

From Disconnections to Connections: Expanding Our Worldviews and Relational Competencies Through the Enneagram Personality Typology

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Introduction

One of the most perplexing issues facing many adults in contemporary society is the difficulty in sustaining loving relationships. Loving is a natural, human need, yet the ability to provide genuine love and to receive it is elusive for many. Creating an intimate relationship requires a desire for and commitment to psychological and relational growth by both members of a relationship. It also involves taking steps toward very real, deliberate action. We are better able to act in relationships when we are conscious of our motivations and essential worldviews and when we are able to understand the worldviews of those we love. Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT) and The Enneagram Personality Typology provide us with contexts from which to understand the motivations, desires, and basic fears that drive our action or inaction in relationships.

RCT provides a context for conceptualizing basic relational dynamics and serves as a framework for our discussion. According to this theory, each of us has an essential need for connection with others (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1993). Briefly stated, connection involves five relational dynamics referred to by Miller (1976) as “five good things” (p.3). According to Miller, each person in a relationship experiences more “zest, vitality, and energy” (p. 3) because of a shared connection within a growth-fostering relationship. She adds that

because the relationship is growth fostering and both parties actively participate, they each experience increased motivation toward action and then act on that motivation. The result is that people come to a clearer view of themselves and of each other. This clarity brings with it a mutually experienced sense of personal worth, generating deepened connection between the two and a desire to form and enjoy such connections with others (Miller, 1976).

In addition, this theory proposes that we have varying capacities for shared connection with others. Our relational images (i.e., expectations of others and of their responses or behaviors toward us) influence our capacities for connection. According to this model, we learn to expect certain behaviors from people; that is, we form relational images that drive our expectations of others and of their responses or behaviors toward us. We form these images through our various experiences. Each subsequent experience provides an opportunity to shape or influence these relational images (Miller & Stiver, 1995). These images either nurture or impede our connections. If our relational images are such that we expect our connections to be satisfying, we will be more open to them and better able to contribute in a growth-fostering manner. If, however, our relational images are more restrictive, we may encounter what the model refers to as the central relational paradox (Miller & Stiver, 1997). When this occurs, in spite of our yearning for connection, we develop strategies of relating that create the opposite effect and instead develop what the model refers to as *strategies for disconnection*. These strategies, in effect, keep us from the very connection we desire.

Certainly, forging connections within a growth-fostering context is problematic when we lack sufficient self-awareness or when we do not understand the worldview of the person we love (Riso & Hudson, 1996). Consequently, increasing self-awareness and enjoying a curiosity about the worldviews of others facilitates positive, productive, and growth-fostering connection. The Enneagram Personality Typology provides a practical means for such a process. A distillation of spiritual and psychological teachings, the Enneagram is an age-old tool for understanding the relational aspects of human nature. The Enneagram assists us in identifying the core desires, fears,

and basic needs that influence our capacity for relationships (Riso & Hudson). It also helps us understand how we engage in strategies for disconnection that can appear to be resistance to love.

The Enneagram study includes nine personality types and nine levels of development within each type, including specific, concrete examples of the personal qualities that distinguish types. Other features of the Enneagram include providing a context for assessing the relational dynamics between types as well as a range of developmental functioning assessed within types. An understanding of Personality Typology as a developmental framework provides a practical and useful structure for assessing and understanding the relational challenges and competencies of our clients.

In addition, the Enneagram provides a context for conceptualizing attitudes and behaviors that promote relational connections and identifies attitudes and behaviors that impede or sabotage them. It aids clients in defining and addressing specific thought and behavior patterns that create disconnection in relationships. This clarity is particularly important, for example, in the midst of the heartbreak experienced at the breakup of a relationship. During these times, information gleaned from the Enneagram study allows clients to make conscious decisions about life direction and responsible behavior regarding their relationships with others. It is also useful in defining and addressing specific thoughts and behaviors that enhance insight and relational competency, as opposed to hindering them.

The use of the Enneagram within RCT allows for a valuable synergy between the two models. For example, when assessing type, it is important to consider the sociocultural, racial, and gender influences in relationship. RCT provides a language and perspective for understanding the qualities and relational patterns that would ideally assume a relational, gender-sensitive position in assessing type. For example, although “interdependence” is a stated goal by most relational therapies, when describing individuals in relationships, qualities of independence, autonomy, and individuation are often noted as “functional” developmental stages in most developmental texts and personality profiles, whereas qualities of striving for

connection seem to be assumed or minimized. Our cultural values reinforce these positions.

Discrepancy regarding the value of interdependence is most evident when we assess or consider men or women as relationally “needy” when they lose their voice and sense of self in order to maintain connection with an elusive other, while failing to consider the “neediness” of their approach-avoidant, seduction-rejection counterparts. The latter group escapes the pejorative stigma of relational “neediness” even though an important consideration within such a relationship would be to question, “Whose needs dominate?” Reframing relational biases such as these with a perspective that values growth toward connection would provide direction without the prejudices and assumptions that we, as a culture, seem to hold (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). In so doing, we could not only move toward depathologizing individuals in counseling through our assessments, we could also take steps toward destigmatizing men and women along relational lines.

Summary

The establishment and maintenance of loving, growth-fostering relationships represent one of the greatest needs and challenges facing adults today. In assessing the relational competencies of couples and families, The Enneagram Personality Typology can be used as a tool for understanding attitudes and behaviors that both increase and impede people’s efforts to establish and maintain relational connectedness. In short, the Enneagram involves moving individuals to consider the influence of their own worldviews, beliefs, core fears, and specific needs, as well as those of others. In addition, the use of the Enneagram, within the framework of the Relational Cultural Model, provides a context for considering sociocultural, racial, and gendered influences on relationship development.

Conclusion

Enneagram Personality Typology, used within the context of RCT, is proving to be a powerful and effective means for fostering relationship development. By using the synergistic effect of the Enneagram Personality Typology within the context of RCT, couples and families have a forum for increasing their self-awareness and relational competencies while at the same time strengthening their bonds and enjoying more fulfilling relationships.

References

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Suggested Readings

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