Addressing Violence Against Women with a Social Work Perspective in the Context of Relational Cultural Theory

Kadına Yönelik Şiddetin İlişkisel Kültürel Teori Bağlamında Sosyal Hizmet Bakış Açısıyla Ele Alınması

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ABSTRACT

Relational cultural theory is one of the postmodern theories and emphasizes the importance of the quality of the relationships with other people in women's psychological development. This theory is more widely accepted for its potential to bring about meaningful and sustainable change in cases of violence against women. By working with women who have been subjected to violence on the basis of relational cultural theory, women are supported to convey their experiences more easily and to establish healthy connections in their relationships. Empathy, with its emphasis on mutual empowerment and cooperation, provides an important basis for supporting women who have experienced violence. Studies show that relational cultural theory increases the resilience and empowerment of women who have been subjected to violence. In this context, this study includes the foundations of relational cultural theory and approaches and explanations in the context of violence against women from a social work perspective. The impact on women's empowerment and healthy relationships is explained, as well as what needs to be taken into account in practice.

Keywords: Violence against women, relational cultural theory, social work

ÖZ

İlişkisel kültürel kuram postmodern kuramlardan olup, kadınların psikolojik gelişiminde diğer insanlarla kurdukları ilişkilerin niteliğinin önemli olduğu vurgulanmaktadır. Bu kuram, kadına yönelik şiddet vakalarında anlamlı ve sürdürülebilir bir değişim oluşturma potansiyeli nedeniyle daha fazla kabul görmektedir. Şiddete maruz kalan kadınlarla ilişkisel kültürel kuram temelindeki çalışmalar ile kadınların deneyimlerini daha rahat aktarmasına, ilişkilerinde sağlıklı bağlantılar kurmasına destek olunmaktadır. Empati, karşılıklı güçlendirme ve iş birliğine dayalı vurgusuyla birlikte şiddete maruz kalan kadınlara destek noktasında önemli bir temel sunmaktadır. Çalışmalar, ilişkisel kültürel kuramın, şiddete maruz kalan kadınların dayanıklılıklarını arttırdığını ve güçlenmesini sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu kapsamda bu çalışma ilişkisel kültürel kuramın temellerine ve kadına yönelik şiddet bağlamındaki yaklaşım ve açıklamalara sosyal hizmet perspektifiyle yer vermektedir. Kadınların güçlendirilmesi ve sağlıklı ilişkiler kurması yönündeki etkisiyle birlikte uygulamada dikkate alınması gerekenler açıklanmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kadına yönelik şiddet, ilişkisel kültürel kuram, sosyal hizmet

Introduction

Relational cultural theory has emerged as an evidence-based therapeutic approach that emphasizes the important role of interpersonal relationships in human development and recovery (Frey 2013, Gomez 2020). At its core, this approach is a new model with the perspective that individuals grow and develop through the relationships and connections they make with each other. It assumes that individuals develop through human relationships throughout the life course (Jordan 2022). On the other hand, the theory underlines the importance of developing genuine, empathic and empowering relationships between the professional and the client (Kelly 2011). The theoretical foundations of relational cultural theory are based on the research and study of Jean Baker Miller and colleagues who argued that psychological development is fundamentally characterized by interpersonal relationships (Frey 2013).

Relational cultural theory, one of the postmodern theories, has an important place in women's studies. The field of women's studies is an interdisciplinary field with a long history of addressing the challenges and experiences

of women in society, which is also one of the subjects of social work discipline. Researchers and professionals at the intersection of these disciplines have sought to explain the interplay of gender, race, class and other social identities in working with disadvantaged groups in society (Hancock 2007). Relational cultural theory is an appropriate approach for social work practice. It includes topics of interest to social work with a focus on assessing the relationships between cultural context, interpersonal dynamics and power structures, especially when working with different client groups such as disadvantaged ones (Comstock et al. 2008).

In addition, it is stated that by including relational cultural theory in violence against women programs, a more comprehensive and effective support system for women subjected to violence can be provided. Violence disempowers women and weakens their resilience. Relational cultural theory is a more accepted approach in the study of violence against women due to its focus on building long-term empowerment and resilience and its potential to create sustainable change (Lloyd-Hazlett et al. 2016).

