How Therapy Helps When the Culture Hurts

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About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and anti-racism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing links between racial identity development and relational theories to support the growth potential of persons who experience disconnections stemming from marginalization and devaluation within the dominant society. She works at Harvard Business School and is on the faculty of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute.

Abstract

The purpose of psychotherapy is movement toward relational healing. However, the practice itself is embedded in a culture where relational disconnection and power-over arrangements are normative. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of cultural disconnections on the therapy relationship. Because they embody multiple social identities within a power-over paradigm, both client and therapist are "carriers" of cultural disconnections. The paper examines the shifting vulnerabilities associated with those identities that may lead to impasse and violation or contribute to possibilities for growth. Scenarios from clinical practice illustrate how conflict becomes a pathway to deeper connection when embraced with such processes as empathic attunement, authentic responsiveness, and mutuality.

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It is impossible to think about movement and healing in the therapy relationship without considering the culture in which the relationship is embedded. To begin engaging the question of how therapy helps when the culture hurts, I will recount a conversation with a dear friend and colleague of mine whom I will call Claire.

Not too many years ago, Claire and I strolled the sidewalks of Santa Fe talking about where our careers had taken us since our days in graduate school together. She had recently become installed as director of a small university counseling service in the Southwest, and I was on the counseling staff of a large professional school in the East. However different our respective venues, we agreed that we had both traveled some distance from the days of videotaped supervisions and mandatory process groups—certainly memorable if not endearing parts of our graduate school experience. As somewhat newly-minted therapists are prone to do, we were discussing some of our more frustrating cases, and were once again enjoying the comfort and familiarity of informal supervision together.

Claire, who is a white woman, told me about her work with another white woman, a young student who had come to the counseling center in acute distress after a breakup with a boyfriend. During the course of their short time together, Claire learned that woman had a long history of abuse at the hands of men and boys. Again as newly-minted *feminist* therapists are wont to do, Claire had elaborate visions of journeying with this woman on the path to empowerment, when one day the woman came into session and abruptly announced that she planned to leave the therapy. She said to Claire, "I have strong suspicions that you are a lesbian. And I don't think it would be good to work with someone like you."

I am not at all certain about the content of the conversation that followed, but I am certain of its

nature. No doubt we commiserated grandly about living in a culture rife with destructive disconnections: a heterosexist culture that at its best colludes with the willful ignorance that often underlies homophobia, and at its worst rewards outright violence against lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual people.

It is important to note that my friend Claire would often describe herself as bisexual—as someone who was "mostly out with some people most of the time." No doubt as she told her story, we were both self-righteously indignant I as her straight sister-colleague who not only grieved my friend's pain, but also as a straight friend who needed to bolster my credentials as an ally. Claire, for her part was strongly identified with feminist politics and had more than a passing interest in interrupting everyday gay oppression. It is probably the case that our conversation eventually wound its way into musings on authenticity—what should Claire or any politically-enlightened therapist do? Cloaked as we were in our images of ourselves and of each other, I am certain we had a comforting and familiar conversation. I am not at all certain that we had a conversation that allowed us to grow and deepen our connection with each other.

What Should the Therapist Do?

Under the usual terms of therapeutic engagement, the question that emerges most immediately is all too often framed in binary terms: Should Claire disclose or not disclose? All too often the apparent, binary options have the potential for disempowering the relationship, where the *therapist,* the *client,* or sometimes *both* can be left in shame and isolation. From the standpoint of the Relational-Cultural Model, the question is not so much to disclose or not to disclose; the question is rather what are the makings of authenticity in this relationship?

A foundational premise for considering such a question is put forth by Elaine Pinderhughes (1989) who states that knowing how power and powerlessness operate in human systems is key to effective interventions. Inasmuch as the therapy relationship is a human system, the participants in that system must necessarily concern themselves with issues of power. It follows then that in relational-cultural practice, issues of authenticity must be understood in light of the operative power issues in the relationship. Therapists who find themselves in situations similar to Claire's can almost always craft a "good enough" response, sometimes even a true enough response. However, from the standpoint of relational-cultural practice, the *why* and *how* of our responses is almost always at least as important as the *what.* Attending to the how and the why helps us to more honestly navigate the complexities of power in the relational system.

It could be said that Claire's young client invited her into conflict with a challenge that was at once a strategy of disconnection and an invitation into deeper knowing and connection. It was a challenge that could lead to either impasse or possibility. Embedded as it was in a culture of chronic disconnection, it was a challenge that illuminated the multilayered complexities of power and powerlessness in their relationship. It is a fundamental premise of the Relational-Cultural Model that acute disconnection can lead to a deepening of connection. In other words, we learn to see acute conflict as the source of growth and possibility. Chronic disconnection on the other hand can lead to isolation, stagnation, and hopelessness. It is against this backdrop of chronic and compound disconnection that we seek to understand how therapy can help when the culture hurts.

Conflict and the "Power-Over" Culture

Every relationship, including the therapy relationship, bears the complexity of multiple social identities. That is, the bodies that we bring into relationship with each other have been formed by multiple sociocultural agendas: we have been raced, engendered, sexualized, and situated along dimensions of class, physical ability, religion, or whatever constructions carry ontological significance in the culture. In a culture of chronic disconnection, manifest difference mutates into what Jean Baker Miller (1986) calls "power-over," a cultural arrangement in which difference is stratified into dominant and subordinate, superior and inferior. In these power-over arrangements, the dominant group protects its status and perpetuates its presumed entitlements through tactics ranging from obfuscation and exclusion to violence and extermination. In addition to bearing the culturally ascribed power of each identity, our experience in relationship is made more complex by the specific images and meanings formed over time, relational images that attempt to predict and explain the meanings of and possibilities for relationship. The way we respond to the inevitable disconnections in relationship is in large measure a function of the multiple social identities operating in that particular relationship and in the relational surround at any given moment.

When Miller (1986) wrote *Toward a New Psychology*