

## **Some Brief Strategic Systemic Therapy Techniques for Couple's Therapy**

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### **Abstract**

By pointing out different important aspects of treatment in couple's therapy, the paper defines Brief Strategic Systemic therapy as a sounded choice for inducing change in couples. Three strategic maneuvers 'in homage to Fisch, Watzlawick and Weakland' exemplify the methodology used to influence partners into experiencing change at different levels: behavior, meaning, emotion, and the relationship. This paper also emphasizes the importance of contemporary research data published by John Gottman's team, to help therapists concentrate on vital factors that stabilize marriages and to realize the necessity of consolidating change after therapy.

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This article will primarily introduce three techniques presented at the European Brief Strategic and Systemic Conference in Arezzo 'Remembering the past, to see the future' from the European Brief Strategic Systemic Therapy Association. These techniques have been chosen to pay homage to my skilled masters Dick Fisch, John Weakland and Paul Watzlawick. This article is meant to be the first one of a series, exploring different theoretical and technical aspects of brief therapy with couples.

When working with couples, therapists have to gain a maximum of maneuverability in order to keep a strong relationship with the couple as well as with each partner taken individually but also to be able to consider their personal suffering. Whilst therapists induce emotional, cognitive, behavioral changes, they have to be equally attentive to the evolution and the context of the interactions. Moreover, the therapists must be extra careful to consolidate those changes, working in this multiple level approach: the behavior, the meaning, the structure of the relationship, the emotional context. On top of this, therapists have to pay especially attention working briefly before the problem destroys the mutual feelings of attachment.

Taking all these into account, I believe that Brief strategic systemic therapy is the most suitable approach when working with couples. Indeed, therapists absolutely need a systemic frame of reference, a brief approach and a strategic stance in order to be able to change the nature of the relationship and to soothe the partner's feelings while solving the problem or problems quickly.

The three techniques described, which are either adapted or derived from my masterful teachers' styles, are used in sessions when the therapists see the couple together. This implies that in my methodology therapists can see consorts separately or together depending on their strategic choices from session to session. But it is also interesting to notice that, many times, it is possible to work on relationship problems by seeing only one of the partners during the whole intervention.

Now, let's see what people are seeking for when they come to a couple's therapy.

People come, at least in French-speaking countries, in the context of a break up. This constraint leaves you a very short time to work; therefore, devices to open up some maneuverability have to be ingenious. You have to be brief and you have to be strategic. Furthermore, partners usually have differing goals at the beginning of the therapy. One of them wants change, the other doesn't. One of them wants therapy but not the other. One of them wants you to see the couple together whilst the other wants to see you alone, you need to be very strategic once more, simply not to loose contact with **both!**

Working with couples usually requires a multiple level approach in therapy. You are required to help them to negotiate an issue, to recover desire and intimacy, to stop fighting, to become more autonomous or inter-dependent, to cooperate better, to be respected, etc. So couple's therapy has to be adapted to the specific demands of each partner as well as to the nature of the relationship of the couple. Therefore, there are different levels of intervention, not all of them need to be treated in every therapy but all levels have to be attended to.

There is a level of problem solving: 'he follows me'; 'she spends too much money'. A level in which you help people calibrate the relationship differently: creating symmetry in a rigid complementary relationship that, for example, lacks desire; or introduce a one-down position in a very symmetric relationship where there is desire but no more sex. There is also the level concerning the development of connivance, support and intimacy; what researchers call PSO (positive sentiment override). Moreover, there is a level of managing discussions, fights and belligerence so they won't drive the couples towards a negative

sentiment override (NSO) or towards emotional disengagement, etc. Every level will need to be consolidated.

To help us take into account each level, at the end of this article, we will look at what researchers have found out about long-term and happy relationships, as well as, what they have found out to be the ingredients that precipitate divorces. This will give landmarks that will help the brief therapist in being more efficient and effective when inducing long-term change.

Let's focus further more into what people specifically complain about:

They complain about themselves: 'I feel pessimistic about my relationship', 'I am incapable of giving', 'I'm unable to keep a man', 'I'm jealous'.

They complain about 'the other': 'he drinks', 'she won't commit', 'he's always around with friends', 'she's never satisfied'.

They can also complain about the relationship: 'we are always fighting', 'we don't seem to be able to negotiate', 'we don't know if we want to continue this relationship'.

In the systemic approach, any of these complaints 'about oneself, the other or the relationship', can be analyzed from a cybernetic point of view. You might not want to talk about couple's therapy when people complain about themselves or their spouse: this wouldn't be very strategic. Nonetheless, any of these complaints will require us to focus on the interaction and the relationship with the partner.

