Relational Awareness: Transforming Disconnection

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About the Author
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Abstract
Development of the capacity for relational awareness allows people to begin to acknowledge, explore, and transform patterns of disconnection. Temporary interpersonal nonresponsiveness or empathic failures can often be immediately transformed into renewed connection. More ongoing failures or violations, however, lead to chronic disconnection which involves a notable lack of responsiveness and movement on the part of one or both people. Societal factors such as racism and sexism also create chronic disconnection. Awareness of relational resources and relational resilience assists people in their efforts to maintain or restore connections. Relational awareness groups can contribute to both an expansion of awareness of these patterns and to finding new strategies for reconnection.

In a relational model of psychological development, disconnection from others is viewed as one of the primary sources of human suffering. Similarly, disconnection from oneself, from the natural flow of one’s responses, needs, and yearnings creates distress, inauthenticity, and ultimately a sense of isolation in the world. We suggest that people gain a central sense of meaning, well-being, and worth through engagement in growth-enhancing relationships; we further suggest that an active interest in being connected and movement toward increasing connection are at the core of human development (Miller, 1988). In speaking about relational being, I am suggesting that there is primary energy that flows toward others, toward joining with others in an expansive sense of interconnectedness. In contrast, the separate-self paradigm would suggest that separation and disconnection is the primary state of affairs (“We are born alone; we die alone”). According to this view, from a place of essential aloneness, we at best reach out to relate to or use “objects” who can meet our needs or provide some passing solace in this lonely journey.

Existing autonomy and self-sufficiency models, then, create a consciousness of separation and a belief that this is at the core of the human condition. Most psychoanalytic or depth psychologies posit that when we peel away the layers of socialization and civilization we find a selfish, aggressive, and isolated individual. Classical Freidians and some object relations theorists see the desire for relatedness as grafted onto other, more primary drives such as aggression, sexuality, or hunger. Connection and love are often seen as illusions, momentarily covering over the more basic condition of isolation and self-interest.
Children are then raised to value separation, to feel proud of signs of independence. Normative socialization teaches that we are safer and stronger if we can exist without needing relationships. This concept is at the core of the power/control mode (Jordan, 1987) which informs socialization of the dominant group in most western cultures but most dramatically in the United States. What we might call "defensive self-sufficiency" is the standard of psychological maturity in this model.

At a personal level when we are injured or violated in important relationships, particularly when this is a chronic state of affairs, we withdraw even more deeply into defensive isolation and fear of connection. There are several forces pushing us toward pervasive experiences of isolation:

1) normative emphasis on defensive disconnection as a means to feeling strong and self-sufficient (e. g., "becoming your own man," "standing on your own two feet");
2) contextually produced disconnections including societal forces which suggest certain "different" or "minority" groups are "lesser than" (e. g., women, people of color, lesbians and gays, older people);
3) individual pathological disconnections which result from repetitive and ongoing violations in close relationships, particularly those which involve dependency and inability to self-protect, such as between small children and parents.

I would like to suggest that the story of our preoccupation with self-sufficiency and autonomy is largely the story of our woundedness, the extent to which the cultural standards of development have warped our natural search for safe and growth-enhancing connection. Pressure toward disconnection is harshly and normatively rendered in the lives of boys and men, with society's insistence on fierce independence, autonomy, and guardedness. Several theorists have spoken about the trauma of the boy's enforced separation from his primary objects: mother and father (Bergman & Surrey, 1993; Bergman, 1991; Pollack, 1995). But I would suggest there is a more pervasive injury in the larger disruption of a sense of connectedness in general, whether with mother, father, or all others. The boy is taught to see himself as standing over or against rather than with; in such a stance he is taught to deny basic human engagement and vulnerability. Psychology itself, with its reigning separate-self paradigm, its overemphasis on individualism, and its emphasis on independent "doers" reinforces this sense of separateness. But anyone who has known the experience of "coming home" to connection, whether in the embrace of a loved one, in gazing into the sparkling and responsive eyes of a baby, or in the rapture of a breathtaking sunset knows there is something basic and beyond doubt about the sense of "being with," being in the flow of relational experience.

Any discussion of disconnections should include the societal factors which push us in the direction of disconnection and do not support the kind of transformation of disconnections into connection that we are suggesting is essential to healthy growth. In addition to the disconnections involved in socializing children toward independence and autonomy, toward an ideal of strength in separation, I would include all the divisive and fragmenting forces in the culture that push people into shame and isolation. Importantly among these forces are racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism; all of the judgments which render groups marginalized, denigrated, or objectified contribute to an experience of disconnection and isolation. Disempowerment and fear usually accompany these disconnections. Furthermore, the suppression of all experience which makes the dominant group uncomfortable or threatened leads to self-protective inauthenticity in many marginalized groups—another source of disconnection.

At this point in history, I would like to add I think there is a profound anti-relational backlash going on. This is not just backlash against women but also against relational values and ways of organizing experience which threaten existing patriarchal power systems. In our field of health care this is epitomized by the increasingly de-humanizing delivery of care through managed care systems. A student recently pointed out that a flyer from one managed care program offered a list of dos and don'ts about the efficient delivery of mental health services. On the list was, "Don't build relationships with your clients. They lead to regression, increased dependency, and demands for longer-term therapy!"

**Disconnections**

As individuals, we all have particular ways that we disconnect, particular situations that render us most vulnerable to disconnection, and particular patterns for transforming disconnections back into