Facilitating Relational Empowerment in Couple Therapy

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Couples in distressed relationships often get caught up in power struggles, “Power Over” interactions that are informed by both neurobiology (e.g., the fight–flight reaction) and by cultural assumptions (e.g., competition, individualism, and patriarchy). This article seeks to widen the discourse about power by highlighting “Power To” and “Power With.” Power To includes the ability to self-regulate, to read and manage one’s own emotions, and to have voice while respecting the other’s voice. Power With reflects the couple’s commitment to configure the relationship through empathy, respect, and generosity. Power To and Power With are proposed to constitute relational empowerment, the ability to navigate one’s inner world and the interpersonal realm. The neurobiology of both couples’ reactivity and relational empowerment are considered. Techniques are offered to facilitate Power To and Power With, interventions that interrupt couples’ cycles of reactivity and allow them to make more thoughtful choices. Emotion regulation and empathy are particularly important skills of relational empowerment, and examples are offered to increase these capacities in couple therapy. The therapeutic perspective offered in this article challenges cultural practices and assumptions that keep intimate partners polarized in power struggles, and explores how relational empowerment can foster an egalitarian, mutually respectful relationship.

Keywords: Relational Empowerment; Couple Therapy; Power Struggles; Power To; Power With; Neurobiology and Couples; Emotion Regulation; Empathy

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COUPLES’ DANCES OF DISEMPOWERMENT AND DISCONNECTION

John and Emily come to my office on the brink of divorce. Emily has had it with John’s temper tantrums, and is contemptuous of his lack of emotional intelligence. John loves Emily deeply, but finds himself periodically enraged when she shuts him out; he does not know how to get through to her, and feels unimportant in her eyes. He has never been physically violent, but his verbal tantrums are intense and alienating to Emily. As I sit with this couple, I am aware of the visible power differences between...
them: John is a tall man with a loud voice, and he earns more money than Emily. Differences of gender, size, and earning capacity would seem to tilt the power scales in this man’s favor. Yet John seems anything but empowered. He is terrified of losing Emily, has no clue how to reach her when he is upset, is not in charge of his own emotions, and is confused about how to maintain and nurture connection in his marriage. Emily, who is female, smaller, and earns less money than John, would appear to have less power. Yet she has the ability to reduce him to the level of a 2 year old with her contempt or by tuning him out. She also has more competence and confidence than John in the emotional–relational realm, navigating parenthood and friendships with ease. Her social competence impresses and at times intimidates John. Despite her social skills in other contexts, however, Emily, like John, feels relationally disempowered in the marriage. She has not been able to get through to John about the damage his tantrums cause her, and she resorts to shunning him as her main means of coping when he is agitated. I am struck by how disconnected and disempowered both of these partners are with each other, despite being successful in other areas of their lives.

My experience with John and Emily is not unique. Repeatedly I sit with partners in couple therapy who resort to a variety of unproductive tactics to connect with each other, and end up alienating each other instead. These couples, as Wile (2002) puts it, make each other into enemies or strangers instead of allies. Traditional notions of power—related to physical size, gender, earning capacity, class, education, etc.—are about Power Over, the power of one person to dominate or influence another. And while these issues do affect couples, they do not fully address many of the poignant power dynamics in intimate relationships, such as those experienced by John and Emily. Frequently in unhappy couples both partners feel disempowered, and neither knows how to get their needs met or how to be a successful partner. This paper attempts to deepen our understanding of empowerment and disempowerment in intimate relationships. We will return to John and Emily as we explore techniques to facilitate relational empowerment for both partners.

**RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT: WIDENING THE DISCOURSE ABOUT POWER AND COUPLES**

Power dynamics permeate couples’ relationships. Values of cultures (such as the dominant culture in the United States) that emphasize hierarchy, competition, and individualism, as well as those that promote male privilege and female accommodation, affect couples, especially heterosexual couples—even those committed to egalitarian principles (Jordan, 2009; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). Addressing power is an important aspect of couple therapy. We normally think of power as “Power Over.” Indeed, assessing Power Over dynamics is crucial with couples—both to identify the risk of physical violence, and to consider power disparities based on gender, physical size, earning power, education, etc. I propose that we widen the discussion about power and couples, addressing “Power To” and “Power With” as well as Power Over. Power To (Fishbane, 2001; Goodrich, 1991) refers to the ability to make choices that are consonant with one’s values and to author one’s own life. Power To is impacted by Power Over; external constraints such as poverty, patriarchy, discrimination, or trauma can limit an individual’s capacity for self-development and choice. Power With (Fishbane, 2001; Surrey, 1991) is the ability to cooperate, share, and care for others. The ways Power To and Power With manifest are shaped by
culture, including gender socialization. While heterosexual couples’ power relationships, shaped by gender expectations, are highlighted in this paper, the approach offered here is applicable to same-sex couples as well.

