

# **Building Alliances Across Differences**

## **Center for Gender in Organizations**

### **Seminar Series 1999-2000**

#### **Relational Practice: Illustrations from Union Alliance-Building**

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Presenters:

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Kris Rondeau

Jean Baker Miller and Kris Rondeau described the formation and functioning of a new kind of labor union. They discussed the relationship between this new way of working in a union experience and relational theory, as well as considering extensions of this thinking to other workplaces. Jean Baker Miller began by explaining relational/cultural psychological theory, and Rondeau followed by explaining her work in the labor movement, which has involved using a relational/cultural approach.

#### **Relational Practice by Jean Baker Miller**

##### ***Relational/Cultural Approach***

Jean Baker Miller began by talking about the relational/cultural approach that she and her colleagues began developing about 20 years ago. Miller and her colleagues have found, through listening to women in therapy, that many of the experiences in women's lives are not addressed in psychological theory, especially women's strengths. Indeed, often when women's strengths have been addressed, they have been pathologized (i.e., "enabling," "dependent," "masochistic").

##### ***Growth-Fostering Relationships and Mutual Psychological Development***

It has been difficult to come up with adequate language to describe women's strengths, though these theorists have described an important part of women's life activity as participating in growth-fostering relationships. Traditionally, these activities are characterized as, for example, nurturing or mothering. And yet these words do not adequately describe the complex process of interrelating with another person so that this person can develop and grow. Further, this activity has been delegated to women.

Relational/cultural theorists are interested in the idea of mutual psychological development, which is the idea that all individuals, not just women, would participate in growth-fostering relationships. Miller explains:

Such action could go on in all of our institutions, such as work, school, communities, and the like, as well as in families. . . . We believe that we are undertaking the huge task of making visible this form of activity which is essential to all of life and functioning, examining it more thoroughly and bringing it forward into the public arena. In doing so, it will also probably be transformed so that it is no longer a hidden form of activity practiced by one group in service to another, but a truly mutual form of activity. It does not have to be an activity whereby one person (or group of people) grow and another person supports that growth, but a form of activity in which both (all) people can participate in mutually growth-fostering behavior (Miller, unpublished paper).

### ***Mutual Empathy and Mutual Empowerment***

Part of the difficulty is that we often do not have the language to talk about these ideas. For instance, even using the term “relational” can be confusing, because relationships are not necessarily always growth-fostering. Miller, citing her colleagues Judith Jordan and Janet Surrey, discussed the idea of mutually growth-fostering relationships as relationships that contain mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. Mutual empathy, a “great unsung gift,” is the ability to be able to feel what other people feel. In order for there to be mutual empowerment, each person in a relationship must be able to respond empathically to the other. The result of mutual empowerment produces five key outcomes.

#### **Five Outcomes of Good Connection:**

1. Zest or high energy—“It is the sense of well-being that comes from feeling connected, feeling part of the human world” (Miller, unpublished paper).
2. Empowerment—To “feel motivated and enabled to act beyond the relationship” (Miller, unpublished paper).
3. Clarity—“[M]ore clarity about their thoughts and feelings; and these thoughts and feelings now further provide a stronger and more knowledgeable feeling-thinking base which motivates action” (Miller, unpublished paper).
4. Sense of worth
5. Desire for more connection

Importantly, this is not about giving or getting, being dependent or depended upon, being helped or being the helper. Rather, what each person gives/gets in the relationship is mutual.

### ***Paradigm Shift***

Relational theorists suggest, then, a paradigm shift in psychology and, they hope, beyond psychology. As Miller explained:

We are proposing that the goal of development can be the increasing ability to participate in mutually growth-fostering connections. In doing so, each person and the relationship become stronger, more effective and more fulfilling. This proposal contrasts to prior theories in which the goal of development is said to be the increasing ability to become separated and individuated. This proposal also suggests a basic shift in the concept of basic human motivation, if we can speak of such a global notion. In psychodynamic thinking (which mirrors the thinking in Western culture generally) the basic human motivation has been described as the drive for gratification. We are suggesting it is the motive to participate in connection, a very different and more active desire (Miller, unpublished paper).

Miller explained that without these kinds of connections, the outcomes are often negative. We have seen these kinds of outcomes occur, and they have been based on race, class, gender, etc., and in many cases have extended to creating violations for a whole group of people.

#### **Five Outcomes of Disconnection:**

1. Diminished energy
2. Disempowerment
3. Confusion
4. Diminished sense of worth
5. Avoiding relationships/isolation

What relational theorists propose, then, is that movement and growth occur in relationships rather than within the self. Rather than emphasizing the importance of autonomy, relational theorists emphasize the importance of authenticity. Relational

theory is not built on a principle of belief in inherent sex differences. Yet Miller and her colleagues, through their work with women, have recognized that, socially, women carry human essentials that have not been valued. These essentials have helped relational theorists build a vision of a framework for understanding all individuals and institutions. Miller explained that she and her colleagues had always hoped that this approach would be used beyond individual relationships and move into the world. Thus, she was especially pleased to be presenting with Kris Rondeau, who does relational work in organizations.