In the first situation, when people complain about themselves: you will mostly need to understand the attempted solutions of the person to change themselves, and acknowledge any intervention from significant others.

In the second situation, complaining about the other, the basic stance or strategy can be 'easy'. As my partner, Jean-Jacques Wittezaele says, there are only '3 solutions + 2'. What are those three solutions? If you complain about someone, you can either leave the relationship, change yourself or you do something to influence the relationship (and by doing so, alter somehow or entirely the incriminated behavior). The +2 option, quite popular indeed, is either to suffer 'in silence' and make the other one pay for his behavior or, to loudly complain, confront, scream and cry in order to push the other into therapy.

The third situation, where people complain about the relationship, is the one I will be addressing in this paper, since the three techniques I will be analyzing here are used in conjoint couple's sessions.

### **The methodology**

I will present now the overall step-by-step phases of the methodology, and then I will describe the three different techniques that constitute the basis of this article and explain their usefulness in promoting change.

For the first session, I meet the couple conjointly when people call in and ask together for a therapy concerning their relationship.

Therefore, as soon as I know that people are asking to be seen together for a therapy. I start right away looking for clues. Gottman's schema about couple's behavior has helped me to build up for a sort of checklist.

What are their myths, metaphors, love-phrases, humor,

How are they giving to each other ways and means to support their personal and marital aspirations? How is the marriage making their life more colorful or easy,

How do they fight, how do they discuss, how do they make up,

Positive sentiment override: what are they positive about, what do they like about each other's endeavor, about their relationship, what are they proud of: Is there resentment and about what?

What is their main dynamic movement, towards each other, are they antagonistic, do they turn away from each other?

What do they like in the other one, what do they admire, what are they moved by concerning their companion?

Do they know what the other wants, needs personally, and needs for and from the relationship?

Whenever I meet any new patient, I begin by explaining the practice of brief therapy, highlighting the fact that we have to work together 'they and me, as a team', to bring about change. I explain that change needs to happen in their everyday life more than in the therapy room. Therefore, I will be asking them to try, in their everyday life, new ways of saying, thinking, doing or addressing the situation that brings them to consult. These new experiences will open up new possibilities within the problematic situation. They will find by themselves the solution or solutions since they will be seeing and experiencing their lives from a different perspective.

In couple's therapy, particularly, it is essential to frame therapy very clearly, the sooner the better.

The first strategic decision in the therapy is about who you are seeing and when. To give myself maneuverability, I always announce to both partners that I will be seeing them separately at some point. I announce this very soon in the therapy, before they can talk to me about their problems. I don't want them to think that I'm seeing them alone or together in a reaction to what they said to me, or to any diagnosis I've made or, to any secret I've detected.

It can be very helpful to see the couple together, for at least one or two sessions. Nevertheless, there are definitely certain situations where I'd rather meet with them alone very soon. The first situation is where there is some negotiation to do, for example: she wants to have kids but he doesn't; she wants to buy a house but he prefers to rent, etc. Particularly, when their attempted solutions are: to discuss the subject over and over. The second situation is when people are ambivalent about leaving or staying in the marriage. Therefore, they have to work this out individually and eventually with the therapist's help, if you don't want the therapy to go on forever. Besides, if the couple is seen together within this ambivalent atmosphere, they will bounce their spouse and the therapist up and down with no real benefit. The third situation is when I have the feeling that one of them or if not both, hold a hidden agenda. For example: they want me to see and diagnose their 'crazy' partner or they are already leaving and simply need some extra time to organize themselves.

But let's concentrate in the cases in which I see the partners together for, at least, one whole session. I start up by asking them (while looking at the floor): 'What brings you in?'

The answer informs me who's more anxious and/or who 'claims' the therapy. After one or two statements from each of the partners, I go on by working 'from bottom to top'. This maneuver concerns the analysis of the main patterns of interaction, the dynamics of the relationship. This is the first maneuver I will be describing under the title '*Working from Bottom to Top*'.

If the interaction is very pungent, and people are fighting I will use *the Rapaport's technique*, which is the second maneuver that I will analyze and exemplify.

If the atmosphere is calm but the problem statement seems to be a disagreement, I will also use this maneuver. Then I would use brief strategic negotiation techniques.

Before going on to explore the cybernetic sequence of interactions related to the stated problem, I use a third maneuver, inspired by the stainless steel style of Dick Fisch's intervention: the 'How can I help?'

One Session after the other I will check not only the evolution of the first problem stated but also the way in which the couple is handling related matters at other levels. For example, people might have complained about fighting and discussing 'the first level. I will be checking later for the development of the soothing processes to recover from fighting. Then, I will check their capability of cooperating. And, in the fourth place: the relationship rigidities and structure and the issue of desire. Then, some issue around the shared dreams and personal development capabilities of the couple.

In every session I will always use strategies to enhance participation in the therapy, to explore the attempted solutions and to find the strategic direction of therapy in accordance with the clients' goals.

I also reframe behaviors and attitudes, deliver metaphors, as well as, I give tasks to let people experience change at home and feel differently about each other.

First thing next session, the task(s) is (are) evaluated, firstly according to the goal or goals, in order to install a clear progression in therapy and a motivational optimism. Every step forward is worked through and analyzed in interactional terms to consolidate change.

Follow ups, through meetings three and six months later, help to further consolidate change and eventually some reconstruction tasks are given at this time.

Now, let's concentrate on the three maneuvers I would like to address in this article:

### **Working from bottom to top**

I would like to dedicate this first maneuver to a great man John Weakland. I'll begin by talking to you about this 'bottom to top strategy' that I have developed thanks to his posthumous inspiration. This could be a perfect example of how to go back to the past to see the future or how to rewrite the past to invent the future.

In 1990 while Jean-Jacques Wittezaele and I were doing research in Palo Alto, we've got the opportunity to meet with some new Palo Alto people and to collaborate again for almost three years with 'the old ones' who I proudly call my mentors. At that time we were studying Bateson's work in the Santa Cruz University archives and discussing extensively with everybody around. We were desperately looking for the foundations of the Mental Research Institute's work; we were reading Bateson et al. and we were trying to make sense out of it all. At that time we rediscovered John. He accepted to meet us several hours a week for more than two years and he gave us so much more than we were looking for.

In one of our weekly meetings we were talking about what the double-bind theory's scope really was. What was important today, 30 years later? John began talking to us about the idea of patterns, of working from bottom to top.

He had written a series of articles about the Chinese culture, one of them was called 'Preparing to action'. He had proposed a pattern concerning the way Chinese people scope with life's chores. If you know Chinese cooking then you would know they select, prepare

and chop down everything for hours, then they only mix everything in the wok and 2 minutes later it's ready. John showed how most aspects of Chinese activities work that way.

I realized that when you work with couples, it could be an excellent investment to investigate 'from bottom to top'. You would select, prepare and chop down the information and then, when you recognize the patterns you can blend each information coherently. At the end of the session everything is combined and, in 2 minutes, you can give a task that transforms the experience for both.

You can use many different questions in order to do this; some of them are borrowed from the structural systemic therapies. But what is important here is the intention. This maneuver has proven to be a wonderful strategy for getting to the heart of the problem while revealing very quickly the attempted solutions. As an intervention it usually works as a strong reframing of the relationship's difficulties.

The first example uses only two very simple questions:

Who asked first to come to therapy and for what reason?

Then, to the other partner, why and how did you agree to come, what are you coming here for?

Let's see the dialogues of this 'typical' session:

Woman: Well, he thought it would be a good idea for us to come because he says I'm unable to commit myself.

Therapist: And you accepted?

W: Yes, I'm here.

Th: You accepted coming to therapy but have you also accepted that you are unable to commit?

W: Oh, no. He asks too much of me and, if I don't agree he gets angry and menaces to split.

Th: So, why are you here for, if you don't think you are unable to commit.

W: Well, I accepted his suggestion for coming.

Th: Do you need any help concerning your relationship?

W: No, not really.

Th: So you came in, so that he wouldn't be angry and ...

W: Yes, I'm scared he might menace me again if I don't come to therapy.

Th: Like when he or you talk about commitment? What does he want from you exactly?

W: That I come and live with him or, if it's impossible, that he moves over to my apartment,

Th: And, what do you want?

W: I want to live alone and go to his place and that he comes to mine, once in a while.

Th: (to him) Can you endure the situation as it is?

Man: No. I need to live with her. I've waited enough. If she can't come to my home right now, she has to tell me when she'll be able to do it.

W: (to him) I don't know if I'll ever **want** to live with you, I won't give a date, I cant. (To therapist) I might never want to live with him.

Th: What will you do if she doesn't give you a date?

Man: I'll leave her.

Th: And, if she doesn't want to come and live with you?

Man: I'll leave her also; I suffer too much when she's away.

W: I don't think I'll ever leave my house and I don't want you to come and live with me. I won't do it. I'm really sorry but then we'll have to stop.

Th: Would you rather stay with her and see if it is possible to live better on your own, or find another woman who wants to live with you.

Man: Find someone else, absolutely. I don't want to live alone and she wants to live alone. (To her) Is that what you want, to live alone?

W: I do, I have lived alone for the last twenty years. I feel fine. I don't think I want to live with you anyway. I need more space than you can be comfortable with.

The couple went on constructing a separation, but opening real space for negotiating an eventual viable relationship.

So, this way of opening up permits to clarify the position and the needs of everyone, in addition to help couples being directly in contact with the basis of their gridlock. But, as I said before, one of the most important part, is to use this maneuver so that it impedes people from using their attempted solutions. In our last example, the man was continuously getting away the discussion she wanted to have with him, by using the attempted solution of labeling her with 'commitments incapacity'.

Another example of this technique would be:

Therapist: So what brings you to therapy?

Man: She wanted me to come in, so I'm here.

Th: That is the only reason.

Man: Yes.

Th: Do you always do what she asks for, what she wants?

Man: Practically always, yes, for the last ten years, since we married.

Th: And how is it then?

Man: I go with it and then I sabotage her projects.

Th: How come?

Man: I hate doing what other people want me to do.

Th: And you sabotage everyone's projects?

Man: I only do what she wants, not what other people want.

Th: Why?

Man: She makes me feel guilty, so I go with it and then I sabotage.

Th: You mean consciously, unconsciously?

Man: Both, but mainly consciously.

Th: So how are you sabotaging the therapy?

Man: Giving you all the elements but I won't do what you'll ask me to do.

Th: Don't worry, I don't ask people to do anything unless they want to change and if I know their goals.

Man: I want things to change. But I don't know what goal I'm pursuing.

Th: That's why I won't ask you to do anything, not for me, neither for her. Thank you.

Th: (turning to her) Why did you want him to come to therapy?

Now, you see how this introductory maneuver helps to understand better who is the main client or at least, who isn't, what is the dynamics of the interaction and what is the problem. But also, it lets you begin getting away from the attempted solutions 'in this case the man and the woman's one. You will also be able to block his attempted solutions (go with the waves and sabotage) and hers ('push' him into doing things without his agreement).

It is a very useful start up in situations where people come in for structural problems in the relationship. And it is quite efficient for problem solving too, as you get to the recurring problem's core very quickly. Even when working with both levels at the same time: the structure and the direct problem solving.

As I said, at the beginning of the workshop it is very important to frame therapy very early and, working from bottom to top allows each partner and the therapist to take a clear and easy stand.

### **Rapaport's maneuver**

In many situations people come to see you because of a deep-set disagreement, or because they enter into symmetrical escalation very easily. I find the Rapaport's maneuver, which I learned from my very dear Paul Watzlawick, to be extremely useful in these cases. Paul Watzlawick explains that he heard about this negotiation technique from Rapaport's writings himself. Rapaport had imagined this communication technique in order to stop the violent disagreements between Russians and Americans at the UN, in the period of the Cold War. Rapaport had imagined introducing a rule that no negotiation would begin unless the Americans explain the Russians' point of view to the entire satisfaction of the latter, and so did the Russians explaining the American point of view.

**The therapeutic** maneuver consists of asking each partner to present the other person's point of view AS IF the other person wasn't there. Frequently I instruct the listener to carefully take note of anything that is missing or misreported, but not to react, just to listen carefully. This enables people to discuss a subject they are always fight about without any violence 'which many times work as a huge reframing and soothes the relationship. But probably the most interesting aspect of it is to eliminate a huge amount of parasite information "he never agrees", "he doesn't understand me, he doesn't hear me", etc. Therapy simply becomes more efficient.

As I said before, if the subject or subjects need negotiation, I will very probably be seeing people alone. This maneuver, in the meantime, will permit you to know what people want, their position and their attempted solutions. And above all, it will allow you to strategically reframe the situation.

For example:

Woman: As I told your secretary, I ask my friend to come here with me because there is a problem that we are discussing about for months now and we can't get to any arrangement. In fact each time we talk about it we get into terrible fights, we stop talking to each other for days: she looks at the man very intimidated, she relaxes when he nods.

