

The Couple's Mutual Identity and Reflexivity: A Systemic-Constructivist Approach to the Integration of Persons and Systems

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This paper presents a systemic-constructivist approach to working therapeutically with couples. Therapeutic change is optimal when both the intrapersonal processes of each individual and their unique interpersonal system are synthesized. This approach targets partners' ways of knowing and experiencing themselves in the context of their relationship. The therapist endeavors to engage the aspect of personal identity which each partner derives through his or her participation in the relationship. Emphasis is placed upon (1) The mutual identity that emerges as a result of the couple's intersubjective, dialectical interplay; (2) each partner's ability to engage as participant-observers within their own relationship; and (3) the ability for the couple to utilize their conjoint reflexive faculty in the service of their own change. Change which arises from this combination of personal motivation and collective agency exhibits a self-generated life of its own predicated upon the couple's own expertise rather than that of an external agent.

KEY WORDS: integrative psychotherapy; mutual identity; couples therapy; interpersonal relations.

Ultimately, it is the process by which that which is individual becomes shared (and the corresponding process by which that which is common becomes personalized) that I find most fascinating and of greatest relevance to the work of psychotherapy.

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The following systemic-constructivist approach to relational therapy takes as its starting point the assumption that the individual is at once both an experiencing agent *and* socially constituted and constructed. Dyadic relationship systems evolve through the creative, often nonconscious and highly subtle interplay between two individuals (i.e., separate self-systems). This mutually derived relational system intimately and intricately reflects the personalities which comprise it. Thus, each relationship is a unique world unto itself. In our practice, we prefer to teeter at the paradoxical interface between the individual and the collective, rather than assume, as traditional approaches often did, that individuals were at the mercy of their systems, and that the system was determined exclusively by behavioral interactions.

In the proposed understanding of person-system integration, personal and interpersonal worlds are regarded as integrated from the outset. Reconciling the individual and the system has only become an issue as of late because the two were artificially separated to begin with (Feixas, 1990a). Individuals in relationships have not changed, our lens for construing them has. In the past, systemic formulations of families and couples appeared to follow a kind of logical dualism whereby the personal and the collective simply co-existed along separate streams. With few exceptions, insufficient theoretical attention was paid to the relationship *between* the individual and the collective, or between intra- and interpersonal dynamics. Thus a reductionistic interpretation of systems theory led to a mechanization of human relationships and a discounting of individuals. However, we believe that the integration between self and system is already inherent within each person in the relationship and our task as systemic therapists is to access this latent integration.

Wachtel (1987) was among the first to develop a foundation for theoretical integration intended to bridge "one of the great divides of clinical theory and practice, that between individual psychodynamic therapy and family therapy" (p. 118). The provision of such an overarching framework or metatheory in the creation and application of therapeutic procedures is more favorable in our view than technical eclecticism that, while effective in one instance, may not work in another situation, or may fail to advance our basic understanding of psychotherapeutic processes. In our own attempt at integration, rather than perpetuate the development of further models of psychotherapy, we articulate a fluid framework about the individual within the broader relationship context. As such, diverse approaches to couples therapy may be incorporated within this framework irrespective of where the therapeutic lens is focused, be it on emotional experience (see Johnson & Greenberg, 1994), meaning construction (e.g., Feixas, 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Procter, 1981, 1985), or psychodynamic processes (e.g., Feldman, 1979; Nichols, 1987; Pinsof, 1983; Wachtel, 1987).

Integration within a systemic-constructivist framework is achieved by virtue of preserving the holistic integrity of persons and their systems. This goal is accomplished firstly, by working with relationship partners' individual experiences of being a "we" in the world, accentuating the person-system integration that already resides deep within each partner; and secondly, by enlisting the couple's reflexive ability in fostering intrasystemic change. This two pronged intention is like pulling a thread that joins many diverse therapeutic approaches together. Clinicians espousing different models likely make use of couples' mutuality and reflexivity to varying degrees; we, however, endeavor to work very deliberately with the couple's conjoint reflexive processing. By pointing up a factor that we suspect is common to many schools of couples therapy, our hope is that the reader will come away with a new way of thinking about the work he or she is already doing with couples.

The systemic-constructivist approach to relational therapy falls within a "second-order cybernetic" framework because it differs from modernist or traditional systemic approaches on two related assertions. First, we assume that any conceived separation between the observer and what is observed is illusory, and that claims to objective knowing, or a capital "T" truth, are naive. All objectifications are subjectively construed. Second, because therapists do not have access to a privileged understanding about the relationship or the couple's functioning, we are therefore reliant upon the couple's own constructions about themselves, their relationship, and themselves in relation to their relationship, in order to be of any value to them as facilitators of change. Relinquishing subject-object dualism thus requires an expansion of the traditional systemic focus on the patterning and processing of behavioral interaction to include intrapsychic experience.

A critical conceptual bridge linking personal and social domains is the notion that individuals are systems in their own right. We prefer to think in terms of "self-systems" rather than "persons" to counter the tendency to see the individual as a circumscribed, separate and above all else, static, whole. The self is conceptualized as a multifaceted, dynamic organization of cognitive, emotional, and physiological subsystems (Whelton & Greenberg, in press). Not only do people carry within their self-systems representations of others, but these representations play a crucial role in maintaining each individual's experience of personal identity (Andrews, 1993).

In a very compelling and dynamic sense, we carry our close relations within us, and this internalized system of mutual influence, in turn, shapes our overt engagements with others. When this "other" is an intimate, with whom we share a common history of relating, a coherent, relational patterning, or dance unfolds which forms the basis for a couple's mutual identity or experience of "we-ness." "We-ness" may be defined as the couple's often nonconscious, participation in a highly implicit, collective reality that is both

shaped by, and integral to, the personal identity of each member of the couple. The couple's identity is a processual entity, continuously evolving throughout the duration of the relationship. Each individual is a necessary ingredient in the dialectical interplay responsible for the existence of "we-ness," and in turn, the experience of "we-ness" enhances the individual self. It is for this reason that we believe loss of a mate due to death or divorce has been identified as one of the most stressful experiences of a person's life (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).

