

The Couple's Therapist as Coaching Double in a Model Encounter

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ABSTRACT: The author describes a model interview in which the participants perform the steps of a successful encounter aloud. A soliloquy about some internal awareness in one member of the couple develops a warm-up to intentional communication.

His or her interpersonal repertoire is reviewed and selected in service of this intention.

He or she delivers an experimental communication face-to-face. The other member of the couple then goes through the same sequence. The therapist acts throughout as a coaching double.

Key words: coaching double in couple's therapy, couple's therapist, model encounter in couple's therapy

Two Forms of Interpersonal Influence

Celebration occurs when one person notices and comments on something that someone else is doing because he or she wants to see more of that behavior. For example, I could say, "I appreciated it when Julia asked a question because she helped me to clarify what I was trying to talk about. I hope that her asking the first question will encourage others in the group to express curiosity." Celebration usually, but not always, results in encouraging others to do more of what is celebrated. It also encourages them to try out other actions, because the first spontaneous offering was well received, acknowledged, and appreciated. Some relationship is established or expanded between people by this process, as one person experiences the other's influence as positive and becomes open to further encouragement. The general form of celebration is, "When you do X, I feel Y." Examples include the following:

When you volunteer, I feel joined.

When you hugged me this morning when we met, I felt affirmed.

When a speaker makes a statement about an action by another person and the positive feeling experienced by the speaker, that is termed a celebration.

The second form of positive interpersonal influence is the invitation. In this form, one person is about to engage in an activity that can be enhanced by the participation of another person. For example, if one person says, "I'd like to go outside and buy some ice cream. And it will be more fun for me if you do it with me," that person has named an activity that he or she wants to do and a role for the other person to play. The first person hopes that the role is valuable to the second and indicates that it is valuable to him or her. An invitation always begins with an activity that a person wants to do and includes a role the person wants another to play.

An invitation is different from mind-reading, from thinking first what another person probably wants to do and then pretending that one, too, wants to go for a walk. Most people at one time or another have probably tried to issue an invitation of that type. The invitation usually fails because the other person thinks that the inviter wants to do the activity, and then both discover that in fact, neither does.

The invitation begins this way: "I'm wanting to do something, and it would be better for me, enhanced in some fashion and more rewarding, if you play a certain, valued role in the activity." An abbreviated form is, "Let's go to the movies." That is fine if the speaker really wants to go to the movies and imagines that he or she will enjoy it more if the other person comes along. Invitations frequently exert substantial positive influence even when they are declined because it feels good to be invited to do something even if one is unable or unready to accept. An

invitation such as, "Will you come to my party?" enhances a relationship even if another commitment precludes acceptance.

Sociometry

An activity that one person wants to do and a valued role in that activity for another person is the basis of sociometry (Moreno, 1951). The activity is called the criterion, and the invitation indicates the preference of each person in the form, "With whom do I want to ... (criterion)?" It is desirable to organize group activities in this way, with attention devoted to expanding the variety of tasks so that each person is chosen by others to participate in valued roles. Moreno (1953) described this function of leadership as increasing group productivity and enhancing the self-esteem of all group members. The strength of a group may be seen in its ability to include its isolates, those members who have hitherto been rejected or marginalized. The "inclusion of the least" is what extends his philosophy beyond office practice to a "truly therapeutic procedure [that] cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind" (Moreno, 1953, p. 3). Other strategies for interpersonal influence that are positive exist and are variations on these two. These two are positive in the sense that they encourage more of what is sought, enhance a sense of connectedness and relationship, and stimulate the display of more repertoire that is appropriate to the situation (spontaneity).

Competent Couples

After observing couples who are moderately competent in low-stress situations and seeing highly competent couples in high-stress situations, I noted a series of steps in their

developing celebrations and invitations. Many of the steps are ordinarily done silently, but in a therapeutic situation, I encourage people to do them aloud in the form of a soliloquy.

