Re-examining Empathy:
A Relational—Feminist Point of View

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This article reviews the literature on the concept of empathy in the social work profession from the days of Mary Richmond to its use in traditional literature today. Empathy is re-examined in light of recent developments in feminist scholarship, in particular the relational-cultural theory developed at the Stone Center at Wellesley College. Moving beyond the more traditional definitions of empathy, this article presents a framework that conceptualizes empathy in an increasingly mutual, interactive, and humanist way. Case examples illustrate the need for connection and empathic responsiveness in which both worker and client feel the impact each has made on the other. Unlike earlier conceptualizations of empathy, this relational approach highlights the active participation of the worker and client system in a dynamic helping process and illustrates how the worker brings his or her own thoughts and feelings into the helping relationship. Implications for practice are discussed.

KEY WORDS: empathy; mutual empathy; relational-cultural theory; Stone Center model; self-in-relation

For thousands of years people have been aware of the concept of empathy. In ancient Greece, philosophers expressed their understanding of “empathy” by the word *empatheria*, which implies an active appreciation of another person’s feeling experience (Astin, 1967). In 1910, British psychologist Edward Titchener translated the German word “Einfühlung” into empathy, literally meaning “to feel oneself into” (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997). In the 1950s, American psychologist Carl Rogers highlighted the importance of empathy in his client-centered approach to working with people. His description of empathy was widely adopted by social workers, giving common voice to its meaning in professional literature. According to Rogers (1951),

it is the counselor’s function to assume, in so far as she is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he/she is seen by himself, to lay aside all the perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding of the client. (p. 348)

Although empathy may be used differently in different models of practice and in different practice settings, current social work scholars consistently identify the concept of empathy as one of the critical ingredients in constructing a helping relationship in which the client feels understood and sustained by the worker (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2006; Shulman, 2006). Furthermore, empirical studies have demonstrated that empathy has been closely correlated with effective outcomes in social work practice. For example, Truax and Mitchell (1971) have shown that the failure to empathize with clients is a key error that leads ultimately to the client’s premature withdrawal from the helping process.

More recently, a review of 52 child psychotherapy treatment studies by an eminent university research team compared treatment groups containing “active” therapeutic interventions with those not containing active therapeutic interventions. The authors suggested that “nonactive” or “nonspecific” relational elements such as empathy, attention, and positive regard likely account for the great deal of unexplained variance in intervention outcomes. They concluded that these neglected variables are not only a necessary threshold for treatment efficacy, but may well be essential to enhancing it (Jensen, Weersing, Hoagwood, & Goldman, 2005).

Perhaps because nonspecific relational factors are difficult to control in looking at indictors
for change, the concept of empathy has received relatively scant attention in contemporary social work literature (Raines, 1990). The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the meaning of empathy and its role in the helping process in light of recent developments in feminist scholarship. Through the lens of relational-cultural theory—a new relational paradigm for practice originating out of the Stone Center for Clinical and Developmental Studies at Wellesley College—empathy is re-examined for effective social work practice. Relational-cultural theory, written from the standpoint of the life experiences and developmental processes of women and girls, moves social work beyond the more traditional unidirectional definitions of empathy suggested in social work literature, to a framework that conceptualizes empathy in an increasingly mutual, interactive, and humanist way.

Relational-cultural theory evolved out of the work of feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan, Nancy Chodorow, Mary Belenky, and others: work written by women about female growth and development based on clinical studies and observations of girls and women's life experiences. The relational-cultural approach applies these developmental theories to practice and is concerned with certain growth-fostering relational activities that are vital to the health of all human beings. The relational-cultural model represents an organic outgrowth of feminist relational theory reflecting a growing awareness of the impact of culture and power practices within a larger sociocultural context (Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004). This article uses the terms “feminist relational theory” and “relational-cultural theory” interchangeably.