The major shortcoming of traditional systemic approaches, as we see it, was not so much that they intentionally set out to ignore individuals (Erickson, 1988; Hoffman, 1990, 1992), but that they often failed to recognize, and act in light of, the highly complex interaction that exists between individuals within a relationship and their respective intrapersonal systems. This dynamic interface was conceptually split in two, behavioral enactments between people, on one side, and intrapsychic experiences within them, on the other. The system came to be defined by behaviors because it was the behavioral interaction that most evidently involved both members of the couple, and it was the behavior that was most easily quantified for research and assessment purposes. However, behavioral processes are only but the surface manifestation of a deeply imbedded, intersubjective and highly experiential reality, the "we-ness" of the couple.

In this vein, systemic interventions that fail to recognize the implicit "we-ness," the intricate relationship that exists between persons and their relational systems, are not only likely to be less effective, but also doomed to be discounting of the individuals who give rise and shape to the "we." The culture of a particular couple resonates with the personalities of its members, and, by the same token, its members often demonstrate personal characteristics which are intimately reflective of the relationship as a whole. It follows that therapeutic interventions should stem from an understanding that couples know themselves in ways that an outside observer simply cannot. As therapists, we are foreigners amidst the highly customized cultures relationship participants create.

Accordingly, our approach to relational psychotherapy is predicated on a "complex systems model" (Reid, 1999) which assumes that a couple's relationship is constituted by a wide variety of variables which are largely nonconscious to the participants. These variables, however, lie within each individual as well as within the relationship between partners. We assume that each partner bears within themselves a tacit understanding of the relationship. This understanding reflects his or her own ways of processing experiences and interpreting events.

Partners' respective understandings are often latently intertwined so that within the couple there already exists a shared understanding of their

relationship, an understanding which is often not yet realized. In therapy, a couple can come to realize this common understanding of their relationship which is integral to each partner's identity. Moreover, once accessed, this common ground can be built upon therapeutically. This shared understanding is profoundly personal and special to the partners. The therapeutic process may become accelerated when partners begin to derive personal value out of jointly discovering aspects of their coexistence which they were previously unaware of.

Rather than debate the ontological primacy of "we-ness," we like to point out that couples willingly and often spontaneously make reference to themselves with stories and commentary about "us" and "we." From a post-modern perspective, the sense of "we-ness" is a psychological construction derived from experiences and shared interpretations indigenous to the relationship. A systemic-constructivist approach to therapy seeks to build upon this shared frame of reference rather than attempt to restructure relational dynamics because the underlying assumption of a complex systems model is that change can only occur from within the system itself. Therefore, the task of the therapist is to "massage" the system so that the couple's own tacit understanding of their relationship becomes more conscious. Once this understanding (including the capacity to advance that understanding) takes hold, it is amazing to see how the couple, as a complex dynamic system, can change.

Central to such change is the fundamental experience that each partner has a newly developing understanding that is both personally revealing and also enlightening of themselves as a dyadic unit. Typically, this understanding occurs when the couple, as a system, begins to actively process itself. The therapist's task at such times is to orchestrate the process with as little intrusion as possible. As this process unfolds, the partners develop an enhanced awareness, cognitively and experientially, of their uniqueness as a relationship and the ways in which their respective personalities contribute to their particular coupling. When this occurs, the initial presenting difficulties may still remain, but the emotional valence changes (Luborsky, 1995), thereby creating the emotional receptivity for alternatives to be realized. In essence, the focus of therapy shifts from actively trying to *resolve* problems, to creating a context in which they can *dissolve* (Anderson, 1995).

As the couple begins to recognize and appreciate their evolving mutuality, many of their initial complaints become more like minor issues. That is, the complaints which once occupied the forefront of the relationship assume less of a presence once the foundation of the relationship has been strengthened. Furthermore, as that appreciation of "we-ness" or mutual identity becomes established, partners often begin to intuit a competence at being able to overcome future challenges in their relationship. The reason, we

argue, is that each partner at an intrapersonal level begins experiencing the relationship as of value to one another's identity.

In what follows, we will elucidate the notion of couple's mutual identity drawing upon diverse areas of psychology. We will then introduce the corollary notion of couples reflexivity and its therapeutic utility followed by a discussion of the facilitation of intrasystemic change by having partners function as participant-observers within their own relationships. Lastly, we address the value of looking beyond conflict resolution as the primary goal of therapy toward the enhancement of mutual identity and appreciation of difference.

THE COUPLE'S MUTUAL IDENTITY

Rather than look upon relational systems as consisting of interacting selves, we prefer to look upon individuals as self-systems, enacting and shaping the relationship which already exists inside of them. We make this subtle yet important distinction at the outset bearing in mind Nichols' assertion that the family (or couple) is merely an abstraction (Nichols, 1987). Relational therapists are only ever dealing with individuals, not a reified entity known as "the couple" or "the family" (Bateson, 1979; Efran & Fauber, 1995; Laveman, 1997). However, it is also important to bear in mind that the person and the relationship grow and emerge together in a reciprocal fashion. The relationship is alive within each participant and expresses itself through the interactions of the individuals who comprise it.

Although a sense of "we-ness" or mutual belonging is an experience with which many can easily resonate, it is nevertheless quite elusive. As Josselson (1994) explains in her description of mutuality, one of eight dimensions comprising the "relational space in which people live" (p. 89): "It is this sense of 'us,' a participation in the space between a 'you' and a 'me,' that connects us in a deeper and richer sense of our existence. And this, of all the dimensions, is the hardest to talk about, partly because it exists so completely between selves (p. 97)." Despite the conceptual challenges it poses, the experience of "we-ness" contains within itself the nebulous space where self and system merge, and as such, if accessed, it may be constructively utilized in therapy toward the enrichment of the relationship *and* the fulfillment of individuals.

