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Work in Progress

Race, Self, and Society: Relational Challenges in a Culture of Disconnection

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About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and antiracism consultation. Her clinical practice and research projects involve developing linkages 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

A fundamental premise of Relational/Cultural (R/C) Theory is that we grow our “selves” through action in relationship with others. Because contemporary American culture is shaped by a legacy of race-based stratification, action in relationship is fraught with risks of disconnection and violation. For Euro-American women, these risks may include silencing, abnegation, and moral ambivalence. For women of color these risks may involve disconnection from the physical self, as well as emotional and spiritual disempowerment. When the dominant culture is an agent of disconnection, the resulting relational images are such that a healthy sense of a racial-ethnic self is undermined. It has been noted that this multi-leveled disconnection poses the most serious threat to empowering alliance among different race women.

Three questions provide the organizing themes of this paper. First, how can we use R/C Theory to explain the causes of racially patterned interactions in women’s lives? Second, how might R/C Theory help us to understand the effects of racism on women’s lives? And third, what does a relational world view tell us about possibilities for healing and reconciliation? This paper will also explore options for moving beyond self-limiting racial-ethnic constructions to expanded possibilities for growth in relationship.

Historically, relationships among different race women in the United States have been filled with disconnection. While individual women have made brave and undeniable efforts to bridge the racial and ethnic differences in pursuit of common goals, there is little evidence of sustained and broad-based movement to overcome the contradictions of living in a patriarchal power structure. The observation has been made that differences of race among women, and the implications of these differences, present the most serious challenge to the mobilization of women’s joint power (Lorde, 1984). Comas-Diaz and Greene (1994) assert that skin color is a determinant variable which differentiates the status of women of color from women of European or white extraction. The effects of the differentiation are such that the dynamics of exclusion, marginality, and internecine oppression countermand women’s tendencies to strive for good connection. Given the premise that women organize a sense of self around the ability to make and maintain good connections (Miller, 1988), these dynamics are all the more problematic. Lorde (1984) suggests that when there are no models for relating across difference as equals, women may seek to ignore, copy, or destroy difference. In this paper I will examine the historical context of contemporary contradictions and explore the implications of Relational/Cultural (R/C) Theory for developing models of relational competence across racial difference.

Scenario 1

A true story was reported to me by a woman (Beverly) who is an American black woman in her mid-thirties. One day as she was waiting for service at the perfume counter in Nieman Marcus, another woman, who seemed to have been browsing in the general area, also came and stood at the counter. This woman was a tall, strawberry blonde, American, white woman who also seemed to be in her mid-thirties. She

was accompanied by a male whom Beverly presumed to be her husband. After a few moments, the sales clerk, also an American white woman came up to the counter, turned to Beverly, and very pleasantly asked, "May I help you?" At this, the white woman who was the shopper, also turned to Beverly and said, "You've got to wait your turn. I was over here first." Beverly realized that this was possibly true, but felt genuinely affronted by the woman's tone and mannerism. She said to the woman, "I'm not sure what your problem is, but you're yelling at the wrong person." The other woman replied, "Why don't you just take a chill pill?" And she thrust her purchase toward the sales clerk. The discourse became decidedly juvenile at that point, as Beverly replied, "No, you take a chill pill." Without a word, the sales clerk took the other woman's merchandise and quickly disappeared. Beverly then heard the woman mutter to her companion, "This really makes me angry. Who does she think she is? You can't go anywhere now . . . they're everywhere you go." Beverly responded, "What 'they'? Could you possibly be talking about ugly, frizz-dried blondes? You only think that because of all of the mirrors in here." This response was followed by stony glares and hate-filled silence.

The sales clerk returned with the completed transaction, and the other woman was escorted away by her companion. The sales clerk apologized profusely, saying she couldn't understand the woman's rudeness. My friend quickly absolved the sales clerk of any responsibility in the encounter and commented that the woman obviously had problems she wanted to take out on the world. When Beverly reported the incident to me a couple of weeks later, she was still deeply offended. She was more than offended; she was sickened by both the woman's and her own behavior during an encounter that had deteriorated into racially driven nastiness. Beverly, a self-described feminist with experience in successful arbitration, only compounded her despondency by becoming totally de-skilled in the moment, completely incapable of a more intentional interaction with another woman.

