

# HEALTHY INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

WILLARD B. FRICK

*Albion College, Albion, Michigan*

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart, and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

—KAHLIL GIBRAN, "On Love," in *The Prophet*.

There is a growing awareness in recent theory and research that client growth, reintegration, and maturity accruing from psychotherapy are largely a result of an experience in a unique human relationship developed between psychotherapist and client. As Brammer and Shostrom put it: "We are becoming more and more convinced that the relationship in psychotherapy and counseling is a creative agent in its own right" (4, p. 144). Rogers hypothesizes that "If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use the relationship for growth and change, and personal development will occur" (10, p. 33). And Hobbs, rejecting the development of insight as a cause of personality gain in psychotherapy, says: "The first source of gain is in the relationship itself" (7). All this confirms Adler's earlier observation that all forms of psychotherapy, regardless of particular method, will show successes "when they happen to give the patient a good human relationship . . . above all . . . encouragement" (2, p. 343).

From their knowledge of these professional relationships, Rogers, Hobbs, Jourard (8), and Maslow (9) speculate that such therapeutic experiences in human relationships can and do occur also in daily life. Rogers states, "There seems every reason to suppose that the therapeutic relationship is only one instance of interpersonal relations, and that the same lawfulness governs all such relationships" (10, p. 37). Similarly Hobbs says that the "experiences that are the well-springs of personality reorganization often occur in daily life quite apart from psychotherapy and are the sources of healthy integration and reintegrations that develop throughout the life span" (7).

To restrict our understanding of the therapeutic potential in human relationships to psychotherapy has certain serious limitations. The professional relationship is, at best, an unnatural and artificial one, despite recent trends toward establishing a more genuine encounter with clients. Quintessentially, it is a business proposition wherein the disturbed and distraught client pays a professional for

the privilege of having such a relationship. Further, the relationship is confined, by necessity, to a certain place and to a specified hour or hours each week. Alexander identifies this artificial nature of the professional relationship by observing,

In the main, the therapist is seen as a person who has helped in a professional way, not one with whom it is possible or even desirable to establish emotional relationships of a permanent type. The person realistically desires to establish these relationships elsewhere. . . . Therapy, in a way, is unreal; it is not a permanent way to fulfill one's needs: the relationship is temporary, alleviative, and palliative (3, pp. 130 & 149).

Let us then leave the area of psychotherapy with its limitations, to speak of the characteristics of healthy daily-life relationships. In his study of the life progress of Joyce Kingsley, Robert W. White reports that one of the major positive experiences in her life was meeting Rennie, after which "she begins to function with great freedom and energy, almost bursting with happiness. Any psychotherapist would be delighted if he could produce so large a change in so short a time" (14, p. 281). "Her relationship to Rennie gave her a tremendous increase of happy confidence, and security, thus opening the way for further development in several directions" (14, p. 283). A follow-up study into her marriage with Rennie confirms these changes.

To shift to another positive point of departure, Erikson maintains that the two great tasks of late adolescence are the establishment of ego identity, and resolving the crisis of intimacy versus isolation, two tasks which are "telescoped into each other" (5, p. 87).

Ego identity can be said to be established when the individual comes to be and feel most himself and this in pursuits and roles in which he also means most to some others—that is, to those others who have come to mean most to him (5, p. 76). The young people with whom we are concerned here usually are trying to establish an intimate relationship with the other sex or the same sex, and this before their identity is reasonably well established. But one cannot easily "lose oneself" in an intimate or sexual relation before one has "found oneself"—or, before one is ready to find oneself by losing oneself (5, p. 86).

Thus, from diverse channels of theory and experience, we perceive a converging emphasis on the growth-promoting values inherent in the healthy interpersonal relationship. And yet we have virtually no knowledge of the characteristics of such healthy relationships in daily life.

What are the characteristics of the healthy growth-promoting interpersonal experience? To address myself to this question I decided to initiate the collection of data which led to the present exploratory study.

## METHOD

The essay method seemed to present the most spontaneous, least structured, and most securely anonymous way of obtaining information in this sensitive area of intimate interpersonal experience. This method has been used in several recent studies concerned with similar problems of personal experience (1, 6, 12, 13).

