

Work in Progress

Power and Effectiveness: Envisioning an Alternate Paradigm

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About the Author

Maureen Walker, Ph.D., is a psychologist with a practice in psychotherapy and anti-racism 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.

Abstract

Relational-Cultural Theory provides a straightforward and elegant definition of power; it is the capacity to produce change. The implication of this framework is that power is the energy of competence in everyday living. However, in a culture stratified along multiple dimensions—race, class, and sexual orientation to name a few—power is associated with hyper-competitiveness and deterministic control. The paper begins by examining the “protective illusions” of the power-over paradigm, where humanity is rank ordered according to perceived cultural value and is stratified into groups of greater than and less than. In addition to exposing the false dichotomies of power-over arrangements, the paper examines the destructive consequences of cultural disconnection, on both the putative winners and the losers. Examples from organizational practice, clinical relationships, and socio-political contexts are used to illustrate the Relational-Cultural Model in action. Specifically, scenarios are presented from the standpoint of the politically disempowered to demonstrate the relational competencies of empathic attunement, authenticity, and accountability that foster healing, resilience, and mutual empowerment.

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There is probably a no more straightforward and elegant definition of power than that proposed by Jean Baker Miller: Power is the capacity to produce change (1991). This definition suggests that power is a fundamental energy of everyday living. However, in a culture that valorizes radical individualism (Jordan, 2002), power is associated with hyper-competitiveness, conquest, and might. Power mutates into “power-over,” and is then viewed as the entitlement of the “winners”—those individuals who have attained the social ranking and the material accoutrements that signify value. Such a model is quite impoverished. Envisioning a more inclusive model begins with acts of revelation: bringing to light the stories and experiences of those people who are typically characterized as vulnerable and marginalized, people who are seen as the “losers” in a power-over paradigm. What these stories often reveal are everyday strategies of attunement, empathy, and reciprocity that not only enable survival, but also enlarge capacity for navigating the complex illusions and machinations of power-over social arrangements.

One such story involves my memory of a power negotiation that occurred on an ordinary Saturday morning well over 40 years ago. On this particular Saturday morning, my mother and I walked into downtown Augusta, Georgia to pay the rent on 1131 Summer Street, the three-room clapboard structure that was my home for at least the first ten years of my life. When we entered the Lucky Real Estate office, my mother presented her cash payment (cash she had earned providing domestic service for white families) to the white woman behind the counter.

When my mother counted her cash and put it on the counter, this woman who did not know my mother, pushed it back at her and said, “Mary, you need to go and get some change.” The racial context of this encounter is significant for two reasons. First, only white people—usually women—worked behind

counters in downtown offices in Augusta in the 1950's. Second, although she did not know my mother, any white woman could, and was in fact *expected* to, exercise the entitlement of familiarity, calling my mother by her first name only to signify the difference in their social ranking. Knowing my mother as I do now, I doubt that she even blinked. I do remember her asking very calmly: "Who needs to go and get some change?" I think there were several moments of silence because no one spoke another word. The woman picked up the money, gave my mother proper change and our rent receipt. We then left and went about the business of doing whatever the two of us did on Saturday mornings.

It seems to me that those us who occupy positions of relative privilege have much to learn from those who occupy the bottom strata of the dominant power hierarchy. In fact, the historical failure of mainstream feminist movements has been the manifest and compound exclusion of women subjugated by race and class in the dominant power arrangements. It is from these people that we can draw insight and inspiration for visions of alternative paradigms. The fictional character Janie Crawford is an example of such a woman. In Alice Walker's (1979) poem about this character, she wrote:

*I love the way Janie Crawford
left her husbands, the one who wanted
to change her into a mule
and the other who tried to interest her
in being a queen
a woman unless she submits is neither a mule
nor a queen
though like a mule she may suffer
and like a queen pace
the floor. (Good Night 18)*

It occurs to me that a part of my attraction to Janie Crawford (and women like her) is that she subverts the restrictive fictions of a power-over paradigm, choosing how she will relate to a social structure that would limit her life to dichotomous choices.

From the founding concepts to the more recent formulations, Relational-Cultural Theory has grappled with issues of power. I consciously use the word grapple because it connotes collective struggle, political risk, and interpersonal discomfort. Jean Baker Miller (1987) laid the foundation for this struggle in her book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, when she stated that:

In most instances of difference, there is also a factor of inequality—inequality of many kinds of

resources, but fundamentally of status and power. These inequalities, which are often natural and essential, all too often mutate into power-over relationships...relationships in which there is no assumption that the goal of the relationship is to end the inequality.

Miller elaborates on this point by commenting that in fact, quite the reverse happens. The dominant group is the model for "normal" relationships. It then becomes "normal" to treat those with less power destructively to obscure the truth of that destructiveness, and to oppose any movement toward equality. In most contemporary social structures, including but not limited to modern work places, rigid stratification of power not only looks normal, it begins to feel necessary. Thus the everyday mystifications that support distorted power arrangements achieve operational credibility, and through practices of either cultural extortion or seduction, they cloud our vision and enervate our capacity for productive critique. In other words, through either the threat of exclusion and/or annihilation, or the illusory promise of inclusion and/or protection, the dominant power arrangements co-opt the talents of the most well-intentioned among us in order to maintain and reproduce their own interests. They do so by quieting the voices of opposition—the voices that would question the foundational values upon which hierarchical power rests.

Elizabeth Janeway (1980) describes our cultural legacy of power similarly:

Power, as we have seen it, involves mastery, with its connotations of individual might, heroic stature, lone suffering that must win, perhaps, a solution born of the mind of a single genius who has achieved a new vision.

Using a term coined by Bernard Loomer, Rita Nakashima Brock (1993) writes that "unilateral power" presupposes an ego-centered, self-contained person, one who aims at creating the largest determining effect on others, while being minimally influenced by the other. Not coincidentally, this model of power is totally congruent with the model that traditional psychology sets forth as "the healthy self," a self of firmly-bounded independence guided by its internal locus of control (Jordan, 1991). This paradigm of power, like this paradigm of self, is grounded in either-or choices. This paradigm of power—like this paradigm of self—is based upon what Karen Brodtkin (1998) calls the "social binary," where "difference" devolves into better than or worse