Relational-Cultural Theory Study Group Readings

John Waide

June 7, 2008

Contents

1 Phase One: Before the “Repairing Relationship” Workshop
   1.1 Format ................................................. 2
   1.2 Meetings & Readings, Week by Week ................. 3

2 Phase Two: “Repairing Relationship” Workshop .......... 6

3 Phase Three: Post-Workshop Follow-up ................. 6
   3.1 Post-Workshop Meeting ................................. 6
   3.2 4 June 2008 ........................................ 6

Bibliography ............................................. 7
1 Phase One: Before the “Repairing Relationship” Workshop

1.1 Format

The group met on Wednesday evenings, 6:00—7:30PM at the Margaret Cuninggim Women’s Center on the Vanderbilt campus. Linda Manning and Kacy Silverstein provided guidance and suggested readings for the group.

The initial email invitation:

“Relational-Cultural Theory” Reading Group on Wednesdays Starting 20 February

Please note changed date

Now is your chance to learn more about Relational-Cultural Theory with a group of interested colleagues. (for a quick orientation to RCT, go to http://www.wellesley.edu/JBMTI/pdf/developingRCT.pdf [Jordan and Hartling, 2002] )

We are excited to announce that the NPI Spring Workshop, to be held May 2nd & 3rd, is “Repairing Relationship: Neurobiological & Sociocultural Perspectives on Trauma.” This workshop will be presented by Amy Banks, M.D. & Maureen Walker, Ph.D. Two scholars of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute & Stone Center at Wellesley College.

A group of interested professionals is organizing a study group to read recent work by the Stone Center. The group will be facilitated by Linda Manning, Ph.D. (Director of the Margaret Cuninggim Women’s Center at Vanderbilt University) and Kacy Silverstein, M.Ed., NCC (co-director of Project SAFE). John Waide will help organize the group.

The group will meet every other Wednesday evening in the Gallery of the Margaret Cuninggim Women’s Center on the Vanderbilt campus, 6:00-7:30PM. Each week’s meeting will focus on discussion of Stone Center articles that have been previously distributed to the group by email. Examples of articles to be discussed include, “A Comparison of Relational Psychologies,” “Therapist’s Authenticity,” “The Movement of Mutuality and Power,” and “Power and Effectiveness: Envisioning an Alternate

---

1 This is my own eccentric version of the history of this group. It is not intended to be authoritative or complete—merely a reminder of where we have been and some of what we have learned together. Please feel free to send me additions or corrections at any time.
Paradigm.” The group will meet a total of six times before the Spring Workshop.

If you are interested in the group or would like more information, please contact John Waide by Friday, February 15th. (Directions to the Margaret Cuninggim Women’s Center and information about parking will be provided to those interested in participating).

1.2 Meetings & Readings, Week by Week

Here is a list of meeting dates followed by the citation for the article we read for that date with some description of our discussions. (See Bibliography below for the full reference information.)

20 February The group began with a discussion of [Miller et al., 1999], a collaborative effort of Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, Maureen Walker, Janet Surrey, & Natalie Eldridge on therapists’ authenticity. Our discussion included, in particular, the meaning of authenticity. The article makes several important points, among which we discussed the following in particular:

- It is important to distinguish “relational authenticity” from “total honesty” (Jordan, p.3).
- It is important to distinguish “relational responsiveness” from reactivity (Jordan, p.3).
- It is important to distinguish “stating my limits” from “setting limits” (Jordan, p.5).
- “This moment-to-moment responsiveness [‘in which the therapist tries to be with the movement toward connection’] is the most important part of authenticity.” (Miller, 2 (my emphasis))
- Terminology in the RCT tradition, for instance:
  
  **Strategies of Disconnection, a.k.a. “SD”** “the methods people develop to keep parts of themselves out of connection” (Miller, p.2)

  **Central Relational Paradox, a.k.a. “CRP”** “the central desire of all people is to connect with others”, but various experiences lead us to feel we can be in connection only by keeping “significant amounts of their experience and responses out of connection” (Miller, p. 2).²

---

²SDs resemble “defenses” in more traditional psychoanalytic terminology

³In the psychoanalytic literature, this is called “working with resistance”.

3
• “Seemingly, paradoxically also, we believe that one of the most important ways to facilitate movement in relationship is to truly honor the strategies of disconnection.” (Miller, 2)

• The therapeutic efficacy of saying “one true thing” (a point Walker makes & attributes to Stiver), especially at points of relational impasse.

Furthermore, we discussed Walker’s case of “John”, the self-described “white, conservative, male Republican” (Walker, p.7).

