is rarely cited in academic work or taught in graduate courses. The intent in the present article is to address this oversight by focusing on how her theory contributes to feminist therapy and thought.

Miller has made a major contribution to our understanding of how personality is affected by child abuse by expanding the definition of abuse to encompass not only physical and sexual abuse, but also the traumatic effects of many socially sanctioned forms of “good parenting.” Miller (1981) originally formulated her ideas to explain the large number of narcissistic disorders she observed in clients who had experienced no known neglect nor trauma in childhood; in fact, all her clients claimed their childhood had been happy and protected. These gifted clients were talented,
admired, and successful, yet they suffered from depression and emptiness. Gradually, Miller identified a commonality underlying her clients' experiences. All showed "a complete absence of real emotional understanding or serious appreciation of their own childhood vicissitudes, and no conception of their true needs—beyond the need for achievement" (Miller, 1981, p. 6).

The roots of self-alienation and narcissism had childhood origins. The clients' narcissistic needs for respect, echoing, and understanding had not been adequately met in infancy and childhood. They had lacked a mirroring parent or other empathic adult who could accept and reflect the whole range of their feelings as children, including rage, jealousy, sadness, and joy. Those core aspects of the self which were unacceptable to the parents were repressed and the child learned to present an idealized, conforming "false self" to others in order to retain the parents' love, upon which her or his survival depended.

Miller contended that these well-brought up children had been abused by their parents' narcissistic use. Parents inflicted small, often unconscious cruelties on the child in order to satisfy their own unmet needs for power, admiration, or acceptance. Miller viewed the way her clients were treated by their parents as representing an unconscious repetition of how the parents themselves had been emotionally deprived as children. Many of the acts that Miller identified as cruelties heretofore have been unrecognized as abuse. For example, an insecure, overwhelmed mother might unconsciously harm her daughter if she continually reacted to her child's normal fearfulness and dependency with anger or withdrawal, particularly if the child had no other empathic adult available to listen to her fears. Thus, parents unconsciously and perhaps deliberately shape a child to be the well-behaved, reliable, empathic, and convenient child who provides them with the attention, approval, and respect their own parents did not give them.

**POWER**

Issues related to power, mothering, and empathy are three themes that Miller developed in her analysis of childhood abuse and trauma which have an affinity with feminist concepts or can be used to expand and challenge them. First, Miller's brilliant insights into the long-term psychological consequences of the power relations between adults and children have important implications for feminist considerations of power. She presents compelling clinical evidence to show that power in the parent-child relationship is not being given the weight it warrants in explain-

ing psychological symptoms or the causes of violence. Adult exercise of power over the child is a use of power that can go undetected and unpunished like no other. It is the devastating effects of this universal psychological phenomenon that Miller sought to bring to light.

Miller's work illustrates that the processes whereby children are shaped by adult power are strikingly similar to how women are shaped by male dominance. For instance, in her groundbreaking book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (which predates Alice Miller's work), Jean Baker Miller (1976) used the concept of power to show how dominant or subordinate status affected the personality traits of the two groups. In effect, the dependency of the subordinates requires that they develop the psychological characteristics pleasing to the dominant group. In the case of women, these traits include emotionality, vulnerability, weakness, and cooperation. Subordinates who adopt these characteristics are considered well-adjusted; those who question the basis for the inequality create open conflict. The psychological consequences of inequality were held to characterize all relationships that are irrationally unequal (men-women, Whites-Blacks). Relationships based on rational inequality (parent-child, teacher-student) were excluded because they supposedly led to different psychological outcomes (Miller & Mothner, 1981).

Alice Miller's case studies clearly demonstrate that the effects of power in the parent-child relation directly parallel those based on irrational inequality and, indeed, may even lay the basis for all other inequalities. For instance, subordinates (children) are primarily concerned with survival, therefore they must strive to please the dominants (parents). Direct, honest reactions to abuse are avoided because opposition to the dominants might result in abandonment and even death. Like other subordinates, children come to believe the dominants' view of their nature. The characteristics of a specific child will be individually tailored to the parents' desires. Children who adopt the traits pleasing to the dominants (parents), like women, are considered well-adjusted.

