

## Work In Progress

### Relationship and Empowerment

Janet L. Surrey, Ph.D.

## Work in Progress

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# Relationship and Empowerment

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## About the author

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## Abstract

This paper examines the concept of empowerment through relationship from the perspective of the evolving theoretical approach of the Stone Center. The empowerment to act is viewed as arising from interaction within mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Attention is given to the importance of creating and sustaining relationships and relational contexts that empower women in all life activities. As an example, the author describes a workshop designed to empower women to become active politically in working toward nuclear disarmament.

This paper was originally presented at a Stone Center Colloquium on January 8, 1986.

Often when I speak about the relational self in women, people ask, "What about action, work, and creativity? A person has to be able to act, to work, to stand, and to move *on her own*." Even among clinicians, our typical models of action tend to evoke the image of a single actor, agentic for her/his own interests, autonomously achieving, self-expressing, and self-maintaining. Relationships are something you have when you're not working or living your life, at night or on weekends. The idea of "doing" or "acting" or "working" appears to be separated from "relating" and, at best, relationships are seen as meeting needs for support, affection, and contact, not as opportunities for action or growth. Further, we too easily fall into the trap of equating "relationship" with our "primary relationships" (this term also needs further exploration) and often with our sexual relationships. For most of us, however, much of our life activity occurs in a larger relational context — both formal and informal.

The notion that action occurs in a relational mode seems to challenge our usual perspectives or paradigms. Bakan described the two basic human modes of "agency" and "community" (1966), and I think this is still a widely held dichotomy. Jean Baker Miller wrote about "agency in community" (1984), and in our Colloquium Series she described the empowerment to act as a part of healthy interaction (Miller, 1986). Tonight, I want to continue the examination of relationship and empowerment, and to explore how women's early self-experience as connected *with* others ("self-and-other" or "self-with-other" experiences) can form the basis for shaping new visions of relational action, power, and movement: new visions which acknowledge the power inherent in "being together," "moving together," and "acting together."

In this paper, I will focus on the *motivational* and *action-based* components of our evolving self-in-relation model, and on the concept of psychological empowerment as it relates to these aspects of women's development. I will explore three questions:

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1. What is empowerment and empowering in relationships?
  2. What constitutes an *empowering relationship* or relational context? This allows me to talk about more than a two-person dyad.
  3. How can we help to create and support relational contexts which facilitate women's empowerment? As a step toward this, I will give an example of a workshop designed to empower women to work for nuclear disarmament.

I want to thank everyone who has been part of the work on this paper. So many people here have participated in the ongoing relational process of inquiry into the nature of women's development. The paper itself is an outgrowth of much dialogue and interaction in many different contexts. I particularly want to thank the Stone Center and this audience for creating the opportunity to continue the dialogue, to generate and consider new ideas together. I especially look forward to our discussion tonight.

## Empowerment in relationship

### Women and empowerment

Why has the concept of empowerment become so popular, and why have we been using it increasingly over the past few years to describe this essential aspect of women's development? First, the use of this concept has encouraged a redefinition of traditional power models. In our first colloquium, Jean Baker Miller proposed a use of the word, *power*, as "the capacity to move or to produce change," to replace the notion of power as dominion, control, or mastery, implying "power over" (1982). She suggested that women would have difficulty embracing a power model that involves competition or winning over others. *Empowerment* does not have such a connotation.

An alternate concept of personal power as inner strength and self-determination has appeared throughout the psychological literature (e.g., Rogers, 1975; Maslow, 1954), but this concept still evokes the image of the highly individuated self-actualizer. We have needed a different concept to suggest power with others, i.e., power in connection or relational power.

Thus, we have talked about mutual empowerment (each person is empowered) through relational empowerment (the relationship is empowered).

Recently, the concept of group empowerment has begun to appear in the community psychology literature (Rappaport, 1984), and in writing on

methodologies for oppressed groups to gain political and social power (Freire, 1970). These writings describe widely diverse ends and means of empowerment. Rappaport has contributed a thorough-going review of the definitions and uses of the word, and has suggested that empowerment is an evocative but not yet totally definable idea, which varies among groups, settings, times, and purposes (1984). For the present, I define psychological empowerment as: the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with the mobilization of the energies, resources, strengths, or powers of each person through a mutual, relational process. Personal empowerment can be viewed only through the larger lens of power through connection, i.e., through the establishment of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. Thus, personal empowerment and the relational context through which this emerges must always be considered simultaneously.

