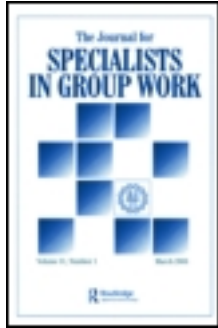


This article was downloaded by: [Eastern Michigan University]

On: 04 January 2012, At: 06:38

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Journal for Specialists in Group Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usgw20>

### The Relational-Cultural Model: A Framework for Group Process

Dana L. Comstock<sup>a</sup>, Thelma Duffey<sup>b</sup> & Holly St. George<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> St. Mary's University, Department of Counseling and Human Services, One Camino Santa Maria, San Antonio, TX

<sup>b</sup> Southwest Texas State University

Available online: 21 Jun 2010

To cite this article: Dana L. Comstock, Thelma Duffey & Holly St. George (2002): The Relational-Cultural Model: A Framework for Group Process, *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 27:3, 254-272

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0193392202027003002>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## The Relational-Cultural Model: A Framework for Group Process

Dana L. Comstock  
*St. Mary's University*

Thelma Duffey  
*Southwest Texas State University*

Holly St. George  
*St. Mary's University*

*The relational-cultural model of psychotherapy has been evolving for the past 20 years. Within this model, difficult group dynamics are conceptualized as the playing out of the central relational paradox. This paradox recognizes that an individual may yearn for connection but, out of a sense of fear, simultaneously employ strategies that restrict or limit the desired connection. This model posits that transformation and healing in group work come from the experience of mutual empathy created in growth-fostering relationships. A discussion of key terms and their application to group work is presented.*

The relational-cultural model was conceived after the publication of *Towards a New Psychology of Women* (Miller, 1976). After this publication, a group of scholars, namely, Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Alexander Kaplan, Judy Jordan, and Janet Surrey, began a process of reconceptualizing traditional models of human development and psychotherapy. What followed was the unfolding of what is sometimes referred to as “self-in-relation” theory or the “relational” model of psychotherapy. Each original contribution to the scholarship of this model is published as a *Work in Progress* through the Stone Center at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts. To date, the model is called the relational-cultural model. For purposes of brevity within this article, it will be referred to as the relational model.

---

Dana L. Comstock is an associate professor of counseling at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Thelma Duffey is an associate professor at Southwest Texas State University. Holly St. George is a doctoral student at St. Mary's University. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Dr. Dana L. Comstock, St. Mary's University, Department of Counseling and Human Services, One Camino Santa Maria, San Antonio, TX 78228-8527; phone: (210) 436-3226; fax: (210) 431-6886; e-mail: chsdana@stmarytx.edu.

JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK, Vol. 27 No. 3, September 2002, 254-272  
© 2002 American Counseling Association (ACA)

The relational model looks at all interpersonal dynamics through a relational lens. Miller and Stiver (1997) suggested that although individuals yearn for connection with others, they develop a repertoire of strategies that keep them out of connection. Such strategies, for example, include withholding love and affection, withdrawing from others, criticizing loved ones, and hiding authentic feelings (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2000). At worst, these strategies are destructive and could involve addictions, compulsions, abusive behaviors, eating disorders, and workaholism. Each of these strategies has the potential to keep individuals out of relationships and subsequently to evoke a deep sense of shame (Hartling et al., 2000; Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

This dynamic is termed the *central relational paradox*. Understanding the paradox is key to understanding relational movement as conceptualized in this model (Dooley & Fedele, 1999, p. 15). By understanding the paradox, group leaders examine individual and group strategies for disconnection with compassion and empathy. In honoring these strategies as indicators of an individual's vulnerability and fear, group leaders can guide group members back into authentic connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Jordan (1999) stated that although this "sounds so seamless and easy, in practice it is challenging and confounding at times" (p. 5). She reminded us that we all "struggle to bring this attitude of compassion to both our clients and ourselves" (p. 5). By design, relational group psychotherapy works with one's strategies for disconnection so that something new and different can happen: "A person can find that by being more herself—being in her own feelings more—she can also be *more connected* to another person" (Miller & Stiver, 1993, p. 3). Accordingly, this is seen as one of the most profound and healing aspects of group work (Fedele, 1994; Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

The authors have two objectives for this article. The first objective is to present an alternative way of framing relational dynamics in groups. The second objective is to address the key concepts, values, and assumptions for conceptualizing group dynamics in this model. An educational component necessary for applying the model to group work will be presented, as will explicitly stated relational group goals. A group scenario and analysis will be presented to illustrate this model.