Soliloquy

To begin, one looks inside oneself, beginning with a meditation about, "What am I aware of? What do I feel? What's going on inside of me?" That activity calls on each member of the couple to experience a slightly altered state of consciousness (Rossi, 1986). Almost every successful encounter is preceded by some, usually silent, meditative inward look—"What's going on inside of me? What do I notice? What am I aware of?" Frequently, there is also an association to earlier experiences. "I'm feeling warm and safe, just like when I've been with friends in a comfortable situation." Next comes the "warm up," that strange—for some people tingling, for some people anxious, somewhat uncomfortable sense of a growing edge; noticing one is almost ready to do something—to speak or to act. After one notices what he or she is almost ready to do, the person thinks about the desired effect. With couples, each is hoping to have some positive effect on the other or on the relationship. Then each does some kind of internal wondering about how each plans to recognize that he or she is having the desired effect. "Am I looking for a smile? Or, am I looking for a nod? Am I looking for a certain kind of playback of what I'm saying from the other person? I will infer that I'm having the effect that I seek by noticing certain signs. What are those signs?" Then each wonders, "What's the repertoire that I have available? What do I know how to do that might be constructive? Do I make eye contact? Do I hold the other person's hand and I talk quietly? I notice that I know how to do some things that might be used in service of the effect I hope to have." Soon, one or both people notice that they are ready

to try the action; they are ready to celebrate or invite. Ordinarily, all this deliberating is undertaken silently.

Therapists may have different observations about the steps that particularly competent couples undertake in stressful situations or that most couples undertake in everyday situations that are not particularly stressful. They may also observe that when the stress level rises beyond the competence level of a couple, individuals tend to skip particular steps. Different individuals skip different steps. Some people notice the warm up and they notice how they can express it, but they skip what effect it is going to have on the other person. They might say to themselves, "The way to relieve this horrible tension inside of me is to throw something at you." And so they throw something. There are people who are skillful at thinking about the effects they want to have, but who seldom notice their own warm up. Only if encouraged to slow down and notice, "What am I getting ready to do?" will they do that. There are some people who are almost allergic to a kind of meditative stance. It might be that they fear they will be flooded and disabled by their own inner voices if they tune in at all. Other people forget about the repertoire they have. They think, "This is how I'm feeling and this is the effect I want to have, but I don't remind myself that I know how to make eye contact, or to break it, or that I know how to make physical contact." So it is helpful, when working with couples in increasingly stressful situations, for the therapist to coach them to enact each step and to notice, while the couple does this, which steps each individual needs encouragement to explore more fully. Frequently, people know how to meditate sitting alone in a room quietly, but as soon as they are in the presence of another person, as soon as there is the possibility of being observed, or of making eye contact, or feeling as if there is something that is supposed to happen, they forget how to tune in to their own inner lives.

Useful couples therapy can be accomplished in a face-to-face encounter by slowing people down so that they fully enact each of the steps.

The Encounter

Following the soliloquy, the encounter occurs, which is the part usually done aloud, in which one person speaks directly to the other, usually offering celebration or invitation. The introduction of these ideas in a couple's therapy is often appropriate after a few preliminary meetings have occurred. In a first meeting, it is desirable to propose some ground rules and to conduct an inter-view, with or without role playing, in which the strengths and resources of each individual and his or her wishes and fears are explored (Lee, 1986; Chasin & Roth, 1990).

Ground rules

Generally, couples are pleased to have the therapist talk in the first few minutes of the first meeting about how he or she likes to do things. In many instances, the couple does not know what is an appropriate set of expectations in this novel situation. Therefore, after the therapist finds out what names people want to be called in this setting, including new or fanciful ones, and a personal introduction, it is useful to suggest some general bounds or ground rules.

