The Vulnerability Cycle: Working With Impasses in Couple Therapy

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In this article, we propose the vulnerability cycle as a construct for understanding and working with couples' impasses. We expand the interactional concept of couples' reciprocal patterns to include behavioral and subjective dimensions, and articulate specific processes that trigger and maintain couples' entanglements. We consider the vulnerability cycle as a nexus of integration in which "vulnerabilities" and "survival positions" are key ideas that bring together interactional, sociocultural, intrapsychic, and intergenerational levels of meaning and process. The vulnerability cycle diagram is presented as a tool for organizing information. We suggest a therapeutic approach for deconstructing couples' impasses and facilitating new patterns through deliberate modes of questioning, a freeze-frame technique, stimulation of calmness and reflection, separating present from past, and elicitation of alternative meanings, behaviors, empathy, and choice. This approach encourages the therapist and couple to work collaboratively in promoting change and resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

Couples often come to therapy polarized by reactivity and power struggles that make them feel increasingly disconnected. Trapped in impasses that they are unable to change on their own, they invite the therapist into the intimacy of their struggles, hoping for a new direction. In this article, we focus on these moments of reactivity and impasse in couples' relationships. We propose a vulnerability model to understand the complex interactions and experience of the couple caught up in an impasse. The construct of the vulnerability cycle presented here works as a nexus that integrates interactional, sociocultural, intrapsychic, and intergenerational aspects of couples'

relationships. We describe a therapeutic approach that helps to identify the couple's pattern and investigate and challenge emotional undercurrents that might be fueling and informing their dynamics. In working with couples' impasses in the here and now, the goal is to help the partners move from reactive to more dialogical positions (Fishbane, 1998), and from a view of themselves as victim and villain to positions of increased responsibility and personal agency. The process of change is facilitated by awareness, behavioral changes and negotiations, and the creation of alternative narratives based on greater empathy and connectedness. This model can be applied to a variety of couples—married and unmarried, heterosexual and gay—from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The literature of couple and family therapy has long recognized the importance of reciprocal patterns of interaction in the persistence of couples' problematic dynamics. While some authors have explored mostly the interactional aspects of the circular pattern (Watzlawick & Weakland, 1977), others, rooted in a psychodynamic tradition, have considered processes and mechanisms underlying the couple's interlocking dynamics (Catherall, 1992; Dicks, 1963; Feldman, 1982; Framo, 1976; Scharff & Scharff, 1991; Wachtel, 1993). Pinsof (1995) and Jacobson and Christensen (1996) have offered integrative approaches for dealing with couples' problematic patterns. In the 1980s, as feminist theorists placed gender and power at the center of our thinking about the structure of intimate relationships, issues of domination, subordination, and inequality became a major focus in understanding couples' dynamics (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1989; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988). More recently, narrative therapists have focused on how couples' reciprocal patterns affect and constrain their overall relationship (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993). In his longitudinal research, Gottman (1999) has looked at circular patterns in terms of the emotional ecology of marriage, finding that marriages are more likely to fail when cycles of negativity predominate over positive interactions. Authors using varied relational approaches (Bergman & Surrey, 1994; Fishbane, 1998, 2001; Johnson, 1996) have highlighted the experiential dimension of couples' reciprocal patterns in terms of connection and disconnection: ''In an impasse, both people feel increasingly less connected, more alone and isolated, and less able to act effectively in the relationship'' (Stiver, quoted in Bergman & Surrey, 1994, p. 5). Over time, ''an impasse begins to have a repetitive spiraling quality,'' and the partners ''become less and less able to keep from going down the same path. There is a feeling of being trapped or taken over by this habitual, stereotypical movement, less sense of freedom. . . . a feeling of being locked into a power struggle'' (Bergman & Surrey, p. 5).

In this article, we address couples' reciprocal patterns at multiple levels, in terms of behavioral/interactional sequences, the subjective experience of each partner, and the sociocultural contexts that shape these patterns. We focus on partners' feelings, beliefs, cultural and family-of-origin themes, mottos, legacies (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986; Papp & Imber-Black, 1996), as well as gender and power factors that inform their individual positions in their reciprocal dance.

CORE IMPASSES

In the course of a life together, couples often deal with normative or existential dilemmas in their relationship that spring from their differences or from situations in which their wishes and needs are not in sync. These quandaries may cause distress;

they can even break up the relationship. In these situations, stressful as they may be, the partners often have a clear understanding of their issues and differences and are able to see each other's perspective, negotiate, and move on.

By contrast, many couples come to therapy feeling stuck, caught up in impasses that are characterized by intense reactivity and escalation, rigid positions of each partner, irrationality, and the repetitive recurrence of the same dynamics in the relationship. While caught up in one of these impasses, the partners are unable to empathize and see the other's perspective. They feel offended and violated by the other's behavior, and become increasingly defensive, disconnected, and entangled in power struggles and misunderstandings. These impasses involve vulnerability and confusion, and they tend to become more pervasive over time, taking up more and more space in the relationship.

We propose the term ''core impasses'' to refer to these moments of intense reactivity in couples' relationships. Even when the presenting problem is a straightforward situational or existential dilemma, a couple's differences sometimes derail into a core impasse in which their attempts to talk and negotiate with each other become part of the problem. In our view, a core impasse is experienced as such a difficult entanglement because it involves the activation of vulnerabilities and survival strategies, which complicates the couple's process. This activation may include emotional overlaps of meanings between their present situation and experiences in the past, or between their present situation and a current painful experience of one or both partners in another context. Core impasses may also spring from tensions related to power inequities and disconnections based on gender or cultural differences.

THE VULNERABILITY CYCLE

Central to our understanding of ''core impasses'' is the construct of the vulnerability cycle that has evolved in our clinical work and teaching over the last 20 years. This construct is also described elsewhere (Scheinkman, in preparation), and related ideas about vulnerability in couple therapy have been presented independently by others (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000; Feldman, 1982; Johnson, 1996; Trepper & Barrett, 1989; Wile, 1981, 2002).