R/C Theory is a world view that speaks a deep truth about women's relationships; it allows us to make sense out of the seeming contradictions in women's lives without pathologizing women as inadequate, dependent, or counter-dependent. By affirming relationality as a central feature in women's development (Miller, 1988), R/C Theory provides a liberating language for conceptions of self—a language that says clearly and powerfully that to grow through action in relationship with others is both

necessary and good.

R/C Theory also exposes more sobering and painful realities. Encounters, such as the one described by Beverly, are not altogether rare. You may, in fact, be thinking now of similar conflictual experiences in which you have been either a witness or a participant. Whenever I am involved in racially charged conflicts, either as a witness or as a "main character," I am compelled to grapple with the complexity of relational challenges in a culture of disconnection.

One of the central tenets of R/C Theory is that the ability to make and maintain relationships is central to a woman's sense of self and well-being (Miller, 1988). In the midst of racially charged conflict, however, it is often difficult to see women as the people on this planet more likely to yearn for empathic connection. Certainly it is difficult to see this yearning in Beverly's story. Nonetheless, incidents such as these are instructive because they lead us to ask three questions: *First*, how can we use R/C Theory to explain the causes of racism in women's lives? *Second*, how might R/C Theory help us to understand the effects of racism on women's lives? *Third*, what does a relational world view tell us about possibilities for healing and reconciliation? It is important to recognize that racism manifests not just in the hyperbolic acting out that we are sometimes called to witness (or in which we may sometimes find ourselves entangled). Frequently and also more insidiously, it is present in the inability to represent oneself with authenticity across racial differences and in the resistance to make more of oneself available for growth and change within the context of cross-racial relationships.

Many factors contribute to cross-racial tensions among women, including the following.

Power-over Culture/Stratified Difference

People who make the rounds of diversity conferences, as trainers or as participants, are very familiar with the frequently quoted maxim: Race prejudice plus power equals racism. To the extent that this saying is true, I could think of no better place to begin examining the causes of racism among women than in a review of Jean Baker Miller's reflections on power (Miller, 1976). Miller writes that, like all concepts and actions of a dominant group, power may be distorted and skewed. This distortion is manifest in a constant need to maintain an irrational dominance: a dominance built on a foundation which includes restriction of another group. Dominance, then, engenders conflict and simultaneously seeks to

suppress it. In speaking to issues of dominance and power, Miller has laid the foundation for a more thorough discussion on race, self, and society. It has become almost cliché to lament the relational disconnections arising out of racial/cultural *difference* in the United States. It is *not*, however, the differences that plague us. It is rather that the differences are *profoundly stratified*. This stratification is the consequence of systematic miseducation that teaches us that white is superior and black is inferior. The *stratification*, not the *difference*, constrains our capacity for authenticity and undermines our desire for connection. The stratification distorts our answers to the questions: “Who am I? Who is this other person? Who are we together?” These distortions, arising out of stratification manifest not only in grand political terms, but also on the level of more mundane, everyday discourse. In fact, I believe that it is often on this very basic, visceral level that the stratifications have the most destructive impact on women’s relationships.

Scenario 2

A few years ago, I led a group in which women were discussing culture and race. During the course of the discussion, the women started to talk about aspects of themselves that they particularly enjoyed. One woman, whom I will call Amy, reported that one reason she enjoyed being white was because she didn’t have to do “s***loads of stuff to her hair in order to look good.” Amy went on to explain that, as a college student, she had shared a dorm with many black women and had endured the stench that filled the building every time one of them decided to straighten her hair. She expressed some level of sympathy that black women could have such low self-esteem that they would go to extreme and probably painful lengths to look white.