### **THE RELATIONAL-CULTURAL MODEL: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The relational model provides an alternate perspective to traditional ways of viewing both internal processes and relational dynamics in

group psychotherapy. For example, traditional therapies value the ideals of individuation, separation, and autonomy and generally honor the concept of the “self” (Fedele, 1994). In contrast, this model espouses that we become increasingly relationally complex rather than more individuated and autonomous over the life span. The uniqueness of relational group psychotherapy is its focus on achieving growth by enhancing each individual’s capacity to “create, build, sustain and deepen connection” as a life-long goal (Surrey, 1987, p. 8).

This model posits that one of our more challenging developmental processes involves that of becoming increasingly able to fully represent ourselves both honestly and authentically in relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997). There are many obstacles to authentic expression. Such obstacles may include different types of shame-based oppression and marginalization, whereby a person’s experience is perceived as defective or, worse, invisible (Hartling et al., 2000; Jordan, 1997; Walker, 2001).

Power differentials, gender role socialization, race, culture, health status, sexual orientation, and all the various “isms” have the potential to silence an individual’s experience (Dooley & Fedele, 1999; Hartling et al., 2000; Miller et al., 1999; Walker, 2001). As such, these experiences are both disconnecting and shame based and have the potential to move individuals into a place of what Miller and Stiver (1997) referred to as “condemned isolation” (p. 72).

Condemned isolation is the experience of “being locked out of the possibility of human connection” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 72). In this experience, individuals carry a deep sense of shame and a belief that they are somehow defective as human beings. They are often unable to see the problem in a sociocultural or relational context and believe the problem is “in them” (Hartling et al., 2000; Jordan, 1999; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Hiding large parts of their experience and engaging inauthentically to reconnect in nonmutual relationships often becomes a strategy for survival (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

According to this model, understanding one’s relational capacities in a sociocultural context allows one to move out of a place of shame and into the possibility for more mutually empathic and authentic connections (Hartling et al., 2000; Walker, 2001). As such, the relational model can be used with both women and men from diverse backgrounds and in groups that address a multitude of issues, which are discussed in the applications section of this article (Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

Another basic tenet of this philosophy is that even in the healthiest of relationships, disconnections occur. One of the goals of group work in this model is to develop an awareness of our personal relational movement, that is, our patterns of connection and disconnection. This goal is

met by increasing our relational capacities in an environment, such as a group, where this awareness is a shared and stated goal (Fedele, 1994; Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Given that the model “necessitates assumptions different from those that underlie previous theories” (Miller & Stiver, 1993, p. 424), it requires a language that reflects its unique values and philosophy. An analysis of the model’s key terms is needed to facilitate an understanding of this language.

### KEY TERMS

Examining a new model requires learning its unique language. The relational model structures its language to promote its philosophies, values, and assumptions.

#### **Mutual Empathy**

Basic to this model is the principle of mutual empathy. Miller and Stiver (1997) described mutual empathy as the essence of relational healing and psychological growth. In this respect, mutual empathy reflects the healing that occurs when individuals believe that others have been genuinely moved or affected by their experiences. To truly be moved by another’s experience, we have to be accessible, and to be accessible means we are vulnerable (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

The notion of mutual empathy is in contrast to the more common expression of “one-way” empathy. In relational terms, two people create mutual empathy when the listener is affected by the experience of the other and the other is moved by the impact he or she has had on the listener. The differences in these terms can appear discreet, even though the differences in the experience, particularly for that of the speaker, are quite powerful. Mutual empathy, as it applies to group dynamics, speaks to both the intrapersonal and interpersonal healing that takes place when group members express being moved by others’ experiences (Fedele, 1994).

In a mutually empathic encounter, everyone’s experience is broadened and deepened. The group leader and group members are “empathically attuned, emotionally responsive, authentically present, and open to change” (Miller, Jordan, Kaplan, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991, p. 11). In other words, everyone must be vulnerable to be authentically present. Each participant must genuinely respect and be moved by the experience of the other if he or she is to be open to change (Jordan, 1999).

### Connection and Disconnection

Building empathic bridges and developing an understanding of relational patterns of individuals and groups are among the greatest challenges of group leadership in this model. Basic to this bridge building is an understanding of the process of moving through connections, disconnections, and back into new, transformative, and enhanced connections (see Figure 1).