Relational cultural theory provides a powerful framework for addressing violence against women because it emphasizes the importance of connections in relationships in individual development and healing. By including relational cultural theory in violence against women intervention programs, it stands in an important point in creating a reliable and supportive environment for women to transfer their experiences more easily and to build healthy connections in their relationships. This theory, with its emphasis on empathy, mutual empowerment and collaboration, provides a strong basis for supporting women who have experienced violence (Comstock et al. 2002). On the other hand, it is stated that this model, which focuses on the quality of relationships, is particularly suitable for people who have been subjected to abuse (Banks 2006).

As it is known, violence is a widespread social problem in Turkiye as it is all over the world. In terms of its consequences, it negatively affects women's mental health and leads to both individual and social dysfunction. In this context, it is considered useful to address the new theoretical methods used in international literature and practices in studies on violence against women from the perspective of Turkiye. It is considered that relational cultural theory, one of the postmodern theories, should be used more in the field with this perspective and should be included in the relevant literature.

There is no study in Turkiye that specifically addresses relational cultural theory in the context of violence against women. In addition, there is a study evaluating the effects of a psychoeducation study based on relational cultural theory within the scope of dating violence (Gündüz 2019) and a review of relational cultural theory in terms of Turkish culture (Yam 2021). In this study, the foundations of relational cultural theory and its practices and explanations in the context of violence against women are presented. The impact on the process of women's empowerment and what needs to be taken into account in practice are explained.

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational cultural theory is an approach mentioned in Miller's (1976) Toward a New Psychology of Women (Comstock et al. 2002), which later began to reconceptualize the traditional human development and psychotherapy models of Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Alexander Kaplan, Judy Jordan and Janet Surrey. Miller (1976) identified gender and power inequalities and their link to social structures and women's mental health and well-being (Oakley 2013). However, in 1978, Miller argued that psychodynamic theories misrepresented women's experiences. Here she argued that the aspects attributed to women as weaknesses may actually be their strengths (Jordan 2022). These studies were followed by study on Stone Center theory and the so-called "self in relationship" or the "relational model" of therapy. Later, the relational cultural theory emerged. This theory approaches interpersonal dynamics from a relational perspective (Comstock et al. 2002).

In relational cultural theory, the relationship of men as well as women with their caregivers during infancy is evaluated in relation to race, culture, sexual, economic and socio-political contexts. Thus, the impact of these social elements on both women and men is put at the center. Classical theories generally focus on the transformation of clients from an individual in need of help and care to an independent adult who becomes self-sufficient. Apart from this perspective, relational cultural theory emphasizes that individuals can develop and grow through the relationships they establish with people in the life process (Jordan and Dooley 2000). However, rather than focusing on the technique, the change in attitudes, behaviors and approaches and the perspective are based on. What is important at this point is that both the client and the professional experience respect, openness to change, empathy and empowerment in their mutual relationship, and that the client also realizes this (Jordan 2022).

Relational cultural theory is based on the traditional model of human development based on emotional maturity in the context of autonomy and individuation. According to this model, mutuality and independence are important in the stages of healthy emotional development (Lloyd-Hazlett et al. 2016). Mutuality is taken as a concept that expresses empathy. It is also the ability to understand each other's thoughts and feelings. Here, both people understand and accept each other as they are (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013).

Emphasizing that relationships are important for the development of individuals, mutual empathy and empowerment are emphasized, as well as the constructive handling of conflicts (Jordan 2000). This theory suggests that situations such as humiliation, shame and loneliness will cause suffering in the individual (Jordan 2001). However, a structure in which both partners contribute, power is shared equally and authenticity is preserved is considered healthy (Jordan and Dooley 2000).

Importance of Relationships in Relational Cultural Theory

Relational cultural theory emphasizes the importance of functional and healthy human relationships for psychological well-being and resilience. It is stated that people can develop, grow and gain productivity within a relationship (Yam 2021). In this theory, it is mentioned that there is a tendency that individuals desire to establish relationships with others. In this relationship, the balance of giving and receiving is important, and people mostly tend towards relationships where the balance of giving and receiving is established (Jordan 2022).