### **Illustration from Union Organizing by Kris Rondeau**

#### ***Early Harvard Union Organizing Drive***

A labor organizer for over 20 years, Rondeau began by explaining that the people that she began organizing with worked together because they were friends. Friendship is still an important element in Rondeau's organizing work. Approximately 20 years ago, when Rondeau was working at the Harvard Medical School as a clerical worker, a group of workers, in the process of developing a collective identity, attempted to obtain wage increases. They brought the matter to the Dean of the medical school who responded that, if they wanted to make an official grievance, they should form a union. They began a union drive, which the mainstream labor movement essentially let exist, though the movement left them alone and did not put energy into organizing them. In 1977, after an intense anti-union campaign paid for by Harvard, there was a union election in which the union got 46% of the votes in the first election and 47% of the votes in the second election. The power of the anti-union campaign in terms of sapping energy and morale was intense, and losing the election by such a close margin and all at once was a difficult experience to come back from. Yet it was from this experience that the organizers learned several lessons.

#### ***Lessons Learned from the Loss of the 1977 Union Election at Harvard***

1. Organizers, after surviving such an adversarial anti-union campaign, were determined to prevent anyone from attacking their self-confidence, humor, friendships, and sense of believing in the world ever again.
2. Organizers learned that people change. Therefore, it does not work to assume:
  - There are those who agree with the union;
  - There are those who are firmly opposed to the union and always will be;

- There are those who are conflicted, and these are the people that organizers can sway.

Rather, organizers believed in the notion that people grow in connection. So if you build relationships with them, both parties can grow and change in a relationship.

3. Organizers decided to stop trying to organize people using traditional union literature, such as leaflets, newsletters, etc. This allowed them to actually form relationships with individuals who were opposed to the union or who had questions, rather than having these people read the literature and remain firmly opposed to or doubtful of the union. It allowed for the creation of a community that shared with one another their lives, jobs, families, and outside interests.
4. Organizers learned that they wanted to create a movement where everyone—even those who disagree—would be connected as a community.

### ***Organizing Goals and Tactics***

Some of the key goals and tactics that union organizers used were:

1. Work to create a safe haven for all.
2. Never send organizers out to work alone (work in pairs or teams).
3. It is important not to rush people. Organizing takes a lot of time, because it is important to listen to people's stories, both to show them that their life stories matter and to model the importance of listening to others and hearing others out. Indeed, it may take time before individuals are even ready to discuss anything about a union. In addition, spending time talking and listening is a way to build community.

### ***Values that the Union Lives By***

The key values that the union lives by when they work with both management and workers are:

- Kindness
- Respect
- Humor

They work to create an environment where people feel safe, where learning is valued, and where problems are solved.

## ***Difficult Issues***

Following the presentations, several issues were raised concerning the use of a relational/cultural approach to organize the workplace.

- Rondeau has found that it can be difficult to understand and appreciate how people's lives are affected by their race and class positions. For example, it may be hard for a progressive white middle-class feminist—who feels that she thinks a lot about what it means to be female—to understand the role that other identity categories may play in the life of, say, the working-class woman of color who works for her.
- In the case of the organizing work that Rondeau has done, which is with clerical workers, many of whom are women, it has been challenging to involve men in the work of the union.
- It is difficult to manage power inequalities and at the same time engage in mutual growth-fostering relationships. Miller explained that in her work the unequal relationships—parent/child, teacher/student—can be thought of as “temporary inequalities” that exist so that learning can take place. But in the workplace, it is difficult to change any situation if you cannot exercise as much or more power than an individual or group that you are challenging. In the case of the union, organizers need to gain considerable support from others before they can even get to the table with management to discuss possible changes.

## **Readings**

Hoerr, J. 1993. Solidaritas at Harvard: Organizing in a Different Voice. *The American Prospect*, No. 14, Summer, 67-82.

Miller, J.B. and Pierce Stiver, I. 1997. A Paradigm Shift. In *The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, pp. 42-62.

Excerpt from an unpublished paper by Jean Baker Miller.

The Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO) is an international resource for innovative ideas and practice in the field of gender, work, and organizations. Recognizing the pervasive role of work organizations in society and our individual lives, CGO seeks to advance learning and support organizations to strengthen both gender equity and organizational effectiveness. In our approach, we understand that gender works simultaneously with race, class, ethnicity, age and sexual identity in shaping organizational systems, cultures, and practices as well as individuals' identities and experiences at work. We work at the intersection of research and practice and we pursue our mission through action learning, consultation, research, education, convening, and information dissemination.

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