
What Do We Mean By Relationships?

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About the Author

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Abstract

Using a concrete illustration, this paper explores the characteristics of growth-fostering relationships. It proposes that such relationships lead to an increase in "zest" (or "vitality"), empowerment, knowledge, worth, and sense of connection with others. An examination of the interactions in growth-fostering relationships suggests that the essential feature is the interplay of mutual empathy created by both (or all) participants.

This paper was presented at a Stone Center colloquium in 1986.

The purpose of these colloquia is to provide a place for exploration of new formulations about women's psychological development. I believe that this exploration helps us to understand men's development as well, and therefore enlarges our comprehension of everyone's experience.

One of the themes which has run through this series is the examination of the sense of relatedness in women's lives. It is certainly not the only topic we have covered, but it has been one that many of us see as central. To summarize this theme very briefly, it is the view that women's sense of personhood is grounded in the motivation to make and enhance relatedness to others. We observe that women tend to find satisfaction, pleasure, effectiveness and a sense of worth if they experience their life activities as arising from, and leading back into, a sense of connection with others. This view differs in its basic premise from most current psychological theories which tend to center on the development of a more separated sense of self.

Over the past few years we have examined women's growth within connections in a number of ways, for example in new delineations of such topics as empathy, dependency, power, anger, depression, models of treatment, and sex of therapists. We have discussed black women's history of living and working within the tradition of close ties to family and community, and the possible implications for women of other minority groups. We have considered women's development at certain ages in life, such as infancy, early childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and early motherhood. We have also discussed implications of this approach for women in the workplace and for women's intellectual development, at least in the college years.

There are many more aspects to be addressed and many questions to be posed. One set of questions which has arisen in our discussions here might be

summarized in the questions: If you talk so much about relationships, what about each person's need to develop as an individual? Doesn't each individual have to take an active part in life, not just sort of sit around relating? Doesn't the individual have to be self-motivated, self-propelled, or self-determined?

I believe the answer is that each person becomes a more developed and more active individual only as s/he is more fully related to others. I think, too, that there is no such thing as "self-motivation," but there is the ability to act which emerges from constructive processes within relationships. Also, there is no such thing as full self-determination, but we can and do play a central part in our own life — and in others' lives.

Such statements require more explanation, and that requires a better definition of what we mean by a relationship. The word is common and has been used to mean many different things both within and outside of the psychological disciplines. Perhaps we should begin to use more specific words.

I find that I can think about what we mean by relationships by asking first: What kinds of relationships lead to the psychological development of the people in them? That is the topic I'll try to address tonight.

The next question would be: What kinds of relationships lead to the reverse? That is, what kinds of relationships diminish or destroy people, lead to trouble, and lead to what is eventually called "pathology"? We can take up that topic another time.

To talk about growth-promoting relationships we should start with the overall societal context that determines the kinds of relationships that are likely to occur for anybody, and specifically for people of each sex, class, and race. However, I'm going to start at a much more concrete level, and merely mention in passing that I don't think our culture provides a good overall "relational context" for anyone. Nor does our society provide well for most of us to learn a "relational mode" of living and acting. This is basic to everything (Miller, 1976, 1984).

In this discussion, I will draw heavily on the concept of empathy as Judith Jordan (1984) has described it. Jordan has characterized empathy as a cognitive and emotional activity in which one person is able to experience the feelings and thoughts of another person and simultaneously is able to know her/his own different feelings and thoughts. She states that empathy requires a high level of cognitive and emotional integration, in contrast to past notions of empathy as a mysterious, intuitive, or even regressive process.

Surrey (1984) has directed attention to the question of how people learn this ability and to the central place of "mutual empathy" in all psychological development. Further, she has begun a delineation of the key processes in psychological development when seen as "development within relationship" — which is where all psychological development occurs. She highlights three key elements: the development of empathic abilities, the developmental process of mutual empathy, the resultant emergence of mutual empowerment and self-knowledge. Empowerment and self-knowledge follow from the experience of mutual empathy. As Surrey described mutual empathy, "In this experience, 'being with' means 'being seen' and 'feeling seen' by the other and 'seeing the other' and sensing the other 'feeling seen.'"

Intrinsic to development within relationships is Surrey's concept of "relationship authenticity." She described it as "the challenge of relationship which provides the energy for growth — the need to be seen and recognized for who one is and the need to see and understand the other with ongoing authenticity." Likewise, Surrey has proposed the concept of the motivation "to take care of the relationship(s)." This is another new formulation which shifts the center of emphasis to the relationship itself.

Surrey suggests that the individual develops a sense of "response/ability" rather than "agency" or "autonomy." By this she means that action and empowerment emerge in the context of the relational process. Each person feels empowered by the experience of mutual empathy and also develops an enlarging sense of a sound and knowledgeable basis for action. Relationships grounded in mutuality do not lead to an increase in the activities of one individual, alone, but to the empowerment of all the people involved.

In this discussion, I will try to carry forward an exploration of these concepts within the framework which Surrey has proposed. However, I will focus a bit more on the question of how these processes actually lead to the development of each individual. Later in this year's colloquium series, Jordan and Surrey will continue the exploration of the concept of mutuality and mutually empowering relationships.

Growth-fostering relationships

We can begin by asking: In those relationships in which we see what appears to be psychological growth, what do we see happening? As a start, I'll suggest some of the phenomena that I think we can observe. I've listed at least five "good things."