The subjects were students in English and psychology courses at Albion College who volunteered to share with the author in essay form, during a 50-minute period, the nature of a deep and healthy relationship each had experienced. The instructions, which did not use the word "therapeutic," were:

"When you think of the deepest, most meaningful relationship that you have ever enjoyed and experienced with another person (i.e., a unique interpersonal relationship that has brought out or enhanced your best qualities or characteristics, that has promoted your growth and maturity as an individual, that has helped release you to become a more creative, spontaneous person; a relationship that has contributed significantly to a feeling of well-being or to a kind of feeling that "it's great to be alive"), what was the nature of this relationship? Describe the relationship (paint a word picture of it as best you can). Describe how you felt or feel about this relationship. What did you contribute to the relationship? Specifically, try to identify the influence that this relationship has had upon your life and/or personality. If you have never experienced such a relationship with another person, please make note of this fact."

The instructions were read out loud while the students read along with their own copy in hand. The students were then given verbal assurance of their anonymity.

In all, 130 essays were collected: 52 from men and 78 from women. Among these, only 5 men and 3 women reported never having had such a relationship. The categories reported below were derived from a study of the essays of both men and women. But work in greater detail was undertaken only on the female sample. In this sample, 9 of the original essays were eliminated for various reasons, such as describing more than one relationship, relationships in general, or stating no such relationship. Thus the data treated further herein are derived from a sample of 69 women.

## RESULTS

### *Categories*

From studying the essays, the following six categories of the nature and significance of the "deepest, most meaningful" non-professional relationship emerged. They are listed according to the frequency with which they occurred; are defined further where necessary; and are supplied with illustrative excerpts from the essays.

*Learning and growth experience:* Has had a great influence on my life. Has made me grow up and realize what a mature relationship can be.—He was a great influence in my continuing my college education.—Has helped me establish within myself just exactly who I was.

*Self-disclosure* (indicating ease or importance and value of communicating in the relationship, freedom to talk, sharing of one's thoughts and feelings): I was never afraid to express my exact thoughts to her.—We were able to talk about anything and everything with ease and interest.—We had long talks after which we knew each other better.—A communication with another person that I have never experienced before.

*Mutuality* (sharing of experience; reciprocal quality; common interests, goals, ideals, etc.; frequent use of the word "mutual"): We found we enjoyed the same things.—We understood each other. We also had a mutual respect for each other.—Now when we talk, our goals are us . . . desires that will affect both of us.—Our minds seemed naturally attuned to each other.

*Transfer to other relationships* (learning and growth have transferred to other relationships): The relationship I had even helps me judge the guys I date now.—This lesson he has taught me helps me in my day-to-day association with students.—He has taught me the satisfaction of being honest not only to myself but to others.—Through him I have come to understand the opposite sex and I've learned a lot about people.

*Erasure of facades and pretense* (freedom to be one's self): I have never felt more comfortable and never felt more like myself than when I am with him.—Being together was like being in your own comfortable chair in your own living room. All pretenses and airs were non-existent.—I felt free to be myself because he was patient and understanding.

*Loss of self-centeredness* (becoming less selfish, less self-centered; not to be confused with the "transfer" category): Perhaps the greatest thing that I have gained . . . I learned to give without always thinking of myself.—It's difficult to describe this freedom . . . but I think it's a lessening of self-centeredness.—It has drawn me outside myself and given me a chance for a broader way of living.—I feel that this relationship is the one thing that has saved me from killing my greater self. If I had not come to love, I think I would have fallen into a fantastic egoism.

To arrive at some measure of reliability in scoring the essays for categories, ten essays selected at random were submitted to each of

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGES OF ESSAYS MENTIONING THE VARIOUS RELATIONSHIP CATEGORIES, ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER OF CATEGORIES PER ESSAY ( $N = 64$ ).<sup>a</sup>

Category	Number of categories per essay			
	2	3	4	5 <sup>b</sup>
Learning and growth	89.6	95.9	100.0	100.0
Self-disclosure	52.7	83.4	85.8	100.0
Mutuality	36.8	75.0	92.9	100.0
Transfer to others	10.5	33.3	64.2	85.8
Erasure of pretense	5.2	8.3	35.7	57.1
Loss of self-centeredness	5.2	4.1	21.4	57.1
Number of essays with the various category frequencies	19	24	14	7

<sup>a</sup>Omitted from this table are four essays which were scored for only one category, and one essay which was scored for all six categories, bringing the total  $N$  up to 69.

<sup>b</sup>Depending on the number of categories, the columns add up to 200, 300, 400 and 500 percent, respectively.

three judges with experience in psychotherapy. They identified which of the six categories were present in each essay. The frequency with which they agreed with the author's judgments and those of each other judge yielded 65% interjudge agreement in terms of possible agreements.