The literature on group empowerment suggests that this process varies for any particular population according to the strengths to be mobilized and the means appropriate to that group. In this Colloquium Series, we have explored one of women's particular sources of strength, i.e., the power to empower others, that is, to participate in interaction in such a way that one simultaneously enhances the power of others and oneself (Miller, 1982, 1986; Surrey, 1985a). While this basic model (often referred to as "nurturing") is inherent in healthy parent-child development, it can be applied to all growth-producing relationships. "Nurturing," however, sounds more like feeding or gardening and describes a more unidirectional growth process. *Mutual empowerment* better connotes the true potency inherent in a growth-promoting, life-enhancing, interactive process (Surrey, 1985a). As Jean Baker Miller has written, this process, perhaps because it has been in women's domain, has been underestimated, trivialized, and misunderstood (1976, 1984). For example, a common misinterpretation of the relational process of "nurturing" or empathic interaction between mother and child is that the mother "takes herself out of the picture" to focus on the child's needs or that the mother becomes "identified with" or "mirrors" the child. This misinterpretation overlooks entirely the highly complex and creative interactive process of empowering. In an earlier paper, I used the words "taking care of the relationship" as a way of describing relational activity (Surrey, 1985a). Again, this process can be more accurately described as *empowering the relationship*, i.e., acting to create, sustain, and deepen the connections that empower. (I might note parenthetically that I have experienced enormous difficulty in trying to find language to describe these interactive processes; as Jean Baker

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Miller has said, our current language feels inadequate to this task.)

### **Alternative models of power and action**

The concept of empowerment is inextricably linked with ideas about action. For example, traditional thinking usually connects the two dichotomies of “powerful/powerless” and “active/passive.” The “power-over” or “power-for-oneself-only” model, assumes an active agent exerting control through the actual or threatened use of power, strength, or expertise. Women often feel unable to act when considering action in the “power-over” or “power-for-oneself-only” model. They anticipate that their action will not take others into account or may lead away from connection. If power or activity is viewed in this model, women will often choose to focus on the needs of the other person in order to allow the other to feel powerful. Therefore, when viewed from this dichotomous model, women’s behavior often looks “passive” or “inactive” or “depressed.” The alternative model of interaction that we are proposing might be termed a “power-with” or “power-together” or “power-emerging-through-interaction” model. It overrides the active/passive dichotomy by suggesting that all participants in the relationship interact in ways that build connection and enhance everyone’s personal power.

The “power-with” or “mutual-power” model grows out of a synergistic and nonhierarchical model of growth through the development of mutually empowering relationships. We have described the dynamics of the early mother-daughter relationship as laying a foundation for such a model (Surrey, 1985a). By contrast, the more traditional, vertical or hierarchical “power-over” model views power as a scarce resource. Competition for power pits people against each other in zero-sum power contests. Freud’s construct of “healthy” Oedipal resolution of the father-son relationship provides a classic developmental model of power in an authoritarian power-over framework. Put too simply, the boy (who is small) wants the resources (mother), but father (who is stronger and bigger) has them. Because he is frightened of the father’s power to castrate, the boy surrenders his wishes, chooses to “identify” with father, and begins to internalize control through the development of a strong, mature superego. The boy is willing to enter into a hierarchical system of power because he will eventually grow up and gain the power and resources, or at least feel entitled to them. This vertical definition of power and authority as a zero-sum commodity is fundamental to a hierarchically ordered developmental model in which little self/big other has the possibility of becoming big self/little

other, where power is defined by size, strength, and power of dominion. Our alternative model assumes that power or the ability to act does not have to be a scarce resource, nor based on zero-sum assumptions — certainly not in interactions by human beings.

The problems of women’s disempowerment have received considerable attention in both psychological and social writing, in part because of the prevalence of this deficiency model to explain women’s psychological problems. Concepts such as “fear of owning one’s power,” “identification with the victim,” “fear of success,” and the “Cinderella syndrome” describe women as they deviate from the more traditional models of power and action. These concepts have shaped the questions we ask about ourselves and our women clients: Is she being *too passive*? Can she learn to be *more active* on her own behalf? Perhaps the questions we need to ask are: Is she being responsibly “interactive”? Has she established a relational context where mutual power is encouraged and facilitated?

Disempowerment, then, is difficulty in creating or sustaining a healthy relational context. Kaplan (1984) suggests that the constellation of factors which can lead to depression includes inhibition of action, which follows from the loss or distortion of a relational context. Steiner-Adair (1986) and Surrey (1985) have viewed eating disorders as a reflection of the disempowerment experienced when women become alienated from their own relational needs. Jordan (1986) has described the psychological difficulties arising from non-mutual relationships, especially for women in heterosexual couples. Stiver’s (1985, 1985a) papers discuss the terrible personal and clinical misunderstandings that ensue when women’s relational motivations are viewed as “dependency” needs and are not validated and fulfilled.

### **Empowerment through interaction**

It is often easier to describe the problematic or pathological aspects of relationships than the positive, growth-enhancing dynamics. However, some theorists have discussed empowerment more positively within a relational framework. The British object relations theorists (Fairbairn, 1954; Winnicott, 1965; Guntrip, 1971; and others) have written beautifully about the primary importance of the relational context in psychological development. In America, Kohut (1971) and Rogers (1975) have emphasized the fundamental significance of empathy in the development of the person within both developmental and therapeutic frameworks. But these formulations do not focus on the bidirectional relational process. In our work we are focusing on the characteristic aspects of mutually empathic relationships that facilitate

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psychological growth and empowerment. This formulation recognizes that, for women, the motivation to understand and foster development of the relationship (which includes the other) is equally as important as the need for empathy or “self-objects” (Kohut, 1971). It further recognizes that empathy does not just exist mysteriously. For the persons to become empathic, the development of the capacity for empathy must grow in the context of mutually empathic and empowering relationships.

