Building Connection Through Diversity

Cynthia Garcia Coll, Ph.D.
Robin Cook-Nobles, Ed.D.
Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.

About the Authors
Cynthia Garcia Coll, Ph.D., is a developmental psychologist who has been conducting research with children and families for the last seventeen years. She is currently Director of the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies, Associate Professor of Psychology at Wellesley College, and Associate Professor of Pediatrics at Brown University Medical School.

Robin Cook-Nobles, Ed.D., is a counseling psychologist who has been at the Stone Center for seven years. She is currently the Director of the Counseling Service, and has a strong interest in development across the life-span and in cross-cultural therapy and training.

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D., is a visiting scholar at the Stone Center. She is an attending psychologist and senior consultant to the Women’s Treatment Network at McLean Hospital and Instructor in Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School.

Abstract
Each presenter offers a personal statement outlining her own particular cultural, ethnic, and racial background and social location. We then explore how these identifications impact our participation in making and maintaining connections across our differences.

Three questions will be addressed:
1. What interferes with the development of cross-cultural connections?
2. What is needed for the establishment of such connections?
3. What is our vision of the future in regard to diversity and multiculturalism?

The Stone Center relational model of connections and disconnections is used as a theoretical framework for this discussion.

Cynthia Garcia Coll
During the last six months, Robin Cook-Nobles, Jan Surrey, and I have addressed, in a very personal way, the issues that arise from trying to build connections through diversity. Starting with the microcosm of the evolving relationships among us, we took it upon ourselves to further explore how we could establish a deeper understanding of the ways in which our diverse backgrounds have shaped our world-views, our attitudes toward ourselves and others, our needs, and our ways of connecting. We have done this as women coming from three very different backgrounds, myself from a colonial, culturally and racially mixed Caribbean island society (Puerto Rico), Robin from the racially segregated South just before the civil rights movement, and Jan from a White, Jewish, middle-class community.

The process has allowed us to acknowledge our similarities as much as our differences, and it has resulted in a deeper connection among the three. Throughout our regular meetings, we have experienced miscommunications and passionate arguments; we have also experienced sadness and exhaustion from sharing very personal, painful experiences. We have become aware of our own misconceptions and prejudices about each other’s experiences and have found some commonalities in areas that were quite unexpected. It has been hard work. Going from the personal to the political, the process has also evidenced very clearly to me that the notion that when women acknowledge their differences, the solidarity among them will be lost is a misconception. Actually, I am more convinced now that this process is necessary if a true new world order is to be established and feminism is to become the voice for many voices that feel excluded. If I can speak for the three of us, which I hesitantly do, I
would say that the process has not only enhanced our mutual respect and admiration for each other, but also has made us recognize the value and uniqueness of our connection in spite of having some very fundamental differences among us. So . . . what are the challenges? Why is it so hard sometimes to establish connections with persons from different cultures, races, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations, and ethnicities than our own?

Several Stone Center working papers have addressed these issues. Cannon and Heyward (1992) described the ongoing effort to build a friendship, the struggle of creating and sustaining a mutually empowering relationship between a white and a black woman in spite of society’s prevalent racism and other structures of oppression. To quote them: “Can we be different but not alienated? . . . the answer lies in the quality of our relation and whether real dialogue . . . is possible and desired between us and around us, among our sisters, black and white. The problem with white liberalism is that liberal white men and women do not advocate real relation, not mutual relation, but rather a patronizing relation” (p. 4).

In my working paper on cultural diversity last year, I raised some similar questions. To quote:

...if we recognize that these groups experience different cultural values, as well as different access to economic and social resources, and that they are subjected to prejudice, racism, classism, sexism, and segregation, we would expect that their world-views, psychic structures, and developmental outcomes would be profoundly impacted.

Where does this reality leave us? How can we collectively (and I would now add individually) recognize how profound these differences are in spite of some basic similarities? (p. 5).

Finally, in her colloquium this year, Beverly Daniel Tatum examined why disconnections occur in significant relationships between white male and female friends and black women, starting during the adolescent years. Black women describe many instances of subtle to overt expressions of racism from white male and white female friends as well. Tatum (1993) states, “. . . in the case of racism, our culture almost guarantees empathic failures, experiences of disconnection” (p. 2). Actually, in her framework, these disconnections tend to precipitate movement in the process of racial identity for the black woman.

In these three Stone Center papers, we all agree that there are some inherent challenges when we attempt to establish connections through cultural diversity. In the present paper we will present, individually, our perspectives on these issues—perspectives that emerge from our personal experiences as well as from our convictions of how connections that recognize, accept, and incorporate diversity can be established and are ultimately necessary in a world which is increasingly interdependent. Each of us will address the following questions:

• What gets in the way of establishing growth-enhancing, mutually empathic relationships across races, classes, cultures, and ethnic groups?
• What works? What can be done to overcome these impasses, these obstacles?
• What is our vision for the future, our ideal of a multicultural, diverse, pluralistic society?

Before I take up these questions, I would like to introduce my personal perspective:

1. My perspective is that of a Puerto Rican, middle-class woman who grew up on the island of Puerto Rico, who was granted U.S. citizenship from birth, and who has experienced Puerto Rico’s rapidly evolving colonial relationship with the U.S. which includes tremendous economic, political, cultural, and educational upheavals.

2. My perspective is that of a Puerto Rican woman who migrated to the U.S. at the age of 22 to pursue a graduate education, which, among other things, resulted in a major shift in my experience from being part of the majority to becoming a member of a so-called minority group.

3. My experience in the United States has been mixed.
   • I have been granted a lot of privileges as a result of the historical oppression of my own ethnic group, like minority fellowships and special criteria for admission to graduate programs;
   • I have experienced, along the way, very subtle to very open forms of prejudice and discrimination;
   • I have undergone a process of acculturation that has opened possibilities for economic and social mobility, but that has also created losses, especially the severing of very strong ties to my traditional culture.

4. I am the mother of three tricultural children who are:
   • American by birth and exposure to the