Consciousness of Context in Relational Couples Therapy

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About the Authors

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Abstract

This paper presents a method of helping couples work through blocks to connection by expanding their awareness of context. By “context” we mean the cultural assumptions and prejudices that are implicit in societal belief systems. Couples are often unconscious of the negative impact that culturally generated beliefs about status-laden dimensions like race, class, gender and sexual life style can have on the relationship. Without an awareness of context, couples develop narrow, problem-saturated stories that involve blaming each other. Our method of eliciting awareness of context helps couples join together and develop mutual understanding and empathy.

We would like to begin by telling a clinical story that illustrates what we mean by our title.

Ann and Peter came into my office in matching states of blame.2 Peter said Ann was unsupportive and critical. Ann said Peter was passive, uncommunicative and showed no spark of ambition. They both said that the relationship had become dramatically worse when Peter had failed to get an important promotion at work, leaving him feeling depressed and unsupported by his wife. Ann, for her part, felt she couldn’t be supportive, because Peter hadn’t really made an effort to get ahead.

Wanting to find some non-blaming ground to explore, I asked them about qualities they valued in themselves. I found that Anne valued her own ambitious and aggressive qualities, and that she had been extremely competent at the job she had left to become a full time mother. Peter, on the other hand, was much more interested in the domestic side of life. He resented his job, because it took time from the things he loved doing: being with his children, doing carpentry projects, and pursuing his hobby of gourmet cooking.

In other words, each was suited to the gender-dictated role the other had assumed. Because neither had thought to notice and question the gender-based assumption that she would stay home and he would go out to work, they were uneasy, then critical, then blaming of the other. They had lost their sense of connection. Neither had empathy for the other’s dilemma. The cultural impact of gender roles had gone unnoticed until we began to explore it in our work.

With this new awareness, they were able to join forces to face the external “enemy”, and took arms against a sea of cultural imperatives. Peter decided to work at home as father and chief domestic; Ann...
returned to work on a full time basis. And after sorting out this still unconventional decision with friends and relatives, they settled into a more satisfying phase of life. Their interpersonal conflict returned to a normal level.

This is a case of context made conscious.

This new awareness allowed them to question the "conventional wisdom" that was dictating their lives. And in so doing, it empowered them to make new choices, choices which unblocked the flow of connection and pleasure in the relationship.

Yet this new perspective was not easy for Ann and Peter to achieve. Why? One reason is that our culture has a cultural imperative to not look at culture. This may seem like a strange thing to say in this era of cultural diversity and political correctness. But there is a profound underpinning of contextual blindness in our society. This blindness is exemplified by the stories of Horatio Alger, the author who wrote novels early in this century about young men who, in spite of impossible circumstances, managed to prevail and become successful (meaning well-to-do). At least this is what the stories have come to mean. Few of us have actually read them. But they have had an impact in creating a powerful cultural myth.

This myth, in some form or another, tells us that context doesn’t matter. That no matter what your circumstances, turns of fate, physical or fiscal limitations, you can do anything you want if you work hard and are of good moral fiber. If you don't succeed it’s your own fault. This means you!

This is a cultural assumption. Horatio Alger lives on in our society. And this means that the ability to be aware of context is not at the top of our list of cultural skills. However much diversity is discussed in the media, in private life we often explain difficulties we’re having by attributing them to personality weaknesses and character flaws. (Preferably our partners, not our own.) What is often lacking is a consciousness of the power that context exerts in creating our limitations and misunderstandings.

So how does this affect couples? It certainly affected Ann and Peter. We will attempt to deepen and expand the understanding of how context affects intimate systems by describing other clinical vignettes in which facilitating an awareness of context has been essential in our work with couples.

But first we want to comment on our own context, the assumptions that underlie our therapeutic work.

Underlying assumptions

Goals and values of the relational model

First, let’s talk about the goals and values that inform our work. We share the values of the relational model developed at the Stone Center of Wellesley College. This model focuses on a connection-centered rather than autonomy-centered way of thinking. It emphasizes the importance of sustaining and improving connection. And it underlines the need to identify and repair ruptures in relationship, build empathy, and be aware of the influence of gender issues. The values of the relational model help us approach the therapeutic relationship more collaboratively and to pay attention to strengths rather than pathology.

We weren’t trained to think in the way just described. If Ann and Peter entered our office fifteen years ago, we would have a whole other way of understanding and treating them. We might have assumed that Ann was unsupportive and critical, and Peter passive in face of her blame. His passivity would fuel her blaming, which would fuel his passivity, and so on. Although we would see this dynamic as circular (his passivity could lead to her blaming and her criticism could lead to his passivity), we would wonder how he could engage when she is so critical: who would want to jump into that fire?

Our intervention would most likely have targeted Ann. We would have suggested that couples move in dance steps: as she moves forward, he moves back. Our recommendation would be that she move back, enabling him to move forward. We would have predicted (although this is admittedly an exaggeration) that as she backed off, he would become more gung ho about work, and they would have settled more happily into their upwardly mobile lives.

Back then, we didn’t question the gender dynamics. We didn’t ask why women were so often labeled the pursuers and men the distancers; we didn’t realize that this dynamic is not unique to each individual couple and is instead a commentary on cultural expectations and norms.

We placed the responsibility for change squarely on her shoulders: she must distance for him to pursue. During that time, we don’t remember ever hearing a therapist suggesting that the man pursue to enable the woman to distance.

The implication is that the woman’s desire for relationship causes the distancing, thus pathologizing rather than honoring the value she places on