The Woman-Man Relationship: Impasses and Possibilities

Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D.
Janet Surrey, Ph.D.

About the Authors
Stephen J. Bergman, M.D., Ph.D., is Clinical Instructor in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Assistant Attending Psychiatrist at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Mass. Under the pen-name of "Samuel Shem," he is the author of the novels The House of God and Fine, and of several plays. With Janet L. Surrey, he has coauthored Bill W. and Dr. Bob, a historical drama about the relationship between two men that led to the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D., is Clinical Psychologist at Harvard Medical School and Director of Psychological Services of the Outpatient Clinic, McLean Hospital, Belmont, Mass. She is a Research Associate of the Stone Center, Wellesley, Mass., and Adjunct Professor at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass. With Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, and Stiver, she is coauthor of the book Women’s Growth in Connection.

Abstract
In this paper we describe the format of workshops designed to bring men and women together to explore the impact of gender differences in relationships, and to provide a context in which to work toward creating mutuality in male-female relationships. We identify prototypical impasses between men and women, suggest structures to help relationships move through these impasses, describe different pathways to mutuality for men and women, and discuss clinical applications.

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As the work of the Stone Center (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, Surrey; 1991), Gilligan (1982, 1990), and others has evolved over the past decade, we have begun to appreciate the different gender-related pathways of psychological development. The stage is set for a crucial dialogue to begin - for men and women to come together to describe and explore the impact of these differences and to struggle not only for equality but for mutuality in relationship. By mutual relationship we refer to what Miller (1986) and Surrey (1985) have described as growth-fostering relationships characterized by mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment.

As old systems of relationship break down, new visions are called for. The historical roots of the male-female relationship are thousands of years old and are embedded in a patriarchal system which has shaped our institutions, our thinking, and the patterning of our relationships. As we work toward change, we must recognize the weight and depth of this history. Clinically as well as culturally, we see many couples struggling with very similar relational impasses. It is essential for both women and men to move out of a sense of personal deficiency, pathology, or blame - as we are all called on to participate in this cultural transformation of the dynamics of relationship. So far there have not been adequate opportunities to work together on these challenges.

In an effort to meet this need, we led our first gender workshop in 1988, “New Visions of the Male-Female Relationship: Creating Mutuality.” Since then, we have conducted this workshop more than twenty times, and its evolution has involved almost eight hundred people, including men and women clinicians, college and medical students, and couples, in Holland, Istanbul, Turkey, and four-year-olds in an American preschool. Usually the men and women do not come in couples, except in workshops designed explicitly for couples. The workshops are designed for specific
periods of time, from three hours to three days. Almost without exception, it is the first time in their lives that participants have come together with members of the other gender for the purpose of exploring gender differences and relationships.

In this paper we’d like to describe what happens in these workshops and what we are learning about how women and men struggle for mutuality. We believe that the workshops are a microcosm of the larger culture, suggesting contexts for facilitating positive growth and change in relationships. We will also discuss implications and applications for clinical work with individuals and couples.

The workshops were originally designed on the model of relational mutuality - namely, that healthy, growth-enhancing relationships are built on experiences of mutual engagement, mutual empathy, mutual authenticity, and mutual empowerment. In designing the workshops, we were also influenced by political workshops created at the Center for Psychological Study in the Nuclear Age in Cambridge, MA to foster Soviet-American relationships. In those workshops a central facilitating structure. Constructive conflict and struggling with difference are inevitable in relationships. They stimulate growth when the creative tension of staying with the differences is supported by the relational context. What Miller has called “waging good conflict” (1976) can lead to growth and enlargement of relationships. The gender workshops are designed to bring out prototypical conflicts and impasses between men and women, and then to offer structures and strategies for breaking through the impasses and for building connection.

Our work up to this point has been primarily with white, middle-class, highly educated men and women, although in most workshops there are members of various ages, sexual preference, race, class, and ethnicity, who have spoken up to represent their different perspectives. We are hoping to find ways to explore more explicitly the impact of diversity on the dynamics of woman-man relationships. The men who have come to these workshops represent a highly select sample - those who will risk doing such work.

Riane Eisler, in her book The Chalice and the Blade (1987), calls for the creation of a new form of relationship - moving beyond the power-over, “dominator” model to what she calls the new “partnership” model, which finds its roots in the pre-Bronze Age, prepatriarchal cultures she has studied. Eisler views this evolution as part of a whole paradigm shift, corresponding to new models of science, physics, and biology, as well as shifts toward global awareness.

In our workshops, we emphasize the qualities of creativity which contribute to mutuality. Moving beyond old models of self-development as the basis for healthy relationship, such as consolidating identity, healthy narcissism, assertiveness, or firm ego boundaries - we emphasize the relational and creative qualities which foster growth-enhancing connection. To name a few: curiosity, flexibility, spontaneity, freedom of movement, patience, persistence, humility, playfulness, humor, and also intuition, risk taking, trying out new perspectives and configurations, paradoxical thinking, holding opposites simultaneously, knowing when to hold and when to let go, and openness to change.

The importance of creativity has not yet been fully recognized in the study of human relationships. Like most psychological characteristics, it has been studied primarily in traditionally male realms - the arts and sciences - and not yet in its fundamental forms in daily life and relationships, where women’s creativity has often gone unrecognized.

The Workshop

The workshop begins with a discussion of the larger cultural context, and how important we feel it is for peacemaking and global survival. We discuss the range and limits of our own particular experience, and how issues of class, race, age, and heterosexual orientation make significant differences. We also take up the issue of stereotyping, emphasizing that we are working with group differences between men and women, cognizant that these will not describe any particular man or woman. Recognizing our own particularities, we begin to articulate a relational perspective on women’s and men’s psychological development, assuming a basic underlying motive and desire for human connection in both groups. Janet describes the Stone Center relational model of development and the paradigm shift that we will be using in the workshop. This involves a complex model, encompassing a sense of self but also a sense of the other and a sense of the relationship, stressing what Stern calls “self-with-other” experiences (1985). Healthy connection implies an awareness of and care for self, other, and the relationship, and none of these can be sacrificed in the search for mutuality. Janet also describes the connections, disconnections, and violations that shape women’s experience in this culture, including women’s carrying the one-sided