The Movement of Mutuality and Power

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About the Author
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Abstract
This paper explores the central importance of movement toward mutuality in relationships between men and women and in psychotherapy. The ways in which power dynamics interfere with the development of mutuality are explored in both situations. In a patriarchal system “power over” others defines broad areas of social interaction and leads to a breakdown of empathy and growth-enhancing connections. Gender differences occur in the exercise of power, the use of violence, and the experience of sexuality. In psychotherapy, power imbalances and objectification of the client also interfere with the growth of mutuality. In contrast to therapy characterized by the abuse of power, good therapy creates mutuality and empowerment.

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Movement toward mutuality lies at the heart of relational development. Rather than viewing people as primarily motivated by a need for self-sufficiency and personal gratification, a relational perspective acknowledges our deep need to establish connections with other people. Growth-enhancing relationships are characterized by mutual respect, honesty, understanding, and recognition; they engender the capacity for caring, a sense of courage, and the ability to act. In mutual connection we can elaborate on our particularity but also move beyond our sense of a unique and separate self. We can seek a humility which honors, but does not elevate, our individual gifts. Growth-enhancing connections lead us away from the extremes of narcissistic grandiosity and depressive diminishment — polarities with which many of us struggle, particularly in a society which stresses individual rather than relational values.

Mutuality and power
In mutuality: “One is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other’s state. There is both receptivity and initiative toward the other. Both the wholeness and the subjectivity of the other person are appreciated and respected. One joins in the similarities with the other and also values the qualities that make that person different. When empathy and concern flow both ways, there is an intense affirmation of the self and paradoxically a transcendence of the self, a sense of the self as part of a larger relational unit” (Jordan, 1987, p. 1). Whether in the joy of empathic contact, in the ecstasy of sexual joining, or in the heat of conflict, mutual relationships move us beyond self-centered control.

An essential aspect of mutuality is the capacity to engage in interpersonal conflict in a way that honors the connection as well as the possibly diverging
individual needs that are striving for expression (Jordan, 1990; Miller, 1976). Without the capacity to engage in growth-promoting conflict, authenticity — and thus genuine mutuality — is jeopardized.

The capacity to respect vulnerability in each person and the ability to maintain oneself in a state of openness to influence are essential. If we respond to the vulnerability in the other with a wish to contribute to her/his growth as well as to the growth of connection, we are in the realm of love and mutuality . . . a decidedly open and growing process. If vulnerability in the other instead leads to exercise of unilateral personal self-interest, we have moved into a "power over" paradigm. When we are invested in a self-image of invulnerability, an aversion develops for "weakness," permeable boundaries, malleability, and affect, i.e., anything that moves us. The need to control and exercise "power over" others reduces our capacity for relationship as it contributes to closed and static intolerance of uncertainty; it further objetifies others in a way that isolates and deadens.

In order to move toward mutuality, then, we must first grapple with the pervasive effects of power dynamics. There are several prevailing beliefs in Western culture that, I believe, prejudice us against an appreciation of the centrality of relationship and mutuality in people's lives. The Baconian model of Science as "mastery over" nature, rather than the Platonic knowing through joining in understanding, supported the importance of the ascendance of reason, the Mind, abstraction, and, most importantly, man's control and dominance over the world he inhabited (Keller, 1985). Deriving from the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, in which mind has been portrayed as superior to body, there has been a tradition of viewing "basic human nature" as selfish and driven. In elaborating on these themes, Freud emphasized that the primal strivings of pleasure seeking and aggression were the deepest human reality and that the civilized overlay of concern, caring, and love were fragile covers on the core impulses of blind self-interest. Darwinian theory was then invoked to suggest that the basically self-striving, competitive instincts not only contributed to the well-being of the individual but guaranteed the "survival of the fittest" and the continuance of the species. Furthermore, only the competitive and not the cooperative quality of species adaptation was valued in the traditional interpretation of Darwin's work. The key notion of a "fit" between organism and environment, of the importance of accommodation and context, was overlooked in what I believe is the distorted popular reading of Darwin. As Stephen Gould noted, failure to adapt to changed conditions is the main cause of extinction of species (1977, p. 90). However, organization of personal experience around a notion of a bounded self which controls internal function (self-control) as well as external factors (mastery) remains central to Western psychological theory and a power/control mode (Jordan, 1987). The patriarchal power structures built upon these philosophical assumptions strongly represent this desire to control the outside world and reduce areas of uncertainty. Nature is to be mastered and subdued. In these systems, women often come to be seen as allied with the uncontrollable forces of nature (e.g., Mother Nature, emotions, menstruation and giving birth, and the like). In patriarchy, then, women, like Nature, are to be dominated and brought under control; the "lesser" men (e.g., minorities, "lower classes," the "less successful") are also made to feel inferior and brought under control through social hierarchy and stratification. The need to control and predict, to exercise power over, brings with it a reliance on instrumentality and objetification.

In speaking about power, I will be referring primarily to what many people now refer to as "power over" — a term that implies the exercise of dominance in order to achieve some personally valued end rather than the ability to do or the capacity to act. Only one person's goals and subjectivity are honored; notably missing is empathic concern for the other person. More recently feminist writers, including Jean Baker Miller, have suggested that power be defined as the capacity to effect change (Miller, 1982). Adrienne Rich has referred to "powerfulness" (1976) as a kind of expressive energy, and Mary Daly (1973) speaks about the "power of being," a more experiential sense of inner fullness, confidence, and competence. A related concept is empowerment or power which is exercised in the service of increasing another's power (Miller, 1982; Surrey, 1987). We might also refer to this as competence in the service of relational goals (relational competence).

Marilyn French has suggested that "in a patriarchal world, power is not just the highest but the only value" (1985, p. 126). In this prevailing power paradigm, pleasure in exercising control and dominance often becomes an end in itself, no longer a means to achieve other goals. Objectification of others emphasizes their difference from self; ultimately their intrinsic value as human beings similar to oneself becomes obscured, as an instrumental, distancing attitude takes hold. We dehumanize those we have power over just as we dehumanize the enemy in a war, so that empathic concern does not interfere with