While traditional psychodynamic couple therapists have focused on individual deficits and psychopathology to understand the mechanisms underlying couples' problematic patterns, our focus is on the ways in which partners manage their vulnerabilities, and the fit and misfit between their interpersonal strategies. Our basic assumptions are consonant with a nonpathologizing family resilience orientation (Walsh, 1998), and with a family life cycle framework that considers both past and present stressors (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Vulnerabilities

We use the term ''vulnerability'' to refer to a sensitivity that individuals bring from their past histories or current contexts in their lives to the intimacy of their relationships. Like injuries that remain sensitive to the touch, when vulnerabilities are triggered by the dynamics of the couple's relationship, they produce intense reactivity and pain. Vulnerabilities may be the result of past traumatic events or chronic patterns in the individual's family of origin, prior relationships, or social context; they may stem from injuries within the history of the couple's relationship itself (Johnson,

1996); or they may be related to current major stresses or crises in the lives of one or both partners (Scheinkman, 1988; Walsh, 1998). Vulnerabilities may also derive from gender socialization, power inequities, or sociocultural traumas such as discrimination, poverty, marginalization, violence, social dislocation, or war-related experiences. Examples of vulnerabilities include experiences of loss, abandonment, abuse, betrayal, humiliation, injustice, rejection, or neglect, and feeling insecure, disempowered, unprotected, or inadequate.

When vulnerabilities are triggered within the couple's relationship, the individual tends to perceive risk and anticipate pain. He or she then reacts to the actual or perceived hurtful behavior of the other person in an automatic way, as if the present situation is in essence the same as a stressful situation experienced in the past, or in a context outside the relationship. In the moment when vulnerabilities are triggered by the relationship, there is a collapse of meanings between present and past, or an overlap of meanings from two different contexts. These overlaps can confuse the individual, stimulate pain, and trigger self-protective modes of reacting.

Although vulnerabilities set off by the relationship often involve resonance between the present situation and experiences in the past, as noted above they can also be related to concurrent stressful and traumatic situations outside the couple's relationship that overwhelm one partner's coping mechanisms or violate his or her belief system (B. Lessing, personal communication, 2003). One example is a husband who, after losing his job, becomes overly sensitive to his wife's requests, interpreting them as criticisms and putdowns. Another example is a lesbian woman who, after a heated fight with her parents, becomes reactive to any signs of rejection by her partner. Having felt marginalized for years, and currently vulnerable with the family tension, she feels wounded and angry when her partner is not in the mood for sex. Other examples include a pattern of sensitivity from the stress of a recent move, loss, immigration, or dealing with a debilitating illness. These situations may leave partners feeling depleted, fragile, and therefore more reactive to triggers from within the relationship.

Vulnerabilities can also emanate from ongoing organizational and power arrangements within the couple's relationship itself, in which one partner is in a subordinate position relative to gender, race, social class, cultural and educational background, or earning ability. Balance of power is a fundamental issue in couples' relationships (Goldner, 1989; Goodrich, 1991; Walsh, 1989; Walsh & Scheinkman, 1989; Walters et al., 1988); when there is a skew in the relationship, with one partner holding authority or dominance over the other, one or both partners may feel vulnerable. The partner in a one-down position—often the woman in a heterosexual relationship—may feel devalued or without a voice and not quite understand why. In abusive relationships, male partners may become violent when they feel vulnerable, regaining a position of dominance and control through threats or force (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, & Walker, 1990). Because power differentials between partners are often unarticulated, mystification adds to the couple's confusion and distress. In the therapy process, in addition to identifying the individual vulnerabilities of each partner, the therapist must address the couple's organization in terms of the balance of power implicit in their arrangement.

Survival Positions

We use the term ''survival positions'' to refer to a set of beliefs and strategies that individuals adopt to protect and manage their vulnerabilities. These positions are

usually the best way a person found in the past to protect self or others in the family of origin, and to maintain a sense of integrity and control in emotionally difficult situations. Survival positions are often adopted before they can be put into words, and certainly before they can be evaluated critically. Survival positions include beliefs and premises that become ''mottos'' to live by (Papp, 1983; Papp & Imber-Black, 1996; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993). Some examples of survival beliefs are: ''It's dangerous to be angry''; ''You can only depend on yourself''; ''Always please people''; ''Don't trust women''; ''Be weak and one-down''; ''Always be strong and don't show your vulnerability''; and ''If you get too close you will get hurt.'' These beliefs are influenced by gender training, cultural norms, and family history. Survival strategies based on these premises are the actions that persons take to protect themselves. Other authors have described similar ideas in terms of ''strategies of survival'' (Miller & Stiver, 1995), ''habits'' (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993), and ''coping mechanisms'' (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000).

In a given family, different siblings adopt different survival positions. Thus, in a family with intense parental conflict, the eldest daughter might become the family therapist, gaining love and approval by being a caretaker; the middle daughter adopts the position of the angry rebel, trusting no one with her vulnerability; and the youngest son tunes out family tension by focusing on his own needs and achieving in school. Survival positions, so helpful and necessary in childhood, become part of the repertoire or dowry that individuals bring into their adult relationships. Survival positions can evolve and become flexible and adaptive, helping the individual deal with stress or adversity. Or they can become frozen in the form adopted in childhood, stultified and inflexible, so that when they are applied to the couple's present situation, they become a hindrance and a major element in perpetuating the couple's current relational impasse.

We do not limit our thinking about survival positions or strategies to survivors of trauma. Rather, we assume normatively that in the course of life, all individuals experience vulnerabilities and develop core survival beliefs about how best to manage these vulnerabilities and navigate in the world. Survival positions, when they evolve and grow, can become adaptive and provide sources of energy, creativity, and individuality. Examples of adaptive survival positions include responsibility, humor, organization, leadership, flexibility, nurturance, and sensitivity. Any of these, in extreme or rigid form, can become problematic and lead to relational impasses.

Mutual Activation Processes

When vulnerabilities are stimulated in the context of an intimate relationship, partners feel as if they have been stung. The survival strategies held in reserve are automatically activated, and partners begin to act from them. In the moment of threat, the individual experiences survival strategies as having protective value. Like a shield, survival strategies are put in place to give a sense of safety and control.

