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Work in Progress

Racial Images and Relational Possibilities

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Work in Progress

Work in Progress is a publication series based on the work of the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, and it includes papers presented in the Center's Colloquium Series. *Work in Progress* reflects the Center's commitment to sharing information with others who are interested in fostering psychological well-being, preventing emotional problems, and providing appropriate services to persons who suffer from psychological distress. The publication also reflects the Center's belief that it is important to exchange ideas while they are being developed. Many of the papers, therefore, are intended to stimulate discussion and dialogue, while others represent finished research reports.

For those papers which were part of the Colloquium Series, each document includes the substantive material presented by the lecturer, information about the speaker, and, where appropriate, a summary of the subsequent discussion session.

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Racial Images and Relational Possibilities

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About the Authors

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

Jean Baker Miller, M.D., is the Director of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Stone Center, Wellesley College and a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. She has written Toward a New Psychology of Women, co-authored The Healing Connection and Women's Growth in Connection, as well as numerous articles and chapters in books.

Abstract

This conversation deals with some of the psychological consequences of structured inequities for those socially defined as "more than" as well as those defined as "less than." Using Relational-Cultural Theory's concepts, the talk illustrates how racial and other social or economic inequities interfere with the mutual openness to influence, which is the source of growth. The speakers also discuss the interrelationship of "controlling images" and relational images.

Introduction

In this conversation, we are trying to understand further the ways in which cultural and relational influences affect each other. Specifically, we want to address how socio-political factors shape psychological development. We explore some of the ways that rigid patterns of inequality and non-mutuality have a destructive impact on all participants in a relationship, restricting possibilities for movement and creativity.

We are talking especially about cultures that first define certain groups of people as less valuable and then oppress and restrict these people. In these cultures, persons who are deemed less valuable suffer both visibly and invisibly. Although persons who have the power to restrict and oppress the "less valuable" groups tend to suffer less visibly, participating in an oppressive socio-political system wreaks damage on relational functioning.

Our conversation rests on the belief that connections with other people are the source of growth for all people and that disconnections are the source of major problems. In order for connection to occur, each person has to be able to receive—and respond to—the experiences of other people.

Out of her/his history of these interchanges, each person constructs a complex set of relational images which constitute her/his picture of what happens in the world. Based on these relational images, each person then creates beliefs about her/himself and her/his characteristics. The background for these concepts can be found in many of the working papers and books produced by the Stone Center—for example, Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Jordan, 1997; and Miller & Stiver, 1997.