In an earlier paper, I suggested the basic “process” of women’s development as a relational self and described this development in the context of the early mother-daughter relationship (Surrey, 1985a). Girls learn to grow in relationship through healthy interaction with their mothers and other significant people. The fundamental processes of mutual relationship are mutual *engagement* (attention and interest), mutual *empathy*, and mutual *empowerment*. Both mothers and daughters are empowered as relational beings through their capacity to “see” and “respond to” the other and to engage in interaction that leaves both people feeling more aware of self and other and, therefore, more energized to act. This capacity “to act in relationship” has been described as *response-ability*. Further, this ability leads to the capacity to “hold” the psychological reality of the other as part of an ongoing, continuous awareness beyond the momentary experience, and to “take the other into account” in all one’s activities. This awareness we have called cognitive and emotional intersubjectivity (Surrey, 1985a; Jordan, 1986). Response-ability, then, is not limited to the momentary process of interaction but implies an ongoing capacity “to act in relationship,” to consider one’s actions in light of other people’s needs, feelings, and perceptions.

Miller has described in further detail the nature of an empowering interactive process resulting in increased zest, empowerment, knowledge, self-worth, and desire for more connection for all participants (1986). The capacity to engage in an open, mutually empathic, relational process rests on the maintenance of fluid “ego boundaries” (Jordan, 1984) and the capacity to be responsive and “moved” by the thoughts, perceptions, and feeling states of the other person. In such an empowering interaction, both people feel able to *have an impact* on each other (Stiver, 1985a) and on the movement or “flow” of the interaction. Each feels “heard” and “responded to” and able to “hear,” “validate,” and “respond to” the other. Each feels empowered through creating and sustaining a context which leads to increased awareness and understanding. Further, through this process, each participant feels enlarged, able to “see” more clearly, and

energized to move into action. The capacity to be “moved” and to respond and to “move” the other represents the fundamental core of relational empowerment.

This process creates a relational context in which there is increasing awareness and knowledge of self and other through sustained affective connection, and a kind of unencumbered movement of interaction. This is truly a creative process, as each person is changed through the interaction. The movement of relationship creates an energy, momentum, or power that is experienced as beyond the individual, yet available to the individual. Both participants gain new energy and new awareness as each has risked change and growth through the encounter. Neither person is in control; instead, each is enlarged and feels empowered, energized, and more real. Empowerment is based on the capacity to turn toward and trust in the relationship to provide the ongoing context for such interaction. This action or movement of relationship, then, transfers to action in other realms as the person has become increasingly response-able and empowered to act.

We have postulated that the early and continuing emphasis on building connection is necessary for the growth of the capacity for mutual empathy. For boys, however, emotional and physical separation and the ability to disconnect — to separate from the emotional context — are seen as fundamental to the development of the independent, self-reliant, and courageous soldier, explorer, thinker, achiever, or worker. Boys are encouraged to make this early disconnection from *both* parents. The hallmark of male identity formation has been seen as the willingness to “identify” (*not* connect) with the father’s way of being powerful. Boys, it is said, are taught to renounce the pleasures, safety, and growth within emotional and physical connectedness to mother (the representative of the “weaker” sex) as well as the open expression of vulnerable feelings (Miller, 1976; Bernardez, 1982; Jordan, Surrey, & Kaplan, 1985; Stiver, 1985). Thus, men do not have as many opportunities for developing their relational capacities and do not learn to develop trust in their capacity to engage in mutually empathic, mutually empowering interaction. They can come to view connection as if it were associated with loss of identity, control, power, and the capacity to act on one’s perceptions and interests.

Girls, in contrast, are encouraged to act and work in connection. Girls do not tend to see relationship and activity as mutually exclusive. Boys tend to believe they must feel themselves more clearly defined as emotionally distinct and separate, and to believe that their action comes from each self, alone. Thus,

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adult men are more likely to attribute their successes to their own efforts, while women more frequently acknowledge the impact of the whole context (Miller, 1986).

I am suggesting that early connectedness for women can lead to a “moving *with*” others, what Jean Baker Miller (1986) calls “movement in relationship.” Unfortunately, this is not a model of action or achievement that is fully encouraged or developed in families or in academic and social institutions, for either girls or boys.

Relational competence can be defined as the interest and capacity to “stay emotionally present with,” to enlarge or deepen the relational context to create enough “space” for both or all people to express themselves and to allow for possible conflict, tension, and creative resolution. Recognizing the growth and change in people, ongoing connection implies a process of attunement to change, i.e., staying “current” in relationship. Western society discourages this possibility. It highlights and encourages separation and individuation, does not emphasize the importance of ongoing connection, and has not given enough support or educational experience to the skillful engagement of differences, conflicts, and powerful feelings in relationships. As a result, this relational pathway of development is obscured; its potential remains unacknowledged and undeveloped. This obscuring of the relational pathway particularly affects women, especially in their efforts to build adult forms of connection in which mutual strengths can be activated, experienced, validated, and sustained. We need a new language to describe adequately the change and transformation of connections throughout life.