Negotiating power and influence can be quite challenging for couples, especially when partners become emotionally reactive. Not knowing how to navigate their own emotional responses or how to reach each other, partners may resort to Power Over tactics. Yearning for connection and acceptance, partners inadvertently push each other away with reactive criticism and anger or withdrawal. One partner’s agitated attempt to be heard activates the other’s self-protective mechanisms, as the couple’s cycle of interlocking vulnerabilities and survival strategies takes hold (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004). Thus partners become trapped in Power Over struggles in the face of mutual disappointment and hurt, and in the process experience more disconnection and dissatisfaction.

Couple therapy can offer an antidote to this negative process, facilitating relational empowerment for both partners (Fishbane, 2010). As formulated here, relational empowerment includes the ability to navigate and regulate one’s inner world and to interact successfully in the interpersonal realm, to have both emotional and social intelligence (Bar-On, 2006; Goleman, 1995, 2006; Salovey, Mayer, & Caruso, 2002). Developing the capacity to self-regulate and to make thoughtful choices in the face of conflict (Power To), and to interact with one’s partner with respect and generosity (Power With) can transform couple interactions. Relational empowerment in both partners can facilitate an egalitarian relationship, which is associated with greater couple satisfaction (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Walsh, 2006). Helping clients develop Power To and Power With skills can minimize the tendency to resort to Power Over tactics during conflict. Framing these skills as increasing one’s own power allows clients to see these new behaviors as self-enhancing as well as nurturing of the relationship. Operationalizing these skills and offering clients specific tools for change increase a sense of mastery and hope.

**NEUROBIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The clinical approach described in this article is informed by the burgeoning research in neurobiology. A brief summary is offered of some key neuroscience findings that shed light on couples’ reactivity, emotion and emotion regulation, couples’ co-regulation of each other neurophysiologically, and processes of change. Much of this research entails fMRI studies of individuals being scanned while performing specific tasks. Unlike other in vivo studies of couples interacting that measure physiological reactivity (Gottman & Gottman, 2006), these fMRI studies do not involve couples interacting in their real lives while in a brain scanner; the technology does not yet allow for that. Furthermore, most of the neuroscience research points to correlational rather than causal effects. Despite these limitations, neuroscience offers important insights into the interplay between the emotional brain and higher cognitive functions, and into processes of emotion regulation. Applying these insights to the clinical realm can facilitate empowerment for clinician and clients, as well as increase hope and confidence in the possibility of change. References to neurobiology are offered with the following caveats: (a) we are applying data from highly structured studies to the more ambiguous clinical context; and (b) the neuroscience itself is constantly evolving.

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Threat and Reactivity

Couples' power struggles and emotional reactivity reflect evolutionary hard-wiring to protect oneself when threatened. The amygdala, deep in the limbic system, is constantly scanning for danger. It works automatically, beneath awareness (LeDoux, 1996). If threat is detected, the amygdala sets off a fight-or-flight response, activating the sympathetic nervous system and releasing cortisol and other stress hormones that speed up the heart and prepare muscles for fight or flight. When partners in a couple feel threatened and reactive, one's emotion sets off the other's through emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacciopo, & Rapson, 1993). Partners’ fight-or-flight reactions manifest as criticize/attack on the one hand, and withdraw/stonewall on the other. When the amygdala is highly activated, the higher brain, or prefrontal cortex, may shut down (LeDoux, 2002). Afterward, in trying to justify their reactivity, partners often create a narrative that blames the partner and exonerates the self. Thus relational disempowerment leads to a worsening of the power struggle, mutual blame, and suspicion.

Emotion Regulation

Humans are not just animals on automatic emotional pilot, however. The prefrontal cortex allows one to plan, choose, and think before acting. There are multiple skills in healthy emotion regulation that involve integration of prefrontal cortex and limbic system: reading one’s own emotions, starting with body cues; being able to self-regulate and self-soothe when upset; and being able to communicate emotion in productive ways to others.

The importance of emotion and emotion regulation is emerging in the neuroscience literature. Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” emphasized the rational mind; “I feel therefore I am” (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008) has been offered as a counterbalance to Descartes. Emotion has received extensive attention in recent years in neuroscience (Fosha, Siegel, & Solomon, 2009), the attachment literature (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Johnson, 2004), and psychotherapy (Fosha, 2000; Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Emotions are defined as evolution-based biological processes (Panksepp, 1998) that give us feedback about the world and our experience in it, and that communicate our experience to others. Emotions begin as physical sensations; when we label them with words, they become feelings (LeDoux, 1996). Indeed, the brain itself is embodied (Damasio, 1994), with a constant brain/body feedback loop. Reading and regulating one’s own emotions is crucial for relational empowerment, and for empathy in particular; self-attunement and empathy with others appear to utilize the same resonance circuits in the brain (Siegel, 2007, 2010).