Because many individuals in group psychotherapy report histories of isolation and emotional torment, an increased need for relational safety is generated (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). As such, the essence of safety in relational groups is the members' expressed commitment to working toward mutuality so that each participant can "represent increasingly her feelings, thoughts, and perceptions in the relationship, can have an impact on the other(s) and on the relationship, and can be moved by or move with the other(s)" (Miller et al., 1991, p. 10).

In the relational model, there are five experiential components of connection (see Figure 1), which are often referred to as the "five good things" (Miller, 1986, p. 3). Connection is experienced when

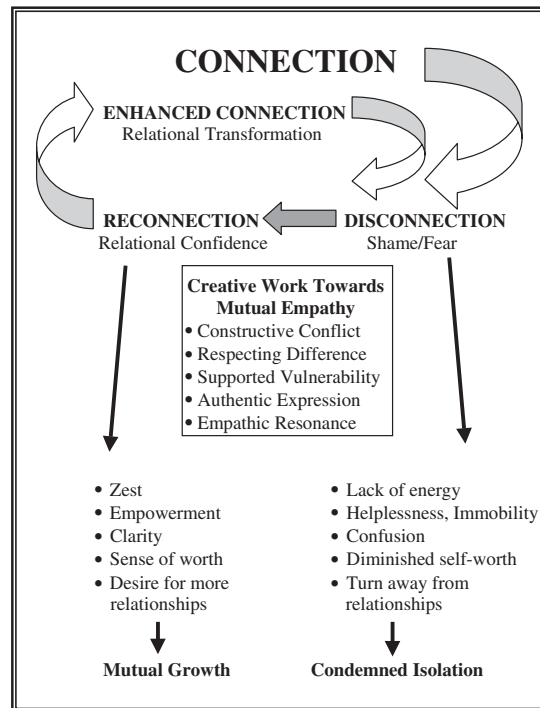
each person feels a greater sense of "zest" (vitality, energy); each person feels more able to act and does; each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and of the other person(s); each person feels a greater sense of worth; and each person feels more connected to the other person(s) and feels a greater motivation for connections with other people beyond those in the specific relationship. (Miller, 1986, p. 3)

The presence of these qualities is indicative of mutuality present in growth-fostering relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

Disconnection is experienced as the opposite of the five good things (see Figure 1). Jordan and Dooley (2000) described the experience of disconnection as "decreased energy; inability to act; a lack of clarity or confusion regarding self and other; decreased self worth; and we turn away from relationship" (p. 13). This "turning away" is often accompanied by a deep sense of shame. Group work is an ideal setting for individuals to learn how to move through disconnections and into "healthy conflict," which can then "become opportunities for mutual growth" (Jordan & Dooley, 2000, p. 15).

The process of moving from connection to disconnection and into reconnection is transformative (see Figure 1). Jordan (1992) articulated this by stating,

In cases of disconnection, transformation involves awareness of the forces creating the disconnection, discovery of a means for reconnecting, and



**Figure 1. Relational Movement as the Process of Creatively Working Through Disconnections Toward Transformative, Enhanced Connections**

SOURCE: From Dooley and Fedele (1999) and Hartling, Rosen, Walker, and Jordan (2000). Copyright 1999 by Cate Dooley, M.S., & Nicole Fedele, Ph.D. Copyright 2000 by Linda M. Hartling, Ph.D., Wendy Rosen, Ph.D., Maureen Walker, Ph.D., & Judy Jordan, Ph.D. Adapted with permission from the authors.

building a more differentiated and solid connection. The movement into and out of connection becomes a journey of discovery about self, other and relationship—about “being in relation.” (p. 8)

### The Central Relational Paradox

Simply stated, all individuals have a yearning for connection. The paradox is experienced when, in the face of one’s yearning for connection, individuals employ strategies for disconnection. These strategies are employed to avoid the perceived (or real) risk of hurt, rejection, or violation (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This is a complicated and frustrating cycle. Individuals exercise various strategies for disconnection, and they do so to varying degrees (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Although individuals

feel a yearning to connect, feelings such as shame make movement into connection difficult.

According to Jordan (1997), "Shame is most importantly a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others" (p. 147). Dealing with relational dynamics in regard to the paradox and dealing openly with a shared sense of shame are both important components of moving group members out of shame-based impasses and into relational transformation and empathic possibilities (Jordan, 1997; Hartling et al., 2000).