EMPATHY IN THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL WORK

Notable social workers writing at the turn of the 20th century, such as Mary Richmond, invoked the importance of sympathetic understanding of clients, which she clearly differentiated from what she considered to be the intrusive efforts of the friendly visitors of the earlier charity organization movement (Richmond, 1922). In their vital need to be recognized as a legitimate profession, social workers were influenced by Freudian theory and Freud's "dynamic" passive technique as a way to establish a more scientific approach to social work practice (Hartman, 1972). An understanding of empathy and its application in the traditional casework setting was seen as a way of tuning into the unconscious or subconscious thoughts and feelings of which the client may or may not be aware. Psychodynamic theorists noted that empathy inferred that the worker did not simply take a client's word at face value, but searched for the deeper meaning in the cognitive and affective signals that the client transmitted (Woods & Hollis, 1999). For example, Mrs. A, a 40-year-old client, talks about her divorce with depressed affect and tears in her eyes. The worker says, "I hear how painful it is for you to talk about your divorce and the loss of your husband. It sounds like you feel quite betrayed." In this traditional approach, the worker uses empathy to reflect on, and gain insight into, the person's feelings and inner state of mind by passive listening. Freud called this "evenly suspended attention" (Freud, 1921/1955, p. 109).

Post–World War II social work leaders representing the diagnostic school, such as Gordon Hamilton (1940) and Florence Hollis (1964), directed attention to elements associated with empathy—acceptance, understanding, expectation, and support—in an effort to gain better insight and deeper meaning into another's mind. This concept of empathy offered professionally trained social workers a way to distance themselves from the ordinary lay term "sympathy" and to strengthen the social work relationship. In the 1940s and 1950s, members of the functionalist school, such as Jessie Taft (1948) and Virginia Robinson (1934), had a deep and abiding commitment to the professional relationship as an ongoing process in support of client growth. Casework thus grew to rely increasingly on the meaning of the client's behavior, and the dynamic relationship with the client became of paramount importance in the emerging development of self in the process of change.

However, until the late 1950s the word "empathy" was hardly used, if at all. The act of offering empathy was largely conceived as the worker listening carefully and offering understanding to the client on the basis of what the client feels and thinks without bringing his or her own self into the relationship. Robinson (1934) wrote: "In her function of understanding and accepting the client, the worker asserts no will of her own, but becomes at his service" (p. 158). By virtue of his or her controlled emotional response, the worker demonstrates a "professional" use of self in receiving the client's feelings in a neutral, objective manner. Perlman (1957) stated: "The casework relationship begins as the client shares..."
some part of his problem, and as the caseworker demonstrates that he feels with the client at the same time that he has professional competence to bring to dealing with the problem" (p. 71).

The concept of empathy is indeed a critical skill essential to social work intervention, and one that is constantly evolving. From the 1960s on, the profession incorporated object relation theory and self psychology into its knowledge base for direct practice, strengthening social workers' understanding of the beneficial effects of empathy. According to object relations theorist D.W. Winnicott (1965), receiving genuine love from a parent who provides the child with a safe, consistent, "facilitating environment" enables the child to identify with this person's feelings states, and subsequently takes on the ability to feel with another (Goldstein, 2001). Similarly for Kohut (1959), the self grows out of an empathetic milieu of interpersonal relationships; the first few years of life being the most critical, wherein the parent usually serves an auxiliary ego function for the child, mirroring back and validating the child's evolving feelings and needs. If the parent fails to do so, the individual seeks out and uses what Kohut calls "selfobjects" to supply reparative and constructive relational processes (see Goldstein).

Following Winnicott's and Kohut's line of thinking, the sensitive and attuned social worker can act as a compensatory selfobject in facilitating the client's ability to form empathic growth-enhancing relationships with others. Through a process Kohut calls "vicarious introspection," the worker attempts to feel the client's pain, pleasure, and whatever other emotions the client experiences as if they were his or her own (Kohut, 1959). Thus, Winnicott and Kohut take the social worker one step closer toward "feeling with the client," while projecting himself or herself into the inner experiences of another.