#### *Distribution of Categories*

The frequencies of the various categories, broken down by number of categories used in an essay, are shown in Table 1. Close to 90% of the respondents considered their reported relationship to be crucial to their development and maturity, even when only 2 categories were mentioned.

*The significant "other."* The other party to the relationship was, in order of frequency: boyfriend, 46 times; girlfriend, 11; teacher, 3; mother, 2; others, 7 times. The latter were a brother, sister, employer, camp counselor, female friend of the family, minister, and a nine-year-old deaf boy. Clearly the most significant relationships for these young women were with their contemporaries, and were heterosexual twice as often as otherwise. Only eight girls selected an adult. Among the 46 boyfriend relationships, ten were specified as being platonic, non-romantic.

*Love and sex.* Most of the relationships reported in this study could reasonably be called "love" relationships. Among the 67% which were heterosexual, what indication of the role of sex do we have? While the majority of girls in one sample reported "love-making short of sexual intercourse," only 15% reported intercourse. In fact, sexual intercourse is here conspicuous by its absence. This would support the belief that most of the pre-marital sex experiences take place within the context of relationships which, unlike those reported here, are superficial, transient, and basically unhealthy.

#### *Mutuality*

Through such significant interpersonal experiences, the Ss appear to achieve a sharpening of their personal identity, a more authentic expression of self, and a great expansion of self-awareness in these relationships.

But along with a growing sense of individuality and self-development, there is, what might seem paradoxical to some, a loss of selfishness and a greater sense of unity and experience of "mutuality,"

not only within the relationship but transferring beyond it to other people, and often to "mankind." This is illustrated in the following excerpts.

"Now that we have reached a love, we can turn our energies, our worrying (not that love stops growing, but the pains of a beginning certainly stop) to other people, other things outside ourselves."

"She [a teacher] instilled a love of . . . the world and people around me . . . She made me aware of the things that were going on around me. I was no longer a blob of protoplasm just sitting and taking up space. I was existing, feeling, creating. I was necessary and useful to life."

"The more I think of it, almost anyone I get to know at all beyond a surface level now gives me some feeling for the overwhelming aspects of life and how marvelous it is to be a part of it all. . . . I have a feeling that he was one of the first people, if not the first, to make me aware enough to see these 'life qualities' in others. . . . People and their feelings and thoughts, whether or not they are happy or sad . . . stimulate me and give me a purpose and joy in living. I feel that this man has given me much of this feeling and I am grateful to him."

"Through him I began to think and was able to speak for myself and to reveal my inner self . . . understanding and love for people. Social status and petty talk moved back into my mind and I began to think of who I was, where I was heading, and what I could offer."

These results tend to confirm Erikson's observation, in speaking of the adolescent identity problem, that "one cannot easily 'lose oneself' in an intimate or sexual relation before one has 'found oneself'—or, before one is ready to find oneself by losing oneself" (5, p. 86).

As we look at the categories regardless of their frequency we see that they are divided equally between developments of self and other-centered growth: learning-growth experience, self-disclosure, and erasure of facades and pretense (the "I," the "me," receiving)—and mutuality, transfer to other relationships, and loss of self-centeredness (the "you," the "we," giving).

The patterns revealed in this exploratory study give strong support to Adler's concept of the striving for superiority and man's potential for social interest (2). More important, perhaps, is a clarification of their interdependent relationship in personality development. In the healthy, growth-promoting interpersonal experience it appears that the development of the self (striving for superiority) frees the individual for a heightened awareness and appreciation of others and for decided movement into the realm of social interest. As Adler stated, "nothing stands more in the way of the development of social interest than an increased inferiority feeling" (2, pp. 124-125). Therefore, the important thing is to bolster a person's self-esteem.

Rogers' position has often been questioned with the admonition that "to be that self which one truly is" (10, pp. 162-182) would surely mean the release of destructive and selfish impulses upon others. To this reluctance to allow man to be what he truly is, Storr answers: "I believe that the development of the individual and the maturity of his personal relationships proceed hand-in-hand, and that one cannot take place without the other" (11, p. 32). Storr's position, like Adler's, is strongly supported by the present study.

### *Two Sample Essays*

To give the reader an appreciation for the actual "raw data" with which we worked, two complete essays are presented below. They have been selected from the extremes of the range of responses, the first being one of the four essays scored for only one category, the second the essay scored for six categories.

