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Feeling So Bad

SILENCING THE SELF

Women and Depression.

By Dana Crowley Jack.

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\$19.95.

By Deborah Tannen

AS I finished reading "Silencing the Self" outside a hotel in the Yosemite Valley, I looked up to see a bride in a trailing white gown walking toward the peaks. If Dana Crowley Jack is right, this bride will find herself hemmed in by moral imperatives as imposing as the towering rock walls on both sides of her. Drawn to marriage by the promise of closeness, women have a choice: they can express themselves and risk losing the marriage or they can silence themselves and suffer isolation within it.

Ms. Jack, the co-author with Rand Jack of "Moral Vision and Professional Decisions: The Changing Values of Women and Men Lawyers," claims that this dilemma is the reason the rate of depression in women is twice that in men. Ms. Jack is dissatisfied with the prevailing psychiatric theory that blames women for their pain: depressed women, the line goes, are too dependent in relationships for their identity and self-esteem; they need more autonomy and self-reliance. This, she believes, is a model developed for men that is imposed on women.

Ms. Jack questions the implication that a yearning for closeness is a dependency. After interviewing 12 white women from rural communities, she concludes that women get depressed not because they have lost an intimate relationship but because they have lost themselves in a relationship. To preserve harmony and to help and please their

men, they are compliant and agreeable, declining to say what they think and feel — not because they are weak but because they are full of moral conviction that harmony is worth the effort. For some, this conviction is reinforced by religious authority, as one woman interviewed by Ms. Jack discovered on her honeymoon. When she declined to do something her husband wanted, he "flipped open" the Bible and said, "It says right here that a woman is to be submissive to her husband. If you don't believe that, then you're not a Christian woman and you are not a good wife. I want you to sit here and read it while I go out."

Rejecting both Freudian theories and conventional wisdom, Ms. Jack points out that it is impossible to shed the need for validation from others. Selves, she writes, "do not exist in isolation." And yet, she suggests, women can become less depressed if they learn to value their true selves and challenge the part of them that watches and judges their behavior. This sounds right, yet I wonder whether the two can be distinguished. The very idea of "a mind of one's own" is probably a fiction: how can one know what one wants, apart from what one has learned to value through observing and listening to others?

That depressed women should be concerned about losing themselves may say as much about contemporary America as about the pathology of depression. In "Talking American," the sociologist Donal Carbaugh shows that the idea that individuals ought to express their individuality is a characteristically American form of popular tyranny. Many of the women Ms. Jack quotes were often beaten by men. One woman worries about her 8-year-old daughter, who on hearing her father's car in the driveway starts "looking around the house thinking 'Now what can we do to make sure that Daddy does not get set off? Is the room picked up, what are we going to have for dinner tonight? Mommy, is dinner ready?'"

After reading interviews with such women, I found myself thinking that there was no need to resort to theories about the loss of self to explain depression. Wouldn't anyone who was being beaten and felt powerless to fight back or run away become depressed? And indeed, isn't it possible that the specter of male violence shadows every woman's responses to men, regardless of whether she has ever been hit by a man?

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Rejecting both Freudian theories

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"Silencing the Self" raises questions as fascinating as the answers it offers. If the inequality of men and women in marriage is the heart of the problem, is there a difference in rates and causes of depression among women in lesbian relationships or no relationships at all? What about women and men in non-Western societies where the notion of an individual self, separate from others, is unthinkable?

What I found most compelling was the women's own voices. The conflicts and losses depressed women describe are different only in degree from those felt by women who are not clinically depressed. That is why this book is relevant to anyone grappling with the central challenge of relationships: how to achieve connections to others without losing oneself. □

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