Current social work literature generally concurs that empathy calls for the practitioner to understand the client's feelings and circumstances, as well as the meaning the client attributes to his or her sense of reality. For example, Kadushin (1990) noted that the use of empathy depends on the workers' ability to know and see the experience of their clients through their eyes, or to "walk in their footsteps," so to speak. In fact, almost every modern social work conception of empathy shares the idea that it involves "the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person" (Barker, 2003, p. 141). This ability to take on another's perspective is generally depicted in social work literature as "having empathy" (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 2006) and is cited as an essential element in establishing a constructive professional helping relationship (see Compton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005).

Woods and Hollis (1999) see empathy as an essential element in maintaining a caring feeling for the client and enhancing his or her sense of feeling understood and supported. Although Woods and Hollis suggested that the worker feel with clients' broad range of experiences, workers are, at the same time, advised to contain their own feelings and inhibit the expression of their own emotional responses. The underlying concern is that if the worker's emotions are not contained, they may interfere with the client's own thinking-feeling process, and ultimately subvert transference reactions.

Hepworth and his colleagues (2006) agree that the worker must avoid losing perspective by taking on the emotions experienced by the client: "The social worker must remain outside of the client's world and avoid being overwhelmed by his or her fears, anger, joys and hurts" (p. 87). According to these authors, when practitioners assume the client's feelings they risk not only losing their vital perspective, but the ability to be helpful as well.

Too much emotionality can bring danger, warned Kadushin and Kadushin (1997), and mitigates the worker's ability to be optimally helpful. They believe responses not tempered by intellectual distancing and objectivity may lead to projection: "That is, the way I feel in this situation must be the way he is feeling" (p. 111).

Like Kadushin and Kadushin (1997), much of conventional literature suggests social workers should never abandon the approach of neutrality when they are matching their emotions to the client's affective state (Keefe, 1976; Raines, 1990). This idea suggests that retaining separateness is a critically important dimension in the social work helping process. In essence, modern-day workers are cautioned to maintain clear and separate boundaries to avoid the possibility of overidentifying with the client. It is here that the relational-cultural model and mainstream social work approach to empathy depart.

THE PLACE OF EMPATHY IN FEMINIST RELATIONAL THEORY

Like traditional social work practice, the relational-cultural approach developed at the Stone

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Center for Developmental Studies and Research on Women at Wellesley College views empathy as a central ingredient in the helping process. In fact, empathic relating is at the heart of this new understanding about women. Recasting it from a one-directional phenomenon to a bidirectional one, cognitive–affective experiences are understood in an interpersonal framework of mutuality and equality. Bidirectionality represents the quality of a mutual relational flow or movement between people (the relationship), in which participation in such a relational flow requires

- affective attunement to the other
- the ability to maintain flexible ego boundaries and a well-differentiated sense of self
- comfort in a relational context of mutual understanding and reciprocity
- the ability and willingness to feel the presence of each other, and the impact each has made on the other (Surrey, Kaplan, & Jordan, 1990).

Stone Center founders Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver (1997) defined empathy as “the capacity to feel and think something similar to the feelings and thoughts of another person that exists in all people” (p. 27). However, unlike more traditional accounts of empathy, the relational-cultural school’s notion of empathy allows for more flexible boundaries between the client and the worker, involves the worker as a more active participant in an interactive and dynamic helping process, directly brings the worker’s own thoughts and feelings into the helping relationship, and places emphasis on the notion of mutuality and the dynamic of reciprocal interaction.

To better understand the concept of empathy from a relational approach, it is helpful to reflect on the development of self, as seen through the eyes of Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey, Judith Jordan, and other leaders at the Stone Center at Wellesley College. These scholars propose that the sense of self develops and matures through the process of relationship-differentiation instead of through separation-individuation (see Erikson, 1963; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975), traditionally viewed as the cornerstone of healthy human development (Jordan, 1984). The implication is that self-differentiation is an ongoing dynamic process in which the individual continuously carves out a sense of who he or she is while maintaining emotional connectedness and proximity to others.