By the time Amy finished her input, a reasonable person might have concluded that the whole U.S. commercial hair products industry was supported entirely by black women. For the most part, Amy was well intentioned and about as relationally skilled as anyone else in the group. Her comments, however, served to illustrate the processes of distortion that can occur in a racially stratified society. She had internalized a stratified cultural aesthetic based on the premise of better than/less than. Therefore, she interpreted what might have been a matter of personal style, taste, convenience, or experimentation as low self-esteem.

What, exactly, does a discourse on power have to

do with hair grooming? It has to do with the *power of naming*: the power to name what’s good, what’s bad, what’s beautiful, what’s normal—what is “minority” or “diverse.” In Amy’s mind, *different* translated into a better than/less than stratification. Physical appearance and hair grooming practices among women are not simply *different*, one is preferred and the other is demeaned. The important part of this rather ordinary conversation was that one mode of grooming is validated by the dominant cultural aesthetic; the other is subject to being interpreted as an expression of psychological fragility.

We are a multicultural society, and we are also a culture of disconnection. It is not problematic that we are of many different colors and cultures. The problem lies in the fact that the dominant culture has the power to define one group as better than the other. Inevitably, certain relational distortions arise from dominant/subordinate or stratified relationships. The dominant culture distorts images of self, images of other, and necessarily, images of relational possibilities. Unfortunately, there is another, more insidious, consequence of this differential valuing.

In a patriarchal society (in United States culture), all women of any race are subject to the oppressive notion that their worth is based largely and sometimes exclusively on physical appearance. From a very early age, young girls receive the message that they must be beautiful in order to enjoy popularity or love or even fresh breath. Added to the devaluing that all women share is a more particularized version of the cultural beauty imperative that says, “How you look is what’s most important; and how *you* look can never be good enough. Given your distance from the dominant aesthetic (whether typified by skin color, hair texture, physical features or some combination of the three), you will always be viewed as comparably less than.”

All women are subject to the debilitating effects of white male domination; women of color exist in a culture that devalues blackness as well. On this very primitive, sensate, and often unconscious level, the stratification begins and has the potential to aggravate any of the inevitable conflicts in which women find themselves. If women were to build healthy connections within a multiracial context, issues of color and culture stratification would need to be earnestly addressed. It may be very tempting for women who enjoy educational, class, professional, or political privilege to dismiss these issues as irrelevant and incompatible with a feminist world view. It is important to remember, however, that professional and class privilege (i.e., the ability to attend a conference and be surrounded by colleagues who

share similar political values) provide comforts and buffers most women in the United States are denied. Privileged women may therefore be more vulnerable to this cultural imperative.

The following excerpt from Carolyn Rodgers' (1968) poem, "I Have Been Hungry," illustrates how the dominant aesthetic both reflects and exploits historical stratification among women.

and you white girl
shall I call you sister now
can we share any secrets of sameness,
any singularity of goals . . .
you, white girl with the head that
perpetually tosses over-rated curls
while I religiously toss my over-rated behind
you white girl
I am yet suspicious of . . .

Collective Biography and Relational Images

In addition to illustrating relational consequences of color and culture stratification, Rodgers' poem highlights another significant challenge to women's relational development in multiracial contexts. Because of our specific histories as women in the United States, we bring to each encounter both an individual and a collective biography. Miller asserts that each participant in an encounter brings her own state of psychological organization *filled* with conceptions about what she *wants to do or could do or should do* (1976). Some research suggests, however, that any formulation of personality or any description of psychological organization is *incomplete*— if it does not include the racially informed meanings and images that have developed over time (Helms, 1990). In other words, what I have come to believe about myself, as a woman of primarily African descent, has a profound impact on my personality formation and, more precisely, on my relational development. Women's shared historical legacy in the United States is that we have been denied access to full participation in the systems and relationships that affect our lives; on a very concrete level, we have been unable to fully participate in setting the terms of how we will relate to the larger world. For women of primarily European descent, this exclusion was traditionally justified by promises of care, protection, and admiration. It is also our historical legacy that the pedestal and the promises, however illusory they may be, have *not* been extended to women of primarily African descent. In fact, the terms of the relationship were such that not only were African women not protected, but their very subjugation served to support, on one level, the

privilege of European women and, on another level, the degradation of all women. This is called a *set-up*. From the inception of this country, different race women have been set-up to wage conflict on terms defined by others. Under these conditions and through this historical conditioning, we develop relational images that hold meaning for us about who we are and who the other is. Such historically conditioned images may constrain our capacity to seriously know what we want, need, and desire in relationships with each other. The historical biography brought to contemporary encounters is one of non-mutuality, one of restricted access to self and to the other.

