

# Introducing Relational-Cultural Theory:

## A New Model of Psychological Development

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## Traditional Theories of Psychological Development

- Growth involves  
a process of  
separating from  
relationships.



- Growth is a  
process of  
becoming more  
independent,  
autonomous,  
self-sufficient.



## Relational-Cultural Theory Proposes



- Growth-fostering relationships are a central human necessity throughout our lives and chronic disconnections are the source of psychological problems.
- Relationships are highly defined by the cultural context.



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## Reflecting on Relationships

1. Think of someone who contributed positively to your growth... *How did that person make a difference?*
2. Think of a time that you felt you contributed to the growth of another person... *What did you do that made a difference?*



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## What are the outcomes of a growth-fostering relationships?

- Zest or Energy
- Action
- Clarity
- Sense of Worth
- Desire for More Connection

### ***“The Five Good Things”***

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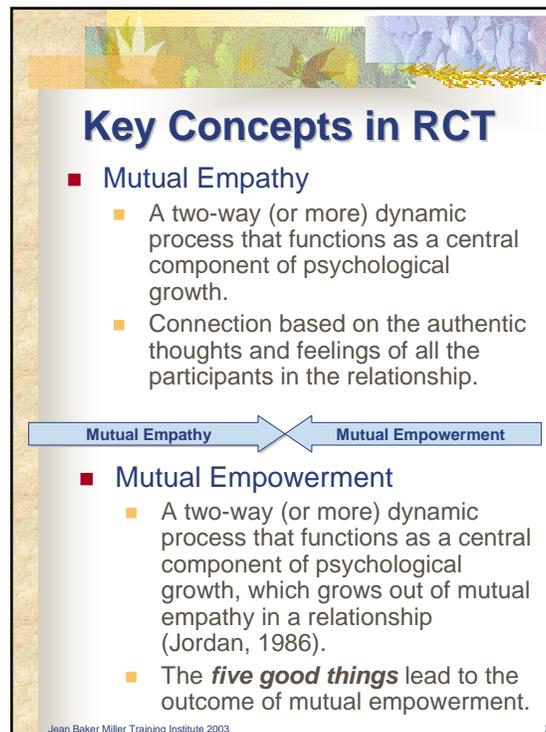
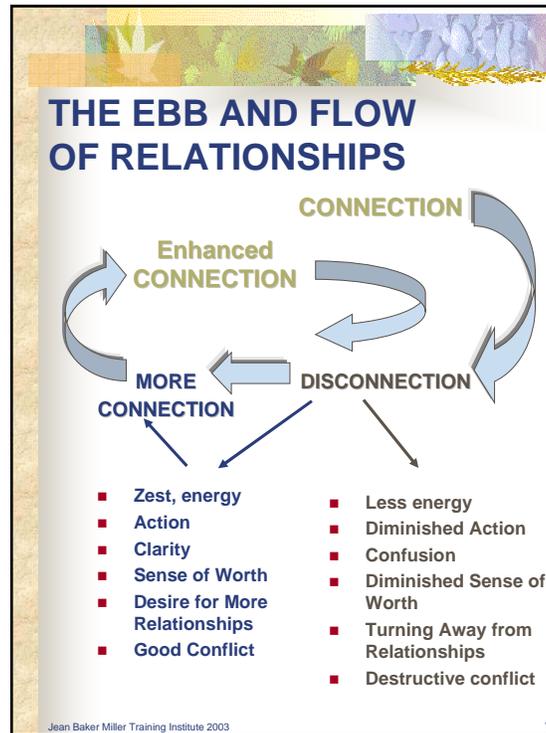
## Five Outcomes of Disconnection

- Diminished Energy
- Diminished Action
- Confusion
- Diminished Sense of Worth
- Avoid Relationships  
Isolation



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## Key Concepts in RCT

### ■ Authenticity



- "Authenticity is ever-evolving, not achieved at any one moment—it is a person's ongoing ability to represent herself in relationships more fully" (Miller, 1999); with awareness of the possible impact on the other person (Jordan, 2003).
- "...authenticity is a process in movement—we move in and out of more or less authenticity as a consequence of the relational dynamics" (Miller, 1999).