The “relational-self” concept is evolutionary in that the self is seen as developing within mutually empathic relationships starting with the mother–infant dyad. Rather than disconnecting from early love objects, the emphasis is on redefining and adapting relationships to meet changing needs, developmental tasks, and environmental demands as one traverses the life cycle (see Kaplan, Klein, & Gleason, 1991). According to feminist thinkers, although the need for connection and empathic responsiveness exists for both males and females throughout the life span, the motive and capacity for empathy differs. Traits associated with empathy are considered “atypical” for males by society’s standards, for example, compassion, sensitivity, emotionality, feeling, and subjectivity, and have the potential to threaten the masculine sense of self. Furthermore, these traits are more likely to be passed onto girls, who maintain their sex role identification with the maternal nurturing role (Chodorow, 1978).

MUTUAL EMPATHY IN THE HELPING PROCESS

Relational cultural theory emphasizes mutual relations in which empathy flows out of a reciprocal interchange between the worker and the client. According to Stone Center theorist Judith Jordan (1986), “The primary feature of empathy, rather than structure marked by separateness and autonomy, is increasing empathic responsiveness in the context of interpersonal mutuality” (p. 2). In other words, empathy is not just a matter of reciprocity—“I give to you and then you give to me”—but rather a quality of relationality, a movement or dynamic of relationship. The “other” is not just an object to gratify one’s needs, wants, and desires or an object to buttress self-object needs, but is a unique individual who has to be considered in his or her own right. For the client to see the worker as a fully dimensional human being enhances the client’s capacity to see beyond himself or herself, strengthening his or her ability to form mutually satisfying interpersonal relations beyond the client–worker relationship.

The role of mutual empathy in relational theory is basic to notions of change, growth, and development. Jordan (1986) defined mutual empathy as “a two way process which occurs when two people
relate to one another in a context of interest in the other, emotional availability, responsiveness, and the intent to understand” (p. 7). Thus, mutual empathy is more than just an intervention technique. It reflects an underlying belief about the nature and quality of the worker-client relationship based on mutual respect, maximum possible relational equality, a belief in the capacity to participate in growth-promoting relationships, and the motivation for emotional connectedness with others. It is this nature of mutuality, always nuanced, often complex, that makes it different from traditional social work concepts of empathy.

**AFFECTIVE RESONANCE AND AUTHENTICITY**

It is important to underscore that in the empathic interchange, the worker must truly experience the client's affective state if she or he is to have an impact on the client. In relational-cultural terms, this ability to feel deeply “with” the other person is called “affective resonance” (Hartling & Littlefield, n.d.). It is a form of physiological arousal in which the worker experiences a vicarious emotional response while cognitively aware that the source of affect in oneself emanates from the other person (Jordan, 1997). The idea is for the client to feel that she or he has moved you—to know that she or he has made an impact on you. The worker may tap into her or his own memories and re-experience a similar life situation on a visceral level to intensify the affective arousal in empathic connection. Without necessarily disclosing personal information, and using split-second timing, the worker shifts back and forth between her or his own cognitive and affective process to focus on where the client is in the moment. If the worker is successful, the empathic process is validated and strengthened.

However, people are different and complex; there is no such thing as “perfect empathy” in gaining access to another's subjective and cognitive experiences. The worker must be willing to take risks, admit mistakes, and allow the client to guide him or her in a process of mutual empathic regulation. "Good-enough empathy" reflects on the nature and quality of the worker-client relationship and contains the capacity for emotional connection with others, the worker's ability to be in touch with his or her own feelings and thoughts in the moment as they arise in direct response to the client's affective and cognitive state, and flexible self boundaries that allow the affective flow necessary for empathic connection. Thus, genuine empathy is embedded in the relationship when the worker is truly engaged, present in the moment, in touch with his or her own feelings, and allows himself or herself to be vulnerable and moved by another.