A couple's mutual identity is so elusive in part, because it emerges outside of conscious awareness or control. It forms the implicit ground upon which the couple's figural, moment to moment interaction takes place. As therapists, we try to help the couple reverse this figure-ground relationship in an effort to make their mutuality more explicit. This therapeutic intention

is supported by evidence suggesting that the greater the couple's experience of "we-ness," the happier and more satisfied they will be in their relationships (Acitelli, 1993; Scott, Fuhrman, & Wyer, 1991; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha, & Ortega, 1993). A sense of "we-ness" is affirming rather than disconfirming of individuals for this sense of belonging could not exist if the relationship did not, in many important respects, incorporate the unique personalities of its respective members. Therefore, individuals and their relational systems need not, and should not, be perceived as mutually exclusive or antagonistic to one another. In fact, we find that partners who feel estranged from one another, and who experience a rather tentative collective identity, suffer greatly on a personal level, and that the amelioration of individual distress is often related to an increasingly more fortified experience of "we-ness."

A collective sense of self, as articulated in the following pages, is not in any way tied to previous notions of enmeshment, self-sacrifice, or "loss" of personal self. These ideas presume a dualistic separation within an individual coupling, and between individuals and their relationships. We presume an intricately interactive dance between individuals which is the substance of the relationship. Moreover, the terms themselves, such as "enmeshed boundaries" carry with them a moralistic tone, an imposition of expert values on couples' dynamics. They suggest an ideal balancing of interpersonal involvement. We believe, in contrast, that couples operate with their own values, that these get negotiated over the course of the relationship, and may or may not reflect those of society or the therapist. Indeed, there will likely be points of disagreement within the couple. However, these values, be they mutual or contrasting, are an integral part of who the couple is and cannot simply be removed and replaced, or scrambled and re-programmed, according to some external observer's better judgment.

REVIEW OF RELATED CONCEPTS

There are numerous authors who have in our view articulated aspects of "we-ness." Before discussing the clinical application of the systemic-constructivist approach, we review those contributions that have most substantively influenced our work. We hope to illustrate how a collective identity emerges and becomes integral to the personhood of each partner, and how the two, the personal and the collective, come to mutually influence one another.

The individualized sense of self evolves through a dialectical exchange between self and others (Mead, 1934; Sullivan, 1953). With Sullivan's (1953) ground breaking assertion that personality, those enduring characteristics

and patterns of behavior definitive of a singular person, was fundamentally *interpersonal*, the focus began to shift from the individual to the dyadic interplay between people. A person's identity was validated, and place in the world secured, through one's interactions with others. Anxiety resulted when interpersonal feedback failed to corroborate one's self-image, and "dynamisms" or recurrent patterns of behavior were adopted to minimize the likelihood of experiencing anxiety.

Sullivan's interpersonal formulation of personality dovetails easily with the concept of an interactive self-system. Essentially, who one is, is embedded within a social network. The self cannot be had in isolation; it can only be seen reflected back through the eyes of others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). According to Andrews (1993), the individual is engaged in an active, though not necessarily conscious, process of self-confirmation in which interpersonal feedback (be it internalized or actual) is filtered through the lens of one's self-concept determining what type of information is attended to, and how it is perceived and interpreted. Eventually, this information is fed back into one's experience of self. The appearance of a stable self-image then, is maintained through a negative feedback cycle entailing the responses of others. Psychodynamically speaking, intrapsychic events such as wishes, conflicts, and defenses are both the cause and consequence of interpersonal patterns of relating, forming a snug yet fluid fit between our internal and social worlds (Wachtel, 1977, 1987).

Thus, the self-system is an interpersonal phenomenon, but experienced from the standpoint of the individual. Personal relationships take root inside of us and play an integral role in how we construct and experience ourselves. At their most ideal, they are the contexts in which we feel most at home and at ease, where we can "be ourselves." They provide a home-base to the self, a place where the self is able to seek momentary refuge from the procrustean bed of society.

From a cognitive psychology standpoint, individuals develop mental representations to help navigate their interpersonal worlds (Baldwin, 1992). Relational schema are developed through general social interaction and become more differentiated the closer and more involved the relationship. Over time, schemas representing expected patterns of interaction for a given relationship emerge. In addition to an interpersonal script, such schema include representations of the self and the other relative to one another (Baldwin, 1992; Fletcher & Thomas, 1996; Horowitz, 1989). In any given relationship, acceptable patterns of interaction and behavior are negotiated through a complex process of mutual role definition (Miller, 1963; Stryker & Statham, 1985). Well-oiled schemas help reduce interpersonal anxiety, but because relational systems are continuously evolving and, as open systems, subject to "perturbations," there will always be exceptions to the schematic

rule. For this reason, relational cognition should be viewed as a dynamic, evolving process (Andersen, 1993).

Aron and Aron's work on cognition in close relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) helps shed light on how individual cognition factors into the experience of "we-ness." Through a series of systematic and thorough experiments, they demonstrated that in addition to behavioral interdependence, close relationships are characterized by a "cognitive closeness." Such closeness is described as an overlapping of selves whereby the significant other is incorporated into one's own experience of self. Intimates expand the boundaries of themselves to include the resources, perspectives, and characteristics of the other. Thus the self in relationship comes to experience the world as though one were, at least in part, merged with the close other.

However, close relationship involvement has its costs as well as benefits. In Allen's (1988, 1993) model of self-system integration, the individual is engaged in a continuous struggle, striving to separate and individuate on one hand, and maintain systemic stability or homeostasis on the other. In order to accomplish the latter, the individual must sacrifice his or her inner-most, authentic self and adopt a pseudo-self consistent with the prescribed roles of the larger social group. He posits an "altruistic paradox" in which the family or relational entity is in fact better served when individuals choose to express rather than mask their true nature because it is only through the process of individual self-expression, that the collective entity may differentiate and evolve as well. Thus individuals and relationships have the potential to grow together. However, because of the strong pull toward homeostasis, individualized expressions are often met with disqualifying behaviors such as overt forms of punishment, or more subtle put-downs leading the individual to feel, at least momentarily, cast out of the system in which they were embedded and through which they defined themselves. The resultant experience of "existential groundlessness," as Allen and others have termed it, will be revisited in a later section on relationship conflict.

