

## Feminist Relational Scholars and Safe Conversation®

Helen LaKelly Hunt; June 2, 2016

As is true of all the sciences, the field of psychology emerged and formally developed within the patriarchy. The psychological trajectory from childhood into adulthood meant moving from dependency to independence. Adult psychological health was synonymous with states of autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Until the middle of the century, therapeutic protocol encouraged analysts and therapists to maintain a respectable detachment from their patients.

Resonate with the ideas of a few isolated male theorists, women's intuitive way of functioning began to shape an alternative psychological paradigm—one that emphasized context and interpersonal relationships. The concepts of cooperation, collaboration and interdependence were fostered. And thus, feminist scholars began actively researching the concept of relationality. Harville and I feel honored that our Safe Conversations work has paralleled, strengthened, and been strengthened by this paradigm, ideas which have been embodied by the work of the women's movement since its origin.

- I. In 1976 Jean Baker Miller wrote the best-seller: *Toward a New Psychology of Women*.
  - In 1977 Jean Baker Miller, who lived in Boston, began meeting twice a month with three other PhD's: Judith V. Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey. This led to the creation of Relational-Cultural Therapy—where relationship and context, rather than individualism and isolation—was valued.
  - In 1981, The Stone Center at the Wellesley Center for Women was founded, with Miller as the Director. This circle of scholars were coming into voice!
  - Therapists from the Stone Center diversified the field of psychology, challenging the white hetero male "norm" that labeled less dominant, more marginalized groups as "deviant."
  - The Stone Center's relational-cultural model "places power dynamics, particularly stratification and development of dominant and subordinate relationships, at the center of people's experiences of isolation and disempowerment." They refer to "relational resilience," the ability to heal individual and social sources of disconnection.
- II. Also in the 70s (and also in Boston) Carol Gilligan was a psychology student at Harvard and research assistant to Lawrence Kohlberg. In a major study that included only men, he deduced the highest human ethic was that of justice—with the goal being autonomy and self-sufficiency. Gilligan challenged his methodologies (only studying men) and his findings, asserting that had he studied women he would have found an equally high "ethic of care" that existed alongside the ethic of justice.
- III. Between the mid 60s and mid 80s, Feminist Theologians were also exploring relationality—within the religious domain. In 1963, Carter Heyward (Episcopal priest, professor, theologian, and pioneer of feminist liberation theology) wrote *When Boundaries Betray Us: Beyond Illusions of What is Ethical in Therapy and Life* "...to sharpen awareness among healers and those seeking healing and liberation that an immutable 'power-over' dynamic that does not move us toward a more shared connection serves to diminish and mute the human spirit." Carter shares: "We are never called forth alone but always to answer the Spirit's call *with* one another...at the core of our faith, we know that in the beginning and in the end, we are not alone. In our living and in our dying, we are not separate from one another."
- IV. Beverly Wildung Harrison (scholar of Christian social ethics and feminist theory) is "regarded by colleagues worldwide as the 'mother of Christian feminist ethics.'" For Bev, the fundamental

universal energy is relationship: “We are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation... Such a perspective enables us to envision our relationship to the full cosmos.”

- Bev developed a “theology of relation,” articulating that the first step toward building “right relationship” is to recognize “the awful, awe-some truth that we have the power through acts of love or lovelessness literally to create one another.”
- V. In 1987 the groundbreaking book *The Chalice and the Blade*, by Riane Eisler, was published. A pioneer of new social paradigms, Riane created a novel conceptual framework for understanding and improving social systems: “the partnership-domination continuum.”
  - VI. In the 1980s, Gen Vaughn worked on “The Gift Economy,” an essay published in *Ms. Magazine*. She later wrote a book about how each human is a part of the collective, citing that personal identity is formed by using the collective’s material, cultural and linguistic gifts, which are given to each of us by others, and are given by each of us to others.
  - VII. In 1988, *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples* was published. Harville and I met in 1977, and once I heard of his idea of a book to help marriages, I proposed! I also became his dialogue partner on the subject, acting as a behind the scenes support in making the book as solid as possible. While Harville was the architect of Imago theory, I helped with much of the content. I had been impacted greatly by Martin Buber’s theory of I-Thou, and continued to be informed by the feminist psychologists and scholars that I’ve listed above. Many of Harville’s and my theses are similar to the Stone Center women’s—their work resonated in my soul. Harville, with his alpha energy, got Oprah’s attention and was on her show 18 times.
  - VIII. The early 90s saw breakthroughs in neuroscience, that resulted in two key discoveries: (1) neuroplasticity exists, the brain can evolve; and (2) we have social brains, they are experience dependent. Thus, the intuitive way that women have functioned for centuries has scientific confirmation in the actual way our brains are structured.
  - IX. Our culture needs the collective wisdom of these women. And about five years ago, Harville had the idea of taking the relational technologies out of the clinic and into the culture. He asked me to partner with him and we are disseminating Imago education in the form of Safe Conversations. There is now a new relational science that is so lasered and precise, that there should be four R’s taught in school: **Reading**, **Writing**, **Rithmetic**, and **Relationship**. This technology belongs in all institutions, everywhere.

## CONCLUSION

The values currently valorized in our culture (winning, getting to the top of the ladder) can result in abusive tendencies that ultimately lead to a winner take all, dominator paradigm. Altering this paradigm has been the work of the women’s movement! Thus Gloria Steinem continues to assert the need for this shift saying, as she asserts: “In this culture, we need to be linked, not ranked.”

Harville and I agree wholeheartedly and look forward to the day when cultural values shift from competition and independence to collaboration and interdependency. My initial involvement in the women’s movement was largely to overcome my irresponsible passivity about the money in my life. Inspired by others, I learned to step up, step out, and take responsibility. It strengthened me to be able to do the work of my heart and soul: helping to foster healthy marriages and a more relational culture. We need not excel as individuals alone, but to work and thrive in partnership and collaboration. There is much to celebrate and illuminate about those who have gone before and what can be created in the future. It’s time for the women’s movement to come full circle and more overtly claim this relational vision for the future.