Like Carl Rogers, the feminist relational approach espouses that the more the worker presents as a genuine human being, the more effective the outcome. Miller and Stiver (1997) briefly described the concept of mutual empathy as “a joining together based on the authentic thoughts and feelings of all the participants in the relationship” (p. 29). Feminist relational practitioners who aim to be authentic are active and expressive in their use of themselves when exercising empathic skills. This critical ability to represent oneself more fully in relationship and to elaborate on one's own feelings and thoughts in the presence of another allows for true engagement in a mutually empathic process.

In essence, empathy is not meaningful unless each person involved in the dynamic interactive process is fully aware of each other's presence, fully participates in the interchange, and feels the impact that each has made on the other. For example, Abby, 30 years old, has been married to Tim, 32 years old, for seven years. She recently discovered that he had stolen money from their joint bank account to support his cocaine habit. Even after he entered a drug treatment program, he persistently denied his drug use despite the fact that his drug tests continued to come out positive.

Although Abby stated that she was no longer in love with Tim, she felt enormously responsible for him. She wanted to leave the marriage, but felt too guilty to do so. I knew it was a very difficult decision for her, fraught with conflict, sadness, and terrible loss. I felt her frustration about not being able to make a decision to leave or to stay. I also saw how tortured she was and felt sad that she was in an unsatisfying, exploitative relationship. I verbalized this, saying,

> It pains me deeply to see how unhappy you are. I understand that it is a great loss to leave someone after many years of being together. You are not only giving up on Tim, but giving up your hopes and dreams of a family, and the memories of all the years you shared together. However, you are wonderful person, and you deserve a better life.
The client teared up and said, “I never felt anyone cared about me so much. I guess I’m not sure I can find someone to love me again, or that I am lovable at all.”

My concern was that Abby had suffered such shame and humiliation at the hands of her husband that she would not have the strength to leave him. Also, the thought of abandoning him evoked guilt in her based on what she learned from her family and the church: that a good Italian girl takes care of her husband and is married to him for better or worse. I imagined she felt like a failure in the eyes of the dominant culture because her marriage did not succeed. I believe my ability to empathize with her and respond to her in a nonjudgmental fashion allowed her to feel safe enough to face her hidden fear of being alone and of never being loved again. I was able to be fully present with her, and accepting of her ambivalence, although it was difficult for me to keep my own feelings in check. I wanted to say to her so many times, “He is manipulating you so bad, why don’t you leave him,” but instead I struggled to help Abby reach her own decision. I truly believe the strength of our connection and my genuine belief in her helped her to move into healthier connection with friends and family, paving the way for her to eventually break away from her husband.

This type of mutual empathic interaction has the potential to elicit a free exchange of feelings and thoughts between client and worker. According to Miller and Stiver (1997), “Because each person in the professional relationship receives and then responds to the feelings and thoughts of the other, each is able to enlarge both her own feelings and thoughts and thoughts of the other person” (p. 29). When the client experiences herself as having an impact on the worker, and is in turn affected by the worker’s response, she can draw strength from the worker–client relationship and enhance relational capabilities. When the client actually “feels the worker feeling with her,” and feels that her experiences really matter to the worker, authentic participation facilitates action, or movement, in relation to the other (Walker, 2004, p. 11).

THE EMPOWERING NATURE OF EMPATHY

The kind of empathic connection established between worker and client can provide a blueprint that can foster the client’s ability to form supportive and sustaining relationships outside of the professional helping relationship. In essence, empathy can be viewed as the fuel, or energy, that drives the relational approach, and the worker–client relationship can be seen as the vehicle through which someone experiences a basic sense of connection to another human being. I am suggesting that an enhanced feeling of power grows out of the healthy interaction with empathically attuned others, contributing to the capacity to act in the environment with a sense of self-efficacy and purposefulness. Miller (1991) calls this sense of being able to effect change in a larger relational context “agency-in-community.”

