Relational Theory and A Dialogue on Social Problems

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Abstracts
This paper is the first in a series of “Talking Papers.” Talking Papers are designed to help make some of the Relational/Cultural theory concepts more understandable for a wide range of readers. While we have always tried to demystify language and present ideas in a readable fashion, we know we have not always succeeded. This series aims to carry this effort forward, especially on topics exploring broader applications of Relational/Cultural theory. In this Talking Paper, we begin using relational/cultural ideas to think about large-scale social change. These are just some initial thoughts and we invite others to think about them with us.

We took the idea for these papers from the “talking book,” A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, published by Bergin & Garvey, 1987.

In the past, psychological theory focused exclusively on individual problems, while sociological theory focused on social problems. At this point the fields are extremely specialized, with separate theories and technical languages which make it difficult to recognize the relationship between psychological and social problems. What is a social problem? How is a social problem different from a psychological problem? How can Relational/Cultural theory, a psychological theory, attend to social problems? We explore these questions in this paper and suggest that Relational theory, with its focus on the development of connections with others, is uniquely suited to address social problems.

First, what is a social problem? Sociologists Stanley Eitzen and Maxine Baca Zinn identify two types of social problems: “(1) Acts and conditions that violate the norms and values present in society, and (2) societally induced conditions that cause psychic and material suffering . . . .” (Eitzen & Zinn, 1997, p. 9). Norm violations include social problems like crime and truancy, while social conditions include institutional systems of bias such as racism, classism, and sexism (Eitzen & Zinn, 1997, pp. 9-10). In identifying social problems, most sociologists focus on the structure of society, on the distribution of power, not on “problem individuals.” Eitzen and Zinn explain:

Individual deviants are a manifestation of society’s failure to meet their needs; the sources of crime, poverty, drug addiction, and racism are found in the laws and customs, the quality of life, the distribution of wealth and power, and the accepted practices of schools, governmental units, and corporations. As the primary source of social problems, society, not the individual deviant, must be restructured if social problems are to be solved. (Eitzen & Zinn, 1997, p. 11)
How is a social problem different from a psychological problem? This is a complicated question, with no simple answer. All of us manifest both psychological and social influences and it is difficult to determine the boundaries of each dimension. However, we are concerned that conventional psychological theories tend to see individual “psycho-pathology” and not see, or minimize, social-pathology. This never resolves the problem, because only the symptom is addressed, not the disease itself.

As Eitzen and Zinn indicate, “The fundamental issue is whether social problems emanate from the pathologies of individuals (person-blame) or from the situation in which deviants are involved (system-blame); that is, whether deviants are the problem itself or only victims of it. The answer lies somewhere between the two extremes . . . . “ (Eitzen & Zinn, 1997, pp. 12-13).

While many theorists acknowledge that the answer “lies somewhere between the two extremes” few have provided theories that address both the psychological and social dimensions. We suggest that Relational/Cultural theory illuminates the inseparability of the social and the psychological. In focusing on the development of the self-with-others, not just the development of the self, Relational/Cultural theory insists that we consider the cultural or societal context of what comes to be called “pathology.”

Relational theory evolved over the last twenty years in response to the individualism of traditional psychological theories of human development. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, maintains that individual development is motivated by the need to gratify sexual and aggressive drives. Object Relations theory moves beyond classical Freudian drive theory and recognizes the importance of relationships in human development, but only to the degree that they satisfy the object relational needs of the individual, that is, that the individual gets what “he” needs or wants from the other (who is called the object). Only in Relational/Cultural theory does the capacity to connect with others in mutually growth fostering relationships become the goal of healthy development. In Relational/Cultural theory, the goal shifts from the development of the self to the development of the self-with-others. The question, then, becomes: which societal factors contribute to creating mutually empowering connections and which impede them?

This is a major shift in the definition of mental health. It represents a new way of looking at human development, which is significantly different from the traditional way of looking. The sociology of knowledge literature stresses the importance of examining our ways of thinking, or what we take to be the truth, for evidence of bias. In relation to the goal of mental health, traditional theories have instituted Western, patriarchal concepts of separation, autonomy, and independence as goals of mental health, as opposed to concepts of connection and interdependence. Relational/Cultural theory shifts the primary goal of mental health and human development from a concern for individual needs to a concern for the growth of the community as it is integrated with the growth of the individual. Given this foundation, Relational/Cultural theory is uniquely positioned to address social problems. It offers a vision of human development that can change the entire social structure. In fact, we believe that steps toward the resolution of serious social problems like racism, classism, and sexism (any “ism” in which someone is deemed deficient because he or she is different from a dominant group) can be found in Relational/Cultural theory.

Over twenty years ago, Toward a New Psychology of Women addressed the issue in this way:

Practically everyone now bemoans Western man’s sense of alienation, lack of community, and inability to find ways of organizing society for human ends. We have reached the end of the road that is built on the set of traits held out for male identity—advance at any cost, pay any price, drive out all competitors, and kill them if necessary. The opportunity for the full exercise of such manly virtues was always available only to the very few, but they were held out as goals and guidelines for all men . . . . It now seems clear we have arrived at a point from which we must seek a basis of faith in connection—and not only faith but recognition that it is a requirement for the existence of human beings. The basis for what seem the absolutely essential next steps in Western history if we are to survive is already available. (Miller, 1976, p. 88)

Over twenty years later, The Healing Connection addresses the same shift in thinking:

. . . we [the authors] were all strongly influenced by traditional psychoanalytic concepts, concepts that reflect societal and cultural assumptions so deeply entrenched in all of us that we scarcely question their validity, we simply think of them as “the truth” about human development. For instance, psychoanalytic thinking has taken over