The ideology supporting adult power over children, termed "poisonous pedagogy" by Miller (1983), is contained in religion, law, and conventional child-rearing practices. The fourth commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother," and other Biblical verses (e.g., "Spare the rod and spoil the child.") represent one source of poisonous pedagogy. These principles include: (a) blind obedience to authority as represented by the parents and other (usually) male authority figures (i.e., God); (b) the endorsement of coercion, including humiliation and physical abuse, in order to achieve this end; (c) the glorification of the aggressor (parent, priest,
dictator) who enacts the oppression; and (4) the tenet that such abuse is for
the child's own good.

The victimization of children through poisonous pedagogy has pro-
found psychological, intergenerational, and societal consequences. Using
biographies, including the life of Adolf Hitler, Miller convincingly docu-
mented a link between poisonous pedagogy, specific childhood abuses,
and adult behavior. According to Miller (1983), the scorn we as a society
heap on all victims originates in our defensive rejection of the unacknow-
ledged helplessness and suffering of our childhood. Hence, victim-blame
stems from childhood cruelty. The unexpressed pain and rage children
experience due to these practices are then acted out on the self in the form
of depression, drug addiction, or suicide, or on others in the form of
hatred, violence, and crime. In addition, many of our authoritarian institu-
tions provide more socially approved outlets for the expression of these
repressed feelings, namely, the military, prisons, churches, and totalitar-
ian governments.

Miller's ideas are useful in bringing new insights to individual dramas
that represent the abuse of male power, as in the Lisa Steinberg case, for
instance. Six year old Lisa was brutally abused by both her adoptive par-
ents and finally killed by her father, Joel Steinberg. The case received a
great deal of media attention because Joel's wife, Hedda Nussbaum, who
was herself battered by Joel, was granted immunity from prosecution for
her abuse of Lisa in return for her testimony against Joel. The case stirred
considerable controversy among feminists, as reported in Ms. magazine.
Because Hedda was a battered woman, some feminists held that she was
not responsible for her abuse of Lisa. Her violence sprang from her vic-
timization by Joel, whereas Joel was held to be fully responsible for his
own behavior. Others argued that treating women as if they are not re-
ponsible for their actions was deeply sexist.

If "behind every crime a personal tragedy lies hidden," as Miller
claimed (1983, p. 177), we would do well to look for the origins of the
violence against Lisa Steinberg in both Joel's and Hedda's life history.
Miller has argued that crime represents a reenactment of childhood expe-
riences. Someone who enjoyed true respect as a child and then as an adult
would not have a need to kill someone. The type of violence Joel Stein-
berg expressed could only have sprung from the experience of a violent
childhood. "Every persecutor was once a victim," Miller has asserted
(1983, p. 249). Accordingly, understanding the personal tragedy of Joel
Steinberg would be as significant to averting future child murders as is
understanding the sociopolitical context which encourages male violence.

The role of adult victim also must be viewed in an intergenerational con-
text. A history of experience as a child victim might make it difficult for a
woman as an adult to be aware of how her submissiveness encourages the
abuser or that she often has the power to stop the abuse. She may also
respond to her past or current abuse by abusing others. This is not to say
that either Joel or Hedda should be exonerated, but rather that both were
culpable in Lisa's death because both abused their power over her.

