

Relational-Cultural Theory and Geriatric Agency Social Work Practice

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What is RCT?

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is a theory of social and psychological development which prioritizes emotional growth through human connection.

Tenants of RCT

- Traditional models do not match women's/human experience.
- The goal of development is to become engaged in growth-fostering relationships.
- Relatedness and connectedness are critical components to healthy development.
- The value of relationships is often minimized in traditional theories, and women are often made to feel ashamed of efforts/focus on emotional connections.

Core Concepts of RCT

1. People grow through and toward relationship in the life span.
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning.
3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth fostering relationships.
6. In growth fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one way street.
7. One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span.

The "Five Good Things"

Miller (1988) noted five good things that come from connected, growth-producing relationships:

A sense of zest that comes from connecting with another person

The ability and motivation to take action in the relationship, as well as in other situations

Increased knowledge of oneself and the other person

An increased sense of self worth

A desire for more connections beyond the particular one

Common Themes of Geriatric Social Work



Selected Concepts of RCT Application

Relational Images – “Inner pictures of what has happened to us in relationships..., Relational images thus determine expectations about what will occur in relationships and a person’s sense of self” (JBMTI)

Older adults have longer life experience in which relational images have operated and served as a protective measure. Work with older adults offers an opportunity to gently challenge some relational images, while respecting the role of other relational images as adaptive.

Mutual Empowerment – The RCT concept that “both people in any growth-fostering relationship are experiencing more aliveness, more clarity, and a greater sense of possibility and potential agency....It is a two-way (or more) dynamic process that functions as a central component of psychological growth, enhancing the strength of each individual in a relationship and ultimately creating strength in the larger community.” (JBMTI).

Mutual empowerment becomes particularly critical in work with older adults, as there often are many ways in which the older adult may have lost/be losing power. For example, changes in physical conditions, housing locations, manifestations of inability to do what previously had been done, possible changes in cognition, etc. all may contribute to feelings of powerlessness. RCT in geriatrics focuses on preserving and supporting the power of the individual and may include new ways of empowerment (for example, life review work, narrative/storytelling work.

The need for human connection remains throughout the life cycle, including into older adulthood.

RCT and Geriatric Social Work Practice

- Focus on healing, growth producing relationships.
- Relational commitment.
- Opportunity for social justice and powerful change through connection
- Focus on quality of life.
- Development of “5 Good Things”
- Ability to reconnect, to continue to develop relationship despite disconnection or conflict.
- Multiple layers of healing opportunity.
- Opportunity to work cross-culturally.
- Focus on diversity issues.
- Consideration of issues of privilege in work together.
- Opportunity to work through vulnerabilities.
- Opportunity for authenticity.
- Relational commitment.
- Recognition that humans have emotional growth through the life cycle, inclusive of later adulthood.

Focus on Culture and Diversity

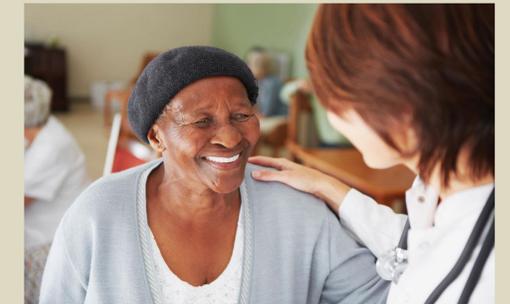
Understanding culture and diversity is essential to an RCT approach.

Key Concepts

- Relational Images
- Cultural Privilege
- Concepts of Power
- Cross-Cultural Connection



Opportunities for Cross-Racial Connection



Stock photo, not an actual client

Race and Connection

1. **Desire for cross-cultural connection is impacted by**
 - Larger cultural context that does not support mutuality
 - Conflict, including the growth that results from conflict
 - Need to “stretch” across difference and experiences
2. **Social segregation**
 - Social work and health care are settings where cross-racial contact occurs
 - Conflict is inevitable
 - Importance of “home communities”
3. **Staying open in cross-cultural connection**
 - Listen without defending
 - Be conscious
 - Recognize the journey and process
4. **Recognize historical context of racial/cultural experiences.**
5. **Recognize privilege issues.**
 - Those with cultural privilege can appear more self sufficient, more healthy, more worthy of privilege
 - Those who have less cultural privilege can be viewed as deficient and needy.
6. **Cross cultural connection can be complicated by age differences of those providing care to those receiving care.**
7. **Understanding racism as a trauma experience is critical to cross cultural geriatric work.**

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