In the Stone Center Colloquium Series, we have often talked about the problems for women related to the incongruities between their early relational, connected self-experience and later societal definitions of maturity that stress independence, self-sufficiency, and individuation. In particular, girls in this culture undergo a major period of discontinuity at adolescence. The discontinuity of adolescence can leave women feeling disconnected from their own experience of trust and power in relationship, in the affective connotations and interactions between people. Carol Gilligan has described this as the loss of women’s voice, the inability to find a language and system of logic to represent our experience (1982). The “dis-ease” of feeling and living this incongruity has profound implications. As Gilligan says, these inconsistencies become “raised as personal doubts that invade women’s sense of themselves, compromising their ability to act on their perceptions” (p. 49), and their ability to be empowered through the creation of

and reliance on mutually empowering relationships.

What is required is a recognition that relationships are the source of power and effectiveness, not of weakness or inaction or a threat to effectiveness. Because this kind of power transfers effectively to movement and action across many relationships, individual activity experienced in a context of shared activity can feel very powerful and sustainable. An appreciation of the enhancement of mutual power through relationship leads us to the next question: How might we build empowering relational contexts for personal growth and learning in all of our activities in life — whether in the family, the workplace, the classroom, or even the U.S. Congress? This is a very different question than the question usually asked in our psychological theories.

## **The relational context**

### **Building connection through dialogue**

We have suggested alternative formulations to the separation-individuation model of human development (Surrey, 1985a). We have posited a relationship-differentiation process in which the motive for connection leads to increasingly complex, differentiated networks of relationships, both within relationships existing over time and in new connections. Another descriptive term for this relational pathway could be “relationship-authenticity,” reflecting the motivation for connection as contributing to the challenge to remain real, vital, purposeful, and honest in relationships. The challenge to “stay present with” and “responsive to” continues to create a mutually empathic context of dialogue which is the core of relational development (Surrey).

An example of such a context is described by Kaplan, Klein, and Gleason (1985) in their discussion of the challenges inherent in the mother-daughter relationship at adolescence. In a study group formed to research the mother-daughter relationship, students at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass., reported a strong desire to change and deepen their current connections with their mothers at the same time as they were engaged in creating new relationships. Their concerns and activities in this relationship are a good example of young women working towards building a relational context which deepens over time as more diverse and differentiated connections are made. Most students still saw their relationship with their mothers as one of the most important relationships in their lives. Daughters were struggling to clearly express themselves and their current experiences and perceptions. While they were concerned about the conflict they might create in this process, they desired authenticity and recognition. They

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wanted *more* connection and access to their mothers as adult persons, not just as their “mothers,” and wished for more knowledge about their mothers’ real feelings and experiences. They felt this would help them to understand both their mothers and themselves as they became adults. They desired increased mutuality, hoped that their own learning and change might contribute to their mothers’ development, and expected even greater mutuality as they grew older and became mothers themselves. Daughters were also interested in hearing about mothers’ new experiences and changes, and worried about possible loss of contact.

This is hardly a picture of increasing “separation,” but rather the desire for maintaining authenticity and connection and deepening the relational context to allow for new and potentially conflictual interactions in the movement toward mutual recognition and understanding. The underlying faith seems to be that authenticity can ultimately strengthen connection and mutuality. Early patterns of mother-daughter relationships must shift to permit the connection to deepen and to accommodate both participants as they grow and change and develop new relationships. Such growth occurs through the development of mutual empathy. This process may be fraught with anxiety and anger as well as satisfaction and pleasure, and it can be seen as a lifelong “conversation.”

We have described how the ability to create a relational context for growth and empowerment arises out of early self-with-other experiences. Under optimal familial and social conditions, girls would be encouraged and challenged to develop larger and more complex relational contexts. The capacity to engage in such creative relational activity with a group of peers has been shown to have a major impact on women’s empowerment. The consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and the emergence of “support” groups for women in response to nearly every life situation and social problem attest to the power of such groups in women’s lives.

Relational empowerment refers to the process of enlarged vision and energy stimulated through interaction, in a framework of emotional connection. Movement-in-relationship refers to the alternations and fluctuations of figure-ground experiences moving toward mutual empathy and shared understanding. Both personal growth and intellectual development occur in this mode as described by Clinchy and Zimmerman (1985) and by Belenky, et al. (1986). They use the concept of “connected learning.” Connected learning means taking the view of the other and connecting this to one’s own knowledge, thus building new and enlarged understanding of broader human

experience. The more numerous and diverse the perspectives with which one has connected, the broader the relational context, and the more enhanced will be the sense of being both connected to and empowered to respond to a larger “human” reality.

Not all human relationships develop in this way. When an important relational context cannot enlarge to allow for mutual experience and the movement of dialogue, women feel disempowered. If the connection feels severed there can be a sense of deadness, blackness, and even terror; some have described this experience as a “black hole.” If the connection is only partially maintained, there can be a fragmentation of self. Here, there can be feelings of stuckness, flatness, nonvitality, confusion, or blurred focus; one client calls this condition a “grey-out.” Under these circumstances it may be necessary to acknowledge that the dialogue has stopped, at least for that moment. Relational empowerment also suggests the capacity to let go and come back to resume and maintain the process over a period of time.