On the other hand, this approach provides a model for conceptualizing the dynamics of relations. Therefore, it is possible to state that it emerged as an alternative to traditional theories. According to the theory, it is mentioned that there should be some characteristics for the healthy development of relationships. These are:

1. Vitality and energy
2. Sense of worth
3. Clarity
4. Productivity and
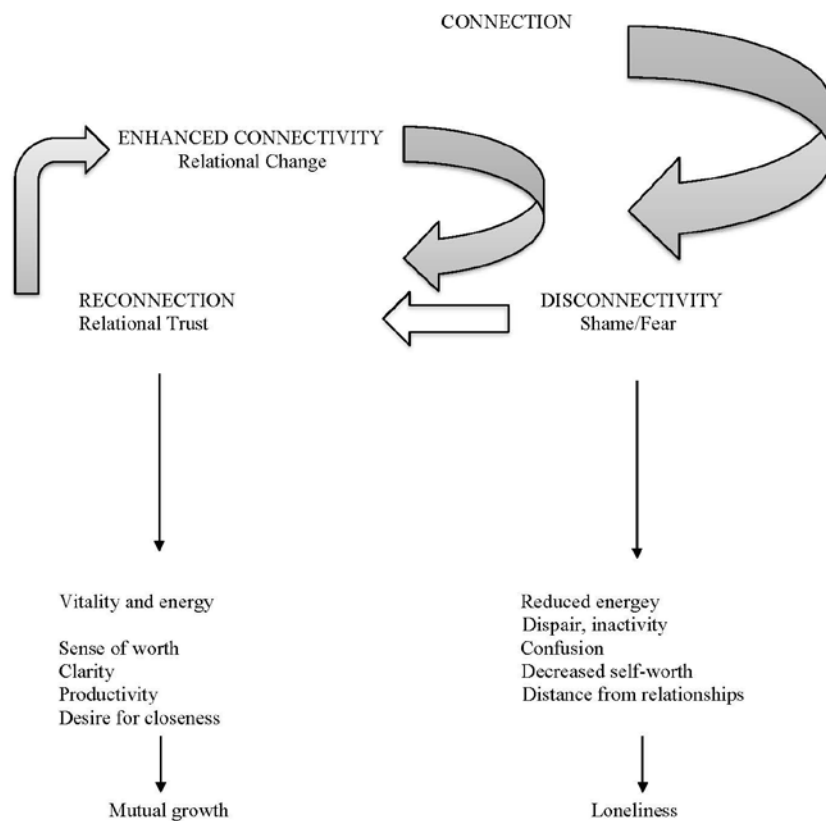5. Desire for closeness (Jordan and Dooley 2000).

Figure 1. Cycle of attachment and disconnection (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013)

When the vitality, value, clarity, productivity and desire for closeness expressed in the cycle of attachment and disconnection shown in Figure 1 are not experienced, individuals may feel lonely, devalued and isolated.

Table 1. Relationships that foster development	
Relationships that foster development	**Lack of relationships that foster development**
Vitality and energy	A sense of diminished vitality, feeling less connected and more alone because of being alone in difficult experiences
Sense of worth	Decreased sense of self-worth
Clarity	More confusion in the relationship, less knowledge about oneself and others
Productivity	Inability to take action in the relationship or behaviors far from the individual's feelings
Desire for closeness	Increased isolation and loneliness, emotional isolation from other people

In Table 1, Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp (2013) present the relationships that promote development and the situations that may arise in the absence of these relationships.

According to the theory, some concepts stand out in relationships. The concepts of connection, empathy and empowerment are of particular relevance in this context. Connection is defined as the mutual protection of empathy and empowerment in relationships (Jordan 2001). Empathy occurs in relationships where both partners are interested in and respond to the other. Empathy also implies a state of mutuality. Mutual caring and sensitivity are factors to be considered at this point (Jordan 2022). Mutual empowerment refers to a relationship structure that is actively supportive and caring for the other. In a relationship based on authenticity, personal development, interpersonal and social support and empowerment are felt (Miller and Stiver 1997).

The professional-client relationship has an important place in relational cultural theory in terms of connection and empathy. The professional is expected to show that what the client is communicating is important to her (Jordan 2000). However, the client is also expected to recognize and empathize with the professional's approach. Thus, the client will feel a sense of competence and influence within the professional relationship. Here the client can realize the importance of connecting with other people rather than disconnecting. It is able to grow and develop by having the ability to change the situation in which it is currently stuck (Jordan 2022).

