Couples Therapy: A Relational Approach
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Abstract
In this paper we describe the application of the relational model to couples therapy. The model emphasizes the importance of holding awareness of self, other, and the relationship. The therapist’s primary work is to help each member of the couple hold this relational awareness. The discussion of gender differences and the introduction of the language of connection, disconnection, and reconnection help couples to move out of relational impasses toward greater mutuality. Issues of autonomy, obsession, dependence, depression, and sexuality are reframed from this relational perspective.

Introduction
For almost a decade we have been working mostly with heterosexual men and women, applying the relational model in gender workshops, couples therapy, and couples groups. We have found that the model — which emphasizes holding awareness of self, other, and the relationship — is a powerful framework for guiding couples therapy. The therapist’s primary work is to help each member of the couple hold this relational awareness. Sitting with a couple, one can begin to "see" the relationship as it exists between and around the two people and to work on the qualities, dynamics, and history of the relationship, and the vision of the relationship in the future. The therapist also "sees" this specific relationship being shaped by a web of others — in the extended family, the culture, the historical context, and in the larger world.

As an example, in our couples groups, we begin by asking people to introduce not themselves nor their spouse to the group, but their relationship. Here are examples from three couples in the same group:

A couple together for a year and a half: “It’s very young, like a fawn, a lot of innocence, great potential. But it’s fragile, tenuous, easily hurt, and could easily go in the wrong direction.”

A couple married seven years, with two young children: “It’s reliable and there, like the sky or maybe the moon. But it’s clouded over, hard to see. Too many conflicting obligations — kids, work. There’s no time for us. We’re in parallel play.”

A couple married almost 50 years: “Very old and solid — like a deep river or a porcupine. A long history of doing things a certain way, so now it’s hard to move.”

Images of nature are often used, as if in the human
imagination the relationship is some being, alive in the natural world.

The work we will discuss is based on our experience with over 5,000 men and women, including children and adolescents, in our workshops; 50 couples in couples groups; and approximately 30 couples in therapy. Steve has done most of the work with individual couples, which he will be describing. While there has been some diversity of race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, and age in our workshops, our couples in therapy are mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class, and privileged. We are continuing to broaden our work to address the intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, which must be addressed if differences are to be used for building connections rather than creating disconnections that lead to isolation, abuse, and violence. We try to hold and integrate this larger context in our clinical work.

It would be interesting to explore tonight how the nature and content of the gender impasses we will discuss change in other relational configurations, such as same-sex couples or heterosexual couples of different class, race, or ethnicity. This sample is relatively high-functioning and generally seeking gender equality. This is a select sample, but we feel it offers new perspectives for couples and family work. While we may talk about “men” and “women,” no particular man or woman will fit our gender descriptions exactly.

The zest and vitality of a couple’s relationship comes from movement—not from connection alone, but from growth in connection. We have found that using the relational model and bringing a sustained seriousness to the challenge of mutual relationship creates an urgency, if not an imperative, for a couple to move one way or another—either to connect and shift toward mutuality, or to disconnect, which may mean separating. In an honest encounter with the psychological facts of the relationship, couples often are able to separate without being crippled by shame or guilt. As one woman put it, “I don’t hate him. I hate the relationship with him.” In Steve’s experience, often the movement one way or the other happens quite rapidly—within four to eight sessions. Sometimes couples do not move but stay entwined in non-mutual, growth-stunting, and barren relationships. For example, a couple described their relationship as follows:

**Woman:** “We’re like two branches of a tree, growing together. I realize that the other branch is there, but I don’t really see the trunk at all.”

**Man:** “An electric power tool, which you plug into a battery pack to recharge. Then you go off and come back when it’s ready to use.”

Our work is guided by the Stone Center model of relational mutuality: that respectful engagement and movement around difference can ultimately lead to growth. As Surrey writes (1986):

In mutual relationships each person can represent his or her feelings, thoughts, and perceptions in the relationship, and each person can feel that they can move or have impact on the other and on the flow of the relationship. The capacity to be moved, to respond, and to move the other represents the fundamental core of mutually-empowering relationships.

In describing relational movement, Jordan (1985) writes:

One is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is receptive to the impact of the other. There is an openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other. The movement toward the other’s differentness is actually central to growth in relationship.

The Stone Center theory has been evolving to a greater focus on the dynamics and development of the relationship, rather than on intrapsychic or individual change alone. “The relationship, then, comes to have a unique existence beyond the individuals, to be attended to, cared about, and nurtured. The development and movement of relationship becomes the central challenge” (Surrey, 1983). Miller and Stiver (1992) write that growth-fostering relationships are characterized by movement—out of isolation and disconnection and into new connection.

There are strikingly different “relational paradoxes” in “normal” male and female development: young boys becoming agents of disconnection to preserve themselves (Bergman 1991); adolescent girls disconnecting from their authenticity to try to maintain relationship (Gillian, 1990; Miller, 1988).

Growth through and toward connection in couples involves working together on all the challenges to mutuality inherent and inevitable in