Th.: Before you begin to explain your problem or disagreement, I would like to ask you both if you would agree to do a communication exercise that might be useful. I will certainly not be able to solve this situation in one meeting, and if every time you talk about the problem you fight, it is probably better to address the issue in a different way. If not, sessions here are going to be more harmful than therapeutic.

Man nods.

Woman: Yes what is it?

Th.: I'm going to ask you each to speak about the problem but I don't want you to tell me your view of things but your partner's view of the problem. As you fight so much (I look at him, and then, at her searching agreement, then go on) when you are talking about

the difficult subject that brings you in. (to the man) So Stephane, what does Sophie say that the problem is?

Man: She wants me to let her redecorate and make changes to my house. I think she also wants me to sell part of my house to her.

Th.: The last thing you said. "I think". Did you mean that you imagine from what she actually says, that she wants a part of the house or do you **think** that is what she wants, even though she hasn't said or implied this to you.

Stephane: Well! She has offered to pay for some of the transformations we have done!

Sophie: I have paid for some!

Th.: Sophie, please. I thank you for clarifying the information. Getting things straight is very important please write down **anything** that needs to be completed or corrected. If you don't want to get into a fight around this issue again, I propose we go on with the experience.

Sophie: (embarrassed) Yes. Can I have some paper? (Th. gives her some paper) Thank you.

Th.: So Stephane you say Sophie has offered! How does Sophie would explain to me the problem SHE is coming in for?

Stephane: She would like to be reassured. She wants me to give away my full rights to my house, share it with me. She wants to feel at home in my place. I said I'm willing to invest in real state with her but she wants my house to be OURS, not another.

Th.: Sophie, how does Stephane see the problem that brings you in? You will complete and clarify your point of view later. Just tell me please, how does he see the problem?

Sophie: He is scared of having another divorce and loosing the house. He loves that I take care of everything there but he doesn't want me to be his co-owner. He wants to leave this house to his children some day. He doesn't understand my need for!

Th.: Please Sophie. Does he think himself that he doesn't understand your need?

Sophie: No, on the contrary, he says he does understand me but then he offers to buy another house instead.

Th.: What for?

Sophie: So I'll be reassured. So I will have a home with him, but this will take years!

Th.: he thinks it will take years, too?

Sophie: For him the number of years is not important, he thinks we have all of our time to buy something for us. To invest in the place.

Th.: Is he quite confident then, that your relationship will last or is he just making you believe that he cares?

Sophie: Well (surprised). It seems he is willing to invest in the long term with me. Let me explain as if I was Stephane (Th. nods) Sophie moved in to live with me 6 months ago, because, she had to buy or rent a new place. The owners of her last address needed their house back unexpectedly. It wasn't planned that we would live together but she seemed most distressed and, well! I don't know! I ask her to live at my place. I had a terrible divorce and many things haven't been settled yet with my ex-wife. So the timing was a little difficult but I ask her anyway. She came in and Ö

It is obvious that the situation they bring in for therapy needs negotiation and the maneuver permitted them to discuss calmly and to listen to each other. But the impact of

the Rapaport maneuver, in this case, was crucial. It blocked Sophie's attempted solution trying to justify her desire to Stephane. And Stephane's attempted solution, which was to be elusive instead of answering "No" to her request.

### **How can I help you?**

This step is extremely important because it works at different levels of the therapeutic interaction. I use this move inspired by the clear cut, right to the matter, Dick Fisch's New York style.

It has a threefold interest. First, it clarifies the means and goals of each partner, as well as of the couple as a group and of the therapist-couple interaction. Second, as you will see within the examples, it will help you make a systemic reframing of the situation. Finally helping everyone to gain control and responsibility in the process of problem definition and problem solving.

Th: (to wife) You've said to me that you are coming to therapy because your husband lies to you. And he has just said that he wants therapy to stop the ongoing fighting with you, so he will enjoy coming back home. How can I help you?

W: I want him to acknowledge that he drinks and that he cheats on me with other women.

Th: I can see what you want from him, but how can I help you?

W: Like a witness. You can say if he smells alcohol and tell him that it is better to acknowledge it!

Th: (to husband) Do you drink?

Man: No, not the way she says I do.

Th: (to wife) He says he doesn't. What can I do?

W: I don't know how to handle the problems if he doesn't admit he has wronged me. I need him to admit.

Th: If there were more efficient ways to handle the problem, other than he acknowledging what you want him to acknowledge would you like me to help you find them and implement them?

W: If we don't get over this quickly, we are heading for divorce. He has already broke up two marriages, never sees his children (weeping)Ö We have a 3 year-old girl; we owe her that.