Neurobiological Interdependence

The neuroscience literature underscores that humans are social creatures whose functioning is intertwined with relationships with others. The dominant cultural myth in the United States of the rugged individual self is challenged by the unfolding science of our deep social interdependence throughout the life cycle. We are wired to connect (Fishbane, 2007), with brain circuits dedicated to reading others and communicating with them, often beneath awareness. Emotional and physical wellbeing are influenced by social attachment and connection throughout life; good intimate relationships promote health, healing, and longevity, while unhappy ones create
chronic stress that negatively affects health and the immune system, especially for women (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Loneliness is associated with stress, premature aging, and shorter lifespan (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Even the experience of pain is deeply social; the touch of a loving spouse can reduce one’s sense of threat in the face of pain (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006). Social rejection triggers pain centers in the brain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004); and watching another person in pain triggers one’s own pain centers (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Couples coregulate each other through love, touch, and empathy; they also may dysregulate each other with a cascade of negative physical and emotional reactions.

**Neuroplasticity, Relationship Plasticity**

Partners can learn to regulate self and soothe each other, developing greater relational empowerment and generosity in the relationship. The ability to develop these new skills, to make conscious choices, reflects the power of neuroplasticity, the capacity of the brain—even the adult brain—to change. But the counterpoint to neuroplasticity and new learning is Hebb’s Theorem: “Neurons that fire together, wire together” (Siegel, 1999). Repetitive habitual behaviors are reflected in neural networks that fire quickly and automatically. Habits reinforce these neural networks, and the neural networks reinforce habits. For couples to change from a Power Over habit to the habits of Power To and Power With requires conscious effort and commitment, as well as repetitive practice, so the new perspectives and behaviors themselves can become automatic. In nurturing neuroplasticity in their brains, partners can create relationship plasticity as well.

**CLINICAL APPLICATIONS: SKILL BUILDING FOR RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT**

**From Power Struggle to Relational Empowerment**

Couples’ power struggles reflect societal values as well as neurobiological survival reactions. Cultural beliefs about competition, dominance, and individualism often inform couples’ power struggles and their resorting to Power Over behaviors. Gender training exacerbates this dynamic in heterosexual couples. Patriarchy and socialization influence men to assume a sense of entitlement in relationships, and to view sharing of power or compromise in a negative light. Furthermore, males are frequently socialized away from awareness and expression of emotions, two key aspects of emotional intelligence (Salovey et al., 2002). At the same time, cultural forces shape women to over-empathize, concede, or defer to a man, frequently becoming resentful in the process. These behaviors and expectations—often unconscious—can create automatic patterns of interaction that make one or both partners feel dismissed or treated unjustly in the relationship.

Couple power dynamics can turn toxic when Power Over interactions take the form of domineering behavior, humiliation, or contempt. Assessing for risk of abuse, violence, or intimidation is crucial. But even in the absence of abuse, many people become angrily escalated as they try to impose their view on their partner. The therapist can help the couple see that this behavior comes from a lack of ability to self-regulate or to have a voice in the relationship. In this frame, aggressive Power Over moves and insensitive pushing of one’s own agenda at the expense of the other are seen as disempowerment. This view turns conventional notions of power upside down. Likewise, passive control (such as shutting the other out or stonewalling) is framed as a form of
Power Over behavior that reflects relational disempowerment. Underlying many problematic Power Over behaviors is a deep desire to be heard, understood, and affirmed. Not knowing how to reach the partner, one may resort to aggressive or insensitive tactics, which usually backfire.

Moving from power struggle mode to relational empowerment means that both partners aim to be their best self rather than “besting” the other. Facilitating relational empowerment in couple therapy entails helping partners to identify their own emotional activation, and to find ways to regulate their emotions. Power struggles are transformed as each partner becomes more adept at self-regulation and more successful at getting through to the other, as each develops Power To capacities. Partners also are encouraged to develop resources of empathy and generosity with each other, utilizing a Power With perspective.

Couples often become caught up in cycles of blame and counter-blame, interactions that are fueled by a cultural emphasis on individual rights rather than relational responsibility. Blame and defensiveness are further maintained by a culture of victimization. Relational empowerment helps partners move from a position of two victims to a position of two coauthors of their relationship. Coauthorship assumes choice and flexibility in terms of how the relationship will look and how each will behave, and a shared sense of relational responsibility. The therapist invites the couple to challenge their automatic reactivity, and the justifying and blaming that accompany it, and to develop alternative skills to choreograph a new dance (Scheinman & Fishbane, 2004). Power With skills such as generosity, empathy, and respect are framed as key aspects of relational competence for both genders. Making these shifts requires commitment and intentionality as partners continue to live in a culture that privileges the individual self, the zero sum game, and conventional — and gendered — notions of power. Table 1 summarizes “Power Over” dynamics, as well as skills of “Power To” and “Power With,” to be discussed below.

