Toward Competence and Connection

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About the Author

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Abstract

This paper explores relational competence, the capacity to move another person, to be moved, to effect a change in a relationship, or to impact the well-being of the participants in the relationship. Relational competence involves movement toward mutuality, the development of anticipatory empathy, being open to being influenced, enjoying relational curiosity, and experiencing vulnerability as a place of potential growth. This occurs in a value-laden context of wishing to empower others and appreciating the life-giving nature of community building and creating strength with others. Strategies for working with the obstacles to relational competence, at both personal and societal levels, are explored.

In the Stone Center model, the yearning for and movement toward connection are seen as central organizing factors in people’s lives and the experience of chronic disconnection or isolation is seen as a primary source of suffering (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997). When we cannot represent ourselves authentically in relationship, when our real experience is not heard or responded to by the other person, then we must falsify, detach from, or suppress our response. Under such circumstances we learn that we cannot have an impact on other people in the relationships that matter to us. A sense of isolation, immobilization, self-blame, and relational incompetence develops. These meaning systems and relational images of incompetence and depletion interfere with our capacity to be productive, as well as to be in creative relationship. They inhibit our engagement with life and our capacity to love and move with a sense of awareness to meet others, to contribute to their growth, and to grow ourselves. The need to connect and the need to contribute in a meaningful way, to be competent, productive, and creative, optimally flow together. Yet, in a system that overvalues competition and highly individualistic goals, a system that pits the individual against society and other individuals, the pursuit of competence and connection can be at odds. Further, in a system characterized by competitive individualism, the people who are more invested in relationship and community typically will feel this conflict more acutely.

The word competence has its roots in two Latin words: “com,” meaning “together” and “petere,” to aim at, go toward, try to reach, seek (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971). It shares these roots with the word compete. In fact, competition used to mean “to strive after (something) in company or together.” Much later did competition come to mean “to be in rivalry with” or “the action of endeavoring to gain what another
endeavors to gain at the same time” (Ibid.). Current notions of competence are saturated with images of “mastery over” and competition. The verb “to master” suggests “to reduce to subjection, to get the better of, to break, to tame” (Ibid.). Evelyn Fox Keller (1985) notes that Western models of science are based on a “Baconian” model of mastery over nature. The competition and mastery implicit in most models of competence create enormous conflict for many people, especially women and other marginalized groups, people who have not traditionally been “the masters.” Rather than focus on the problem of these groups for being unable to fully participate in “the psychology of being a master,” perhaps we need to focus on the problems of a system which replaces ability, confidence, creativity, participation in growth-fostering relationships, and creativity with being the lone star at the top, dominance, being a master, and ultimately participating in oppression of those who are not fully invested in the power that this model confers (Walker, 1998). Today I would like to begin a re-examination of this system of competitively defined competence and begin to suggest what Carol Gilligan calls some strategies of resistance (Gilligan, 1990) and transformation.

Most of the original work done on competence and competence motivation was undertaken by Robert White, who suggested that there is an intrinsic motivation to be in effective interaction with the environment (1959), and that all people experience a need to feel effective, able to move or change things. The extent to which the environment responds to the efforts and actions of the individual determines the extent to which the individual feels competent or effective. When one is not able to effect a change in one’s environment, one might experience a sense of incompetence or what Seligman has called “learned helplessness” (1972). The signs of learned helplessness are close to what would be the opposite of Jean Baker Miller’s “Five Good Things”: a drop in zest, decreasing clarity, withdrawal from connection, less self knowledge, and a decrease in sense of self-worth (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Competence, as traditionally defined, usually refers to mastery of a task, the capacity to be instrumentally effective and competitively successful. Taking the individualistic road and “beating” others comes to be seen as interpersonally strong, good, and competent. The irony is that one’s sense of self-worth is rarely buttressed in any long-term way in such a competitive system. As Morton Deutsch notes, “self-esteem is more negative in a competitive system than in a cooperative grading system. Winning doesn’t satisfy in an ongoing way and losing makes us feel like losers. King of the Mountain doesn’t work” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 399). Furthermore, competition can damage relationships. Karen Horney noted such a system creates “envy toward the stronger ones, contempt for the weaker, distrust towards everyone” (Horney, 1936, p. 161).

As Alfie Kohn (1986) points out, myths supporting the importance of competition suggest it is an unavoidable fact of life and that it motivates us to do our best. A distortion of Darwin’s work on evolution would have us believe that we are engaged in a competitive struggle toward the “survival of the fittest.” On the contrary, Stephen Jay Gould states that “there is no necessary relationship between natural selection and competitive struggle . . . that success defined as leaving more offspring can be attained by a large variety of strategies including mutualism and symbiosis . . . that we could call cooperative” (Kohn, 1986, p. 21). Yet, our education systems and our systems of assessment actively encourage this emphasis on winning, on being the best, and on competence defined by competitiveness. Assessing a child in a play setting, Piaget, himself, asked, “Who has won?” When the child responded, “We both won,” Piaget continued, “But who has won most?” (Piaget, 1965, p. 37). What are we teaching? Separate-self models in traditional psychology suggest that we are self-centered, self-gratifying at heart, and that competition is inevitable. The model of separate self, of autonomous self, of self disconnected from others, contributes to a self that is free to compete.

Psychology’s elevation of separation and autonomy thus contributes to the ascendance of a competitive, individualistic, sociopolitical agenda. A psychology of connection, on the other hand, poses challenges to the larger competitive system.

The dominant myths of instrumental competence, which largely coincide with the myths of masculinity, include:

1. the myth that competition enhances performance;
2. the myth of invulnerability;
3. the myth of certainty, what I call the cultivation of pathological certainty;
4. the myth of self-sufficiency (“I did it alone, so can you.”);
5. the myth of mastery (“I mastered it, I am the master.”);
6. the myth of objectivity;
7. the myth of the expert;
8. the myth of unilateral change (In an interaction, the less powerful person is changed).