The concept of disengagement is defined as the withdrawal and isolation of the individual from the relationship. It usually results from perceived or actual experiences of exclusion and devaluation (Lloyd-Hazlett et al. 2016). There are many disconnections in human relationships and they can occur at various levels. This disconnect can arise from small misunderstandings in relationships, or it can manifest as repeated behavior. This disconnection can take the form of physical or sexual violence, stalking, manipulative or mentally and emotionally hurtful behavior, emotional neglect, shame, humiliation and discrimination. Disengagement can be particularly painful in situations such as violence based on power inequality (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017).

Relational Cultural Theory in Relation to Other Theories

Relational cultural theory has some differentiating and intersecting aspects with other theories and approaches. First of all, many classical theories are based on personalizing and pathologizing problems at the individual level. In such theoretical approaches, problems are often addressed on the basis of individual deficiency. However, classical approaches have a framework that includes people with certain characteristics such as white, middle class, patriarchal, western, male and heterosexual. Since classical theories do not have a perspective that takes into account structural factors such as gender, race, class, etc. and the connection in relationships, it is stated that their scope is limited (Devis and Aronoff 2021).

Other theories and approaches have been criticized for being far from a gender perspective and not being women-centered (Oakley et al. 2013). Relational cultural theory is a postmodern theory that, contrary to classical approaches, explains that women's basic developmental needs are different from those of men and that these needs are as important as those in dominant male-dominated models. The quality of their relationships with other people is important for women's psychological development. Therefore, it is necessary to address and evaluate the quality of the relationships that women have (Shepard 2005). In this context, there are many aspects that intersect with the feminist approach. These intersections include power differentials, the importance of relationships based on equality and women's empowerment in socio-cultural contexts (Oakley 2013). Although it was developed within the framework of feminist theory, it is considered to be an appropriate theory not only for women but also for men, as it examines gender roles and brings an alternative perspective

to the need for development. Socially, masculinity roles are shaped by the avoidance of emotions. This avoidance causes men to feel more lonely and helpless and may lead them to be oppressed under this role (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013).

Classical theories generally focus on transforming the client from an individual in need of help and care to an independent adult who becomes self-sufficient. However, the relational cultural theory emphasizes the importance of professional and client collaboration in the intervention process (Gomez 2020). Relational cultural theory also overlaps with the Person-Centered Approach as a model that puts the client at the center (Quinn 2013) and suggests that individuals develop together with a sense of connection, mutual empathy and empowerment in their interpersonal relationships (Kelly 2011).

Another aspect of relational cultural theory that distinguishes it from other theories and approaches is that it approaches human problems in a social context (Yıldız Yüksel 2023). It is also functional in working with individuals from different cultures. Relational cultural theory addresses the exclusion experienced by groups subjected to marginalization in society in the process of professional intervention. This shows that the theory has a perspective based on multiculturalism and social justice (Shepard 2005, Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017). Relational cultural theory reveals the impact of a number of structural factors such as sexism, racism and discrimination that affect women's positive development in their personal, interpersonal and socio-political contexts (Teater 2020). Power imbalances, oppression and marginalization in social structures based on stratification result in the isolation of individuals from society and lead to disconnections in individual, group and community relations. Therefore, superiority, marginalization and injustices in social structures have a direct impact on the psychological development of individuals. In terms of addressing issues of multiculturalism and social justice, relational cultural theory differs from other traditional theories in its view of the problems affecting marginalized groups (Miller and Stiver 1997).

Table 2. Similar aspects of relational cultural theory with other theories	
Theory	**Similarity**
Person-centered approach	Client-centered Empathy and cooperation in the intervention process Distance from hierarchical structure in professional relationship
Feminist approach	Women-centered perspective Considering gender and power inequalities Empowering women Empowering women
Empowerment approach	Distance from hierarchical structure in professional relationship Emphasis on the client's strengths and experiences
Anti-oppressive approach	Considering power structures in society An approach that addresses differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Disadvantaged groups The impact of social structures such as multiculturalism and social justice on the client's functioning
Schema therapy	Patterns of relationship experiences in early life, patterns of beliefs

Table 2. briefly shows the similar points of relational cultural theory with other theories and approaches. As a whole, it is considered that relational cultural theory has a very rich and comprehensive content and approach both in terms of the difference in its approach to individual problems and its similarities with other theories.