As group leaders, it is critical that we understand why and how individuals are "protected" by their strategies for disconnection, which paradoxically are the source of so much pain. Group members who express their vulnerabilities need others to resonate with their feelings rather than disconnect or become emotionally disengaged (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

It needs to be noted that disconnections are an inevitable part of all relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). At times, all individuals are challenged to stay in connection when they feel drawn to exercise strategies for disconnection. The process of resisting such strategies, by moving into a creative place for enlarging mutual empathy, is essential for developing relational resilience. Enlarging mutual empathy and fostering relational resilience is an ongoing task within this model. The more group members are able to be creative in this way, the more relational confidence is established. This is another way of describing the oscillation of trust in groups.

As hard as group leaders work to establish trust, group members inevitably adhere to their distorted expectations of how others will treat and respond to them. In this model, these expectations are not thought of as irrational, unfounded, or unreasonable. Rather, they are based on years of experiences, sometimes in the context of abusive relationships wrought with repeated and chronic disconnections. The challenge for group leaders is to help group members recognize relationships where mutual engagement is possible, in spite of their expectations. These expectations of the outcomes of relationships are what Miller and Stiver (1995) referred to as relational images.

### **Relational Images**

According to Miller and Stiver (1995), relational images are expressions of our expectations and fears of how others will respond to us. In essence, they relate to our expectations of the outcomes of relationships



when we make personal strides toward authenticity. If we go through our lives and continue to engage in relationships where we are denied empathic possibilities, our relational images become confirmed. Our patterns of relating then become outdated, “fixed and difficult to alter” (Miller & Stiver, 1995, p. 3).

Outdated relational images are frustrating and binding because they negate the emergence for new relational possibilities. In reality, individuals may have more relational possibilities than they are able to construe. In groups, members create the possibilities of the here and now as they struggle with the disappointments, abuses, and violations of the past.

### **STAGES OF RELATIONAL MOVEMENT IN GROUPS**

What does relational movement look like in group psychotherapy? Jordan (1992) described a process of relational resilience in therapy that includes movement into supported vulnerability, flexibility, empowerment and conflict, relational confidence, and relational awareness.

#### **Supported Vulnerability**

The first stage of therapy, one that is unique to the relational model, is one of supported vulnerability and refers to specific means of establishing safety. Jordan (1992) stated that “dependability, respect, care and empathic listening contribute to a sense of safety” (p. 7). Group leaders can facilitate a sense of safety by having group members commit to the creative yet difficult process of working through disconnections.

It is anticipated that group members will be able to recognize and articulate how they might need support and from whom they need this support. It is also important that the group leader have group members explore and share their patterns of disconnection and openly explore what types of issues keep them from seeking support. Their feelings could include shame, pride, fear, or anger. In this phase, it is important for group members to identify their relational patterns and images so the group can recognize old patterns when they emerge. This is often a vulnerable time for groups. Group members who struggle with self-awareness and are unable to describe their patterns for disconnection may only be able to identify them with the help of the group leader and group members at a later time.

### **Flexibility**

According to Jordan (1992), as the group begins to develop its history, a deeper sense of trust or relational confidence is established. This movement enables group members to become “more differentiated and self protective in decisions about whom to trust and in what ways” (p. 7). To be differentiated in this model refers “to a process that encompasses increasing levels of complexity, choice, fluidity, and articulation within the context of human relationship” (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991, p. 60). They become empowered to make healthier choices regarding with whom to build relationships. In this process, group members begin to question their respective relational images and become more open to examining their patterns of disconnection.

Group members must begin to distinguish between strategies for disconnection in growth-fostering relationships, where reengagement is desired and necessary for relational transformation, from strategies for survival in nonmutual relationships (Jordan & Dooley, 2000). Knowing this distinction allows individuals to develop their relational capacities with group members who are mutually committed to the creative work necessary to move through disconnections. As a part of this learning, group members may not only choose to make different relational choices in their lives but may also come to gauge the degree of engagement and the level of vulnerability they extend into nonmutual relationships that they feel unable to affect.

### **Empowerment and Conflict**

Managing relational movement, whether in growth-fostering relationships or in nonmutual relationships, can be painful. Group leaders are especially challenged when they experience a need to disconnect from the group during times of conflict. Jordan (1992) referred to this challenge as “holding the tension” between differing perceptions and experiences (p. 6).