However, although survival strategies may be self-protective, they are often counterproductive interpersonal solutions. They tend to stimulate in the other person the very behaviors that the individual is trying to avoid, unwittingly promoting self-fulfilling prophecies. When acting from survival strategies, persons often behave in self-referential and defensive ways and can become blind to the views, needs, vulnerabilities, and strengths of the other person. This insensitivity to the other

person triggers the partner's vulnerabilities; in a parallel way, the partner's vulnerabilities call forth his or her automatic self-protective responses. The vulnerability cycle is then initiated, each partner's survival strategies triggering the other's. In a core impasse, both partners are guarding their vulnerabilities, and acting and reacting from their survival positions. This is, what makes the impasse so heated, confusing, and intense.

The Vulnerability Cycle Diagram: The Case of Mark and Sara

The vulnerability cycle diagram is a tool for tracking the couple's interactional pattern, including their vulnerabilities, survival positions, and mutual activation processes. The diagram integrates interactional, intrapsychic, intergenerational, and sociocultural elements of the impasse. Similar to the genogram, we may use it to organize information and plan interventions, and as a tool that can be shared with the couple to better understand their dynamics.

The case of Mark and Sara illustrates the vulnerability cycle. Mark, a 40-year-old contractor, and Sara, a 32-year-old graduate student, were together for one year before coming to therapy. They had planned to get married but were concerned because their relationship was rapidly deteriorating due to Mark's intense jealousy and their escalating fights.

They traced the beginnings of their problem to 4 months before, when Sara started graduate school and moved close to campus; they saw each other only once a week. Mark began to feel rejected and neglected by Sara, and their fighting became increasingly intense, with Mark becoming verbally abusive and Sara depressed. Mark complained that Sara would forget to call him as she had promised; he saw her actions as rejection and evidence that she might be betraying him. He worried that Sara would outstrip him and become attracted to someone more educated than he was. Sara saw the problem as Mark's lack of understanding about the pressures she was experiencing in graduate school. She felt intimidated and unable to defend herself against his aggressive accusations.

In the therapy, it became clear that when Sara was consumed by schoolwork, she did become unavailable and forgetful. This triggered great anxiety about abandonment and betrayal in Mark, and while he waited for her calls, he became increasingly angry. When they finally talked, he was furious and accused her of being with other men. Baffled by his accusations, Sara became increasingly more withdrawn and depressed. Her withdrawal intensified his anxiety, leading him to pursue her ever more fiercely. Unwittingly, they co-created a pursuer-distancer dance that would continue for several days until there was an outburst; Mark would be angry and Sara would sob. After these ''big purges,'' Mark would apologize and they would reconcile, until another seeming act of neglect on Sara's part would initiate their cycle again.

After the therapist tracked the couple's interactional dance, she connected with each partner's vulnerabilities and challenged their survival strategies. In particular, the therapist set limits on Mark's intimidating behavior, suggesting alternative ways for him to express his needs for connection. She encouraged Sara to be more outspoken about her need for boundaries in order to do her studying, and to explicitly reassure Mark that she was faithful to him. The therapist and couple also explored the impasse by considering its sociocultural underpinnings in terms of men intimidating women and women being overly accommodating. Mark did not want to be an abusive

partner, but had known no other way to express his fears. He connected his strategy of aggressiveness to his socialization in sports and as a male. Sara was afraid that being assertive meant being aggressive and unfeminine.

As the couple felt understood and accepted by the therapist, they were able to reveal more about their vulnerabilities. Mark felt that his irrational feelings of abandonment and betrayal were related to his complicated personal history. Having been put up for adoption at age 3, he was in foster care and reported painful memories of waiting for his mother to return. Adopted when he was 5, he learned to get his mother's attention by being demanding and pursuing her whenever she was depressed or not ''emotionally there.'' He connected with his father mainly through activities and sports. When he was 17, his adoptive mother died suddenly of an illness, leaving him feeling abandoned once again. As a young adult, Mark decided to look for his biological mother. Mark learned that, when he was a toddler, his mother met a man who insisted that in order for them to get married, she had to give up her child.

Sara talked about how her vulnerabilities were related to her family dynamics. As an only child, she grew up spending a lot of time by herself. Her parents, although caring, were reclusive and unexpressive. She grew up feeling emotionally neglected and lonely. As the mottos in the family were self-sufficiency and self-containment, Sara's survival strategy included being very independent. However, her gender training also shaped her survival strategy; she learned to be overly accommodating and not to state her needs directly. In the relationship with Mark, rather than negotiating up front with him when she needed space, she would ''forget'' to call him.

The vulnerability cycle. When Sara started graduate school, her unavailability triggered Mark's vulnerability about abandonment and betrayal. His vulnerability in turn activated his survival strategies of suspiciousness and anger. As he insistently pursued Sara, she felt overwhelmed, which in turn activated her survival strategy of withdrawal and self-sufficiency. The vulnerability cycle was initiated. Sara and Mark were trapped in a core impasse in which he became more and more demanding and aggressive, and she felt more and more intimidated and helpless (Figure 1).

DECONSTRUCTING THE IMPASSE: FROM REACTIVITY TO REFLECTIVITY

Core impasses can serve as a gateway to the exploration and deconstruction of key dynamics in the couple's relationship. The very nature of the impasse—its thick texture of misunderstandings and entanglements, often based in the past history of the couple and of their prior relational experiences—yields rich potential for greater awareness and change. In identifying the impasse and coming to understand the various strands embedded in it, the couple and therapist have an opportunity to learn more about each partner and to transform the couple's core dilemmas.

In working with a couple in a core impasse, the overall goal is to help them move from highly reactive positions to more reflective ones, from automatic actions and reactions to greater differentiation, awareness, and flexibility. We use the term ''reflectivity'' to refer to an individual's ability to pause and be thoughtful and planful before acting or communicating. In facilitating reflectivity, the therapist helps each partner to feel more empowered and empathic, and to have more options and choices

The Vulnerability Cycle

acting
withdrawn,
self-sufficient

feeling
betrayed,
abandoned

v   ss

ss   v

feeling helpless,
overwhelmed

acting suspicious,
controlling;
angrily pursuing

v= vulnerability
ss= survival strategy

Mark   **Sara**

1–Premises, beliefs
"Women are not to be trusted"; "If you
don't demand, you will be abandoned";
"Men should be strong, not weak"
2–Vulnerabilities
Betrayal, abandonment, loss
3–Survival strategies
Suspiciousness, angry pursuit, control
4–Family of origin
Age 3 put in foster care; adopted age 5
Adoptive mother depressed
Age 17 loss of adoptive mother
5–Contextual/sociocultural factors
Geographic separation from Sara
Educational inequality

1–Premises, beliefs
"If you are under pressure, take care of
yourself"; "Women should be
accommodating, not assertive"
2–Vulnerabilities
Loneliness, feeling overwhelmed, depressed
Difficulty expressing her needs
3–Survival strategies
Self-sufficiency, withdrawal,
unassertiveness
4–Family of origin
Uncommunicative family
Value independence and self-sufficiency
5–Contextual/sociocutural factors
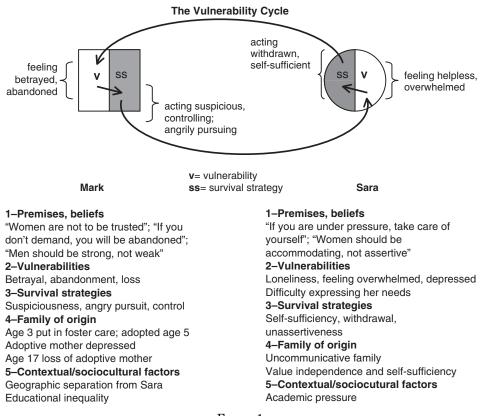Academic pressure

FIGURE 1

in these critical moments of their interpersonal process. This work builds on Bowen's differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978; Lerner, 1989).

Our thinking about deconstruction has been influenced by the work of White (1993), Freedman and Combs (1996), and Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993). We use the term ''deconstruction'' to describe a process in which the therapist in dialogue with the couple identifies the impasse, exploring ''strands of meaning'' (Goldner et al., 1990) based in the couple's history, and in sociocultural, intrapsychic, and intergenerational levels of experience. In a respectful way, and using a multilevel lens, the therapist questions and challenges these meanings, facilitating a new narrative and more resilient patterns.

Facing the Impasse as a Collaborative Team

We visualize the therapist and couple becoming a collaborative team, confronting the impasse together. We present here interventions that we have found useful to facilitate this process.

Building the team. In our initial work with the couple, we take active steps to intervene in a straightforward way by teaching about circularity, offering alternative problem-solving strategies and communication skills. With some couples, teaching

these skills suffices to transform the impasse; often, it does not. In either case, it is not the therapist who resolves the impasse *for* the couple. Rather, the therapist invites the couple to stand outside the impasse and explore it with curiosity and reflection.

Some therapists feel paralyzed by the intensity of the conflict during a couple's impasse. One of the reasons for this paralysis is the assumption that it is the therapist's job to resolve the impasse. This assumption promotes frustration and burnout in the therapist, and it may, in fact, be an impossible task. The impasse and its underpinnings are often complex, based in the partners' vulnerabilities and survival positions, so attempts to change it frontally may fail.

Couples often come to therapy with a competitive model, looking for validation from the therapist about who is right and who is wrong. They look to the therapist to take the position of judge. This puts the therapist in an impossible bind, doomed to fail. We find it helpful for the therapist to explicitly or implicitly sidestep the judge role, and to relate to the couple from a position of ''multidirected partiality'' (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). In this mode, the therapist validates each partner's concerns and needs and looks at their dilemmas as burdensome to both. The therapist helps the couple diminish anxiety by legitimizing individual feelings and by assuring both partners that their needs will be taken into account.

Creating safety. Couples in impasse are often highly anxious and reactive; in that state, they are unable to problem-solve and to reflect about their participation and feelings. One's ability to take in new information and think creatively is much greater in a calm state than when flooded with anxiety or anger (Gottman, 1999). One of the ways to calm the system down is for the therapist to convey a sense of hope that the impasse can be understood, and that the couple will be able to get to a different place and level of competence about their relationship. Initially, it may be only the therapist who has hope; the therapist often has to lend this hope to the couple.

The therapist also helps to create safety by mediating the couple's interactions and by interrupting blame and devaluation if they occur during a session. When the couple's reactivity is particularly intense, the therapist positions herself as a go-between, inviting communication to go through her. The therapist asks one partner for his views and feelings while in the impasse, and before allowing the other person to react, she responds empathically, articulating the vulnerability involved in his position. She then does the same with the other partner. The therapist's mediation helps calm the couple's reactivity. On occasion, the therapist may even reposition the chairs to block eye contact between highly reactive partners. Although we prefer partners to witness each other's work, which tends to increase empathy for the other, at times we use individual sessions to help partners cool down and identify needs and vulnerabilities behind their defensiveness. If there is any danger of violence between the partners, we take additional steps to protect their safety (Goldner et al., 1990).

Translating anger into needs. In reflecting back the partners' positions, the therapist uses suggestive reframing in which anger and frustrations are translated into needs and wishes. This translation helps the couple contain their escalation and create a more constructive narrative in which needs can be understood and negotiated. For example, when Mark angrily accused Sara of neglecting him when she was busy with her finals, the therapist listened to him with empathy, suggesting that he seemed to

feel disconnected and needed more reassurance from Sara. At the same time, the therapist noted that Mark's anger intimidated Sara and pushed her away. Mark was helped to speak his needs more directly and respectfully, and to take into account the impact of his words on Sara. The therapist then turned to Sara and suggested that her withdrawal was the best way she knew to protect herself in the face of Mark's anger. In the therapy, Sara learned to speak up for herself in a more direct way and to set limits with Mark when she felt he was being overbearing. The reframing helped each partner see the other as a subject, as vulnerable rather than as the enemy; learning more direct communication of needs allowed each to feel more empowered.