Relational Cultural Theory and Social Work Perspective

Since the social work profession has a perspective that prioritizes groups with social, economic and mental problems, the relational cultural theory stands in an important point for social work (Tseng 1999). Within a relational cultural approach, social workers can develop insights into clients' experiences and perspectives and design interventions according to the cultural context (Kolivoski et al., 2014). Practising this approach requires social workers to be aware of their own cultural biases, to proactively develop a comprehensive understanding of their clients' cultural backgrounds, traditions and lived experiences, and to implement culturally sensitive and empathetic interventions based on each individual's unique needs. Furthermore, social workers critically examine power structures, systemic inequalities and institutional barriers that perpetuate racial, ethnic and socio-economic inequalities and advocate for policy and practice changes that promote social justice, equity and inclusive practices. The practicing of relational cultural theory in social work is suitable for meeting the mental

health needs of various clients who may have different cultural beliefs, values and help-seeking patterns (Asnaani and Hofmann 2012).

Marginalisation practices in social structures are evaluated in relational cultural theory. Prejudices such as racism, sexism and homophobia lead to individual and social disconnections. The effects of power and oppression on groups including but not limited to women are analysed in this theory. This corresponds to the relationship of relational cultural theory with social justice (Jordan 2022). In this respect, it is possible to see the intersectionality of this theory with social work as a human rights and social justice profession.

Relational cultural theory is an approach that emphasises the importance of understanding and integrating the cultural structures of individuals and societies into the intervention process. This model has the perspective that individuals' mental health is largely shaped by their relationships and the cultural environments in which they live. It suggests that individuals have a desire for relationships that support personal development and that psychological well-being depends on the capacity to enter such relationships (Comstock et al. 2008). It also has an important point for social work practice as it underlines the importance of understanding power dynamics, inequalities and the realities of marginalised racial and ethnic groups (Campbell 2017). In this framework, it can be mentioned that the theory in question has an important place in terms of the profession and discipline of social work. Social work stands out as a social justice and human rights profession that prioritises the welfare of the individual and society and aims to increase social functionality. Social work involves challenging power and oppression in society in favour of disadvantaged groups and ensuring social justice by advocating on behalf of these groups. In the relational cultural theory, the social worker facilitates the client's connection with her environment in the progress of her life. The main goal of the intervention process is to enable the person to realise the disconnections in human relations in her life and to change them by making sense of them (Jordan 2001). At this point, establishing the connection between the client's life and the environment on the basis of relational cultural theory is important in terms of conceptualising the close relationship with social work.

Understanding Relational Cultural Theory in the Context of Violence against Women

Violence is one of the traumatic situations created by human hands (Anyikwa 2016). Trauma is a subjective situation that the person perceives as a threat and cannot use adequate coping mechanisms. On the other hand, abuse and violence caused by human beings are considered to be one of the most destructive situations in terms of relationship. Childhood neglect and abuse and domestic violence can be given as examples of human-perpetrated relational abuse (Gómez 2020). However, the negative effects of all kinds of abuse, neglect and violence from known and trusted people can leave much deeper and destructive effects on the person. It can create a generalisation on the person such as 'This person hurt me, all people will hurt me'. Having a secure relationship during the period of being subjected to trauma is decisive in terms of eliminating the long-term negative effects of trauma (Banks 2006). As stated before, relational cultural theory mentions that relationships are important in ensuring the well-being of individuals. This approach focuses on the effect of mutuality and interdependence in human relationships on mental health. In the context of violence against women, it is possible to state that relational cultural theory provides a framework for understanding the dynamics in abusive relationships (Lloyd-Hazlett et al. 2016, Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017).