There are *four* specific consequences of cultural non-mutuality. *First*, under these conditions, American black and American white women become abstractions not only to each other, but also to themselves. *Second*, abstracted images become frozen in time, impeding the development of new relational images and new relational possibilities. *Third*, stratification contaminates conflict; under stratified conditions, it becomes very difficult to mutually engage the task of growth through resolution. *Fourth*, with limited opportunities for action in relationship, our capacity for authenticity, and thus for connection is seriously compromised.

Effects of Racism on Women's Relational Development

When we examine the relational consequences of racial stratification on women's lives, it is again helpful to review Jean Baker Miller's reflections on conflict. Miller (1976) has written that conflict is both inevitable and necessary for human growth. Under conditions of racial/cultural stratification, the basic dominant/subordinate mode of waging conflict—the mode of disconnection—is likely to appear. Furthermore, the conflict may be expressed in extreme forms, as one seeks to hold onto to a sense of well-being and safety either by overwhelming and shaming the *other*, or quite paradoxically, by silencing and shaming oneself.

In speaking about historical or collective biographies, one is inclined to think of a time long past and gone. The time *is* long past, but not gone. It is important to recognize the *intergenerational* impact and residual effects of distorted relational images. In fact, ambivalences that remain as a result of old relational images are likely to be exacerbated as opportunities for interaction and expand as cultural norms become more ambiguous. The potential for *disconnection* among different race women will become more acute.

This notion is consistent with Miller's hypothesis that people are more aware of conflict precisely because women are trying to act in new ways (1976). To the extent that we are unable to speak with authenticity about conflict, power, and race, we become caught in the grip of shame where historical hurts can override our most genuine yearnings for connection.

Scenario 3

A situation between two women, whom I will call Stacy and Sue, illustrates this point. Stacy and Sue were undergraduates who not only worked together in the campus women's association, but who had also formed a nice friendship that extended far beyond the obligations of committee work or political activism. Toward the end of the semester, I started to notice that the two women seemed, initially, to be avoiding each other and, later, to be actively hostile toward each other. Any comment or inquiry about Stacy would elicit a caustic remark from Sue and vice versa. When I finally commented about the change in their relationship, Sue, first defiantly and later tearfully, told me about the incident that created a rift between the two friends. Sue, who describes herself as a Korean American woman, had darkened her skin and chosen to wear something that she called an "Afro fright wig" for Halloween. Stacy, an African American, felt insulted and betrayed by her friend, whom she perceived to be making fun of African racial features. She retaliated by suggesting that she would go and find a yellow mask with slanted eyes. Sue accused Stacy of being too sensitive, and worse, needing everyone to be politically correct. Stacy accused Sue of being racist, and worse, really wanting to be white. Both women, fearing that their connection had been irreparably ruptured, remained distant from each other for the next several months.

The situation between Stacy and Sue serves as a poignant example of what can happen when two women strive for connection within a context of non-mutuality. In a less stratified society, this minor disconnection could have led to relational movement. In this culture, however, their efforts to be in relationship were sabotaged by a legacy of stratification that probably neither of them understood. This situation also illustrates the pervasiveness of the legacy. Although the template for stratification was originally set in black and white, the effects extend beyond this simple polarity. Relationships among women of any race are vulnerable to the impact of a legacy of culture and color stratification—a system of inequality that has

ensconced white on the *top*, black on the *bottom* and left millions of other not-so-easily classified women on an *ever shifting middle ground* asking the question: Where do I fit?