“Holding,” in this context, means that group leaders may find themselves the “lone container of hope” for the group, the visionary who has to “hold the possibility for relational resilience” (Jordan, 1992, p. 6) until this responsibility can be more fully shared between group members. It is particularly empowering for group members when they become increasingly able to hold these tensions and find new ways of working creatively through disconnections on their own. This creative energy leads to increased mutuality, as group members become more able to represent their individual experiences more authentically.

Jordan (1992) made the point that people are often relieved to let others truly know them, to be all of who they are in relationship. As group members begin to relate more authentically and empathically, they begin to understand themselves more clearly. This clarity results in the development of increased relational capacities and relational confidence.

### **Relational Confidence and Relational Resilience**

The relationship between relational capacities and relational confidence is like an upward spiral. The better able group members become at reworking disconnections and empathic failures, the better they can manage disconnections. According to this model, the ability to manage disengagement is an indicator of one's relational resilience.

## **ISSUES RELATED TO THE APPLICATION OF THE RELATIONAL-CULTURAL MODEL TO GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY**

### **Appropriate Group Topics and Populations**

Relational groups are appropriate for addressing and serving a broad spectrum of issues and populations. Group work issues related to personal growth (for men and women), grief, sexual abuse/assault recovery, addiction, relationship violence, divorce, and eating disorders are all examples of groups that lend themselves well to a relational analysis (Fedele, 1994; Jordan & Dooley, 2000). As highlighted earlier in the article, many of these issues are manifested as forms of strategies for disconnection. As such, a goal of relational groups involves a discourse regarding the central relational paradox and how it may play out in specific groups.

In addition, this model can be applied in a variety of settings to meet the needs of varied populations. Jordan and Dooley (2000) reported that this model has been successful in schools, prisons, housing projects, work environments, residential treatment programs, and mental health settings. Selecting potential group members from these various settings involves a prescreening process addressed in the following section.

### Prescreening and Orientation

An educational component is central to applying the relational model to groups. This component involves an orientation to the model's language. It is important that potential group members have appropriate levels of self-awareness, an ability to be influenced by others, and cognitive and communication capacities related to these skills. These three factors are central to understanding the experience of the individual and collective relational movement as a part of the group experience.

During the orientation phase, group members learn relational language that guides them to look at the relational dynamics they bring to the group. Depending on the type of group, members' strategies for disconnection are sometimes identified as a central theme (e.g., patterns of addiction). One of the key benefits to having the ability to identify relational dynamics in groups, particularly during times of disconnections, is that it facilitates a context for dismantling shame. This dismantling empowers group members with the tools to begin to creatively work toward rebuilding mutual empathy and, subsequently, a reconnection.

The following questions can serve as a helpful guide to orienting members to relational group process:

1. What are your strategies for disconnection and how might they be exercised in the group?
2. Given your strategies for disconnection, how have you experienced the central relational paradox?
3. What are some of your relational images, and what experiences shaped these images?
4. How have these relational images kept you out of connection, and how might they affect your participation in this group?
5. What part(s) of yourself have you left out of relationships?
6. How has inauthentic relating affected your sense of self-worth and relational confidence?
7. In terms of authentic relating, what parts of yourself will you be challenged to bring into the group?
8. What are some sociocultural influences that have affected your capacity/ability to develop/maintain mutuality in your relationships?
9. In response to such sociocultural influences, what types of strategies have you used for survival? For resistance? For transformation? For managing shame?
10. How does the sociocultural makeup of the group affect your sense of safety regarding authentic relating and mutual engagement?
11. What relational strengths do you bring to the group?

### Relational Group Leadership

Relational group leaders are guided by a philosophy that places an emphasis on them “working more as an egalitarian ‘coparticipant’ who collaborates with patients to help them develop or construct new (non-neurotic) understandings of their experience rather than on the therapist as an authority who knows best what is on the patient’s mind” (Wright, 2000, p. 183). This philosophy also indicates that it is the quality of the presence of the group leader and not the use of interpretive theory, which differentiates relational group leaders from traditional group leaders. Even leaders of groups intended to increase “relationship functioning” (e.g., attachment theory) value their role of clarifying, conceptualizing, and interpreting group members’ behavior as central to change (Pistole, 1997, p. 11).