By inhabiting one another's subjective worlds over a prolonged period, the couple negotiates a shared reality characterized by multiple layers of meaning (Berger & Kellner 1964; Dixon & Duck, 1993; Montgomery, 1988). In the constructivist literature, the meaning frameworks which couples and families collaboratively derive have been variously labeled, "family construct systems" (Feixas, 1990a, 1990b, 1995; Proctor, 1981, 1985), "family epistemologies" (Alexander & Neimeyer, 1989), and "family paradigms" (Reiss, 1981). Underlying these collective acts of meaning are "abiding assumptions" (Reiss, 1981) which define the family's identity and signify the individual's membership in it. The greater the degree of overlap between the individual's personal construct system and the family's or couple's, the

more dependent the member's personal identity is on his or her participation in the group, and therefore, the more the individual will seek out and find validation through his or her involvement with other members (Feixas, 1990b). As with relational schema, personal constructs and the apprehending of these constructs within the partner, enable recurrent themes to be identified and order to be imposed upon the unstructured flow of experience. Redundancies in thinking, feeling, and behavior come to define the expectations which the couple hold of one another and the implicit rules and values of the relationship.

Considering the high degree of specificity of the interpersonal interaction and meaning generation taking place within couples, we find it helpful in psychotherapy to approach the couple as though they were a highly idiosyncratic culture unto themselves. This microculture is a melding of two subjective realities. Through this unification, a third reality is born, the unique culture of that couple replete with its own symbolic repertoire (Baxter, 1987a). Adopting a view of ourselves as respectful visitors to the inner world of the couple, rather than residents or titulary experts, instills in us an attitude of curiosity. We take it upon ourselves, as visitors, to become educated in the ways of the couple—the values they hold, the rules they live by, the history they share. The couple reveals their culture through their language that includes symbolic enactments as well as verbalized expressions. We pay close attention to the languaging of the couple, how they communicate with each other and present themselves, as individuals and as “a couple,” to us, the world outside.

Over the course of the relationship, couples come to develop their own “discourse community.” Linguists use this term to connote a style of communicating that distinguishes one social grouping from another (Maines & Bridger, 1992). The couple forms its unique identity through its discourse which partners negotiate throughout the enactment of their relationship. As the discourse changes and evolves over time, so too does the identity of the couple, each partner influencing the other in a reciprocal fashion (Wilmot, 1987; Wilmot & Hocker, 1993). When individuals first meet, they communicate by virtue of the language of the larger social order or culture in which they belong. Over time, this languaging deepens and becomes more idiomatic reflecting the relationship partners' interdependence (Sillars & Zietlow, 1993). Code words, inside jokes, pet names, and secret signals get bandied about the couple's interpersonal sphere forming a richly textured, highly efficient communication system. This idiosyncratic style of communication implies a shared frame of reference indicative of the couple's mutual identity.

We assume, in our work, that although the couple's culture is novel for us, for the two who reside within it, it is exceedingly ordinary. So ordinary,

in fact, that they do not notice it. This customized culture provides the backdrop to their day to day life. Although the following quotation was made in reference to an individual's cultural embeddedness, its meaning is highly relevant to the culture of relationships and the integral coupling which forms between individuals and their interpersonal systems. "We are embedded in our culture, which is embedded in us, creating a sense of identity that, if firm and well integrated, organizes us to such an extent that we become unaware of it. We belong, we are connected, we are in the world that is in us" (Josselson, 1994, p. 98). Andersen (1993), in his discussion of the "cultural schemata" which govern and shape couples' idiomatic patterns of communication, comments similarly: So deep are such cultural schemata, "that they are invisible to most members of a culture; indeed they are part of us" (p. 17).

Embedded in a couple's discourse are the narratives they mutually derive (Wilmot & Hocker, 1993). Narratives and self-stories are ways of organizing one's experiences and subsequent knowing. A couple's co-constructed stories are like pebbles cast upon the beach of a relationship, weathered and worked with the changing tides, taking shape, and shaping the relationship as it unfolds and moves through time. The narrative situates the couple in space and time linking together past, present, and future. Through narrative, the couple can reflect back upon their history, make meaning of their present, and plan the course of their future. Couples' narratives are a testament to the fact that the *couple has lived*, that the individuals within their relationship have shared flip-sides of the same psychic space.

Stories are the window into the couple's inner life together. Gergen & Gergen (1987) describe the progressive ("happily ever after") and regressive ("falling out of love") narratives couples co-construct. They distinguish the latter types of narratives from those of a seasoned relationship. Enduring relationships fashion a deeper sense of relatedness with a more complex narrative structure, one which is capable of incorporating life's inevitable lows as well as highs. What emerges is a narrative construction of relationship that will withstand the trials of contingency and the test of time. Storied accounts give the life of the couple a meaningful coherence and contribute to their sense of themselves "as a couple." Without such stories a couple's life would lack coherence and consist of a haphazard hodge-podge of events apparently leading nowhere (Gergen & Gergen, 1983).

The dialectic tensions which account for the flow of creative discourse, the co-construction of meaning, and the development of shared narratives are also experienced nonverbally by intimates. An important factor distinguishing two individuals in an intimate relationship from strangers in interaction is a heightened sensitivity to the other, an emotional resonance or attunement. Emotion is considered by many to be the binding substance of

relationships (e.g., Bowen, 1966; Clarke, 1987; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Greenberg & Marques, 1998; Kiesler, 1982; Sullivan, 1954). Relationship partners are rhythmically attuned, often nonconsciously, to one another's nonverbal signals like a well-rehearsed Morse code. This tacit form of knowing may be expressed in any number of ways—through a shifting of a brow; a slightly longer than usual pause between vocalizations; a disengagement at an inopportune time; “a look.” All these contribute to the couple's hidden repertoire of mutual recognition and silent communication.