Pass Until Fully Ready to Answer

The first rule concerns participation. The therapist and the couple can ask any question or propose any activity, but the individual decides for herself or himself whether to participate. Each ponders the question: "Am I fully ready to do what has been proposed, fully ready to answer what has been asked?" If the person concludes negatively, he or she responds,

"I'll just pass; I'm not ready to do that right now. Maybe later." The person can indicate a response with a nod of the head or a wave of the hand. It is useful to include a nod or a wave as an acceptable indication of passing, particularly when working with adolescents, because a person's silence can be understood as cooperation and as that person's willingness not to act before he or she is ready. The belief is that people are most fruitful in what they are most ready to do; it is better to delay action until a full warm up is achieved. In general, it is more productive to hold people back rather than to push them ahead. A therapist can get most people to act ahead of their readiness, but they do not learn much from it. They do what the therapist asks as if in response to a dare, going through the motions. If, however, the therapist holds somebody back until he or she is fully warmed up, then the action that is taken is an expression of a full sense of readiness. It is useful to explain that the rule works most effectively only after everybody has passed on a question at least once. When the first person passes, it is wise for the therapist to thank him or her. James M. Sacks, director of the Psychodrama Center of New York City, proposed this ground rule in his training program in the 1970s. He devoted a great deal of attention to siding with resistance, holding people back until a full sense of readiness was developed.

Recording

Another helpful ground rule concerns video or audio recording (Hollander & Moore, 1972; Berger, 1978; Lee, 1981). It is desirable to suggest that the most conservative wish prevails. Therefore, if anyone in the room does not want a recording to be made, it will not be made. If anybody wants it turned off at a certain point, it will be. If one wants some part erased, it will be. After the tape is made, the same rules apply so that if anybody does not want it used, it

will be erased. All need to agree before it can be shown to an absent family member or to a consultant. Whatever use is proposed, unanimity needs to prevail. It is unwise, before everyone knows what is on the tape, to seek permission for it to be shown to unseen audiences or to other people. This is likely to result either in the withholding of permission or in excessive caution and inhibition in the session.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a very serious matter in families and should always be addressed at the beginning. A group can make any decision it wants about confidentiality, but it is the therapist's responsibility to address the question rather than to assume that everybody makes the same assumptions. In general, people may be encouraged to share their own experiences with anybody they choose-with a partner, a friend, or a stranger on a bus. The therapist needs to ask the participants to agree that they not talk about what anybody else said or did or what anybody else experienced. Even withholding names is not enough in some settings because if people know anything about each other, they can deduce from a description what has been going on.

Other Bounds

Other possible bounds include obtaining an agreement that no physical violence be acted out against participants. It is safer to encourage the exploration of violent feelings in a setting where the group agrees to help direct those feelings toward inanimate targets. At the beginning, it is prudent to obtain an agreement that later ground rules might be proposed by any group member and negotiated with the group.

The Double

It is necessary to establish in some way the convention of the "double" (Moreno & Moreno, 1975). The double begins by assuming the posture, the position, the point of view of another person sitting beside or slightly behind that person and trying to see the world through her/his eyes. When the double speaks, it is in the first person, imagining what the protagonist, the person in fronto may be thinking. Tharisa hypatining viar the rob guns then. to cot-rect or expand the double's understanding and two, to encourage the protagonist to be more expressive and exploratory (Selvini Palazzo, Bascule, Cochin, & Prate, 1980; Tomm, 1984). After the double speaks, the protagonist restates the theme in his or her own words, correcting and expanding as appropriate. The protagonist always has the definitive last word in response to a double's hypothe-ses. A double is successful when the protagonist says more than the double says. When the double says twenty words and the protagonist says three, or one, such as "yup," or "right on," then the double knows that he or she is doing all right.

However, if the double is not helping the protagonist to produce more that will then correct or enhance the double's understanding, then the double is not meeting the other objective, which is to encourage the protagonist to be more expressive and more exploratory. Here, a metaphor from sailing may be helpful: if the double says twenty words and the protagonist says one, the double is "in irons." That is, the double is headed into the wind and has no power. A solution in sailing is to tilt the rudder so that the wind is at an angle to the boat, providing the most power. The tilt for the double is to understate or overstate something, or say something absurd to get a correction from the protagonist, and then begin to get some forward momentum.