Relational group leaders use many of the same facilitative techniques as do leaders of other types of groups. There is, however, a particular focus on leadership skills aimed at enhancing connection and engagement. As discussed in a previous section, relational group leaders are often challenged to hold relational tension and the possibility for reconnection during times of disconnection and conflict. This is operationalized as the group leader’s ability to be empathic with both sides of the central relational paradox. Specifically, this means that just as we are empathic with one’s yearning for connection, we are also challenged to be empathic with one’s need to exercise strategies for disconnection, including our own. Therapeutically, empathic responses to an individual’s need to disconnect or to seek safety affects his or her capacity for self-empathy and increased authentic engagement.

The group leader’s participation and quality of presence as described in the relational model is indicative of a degree of vulnerability not always addressed in other models. In the relational model, it is assumed that group leaders grow with group members in ways that are manifested by “enhanced empathic possibilities, capacities to stay present with a wide range of complex and difficult feelings in herself and others, and greater freedom to stay in the process and bring more and more of herself into the relationship” (Miller et al., 1991, p. 1). As a result of mutual and authentic engagement, empathic bridges are established, and all participants, including the group leader, have the potential to develop increased relational capacities as a central goal of relational groups.

### Group Goals in the Relational Model

Group theoreticians such as Bion, Foulkes, Lewin, and Moreno (as cited in Wright, 2000) have written about variations of the theme of “mutual influence” (p. 184) for decades. In spite of this, there has been a lack of emphasis, appreciation, and value placed on the development of relational competence in lieu of autonomy and independence indicative of Western individualism.

Using relational language, individualist group goals can be reframed and expanded to address the essentials of relational competence. Relational group goals may be best understood in a context that contrasts them with the language of some traditional group goals identified by Corey (2000). To demonstrate this, we have reframed the following:

1. Autonomy is reframed as increasing one’s ability to represent himself or herself more fully and authentically in relationships. It is the growing into more complex relationships and relational networks, not away from them, that is identified in this model as one of our most challenging developmental tasks.
2. Self-awareness is reframed as developing self-empathy for the purpose of increased authentic relating and the development of an understanding of one’s relational movement, which is done in, not out of, engagement.
3. Self-worth is reframed as increasing relational confidence experienced as feeling good about one’s relational capacities and one’s ability to affect others.
4. Conflict resolution is reframed as acquiring the ability to move into healthy conflict and to resist the sources of disconnection while understanding that conflict is worked through (not resolved) only to the degree that the parties are able to move through their differences toward mutuality and ultimately into a renewed connection.
5. Self-knowledge is reframed as obtaining clarity about self, other, and the relationship during the experience of connections in growth-fostering relationships. Our unique identity is defined in, not out of, relationship.
6. Trust is reframed in others as becoming increasingly able to move into a place of supported vulnerability in mutual relationships where we are able to build new relational images. It is learning to trust one’s self and others’ capacity for and interest in relational movement. It is also a trust in the relational process.
7. Self-respect is reframed as becoming able to name and dismantle our respective sources of shame-based oppression and marginalization and to build supportive relationships that serve as a source of strength and resilience.
8. Personal growth is reframed as experiencing relational transformation inclusive of the growth of others, the relationship, and ourselves.
9. Self-confidence is reframed as developing relational confidence, which comes from the experience of going full circle in relationships and into relational transformation.

10. Self-preservation or resistance is reframed as understanding the playing out of the central relational paradox, while respectfully honoring one's fear and vulnerability while simultaneously yearning for connection.

The following section illuminates relational dynamics and goals as illustrated in the case of Sandra. An analysis of these dynamics will follow.

### CASE STUDY

Sandra (pseudonym) was a European American graduate counseling student who was participating in a personal growth group as a part of her curriculum. She was in her early 40s, was separated, and had two young children. She had struggled with depression for some time and had undergone intensive therapy, some successful and some not. She was also able to articulate and conceptualize the issues presented by her fellow group members. The group members often expressed how moved they had felt by her support and often solicited her feedback. Given all this, it was difficult to construe that anybody wanted anything different from her.

One evening, about midsemester, while Sandra was interpreting the experience of one of her classmates, one of her fellow group members made the assertion that nobody knew anything about her. Other members chimed in by sharing that although they appreciated her support, there was an imbalance of vulnerability and risk taking in the group. Members expressed they had become increasingly uncomfortable with the dynamics in the group by stating, "We would certainly like to interpret your behavior, but you haven't once given us anything to go on!" Did she think she was better than everybody else? After all, "We are all counseling students here and you act like you've got us all figured out!" The group was suddenly defensive, confused, and on a downward spiral.

