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# Relationships in Groups: Connection, Resonance and Paradox

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper describes the differences between a relational group theory and more traditional approaches, and discusses how a relational approach grows out of a feminist perspective. The core relational concepts applied to group process in this paper are paradox, connection, and resonance.*

## **Introduction**

Jean Baker Miller has described an important relational paradox: In the face of profound yearnings for connection and in order to connect to the only relationships available, we develop strategies that keep more and more of ourselves out of connection (Miller, 1988; Miller & Stiver, 1991; Stiver & Miller, 1994). This paradox is also at the heart of a group experience. The ongoing process of connection, disconnection, and reconnection with the aim of enlarging relational possibilities is the very essence of group work.

In this paper, I will review first the relational model developed by Miller, Jordan, Stiver, and Surrey as it applies to group work. Second, I will touch on traditional and feminist theories of group therapy, emphasizing the contributions of a relational group theory. Third, I will examine three important relational concepts: paradox, connection and resonance. Finally, I will end with two clinical examples of relational group process.

The journey that Miller began with the publication of *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976, 1987) and that continues in the work at the Stone Center has helped me understand relationships in both personal and professional settings. As a therapist, group therapist, teacher, consultant, and supervisor, I have found the relational model extremely helpful in understanding the relationships, conflicts, and dynamics that are fundamental elements in any group. This includes group therapy, supervision groups, working groups, training groups, consultation groups and larger communities, such as the feminist community. A model of relationships in groups is enhanced by a feminist perspective, but is applicable to all types of groups, including groups with men.

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As a community, women have learned the powerful impact of groups, ranging from consciousness-raising groups of the seventies, therapy group, twelve-step groups, support groups, self-help groups, peer groups, supervision groups, training groups to politically active groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and the Children's Defense Fund. Over the years, I have seen the need for all women to connect with other women in order to develop an adequate support network and to deal with the severe pressures women face each day in a societal structure that devalues them. These women include mothers, secretaries, therapists, homemakers, administrators, lawyers, academics, teachers, and technicians. They are a true cross section of women representing several racial and ethnic groups as well as heterosexual and lesbian women.

One significant example of the importance of networks is the development of support groups for battered women. One way these groups help women is by assisting them through the intricate maze of the legal system, which is extremely male-biased since patriarchy is at the heart of the judicial system. How many times have we been demoralized? How many stories have we heard about judges who were racist, sexist, classist or homophobic? How many of us know how awful it feels to support women through a system where the safety of the outcome is uncertain, at best? How many times must we hear about women as victims of domestic violence? And yet, over and over again the power of women connecting and resonating with each other gives us hope in the midst of such danger. At this very time, women are confronting the inequities and irresponsibility of the judicial system by coming together and demanding changes.

At the same time, there is a growing movement among men to use groups as supportive relational structures. A recent article by Steve Krugman and Sam Osherson (1993) on men in group therapy illustrates this trend. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that old models of development and relationship do not address men's experience any more than women's.

### **Relational development and movement**

But how do relationships in groups provide a potential for healing and empowerment? In order to examine a model of group work enhanced by a relational perspective, I will review the key points of the relational model developed by the scholars at the

Stone Center (through clinical understanding of women's development) and by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues at the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development. The desire to make connections and the movement toward mutuality in those connections are at the heart of relational development as described by the Stone Center group. This relational movement is the focus of the group therapy model discussed in this paper. Jean Baker Miller (1986) in her paper "What do we mean by relationships?" describes five qualities of growth-enhancing relationships that can also be evident in therapy groups: First, women together experience a high level of energy, or what she calls zest. Second, women in a group who were stuck become empowered and get unstuck. Third, women begin to understand themselves and other women with more clarity. Fourth, all the members develop greater authenticity and self-worth. And fifth, because of the positive experience in a group, women experience a desire for more connection, both within the group and outside of the group.

Relationships in groups are fertile with the relational paradox Miller first described in her paper "Connections, disconnections and violations" (1988). This paradox states that during the course of our lifetime, in the desire to make connections and be emotionally accessible, we all experience harm or violation that leads to a need to develop strategies to keep large parts of ourselves out of connection. In the face of intense yearnings for connection and in order to remain in the only relationships available, we develop strategies that keep *more and more* of ourselves out of connection. Simply put, the paradox is that in order to stay in connection, we keep parts of ourselves out of connection.

Gilligan (1991) enhances our understanding by describing the central paradox of girls' development at adolescence: girls are cut off from their own experience by taking themselves out of authentic relationship for the sake of what looks like relationships (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990). Stiver (1990a; 1990b) elaborates upon the strategies for disconnection in families with secrets like sexual abuse or alcoholism. The strategies, though preferable to isolation, carry a big price tag—disconnection from one's self, lack of clarity about one's feelings, and a sense of inauthenticity. Jordan describes the shame that accompanies the disconnection as the loss of empathic possibility, the loss, therefore, of the full