When working with cases of violence using relational cultural theory, the main focus begins with identifying healthy connections in relationships and encouraging the establishment of such connections. In addition, it is aimed to enable women subjected to violence to discover patterns and images in their relationships and to learn structures that support growth and development (Brown Mcgriff and SpeeIin 2017). However, conflicts in relationships are not ignored in this theory. Here it is considered that conflicts should be effectively assessed and practiced on. In this way, growth is also achieved by starting from the practice of change. However, the conflict referred to here is not a conflict involving violence, oppression or aggression. On the other hand, in this theory, it is mentioned that all kinds of power, domination and oppression should be addressed in professional intervention (Jordan 2022). Relational cultural theory also considers the person's efforts to get rid of the problems that may cause trauma as a strength. At this point, what makes a person strong is essentially the ability to ask for help. Being alone, in other words not being able to ask for help, leads to relational detachment. When a person asks for help and develops in a relationship, he or she can also make the connection in this way. However, according to the theory, since healthy relationships are considered as a social support mechanism, they are also useful in terms of realising one's power (Jordan 2013, Yıldız Yüksel 2023).

According to the relational cultural theory, various detachments and disconnections in human relations may cause the person to become lonely and develop psychological problems. At this point, the importance of healthy and functional relationships in terms of mental health is emphasised. The importance of not only the relationship but also the quality of the relationship is mentioned (Yıldız Yüksel 2023). In this theory, the ultimate goal is to establish connection in relationships and overcome disconnection. Disconnection occurs in many relationships, but it is emphasised that it is not harmful on its own. It is emphasised that disconnection can be useful for development if it is practiced on and if people realise that they have respect and influence in the relationship and try to improve it. Disconnections usually occur when they become chronic, characterised by humiliation, disrespect, abuse and ignorance (Jordan 2022). At this point, it would not be wrong to state that violence is one of the most important examples of non-connectedness. Violence is the best known and most disturbing example of an unhealthy relationship pattern. Regardless of the type, it is not always possible to talk about psychological resilience in a relationship where violence is present. Therefore, when working with women who have been subjected to violence, it is essential to emphasise the nature of a healthy and functional relationship and what dynamics it involves.

As emphasised earlier, women's self-perception and self-confidence mostly depend on the quality of the relationships they establish with their environment. Growing up in a protective bond and relationship helps women to develop positive self-esteem, self-confidence and good relationships with other people. Thus, women who subjected to violence, abuse and neglect in their close relationships can make the necessary changes by being aware of themselves and their needs. Can manage to protect themselves by changing the dynamics of the relationship instead of staying in self-destructive relationships. Women's prioritisation of their own needs plays an important role here. In the intervention, support can be provided for women to realise the importance of their own needs and self-destructive relationships and to have the power to change them (Teater 2020).

In relational cultural theory there is an understanding of power dynamics, empathy and a perspective that supports growth in relationships. When considered in the context of violence against women, it provides an understanding of the impact of empathy, power balances, potential growth and development in relationships. According to relational cultural theory, relational disconnections occur in relationships where one party uses power over the other, and the individual's well-being is interrupted at this point. Currently, violence is an instrument of power and control (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017). Being subjected to a relationship of violence and abuse can cause women to feel powerless and silent, as well as feelings of guilt, helplessness and shame. In addition, those who have been subjected to violence may have problems in breaking the connection in other relationships and establishing healthy relationships. In supporting women who experience such relational disconnections caused by violence, emphasis should be placed on building healthy relationships. Violence occurs within a relationship, and relational cultural theory emphasises the importance of connection in relationships and the dynamics of relationship building that support growth and development. The intervention aims to help the woman subjected to violence to recover and learn healthy behaviours in a therapeutic relationship. In this context, relational cultural theory is considered as a prominent approach in working with women subjected to violence due to its emphasis on relationship and connection aiming for growth (Collins and Dressler, 2008, Comstock et al. 2011, Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017).

Relational disconnections have the function of preventing individuals from growing and living healthy lives. This is especially the case in relationships where there are dynamics of domination and power over the other (Jordan 2010, Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017). However, disconnectedness causes women to internalise relational images in their perceptions of themselves and others. Women subjected to violence often adopt relational images that perpetuate violent and dependent relationships (Miller and Stiver 1997). Violence causes impairment of women's well-being, especially when it becomes a permanent pattern for relational development. Violence and abuse may cause various emotions that reinforce the power and dominance of the perpetrator over the woman subjected to violence. Sometimes women may normalise the perpetrator's violent behaviour by idealising traditional stories of femininity and internalise the beliefs that lead to violence (Wood 2001).