Capturing the Impasse

Tracking the interactional "dance". After obtaining a brief history of the problem and genogram, we encourage the couple to report on a specific instance of their struggle. In this initial phase, our effort is to go from a specific instance to a more general understanding about the couple's overall pattern. The therapist asks each partner to describe in detail a problematic moment, focusing on each person's perception of what triggered it, who said what to whom, and how each reacted to the other in a sequential way. In this process, the partners come to identify how their actions and reactions may be reinforcing one another, and how together they participate in a dance that, once it starts, takes on a life of its own. This co-construction of the couple's circular pattern implicitly challenges their linear narratives of victim and villain, and invites them to see themselves as having power to change their own participation and to eventually become co-authors of a new pattern.

Contextualizing the dance. As we articulate with the couple their circular impasse, we also focus on how the emergence of their impasse may be related to stresses or changes in their sociocultural context. We ask the couple why they are coming to therapy now. We explore how factors in their social environment may be impacting their assumptions about self and other, their quid pro quo and the power balance in the relationship. Interventions on this level include articulating how contextual factors are affecting the couple's dynamics, and facilitating negotiations of a new quid pro quo and a new organization for the relationship. For example, when Joana and Marco emigrated from Colombia, they no longer had the assistance of their families in raising their children. As Marco immediately became busy in his job, Joana found herself increasingly isolated, depressed, and overwhelmed by childcare and household responsibilities. It was only after the couple identified the losses and challenges brought on by immigration that they were able to recognize that Joana needed time away from home to learn English and to develop skills that eventually would make her employable. They both needed to cultivate friends to feel happier. The therapy included finding community resources to help Joana with her individual goals, and helping Marco to find ways to become more involved with the children.

In the case of Mark and Sara, the therapist helped them identify how the emergence of their impasse was related to Sara's entrance into graduate school. As the couple explored their stress from living far apart, they also discussed how, in her new role, Sara was no longer as available and accommodating as she had been before. The change in social environment shifted the couple's organization and established gendered power balance, requiring them to update their assumptions about self,

other, and their relationship. As the couple achieved a clearer understanding about themselves in the new situation, Mark agreed to be the one doing all of the commuting and most of the household chores in Sara's apartment, in exchange for spending more evenings and weekend time together. Renegotiation of their quid pro quo allowed Mark and Sara to feel closer and less reactive, and more ready to reflect on other factors that were also fueling their core impasse.

Freeze-frame technique. Once we have identified that the couple is caught up in an impasse, and have identified contextual forces impacting their relationship, we work to slow down their interactional process so we can better understand it. Using the language of film, we may ask the couple if we can "freeze frame" one of their reactive moments. As if catching a frame from a movie, we invite them to pause and look at their interaction with some distance. Or, we might suggest that we look at their reactive sequence in slow motion (Goldner et al., 1990). In suggesting freeze frame or slow motion, we encourage the couple to step outside their process and eventually have some control over it. We convey a sense of nonjudgmental interest and curiosity in the couple's process, a position we encourage them to adopt as well.

For example, a couple was reporting an impasse they had at home. The wife felt that the husband had been critical and nonsupportive of her parenting efforts. The therapist encouraged her to describe the context of the fight and the sequences. As the wife told her version, rich with emotional nuance and detail, she said, somewhat embarrassed, "I know I am making a short story long." The therapist responded enthusiastically, "That's just what we need!" We need to take the quick action/reaction escalation sequence and slow it down, look at it with its various nuances and meanings. "To make a short story long" could be a motto for this step in the deconstruction process.

Externalizing the impasse. "Externalizing the impasse" is an adaptation of Michael White's (1989) work with externalizing the problem (see also Mirkin & Geib, 1995; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993). The problem here, the couple's impasse, is reframed as external to the couple and therefore potentially controllable. In this process, the couple comes "to view the cycle as the enemy rather than each other" (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001, p. 148). In externalizing, we also help the couple understand the effects of their pattern on their relationship. For example, Mark and Sara, looking at their own pattern as external, came to see how their pursuer-distancer dance was eroding their commitment, slowly permeating every aspect of their relationship.

Developing curiosity. Partners often assume the other's motivations to be negative in the context of the impasse. This mind-reading or stereotyped "knowing" objectifies the other, leading to stagnation and blame. By contrast, a position of curiosity and "not knowing" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) allows spontaneity and a "readiness to be surprised" (Fishbane, 1998). We challenge the couple to become expert observers of their sequences of actions and reactions, and to reflect about their positions in the dance. We encourage them to "ask" rather than "know," and suggest that they introduce more complexity into their understanding of the other's motivations.

When couples are attached to their own assumptions, they often fight over whose reality will prevail, becoming embroiled in struggles over "the facts," and who said what to whom. We encourage them to embrace the idea of multiple perspectives rather

than to compete over reality (Anderson, 1997). This shift tends to facilitate greater empathy for the other's experience.

Disinviting blame. Couples in impasse are often caught up in a mutual cycle of blame. The survival strategy of blame begets more blame; criticism and attack beget defensiveness and counterattack. For example, the therapist suggested to one couple that the subtext of their conversations was ''Whose fault is it?'' In this case, each partner felt a deep sense of shame; both felt that they were really to blame for the marital problems. This shame/self-blame was so painful for both that each had to blame the other. Anger and blame of the other served as an antidote to blaming the self.

When partners are able to identify blame sequences but have difficulty letting them go, the therapist might suggest, ''Perhaps you can leave the blame in my office; it will be here waiting for you if you need it.'' This somewhat fanciful suggestion allows for a space to be created between the couple and their blame; it allows them to ''disinvite'' blame from their relationship. Disinviting blame empowers the couple; they have a choice whether to allow blame to dominate their relationship. It is a helpful antidote to the sense of helplessness that so often characterizes couples in impasse. The use of humor and playfulness in ''leaving blame in the therapist's office'' serves to further separate the couple from the problem and from the grip of seriousness with which they may be approaching their relationship.

Identifying virtuous cycles. Just as we encourage couples to identify vicious cycles, we also help them ''catch'' moments when they feel understood and connected. These moments are usually parts of ''virtuous cycles'' in which the self-responsibility, generosity, or collaboration of one promotes similar qualities in the other.