What emerged was a shared sense of suspicion and frustration over having been "walled off" from Sandra's experiences. Sandra was seemingly stunned and hurt over what transpired. In fact, she was moved in ways that nobody could have predicted. Sandra sat, for some time, with what the group had shared. The group sat with her in a space filled with trepidation, regret, yearning, confusion, and uncertainty.

When Sandra was able to respond, she shared that she was first and foremost surprised by their response. She expressed a desire to be more present in the ways they were asking but was not quite sure how to do it.

She shared that she had always taken care of other people and reported receiving a great deal of satisfaction from helping people out in this way. She expressed confusion over having worked so hard in the group only to be asked for more. This was the first time she was certain that she did not have anything more to give.

As she began to move into a real place of vulnerability, the group moved with her. Clearly affected by what she had shared, the group empathically responded by telling her that in spite of their anger, they simply wanted to know her better. They wanted to know who she was and what it was that she needed. Deeply moved and overwhelmed by this, she began to tearfully share that she did not experience herself as worthy of being known and often questioned whether she was of any value at all. Again, the group sat with the experience.

As the group began to reengage, they did so with increased clarity not only about Sandra but about themselves as well. As they began to reconnect, they became increasingly able to explore deeper issues that led the group into more authentic engagement. On this particular occasion, the topic moved to a shared sense of unworthiness and shame. They explored how shame had worked to keep them all invisible in some ways. Having been truly seen and tended to by Sandra seemed to have exacerbated the group members' sense of vulnerability and shame. They shared that this experience felt both profound and frightening. Sandra's "tending to" was met with a mix of appreciation and discomfort.

As the group moved back into a renewed connection by having named their shame and their yearning for more authentic relating, they recommitted to continued efforts toward mutuality. Over the life of the group, members continued to move through disconnections, at times with great difficulty. As the group members became increasingly authentic, they also became more vulnerable. Again and again, group members exercised strategies for disconnection. Each time, the group members' ability to respond empathically to these strategies grew with increased relational resilience, confidence, and awareness.

### A RELATIONAL ANALYSIS

The movement from disconnection to reconnection and into an enhanced connection (see Figure 1) was clearly evident in this case. As the group struggled for more authentic and mutual engagement, they risked disconnection. For members, the experience of having been cared for by Sandra evoked a deep sense of vulnerability that was manifested in both their yearning for a deeper connection with her and their need to



move into a place of supported vulnerability as a group. By asking for more authentic engagement with her, they paradoxically risked moving into a disconnection. This particular conflict was both timely and constructive. Although the group had experienced some mutual and authentic engagement, something seemed to be missing. In this instance, that “something” was Sandra.

Before Sandra responded, the tension in the group was intense. All the qualities of a disconnection were there: a lack of energy, confusion as to what would happen next, a sense of immobility, regret and shame, and an immediate need to hide, to undo what had seemingly been done. There was also a sense of dread that there would be no movement and that the disconnection would be chronic and go unresolved.

The risk of chronic and unresolved disconnections is always a grave concern. In this case, Sandra could have responded in any number of ways that would have led the group into a downward spiral. She could have attempted to elicit guilt, given that she had “done so much” for them. She could have accused them of attacking her and chosen to retreat in response to shame and a need for safety. The list of potential strategies for disconnection is endless.

Moving through disconnections is done through creative work toward mutual empathy. Many group exercises are, in fact, designed to bring forth increased authentic relating between group members. First and foremost, disconnections need to be named. This is an example of how using relational language can spark creative movement toward mutuality. Sometimes groups know exactly what needs to be done to move toward a reconnection. Other times, disconnections feel so immobilizing that the prospect of any resolution seems impossible or at best bleak. This too, needs to be named.

In these cases, simply naming a shared sense of hopelessness and exacerbation moves groups into a place of supported vulnerability. By doing so, a new “place of meeting” is created. In this model it is essential that group leaders participate authentically by joining with the collective sense of vulnerability, while simultaneously holding a vision of new relational possibilities for the group.

In this example, Sandra moved quickly into a place of vulnerability, and the group supported her. For Sandra, this experience was transformative in that it challenged her now-outdated relational image of herself as unworthy of being known. This experience was also in conflict with her belief and expectation that others are uninterested in her as a person.

As a result of moving through the disconnection, she was challenged to enhance her relational capacities with other group members who

were willing to and needing to engage with her on this level. This engagement moved the group toward reconnection and into a discourse about the role that shame plays in their relationships. During this time, the “five good things” experienced in growth-fostering connections were evident.