The ability to be moved through emotion depends on each person’s willingness and capacity to be open to her or his own feelings and to receive the feelings of others. Feeling together and moving together also involves thinking together, being open to new perceptions and ideas that arise in this affective, relational joining. One of the greatest sources of women’s cognitive disempowerment is the sense of experiencing a split between feeling and thinking. As one woman in therapy said, “When I’m in the presence of someone who does not want me to feel — who will not join me at a feeling level — I can’t think, everything dries up.”

When the process of relational empowerment works in a group, the context is sustained, and participants internalize the process as an increase in energy, power, or “zest,” and a sense of effectiveness based on their ability to contribute to everyone’s greater awareness and understanding (Miller, 1986). A heightened sense of reality and a feeling of moving forward together occur. In this process each participant’s voice is acknowledged, so that he or she experiences a heightened sense of personal clarity and feels affirmed and empowered as a relational being. The joining of visions and voices creates something new, an enlarged vision; the individual participants feel enlarged. Thus, the sense of connection and participation in something larger than oneself does not diminish, but rather heightens the sense of personal power and understanding.

The experience of mutual empathy and empowerment can be facilitated through the creation of growth-promoting relational contexts in any area — the classroom, the workplace, various political and



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social arenas, and, of course, the therapeutic relationship. When I refer to relational contexts, I mean both the structures we can easily see — i.e., the number of people, the setting, the structure of the interaction — and the creative process itself, which includes the experience of an enlarged “space” that can stretch and grow to encompass developing perspectives, needs, and feeling states.

### A context for empowerment

A 26-year-old woman, Marcia, whom I see in therapy, offers an excellent example of relational empowerment experienced in the context of a growth-promoting dyadic relationship. At the time Marcia began therapy, her close friend Laura was in the final stage of a two-year struggle with leukemia. Marcia described their relationship as very special. Beginning in early childhood, the relationship had gone through many stages of closeness and distance and had weathered geographic moves, the addition of other relationships, and periods of great differences in interests and work. The two friends were now engaged in an intensive, nearly daily involvement as they struggled to come to terms with Laura’s imminent death. They were reviewing their lives together and deciding what they wanted to take from and leave with each other as a way of both letting go and maintaining their connection beyond death.

Marcia describes the quality of authenticity in connection beautifully: “This relationship taught me what it means to be there, I mean really *there* as *myself*. I can recognize this in myself now in other situations — not disappearing or withdrawing because I’m afraid to say what I see or think, or feeling it’s hopeless, or just getting angry.”

In describing the relational context she says:

The most important thing was that I always felt that Laura would want to hear my experience. Even when we disagreed, I felt there was room for each of us to have her own viewpoint, and there would eventually be some way to come to see or understand the other person’s viewpoint, although not necessarily to agree with it. Once, following an enormous disagreement, it took two years for us to fully understand each other’s experience. Still, I really felt that Laura wanted to hear what I thought, and I really valued her experience. We had some big disagreements and learned the ways we usually disagreed. This helped me to know myself better. The space and trust I felt developed into a faith in the power and endurance of the relationship. I never really felt this before. I feel my parents love and support me, but I don’t feel they know me or share themselves with me in the same

way.

In our discussion of her goals for therapy, she stated,

What I want help with now is: not losing this faith, and learning to bring myself to other relationships in this way. I’m especially concerned about not losing my sense of myself in my relationships with men. Laura used to get angry with me when I started getting confused, acting like a victim, what I call “crazy angry” with my boyfriend. I guess you would say disempowered. I do know what it means now to be part of this healthy kind of relationship. Do you really think it’s possible to have this again in my life?

Throughout the relationship, and since Laura’s death, Marcia has tended to see Laura as the more capable and insightful one. It will be important for Marcia to begin to see her own relational strengths, to see *herself* as strong and empowering in this relationship. As she recognizes her own part in creating the context and participating in Laura’s development, she will begin to internalize this strength and competence, and feel she is capable of bringing this to other relationships.

In the therapy setting, it is useful to explore and validate experiences of relational empowerment and to help the patient internalize this capacity and learn to establish new relational contexts in which strengths can be affirmed and new growth facilitated. The capacity to create such relationships is an important therapeutic goal. Marcia is beginning to learn that the creation of such a context is a mutual enterprise; both or all people grow in their ability to create and participate in this way.

This process is not limited to therapy. In all of life, the sense of being part of the growth and empowerment of the other develops through the process of seeing and feeling the other becoming “more of who they are” and simultaneously feeling this oneself. The ability to feel and move as part of such a “we” is the goal in other contexts. Many women have experienced the special quality of relationships between women in which both participants have grown and developed in their relational capacities. They are aware of the empowerment resulting from women standing in strength together, trusting in the continuity of the relationship. However, because we have all lived in a society supporting the “power-over” model, such strengths have not been experienced openly and shared fully yet. It is essential that we learn to maintain and sustain our strengths through connection, and

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to do so, we must learn to value and develop sustaining relational contexts.

