Relational–Cultural Therapy is a well-written, compact introduction to one of the more recently developed therapeutic approaches that has gained a place of prominence and acceptance with many practitioners. The book is part of the American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) Theories of Psychotherapy series, an ambitious undertaking that eventually is intended to include 24 volumes describing important contemporary approaches to therapy, each of which is to be accompanied by a DVD that demonstrates the theory applied in actual therapy. (There are currently 11 monographs in the series listed at the APA book website http://www.apa.org/pubs/books/index.aspx.)

Relational–cultural theory (RCT) has its roots in psychodynamic and feminist theory but is distinct from both. While it is unlikely that any complex system of thought has a single point of origin, RCT uses the publication of Jean Baker Miller’s (1976) Toward a New Psychology of Women as a convenient event to mark the convergence of ideas that has evolved into this new approach to helping and growth.

Theoretically, RCT is based on the idea that interpersonal connection (rather than independence) is at the center of personal growth. Indeed, RCT posits that it is in our nature to need to connect with other people and that it is in the act of connecting that we experience true well-being.

Relational–Cultural Therapy lays out the case for this new approach in a clear, logical style. After a general introduction that orients the reader on what lies ahead, brief and balanced chapters present the history of the approach, its theory, and the actual therapy process. A comprehensive research-based evaluation chapter follows, discussing several dozen studies. Very significantly, the relation of the ideas of RCT to contemporary neuroscience findings is laid out. Although not necessarily inspired by RCT, this recent research is consistent with "the notion of neuroplasticity through relational engagement, points to the intrinsic movement toward mutual relationship, and validates the efficacy of RCT’s theoretical model" (p. 77).

A final chapter looks at future developments, especially in terms of new applications for the approach, for example, couple and family therapy, substance abuse, and hospice and grief work. The book concludes with a basic glossary and a bibliography of over 250 items. A short, separate list of 10 suggested readings is also provided, and descriptive vignettes from therapeutic sessions that illustrate points of discussion are included where relevant.

Throughout the text, the author is careful to point out what RCT is not: It is not simply a feminist approach to therapy. In fact, RCT has drawn fire from some feminists for leaving the door open to (or even encouraging) a return to limiting women to certain traditional “caregiving” roles, a charge the author denies, citing Robb (2006, p. xxiii): “Relational psychologists are saying not that women are essentially nurturant but that nurturant human connection is essential.”
Another thing that RCT is not, according to the author, is a therapy reserved for women (pp. 89, 90). Indeed, the approach offers all people the opportunity to escape from rigid gender stereotypical roles that have a tendency to isolate and alienate.

A third item on the “not list”: RCT is not primarily a set of techniques that can be picked up and inserted into a standard structured therapeutic approach. Indeed, technique is downplayed. "Relational-cultural theory (RCT) therapy depends more on an attitude and quality of mutual engagement than on any specific techniques or interventions.” Lacking a focus on technique, RCT can be challenging to mentor and learner. “Supervisors are called upon to help students learn the difference between ‘letting it all hang out’ . . . and finding the ‘one true thing’ to share that will facilitate the movement of therapy” (pp. 64, 65).

Looking at the other side of the coin, RCT is an approach that is marked by a move away from therapist neutrality toward active involvement, intellectually and emotionally, with the client. Disappointment, success, frustration, and sadness are experienced and acknowledged by both parties in the relationship. Interpersonal dependence, at the core of RCT, is put into practice in the therapeutic relationship.

Relational–Cultural Therapy is written by a leader and promoter of the approach. It is not neutral, but it is not blindly promotional, either. It takes its accountability seriously and backs up its theory with empirical studies. This book, combined with a few other titles from the Theories of Psychotherapy series, would provide a solid basis for a graduate class introducing students to the foundations of the field. Bundled with the accompanying DVD, it should be even more effective in orienting novice clinicians to the tools available in their chosen profession.

References