It is also important to establish that the double can be dismissed as a dou-ble. The double might step out of role, become himself or herself again, and might say to the couple, "If I'm not

being helpful or am being annoying or dis-tracting, I'd like you either to tell me to stop and be normal or you could say, I'm having double trouble, or you could in some fashion indicate to me that this is not working."

Subsequent Meetings

At the end of the initial meeting, ideally of 90 to 120 min duration, the therapist proposes that the couple go home and discuss the meeting and agree about whether the setting is promising enough to schedule three more meet-ings. The first two meetings are with each individual alone for 1 hr, to map the areas that one individual may find somewhat more difficult to discuss in the presence of the other. The areas may include secrets, but more usually, they include subjects about which one feels the need to choose one's words carefully, lest the statement provoke an unwanted reaction. The individual sessions give the therapist a map of ways each member of the couple is inhibited in the presence of the other, and the therapist realizes what it is like to meet each person in the absence of those constraints. The two individual meetings give the therapist more authority when making the recommendations presented in the subsequent 90- to 120-min meeting with the couple. If it appears to the therapist that it might be useful to experiment with the solil-oquy/coaching double format, he or she introduces that idea in the second joint meeting, usually the fourth meeting of the series.

The Model Encounter

As the opening instruction for the exercise, the therapist directs the couple to sit quietly, face to face, and to remain silent until each person has noticed something that is going on inside that she or he might be aware of, perhaps a feeling or imagining. The therapist speaks to the

couple, saying, "As soon as one of you speaks, I'll sit beside you, and I will try to describe aloud from time to time what you might be feeling or thinking. Then I would like you to say it again in your own words if what I have said is right or to change it if it is wrong." That is their introduction to the doubling strategy of psychodrama.

The Coaching Double

Doubling is an improvisational theater form, adapted for psychological use by J. L. Moreno and Z. T. Moreno (1975). What is different here from traditional doubling is that the therapist is leading and restraining rather than following. When someone is skipping steps in the soliloquy, the therapist as double might say, "Before I speak to my partner, I might want to talk to myself." After establishing those ground rules and conventions, the therapist might begin by saying, "I'd like to begin by asking each of you to sit quietly and comfortably for a few minutes and to notice something interesting, of which you are becoming increasingly aware. When one of you is ready to wonder aloud about this perception, just begin to speak and I'll move to you as double." Then guide the couple through the steps of the soliloquy described earlier. The invitation from the therapist is essentially an Ericksonian instruction (Haley, 1967). It is permissive, and it makes certain assumptions presented as presuppositions. It is an open instruction to the couple to sit quietly and notice what is going on inside and to notice that process is not static and that people's awareness is a constantly growing process, both in intensity and in range. As soon as the soliloquist has reached the end of the soliloquy and is ready to speak to the other, she or he addresses the other directly, and the therapist will get up and sit beside the person on the receiving end of the transaction. Thus the therapist, moving to double the other member of the couple, experiences the transaction coming at him or her in the role of

the other person in the encounter. Then, the therapist as double takes the second person through the same steps. The therapist as double might say, "Before I respond, I might talk to myself about what I'm aware of, what I notice, what I'm reminded of, what I'm warming up to do, what it feels like to warm up." The therapist is continuously reversing roles, flipping back and forth between sitting next to one and then next to the other. As soon as the one whom the director is sitting beside talks directly to the other and the therapist thinks that he or she has addressed each step in the soliloquy, the therapist moves to sit next to the person who is listening.

Indications for Use of the Coaching Double

This format is most appropriate when the interviewer has noticed some subjects about which the members of a couple seem to be having difficulty discussing with each other. The initial "coaching double" sessions will be successful if they are not too exciting, if they focus on matters that are not too difficult and challenging, so the couple has a chance to test the form and see whether it feels comfortable. Then it is likely that the couple will move to subjects that are more explosive, more difficult, or more challenging after the couple has settled into the form. It is useful to think of this form as the scaffolding to hold up construction that is incomplete or as a cast on a broken leg, which a person does not wear throughout his or her life. Couples come to therapy because they recognize that some aspect of their relationship has a broken leg or its equivalent. The therapist is initially constraining something so that it heals into a shape that will be more functional. Young children who throw tantrums need to be hugged and assured that they will not be allowed to hurt themselves or will not be allowed to hurt adults who hold them. Thus they can become relaxed and calm within a few seconds. Some couples behave in an analogous

fashion. They also need similar assurances. The coaching double offers a form of hugging. The double's constraint is slowly and progressively loosened as the couple functions better.