Only as we value our connections and see that maintaining and deepening them are crucial to our development will we begin to take the risks necessary to empower our relationships. Growing and becoming empowered in relationship means being aware of our shared responsibility for mutual security and well-being through the aliveness and growth-supporting aspects of our relationships. It means learning how to open, create, repair, and let go in relationships with sustained awareness of how interconnected we are. This sustained awareness, in turn, will present a healthy challenge to the defensive need, based in part on contemporary Western culture, to feel self-sufficient and independent.

The power to create, build, sustain, and deepen connection does not mean always being strong, but it does mean being able to stay connected through periods of “strength” and “weakness” and through wide ranges of different feelings. It is rarely possible to experience a full spectrum of empowerment in one relationship. For most people, empowerment occurs through the creation of multiple and varied, although often overlapping, relational structures for personal, educational, work, social, and political development. As clinicians, we need to foster consciousness of and competence in the building of empowering relational contexts.

### **Creating and supporting relational contexts**

I would like to move beyond both therapy and a two-person model to further examine empowerment in relationship. The dynamics of empowerment in “personal” relationships can be applied to activity in other arenas. Practical applications beyond the clinical context are important in themselves, but they can also illuminate the therapeutic relationship.

Over the past year, I have been involved in the collaborative evolution of a day-and-a-half workshop designed to empower women to speak out for nuclear disarmament. The workshop is sponsored by Women’s Action for Nuclear Disarmament (WAND), an organization founded in 1980 by Helen Caldicott and others to empower women to work with a singular focus for nuclear disarmament. This empowerment workshop, entitled, “Our Vision — Our Voices — How to Speak Out for Nuclear Disarmament,” offers a beautiful example of building a relational context that empowers women. It illustrates many aspects of empowerment through connection. Although, in this case, personal growth is not the primary purpose of the empowerment process, the workshop in fact does mobilize the strengths and energies of connection, shared vision, and shared

activity. The workshop captures the essence of relational empowerment, generating increased energy, clarity, and commitment to action for all participants. It may serve as a useful model for efforts to create and support empowering relational contexts in other settings.

The workshop, which usually includes two leaders and 20-30 participants, begins with a graphic audiovisual demonstration of the arsenal of nuclear weapons currently in existence. Thus the real threat of potential world destruction is brought right into the room, demanding urgent attention. The first few hours are spent creating an atmosphere for the sharing of intense feelings and responses to this threat, including awe, terror, anger, grief, and helplessness. I personally experienced a tremendous sense of relief to finally have the opportunity to focus my feelings about nuclear destruction and to join with others in doing this. This experience suggests the reversal of what Lifton has called “psychic numbing” (1979) and what Macy describes as “despair” in her “Despair and Empowerment” workshops (1983).

The framework of “looking together” provides the structure for the creative empowerment process. The opportunity to join together in emotional connection in a situation where people respond in free flow to each other’s feelings and perceptions generates desires to care for and support each other. From the expressions of helpless rage, despair, and confusion, the group builds together to a sense of urgency and shared responsibility: *We must do something.*

Negative affects of helplessness, anger, fear, and confusion become transformed into the energy of positive movement. To call this process “just talking” or “sharing feelings” would be to trivialize and misrepresent it. As the movement or vision of the whole group begins to emerge, each person feels a heightened sense of authenticity, validation, and response-ability. The “I” is enhanced as the “we” emerges. Through building the “we,” i.e., “seeing” together through creating an enlarged vision, participants transform their personal self-doubt and confusion into clarity and conviction. The sense of powerlessness of the individual is supplanted by the experience of relational power.

Most of the work takes place in small groups of six to eight people, which meet three times during the workshop to provide opportunities for people to share more personally, to give each other feedback, and to compose and deliver a practice “speech” to an imagined audience. In the afternoon of the first day, there is a plenary session entitled, “Women’s Voices and Visions of Peace,” which explores women’s current and historical strengths as potential peacemakers. In this session participants directly

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experience their power to empower others through a guided exercise, performed in dyads, that evokes the creative energy of connected interactions. Participants carefully and attentively ask each other a list of prepared questions: "Why do you care?" "Why are you here?" "Have you ever felt that you don't know enough to speak out?" "What do you know?" "Where has this message come from that you don't know enough?" "What has kept you from acting?" "What has allowed you to act on your reasons for caring?" "What do you need to keep going?" Session leaders direct attention to the relational context created through addressing these basic questions together and to the sense of mutual empowerment that emerges through shared focusing on highly personal issues. This process acknowledges that participants need such a context both to initiate and to sustain action.

Participants' sense of connection arises from the intensity of the dyadic experience, and then is extended, throughout the workshop, to the group as a whole, to WAND as an organization, and to women throughout history. This experience of different levels of connection parallels WAND members' growing motivation to extend protection and care for closely related individuals, such as one's own children, to the entire human community. One technique for evoking widening ranges of connectedness is through the reading of emotionally evocative quotations from the writings of women speaking about the nuclear issue. An example is from Sally Miller Gearhart:

I believe we are at a great watershed in history, and that we hold in our hands a fragile thread, no more than that, that can lead us to our survival. I understand the rising up of women in this century to be the human race's response to the threat of its own self-annihilation and the destruction of the planet. (1982)

Quotations like this emphasize the ethic of care and responsibility, as well as the joy in courage and risk-taking, in facing this threat together, and in creating a sense of safety and peace through awareness and experience of our connectedness.

