

RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework

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Content

RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework

Resource type: Tier 1 Flagship — Methodology / Framework

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Library home: L08 Emotional Intelligence Library; L03 IDI-Informed Intercultural Development Library

Companion to: T04_04 Cultural Humility; T04_05 Goleman EI; T04_06 SAMHSA TIP; T04_11 Intersectionality

What this framework is

The Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework (RMHF), as used in DSD's learning ecosystem, brings together two connected frameworks:

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) was developed by Jean Baker Miller, M.D., Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey at the Wellesley Centers for Women (formerly the Stone Center) beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. RCT proposes that humans — contrary to dominant psychological models emphasizing individual autonomy and separation — grow and develop through connection, and that the quality and character of relationships are the primary vehicle of psychological health and development throughout life.

Multicultural Humility, as a framework applied alongside RCT, extends the relational focus to the cultural and power dimensions of helping relationships — recognizing that therapeutic, supervisory, and service relationships occur within cultural, historical, and systemic power contexts that are not optional or incidental but fundamental to what happens in those relationships.

The Wellesley Centers for Women describes RCT's development (<https://www.wcwonline.org/JBMTI-Site/the-development-of-relational-cultural-theory>) as emerging from the observation that existing psychological theories (Freudian, object relations, Eriksonian) described human development in ways that centered the experiences of white, Western, middle-class men, and that pathologized relationality (particularly in women and non-Western cultures) as immaturity or dependence.

Why DSD uses this framework

DSD staff build relationships with people with disabilities, families, colleagues, and communities — relationships that are the primary vehicle of effective service delivery, just as RCT suggests they are the primary vehicle of human development. The quality of those relationships is not a soft peripheral concern; it is the core mechanism through which good outcomes are produced or not.

RCT, paired with multicultural humility, gives DSD a framework for:

- Understanding why relationships in DSD work feel meaningful or hollow, effective or stuck.
- Recognizing the power dynamics embedded in service relationships and addressing them constructively.
- Building organizational cultures where staff can thrive and grow — because growth happens in connection.
- Centering the relational quality of service delivery as a primary quality standard, not a secondary nicety.

The core concepts (plain language with citations)

Relational-Cultural Theory: Core Propositions

1. Humans grow through connection, not separation.

The dominant model in Western psychology — from Freud through Erikson — treated healthy human development as a progression toward increasing separation, autonomy, and independence. RCT challenges this: as described by Beyond Intractability (<https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/relational-cultural-theory>), RCT proposes that "human beings grow and develop in the context of relationships and that psychological health is characterized by increasing complexity of connection rather than separation and increasing self-sufficiency."

For DSD: This means that services oriented solely toward individual independence may be misoriented. Connection — to family, community, peers, supporters — is not a developmental stepping stone to be transcended; it is a lifelong condition of human wellbeing. The Disability Justice principle of interdependence (T04_12) converges here.

2. Growth-fostering relationships have specific qualities.

RCT identifies five good things (<https://cupofpeace.com/?p=186>) that people in growth-fostering relationships experience:

- Zest: Increased energy and vitality.
- Action: Movement toward change and engagement.
- Knowledge: Increased self-understanding and understanding of others.
- Worth: A sense of increased self-worth.
- Connection: Desire for more connection.

When a service relationship produces these five outcomes, it is a growth-fostering relationship in the RCT sense. When it does not — when a service interaction leaves a person feeling diminished, more isolated, or more confused — the relationship may be what RCT calls a "disconnection."

For DSD staff: Audit your service relationships against these five outcomes. After an interaction with you, does the person feel more energized, more capable, more worthwhile, more connected? If not, what is producing the disconnection?

3. Disconnections are inevitable and can be repaired.

RCT does not assume that growth-fostering relationships are always harmonious. Disconnections — moments of misunderstanding, hurt, power differential assertion, or failure to be seen — are inevitable in all relationships. What distinguishes growth-fostering relationships is not the absence of disconnection but the capacity for repair: the ability to acknowledge the disconnection, understand what happened from both perspectives, and restore connection.

Cup of Peace describes (<https://cupofpeace.com/?p=186>) the three phases of healing: joining through truth (confronting the dysfunctional pattern directly), skill-building (developing communication, boundary, and empathy skills), and ongoing maintenance (relational mindfulness and mutual growth).

For DSD: Service relationships will have disconnections. A supervisor who dismisses a concern, a case manager who misunderstands a family's priorities, a DSP who does not notice that their communication style is not landing — these are disconnections. The professional response is not to pretend they didn't happen but to repair: to acknowledge, understand, and restore.

4. Mutual empathy is possible across power differentials.

A central tension in applying RCT to service relationships is that genuine mutuality — both people affecting and being affected by the relationship — is complicated by the power differential inherent in professional service relationships. RCT does not require that the power differential disappear; it requires that it be named, acknowledged, and navigated with integrity.

Judith V. Jordan's work (<https://www.wcwonline.org/JBMTI-Site/Founding-Scholars/judith-v-jordan>) explores the concept of mutual empathy as a condition of relational growth — not that the staff member becomes the client, but that both are genuinely present in the relationship, that the staff member's genuine care and genuine uncertainty are visible, and that the person being served is not positioned as an object of professional expertise.