COUPLES REFLEXIVITY

By exploring various realms in the study of relationship, we have attempted to uncover differing paths which, when taken together, provide us with a better grasp of the collective reality couples experience, and the interaction between personal and mutual identity. However, couples in distress will typically place a great deal of emphasis on their personal differences paying little heed to their interpersonal entirety beyond a very general, “We can't seem to communicate.” One person may be overly reticent, while the other too outspoken; one may be complacent in the relationship, while the other frustrated and yearning for change; one may be critical of the other's approach to parenting, or possess the most intricate psychodynamic formulations about the other person's character flaws, etc. Such points of difference often represent separate world views behind which partners encase themselves, and through which the couple is so often torn asunder.

However, even at the best of times, the couple's mutuality often goes unnoticed, submerged outside of awareness. Relationships seem to take on a life of their own. Relational schema, interpersonal scripts, and emotional signaling provide quick routes to interaction that enable us to enact our relationships without much conscious awareness. Owing to these cognitive-affective “shortcuts,” communication in relationships is generally characterized by “mindlessness” (Burnett, 1987) and “indirectness” (Baxter, 1987b; 1988). Baxter (1987b) maintains, “the typical relationship process is not dominated by open, direct relationship communication, but rather involves the construction of a web of ambiguity by which parties signal their relationship indirectly” (p. 194). It would appear that relationships do not require extensive planning or upkeep in order to occur. However, for relationships to change, the system must begin to actively process itself. Such processing requires an awareness, not only of one's own habitual actions and reactions, but also of the other person, and most critically, how the two interact and mutually influence one another.

With this objective in mind, the cultivation of relationship awareness becomes the primary task for couples therapists. At the level of the individual, Acitelli (1993) defines relationship awareness as such: "A person's thinking about interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between himself or herself and the other partner in the relationship. Included are thoughts about the couple or relationship as an entity" (p. 151). During conflictual interactions, it is more common for discourse between partners to center on one person or the other, rather than the relationship as a whole (Acitelli, 1988, 1993; Bernal & Baker, 1979). Acitelli also distinguishes between thinking and talking *within* the context of the relationship, versus thinking and talking *about* the relationship context itself. By making the relationship context the object of discussion, the couple engages in a collaborative reflexive process whereby the couple assumes a "We" perspective (see also, Duck, 1992; Mehrabian, 1971). This process is akin to a subjective "I" attending to an objectified "me" (Mead, 1934; James, 1890/1950) but when done conjointly, entails an intersubjective "We" attending to an co-objectified "us."

The notion of a collective self or "we-ness" incorporates both the "We" and the "us," the "We" which is constructing the relationship and the "us" which is being constructed. "We" are living the story of "us" as it comes into being. In essence, the relationship context is capable of examining *its own* context—a process we term "couples reflexivity." Couples reflexivity extends beyond the couple's involvement in a collaborative relationship awareness. According to Rennie (1992), reflexivity entails self-awareness and instrumental agency within that self-awareness (p. 225). Thus, reflexivity involves an experiential as well as an intellectual understanding. To this we add experiential processing (Epstein, 1994) which involves an awareness of the emotional, the nonrational, and the intuitive aspects the couple share in their relationship. Relationship participants recognize they have the capacity to act in light of this evolving awareness, and as action and new-found awarenesses come to influence one another, couples begin to acquire a sense of collaborative agency. The esprit de corps expressed through couples reflexivity is most pronounced when the partners find that processing the relationship is most authentic and satisfying when both are doing this together. For only one partner to undertake such a processing on their own would undermine the sense of "we-ness."

Because couples reflexivity entails both experience and reflection, we attempt to help couples become participant-observers within the relationship context itself. The notion of participant-observation is in keeping with Guidano's (1995) "movieola technique" whereby clients are taught to sharpen their reflexive faculty so that they become more adept at "zooming in" on their cognitive-affective experience, and "zooming out"

to view their behavior from an observer's perspective. The acquisition of such reflexive agility affords clients two views of themselves—subjective and “objective” respectively. Bernal and Baker's (1979) “metacommunicational framework of couple interaction” is also of relevance here. They distinguish between lower and higher levels of communication. During conflict, lower level communication entails a focus on a particular partner or a contentious issue, whereas higher level interaction involves focusing on the relationship and its processes. They contend that the latter level is the position from which the couple can arrive at constructive solutions to their problems.

To summarize, implicit in a “We” perspective is an objectified “us” that couples can examine together. In couples reflexivity, partners take a step outside of the co-constructed reality in which they are embedded, and look back upon themselves. The process of consciously objectifying their relationship creates a reflective space between the “We” of the couple and their conflict. In doing so, it places both partners on the same side of the relational fence, a perspective that is inherently incompatible with conflict because partners cannot be both allies and adversaries at the same time (Acitelli, 1993). The closest a couple can come to remaining allies while being actively adversarial is to “agree to disagree” or to create implicit contracts to tolerate their differences. However, as partners discover the synthesis between their differences that is the foundation of their mutual identity, they frequently find value, and even celebration, in their differences. Moreover, by “externalizing the problem” (White & Epston, 1990) or difficulty in the relationship, the problem of “us” becomes momentarily separated from the “We.” It instills an attitude of “We're greater than our problem,” thereby subtly strengthening the couple's experience of “we-ness.”

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT, INTRAPERSONAL FRUSTRATION, AND THE EROSION OF “WE-NESS”

When couples are in conflict and therefore experiencing a tenuous bond with one another, the personal identities of relationship partners are frustrated. Whereas conflict threatens the existence of the individual self, at least to some degree, “we-ness,” from a systemic-constructivist perspective, reinforces and enhances the personal sense of self. In other words, because of the intimate connection that exists between individuals and their systems, when partners feel strong in their relationship, they feel strong in themselves. However, when the interdependence between partners is frustrated, this can lead to an experience of profound isolation, confusion, helplessness, and threatened personal identity-aspects of “existential groundlessness”

(Allen, 1993). The relationship becomes a source of invalidation rather than the source of personal validation it once was. At this point, partners will often begin to establish themselves as separate from “us,” seeking out alternative sources of validation sometimes in very insidious ways such as immersing oneself into one’s work, or casting a third party in the role of confidant.