**Power To**

*Choice and self-regulation*

Power To is exemplified by the ancient Stoic philosopher Seneca: “Most powerful is the person who has himself in his own power.” Power To is the ability to make choices

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Power Over Dynamics</th>
<th>Power To Skills</th>
<th>Power With Skills</th>
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<td>Physical violence, threat, intimidation</td>
<td>Flexibility, thoughtfulness, reflection</td>
<td>Shared relational responsibility</td>
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<td>Humiliation, contempt</td>
<td>Self-responsibility, responsiveness</td>
<td>Nurturing the “we”</td>
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<td>Power struggle, domination</td>
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Table 1

*Relational Empowerment: From “Power Over” to “Power To” and “Power With”*
that are consonant with one’s values. There are many capacities that comprise Power To: flexibility, thoughtfulness, self-regulation, responsiveness, and responsibility. These are prefrontal functions. There are individual differences in prefrontal regulation of emotion that underlie choice and flexibility. For example, both depression and a tendency to violence are associated with an inability of the prefrontal cortex to inhibit the amygdala (Davidson, Putnam, & Larson, 2000; Johnstone, van Reekum, Urry, Kalin, & Davidson, 2007). The abilities to differentially identify one’s emotions and to regulate them are linked (Barrett, Gross, Christensen, & Benvenuto, 2001); both are aspects of emotional intelligence and vital for couple well-being.

Managing emotions

Partners become easily flooded and reactive in intimate relationships as the emotional brain overwhelms the rational brain (LeDoux, 1996), and the couple is off on an escalating cycle of reactivity. When one is upset in the present moment, old emotional memories may be triggered, a process modulated by the amygdala (LeDoux, 1996). The rational brain tries to get into the conversation, offering a rationale for the upset (and it often has to do with something one’s partner did). This “interpreter” function of the left hemisphere (Roser & Gazzaniga, 2004) attempts to make sense of one’s behavior, at times making up stories to explain or justify an emotional reaction. And one partner’s self-justifying narrative can activate a defensive response in the other. The challenge is to invite partners’ higher brains to the process of joint reflection and change.

We are never free of our amygdala tendencies; we would be endangered creatures if we were. Rather, one can learn techniques to calm down and self-soothe when agitated. When painful memories are activated, one can learn to deal with them more successfully. Regulating emotion does not mean suppressing emotion with reason, but rather experiencing emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. Identifying and naming emotions activates the prefrontal cortex and calms down the emotional brain (Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007). With emotions experienced as manageable, one can feel safer connecting to self and other.

In adult intimate relationships, when partners are unable to regulate their own emotions, they are at the mercy of their internal experiences. They are also at the mercy of the other partner’s ability to be understanding and soothing—or not. A person who feels dysregulated and frustrated by the partner’s lack of empathy may resort to Power Over tactics. For example, in a couple therapy session, John is upset by what he feels to be Emily’s disinterest and dismissal of his concerns. John—a tall man—stands up in the middle of the session, yelling at the top of his lungs. This is the first time I have seen one of John’s tantrums that are so distressing to Emily. While John has never been violent, both his wife and I feel intimidated by his outburst. Emily shuts down and tunes out altogether, looking out the window. I say to him, “John, you’re in a lot of pain right now, and you deserve to be heard. But with you standing there yelling, neither Emily nor I can hear you; it’s very intimidating. So please, sit down, and tell us from the heart what it is you need and want us to know.” This fulminating man sits down, sobbing, and speaks about his pain at not being able to get through to his wife. He notes that he is frequently unable to express his feelings or needs to Emily; when he becomes frustrated enough, he blows up verbally. While this couple, together for 20 years, have shared good times and parented well together, John’s periodic temper tantrums have created so much unhappiness for both partners that Emily is considering divorce.

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In therapy, I frame John’s blowups as moments of disempowerment, in which he loses himself and Emily as well. We work to help him learn more effective ways to identify and regulate his emotions and to reach out to Emily. He gradually increases his tolerance for his own feelings of vulnerability. Less panicked if Emily does not attune or attend to him in exactly the way he needs, John eventually becomes more relationally resilient. He also learns to identify the prodromal cues of his anger before it escalates, and practices focused breathing techniques when he feels the agitation rising within him. With these new skills of body awareness and self-soothing, John is able to rely less on his old Power Over tactics. He sees that they arise from his sense of frustration and emotional inadequacy, and from his loneliness in the marriage—and he sees how his tactics have been pushing Emily away. He comes to understand how his behavior as an angry threatening man is playing out destructive gendered power scenarios in his marriage. We also work on the ways Emily has shut down and shut John out over the years, as she has tried to regulate her own fear and anger in the relationship. She has shut John out in other ways as well, excluding him from decision-making about their children. In her passive way, