

Discussion of “Movement Toward Mutuality”

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Creating New Relational Possibilities, Creating Change

Eliminating humiliation and human rights violations cannot be accomplished through individual change, but through relational-cultural change. A relational lens not only offers a larger framework for understanding the complexities of humiliation and human rights, it leads us to explore the qualities of relating that promote movement and change in relationship that can prevent humiliation as well as promote human rights. RCT suggests that constructive movement or positive change in relationship (a.k.a., growth) depends on three essential, inseparable factors: *mutual empathy*, *mutual empowerment*, and *movement toward mutuality* (Jordan, 1986; J. B. Miller, 2002; Surrey, 1987). For shorthand, one might call these the “3Ms” of growth-fostering relationships. Mutual empathy is a two-way dynamic process that involves openness and a joining in relationship that allows both (or all) people in the relationship to know and respond to the feelings and thoughts of the other person. Jordan (1986) describes mutual empathy as:

...the affective-cognitive experience of understanding another person...[It] carries with it some notion of motivation to understand another’s meaning system from his/her frame of reference and ongoing and sustained interest in the inner world of the other. (p. 2)

Mutual empathy *is not a relational courtesy*; it is a sophisticated skill that clears a critical pathway toward greater clarity and knowledge in relationships. It is an “empathic bridge” (Jordan, 1992) on which people from different perspectives can meet and engage in the dialogue necessary to create change without employing power-over tactics or inducing feelings of shame or humiliation. It requires the practice of “radical respect” (Walker, 2004), which presumes that all human beings deserve freedom from contempt and deserve to be treated with dignity. This may be the type of respect that Miller and Savoie (S. M. Miller & Savoie, 2002) suggest leads to rights which lead to respect. Mutual empathy allows people to bring more and more of themselves into the relationship. It allows people to authentically represent their experience, that is, to “show up” in the relationship (Walker, 2004). This is what promotes greater clarity and

knowledge about each person's experience, and this knowledge is essential for creating constructive, enduring change.

Mutual empowerment grows out of mutual empathy (J. B. Miller & Stiver, 1997; Surrey, 1987). When both (or all) people feel seen, known, heard, and respected in relationship, they begin to generate mutual empowerment. Like mutual empathy, mutual empowerment is a two-way dynamic process in relating, however, mutual empowerment involves the feeling that both (or all) people can have an impact on the relationship, can influence and shape the development of the relationship. Janet Surrey (1987) observes that:

The capacity to be “moved” and to respond and to “move” the other represents the fundamental core of relational empowerment. (p. 4)

J. B. Miller (1986) proposes that mutual empowerment is characterized by at least *five good things*: 1) a sense of energy or zest that comes from connecting with another person(s); 2) An increased ability and motivation to take action in the relationship as well as in other situations; 3) Increased knowledge of oneself and the other person(s) and of the relationship; 4) An increased sense of worth; 5) A desire for more connection beyond the particular one. Most of us who have suffered from disempowering, disconnecting, or humiliating relationships are readily familiar with the opposite experiences of relating. Disempowering relationships lead people to feel drained, immobilized, confused, worthless, and increasingly disconnected or isolated. These types of relationships discourage and obstruct movement, change, and growth. In contrast, mutually empowering relationships open the way to new relational possibilities and new opportunities for growth.

Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment lead to a third key ingredient of positive change: *movement toward mutuality*. Jordan (1986) describes mutuality as the experience of:

...both [people] affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other's state. (p. 2)

Movement toward mutuality in relationship is movement toward emotional and cognitive action *that benefits both or all people* in a relationship (J. B. Miller & Stiver, 1997). Nonmutual relationships—e.g., dominant/subordinate, power-over relationships—are relationships in which emotional and cognitive actions primarily benefit the more powerful or dominant participant in the relationship. Nonmutual relationships obstruct the growth of all people, but particularly the

growth and development of subordinate or marginalized groups. In nonmutual relationships, subordinate individuals or groups must exert massive amounts of energy to: 1) fend off exploitation; 2) gain access to necessary material resources (education, housing, transportation); and 3) to protect themselves from injuries intentionally or inadvertently inflicted by the dominant group. Nonmutual relationships also obstruct the growth of members of the dominant group because, among other things, dominants must exert massive amounts of energy to: 1) maintain their power-over subordinates; 2) they must constantly protect their access to material resources; and 3) distance and insulate themselves from real or imagined threats from subordinates. In nonmutual relationships the dominants tend to believe that subordinates should do all the changing, *e.g.*, women should be more like men, blacks should be more like whites, non-Western-European countries should be more like Western-European countries, “underdeveloped countries” should be more like developed countries, etc. Furthermore, in nonmutual relationships dominants can easily convince subordinates that they need to do all the changing because dominants set the standards by which subordinates are evaluated as deficient. This inflicts another form of humiliation on subordinates, the humiliation of unjustified self-contempt.

J. B. Miller (2002) points out that positive “change requires mutuality in movement” (p. 4), *i.e.*, all people in the relationship must be willing to change. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment lead people to believe that it is possible to create mutuality in movement, that it is possible to take emotional and cognitive action that benefits all people in the relationship. Even when there are temporary inequalities in relationships (*e.g.*, teacher-student, parent-child) or functional hierarchies operating in relationships (*e.g.*, a pilot flying a plane, a conductor leading an orchestra, a president leading a country), movement toward mutuality, or the growth of all people in the relationship, can be promoted, though people are growing in different ways. Movement toward mutuality is achieved through building mutually empathic, mutually empowering relationships. Here are some examples of organizations creating constructive change through building mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and movement toward mutuality in relationships.

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