Th: I don't know if you owe her that. But I understand that you want me to help you get over the problems. What are they?

W: He's right we fight all the time. But it is normal. I can't just stay there smiling when he gets home drunk and when I can see from small details that he has been with a woman. I suspect one of his coworkers to be his mistress.

Th: You fight one with the other, he comes home in a state you dislike, and you suspect him of having a mistress. What can I do for you?

W: If he agrees not to see his mistress anymore outside of his job!

Man: [interrupting] I have no mistress!

W: **And** if he comes home without stinking alcohol, I would like help with the fighting.

Th: As you put things before, if he doesn't see the woman whether she's her mistress or not, and if he never takes alcohol you would stop the fights by yourself. I don't know why you would need to spend your money with me, then!

W: You are hard on me.

Th: I know I am.

W: Well, what can I do to make him come home sober and to make him drop this woman.

Th: [to the man]Can she do anything for that?

Man: Of course. If she stops nagging and fighting, if she spoke to me with respect in front of my child. I would be home earlier. I go to have some drinks with my colleague once in a while but she's not my mistress.

W: You liar.

Th: What is he lying about? The fact that he goes out and have some drinks with his colleagues or, that the woman is not his mistress. Or even that he would enjoy coming home earlier if he was warmly greeted.

W: The mistress thing.

Th: Do you think that concerning his other statements he's being truthful?

W: Yes.

Th: So what can I help you with, if I can be of any help?

W: I would need to relax and not be so tense. When I know he is coming home, I begin to get ready for a fight and when he arrives I'm there to pick up a fight. I get angry just thinking he's having fun on his own, with this woman and when he arrives late!

Th: Do you mean that you would like to be able to greet him calmly and see how things go? Even if he has seen this woman and have some drinks?

W: I don't think that fighting is helping him or me, it's upsetting to our child too. If things get worse I might consider divorce, but fighting is not helpful anyway.

Th: (to husband) And you? How can I be of any help?

Man: I'm very tense and unhappy because I am living on weekdays with my mother and working in a city away from home and I'm terribly stressed about coming home on weekends. I couldn't stand it without going out and I need to have some drinks to get enough courage to go on. I feel quite depressed. In fact, I'm scared of being depressive once more, scared of thinking about suicide, Ö

You will know how you can be useful when people ask your help with something they can't do or can't stop doing and that is obviously contributing to build up the problem or problems. In this example, she couldn't stop greeting him badly and talking to him 'like he was a dog' and, he 'couldn't stand' his everyday life without going out to have some drinks on weeknights.

Please notice that the exchange between the therapist and the wife was somehow rude because I was calibrating myself with the woman's harsh style of speaking, but my tone was calm, firm and good-willed.

### **The cybernetic cycle exploration**

Once you know how you can be useful, you can explore the interaction patterns that lead to the problem.

W: As he doesn't show any love and attachment for me I spend money to soothe me and the children,

M: as she spends so much which makes me scared and depressed, leaving me without any sense of being in control of my life, I withdraw and hate her.

W: As he doesn't look for a job, I have to keep my two jobs, I'm overstressed and tired and I resent him for not proposing to help with the income.

M: As the only positive thing we have in our couple is money and my wife is always overstressed and tired, we don't have much fun. I don't see why to rush into work, I do trainings that fulfill my life and that will prepare me for a good interesting job in the future.

W: I've made suicidal attempts because I can't stand when he leaves me. He says that he would like to stay, that he loves me. He comes back 1 or 2 times a week for sex, but he leaves me again every time saying that I'm so crazy that he can't handle me.

M: I have to leave because I can't stand anymore her threats and suicidal attempts, she's damaged way over repair.

W: I can have sex only if he's close to me if he's sweet and caring,

M: I love to be caring but I only feel close if I have sex with her.

W: I get angry because he is never home,

M: I don't enjoy myself at home, she is always making me feel guilty.

You can see through all these examples how the interactions fit together to construct hell. After all these years working with people and couples particularly, I still deeply believe that my main task, if not the only one, is to stop the attempted solutions.

This way of working sounds like sheer reductionism, it definitely is, if you consider the attempted solutions just as a behavior or a simple communication, like a contingent response in Skinner's terms. But if you consider the attempted solutions for what they are, the essence of the dynamics in a relationship, or the apex between two worldviews, what is it that makes a problematic relationship stick together, then you will be amazed by the power of simply STOPPING this ironic cycles.