Catching these positive developments in the relationship is what Michael White (1993) terms ''unique outcomes'' or ''sparkling events.'' These are moments when the partners are not being bullied by their survival strategies, when they reach out to each other and feel connected. We highlight these moments and encourage the couple to celebrate them with each other. The therapist facilitates this by allowing herself to be moved and affected. She might say, ''Wow! I love the way you guys just negotiated this decision. . .'' Wachtel's (2001) language of ''becoming'' is helpful here. For example, as one husband struggled to express his concern for his wife's health from a caring position rather than his usual criticism, the therapist responded enthusiastically, ''I'm impressed by how you're becoming able to express concern for your wife in a loving manner.'' The husband was pleased as he considered this new development of his relational competence.

Challenging the Impasse

Identifying survival strategies and vulnerabilities. At the heart of the deconstruction process is the naming of each partner's survival positions—the premises and strategies from which they act when caught up in an impasse—as well as the corresponding subtext of vulnerabilities and needs that activate these actions.

We work to articulate the premises underlying each partner's actions. These premises and beliefs are not necessarily buried deep in the unconscious, but they are often lurking just below the surface, ''pre-articulated'' (S. Kennedy, personal

communication, 1992). They may come as a surprise even to the holder of the belief. When these premises are named, they usually complete the picture and bring a sense of understanding and relief. For example, Mark's belief that women would betray him informed his jealous pursuit of Sara; Sara's assumption that her painful feelings should not be shared led her to withdraw when upset. Mark and Sara came to understand that the other's behavior was not intended to hurt, but emanated from each person's past experiences. Because they could see each other's actions in the context of their history, not just as an artifact of their mutual battle, they felt more connected.
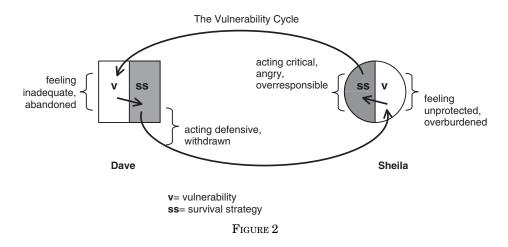
As we have described, when caught up in an impasse, partners don't see the hurt, but only the self-protective shield of the other. The therapist helps them to see the experience ''behind the scenes'' of the survival position, to see the other's vulnerability. This is similar to Johnson's (1996) approach to helping couples move from secondary defensive emotions to primary emotions of hurt or desire for closeness. For some people, the vulnerability can be accessed relatively easily with empathic questioning. Individuals whose vulnerabilities are extremely painful or threatening often benefit from concomitant individual sessions.

Diagramming the vulnerability cycle: Highlighting reciprocity. The therapist helps the couple see how each one's survival position stimulates the other's vulnerability and survival position, and how, in a reciprocal way, the couple becomes drawn into a pattern of reactivity.

For example, Sheila and Dave had a highly conflictual marriage for 10 years. Sheila was chronically resentful that Dave didn't help enough with the housework. Dave felt that he could never please her, and ducked to avoid her displeasure. In their core impasse, Sheila became angry and critical, and Dave became defensive and withdrew into stony silence. In the therapy, we named each partner's survival position and traced its origins. Sheila grew up feeling unprotected in her physically abusive family. She survived both by being extremely responsible and by angrily counterattacking. She literally held onto her sense of reality by staying angry and showing no vulnerability to her abusive father. Dave, for his part, grew up in a cold, critical family in which he felt unseen and inadequate. His mother died when he was 6 years old, and his father, who was critical and emotionally distant, became even more self-absorbed and harsh. Dave went through his childhood feeling frightened and unlovable. He protected himself by fending off his father and withdrawing into his own world. In the honeymoon phase of their relationship, both Dave and Sheila felt understood, loved, and safe. As the magic faded, each became more self-focused in the relationship, and they began to disappoint each other. In the face of feeling hurt, both resorted to their old survival positions (Figure 2).

An important step in the therapy process is to name the survival position at the moment it is being activated. The therapist helps the partners identify when they begin to feel threatened and are entering into survival mode, and encourages them to become thoughtful about the vulnerabilities and needs that trigger their defensiveness. Dave and Sheila each learned to see when their protective shields went up. In this process, they were encouraged to *talk about* their survival positions of angry attack and defensiveness rather than to act from them automatically, and to remember the vulnerabilities that lay hidden for each.

We use the vulnerability cycle diagram in two ways. From the beginning, the diagram, along with the genogram, helps the therapist organize information. In addition, we may offer the diagram to the couple as a visual tool to highlight their reciprocity in

The Vulnerability Cycle

feeling
inadequate,
abandoned

acting critical,
angry,
overresponsible

feeling
unprotected,
overburdened

acting defensive,
withdrawn

Dave

Sheila

v= vulnerability
ss= survival strategy

FIGURE 2

the impasse. Dave and Sheila were intrigued by their diagram; it anchored their understanding of their process, both internal and interactional.

Legitimizing vulnerabilities and challenging defensive behavior. In working with the couple's impasse, the therapist is simultaneously ''holding'' the vulnerability of each partner, supporting the hurt feelings, while challenging the automatic behavior that springs from the survival position. This dual process is a critical aspect of the therapy. As one wife put it, ''You help us feel we have a right to our feelings, but we need to act in a more constructive manner.'' If the therapist suggests behavior change without supporting the underlying vulnerability, the couple may feel bullied into change and may resist. If the partners feel that the therapist respects their feelings and is on their side, the therapist has more latitude to challenge their behavior.

If a partner's survival strategy is dangerous or abusive—including, for example, violent behavior or suicidal risk—the therapist must address safety, limit setting, and accountability. Jenkins's (1990), Goldner's (1999), and Greenspun's (2000) approaches to holding violent men accountable while engaging with them in treatment are very helpful in this regard. Even when there is no threat of physical violence, in working with heterosexual couples, we are attuned to power imbalances that may threaten or intimidate the woman.