As noted in Figure 1, one aspect of connection is empowerment. For group members, being a cocreator of relational movement is incredibly powerful. For the first time, a group member, in this case Sandra, finds that she is not invisible, that she matters, and that instead of feeling chronically unable to affect nonmutual relationships, she now has the experience of being “a creative and connecting force” (Stiver, Rosen, Surrey, & Miller, 2001). In essence, being able to participate in the cocreation of mutual empathy is what leads to reconnection and ultimately relational transformation (Stiver et al., 2001).

The group was energized and eager to share as they moved toward reconnection. They shared with a sense of clarity about themselves and Sandra and clearly understood what had just transpired. They felt more connected and better about themselves for having gone full circle. They were also excited about the possibilities that lie in other relationships outside of group. They had all learned that by moving into a place of authenticity and supported vulnerability, they could take better care of themselves and of relationships. The group had clearly met some of the goals set forth for relational groups.

## CONCLUSION

Relational groups can provide a context by which individuals can begin to heal from the effects of nonmutual relational and sociocultural experiences. Nonmutual relationships exist in social, personal, parental, professional, and familial contexts. These nonmutual experiences are often normalized in a culture where privilege and marginalization serve to make some individuals' experiences more normative and visible than those of others (Dooley & Fedele, 1999; Hartling et al., 2000; Jordan, 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Walker, 2001). Naming the effects of nonmutual relationships, particularly in group psychotherapy, empowers individuals who have moved into a place of condemned isolation the opportunity to reengage and to heal through the experience of mutual empathy.

The relational model, as it applies to group psychotherapy, provides a new perspective from which to understand the dynamics of group work. By reframing the dynamics of group through this relational lens, group

leaders and group members are able to see, experience, and value the psychological growth that occurs within growth-fostering relationships (Jordan et al., 1991). The relational model stresses the cocreation of an environment of mutuality and safety that encourages and supports all participants to bring more authentic parts of themselves into the group and, ultimately, into relationships with others.

## REFERENCES

- Corey, G. (2000). *Theory and practice of group counseling* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Dooley, C., & Fedele, N. (1999). *Mothers and sons: Raising relational boys* (Work in Progress No. 84). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Fedele, N. (1994). *Relationships in groups: Connection, resonance and paradox* (Work in Progress No. 69). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Hartling, L. M., Rosen, W., Walker, M., & Jordan, J. V. (2000). *Shame and humiliation: From isolation to relational transformation* (Work in Progress No. 88). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Jordan, J. V. (1992). *Relational resilience* (Work in Progress No. 57). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Jordan, J. V. (1997). Relational development: Therapeutic implications of empathy and shame. In J. V. Jordan (Ed.), *Women's growth in diversity* (pp. 138-161). New York: Guilford.
- Jordan, J. V. (1999). *Toward connection and competence* (Work in Progress No. 83). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Jordan, J. V., & Dooley, C. (2000). *Relational practice in action: A group manual*. Wellesley, MA: Stone Center.
- Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (1991). *Women's growth in connection: Writings from the stone center*. New York: Guilford.
- Miller, J. B. (1976). *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston: Beacon.
- Miller, J. B. (1986). *What do we mean by relationships?* (Work in Progress No. 22). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B., Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. I. (1991). *Some misconceptions and reconceptions of a relational approach* (Work in Progress No. 49). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B., Jordan, J. V., Stiver, I. P., Walker, M., Surrey, J., & Eldridge, N. S. (1999). *Therapists' authenticity* (Work in Progress No. 82). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. P. (1993). A relational approach to understanding women's lives and problems. *Psychiatric Annals*, 23(8), 424-431.
- Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. P. (1995). *Relational images and their meanings in psychotherapy* (Work in Progress No. 74). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Miller, J. B. & Stiver, I. P. (1997). *The healing connection: How women form relationships in therapy and in life*. Boston: Beacon.
- Pistole, C. M. (1997). Attachment theory: Contributions to group work. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 22(1), 7-21.

- Stiver, I. P., Rosen, R. B., Surrey, J., & Miller, J. B. (2001). *Creative moments in relational cultural therapy* (Work in Progress No. 92). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Surrey, J. L. (1987). *Relationship and empowerment* (Work in Progress No. 30). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Walker, M. (2001). *When racism gets personal: Toward relational healing* (Work in Progress No. 93). Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Paper Series.
- Wright, F. (2000). The use of the self in group leadership: A relational perspective. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 5(20), 181-189.