5. Cultural context is not incidental; it is relational.

RCT began as a challenge to the cultural assumptions of mainstream psychology — specifically, the assumption that the white, Western, male developmental trajectory was universal. Multicultural humility, integrated into RCT, extends this challenge: every relationship is culturally embedded, every relationship involves different positions within systems of power, and ignoring these dimensions does not make them disappear — it just makes them invisible to the professional while remaining very visible to the person being served.

Multicultural Humility within RMHF

Multicultural humility, as articulated by Sue, Rasheed & Rasheed (2016) and integrated with RCT by Jordan and others, brings three core orientations to helping relationships:

1. Cultural humility in the relationship:

Not just knowledge about culture (cultural competence), but genuine openness, curiosity, and not-knowing — the willingness to be taught by the person about their own cultural context rather than presuming the professional's cultural knowledge is sufficient.

2. Awareness of power dynamics:

Every helping relationship involves power — professional authority, institutional backing, resource control. Multicultural humility requires naming this power, examining how it operates in the relationship, and working to use it in service of the person rather than in service of the professional's comfort or the institution's efficiency.

3. Social justice commitment:

Multicultural humility requires recognizing that individual helping relationships exist within systemic contexts that produce the conditions requiring helping. A culturally humble helper does not only help individuals navigate unjust systems; they work to change those systems.

How RCT and multicultural humility connect in DSD

The integration of RCT and multicultural humility produces a framework for DSD service relationships that holds simultaneously:

- The relational quality of the interaction (Does this produce growth-fostering connection?)
- The cultural dimension of the interaction (How is cultural context shaping what each person experiences in this relationship?)
- The power dimension of the interaction (What does the power differential in this relationship require of the professional?)
- The systemic dimension of the interaction (What structural conditions are shaping what is possible in this relationship, and what responsibility does DSD have to change those conditions?)

What it looks like in DSD practice

Growth-fostering service relationships:

A case manager who has worked with the same family for three years reflects that after every planning meeting, the mother seems more capable of articulating her son's needs and more confident in navigating systems. This is RCT's five good things — zest, action, knowledge, worth, connection — in a service relationship. The case manager has been a growth-fostering presence.

Repairing disconnections:

A DSP misunderstands a communication from the person they support — interprets a behavioral signal as agitation when it was actually excitement — and responds in a way that escalates the situation rather than resolving it. Later in supervision, with support, the DSP acknowledges the misread to the person directly:

"I got that wrong yesterday, and I'm sorry. I want to learn to understand you better." This repair strengthens the relationship rather than ending it.

Mutual empathy across power differentials:

A supervisor conducting a performance review acknowledges their own uncertainty: "I'm not always sure I see everything that's happening for you in this work. Can you help me understand what this past month has been like?" This is mutual empathy — not pretending the power differential doesn't exist (the supervisor is still the supervisor), but genuinely seeking to understand and be affected by the other person's experience.

Cultural humility in the relational frame:

A DSD program manager notices that their supervision style — direct, agenda-driven, task-focused — is not working well with a staff member from a cultural background that emphasizes relational connection before task engagement. Rather than attributing the friction to the staff member, the manager reflects on their own relational assumptions and adjusts their approach: they begin meetings with genuine relationship-building conversation before turning to the agenda.

How to apply this in your role

As a DSP:

- Before service interactions, ask: "How can I be genuinely present with this person today — not managing them, but actually connecting?"
- After service interactions, ask: "Did this person seem more or less connected to me after our interaction? If less, what happened?"
- Practice repair: when something goes wrong in a service relationship, address it directly and gently rather than moving on as if it didn't happen.

As a supervisor:

- Create the conditions for growth-fostering supervision: psychological safety, genuine curiosity about staff experience, willingness to be affected by what they share.
- Name power dynamics in supervision: "I hold authority in this relationship, and I want to use it in your service, not against you."
- Model relational repair: when you get something wrong with a staff member, acknowledge it.

As a leader:

- Assess organizational culture through an RCT lens: Does the organizational culture of DSD produce growth-fostering conditions for staff? Or conditions of chronic disconnection?
- Use multicultural humility in leadership: be genuinely uncertain, genuinely curious, genuinely willing to be taught.

Common misconceptions

"RCT is just about being nice and warm." RCT is analytically rigorous and includes clear thinking about power, disconnection, and the conditions of growth-fostering connection. It is not a mandate for constant positivity.

"Multicultural humility means I can't have professional expertise." Multicultural humility is about how expertise is held and applied — with openness and curiosity, not with presumptuous certainty. Expertise and humility coexist.

"RCT is only relevant for therapy, not disability services." RCT's core insight — that humans grow through connection — applies to every helping relationship, including DSP-person, case manager-family, and supervisor-staff relationships.

"This is too soft for the real challenges of DSD work." The relational quality of service delivery has direct, measurable impacts on trust, engagement, outcomes, and equity. Relational practice is as rigorous and as important as any technical practice.