*Essay F73, one category (learning-growth experience):* The relationship I want to describe is one where I knew the boy so well that I just felt happy to be with him. Neither of us were great conversationalists. Sometimes we could say whatever was on our mind and other times it would have been impossible. This is hard to explain. He was the first boy I ever went with, and after a while, parking got to be the big thing in our relationship. Well, after you're so close to someone like that, you feel like you know them better than you really do. I mean, making out can give you such great satisfaction and you feel so comfortable that you just think you really like this person. But, then later on, when you're not with him, and you think about the relationship, you realize that it's not his personality or anything like that, that you like. But then, you think that it's so great to be together, so the heck with his personality. Well, after a year of this, I came to realize that this kind of relationship is not (i.e. cannot be) permanent. It would be pretty awful to be married to someone and all that you enjoy together is your sex life. I guess I've sort of learned a lesson from this relationship—that physical love just isn't enough although, at the time, I just felt *great*.

*Essay F22, six categories:* The relationship I am going to paint a picture of is one that has developed gradually. It began two and a half years ago with a blind date. I have selected this relationship because it has continued and will continue to be very significant for the rest of my life.

This relationship has brought me to a degree of giving that I have never experienced before. Through this relationship I have developed trust, understanding, and love, and in return I have received the same. I have had to accept responsibility for all that I do. This relationship has helped me to be myself.

I have always thought myself to be an easy-going, friendly character until I reached Albion. My freshman year I pledged and was initiated into a sorority. I made friends with the girls in the sorority, other girls and guys. Still, my closest friend was a girl from home. After rush and pledging my sophomore year, I found the pledges not unfriendly to me, but rather aloof. Much to my

surprise, I found they were "afraid of me." This surprised me very much. Now, as a senior this has completely changed. The change I can refer directly to the relationship of which I am speaking. (This is only one of the ways that this relationship has helped me.)

The basis for my aloofness was lack of trust of myself and of others. (I have a tendency to say what I think and feel, which is not always the right thing to say at the time.) Our relationship, by his easy-going way, you-talk-I'll-listen attitude, and his understanding of my feelings, and the expression of his own feelings, has brought me to see different ways of approaching people. He has shown me by his attitudes toward people, how to relax, enjoy, and be really friendly and sincere toward people.

In this relationship I can say what I think and feel. The same is returned. There is present a mutual trust and respect. Although I have had this experience before, it has never been as profound as it has been and is in this relationship. From the trust in me and the respect given to me, I have gained a self-confidence that I have never known before (not an over-self-confidence).

The characteristics that have been shown to me are hard to describe. Maybe one can be called "I am who I am, take me or leave me." The other is understanding of me and my feeling, and a respect for me, as a person.

When we are together I am able to really relax, to enjoy myself and the entire relationship (most of the time, that is). Of course, the path isn't always smooth.

I feel that I contributed to the relationship by being myself and by giving of myself. An unselfish attitude is my greatest asset. This attitude has contributed to our relationship.

The influence of this relationship is most significant. It has had an effect on my personality and my life. We have both grown up quite a bit and are still growing. We have learned responsibility, but certainly our married life will teach us even more. We have had and will have to continue to trust each other. These aspects of personality will grow.

I chose this relationship as most significant to me because it is a lasting one, one I will have for the rest of my life. I feel that this relationship is the deepest most meaningful relationship that I have ever experienced, or I wouldn't be marrying him.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Reliable and valid criteria of the nonprofessional therapeutic relationship would prove valuable in several respects. Such an index could serve as a tool for research, to learn more about the developmental pattern of interpersonal experience. It might help to answer questions such as: Do relationships change with age? If so, how? When? What forces promote or retard them? Is there a critical period in life for such experiences? What happens to relationships after marriage and during the middle years of life and beyond? Is there an increase in institutionalized "role" relationships as one grows older, and thus a concomitant attenuation of authentic, therapeutic relationships? What factors generally contribute to



one's ability to enter into depth relationships? What influences are effective?

Such an index for the healthy interpersonal experience could also prove of value in judging movement in psychotherapy. I would even go so far as to suggest that college students who have experienced extremely healthy interpersonal relationships could be recruited and developed as effective group therapists or co-therapists in working with disturbed students.

#### SUMMARY

Since man's illness as well as his healthy functioning finds its most sensitive reflection in the quality and depth of his interpersonal relationships, the quality, nature and value of healthy nonprofessional therapeutic relationships of daily life were studied. Analyses of essays describing one's "deepest, most meaningful relationship," written by 69 female college students, yielded categories of learning and growth, self-disclosure, mutuality, transfer to other relationships, erasure of facades and pretense, and loss of self-centeredness, in this order of frequency. It appeared that the most therapeutic relationships combined self-development with increasing other-centeredness, as two modes of the same growth process.

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