### ■ Movement Toward Mutuality

- A dynamic process in which the individuals engaged in a relationship are increasingly able to be authentic and authentically responsive to each other's thoughts and feelings.
- Movement toward emotional and cognitive action that benefits both people in a relationship, which involves mutual empathy, authenticity, mutual empowerment, and mutual responsiveness.



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## Culture and Connection

### ■ Each Person in a Relationship Embodies the Culture

- Each person has multiple social identities.
  - race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.
- Social identities are stratified.
  - dominant – subordinate, better than – less than (Walker, 1999).

### ■ Difference and Power

- "Differences are profoundly stratified...The stratification, not the difference, constrains our capacity for authenticity and undermines our desire for connection" (Walker, 2002).
- Power-over practices
  - Suppress difference.
  - Interpret difference as opposition.
  - Diminishes authentic engagement in relationships.
  - Impedes movement toward mutuality in relationships.
  - Limits one's ability to find and engage in growth-fostering relationships.



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## Growing-Fostering Relationships...Research

- **A relationship with one supportive adult is associated with good outcomes when children are faced with:**

- Parent mental illness (Rutter, 1979).
- Separation from a parent (Rutter, 1971).
- Marital discord (Rutter, 1971).
- Divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1990).
- Poverty (Garmezy, 1991).
- Child maltreatment (Cicchetti, 1989).
- Multifaceted or combinations of risk factors (Seifer et al., 1996).



- **Parent-Family Connections**

- Study of over 36,000 adolescents in grades 7-12 found that parent-family connectedness provided adolescents with protection against emotional distress and suicide (Resnick, et al., 1993).

- **Parent-School Connections**

- Study of 12,000 adolescents, independent of race, class, SES, connection reduced an adolescent's risk of violence, substance abuse, depression, early sexual activity, suicidal behavior (Resnick et al., 1997).

- **School Connections**

- Survey of 90,000+ adolescents from 80 different communities showed that students who felt connected were less likely to use cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs; less likely to engage in early sexual activity, violence, or become pregnant; and less likely to experience emotional distress. (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002).

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## Connection Throughout Our Lives

- **Adult Connections**

One example, Berkman & Syme (1979) demonstrated that men and women who had contact with close friends and relatives, who were married, or who had informal or formal group had "lower mortality rates than respondents lacking such connections" (p. 188).



- **Community/Social Connectedness**

- In his national analysis of social connectedness, Harvard professor Robert Putnam (2000) noted that studies:
  - "...have established beyond reasonable doubt that social connectedness is one of the most powerful determinants of our well-being" (p. 326).
  - "...happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections" (p. 332).

- **Continuing Research...**

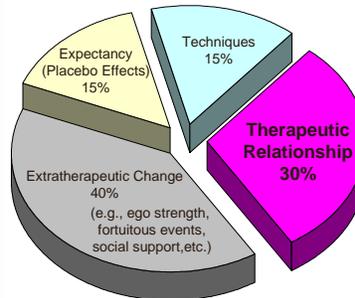
- Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire
- Relational Health Indices
- JBMTI Research Network

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## Relationships in Therapy and Change

Percentage of Improvement in Psychotherapy Patients as a Function of Therapeutic Factors



References:

M.J. Lambert (1992). *The Handbook of Psychology Integration*. Basic Books, p. 97.

Hubble M.A., Duncan, B. L., & Miller, S. D. (1999). *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

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## Relational-Cultural Therapy in Practice

- Developing mutual empathy
- Attending to the quality of connection in the relationship
- Attending to the impact of power on therapy and other relationships
- Understanding and honoring strategies of disconnection
- Understanding relational and controlling images

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## Relational-Cultural Therapy in Practice Continued...

- Reversing the central relational paradox:
  - Defined: In the face of repeated experiences of disconnection, people yearn even more for relationships. However, they also become so afraid of engaging with others that they keep important parts of themselves out of relationship, i.e., they develop techniques for staying out of connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997)
  - The therapist is empathic with both sides of the relational paradox: yearning for connection and strategies of disconnection.
  - Isolation and relational images shift as clients move back into growth-fostering connections.

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## The Goal of Development



...is the growth of  
mutually empowering  
relationships.

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***“RCT leads to a new and  
enlarged vision of human  
possibilities in all  
realms of life.”***

~ Jean Baker Miller, M.D.  
Director