Joan, a 45-year-old Afro-Caribbean woman with whom I have been working for two years, is an excellent example of someone whose sense of empowerment increased in the context of a growth-promoting dyadic relationship marked by mutual empathy and respect. She had been a successful high-level bank executive for the past 12 years. However, recently she had been subject to criticism about her work on a daily basis from the newly hired bank president, a white man who was less qualified than Joan. His constant belittling of her work led Joan to believe that she was incompetent and had no other recourse but to leave. The emotional abuse she had endured for the past few months eroded her self-esteem. At this point she came to see me, stating that “her world was falling apart.”

Joan had dealt with discrimination previously in her career but did not expect it at this point because she had been so successful and respected at her job. She spent weeks exploring feelings of shame and disappointment. I was deeply moved by and open to Joan’s pain; as a female professional, this resonated with experiences I have had in my own life, and I let her know this (without sharing details). I integrated my ability to share my emotions and thoughts while being mindful of professional boundaries. Joan saw that she had made an impact on me; I felt sad that she was not able to change the relational image she had of herself based on the “dominant group’s perceptions” (see Collins, cited in Jordan et al., 2004, p. 142). It was perhaps more frightening for her to acknowledge the extant racism and sexism than to blame herself. Thus, she felt helpless in the face of an oppressive force she could not control.

When Joan discussed her work life with me, she presented as articulate, bright, and clearly very competent. I communicated my confidence in her through the empathic process, which allowed her to develop a more contextual understanding of the
possible social and political forces present in her workplace situation. As a result of this process, she was able to explore alternative career opportunities. Eventually she found another job in a work environment more compatible with her strengths and needs.

Early in her life Joan had incorporated into her sense of self the negative images of black women that are prevalent in the larger society, making her particularly vulnerable to the disrespect she experienced from a white male authority figure. Joan’s stressful situation was exacerbated by the fact that she was the only ethnic minority woman in a management position in the bank and could not rely on a support system. My empathic attunement to her suffering helped her to distance herself from her pain and examine her position in a more objective manner. Furthermore, I communicated my belief in Joan’s talents and abilities, which she was able to incorporate into her persona. The level of trust and comfort between us helped her to heal some of her wounds.

ON THE CULTURAL SIDE
This feminist-oriented relational approach has expanded the boundaries of its theoretical framework to include a heightened awareness of the diverse cultural and sociopolitical contexts that shape women’s growth and development and relational experiences in the environment. Relational—cultural theory challenges some of the basic tenets of 21st century Western industrialized culture—male-oriented ideals of competition, power over others, and independence—that have been considered indicators of increasing levels of growth and maturity in traditional developmental theories (see Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1981). Demonstrating increased sensitivity to the sociocultural context of empathic connection, the relational—cultural approach recognizes that the female experience is marginalized in a patriarchy, and often the ways in which women and girls find strength through connection are undervalued and underresearched.

Placing connection with others at the center of this relational—cultural model establishes that the self cannot be fully understood outside of the sociocultural context in which it exists. The relational—cultural school takes as a given that women’s gender-related experiences intersect with socioeconomic status, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other forms of difference that situate people in a socially stratified and hierarchical society and become powerful determinants of the reality of their lives (Jordan et al., 2004). If empathic communication is to be successful, it is critical that the worker understand that the client’s worldview is filtered through her or his own cultural frame of reference. This includes the recognition of power differentials that exist across racial, ethnic, and gender lines.

Echoing the writings of Pinderhughes (1979) and Dyche and Zayas (2001), the client’s perception of power, or lack of power, is a critical ingredient in the worker’s ability to establish an empathic complementary helping relationship. Knowing that resources and opportunities are often rewarded or withheld based on cultural privilege, the relational—cultural school makes more conscious the power differentials, values, and cultural determinants that inform their theory, research, and practice, empathy being a crucial component (Walker, 2004). The relational—cultural school suggests that the worker acknowledge the impact of cultural forces and power differentials as a starting point in using empathy to build a more authentic, open, and mutually empathic relationship (Surrey et al., 1990).

