BEYOND THE CONSUMER SELF

Selections from Chapter One of
The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy
by William J. Doherty, Ph.D.

The consumer culture may be the most powerful force in American life and yet we've mainly ignored it in therapy literature. It teaches that we find meaning and purpose in economic and psychological self-interest (Cohen, 2008).

Personal relationships become more fragile in a consumer culture because their main source is not lasting commitment or enduring friendship but the sense of whether the relationship is "working for me" these days.

At a civic level, the consumer culture accelerated the decline in civic engagement. Long gone was John F. Kennedy's call to national service, replaced on the political right by promises to tax less and on the left by promises of more government services.

My central argument is that the field of psychotherapy was influenced by and contributed to this cultural trend towards too much "I," and that we can now help create a healthier balance between the I and the We—between the individual and the communal. This can only occur if we admit to being part of the problem we aim to fix.

The Individualistic, Consumer Self in Therapy

The individualistic Consumer Self shows itself in therapy when we embrace a transactional approach to relationships, which emphasizes primarily what clients are getting out of their relationships (*"How is this working for you, is this problem a 'deal breaker" for you?"*) to the relative neglect of what they owe people in relationships. Family cut off decisions become not ethically complex dilemmas but straightforward ways to enhance personal well-being.

The fragility of transactional, consumer relationships even shows up in parenting as the category of "runaway kids" has morphed into "throwaway kids," sometimes after a custodial parent brings in a new partner who doesn't get along with a teenager—and the teen is sent away.

© The Doherty Relationship Institute for educational distribution purposes
RelationalEthicsInTherapy.org

Trends Beyond the Consumer Self in Therapy

Newer models of therapy are centering more on relationships (for example, attachment models), but we therapists have not regained the cultural influence we once had, in part because we have not confronted at a broader level the ramifications of the me-first Consumer Culture and its image of the Self. In contrast, early psychoanalysts offered a potent critique of the Victorian and Post-Victorian culture of repression, and therapists in the Human Potential Movement identified and criticized the 1950s culture of conformity that it sought to transcend. Becoming culture influencers today will require looking not just at the psychological and interpersonal problems we see in our offices but also at the cultural pathologies that underlie them—and to offer an alternative to the Consumer Self.

The Relational Self

The Relational Self is the idea no self outside of relational systems. Stated more informally, there is no "I" without a "We."

The idea of a relational Self was a core principle of family systems theory that became obscured when family therapy entered the mainstream as an intervention to treat individual DSM disorders. It's a centerpiece of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2015), contemporary attachment-oriented therapies (Johnson, 2013; Steele & Steel, 2017), and the development of relational psychoanalysis (Mitchell & Aron, 1999). Some identity theory literature in psychology explicitly uses the term "the relational self" (Chen et al., 2006).

At the community and societal levels, the idea of the Relational Self speaks to the importance of authentic connections across group differences. Without those relational bonds, people become isolated and in need of therapy.

Commitment and the Relational Self

But "relational" alone is not a strong enough idea to counteract the fragmentation of today's world. After all, relationships can come and go. For this reason, commitment must be a core element of the Relational Self. By commitment I mean sustained investment in something outside oneself, to relationships and causes that transcend us, extend us, challenge us, and require continual struggle to manage and even sacrifice for (Doherty, 1995; Taylor, 1992). The importance of commitment comes from the fact that we are born into families and communities that both support us (even if imperfectly) and call on us to give back. In other words, these relationships come with ethical obligations to be sustained over time, even difficult times.

But ethical commitment is inconsistent with the Consumer Self that honors no previous obligations unless they promise future rewards.

© The Doherty Relationship Institute for educational distribution purposes
RelationalEthicsInTherapy.org

Community and the Public Dimensions of the Self

The Relational Self as I conceptualize it is communitarian. It is not limited to the intimate sphere because human beings exist in groups larger than family and close friends (Doherty, 2017). Most traditional theories in psychotherapy have not paid much attention to articulate a public dimension of the Self, which means there is little psychological guidance for how individuals and their families can be productive citizens in the larger world and its institutions. This gap is at the heart of concerns by social scientists about the contemporary retreat from broad social engagement and commitment to civic life (Bellah et al., 1985; Putnam, 2016). Marriages, families, and other close relationships must fulfill all the social needs of individuals—and often fail the task. We therapists have a responsibility to contribute to the renewal of community bonds.

In sum, if we can find a way to integrate commitment and community into our emerging emphasis on interpersonal connection, we potentially have a new cultural ideal—the Relational Self. It's an antidote to the poison of the Consumer Self. In terms of psychotherapy, the Relational Self means that no problem can be treated as if it is contained only within the individual client. Healing occurs within a web of interconnected, committed bonds, personal and communal.

As I once heard family therapist and Ojibwe tribe healer Sam Gurnoe say, "Outside of a culture, a community, and a spirituality, you can treat but you cannot heal."

References:

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life.* University of California Press.

Cohen, L. (2008). *A consumer republic.* Vintage.

Putnam, R. D. (2016). *Our kids: The American dream in crisis.* New York: Vintage.

Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity.* Harvard University Press.

© The Doherty Relationship Institute for educational distribution purposes
RelationalEthicsInTherapy.org