5 March The next meeting focused on an article about who and what changes in therapy. [Eldridge et al., 2003] We discussed the case vignettes presented in the article, each of which illustrated ways that the therapist is changed by the relational therapeutic process with a client/patient. The cases discussed were challenging and raised a variety of issues related to responsiveness, gift-giving & receiving, and other “boundaries”.

19 March We discussed “How Change Happens” using an article by Jean Baker Miller [Miller, 2002]. Once again, there was some new terminology to learn:

Relational Image, a.k.a. “RI” “the inner constructions we each create out of our experience in relationships” (p. 1)

Controlling Image, a.k.a. “CI” Controlling images define who and what we each are. They determine what is acceptable and what is not, what people can do and cannot do. They exert a powerful impact on how we can act and how we construct relationships. Consequently, CIs create the framework within which people make the kinds of relationships that go into the construction of RIs. (p. 2)

Much of the discussion centered on issues of mutuality and “power-over” dynamics in therapy and society.

2 April We focused our attention to an RCT perspective on the treatment of trauma survivors, examining an article by Amy Banks. [Banks, 2006] She examines the neurobiological consequences of trauma. Relational-Cultural therapy aims at helping build (or rebuild) mutual, growth-fostering relationships. Strategies of Disconnection are commonly employed by persons with PTSD and leave the

---

4Much of this includes what is often referred to as “countertransference”.
5Miller cites Miller and Stiver [1997]
person “safe”, in a way, but disconnected. We discussed the useful comments she makes, based on neurobiology, about how to conduct therapy for trauma survivors without retraumatization. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of the “five good things” Miller & Stiver identified as a template for healthy relationships (which I quote here)(Banks, p.41; she cites [Miller and Stiver, 1997]):

1. an increased sense of energy or “zest” within the relationship;
2. each person within the relationship feels an increased ability to act and does act;
3. each person within the relationship has a greater sense of worth;
4. each person in the relationship has a greater clarity about herself, the other and the relationship;
5. each person within the relationship has an increased desire for more connections outside of the relationship.

Our discussion particularly explored experiences of working with traumatized patients.

**16 April** We discussed Judith Jordan’s article, “Commitment to Connection in a Culture of Fear”. [Jordan, 2005] Much of our attention was on the ways that chronic fear affects us. Jordan urges us to struggle to be aware of the larger cultural power dynamics that often obscure the origins of suffering from us. Our discussion revolved around the ways that we may often neglect to ask both “Where is the pain?” and “Where is the problem?”. We spent some time discussing Jordan’s fascinating example of a troop of baboons in which the dominant males were all killed by a fluke exposure to tuberculosis, leaving the rest of the troop to change its culture in ways that seem attractive.6

**30 April** At our final meeting before the workshop, we discussed the article on a relational perspective on shame and humiliation. [Hartling et al., 2000] We used the article as a springboard for discussion of the ways in which “power-over” relationships are used to humiliate others and instill shame. We integrated this with discussion of Rosen’s case of “Carol” and the boundary issues it presents.

---

6See [Angier, 2004] for the original article and [Bailey, 2004] for a letter to the editor in defense of bullying to demonstrate that there are still people who defend this sort of aggression and power-over. The original research article, [Sapolsky and Share, 2004], is worth reading, along with some follow-up references to it: [de Waal, 2004],[Rutte and Taborsky, 2007], and especially [Brunner, 2007].
2 Phase Two: “Repairing Relationship”
Workshop

The workshop—“Repairing Relationship: Neurobiological & Sociocultural Perspectives on Trauma”—occurred 2-3 May 2008, featuring Amy Banks, M.D. & Maureen Walker, Ph.D. Most of the participants in the Study Group attended.

3 Phase Three: Post-Workshop Follow-up

3.1 Post-Workshop Meeting

The group resumed meeting on 21 May 2008 at the usual place and time. We devoted that first meeting to

- discussion of the workshop and our afterthoughts about it,
- discussion of whether any changes to our format (which day of the week, time, possible case discussions) are needed,
- discussion of what readings we want to take on.

We decided to ask those on our email list about possible format changes.

As for readings, we decided to work our way through [Walker and Rosen, 2004]. For our next meeting we agreed to read an article to be chosen later.

I should add that there was a delightful atmosphere among those few in attendance. Several had emailed their regrets and intent to resume participation.

3.2 4 June 2008

The selected reading was [Walker and Miller, 2001] (John’s choice from several articles Kacy offered for consideration). The discussion ranged over racism & sexism. One member noted, near the end, that we had talked more about sexism than about racism. Nevertheless, the discussion was energetic and—in my opinion—vital.

We agreed to begin working through [Walker and Rosen, 2004] at our next meeting in two weeks. Linda will choose an article from the book.
Bibliography