By focusing on the parent-child relationship, Miller has encouraged us
to think more broadly about the causes and consequences of power and
powerlessness. The parallels between children's and women's oppression
indicate that feminist analyses of power such as J. B. Miller's must be
broadened more fully to encompass parent-child relationships if we wish
to understand and eventually end sexism and other forms of oppression.
Feminist theory has not ignored the impact of childhood powerlessness
and victimization on adult behavior (e.g., Firestone, 1970), but analyses gen-
erally have focused on only one type of victimization (e.g., sexual abuse,
impact of sex role stereotypes on girls), or on one sex (usually girls and
women). For instance, the crippling effects on women's autonomy, sexual-
ity, and life choices of sex-type parental prohibitions have been amply
demonstrated by feminist psychologists. Likewise, but to a lesser extent,
the impact of the emotionally restricted male sex role has been examined.
However, the consequences of other more generic abuses, such as physi-
cal and emotional violence against children, usually have not been the
domain of feminist psychologists, at least as is reflected in the content
of major psychology of women or feminist psychotherapy textbooks (e.g.,
Matlin, 1987; Howell & Bayes, 1981). Nor have the deep and lasting
effects of male abuse by parents and other men been explored fully by
feminists, although they are beginning to be examined in the addiction
field (e.g., Bradshaw, 1988a, b). Lastly, with the exception of Firestone
(1970), child liberation has not been seen as integral to the feminist strug-
gle. However, if Miller's analysis is accurate, one of feminism's highest
goals must be to end the intergenerational abuse of the child.

MOTHERING

Miller's views on mothering encompass three issues that have been of
great interest to feminists, including the effect of patriarchy on the moth-
er's psychological development, the consequences of idealizing the moth-
er, and the father's role in childrearing. In examining the mother's role,
Miller (1981) has made considerable effort not to be mother-blaming. For
instance, she does not hold that unconditional mother love is necessary for
healthy development. As long as a mother who lacks empathy allows her child to seek out more adequate adults, the child may acquire from others what the mother lacks. Miller also is aware of the role culture plays in shaping women's psyches and how inadequacies in the mother are transmitted across generations.

Nevertheless, Miller (1984) is asking us to confront the fact that many mothers, if not all, hurt their children, because "no mother is perfect and always able to understand her child" (p. 299). As the primary parent, mothers have unlimited opportunity to use their children to fulfill their unmet narcissistic needs. Furthermore, the discrimination women experience in a patriarchal world practically guarantees that they will be devalued and humiliated as children. Children are one of the only outlets available to many women for passing on the contempt they once experienced. This "can be done secretly and without fear of reprisals, for the child has no way of telling anyone" (Miller, 1981, p. 68). The child will idealize the mother and blame her or himself for the treatment received. Later, these humiliated adult women will revenge themselves on their own children, if no other outlets are available. The adult men will despise and revenge themselves on women.

The effect of the devaluation of women on the experience of mothering also has captured the attention of feminists, who have arrived at conclusions similar to Miller's. For instance, Flax (1981) argued that patriarchy and the socioeconomic system impinge on a mother's ability to provide emotional support for her child. The mother's own psychological development under patriarchy leaves an imprint on her feelings about herself that affect the type of mothering she would provide. Similarly, Rich (1976) concluded that a mother's victimization, self-hatred and low expectations are "binding rags for the psyche of the daughter" (p. 243).

The asymmetries women's mothering produces in the relational experiences of girls and boys as they grow up has been elaborated most extensively by Chodorow (1978). Women as mothers systematically curtail and repress sons' nurturant capacities and needs, whereas the mother's identification with the daughter leads to the basis for empathy in girls. Chodorow contended that the mother's identification with the daughter enhances her wish to mother the daughter as she, the mother, would have liked to have been mothered, as well as to recreate herself in her daughter. This bondedsiness supposedly makes fear of losing the mother's love an especially powerful force in the daughter's life.

Miller's analysis implies that the mother's needs should be examined even more closely than Chodorow and others suggest. According to Miller, childhood symptoms (i.e., fear of losing love) are a response to parental treatment. Therefore, it is possible to view the fear of loss of love not only as resulting from the parent-child bond, but also as the child's response to real or threatened abandonments by the mother. For instance, a mother who received little attention from her own mother may expect her daughter to never desert her and to be completely centered on her. Such a mother may feel abandoned by the daughter as she attempts to assert her autonomy, causing the mother to withdraw from or be angry at the daughter. The daughter's dependency on the mother's goodwill will guarantee that she will conform to the mother's wishes for her to stay close and repress the anger she feels at being curtailed.