The importance of building connections between women to create new understanding and new strategies of peacemaking is emphasized through the presentation and discussion of new research and theory on women's development. An example is a passage from Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*:

Humanity has been held to a limited and distorted view of itself, from its interpretation of the most intimate emotions to its grandest

visions of human possibilities, by virtue of its subordination of women.

Until recently, "mankind's" understandings have been the only understandings generally available to us. As other perceptions arise — precisely those perceptions that men, because of their dominant position, could not perceive — the total vision of human possibilities enlarges and is transformed. (1976)

In response to the urgency of the nuclear issue, women in this workshop learn to operate from the source of their own power, which is staying centered and connected with each other in what we see, feel, and think. Toward this end, the concept of a *paradigm shift* is introduced. A paradigm is defined as a set of assumptions, a mental framework from which beliefs and opinions are constructed. Throughout this workshop, exercises are designed to illustrate and elicit a paradigm shift. The goal of the workshop is for women to help each other shift from the paradigm of passive, helpless victim to a new paradigm of empowered, "related," responsible person; from the giving over of authority to the political and military "experts" to the taking of responsibility by concerned and caring human beings; from the valuing of technical or objective ("separate") knowledge to the valuing of personal and connected knowledge; and, finally, a shift from the emphasis on "public speaking" and debate to the emphasis on finding one's own voice and staying in dialogue.

Most participants in the workshop experience these paradigm shifts and understand how they lose their sense of power as peacemakers when they shift back into old paradigms. They perceive the necessity of staying connected with each other, i.e., sustaining the relational context, to maintain these shifts. Finally, they perceive the power inherent in evolving new ways of entering the arena of the "experts" without losing touch with the source of one's own power. This is accomplished through both experiential and educational processes which examine the sources of relational disempowerment as well as empowerment and highlight the necessity of building relational contexts which support and sustain empowerment. For example, we play a tape of Elissa Melamed, a well known peace activist, speaking to participants at the 1984 Denver WAND Speaker Training Workshop, saying:

Basically, the barriers to being a good communicator are the fears that we feel and the ways that we disqualify ourselves and don't think we have a great deal to contribute as women. In addition to our own personal

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feelings of inadequacy that come from our own private histories there is a certain male norm of what makes for an effective speaker — and we're measuring ourselves by this norm, and we're not stopping to ask how effective that model really is for what we're trying to do.

In the final session of the workshop, the whole group focuses on planning different modes of future action. People are asked to make specific commitments to concrete activities. Despite the overwhelming issue at hand, an enormous amount of energy, excitement, and joy is generated in this workshop. This is the "zest" or vitality experienced in feeling related, connected, and empowered together to work for what is truly important. This process can be acknowledged and built into strategies for initiating and maintaining activities of all kinds.

Inherent in the workshop is a respect for relational empowerment and for action at all levels, from the smallest personal change to the largest life commitment. Joining the group, sharing in the growing awareness, seeing and listening to others speaking about the issues are all important actions, as are movement and action in larger political arenas. Such a definition of action and activism is based on the understanding that individual and relational power are interconnected, grow simultaneously, and work synergistically.

Some people are moved by the workshop experience to change their lives dramatically, others in small ways. Some work collaboratively, while others work in solitude. Individual creativity or risk-taking can be experienced as part of the larger relational context, just as can collaborative group work. For women especially, this sense of personal expression in action is often most meaningful when it is experienced as both intensely personal and related to the larger connection, the shared vision and commitment. This is what we mean by "action in a relational context."

Originally, WAND had followed the model of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) in trying to develop a bureau of public speakers on the nuclear issue. PSR had trained medical doctors and other professionals to speak as "experts" on the facts and figures of the medical effects of nuclear war. It became clear that this "expert" training for public speaking was inappropriate for WAND. The "expert" model is based on an authoritarian model of power through debate where the domain is scientific facts and numbers. WAND's evolving message is that it is precisely in questioning this model of authority that women reconnect to their own untapped power. Rather than becoming over-involved with facts, figures, and technojargon, WAND offers the message

that feeling and conviction are an appropriate and sufficient first response to this issue and form the most powerful basis for further education and action.

At the heart of the training is the recognition that it is insane to disconnect from feelings about the nuclear threat; rather, women must learn to speak out in an emotionally powerful and cogent manner. Women's power to empower others, and to use the power of their emotions effectively to move others to become involved and active, rests not on technical expertise, but on personal authenticity and the energies released through emotional connection. The power of "listening" and "responding" from the heart is thus validated as forming a more valuable and lasting base for power than "speaking out" as an "expert." It is the building of relationship, the creation of the "conversation" that connects people, that is the core of women's powers and creative energies — and, potentially, men's as well. Accordingly, the workshop encourages connections with men. However, it also recognizes and addresses the ways that women can become disempowered when connections with men are fragmenting, that is, maintained at the expense of the deepest connections to self and other women. Thus, women's connections with each other are seen as the first step in evolving a new relational structure for mobilizing, sustaining, and organizing information and activity. Men are welcome to work within this structure. Put another way, the workshop creates a more "realistic" and more total basis from which to gain and use our knowledge about the nuclear threat.