Women's self-perception varies according to their self-esteem and the relationships that surround and affect them. Women who exist and grow up in a positive relationship have a positive perception of themselves, are self-confident in their relationships with other individuals and can develop positive relationships with other people. In the event of an unempathic response or lack of understanding, the woman may terminate the relationship or develop various strategies to cope (Brown McGriff and Stacy 2017). On the contrary, women tend to fulfil the needs of others rather than their own needs. As a result, they become less authentic, their self-esteem decreases, and their positive growth and development is hindered. In this context, in the relational cultural theory, it is assumed that women's awareness of meeting their own needs will empower them. Thus, it will be easier for

women to develop resilience in their relationships and change their relationship dynamics when they encounter damaging relationships (Teater 2020).

Use of Relational Cultural Theory in Working with Women Subjected to Violence

The studies are based on relational cultural theory and examine the nature of healthy relationships and the processes involved in establishing them, with a particular focus on women who have subjected to violence. It is also ensured that the woman recognises relational images and disconnections (Miller and Stiver 1997). The intervention focuses on ending disconnection and isolation and making it easier to recognise and build healthy relationship patterns. The level of disconnection that the person is in is an important factor in reconnecting (Banks 2006). For women subjected to violence, the intense longing for a secure bond in the relationship and the fear of being hurt again coexist. On the other hand, the feeling of loneliness caused by violence can also create a feeling of helplessness. Women who have been subjected to violence or abuse may show different reactions in their new relationships. They can be scared in a close relationship and escape from new relationships in order to stay in a safe space, or they can react by fighting against closeness by focusing on self-protection (Brown McGriff, and Stacy 2017). Another response may be to feel weaker in the new relationship. People who do not have a healthy relationship experience may have difficulty in recognising the people they will trust and may be in relationships that will re-traumatise themselves (Banks 2006).

Relational cultural theory emphasises the importance of mutual empathy and connection in healing traumatic situations caused by violence. It is considered to have an important place in the healing and empowerment of women subjected to violence with their efforts to share their experiences, develop empathy for the other and establish healthy connections (Comstock et al. 2011). This theory is more commonly used to help women who have been subjected to violence to establish and identify appropriate connections in their relationships. It supports them in reviewing their relationships, relationship patterns and self-image. In this way, relationships for healing and development can be established. In intervention, it is important to establish and maintain an authentic, caring, valuing and empathic professional relationship. It should be ensured that women's behaviour in their relationships is handled in a relational context rather than being evaluated individually. The answers to questions such as 'What are your observations about yourself and your previous relationships?' and 'What do you value in your relationships?' create an opportunity for women to show empathy towards themselves and others and to share their feelings (Comstock et al. 2011). It is important to inform the woman that it is normal to want to be in contact with her partner, that her strategies for disconnection are valid and that she uses them to protect herself. The professional is expected to provide insight into the fact that, although women experience violence, the dysfunctional strategies they use in the relationship are related to relational situations and that the desire to connect with others is a common desire of all people (Brown McGriff, and Speedlin 2017).

In the following headings, 'disconnection, relational images, relational resilience and relational courage', which are the basic concepts of relational cultural theory, are explained in the context of violence.

Disconnection

Connection refers to mutual empathy and empowerment in interpersonal relationships. Mutual empathy indicates a structure in which both parties in the relationship actively take responsibility and are sensitive to the other. Mutual empowerment is the realisation that the other is important and valuable. According to relational cultural theorists, being connected is important for people's psychological health. Disengagement leads to powerlessness and isolation (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017, Jordan, 1997, 2001). Violence is one of the most concrete examples of disconnection and weakens one's ability to establish healthy connections (Gomez 2020). Disengagement occurs in physical, psychological, sexual and other forms of violence. For example, stalking, emotional neglect, humiliation and discrimination. These disconnections in situations of violence lead to painful consequences as a result of power imbalance (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017).