Both Stacy and Sue blamed the other solely for violating the trust between them. They were both unaware of the original violation perpetrated by the dominant culture. As Judith Jordan comments, an abusive society, like an abusive family, effects a pattern of violating vulnerability, actively silencing, and moving people into shame, self-doubt, and isolation (Jordan, 1993). It seems Stacy and Sue were both unaware of their heightened vulnerability as women of color in a society that devalues both their color and their cultures. Neither woman had access to enough of her own internal reality to be appropriately sensitive and intentional in her response to the reality of the other. Their inability to remain active right in the relationship represents yet another relational challenge. That is, as Miller (1988) pointed out, action in relationship enables a stronger thinking/feeling base. As a person develops more clarity about her own thoughts and feelings, she becomes more available to the relationship. In this relationship, she continues to learn about herself and the other person, thereby enhancing her capacity for self-empathy and empathy for the other. I have no doubt that by the end of their first week of estrangement, neither Stacy nor Sue really knew what she was feeling. There was, in fact, a transmutation of feeling as each woman moved farther and farther away from her original feeling/thinking base and started to position herself more and more according to cultural expectations. Stacy became "Angry Black Woman"; Sue became "Aggrieved, Confused Victim." Both became abstractions to themselves and to each other—not daring to represent fully their vulnerabilities, their fears, or their sadness. I can think of no better example of what Miller (1988) has termed *condemned isolation* than the situation in which these two women found themselves. In their efforts to appear invulnerable, each tried in various ways to shame the other, thereby avoiding the cultural shame they both carried as women striving for connection in a stratified society.

Each of the women developed camps of people with whom they would rehash the incident. And in each retelling, the speaker became more and more vociferous in her account of how she had admonished her erstwhile friend. Each speaker became more and more invested in her image of herself as invulnerable, and actually having power over the other. In this way, each woman became more and more disconnected

from her own experience and less authentic in her presentation to other peers. Within their “camps” each became increasingly strident in expressing her outrage at the other. Each woman became increasingly invested in relational images that helped her to feel safe and protected from impact by the other person.

It is quite likely, in generations past, this situation would never have developed between Stacy and Sue, precisely because their paths might never have crossed. However, with new opportunities for cross-racial contact, and with increased opportunities to behave in new ways, opportunities for connection and disconnection are potentiated. The paradox is that apparent openings/expansions in the relational arena may lead to a more restricted internal life when one is living in a racially and culturally stratified society.

If Stacy and Sue’s experience illustrates the polarization of conflict in a stratified culture, yet another challenge to connection is the tendency to homogenize experience. Because relationship is such a central feature of women’s relationships, women in multiracial and cross-cultural contexts will sometimes pretend that real inequalities do not exist. Or more likely, we may settle for a pretense of connection using a complicated strategy of disconnection. Typical of this strategy is a game called “my inequality is the same as your inequality.” Potentially productive discussions about cross-racial relational dilemmas often get derailed with comparisons of oppressions. The comparisons are usually expressed in comments like “sexism is the same as racism” or “classism is worse than racism.” Usually these comments are attempts to reduce anxiety about historical racial stratification or, as Carolyn Rodgers said, to express “some singularity of purpose” (Rodgers, 1976). We are not hard-pressed to find a variety of oppressions that plague our society, and more often than not those oppressions are interlinked. However, we do little to promote healing and reconnection when we pit one oppression against the other. In these cases, anxiety about historical and contemporary stratification overrides attempts to stay active in the present relationship. In the attempts to homogenize, precious parts of each person’s experience get lost. Some part of each person’s experience, perhaps that part that we fear will not be affirmed, is either held out or pushed out of relationship. Experience shows that once those “pushed out/held back” parts can be named and acknowledged, the relationship can move forward with integrity.