Connection to other frameworks

- Emotional Intelligence (T04_05): Goleman's domains of social awareness and relationship management are the EI dimensions most directly supported by RCT. RCT provides the relational theory; EI provides the competency framework.
- Cultural Humility (T04_04): Multicultural humility within RMHF is an extension and deepening of cultural humility practice into the relational frame.
- Trauma-Informed Practice (T04_06): Growth-fostering connections and the capacity for relational repair are exactly what TIP's safety, trustworthiness, and collaboration principles require.
- Intersectionality (T04_11): RCT's attention to how power dynamics shape relationships must be deepened by intersectional analysis of which power dimensions are operating in any specific relationship.
- Person-Centered Planning (T04_07): Genuinely person-centered planning requires the relational presence that RCT describes — being genuinely curious about and moved by the person's experience, not processing them as a case.

Connection to DSD's six program goals

DSD Goal — RMHF Connection

Goal 1 — Eliminate Disparities — Disconnected, power-unaware service relationships reproduce disparities. Growth-fostering, culturally humble relationships are a mechanism for disparity reduction.

Goal 2 — Community Engagement — Genuine community partnership requires relational qualities — mutual empathy, repair capacity, cultural humility in the relationship — that RMHF describes.

Goal 3 — Hiring and Retention — Staff retention is shaped by the quality of supervisory and organizational relationships. RCT provides a framework for understanding why staff stay or leave.

Goal 4 — Learning and Development — Growth happens in relationship. Learning and development programs that create growth-fostering conditions will produce better developmental outcomes for staff.

Goal 5 — Contracts and Procurement — Authentic community partnership relationships — as distinct from extractive consultant relationships — require the mutual respect and cultural humility that RMHF describes.

Goal 6 — Communication and Accessibility — Communication that is relationally grounded — attentive to

the other person's experience, transparent, responsive to feedback — is more accessible across cultural and disability contexts.

When to escalate / where to refer

- For RCT-informed supervision training: Contact the Equity and Inclusion Operations Consultant; RCT-based supervision is a recognized model in social work and human services education.
- For relational repair in conflict situations: Consult with your supervisor and HR; some relational ruptures require mediation beyond one-on-one repair.
- For multicultural humility in clinical relationships: Refer to behavioral health consultation and multicultural clinical supervision resources.
- For Wellesley Centers for Women resources: <https://www.wcwonline.org>

Reflective questions for your practice

1. After your most recent service interaction, did the person seem more energized, more capable, more worthwhile — or less? What drove that outcome?
2. When have you experienced a disconnection in a service relationship — a misunderstanding or failure of connection — and successfully repaired it? What made the repair possible?
3. In your supervision relationships — whether you are the supervisor or the supervisee — do you experience the five good things of a growth-fostering relationship?
4. What power dynamics are present in the service relationship you find most complex right now? Have you named them? How do they affect what is possible in the relationship?
5. What would it look like for your team or unit to create genuinely growth-fostering conditions — not just for the people you serve, but for each other?

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Always defer to the person in front of you. Frameworks describe patterns; people are individuals.

Create the conditions for growth-fostering supervision: psychological safety, genuine curiosity about staff experience, willingness to be affected by what they share.

Name power dynamics in supervision: "I hold authority in this relationship, and I want to use it in your service, not against you."

Use multicultural humility in leadership: be genuinely uncertain, genuinely curious, genuinely willing to be taught.

Ask: When have you experienced a disconnection in a service relationship — a misunderstanding or failure of connection — and successfully repaired it? What made the repair possible?

Ask: What power dynamics are present in the service relationship you find most complex right now? Have you named them? How do they affect what is possible in the relationship?

Ask: What would it look like for your team or unit to create genuinely growth-fostering conditions — not just for the people you serve, but for each other?

Verify current authority, preserve rights and exceptions, and route interpretation questions using RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework.

For policy regulatory analysts, use RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework to verify current authority, preserve rights and exceptions, and route interpretation questions; trace each recommendation to current authority, preserve exceptions, and document the decision record. Start by create the conditions for growth-fostering supervision: psychological safety, genuine curiosity about staff experience, willingness to be affected by what they share.

For community engagement staff, use RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework to verify current authority, preserve rights and exceptions, and route interpretation questions; plan accessible participation, make influence visible, and close the feedback loop with community partners. Start by name power dynamics in supervision: "I hold authority in this relationship, and I want to use it in your service, not against you."

For facilitators learning leads, use RMHF — Relational-Cultural Theory and Multicultural Humility Framework to verify current authority, preserve rights and exceptions, and route interpretation questions; build the guidance into preparation, practice, debrief, access checks, and follow-up. Start by use multicultural humility in leadership: be genuinely uncertain, genuinely curious, genuinely willing to be taught.

Use cultural and community context to ask better questions, never to predict an individual or treat a group as monolithic.

Do not replace official legal, policy, clinical, supervisory, program, or Tribal authority.

Do not infer an individual's identity, preferences, needs, or experience from group-level information.

State uncertainty, use current authoritative sources, and escalate when the decision exceeds the user's role.

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