Survival strategies are often counterproductive even when they do not involve violence. When partners are caught up in their survival positions, it is likely that they will not get what they want from the other. Sheila *could not be heard* by Dave when she was yelling at him. The therapist pointed out that Sheila's *voice* was important and needed to be heard by Dave, that her feelings and frustrations were legitimate. However, it was impossible for Dave to hear her when she yelled; the volume of her voice ensured that he would feel flooded and withdraw (Gottman, 1999). Sheila was faced with a choice: She could yell at Dave, knowing that she would be tuned out, or she could find a more constructive way to communicate. She learned to ''make a relational claim'' (Fishbane, 2001), to speak her needs and feelings while staying connected with Dave. This was a challenge to Sheila; as a woman and in her family of

origin, she had not felt entitled to her own needs being met. It was only when she was furious that she could find her voice.

Dave yearned to receive the warmth and affirmation he missed growing up. When Sheila criticized him, he felt once again small and inadequate, afraid he would lose her. While protecting himself in the moment, his defensiveness exacerbated her frustration, making her more likely to criticize him again. The therapist helped Dave to be empathic with his overburdened wife, and to tell Sheila when he was hurt by her tone. Dave was also encouraged to be open to his wife's relational claim, and to challenge his assumption that he would lose power if he acceded to her requests. Both were encouraged to talk about their vulnerabilities and needs rather than react defensively.

In this process, the partners transformed their survival strategies. Sheila's anger and criticism became a more adaptive assertion of her needs. Dave's defensiveness evolved into a more flexible way of communicating his hurt to Sheila, and an openness to her needs. It is our belief that survival strategies don't disappear in the process of change. Instead, they gradually evolve into more productive interpersonal capacities in which self-protection no longer pushes the other away.

It was essential for the couple to work on the content area of their impasse, as well as on their vulnerabilities and survival strategies. They explored their gendered assumptions about their division of labor with Sheila overfunctioning at home, even though she had a full-time job, while Dave tuned out. Linking their own assumptions and division of labor to the larger sociocultural discourse around gender roles allowed them to step back and reconsider the fairness of their arrangement. They devised a plan to meet every Sunday night to make a list of chores and tasks that needed to be done in the coming week. Rather than Sheila being the sole manager of the household, doling out chores to a reluctant Dave, they aimed to become co-managers who jointly determined what needed to be done and by whom.

Encouraging empathy. The therapist encourages empathy by highlighting the subtext of vulnerability and legitimizing the feelings and needs underlying the position of each partner. The other partner is then invited to consider that subtext and to relate to it from his or her own experiences.

Some blocks to empathy are based in survival positions related to gender training. Having been socialized to empathize with others at the expense of self, a woman may fear that she will lose herself if she is too empathic with her partner. In a relationship, she then faces the choice of either overempathizing or withdrawing to protect her boundaries. Men tend to be deskilled in empathy while growing up (Bergman, 1991); socialized to fix problems, they may approach their partner's pain or concerns with advice rather than by listening. When this fails, as it often does, a man may feel guilty or angry that he can't make his partner happy. In frustration, he is even less able to be empathic. Deconstructing the couple's impasse often includes articulating and challenging these gender roles and expectations that limit partners' empathy and openness to each other. The therapist may work with the woman to strengthen her boundaries and her capacity to make a claim for herself while staying connected, and may work with the man to teach him empathy skills.

Exploring overlaps between present and past. Once we have identified survival positions and legitimized vulnerabilities, we focus on overlaps of meaning between the present situation and similar experiences in the past. We may ask, "Is this bind

familiar? Have you felt this way before? Perhaps in your family of origin, or in your past relationships?'' These questions, when asked empathically and with careful timing, are powerful in opening up a new level of awareness and dialogue.

In the case of Dave and Sheila, neither could apologize after hurting the other. This would result in a second impasse for the couple. The therapist asked, ''Is this familiar to you? Someone close to you wants you to apologize, and you just can't do it?'' Sheila recounted that in her battles with her father, after beating her, he would try to force her to apologize for being fresh. Her refusal to apologize was the only shred of power and integrity she could muster in the humiliation she felt. Now, in her relationship with Dave, Sheila's experiences resonated with her feelings from the past, and once again she was unable to apologize. Dave recalled his father's depression after his mother died; when Dave spilled a glass of milk, his father would suddenly become enraged and berate the boy mercilessly. Dave would quickly apologize to assuage his father, terrifed that his father would leave him. His apology, however, was more an appeasement than a recognition of responsibility; he had to be inauthentic to keep the relationship with his father (Stiver, 1992). Haunted by the past, both Sheila and Dave became reactive in the marriage around the issue of apologizing.

Exploring overlaps of meaning between present and past often may bring out unfinished business that partners have in their past histories and families of origin. In this situation, the therapist offers more intensive intergenerational work, either individually or in a couple session. In particular, an individual who is stuck in anger or is cut off from his or her family of origin may act out grievances toward the parents in the current relationship with the partner. Working through the intergenerational impasse often releases partners to be more flexible and loving with each other. As each witnesses the other's family-of-origin work and comes to understand the partner's survival positions in terms of dilemmas from the past, their interaction can change dramatically. The couple's fight yields to a more collaborative dialogue. The empathy is often palpable in the room, as each visualizes the hurt child his or her partner once was. This witnessing helps loosen the grip of the past on the present.

On occasion, partners use family-of-origin disclosures in destructive ways. When one partner's vulnerability in the current relationship is connected to old hurts from childhood, the other partner may use this information as ammunition, saying, for example, ''You're acting just like your nasty mother right now.'' We challenge this misuse of family-of-origin revelations and encourage partners to be respectful of each other's vulnerabilities. In rare instances, when partners are unable to refrain from attacking each other with historical or diagnostic insights, we see each partner individually to continue exploring family-of-origin issues.

In addition to family-of-origin work, the therapist may delineate in a straightforward way the differences between the present and the past. The therapist may point out, ''Even though the present situation resembles your past, the present is not the past; your partner is not your father or your ex-husband. Your survival strategy does not fit the present situation, and it actually perpetuates the problem.'' This clear intervention, when coupled with a recognition of the client's strengths and ability to choose in the present, promotes resilience and can lead to an important shift.

