A MORALITY FOR THE 80'S

By CAROL TAVRIS; Carol Tavris, a social psychologist and writer, is author of the forthcoming "Anatomy of Anger."


MAXINE SCHNALL wants to do to our social lives what David Stockman wants to do to the budget: Cut out excess. After years of emotional and sexual profligacy, she argues, we have learned that liberation is "just another word for self-imprisonment." For both sexes, true freedom, happiness, liberation and love require an internal moral map that sets limits. For women in particular, these limits lie somewhere between the "feminine mystique" of overdependence and the "feminist mystique" of counterdependence.

Mrs. Schnall should know whereof she speaks, since her own life almost dutifully reflects the dizzying changes of the last decades. "In the Fifties," she writes, "I married under the influence of the myth of romantic love and togetherness as an alternative to growth. In the Seventies, I fell under the spell of the myth of romantic divorce: It led me to believe that I had found the final solution to all problems in relationships." She also found a career, she founded a "wives' self-help" counseling center, and she found out that people need attachments and commitments.

When Mrs. Schnall tells her own story and those of the individuals she interviewed, the book comes alive. Perhaps you know (or are) a classic "commitmentphobe" and "cultural narcissist" such as Barry, an "absent father" such as Milt, a "permissive mother" such as Vivian, an ambivalent young working woman such as Lisa. All the characters of our culture are in here, and Mrs. Schnall treats them with sympathy and affection. We would do well to heed her psychological advice, for it is the wisdom of the ancients: selfsufficiency is not the same as not needing anyone; romantic love fades; intimate affection lasts; too much ice cream, or sex, is satiating; narcissism and overdependency are both bottomless. Autonomy is destiny.

Unfortunately, "Limits" is not simply the saga of one woman's odyssey toward understanding; it is confession disguised as science. She wants to show how "the deep, unconscious roots of our greed and envy, along with our basic distrust of the self, have been exacerbated by cultural trends from one generation to the next, from the Thirties until today." (It is typical of most contemporary American efforts to retrieve history that they go back only so far as memory, or one's parents' memory; we can be sure that the roots of American "greed and envy" go back long before the 1930's.) And so we are treated to descriptions of the Depressing Thirties, the Patriotic Forties, the
Square Fifties, the Revolutionary Sixties, the Selfish Seventies and - she hopes - the Concerned Eighties. We never learn whether we are at the end of decade mania, or whether we should gloomily anticipate the Nihilistic Nineties.

All of this would be great good fun if Mrs. Schnall were simply being playful, but she wants to be scholarly. Unhappily, there is nothing in "Limits" to indicate that she can distinguish good research from poor research, a psychologist's assertion of a point from its demonstration, or even social psychology from clinical psychology or psychoanalysis. (The book jacket informs us that Mrs. Schnall, who calls herself Doctor, has a Ph.D. in social psychology from Columbia Pacific University, a nonaccredited California school from which one can, by mail, get a Ph.D. in psychology.)

Thus Mrs. Schnall reports that "the message of Gail Sheehy's 'Passages' has become common knowledge: that adults go through 'predictable' crises of growth and development just as children do" and that Matina Horner's work on women's so-called "fear of success" is likewise "common knowledge." These observations may be common, but they are not knowledgeable. As developmental psychologist Bernice Neugarten and many other life-cycle researchers have shown, adult change is indeed possible and even likely, but it does not occur at "predictable" intervals; adult change depends on one's opportunities, economic situation, job and family - the normal crap shoot of adult life. And the hundreds of studies done since Matina Horner's classic research have shown that fear of success is not limited to women; that it isn't so much about fear as about anticipation of specific conflicts; that it isn't really about success since the women who supposedly have it are in fact the most successful; and that its origins have more to do with worries about being the only woman in a man's world and other realistic constraints of the job market than with intrapsychic rumblings.

But Mrs. Schnall is seduced by those intrapsychic rumblings, even though she knows better. "By emphasizing the self as the center of each person's psychological universe," she writes, "popular psychologies have fostered the impression that each of us can overcome our anxieties and conflicts through our inner powers alone. What psychologists have overlooked is the social reality of our existence. The developing ego in each of us is surrounded throughout life by an ever-changing set of environmental conditions - cultural, economic, political and social - that may influence our lives even more profoundly than genetic factors or the experiences of early childhood."

An excellent social-psychological point, but that's the last we hear of it. Occasional references to "social conditions" and "forces at work in our culture" pop up throughout the book, but Mrs. Schnall's major effort is to show how the child-rearing practices of one generation affected the next. But as longitudinal studies and Mrs. Schnall's own interviewees suggest, the effects of child-rearing are frequently superseded by each generation's contemporaneous experience. Strong, loving, non-permissive parents who lost children to the drug culture can testify to this, as can those whose children are now out of the drug culture and into the stock market.

Mrs. Schnall knows that true feminism, a movement to end legal and economic discrimination
against all women, means a great deal more than the hedonistic "self-fulfillment" of a few. Unhappily, "Limits" obscures that difference. She offers the example of Jennifer Skolnick, a victim of the "Selfish Seventies," who left her marriage for a vague starry-eyed dream of personal liberation. But she neglects to discuss the women who left miserable marriages, or those who stayed with their marriages but transformed them, or the men who did likewise. Were the Skolnicks, as implied, really in the majority or did they just make good copy?

In the end, the lack of social perspective defeats the book’s stated intentions, for it puts the burden of change back on people's psyches, overlooking the "social reality of our existence." Surely our "greed and envy" have something to do with an economic system that depends on those vices? How is the prevalence of "commitmentphobic" men and "counterdependent" women related to the stark fact that there aren't enough men to go around for the women of the baby-boom generation? What exactly is the link between the economic limits we will face in the 80's and the emotional limits we will face in our private lives? I'd like to share Mrs. Schnall's confidence that rational love "is shaping up as the love of the future," but all she has convinced me of is that Americans are peculiarly susceptible to the transient morals and mores of a decade. Will rational love still be "in" if affluence returns?

It was easier to be a feminist in the 70's when it was trendy. It will be more difficult to be a feminist in the 80's, when the mood for justice has turned cold, when we may be free not so much to set our own limits as to have them set for us. Maxine Schnall, meet David Stockman.