Therefore, in day to day conflictual interactions, amidst the crossfire of accusations and justifications hurled to and fro, partners are often involved in a more general fight for self-definition in the face of feeling invalidated by the other. The need to justify one’s actions or how one is feeling, may be suggestive of a greater need to extricate or unbind oneself from unduly constraining limitations perceived as imposed upon the personal self by an external other. During argumentation, or moments of negative tension, this fight for self-definition is reciprocal so that each partner comes to devalue the other amidst trying to reinforce themselves. If one is right and the other wrong, then some self has to lose. It is no wonder that both participants desperately clutch at their own version of truth (Efran & Blumberg, 1994), because to *not* do so is to risk a seemingly unbearable loss.

Here we hark back to the interpersonalist notion that “who” we are is defined by and experienced through our ongoing interactions with others, but in times when these interactions disconfirm our self-concept, we feel anxious and insecure, and will often do whatever is required to re-establish that once secure relational base. Ironically, the very attempt to do this by declaring the other wrong and by implication, oneself right, is exactly what divides partners, perpetuates the conflict, and over the long term, erodes the relationship. In argumentation, both partners are essentially saying, “Why can’t you see it my way so I can continue to view and experience myself in ways I am most accustomed and content in relation to you?”

We recognize that engaging a rational, reflective awareness may be particularly difficult when under the grip of strong emotions, but paradoxically, we view powerful emotional expressions as an opportunity for change and growth in the relationship. Because of the emotional salience of conflict, couples are capable of becoming *more* aware of themselves as a couple during negatively charged interactions than during more neutral periods. The all consuming nature of conflict brings the interactional foreground of the relationship into crystal clear view, rendering the tacit background of the “We,” by contrast, more accessible. Some couples even find it a relief to stand back and take a break from a tiresomely familiar, unsatisfying and often painful form of engagement. Couples can readily identify when they are on the verge or in the midst of such an interaction. It is as though these

bad times lay dormant within each participant waiting for the right trigger to set them off. And when they are caught up in these interactions, there is generally no mistaking it on either participant's part. What is most important here is that, at these times, the couple is *in agreement* about the pernicious state of *their* union.

FACILITATING INTRASYSTEMIC CHANGE WITHIN A RELATIONSHIP

In the systemic-constructivist approach to relational therapy our intention is not to restructure relationship dynamics according to the therapist's preconceived notions of healthy interpersonal functioning, but rather to assist partners in discovering for themselves, each individual's contribution to the relational dance, as well as the dance itself. In our view, traditional systemic approaches were restricted in the extent to which they could apply the systemic paradigm because the onus of change was often placed in the hands of the therapist, a foreigner amidst the couple's intersubjective world. Merely using a systemic map to inform interpretations or guide interventions stops short of fully realizing the potential of the therapeutic application of systems theory. With a more complex understanding of systems thinking, one which recognizes that relationship systems differ from mechanical systems on the basis of their subjective interiors (Wilber, 1995), and one which also assumes that enduring systemic change can only occur from within the system itself, our primary focus shifts from imposing systemic principles *on top* of couple's dynamics to helping couples begin to observe and reflexively process *their own* relationship system.

Initial sessions are spent laying the groundwork for partners to assume an exploratory rather than accusatory stance with one another. We work actively to engage the couple in a discourse designed to elicit the latent, common sense understanding that a singular, unitary truth regarding their conflict does not exist, and that it is possible for there to be two distinct yet valid perspectives regarding the same situation. In doing so, the therapist's role becomes more defined. The therapist is not the mediator of truth that couples so often expect and want him or her to be, but rather a promoter of understanding and mutual discovery. We readily draw upon techniques from other therapeutic models to help partners expand their respective viewpoints, particularly reflective listening and perspective taking exercises. Another vehicle to helping partners loosen their grip on divisive truths is to have them generate ideas about what they would look for in an ideal relationship independent of their current partner. Focusing on an ideal relationship, rather than an ideal partner, draws attention to their individual

needs and personal levels of functioning. It is interesting how each partner bears a tacit knowledge of what they could do or change in their own behavior to make their ideal relationship more feasible. When partners begin to share implicit personal knowledge it becomes quite generative for it deepens their curiosity in one another's ideals in light of their currently shared conflict-full reality. This is a deliberate dialectical juxtaposition intended to facilitate reflexive thought that can be shared.

What is essential in the application of the systemic-constructivist approach is that intervention procedures be coherent with the partners' ways of knowing and experiencing their relationship. Following from postmodern assumptions, therapy focuses on the conceptual and experiential frameworks that the partners themselves share. It is therefore desirable that the therapist be willing to either create or customize existing procedures so as to facilitate partners in becoming increasingly self-aware interactively. The application of these procedures ought to be subtle and sensitive to the couple's unique system. It is critical in this regard that the therapist assume an agnostic position, a position that is genuinely "nonknowing" of the couple's ways of being (Anderson, 1995). There is a vast difference between the therapist being guided by his or her own conceptualization of the couple's ways of being, and the therapist facilitating the couple's being aware of their own ways of being. The therapist always begins with what the couple "knows" and from this starting point, assists the couple in becoming aware of their own knowing and meaning making.

The therapist "massages" the couple's system by attempting to work from within the couple's framework. We have chosen the word "massage" over "perturb" or "confront" because in our view, the latter terms connote intrusions that are foreign and external to the couple. Efforts to massage the couple's system are based on the assumption that the system can only accommodate and utilize information which accords with its own internal frame of reference. Interventions which jar with the individual's self experience, or clash with the couple's culture, will either not register for the couple, or are likely to be resisted, rejected, or at best, be short lived. Thus cognitive reframing techniques, training in conflict resolution or communication strategies, or well-intended advice generally lose their initial impact as the couple's omnipresent ways of interacting take precedence over their initial accommodation to the therapeutic intent of the therapist. Similarly, we find that when one partner attempts to implement ideas from self-help manuals, or transpose other types of external solutions onto the relationship because they make intellectual sense to him or her, that these attempts often result in the exacerbation of interpersonal conflict rather than the intended improvement. In contrast, interventions that are continuous with the couple's culture, which entail slight alterations to what partners are already doing

and experiencing, are more easy to assimilate. Subtle, seemingly minor adjustments are rapidly absorbed by the couple such that they lead to other unforeseen yet self-generating adjustments.

