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# How Change Happens: Controlling Images, Mutuality, and Power

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

*Change is inevitable but it can go in a positive direction toward growth or in a negative direction. Extending Patricia Hill Collins' concept of controlling images (2000), we can see how these images interact with relational images and strategies of disconnection to obstruct growth on both the societal and the personal level. In therapy, change is defined as movement-in-relationship toward better connection; and increased connection leads to growth. Several aspects of therapy that lead to deeper and wider connection are explored, especially increasing the patient's power. Prior versions of parts of this paper were presented at the Jean Baker Miller Summer Training Institutes in 2001 and 2002 and at the 2002 Learning from Women Conference sponsored by the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute and the Harvard Medical School/ Cambridge Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts.*

As therapists, we're "in the business" of change—change for the better. That's our goal. Another word for change for the better is growth. Change is the essence of life. It is most obvious in children but it is a necessity through all of life. Change will occur inevitably but it can go in a positive or a negative direction. Further, I believe change toward growth creates pleasure. We feel most alive and zestful when we are engaged in this expanding activity.

## **Change and Relational Images**

I'd like to explore the use of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) to further our understanding of change and its difficulties. Growthful change occurs as we encounter new experience, and this new experience usually happens in interaction with other people. We do not usually grow and develop in isolation. I think growth requires the ability to modify our relational images or to construct new ones. To do this, we must open ourselves to the influence of others. We've defined relational images (RIs) as the inner constructions we each create out of our experience in relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997). We begin to construct them early in life, and we modify and develop them repeatedly. They define what we believe will happen to us. Not only do they portray what we expect will happen in relationships, they determine the meanings of this experience for our total conception of ourselves. For example, if our relationships have made us feel valuable, we will tend to carry this belief over to most realms of life, in school, work, or others. For the most part, we do not construct these images consciously.

To take in new experience in a growthful way, we probably compare the experience to the RIs we've created to date, again not usually consciously. If our relational images are relatively flexible, we may then modify them. However, if they have been reinforced very powerfully, and especially with threats of

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isolation and condemnation, we will build more rigid RIs. They will be much harder to change.

For example, a little four-year-old girl, Lucy, was very curious and gleeful. For their own reasons her parents couldn't join her in these interests and joy. She began to develop the image that when she pursued her interests no one would be there. As time went on, this RIs became rigidified into, "Whenever I pursue my interests, I will be isolated." As happens when a child feels isolated, she also developed the belief that something was "wrong" with her if she landed in this dreadful place.

Another child may be more fortunate; she may find other people, a teacher, a grandmother, or other relative who can join her in her interests and joy. She may be able to alter some of her RIs or create some new contrasting images. Perhaps she will be in conflict.

## Societal Context

Therapists working with people in marginalized groups cannot think about what will help people to change without thinking about change in a larger context. For example, they can't think that things are fine for African American youth and they should just adapt to the status quo. Or that working-class youth face no obstacles but their own.

Many therapists didn't consider a need for societal change for the dominant group until they were challenged by their disciplines to become culturally competent. For others, the women's movement opened up the whole question of the norms held out for white women. This elucidation has led to questioning the norms for people of both genders and the whole construction of gender. More recently, led by marginalized women, feminists have begun to explore the intersection of race, class, and gender.

In her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins, a sociologist and one of the scholars leading the exploration of this intersection, has suggested the concept of "controlling images." Maureen Walker referred to this idea in another paper (Walker & Miller, 2000). I find this concept provides a valuable link between the social and the psychological. Collins discusses the controlling images (CIs) inflicted on African American women. Several other authors have also discussed them, including Elizabeth Sparks in a paper on African American mothers for example, "the Mammy," "Jezebel," or, more recently, "the welfare queen" (1998).

I believe the concept can be extended to all the groups that society creates. Society also defines some

groups as better than others. Working-class people can be portrayed as dimwitted, burly, uncouth, brash, and the like. White women have been described as either Madonnas or whores. In Hispanic traditions the Virgin Mary image has been very powerful.

Controlling images define who and what we each are. They determine what is acceptable and what is not, what people can do and cannot do. They exert a powerful impact on how we can act and how we construct relationships. Consequently, CIs create the framework within which people make the kinds of relationships that go into the construction of RIs. We fashion RIs in the immediate interactions in our lives. They form the psychological constructions we then carry in our minds, often without awareness. But the RIs are very determined and in many societies constricted and limited by the CIs. We are often not fully aware of the operation of CIs, although members of marginalized groups may be more conscious of them than members of the dominant group.

Collins (2000) defines all of the controlling images as lies, falsities. Although false, they exert a powerful force holding people of all groups in their place, that is, resisting change. Therefore, CIs can induce people of both privileged and non-privileged groups to believe that change cannot and should not occur. For example, white women were led to believe that they must adhere to the dominant group's image of the good heterosexual woman or they will fall to the level of "those other people," the "bad women," the "Jezebels," the "sluts," or the "dykes." They will sink into these "degraded groups."

But it is more complicated. While CIs affect us powerfully, people also create forces resisting them. These resistances may arise from two major sources. One is the truth of their own experience, which differs from these falsities. For people in marginalized groups, their group culture may reinforce these truths and convey different traditions. For example, African American people know a different story about African American women, or Latina women know that they are not docile victims. However, it can be complex for people to hold on to their truths when bombarded by the CIs.

Second, particularities within a person's immediate development may counter the CIs. For example, while a working-class family may convey to a child that s/he can't aspire too much, a parent may, in the very immediate way s/he relates to the child, convey that s/he is most precious and valuable. This attitude can form a base for the child's ability to counter restrictive images.

In sum, our society, and certainly others too,