It is not possible, in the scope of this article, to analyze different techniques to stop the most typical attempted solutions. Neither it is possible to analyze a big number of strategies to enhance motivation or tactics to use in the therapy room. But, I think it is important to discuss some interesting insights about couples inspired by recent research. This can help you to efficiently structure your interventions, and consider the importance of consolidating change.

I would like to begin by describing a couple I'm seeing in order to illustrate some of the concepts that researchers use. I hope these concepts will help you to consider some important aspects of the couples as a system.

The first thing that comes to my mind to characterize this couple is that the man, a 34 year-old employee is NOT SWEDISH. That's the way he defined himself to me when he first came to therapy.

He came in with his wife, a food store-employee, who has the same age as her husband. Married, 5 and a half years ago, they have a 2 year-old daughter.

They have consulted extensively the past year because of extreme violent fights which both accept as being co-constructed. They say these fights have been worsening since they have a child.

In fact, she complains that her husband is a maniac person; he wants perfect cleaning and order in the house. But having a full-time job and a baby doesn't give her time to do

everything first-rate, as he would like her to do. He insists that he doesn't want everything perfect but it is true that he is extremely uncomfortable if things aren't in place, he only needs the kitchen, bathroom, living room and bedroom clean, tidy and in order as well as the beds done. Here he adds again as I said earlier I'm not Swedish, I won't help with the house cleaning unless this is absolutely necessary and in a very limited manner. She begins crying saying she doesn't have time to enjoy her baby girl as she gets home and rushes to clean the kitchen, make supper! He insists she should organize herself better, adding that their worst fights concern the laundry, which is never in the shelves on time.

As they tell me they've consulted before, I try to see first what the other therapists have done before. Mainly they've tried either to convince the husband that the wife's doing the best she can or to give them advice on how to fight 'nicely', one brave new therapist prescribed fighting. None of these worked. When fighting was prescribed, they fought extensively.

They wanted most of all to stop fighting, but he also wanted his house clean and she wanted time with her 'baby'. They also added that the husband had lost his work some months ago, so he stays full-time at home and he has the 'chance' of raising-up the 'little one'. Mother is desperate, as she feels excluded from the father-child relationship. Father is extremely happy to be with his child and he is worried about getting back to work full-time. He doesn't know how he is going to handle being separated from his baby girl all day long. They added they fight a lot about the time spent by each with their child.

I decided to make the session short and ask if they were expecting above all that I give them something to do to stop fighting, they answered a big Yes and they listened.

I told them that it was obvious that she wasn't organizing herself the way the husband wanted her to. This was pretty obvious, since he would never ask from her more than it was humanly possible to do. But, probably when he meant the kitchens' tidiness, he didn't mean every small little corner of it or moving all the furniture around, **'of course he couldn't mean that!'**

To make sure that she cleaned only what he needed most and the way he wanted it **exactly**, I've asked him to clean all that really needed tidying-up in front of her. When she came home in the evening, several days during the next week, she had to follow him, note down the exact tasks he was doing and write down the exact amount of time he was using for each cleaning chore. You can clean the floor for 5 minutes, 10 minutes or wax it for an hour, you have to show her exactly how you like it! He was to do dinner, etc. He said right away that he was willing to do part of the chores, make beds each morning and clean the table at the mornings when she left for work. I said that he shouldn't begin interfering with the organization before doing the simulation in real life!

They came in 3 weeks later; they had done the task 4 days the first week and they hadn't fought once because of household chores. They had fought a little (but violently) concerning laundry, and the sharing of child's care. I congratulate them for having been so thorough and cooperative and for getting such good results. I ask the husband for the next two weeks, to take note of any flaws in his wife's cleaning and organization of her housework. He had to criticize extensively and meticulously **ON PAPER ONLY** whatever she did wrong or in a disorganized manner. He shouldn't say anything to her. I instructed her on doing her cleaning and organizing her work, as she wanted, just being very careful to begin evenings with a 'full love-bath' with her baby-girl. Father should leave them alone until mother felt replenished and then only she had to organize her chores. Husband's homework should serve as model for the perfect goal to attain but he/she knew it would

only be attainable after some months from now. She had to be helped by her husband notes. These notes would be only shared in the session, so she could improve herself.

Third and fourth sessions were used to consolidate change 'as fighting disappeared' and they talk extensively about their differences regarding their educational methods. They appreciated the idea of keeping, each of them, their own unique styles regarding the daughter's education. They were to act: 'first arrived, first served' and the other parent had to support the first one's directives to the child.