The workshop creates the initial setting for experiencing and validating relational power and for training in speaking out, both formally and informally. It also provides information and structure for channelling this energy through individual, small-group, or organizational action on local, national, and international levels. The workshop helps participants move from positions of isolation, doubt, and confusion to a sense of connection, knowledge, and positive action together. This movement reflects a crucial aspect of women's moral development, described by Carol Gilligan as the development of an ethic of care, whereby the negative injunction against "selfishness" or hurting others can be transformed into the energy of positive responsibility for our mutual security, survival, and well-being (1982).

The workshop experience has strengthened my own conviction that relational empowerment strategies are essential and relevant to women's empowerment in all arenas. We need to learn more about the tremendous creative power of moving and acting in relationship in order to better describe and facilitate it. Perhaps we ought to substitute "empowerment" training for assertiveness training.

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Further, this model of empowering the relationship may be the most fruitful way to study the process of growth and development in all of life — including psychotherapy. We will be exploring this proposal further in the Colloquium Series.

## Discussion Summary

*After each colloquium lecture, a discussion session is held. Portions of the discussion are edited and presented here to expand and clarify the speaker's ideas. In this session Drs. Jean Baker Miller of the Stone Center and Irene P. Stiver of McLean Hospital joined Janet Surrey in leading the discussion.*

**Question:** The workshop you described sounds very different from the therapy situation. How might this translate to the therapy setting?

**Stiver:** It's really not so different from what you attempt to do in therapy. We help the person listen to her own voice by staying with genuine feelings and perceptions and with both people's (client's and therapist's) authentic experience. Being there with the person in this way is a process of empowerment.

**Miller:** It's an important question. I think the basic model is what therapy should be. Traditionally, it hasn't been described that way at all. One way to think about it is that the goal of therapy is to *increase* the relationship in this way, where *each* person can be more totally there and actually in that movement back and forth. The key thing is the creative interaction, with both people learning and growing. The goal of therapy is to create of the fullest, mutually empathic relationship possible. That's a whole other topic we'll need to develop more precisely.

**Surrey:** I think good therapy does involve a mutually empowering relationship. We have not yet focused on, nor had language to describe, this interactive process, and particularly to describe how the therapist is also growing. Clearly, therapy is different from friendship. Even though the focus may be the patient's experience, the therapist grows as a therapist and as a person herself through the interaction. When therapy is working well, both client and therapist feel more real, more connected to their own experience, more energized, and more capable of action. It's not an issue of "giving and getting," but rather engagement in the movement of relationship; in another paper I tried to describe this movement as "fluctuations of figure-ground experience."

**Question:** How can male-female relationships develop in this way? Don't boys need to learn *not* to become disconnected from their feelings, and doesn't this have to happen very early in life?

**Miller:** Change can happen later in life. We're not talking about biological differences. This ability to

move in relationship is in the realm of possibility for all human beings.

**Surrey:** I find it useful in working with couples to talk about "empowering the relationship." This changes the level of conceptual reality to *the relationship*, rather than locating the power in the individual. I might say, "What might be a way the two of you could solve this problem or change this situation?" The therapist is helping the clients build a relational context by helping to create a "we" through the engagement of both people's energies, perceptions, and understanding.

**Question:** I worry that what you are talking about is too idealistic and utopian. What about greed, territoriality, and narcissism, which appear to be basic to the human character?

**Surrey:** I agree that this vision or possibility in human society is clearly *not* the reality. We have all grown up in a condition that does not foster mutual empowerment in relationship, especially in the modal parent-child and male-female relationships. I certainly have experienced moments in my own life where such interaction has occurred, sometimes in a very powerful way, sometimes in the "usual" interactions of daily life. I have begun to see that this is how I do grow and change; this is what empowers me and deepens my own understanding. Again, we need a language to help illuminate the empowering processes that do exist, because we have not yet focused our attention on them. I'm saying this kind of activity occurs, but we tend not to recognize it. Also greed, narcissism, and the like may not be basic, but the products of non-mutual societies and institutions.

**Question:** I can see why such a model would appeal to those who have been in a one-down position of power. Why would it appeal to those in the one-up position?

**Comment:** I have worked with men in these WAND workshops. I think that horizontal exchanges feel better to people of both sexes. Men also say they feel much more enlivened, appreciated, safe, and "heard."

**Surrey:** I think we have to remember that power in the "power-over" model is always unsafe. It's never enough and always being challenged. The person in the power position is always threatened and needs to be on the defensive.

**Stiver:** I agree. The problem for both men and women is how to help people stop being afraid long enough to risk letting down defenses and see how valuable that can be.

**Surrey:** And further — we need to keep trying to create the relational contexts that will help us to feel

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less afraid and safe enough to do that.

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