In identifying overlaps of meaning between the present and the past, and focusing on historical and family-of-origin contexts, we are *enlarging the story*. The couple's impasse is no longer just about the two of them. It is more complex, and often becomes

a multigenerational story. We are helping the couple move from a narrow, rigid perspective of their impasse to a larger view based in a broader context (Mirkin & Geib, 1995). Likewise, situating our observations about the couple's dilemmas within their sociocultural contexts of gender, power, or ethnic backgrounds also widens the context and enlarges their story.

FACILITATING NEW PATTERNS: MOMENTS OF CHOICE

As the partners become less mired in their impasse, the therapy moves to help them make choices that are more consonant with their relationship goals. We encourage the couple to deal with each other in a spirit of collaboration, to think of themselves as co-authors of their own relationship. Thus, we might ask, "If you were to be the authors of this relationship, what would it look like? How would you like to shape it?" The following are specific techniques that help the couple choose alternative, more productive strategies in those heated moments that would normally trigger an impasse.

Developing Awareness in the Moment: The Fork in the Road

As noted above, impasses often escalate very rapidly; before the partners know it, they are cycling out of control. We help the couple catch the impasse in its earliest moments, before it escalates—for example, by identifying bodily cues of anxiety, anger, or defensiveness, or automatic thoughts such as, "he is so selfish!" This process allows each partner to reflect and make more informed, conscious choices rather than to react impulsively.

For example, Dave tended to respond defensively to Sheila's criticism, dismissing the validity of her complaints; this inevitably triggered an impasse. Fearing that she would never get through to him, Sheila would become more critical and angry, leading Dave to shut down completely. The therapist asked Dave to notice his defensiveness when it showed up in a therapy session; she then asked him if he could put his defensiveness down on the table for a few minutes, knowing that he could pick it up at any time and put it back on (Fishbane, 1998). Dave laughed, and agreed to try. Over time, this process of *choosing* when to be defensive and when to put his defensiveness down became a natural part of Dave's repertoire. He began to feel that he could be in control of his defensiveness rather than have his defensiveness control him. He felt an increased sense of "power to," of relational mastery, and less need for "power over" with his wife. This shift was facilitated by his developing greater empathy skills and feeling more relationally competent. At the same time, the therapist helped Sheila bring her concerns to Dave with a "softer startup" (Gottman, 1999), which would be less likely to stimulate his defensiveness.

As partners learn to catch the beginning moments of their impasse, they also become aware that they have choices about whether to follow their automatic reactivity or do something different. We call this moment of choice "the fork in the road." We help the couple identify specific alternative responses that they might have in tense moments with each other. This usually occurs first, retroactively, in a therapy session during an analysis of a recent fight. Each identifies what he or she might have done differently, not what the partner should have done differently. Thus, we might ask, "If you could rewrite the script of this fight, how would you redo *your* part?" The awareness of alternative responses initially comes *after* the fight; we encourage

''Monday-morning quarterbacking,'' or ''retrospective awareness'' (Christensen & Jacobson, 2000) in the service of developing new strategies and choices. Gradually, the time gap between the fight and the awareness of alternative choices narrows until the couple can catch themselves *during* a fight. In a session, Dave reported that over the weekend, Sheila was angry with him for not helping clean the kitchen. He had started to get defensive with her, but remembered our work in therapy, including the empathy training, and made a different choice. He hugged her, and said, ''Honey, I think you're exhausted and overworked; tell me what I can do to help.'' She responded with tears of relief and relaxed into his arms. Dave saw the fork in the road and chose a more generous response. Sheila's reaction reinforced his new behavior, and together, they entered a virtuous cycle.

"Laying New Neurological Cable"

Couples tend to find their old automatic ways of relating and reacting to be much easier—albeit more destructive—than their new strategies and responses. The old behaviors often seem as if they are the result of automatic synaptic firing at the neurological level. This is a helpful metaphor for couples changing their dance. We suggest to them that developing new responses can feel hard, even back-breaking, as if they were laying new neurological cable—for they are, indeed, creating new pathways of reaction and choice. One wife, busy trying to relate to her husband in new ways, described how exhausted she felt at the end of the day from the mental effort she expended to respond differently. Couples often report that the new responses feel artificial at first, like techniques; some distrust this deliberate process and assume that if it doesn't feel natural, it isn't honest. We validate the difficulty of this work and suggest that the new behaviors will eventually stop feeling so awkward, and will become integrated into the identity of the partners and the relationship. Then, as one client said, ''the responses come less from technique, and more from the heart.''

Even as new patterns become part of the couple's repertoire, in conditions of stress or fatigue, the old dance may re-emerge. We normalize this and predict that it may happen. We suggest that, rather than viewing this as a failure or a crisis, the partners anticipate how they could respond to their old patterns should they occur in the future. The couple's ability to recognize the old dance and stand outside it allows them to intervene quickly and make more informed choices in keeping with their expanded relational repertoire.

CONCLUSION

We find the vulnerability cycle to be a helpful theoretical construct in working with heterosexual and same-sex couples from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The articulation of the impasse in terms of vulnerabilities, survival positions, and the circularity of actions and reactions within a historical and sociocultural framework is useful clinically with a broad spectrum of couples, from those experiencing a moderate sense of disconnection to couples in despair over their deteriorating relationship. The dual manner in which the therapist relates to the couple—on the one hand as vulnerable and as having legitimate feelings and needs, and on the other hand as resilient and capable of change—tends to disarm resistance and foster responsibility. The language of vulnerabilities, survival strategies, and impasse helps

us to challenge couples' problematic behavior without pathologizing the individuals. The collaborative approach described in this article encourages the therapist to lead the process while consistently placing the responsibility for change as a choice in the hands of each partner. Couples report feeling understood and respected when the therapist relates to them with these lenses.

The vulnerability cycle diagram is a concrete tool that captures individual, interactional, and intergenerational processes. Along with the genogram, it helps the therapist collect relevant information and functions as an anchor in both assessment and in the therapy process. The diagram can be used as a clinical intervention in which the therapist shares it with the couple to demonstrate their predicament visually. Finally, the conceptualization of the vulnerability cycle and the diagram are essential tools for us in teaching couple therapy, and in supervision and case consultation.

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