The Conundrum of Mutuality: A Lesbian Dialogue

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About the Authors

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All three speakers are members of the Stone Center Lesbian Theory Group, which also includes Wendy Rosen, Ph.D. Dr. Rosen’s participation in discussions on this topic informed the development of these papers, but she was unable to be present at this presentation.

Abstract

Scholars from The Stone Center and others have, in recent years, persuasively articulated the need for therapists to work to construct more mutual therapy relationships with their clients. In these three separately written papers, the authors each address an aspect of implementing the concept of mutuality into the practice of psychotherapy, with an emphasis on the lesbian client/lesbian therapist dyad. Ms. Mencher’s paper examines structural elements in the therapeutic relationship, and particularly explores issues related to the power and role differentials inherent in therapy relationships, the therapist’s uses of herself, the construction of boundaries between the client and the therapist, and the management of complexities for lesbians in post-termination contact. Ms. Slater’s paper addresses the development of intimacy in the therapeutic relationship and argues that lesbian client and therapist dyads engaged in working towards mutual (though unequal) therapy relationships do so in the presence of an underlying reminiscence to each one’s experiences in forming lesbian love relationships. Specific aspects of the therapeutic relationship potentially colored by this association are identified. Finally, Ms. Eldridge’s paper proposes that psychotherapists move beyond the traditional ethical code which provides only parameters about what to avoid and instead adopt a relational orientation to our thinking about ethical dilemmas. Ms. Eldridge outlines specific principles of ethical thinking from a relational orientation and offers practical suggestions for an ethical use of mutuality in psychotherapy. The author applies these principles to ethical issues common to lesbian client/lesbian therapist dyads.

Over the past decade, the Stone Center theory group has created a rich theoretical perspective on women’s growth through connection, establishing that mutuality is a central hallmark of healthy relationships for women. Judith Jordan has developed and elaborated on the concept of mutuality and pointed to its importance in psychotherapy (1986, 1991b). In 1989, lesbian feminist liberation theologian Carter Heyward took an additional step to alert feminist therapists to the dangers of non-mutuality in most therapies (1989a). She challenged us to explain and correct the fundamental contradiction between the feminists’ definition of what constitutes a healthy relationship and the reality of what characterizes a typical therapy relationship. We of the Lesbian Theory Group believe that it is no coincidence that a
lesbian pressed this challenge, since lesbian relationships outside of therapy fundamentally challenge traditional arrangements of power and connection, and since lesbians historically have articulated the radical edge of the feminist critique.

The Stone Center theory group has featured mutuality in psychotherapy as a major topic in virtually all of its work over the past four years on psychotherapy relationships. In such papers and presentations as Jordan’s “The Movement of Mutuality and Power” (1991a), Heyward and Jordan’s “Mutuality in Therapy: Ethics, Power, and Psychology” (1992), Heyward’s and Surrey’s workshops and trainings on mutuality, Miller and Stiver’s “A Relational Reframing of Therapy” (1991), and the Stone Center’s Cape Cod summer seminars, these theorists have questioned the traditional models. They have challenged the notion of the therapist as expert within a rigid, hierarchical structure of power over the client. Instead, they have struggled to define mutuality in therapy and have clearly endorsed the necessity of mutuality within the relational perspective’s definition of what constitutes good therapy.

Other theoretical communities and groups of scholars and practitioners have been examining this issue as well. In the pages of Psychoanalytic Dialogues: A Journal of Relational Perspectives, a (mostly male) community of contemporary psychoanalysts has been debating various challenges to traditional theory and practice. This community has been alternately referred to as “relational,” “interpersonal,” or “relational-perspectivist” psychoanalysis. These discussions—such as Mitchell’s (1988) and Aron’s (1991) work on intersubjectivity in the analytic relationship, Modell’s (1991) examination of the interplay of reality and transference, Burke’s (1992) exploration of the use of countertransference disclosure, and Hoffman’s (1992) and Tansey’s (1992) questioning of the nature of psychoanalytic expertise—represent an exciting challenge to some of the most basic principles of analytic thought, an exploration that runs parallel to and often intersects with our own feminist debate here at the Stone Center.

The work of other feminist thinkers, such as Rogers’ “A Feminist Poetics of Psychotherapy” (1991) and Bograd’s “The Duel Over Dual Relationships” (1992), has also enriched our exploration of mutuality in psychotherapy. Recent conferences on such topics as intimacy between therapist and client, boundaries in psychotherapy, and love in the therapy relationship indicate that many others in our field are thoughtfully considering the various issues related to mutuality in psychotherapy.

At this point, we in the Lesbian Theory Group have felt the need for the discussion to move forward, from advocating the importance of mutuality in therapy, to examining more closely how to incorporate mutuality effectively in treatment. We must turn our attention now to the various complexities that emerge from a more mutual psychotherapy. As we move from establishing the importance of mutuality to discussing how it is manifested in therapy, it is critical to include the many voices of therapists and clients—women of various ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, women of various sexual identities, and women from various professional disciplines.

In this presentation, we will be introducing the voices of lesbians—to be precise, three white lesbian feminist therapists. We do so not merely for the sake of enhancing diversity or broadening the discussion, but also because we believe that lesbian therapists have always been required to wrestle with questions related to mutuality. We hope that our particular experiences will, therefore, not only broaden but also deepen our collective re-visioning of mutuality.

Once we agree that mutuality has an important place in relational therapy, many complicated questions emerge:

- What is mutuality in psychotherapy?
- Are there essential structural elements of therapy that determine whether and how mutuality is possible in psychotherapy?
- How can the treatment relationship maintain its unique and precious qualities while incorporating mutuality?
- Can mutuality exist without authenticity?
- What is authenticity for a therapist?
- What are the limits on authenticity and mutuality for the lesbian therapist who is not out to her clients?
- Is it possible to hold to traditional notions of termination and also believe in the importance of mutuality?
- What exactly are the clinical applications of mutuality in therapy? First, a few comments about our process as a group: In meeting after meeting over the past nine months, we struggled with these questions, often wondering if we were getting anywhere. Every time we tried to grab hold of some