About the Authors
Jean Baker Miller, M.D., is Director of Education at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine, editor of Psychoanalysis and Women, author of Toward a New Psychology of Women, and co-author of Women’s Growth in Connection.

Irene P. Stiver, Ph.D., is Lecturer in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Director Emerita and Senior Consultant to the Psychology Department at McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA, and Visiting Scholar at the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College. She is co-author of Women’s Growth in Connection.

Abstract
A relational approach to psychological development proposes that people create internal relational images built upon their experiences in relationships. Along with these images, they construct the meanings of the images, e.g., a child whose alcoholic parents often could not respond to her constructs the belief that she is not worthy of anyone’s interest and concern. In psychotherapy people can come to understand their relational images and associated meanings and can alter them.

Introduction
As we have worked on our relational understanding of psychological development and psychological problems, we have found that we are led to premises different from those of traditional models. Over the last few years we have been trying to reframe psychotherapy in this light and have arrived at certain basic assumptions: 1) disconnections in relationships, especially when they are profound and chronic, are the source of psychological problems; 2) the major work of therapy is moving the relationship from disconnection to more and better connection; and 3) the paradox of connections/disconnections provides the central guide to the therapist’s work (Miller, 1988; Stiver, 1990a; Stiver, 1990b; Miller & Stiver, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1994).

This paradox refers to our observation that in the face of significant and repeated experiences of disconnection, all of us yearn even more for connections with others. But we become so fearful of engaging with others because of past neglects, humiliations, and violations in response to our yearnings that we begin to keep important parts of our experience out of connection. We do not feel safe enough to more fully represent ourselves in our relational encounters. This process proceeds within or outside of awareness. Thus, in our deep desire to make connections, we develop a repertoire of methods, what we call strategies of survival, which keep us out of authentic engagement.

In therapy it is essential that the therapist be continually aware of feelings of connection and disconnection and also that she remain empathic with both sides of the paradox—that is, the yearnings for connection and the methods used to stay out of connection.
Relational images

We would now like to add another basic feature in therapy (and in psychological development): relational images and their meanings. The strategies people develop to survive the pain of disconnection emerge out of layers of relational images which portray what has happened in their relationships through the years. These images are expressions of the central paradox, since they reflect a person’s expectations and fears of how other people will respond to her longings for connection. It is the articulation and understanding of these different layers of relational images and the meanings they acquire that inform the therapist’s communications and interventions in the course of therapy. In an earlier paper we referred to relational images in reframing transference (Miller & Stiver, 1991). Indeed, old relational images are “played out” in the transference, sometimes symbolically and without awareness and often in displaced and distorted forms. In this paper we will try to give more of a sense of how these notions guide us in our work.

Certainly many therapists would agree that talking about relationships is central to what they do in therapy. But their focus has largely been on the ways in which the significant relationships in a person’s life have gratified or frustrated her important “needs” or how these relationships helped or hindered the formation of a cohesive sense of self, self-esteem, autonomy, and the like. Less explicitly stated, however, is the frequent assumption that it would be therapeutic to help the patient separate from those relationships which are seen as “pathological.” The language used to talk about these relationships include words like “engulfing,” “symbiotic,” “enmeshed,” or “intrusive.” This perspective typically leads the therapist to help people recognize the ways in which these relationships are harmful and how much they impede development.

We believe, however, that relational awareness grows when we can acknowledge much more fully the power of people’s yearnings for connection, even if with the very people whom they experience as hurtful, abusive, rejecting, undermining, and the like. Once said, this thought may seem obvious. Yet it is usually not discussed in the literature or in presentations of clinical material. This explicit acknowledgment helps people to feel that there is something understandable when they hold on to the very relationships that they also know are hurtful. They know, too, that other people often judge them negatively for staying in such relationships, which is an additional source of bewilderment and shame.

This perspective moves both therapist and patient toward a greater understanding of the pain of disconnections in these non-mutual relationships. Thus, the therapist conveys her respect and understanding of the importance of her patient’s longing for connection and at the same time validates and resonates with her patient’s despair as well as rage toward those who have so wounded her. We believe this process does help people eventually to move out of destructive relationships and to find connections that are more mutual and empowering. The work of therapy can then move to more focused attention on what the patient expects of relationships and how these expectations were formed.

The relational images each person creates become the key inner concepts we use to order our experience. Since they determine our expectations about what will occur in relationships, they then guide our actions. They are the inner pictures we devise out of what’s happened to us. Once created, we carry them in us. They become the framework by which we determine who we are, what we can do, and how worthwhile we are.

Other psychodynamic writers have talked about these inner creations mainly as introjects or internalized “objects.” Thus, infants and children are said to introject the “good object” or “good mother,” the “bad mother,” and the “good breast” or the “bad breast.” We think people form internal images of more complicated relational patterning. People have varying degrees of awareness of the patterns they have created. For example, a person may “believe”—although without full awareness—that as soon as she begins to reveal her feelings to another person, to count on another, or to feel close to another, then the other person will hurt her, attack her, or leave her.

But it is more complex than this. Relational images are probably built on very early images beginning in infancy. No one knows what really goes on in the mind of an infant, but Daniel Stern (1985) has suggested a description of likely patterns. For example, a young infant may begin to build a pattern that portrays, “This soft warm something feels good whenever it is near.” As she goes on to have more difficult experience, this image begins to become more