Miller's notion that mothers might fulfill unmet narcissistic needs for attachment through their children indicates that further exploration of mothers' fears of separation from daughters should be undertaken. Relevant areas of investigation include the nature of a mother's relationship with her own mother, how mothers differentially respond to daughters and sons, and how internalized sexism affects the mother's role and contributes to child abuse. Answering these questions would have therapeutic benefits for women. Miller claimed that only by identifying and reliving their early traumas in an empathic environment would mothers be able break the cycle of contempt and recover their vitality. "Only a mother's own growth and vitality, not a depressing sense of duty, enable her to have warm and respectful affection for her child" (Miller, 1984, p. 256).

The idealization of the mother is a second concept related to mothering that has special significance for feminisms. Miller asserted that the idealization of mothers and fathers is one aspect of poisonous pedagogy that prevents the consequences of child abuse from being examined more fully. The love the child has for the parent ensures that abuses will go undetected. "The conviction that parents are always right and that every act of cruelty, whether conscious or unconscious, is an expression of their love is . . . deeply rooted in human beings" (Miller, 1983, p. 5). The cultural idealization of the parent promotes the idea that parental actions are always justified (e.g., God's warning to Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit), whereas children's are not (e.g., Eve's healthy curiosity and desire to eat of the tree of knowledge).

Abused children have been taught to obey the commandment, "Thou shalt not be aware" (Miller, 1984). In order to protect the parent and other authority figures from blame for what they do to children, children blame themselves for whatever happens to them. If a father attributes all his inadequacies to his child, that child will learn to embody those attributes
and serve as a scapegoat. If a mother will only tolerate loving behavior in a daughter, that daughter later will believe it is her fault she is a woman who "loves too much" or is "codependent." The goal in therapy is for these clients to realize how powerless they were in the face of parental expectations and become aware of how their needs were not allowed to unfold or mature. This requires that the therapist act as an advocate for the child within the client and help to demystify the idealized parent (Miller, 1984).

Whereas feminists have been straightforward about demystifying the idealized father by exposing child sexual abuse and other wrongs embedded in the patriarchal family, exposing mothers' abuse of children has been approached with more ambivalence. Mothers are commonly viewed by feminists as victims of sexism and, subsequently, as not personally responsible for their oppression of children. Feminist therapists often express a concern that clients learn to see how all women have been shaped by cultural forces, rather than continuing to direct their anger at their mothers (e.g., Kaplan, Brooks, McComb, Shapiro & Sodano, 1983; Robbins, 1983). Caplan (1989) argued that individual and societal views of mothers are distorted and has urged women not to blame their mothers for the problems they have. In general, feminist therapists favor sociological analyses of women's status as explanations for women's psychological symptoms over ones emphasizing childhood experiences (Surdivant, 1980).

Whereas Miller would agree that any mother's actions must be considered in a societal context, her work suggests that feminist therapists should be cautious about minimizing a mother's negative impact on a client. Miller (1984) claimed that her clients always portrayed their parents more positively than they actually experienced them. In therapy, clients will be able to communicate only a very small part of her or his trauma, perhaps as little as ten percent. A therapist who tries to determine the legitimacy of the client's complaints or defend the mother ("But your mother was a victim, too") will deprive the client of even that ten percent. The stance the therapist must take toward the child within the client is, "The child is always innocent." This empathic stance will enable the client's repressed feelings of abandonment, loneliness, powerless and rage to emerge.

Therefore, Miller (1984) holds that bringing about a woman's reconciliation with her mother should not be a therapeutic goal. Although therapy may help a client to see her mother more clearly and even lead to greater acceptance, deliberate attempts at reconciliation could be a sign of the therapist's own unresolved idealization of the mother.

A third issue related to mothering that Alice Miller addressed has to do with the father's role in childrearing. Many feminists have proposed that greater involvement by fathers would eventually eliminate gender differences (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Lerner, 1981). Chodorow (1978) argued that if men were primary caregivers, girls and boys could both take the father as a love object. This would result in a girl's being less closely tied to her mother and reduce a boy's need to distance himself from anything female. Lerner (1981) proposed that shared parenting would prevent children from developing the excessive envy and fear of women that now arises from their total dependency on a maternal figure.