One approach to massaging the system is to have the couple replay a conflictual interaction with one partner repeating a reactive statement previously directed at the other person. The deliberate and self-conscious repetition of the communication has the effect of "slowing down the system" so that the respondent can say what they say with considerable participant-observer awareness and enter into a recursive learning process. In turn, it can be helpful to have the partner who was on the receiving end of the communication, also repeat the same comment slowly and genuinely so that both partners can listen to the words and experience their impact, together. Another procedure which is quite effective in eliciting tacit knowledge pertaining to the couple's mutual identity is to ask each partner to think about the other as though he or she was suddenly gone forever. Of course, this question is only posed when the emotional tone of the couple's dialogue seems appropriate. Each person is then asked to consider something unique about their partner that they are fond of, but that is different from themselves, and that would be missed if the partner were suddenly gone. No matter what the level of ill will between the partners, the deliberate contrasting of what would be lost with what is currently taken for granted, invariably creates new discursive avenues for partners to explore.

The ultimate intention behind various procedures for massaging the system is to slow the system down enough so that partners may see and experience themselves and how they operate; how they feel, interpret, and behave. Such relationship awareness is absolutely essential for the system to begin actively processing itself. Bear in mind that for the couple to create an "us" in a reflexive fashion, there must be a "We" to define it. Couples reflexivity is therefore inextricably linked to the couple's experience of "we-ness." All therapeutic efforts which are successful in fostering couples reflexivity inevitably incite a more pronounced experience of "we-ness" or mutuality in the couple. Not only is "we-ness" expressed when the couple discusses themselves as a dyadic entity; it is also active when partners begin to engage the other in their own awareness, or when personal awarenesses gradually expand to include the other. As awareness increases, relationship partners become more personally and interpersonally sensitive to one another which in turn begets greater relationship awareness.

Once partners begin to collaboratively derive insight into their relationship functioning, they eventually quite naturally come to affect their own alterations, *alterations woven from the very cloth of their relationship*. Understandings which the couple themselves generate are informed by "insider knowledge," they are inherently contextualized within the culture of

the couple itself, and therefore, are intimately tied to the experiential reality of the individuals within the system. Furthermore, insights that are self-generated are often impossible to ignore and are therefore more likely to influence the couple's "in vivo" interactions.

The emphasis on an evolving and mutual, experientially-based awareness, rather than insight into the origins of behavior is what distinguishes a systemic-constructivist approach to the integration of persons and systems from past integrative attempts which incorporated psychodynamic and systemic theories (e.g., Framo, 1965; Friedman, 1980; Nichols, 1987). Our view is more synchronous with those approaches which are founded upon theoretical rather than technical integration. These approaches manage the tension between individuals and systems by examining how intrapsychic interpretations and experiences are manifested and reinforced through the couple's present moment interactions (e.g., Feixas, 1990a, 1990b; Feldman, 1979; Pinsof, 1983; Wachtel, 1987). The difference, however, lies in that a systemic-constructivist approach assumes that integration takes place by virtue of engaging the couple's reflexivity through which the holistic integrity of the individuals and their systems is retained. Instead of the therapist identifying mechanisms by which personal, historical, or internal experiences manifest in the couple's current interactions, the couple is helped to come to their own discoveries, understandings which, unlike those of the therapist, are indigenous to the couple's own cultural system. When partners begin to reveal themselves and study their interactions within their own framework, systems and individuals are naturally integrated.

A further difference between our approach and former systemic therapies is that in principle, we are opposed to the view commonly associated with earlier schools of marital and family therapy of the mastermind clinician capable of tricking the family into change. Not only is such an attitude outwardly pejorative, but we find it implicitly undermining of the couple's own inherent agency and the intelligence and creativity which arises out of that. The attitude of therapist superiority arose out of, what is in our view, a limited interpretation of systems thinking. That the therapist was somehow able to transcend their own subjective lens and "purely" interpret faulty relationship dynamics was not only epistemologically naive, but also fundamentally, not at all systemic (Fergus & Reid, in press). The second-order cybernetic movement in family therapy rejected the assumption of subject-object dualism underlying earlier systemic approaches, and in doing so, placed heavy emphasis on therapist reflexivity—that is, the therapist's participatory engagement in the co-construction of the couple's or family's reality. The systemic-constructivist approach in contrast, acknowledges the importance of therapist reflexivity, but is more actively involved in fostering the reflexive capability of the couple itself.

Case Example

The development of couple's reflexivity is a continuously evolving process. The following is an excerpt from a transcript of a couples therapy session illustrative of this evolution. It is Bob and Betty's sixth session of couples therapy. Betty is an energetic, self-aware, and outspoken woman. Ten years ago, she gave up her job as a nurse to pursue a dream of buying a farm in the country where she could breed and raise sheep. The couple was able to rely on Bob's stable income as a sales manager for IBM to make this dream a reality. For the past few years however, Bob has been feeling insecure in his profession, believing that his years of dedication to the company have gone unrecognized. In addition, with all the restructuring taking place, he feared that his position with the company, and therefore his ability to provide for his family, were in jeopardy.

The couple presented for therapy on Betty's initiative. She was fed up with Bob's angry silences and tendency to withdraw from her and the family because of his problems at work. She could read the pained expression in his eyes and was certain that he was "hurting inside" but whenever she attempted to engage him in a discussion, he would "go blank" and disengage from her. As a consequence, Betty claimed she was "dying inside." Another pervasive pattern in the relationship was one where Bob thought he was helping Betty when she was distressed by assuming the role of problem-solver and offering solutions. Betty in fact saw this as a put-down, undermining her ability to take matters into her own hands. Whenever she felt diminished in relation to Bob, she would forcefully and quite belligerently assert her views. At which point Bob would withdraw behind the blank facial expression.