But as a therapist I knew that we were far from being out of troubled waters, something was really wrong, I could sense that there wasn't any love, caring, friendship, ...call it what you want...Of, course, they felt happy not to fight anymore, but ...

On the fifth session I ask how were things going, she said: 'Fine, we haven't fought in weeks and I have plenty of time with the little one. We even shared some moments... He interrupted, storming out, '... we don't fight but **everything** is wrong, yes we don't fight but (to therapist) do you think it is normal we haven't had sex in a year, not even a kind caress. I can't go on like this anymore.

This is where I would like to introduce some concepts from Dr. Gottman's research that I have found very useful to help me work briefly with situations like this.

### **What does research show?**

John M. Gottman and his different teams have conducted a series of quite impressive longitudinal studies on 677 couples from newlyweds to retirement. He has studied three main subjects: the 'masters' of marriage stable and happy couples, the 'disasters' of marriage predicting the factors that are devastating for couples and conduct to divorce, and third, physical violence and battering.

Gottman's team have been able to predict either divorce or marriage stability with high accuracy. In fact prediction for divorce can go as high as 90%, when it comes to predicting divorce for two groups, early divorce and late divorce. Gottman's goal is to build a sound theory about marriage failure or marriage success. We won't be discussing Gottman's overall theory here, but we will discuss several of the factors discovered by him. These factors can help us predict therapy's long-term success.

Gottman and his team affirm that in a follow-up of couples having successfully finished conjoint therapy, only 18% of the couples were still satisfied and getting along well after two years. They state that this is the worst outcome of therapy for any pathology or group.

Two factors contribute highly to divorce. In early divorced couples, 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' type of communication criticism, defensiveness, contempt and, stonewalling is considered essential for the dissolution of marriage. In late divorce, the main factor for break up is a suppression of affect, actually a lack of positive general affects.

Therefore, we can conclude that the absence of negative escalating conflict and the presence of a positive general affect (in and out of disagreements) are essential to make marriages last and work.

What are the other characteristics of 'functional' or 'dysfunctional' marriages? Functional marriages handle well conflict, and they do it in any of the three typical styles that the dysfunctional couples also use, conflict avoidance, validation or volatility.

So what's different between functional and dysfunctional marriages? Well, it is easier for a marriage to last if both spouses use the same conflict resolution style. In functional marriages the styles of conflict resolution of man and wife match, even though the ratio of solvable/unsolvable disagreements might not vary.

I hope Gottman's research enlightens us as to many of the useless things we sometimes do in couple's therapy, making us waste time and dilute our influence. For example, trying to make people change the way they handle conflict, especially when it is volatile. We've seen this is not important unless one or both partners state explicitly volatile conflict as a concrete problem. As research shows, the most important factors of the couple's success regarding conflict are that the wife will **start up** conflict in a soft manner, helping the husband to listen and to accept her influence. Most marriages where wife starts up conflict softly are those in which the emotional context is benevolent and men watch out after their wives in everyday life. It is interesting to note that the presence of positive affect mostly soothes males. In fact, men are able to diminish their heart rates significantly after conflict, in happy stable marriages, a very important satisfaction factor disregarded by many therapies.

Another useless thing in therapy is to try to have a solution for all the problems, as most of the divergences, never find a permanent solution anyway. Therefore, it is not interesting to concentrate too much on negotiating a solution to arguments, concentrate instead on the communication pattern and emotional context of the relationship. Let's simply remember that, in functional families, the affects and dialogue regarding the unsolvable problems is usually benevolent. They discuss in a tender way, using humor, finding partial and temporary solutions to their recurring problems.

I would like to add that my idea in bringing up this research is not to misguide the reader towards normalization and pathology but, on the contrary, to let therapists concentrate on what kind of help people ask for. I do hope that this research helps therapists realize that people can feel good whether in volatile conflict or living with 'problems' that the therapist might see as intolerable. This doesn't mean that people are crazy, sick or not knowing where they are heading. People can handle difficult situations and we need only to change the pattern that sustains hurt while paying attention to the context.

I do hope that some of the characteristics of functional couples raised by Gottman's research teams may also provide therapists with some ideas for reframing or selling tasks to patients.

It is obvious that treatment in couple's therapy is not an easy endeavor, as most partners are ambivalent about their commitment to the relationship, especially when people suffer for years before venturing to ask for help. Knowing how to motivate partners, how to build a good therapeutic relationship, how to work quickly, how to build up optimism, how to adapt strategies to each level of distress while paying special attention to consolidate change step by step are major assets to an effective and efficient outcome to treatment.

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