Miller's theory would predict, however, that giving men a more significant role in childrearing would not necessarily improve women's condition. Adult men as well as women may be narcissistically deprived. Being around children would not make a wounded, unempathic man more empathetic. For example, a father who as a child was despised for being weak, and who could only accept the strong parts of himself, will reject the despised, weak part in his child (particularly a male child) from the very beginning. As a primary caregiver, such a man would unconsciously use his child to meet his unfulfilled and unacknowledged needs, as a mother might. He may want his child to admire him and see him as all powerful, and he may humiliate and reject the child for his weaknesses. The well-documented tendencies of fathers to use strongly sex-role stereotype their children (e.g., Martin, 1981) indicates that greater involvement by men in parenting might only provide them with more opportunities to impose crippling sex roles on children.

EMPATHY AND THE "FALSE SELF"

Miller's analysis contributes to a third issue highly relevant to feminist therapy and theory, namely, the origins and importance of empathy and other "caring" traits. Although Miller did not specifically address the development of empathy as a gender-related trait, her description of how parents shape children can easily be used to explain its prevalence in and consequences for women. The feminine traits of empathy and caring can be seen as manifestations of the false self that girls learn to express to satisfy parents' needs for loving and dutiful daughters. "Unfeminine" feelings which are unacceptable to the parents—anger, resentment, envy, aggression—are split off and repressed. Thus, women can be seen as suffering from a narcissistic disturbance resulting from parental misuse of their emotional responsiveness as children. This pattern is one Miller believed also described how people who become therapists have been
shaped in childhood. It is unlikely that a child who was not misused in this way would develop the talent and choose to spend hours listening to and deciphering the unconscious messages of others, as therapists do, Miller (1981) claimed. The same would apply to women.

If empathy is expressed as a part of the false self without an awareness and reintegration of other feelings which were denied expression in childhood, either grandiosity or depression might result. The woman who is "grandiose" is admired everywhere for her sensitivity and compassion. If she fails to demonstrate caring and nurturance to others, a severe depression may follow. Empathy in this case has been developed as a quality to be admired and is not based on the authenticity of the woman's own feelings.

Unless a woman gets to experience her unconscious anger and rebellion at being compelled to gratify her parents' needs at the cost of her self-realization, she will expect others to fulfill her unmet narcissistic needs for approval. She will hope to find an understanding, empathic mother—perhaps a friend, a client, or a child—who will be at her disposal. A woman's search for and acceptance of her true self will free her to experience spontaneous feelings, including jealousy, disgust, greed, and despair—indeed, the whole range of human emotions that are essential to vitality (Miller, 1981).

The idea of empathy as a manifestation of the false self, as is perhaps the case for many women, implies that there are hazards associated with overvaluing it for women individually and within the feminist movement. The societal denigration of feminine traits has prompted writers like Jean Baker Miller (1976) and Gilligan (1982) to explore the positive aspects of empathy, emotionality, affiliation and caring. The importance of the "unimportant" feminine traits for the survival of humanity have been pointed out brilliantly by Jean Baker Miller (1976). In addition, Gilligan's (1982) work has resulted in a revaluing of empathy. Gilligan proposed that girls and women more often are motivated by an ethic of care than an ethic of justice when making moral decisions. An ethic of care emphasizes interdependence and empathy over autonomy and abstract logic and usually is associated with more humanitarian outcomes.

However, there are indications within feminism that the trait of empathy is being idealized, as well as being revalued, and that other categories of feeling are rejected, split off, and considered "male." Even among feminists, women are expected to be "caring." Feminist therapists and women's studies faculty alike have attested to the pressures on them to be the "all good mother" (e.g., Brown, 1988). Other traits are less accept-
for feminist ideas about power, mothering, and empathy presented here represents a first step toward recognizing her contribution to the field.

REFERENCES


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