BOUNDARY ISSUES AND USE OF SELF IN THE EMPATHIC PROCESS
Contrary to past psychoanalytic notions wherein workers were overtly concerned about maintaining emotional distance out of fear of encountering transference and countertransference, the “relational” social worker experiences and willingly expresses a wide range of thoughts and feelings in the moment, facilitating a sense of connection (Jordan, 1984). Feeling deeply with another in the professional relationship does not necessarily imply a form of “regressive merging” nor does it suggest a “blurring of the self with another,” as has been traditionally considered by many male theorists, thereby devaluing women’s emotional experiences. Jordan (1983) has characterized empathy as a cognitive and emotional activity in which one person is able to experience the feelings and thoughts of another person as if they were one’s own, while simultaneously being aware that his or her own feelings and thoughts are different from another person’s. These ideas imply that the worker is mature and capable of maintaining a relatively clear sense of self and flexible ego boundaries to allow for the high degree of emotional and cognitive integration essential for empathy to be effective.
Because relational–cultural theorists believe that movement and change happen through connection and disconnection in relationship, the worker should be in touch with a vast array of feelings and thoughts that are in direct response to what the client is experiencing. Misunderstandings and differences, as well as connections and similarities that arise in the mutual flow of empathy, have to be negotiated and accepted for what they are for both the client and the worker to grow (Kaplan, 1990). The challenge for the clinician is to maintain a well-differentiated sense of self in addition to an appreciation of, and sensitivity to, the differences and the similarities of the other person.

CONCLUSION
The relational–cultural approach enriches the concept of empathy by adding the notion of mutuality. The ability to participate in a mutual relationship through the use of empathic communication is seen as a goal for growth and development, as well as a mechanism that allows for change in the worker–client relationship and beyond. Although current social work literature reflects different views regarding the degree to which workers should remain emotionally detached when feeling with, and entering into, the client’s experience, the general consensus calls for the worker to maintain a neutral, objective persona and a sense of separateness in using empathic attunement as an intervention in the helping process. Unfortunately, the more the worker expends energy on keeping parts of herself or himself out of the process, the greater the rigidity in self-ego boundaries and the less spontaneous and genuine he or she is in relating to the client system. Consequently, the worker–client relationship runs the risk of becoming organized into dominant–subordinate roles.

The relational–cultural approach enables the worker to bring more of herself or himself into the relationship, allowing for the development of a mature, authentic, mutual relationship wherein two or more people feel they are having an impact on one another (see Spencer, 2000). It is important to keep in mind that empathy is not a static skill, but part of a larger relational process that takes place within a specific client–worker relationship. The feminist relational–cultural school places emphasis on the importance and meaning of the dynamic interaction of relationships in a cultural context. This relational context is evaluated with regard to diversity issues such as age, race, culture, and gender and their impact on the use of one’s self in the empathic process.

Although this perspective is based on the practice and scholarly writings of women and the ordinary life experiences of females, such a perspective applies to men as well. The social worker can present a model of mutual empathy that allows for more responsive, respectful, and empowering relationships for both male and female clients. Both social worker and client, regardless of gender, must have the capacity to get in touch with their own inner experience and to get in touch with the inner experience of others. This requires that the skilled social worker be a mature individual who has learned through professional training to be acutely self-aware and ethical in her or his practice.

Moreover, true mutual empathic practice requires institutional support and possible change in the way social work practice is carried out. Social services agencies and organizations would need to offer additional supports to their workers in the form of peer consultation, supportive supervision, decision making based on consensus and mutual respect, a collaborative teamwork approach, and policies that enhance personal and professional growth (Straussner & Phillips, 2005). Mutual empathy can be a powerful experience that communicates to the other person a sense of self–worth and importance. The resulting self-regard may release greater energy, allowing more effective interaction in, between, and among people, institutions, and environments.

REFERENCES


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