Contraindications for the Double

Most couples respond positively to the doubles method. A small number of people, however, seem to have a kind of allergy to doubling or, perhaps, to a particular double. Some members of a small number of couples find it too explosive, even in a highly structured situation, resist encouragement to look inside themselves. Some additional face-to-face meetings with each member alone, or some other conjoint format, may be necessary in such instances (see, for examples, Umbarger, 1983; Paul & Paul, 1975; Papp, 1976; Duhl, Duhl, & Kantor, 1973). After leading a couple through the steps described earlier, the therapist must always provide an adequate opportunity for sharing (10 to 15 min is usually adequate). That can be done while rewinding the videotape.

The interviewer might say, "I wonder if each of you might be willing to say a few words about what you're experiencing right now, as today's meeting approaches its end?"

Video Playback

If nothing positive occurs during the taping, it is wise to erase the tape. If, however, the interviewer believes that something positive has occurred, it is generally advisable to play the tape back in the session or send it home with the couple. A videotape is a very intriguing amplifier of successful repertoire. Without videotape, each person has only half the important data. Each knows what he or she felt and intended and how the other looked and sounded, but not how she or he looked and sounded or what the other person felt or intended.

If the two discuss what has gone on between them, the data that each brings have no overlap at all. Some couples imagine that they should agree about what went on in a discussion that they had at home. They might be experiencing some level of convergence in their descriptions and might have a similar inner experience, but the data they are trying to compare cannot be expected to agree.

For example, if something good happens, if I say something and I get a good response from you, then I know how I felt and know what I intended. I, however, have no clear idea what I did. Similarly, you know what you felt when I did it, but you do not know what behavior I saw. Having an opportunity to play back the tape of a successful interaction gives the people involved the other half of the data they did not have. That anchors behavior that has been effective in their memories. They can each say, "I've seen myself do something positive and influential in the relationship, and I know how I looked and sounded." I do not know of any more successful or powerful amplifier.

Videotaping has a nasty dark side, however. If people see an interaction in which the outcome is bad or they feel embarrassed, they are likely to hate videotaping and refuse to have it used again. More important, the videotaping experience can result in participants' developing striking inhibitions and dramatically lessened spontaneity and may block access to range of repertoire in the near future. Sometimes people become robotic for at least a brief period after they see a videotape of themselves behaving in a way that has a bad outcome. Nevertheless, the viewing does not extinguish the undesired behavior. The participants generally withdraw from each other in some way, not because they hate the other, but because they do not trust themselves to be able to be constructive. Therefore, it is more desirable that the therapist shows only the positive moments, particularly when something good has happened and people do not understand

it. After a couple has practiced these steps in the office, the therapist may recommend that they do some of the procedures at home, perhaps with a tape recorder running. If they get stuck, they might bring in the tape and ask the therapist to offer some consultation on the point at which they got stuck. The therapist can then coach them to do it better and to shape an interaction that they like better. Some couples have found this format so productive that they have chosen to use it throughout the subsequent meetings. Sometimes, after a few minutes of greetings and "checking in," they sit in the appropriate chairs and show that they are ready. The therapist may then begin by saying, "You might want to be quiet for a moment, and take some time to notice what may be going on inside." The therapist never dictates what the subject is going to be—what it is they want to say to each other. That develops from the soliloquy or meditation and the warm-up.

Modifications of this general form have evolved in work with each of the couples who have chosen to use it beyond its first presentation to them. I urge readers of this article who have used such customizing refinements to share their techniques with me.

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