Relational-Cultural Practice: Working in a Nonrelational World

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Abstract
While more and more clinicians are practicing a relational-cultural approach to therapy, many work in settings that continue to reinforce the normative values of separation and disconnection. Consequently, practitioners face the challenges of helping clients heal and grow-through-connection while navigating work settings that are all too often professionally disempowering, disconnecting, and isolating, i.e., “cultures of disconnection.” This paper begins a conversation about the complexities of practicing Relational-Cultural Theory in nonrelational work situations and explores new possibilities for creating movement and change in these settings.

This paper is based on a presentation that was a part of the 2001 Summer Advanced Training Institute sponsored by the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

We would like to think that most clinicians work in settings that are receptive to relational approaches to therapy, environments that explicitly or implicitly value the qualities of growth-fostering relationships, mutual empathy, mutuality, authenticity, where clients and clinicians regularly experience aspects of the five good things described by Jean Baker Miller (1986): zest, empowerment, clarity, sense of worth, and a desire for more connection. However, we know that many clinicians have had to be relational-cultural trailblazers, bringing Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) into their practice of therapy, into their interactions with families and communities, into their interactions with colleagues and supervisors, and into their interactions with organizational systems. Unfortunately, most of these contexts rest on traditional theories of psychological development that suggest that healthy development follows from an evolving process of separation from relationships. As a result, these environments reinforce and reward practices that promote the development of a separate self, rather than practices that encourage relational development or growth through connection.

Judith Jordan (1997) observes that, “Normative socialization teaches that we are safer and stronger if we can exist without needing relationships” (p. 2). Normative socialization—in alignment with traditional models of psychological development—propagates the values of separation from relationship, competitive individualism, hyper-independence, and self-sufficiency (Jordan, 1999). RCT offers a new view of development, proposing that people grow through participation in mutually empathic, mutually empowering relationships. This view is supported by a substantive body of research that shows that engagement in supportive relationships throughout one’s life enhances development and strengthens resilience (Spencer, 2000; Hartling & Ly, 2000). Nevertheless, most Relational-Cultural Practitioners...
live and work in environments that are rooted in the values of the dominant, separate-self paradigm, which perpetuates the view that independence and separation from relationship are the ultimate goals of development (Cushman, 1995; Putnam, 2000).

Taking a relational-cultural approach to therapy while working in settings that valorize separation challenges us to exercise professional and personal courage, the courage to pursue a vision of growth through connection, not only in our interactions with our clients, but also in our interactions with colleagues, supervisors, administrators, and other service providers. By taking a relational-cultural approach, we are committing ourselves to critically analyzing and transforming the systems of power, domination, subordination, and stratification that impede the health, growth, and development of all people.

In this paper we will explore some of the obstacles and opportunities associated with being a Relational-Cultural Practitioner working in nonrelational settings. Specifically, we will 1) discuss a four-step model for strengthening our resistance and resilience, 2) examine three challenging examples of nonrelational working situations, and 3) identify ways to begin transforming nonrelational practices into opportunities for creating constructive change or growth through connection.

Of course we would like to offer Relational-Cultural Practitioners a complete and comprehensive roadmap to optimal workplace resilience, if such a plan existed. We would like to be able to divulge “The Seven Highly Effective Habits of Successful Relational-Cultural Therapists.” But, rather than offering simplistic solutions to complicated problems, we invite readers to view this paper as the start of an ongoing conversation about the challenges, complexities, and promising potential of practicing RCT in nonrelational settings. Furthermore, to begin our discussion, we encourage readers to approach this topic by adopting the perspective of a “visionary pragmatist” (Collins, 2000). Visionary pragmatists hold the vision of what is possible while realistically addressing the obstacles that impede their efforts to create change. For our purposes, this means holding the vision of growth through connection while acknowledging and responding to the obstacles to connection, the forces that reward and reinforce disconnection and separation in our workplace settings.

A Framework for Building Healthy Resistance and Resilience

In her book, The Skin We’re In, Janie Ward (2000) describes a four-step model for fostering healthy resistance and resilience in African American adolescents confronted with the painful and pervasive realities of racism. Ward’s model provides a method for developing constructive responses to the daily dilemmas and pernicious experiences associated with being a target of racism. In this paper, we will adapt Ward’s model as a framework for strengthening our resistance and resilience as Relational-Cultural Therapists working in nonrelational settings. Nonrelational settings are environments that privilege separate-self values, settings that discourage or suppress the conditions that facilitate the development of growth-fostering relationships, that impede mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, movement toward mutuality, and authenticity. Adapting Ward’s model, we can take the following steps to strengthen our resilience as Relational-Cultural Therapists working in nonrelational settings (See Figure 1):

1. **Read it:** Clearly assess the context in which we are practicing a relational-cultural approach to therapy. This involves critically evaluating the possible risks associated with taking this approach in our specific working situations.

2. **Name it:** Name the practices that promote or impede our efforts to be effective relational practitioners.

3. **Oppose it:** Identify healthy options for opposing nonrelational practices.

4. **Replace it:** Take action to replace nonrelational practices with practices that foster constructive change, growth, or healing through connection, transforming practices that foster disconnection and isolation.

Each of these steps opens a door to new possibilities for understanding and effectively addressing the challenges of working in nonrelational settings. However, it is important to note that this model was not designed to be implemented in isolation. One must have a system of support established before engaging in these steps. As always, relational practice and action work best when one connects to a group of trusted colleagues or a community of people who understand the value of relational approaches to therapy. With the help of supportive connections, we can strengthen our resilience and begin to effectively formulate ways to transform nonrelational practices utilizing these steps.