

Jean Baker Miller, 78, Psychiatrist, Is Dead

By Jeremy Pearce

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Dr. Jean Baker Miller, a psychiatrist who disputed traditional notions of social roles and developed a theory that serves as a foundation for treating women's depression and other disorders through the building of fruitful relationships, died on July 29 at her home in Brookline, Mass. She was 78.

The cause was respiratory failure, her family said.

Dr. Miller developed her premise under what she called relational-cultural theory and explained it in an influential book, "Toward a New Psychology of Women" (1976).

The theory holds that isolation is one of the most damaging human experiences and is best treated by reconnecting with other people. Dr. Miller proposed that social competition helped provoke psychological illness and that the therapist's role was to foster an atmosphere of empathy and acceptance for the patient, even at the cost of the therapist's neutrality.

The relational-cultural theory was developed for women suffering from depression or identity disorders and was inspired in part by Betty Friedan's "Feminine Mystique" and other works of the rising feminist movement of the 1960's.

Dr. Miller, who based her theory on clinical observations, argued that social reinforcement of traditional roles in childhood widened an often artificial division between the sexes, and propelled women into a cycle of anger, guilt and self-punishment.

In 1995, Dr. Miller and others set up the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wellesley College to teach the theory to mental health professionals. Judith V. Jordan, a psychologist and the institute's director, said the theory had since been applied in psychiatric hospitals, a women's prison and nonprofit organizations "to build an increasing sense of trust and connection, and social justice, and to diminish violence and depression."

A practitioner who successfully applied the relational theory is Dr. Amy E. Banks, a psychiatrist in private practice in Lexington, Mass. Dr. Banks treated men and women who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological trauma caused by sexual and physical abuse.

"Increasingly," said Dr. Banks, who also teaches at Wellesley and Harvard, "neurobiology is telling us about the importance of relationships, that we are all hard-wired to connect with each other. In that sense, to be disconnected is to be wounded."

In the 80's and 90's, Dr. Miller continued to advance her ideas and was a co-author of two other books, "Women's Growth in Connection" (1991) and "The Healing Connection: How Women Form Relationships in Therapy and in Life" (1997).

Jean Baker was born in the Bronx. She attended Hunter College High School and Sarah Lawrence College. In 1952, she received her medical degree from Columbia.

After training as a psychoanalyst, she taught at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Harvard and Boston University. She had private practices in New York and Boston.

Dr. Miller is survived by her husband, S. M. Miller, an emeritus professor of sociology at Boston University.

She is also survived by two sons, Dr. Edward D. Miller of Manhattan and Jonathan F. Miller of Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.; and a grandchild.