Women subjected to violence may develop some disengagement strategies to protect themselves. In this context, it is necessary to emphasise the disconnection strategies that women use to avoid establishing relationships in studies with women subjected to violence. Answers to questions such as 'What did you do as a result in this abusive relationship?', 'How do you approach relationships in general?' can also provide an idea of how the strategies developed by women in their relationships turn into relational schemas (Hellemans et al. 2015, Brown McGriff, and Speedlin 2017). It is normal to want to be connected in relationships. Although women desire to be connected with others, they may sometimes develop strategies to keep themselves away from this connection (Comstock et al. 2002). This situation, called the central relational paradox, is a strategy developed to protect

against damaging relationships (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017). Emotions caused by previous negative experiences, such as insecurity, guilt, shame and suspicion, can distract women from being in contact with other people. Therefore, the central relational paradox can be used in future work with the woman to help her gain insight that the desire to be connected is normal, that experiences of disconnection are acceptable and that she uses them to protect herself from future hurt. In order to protect the woman from future negative experiences and disconnections, professionals will provide support for the woman to explore defence mechanisms that do not work, discover new ways for more connection in relationships, and reorganise them (Comstock et al. 2011, Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017). Regular revealing of strategies for non-engagement will have an impact on women's relational expectations. These questions will enable the woman to reframe unhealthy strategies such as withdrawal, isolation and guilt with healthier strategies such as authenticity and listening. However, the therapeutic relationship will be a model for healthy connection (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013).

Relational Images

Relational images are internal structures and expectations based on previous relationships. These experiences are related to how women expect to be treated in relationships and how they perceive relational dynamics (Hyden 2005). These images, which can also be called schemas that develop depending on experiences, may negatively affect the woman's self-perception and the quality of her relationships and may cause her to remain stuck in her past relationships. For this reason, it may not always be easy to change the schemas expressing these relational disconnections (Jordan 1997). However, negative schemas subjected or witnessed during childhood are one of the important obstacles to the improvement in relationships (Banks 2006).

Women subjected to violence begin to use disconnection as a strategy to maintain emotional stability in their relationships. In this framework, it can be ensured that women understand that the violence they witnessed in childhood can lead to submissive behaviours such as accepting blame for their partners' abusive behaviours and refraining from speaking out (Jordan and Dooley 2000). It can be argued that these disconnections may stem from childhood and the strategies developed by women to be connected in relationships (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013). Thus, the woman can gain insight into the connections and disconnections in other relationships and use the relational dynamics she has learnt in her new relationships. Disengagement can cause women to develop relational images that have an impact on the way they relate to others and perceive themselves. In this direction, women subjected to violence can often adopt relational images that perpetuate violence and dependent relationships (Brown McGriff and Speedlin 2017).

Relational Resilience and Relational Courage

It is important for individuals to develop relational resilience for healthy development. This resilience can be explained as the capacity to turn towards attachment and ask for help after disconnection. On the other hand, courage is defined as the process of asking for support in times of fear (Işık Terzi and Ergüner Tekinalp 2013). This gives courage a relational dimension. For this reason, it may be useful to support women to increase their relational resilience and relational courage in studies to be conducted with women subjected to violence.

Studies indicate that relational cultural theory is effective in increasing the resilience and empowerment of women subjected to violence. It offers a transformative effect in supporting women subjected to violence by providing an understanding of relational dynamics and the impact of social power structures (Hellemans et al. 2015, Brown McGriff and Stacy 2017). In this framework, it is considered that by including relational cultural theory in the intervention on women subjected to violence, the necessary support will be provided for women to establish functional and healthy relationships.

Conclusion

Relational cultural theory is considered to be effective in working with women subjected to violence due to its feminist foundations in terms of addressing power, privilege and dominant roles. Relational cultural theory stands in an important point for women subjected to violence to recognise and gain insight into the impact of concepts such as relational images, disconnection and shame on healthy life and psychological development.

Relational cultural theory has a perspective that problems in social structures such as discrimination, marginalisation and injustice directly affect the psychological development of individuals by including the environment in the problems. This is an important feature that distinguishes this theory from other theories. In addition, this approach constitutes one of the intersection points of relational cultural theory with social

work. The protection of human rights of all people, especially disadvantaged groups, and ensuring social justice constitute the essence of social work.

In this study, relational cultural theory is explained and its place and importance in the studies with women subjected to violence is revealed. Although there are studies on the use of relational cultural theory with women subjected to violence in the international literature, it has been determined that there is no study on this subject in the national literature. At this point, this study has been prepared both to contribute to the literature and to guide practitioners working in the field of violence. Within the framework of the evidence-based approach, it is suggested that studies can be carried out to evaluate the effect of relational cultural theory by applying it to women subjected to violence. Thus, a contribution will be made to the evaluation of the theory in terms of Turkish culture..

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