Relational Possibilities and Reconnection

It is very clear that women yearn for connection in a cultural context that undermines mutuality. Through acts of omission and commission women have been active participants in sustaining racism, in whatever mutant form, throughout our shared history. Sometimes, women have participated in the development of new strains/variants of racism by exploiting their positioning within the white heterosexist patriarchy. In the United States, this positioning has been used to exclude and oppress both women and men of color. Such shortsighted alliances produce vicarious power, but according to Miller (1976), they also create a fraudulent sense of pride (Collins, 1990). In this regard, power based on race is used to create and maintain *disconnection*. How then, do we face the challenge of moving from cultural disconnection to a place of hope, reconciliation, and reconnection? How does a relational model inform the possibilities for healing and reconciliation? The relational model teaches us to ask: How can I know my “true self” / “healthy self” if it has not been formed in the crucible of relationship with others? Specifically, how can a woman understand herself as a person of whatever racial or ethnic descent—whether white, Mexican, biracial, Japanese, or Afro-Caribbean—without such action in relationship?

Action in relationship offers women the gift of conflict—the very process many women have been taught to avoid. In *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Miller (1976) wrote that whenever two people interact with each other, each person is presenting something new—something different from what would arise within herself. The ability to engage that “something new” is the source of personal and relational growth (Bergman & Surrey, 1994). When women wage good conflict, old relational images, thin abstractions of self and other, can be replaced by more fully textured images that are authenticated through action in relationship.

Scenario 4 (Change to Social Service Setting)

I would like to close by returning to a racial reconciliation for an example of women waging good conflict. Ana, a second generation immigrant from Cuba, engaged another group member Rhonda, an Afro-Caribbean woman, in a conversation about her experience with a friend and former co-worker. Both women were social service providers. Ana reported that in a conversation with this woman, whom she

identified as Italian American, they discussed recent changes in Ana's office. The co-worker had confided that she was happy that she no longer worked with the agency because the clientele consisted of a new wave of immigrants who were "no longer people like us." Her specific complaint was that people from Haiti were very difficult to work with and were probably best served by people like themselves. Wanting to avoid an emotionally charged disagreement with her friend, Ana responded that "the new people weren't all bad." "Besides," she said, "the government makes us work with them." At this point, Ana very tearfully said to Rhonda, "I feel as if I have betrayed you. I wish I could have been more effective." Rhonda acknowledged that she felt betrayed. She was able to say that she deeply understood Ana's need to protect her relationship with her friend and wished it hadn't been at the expense of herself and other black people. Each woman made herself available to move and be moved by the other. They expressed their ambivalences, disappointments, and desires to stay close to each other, even in the midst of grief, guilt, and disappointment. They continued to engage, not only with each other, but with the rest of the group as well, as they discussed ways to find and hold onto their own voices in the face of racial disconnections.

R/C Theory tells us that when women learn to make use of conflict, they accomplish two major tasks: *First*, they escape the trap of rigged conflict. Rhonda and Ana were able to voice their own desires, to say for themselves what each wanted from the other in relationship. They rejected the archetypal/historical scripts the dominant culture had prepared for them (For Rhonda that may have looked like some variant of Angry Black Woman; for Ana, a variation on the theme of Confused, Innocent Caught in the Middle.) Unlike Stacy and Sue in the earlier scenario, they refused to fade into thin abstractions; they remained real and available to themselves and to each other.

Second, they understood that conflict is an inevitable part of life, which creates potential for growth. Each woman approached the conflict with a sense of integrity and respect. From this standpoint, they were able to practice both self-empathy and empathy for the other.

The hope in the Rhonda and Ana scenario is that they refused to wage conflict on someone else's terms. They let neither historical stratification nor more contemporary frictions sabotage their desire for connection with each other. Although their conflict involved anger and anguish, each woman left the interaction feeling changed and hopeful, having

embraced new possibilities for personal and relational integrity.

Because we live in a culture shaped by a legacy of race-based stratification, *disconnection* often seems the most expedient course as we navigate through our everyday lives. What we learn from R/C Theory is that healing and reconnection are active possibilities only when we make ourselves available to the experience of challenge and the complexities of conflict, as well as the opportunities for resilience and expanded empathy that multicultural connectedness can bring.

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