When the couple presented for therapy, it was apparent that Bob was very concerned about Betty and the relationship, and was motivated to do whatever was necessary "for Betty to be happy." Although Bob was not one to express himself verbally, his sadness was indeed evident by the welling of tears in his eyes. Frustrated by Bob's inability to openly communicate with her, Betty would tell him what he was experiencing, through a litany of rhetorical questions and empathically phrased accusations. Quite early on, Bob distinguished for Betty the difference between "telling" versus "talking," and Betty soon came to realize that her style of "telling" only served to push him further away, and reinforce his withdrawal. With this understanding, she became motivated to change.

By the sixth session, not only had Bob become aware of how his "blank look" set off a chain of events beginning with Betty's exasperated reaction, but he had also become conscious of dawning this expression in the actual moment of relating to Betty. This facial cue contains a charge for both members of the couple and punctuates their interaction. It is important to note

that neither Bob nor his facial expression are being accused of instigating the conflict; rather, it serves as a point of entry which both partners can identify with and experience from their individual perspectives, and therefore collaboratively access.

In the following passage, the couple recounts an exchange that took place during an hour long planning session around the renovation of their kitchen demonstrating, in a collaboratively reflexive fashion, how they engage as participant-observers in their own system, and in doing so, cultivate “we-ness.” Evolving personal and shared awarenesses of both the “me” and the “us,” the individuals and their system, and how the two interact are evidenced here.

Bob: When the blank look came over my face, you (Betty) consciously said, “You’re not listening” . . .

Betty: But I wasn’t prepared for my reaction. I thought by now, and here comes my impatience, I thought by that point I wouldn’t have responded quite as vocally as I did. I didn’t tear him apart but I said, “This has to end. I can’t deal with this anymore!” I didn’t think I would have responded that way, at this point, to that look. I wish it would have been altered more. I wasn’t quite prepared for that same feeling to be there . . . I thought it would have vanished by now.

Bob: But it was there!

Betty: Yes. Did it bother me after? No. Even though I reacted in a bit more of an aggressive manner than maybe what was required, I didn’t attack, I didn’t hurt you. I made it quite clear I needed that.

Bob: But 6 weeks ago, you would have reacted, you would have had a totally different reaction. You would have laced into me.

Therapist: And how about you?

Bob: Yes, me too. I would have felt like justifying myself, and we would have probably ended up in an argument or a fight.

Therapist: Felt like or wanted to?

Bob: Probably both, I probably would have gone into justification mode, which I didn’t.

Therapist: What did you do instead?

Bob: Well, I’m not sure . . .

Betty: He had to deal with all my ideas flying at him, like missiles—Chh, Chh, Chh, Chh . . . I know what he did—He smiled, he actually smiled, not a full ear-to-ear, but it was a definite smile.

By this point in therapy, Betty has developed an awareness of how her prior attacking response to the blank look is hurtful to Bob. She has also become aware that when she hurts Bob, she is hurting herself. Bob has come to a similar realization around the same pattern. With this enhanced awareness and corresponding sensitivity, both are motivated to change their behavior. Betty is reflecting upon herself in her system with Bob, and because she is a result-oriented person, she is impatient with the fact that she is still

triggered by Bob's facial expression. This is indicative of the processual, highly idiosyncratic nature of couple's reflexivity. Betty's personality is not suddenly transformed, nor are behavioral changes easily had. The couple can expect to undergo a period of trial and error before their conflictual cycle loses its emotional charge. However newfound shared awarenesses cannot be undone, especially because these are unfolding for both partners simultaneously. The individual functions as a behavioral mirror for the other, and an experiential window into the self, promoting change in the other and the relationship often at an exponential rate.

Cultivating "We-Ness"

One of the values of working with couples within a systemic framework is that it is inherently contextual. We need not hope that treatment gains, in session, translate into the couple's everyday life because their everyday life is enacted, in full color within the parameters of the therapy room. However, we will attempt to further ensure that awarenesses instilled in therapy will continue to blossom when back at home between sessions, and then once therapy is complete. In session, for example, while reflecting on their relationship, we have couples actively imagine what they will do the next time a particular conflict arises. We query, in session, will each be aware of themselves? Our hope is that participant-observation and couple's reflexivity become a way of being for relationship partners, and as new challenges arise, the couple will be better equipped to handle them. Although in therapy the primary focus is often areas of conflict, couples need not wait for conflict to arise in order to engage reflexively in their relationship. Obviously, celebrating high points and moments of joy in the relationship will also strengthen the couples experience of togetherness. We view the dissolution of conflict as a necessary, but by no means sufficient, outcome for relational psychotherapy.

The dialectical tensions between self and other that span the entire spectrum of "we-ness" are simultaneously both the life-blood and pulse of the relationship. Without the rhythmical give and take of two unique individuals, there would be no "We." The inevitable differences between members of a couple may contribute to the pooled resources of the relationship, or alternatively, define the destructive force which tears it apart. Our task as therapists is not to smooth over these differences, but rather to help couples in relationship learn to, at the very least, accept them, but at best, come to truly value them as integral to the creation of their intersubjective world. This diversity enriches the relationship and in turn, each participant within it.

SUMMARY

“We-ness,” is central to the identity of the relationship and the individuals who comprise it. It defines that hard to reach place between two people where self and system merge, where the “you” and the “I” intersect and become a “We.” Relationship partners anchor one another’s personal identities creating a context where, ideally, each person feels most “at home.” Each participant both defines and is defined by the microculture of the relationship creating a customized, interpersonal environment for relationship partners to inhabit. The systemic-constructivist approach to relational therapy maintains that the integration of one’s self with one’s interpersonal system is already inherent within each partner, and the task of the therapist is to facilitate partners in jointly realizing and acting upon this latent integration. By helping partners observe their experiences amidst conflictual interactions, a reflective space is created whereby intrasystemic understandings may emerge. As these understandings come to infuse the couple’s daily life, the relationship can begin to evolve in mutually gratifying directions.

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