

# The Development of Relational-Cultural Theory\*

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*Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT) is rooted in the groundbreaking work of Jean Baker Miller, who proposed a new understanding of human development in her book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976). In 1978, Jean Baker Miller, a psychoanalyst, along with three psychologists, Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey, began meeting informally to re-examine developmental psychology and clinical practice (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Their twice-a-month meetings were the beginning of a collaborative theory-building group that led to the birth of a revolutionary approach to understanding psychological development.

In 1981, Jean Baker Miller was appointed as the first director of the Stone Center at Wellesley College and the theory-building group found an institutional home, allied with the Stone Center's mission to study psychological development and the prevention of psychological problems. At the Stone Center, the theory group initiated a series of colloquia in which they, along with other scholars and researchers, explored the complexities of women's development. Over the last twenty years, the proceedings from these colloquia and other presentations have been documented and published as over 100 "works in progress." These works became the core writings that describe the fundamental concepts of the theory that has become known as RCT.

Today, many of the core ideas underlying RCT are articulated in several books (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker & Rosen, 2004; Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004; Robb, 2006). These ideas suggest that all growth occurs in connection, that all people yearn for connection, and that growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. In particular, Jean Baker Miller (1986) described *five good things* that characterize a growth-fostering relationship: 1) increased zest (vitality), 2) increased ability to take action (empowerment), 3) increased clarity (a clearer picture of one's self, the other, and the relationship), 4) increased sense of worth, and 5) a desire for relationships beyond that particular relationship. These *five good things* describe the outcomes of growth-fostering relationships, that is, the outcomes when growth occurs through mutual empowerment and mutual empathy; we grow not toward separation, but toward greater mutuality and empathic possibility.

In addition to describing the benefits of growth-fostering relationships, i.e., connection, RCT explores the impact of disconnection, recognizing that disconnection is an inevitable part of being in relationship (caused by empathic failures, relational violations, injuries, etc.). When, in response to a disconnection, the injured (especially the less powerful) person is able to represent her feelings and the other person is able to respond empathically, experiences of disconnection can lead to a strengthened relationship and an increased sense of *relational competence*, i.e., being able to effect change and feeling effective in connections (Jordan, 1999). However, when the injured or less powerful person is unable to represent herself or her feelings in a relationship, or when she receives a response of indifference, additional injury, or denial of her experience, she will begin to keep aspects of herself out of relationship in order to keep the relationship. In RCT, this is referred to as the *central relational*

*paradox* (Miller & Stiver, 1997). In these situations, the individual will use a variety of strategies—known as *strategies of disconnection* or survival—to twist herself to fit into the relationships available, becoming less and less authentic (Miller, 1988). This is similar to the pathway that Carol Gilligan traces for adolescent girls who keep more and more of themselves out of relationship in order to stay in relationship (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990). This pathway leads to failures in growth-fostering relationships, accompanied by diminished zest, empowerment, clarity, worth, and desire for connection. Within this context, one's natural yearning for connection becomes a signal of danger; the individual comes to dread the vulnerability necessary to fully engage in growth-fostering relationships.

While RCT was initially developed to understand women's psychological experience, it is increasingly being used to gain a better understanding of all human experience, including men's experience. Special attention is being paid to examining the importance of difference, particularly difference informed by imbalances in power and privilege. RCT is the foundation for a growing body of research on depression, trauma, eating disorders, substance abuse, chronic illness, mother-daughter relationships, lesbian relationships, as well as issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, along with a multitude of other psychological and social problems (Hartling & Ly, 2000).

### **Social/Cultural Disconnections**

Another key component of therapy based on RCT is the recognition that disconnections as well as opportunities for growth occur not only on the individual or familial level, but also occur at the sociocultural level. Societal practices of categorizing, stereotyping, and stratifying individuals have an enormous impact on peoples' sense of connection and disconnection (Walker, 1999, 2001; Walker & Miller, 2001). Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism impede all individuals' ability to engage and participate in growth-fostering relationships. RCT suggests that therapists must be aware that different forms of unearned advantage and power accrue to different categories of identity. For example, being middle-class, white, or heterosexual carries with it all sorts of unearned privilege in a society that values these characteristics over others. bell hooks' notion of "margin" captures some of the dynamics of this distribution of privilege and advantage (hooks, 1984). Those at the center hold the power of naming reality, the power of naming deviance and norms, and often hold the power to eliminate the possibility of open conflict with or challenge from those who are forced to the margins. The exercise of dominance and privilege suppresses authenticity and mutuality in relationships, limiting and interfering with the formation of growth-fostering relationships. These sociocultural dynamics inflict disconnection, silence, shame, and isolation on marginalized groups. These issues must be in the forefront of the therapist's work with a client.

Thus, the central tenet of RCT is that people develop through and toward relationship, which occurs within and is influenced by a cultural context. Above all, RCT asserts that people need to be in connection in order to change, to open up, to shift, to transform, to heal, and to grow.

\*The above article is adapted from Jordan, J.V., & Hartling, L.M., (2002). *New Developments in Relational-Cultural Theory*. In M. Ballou & L.S. Brown (Eds.), *Rethinking Mental Health and Disorders: Feminist Perspectives* (pp. 48-70). New York: Guilford Publications.

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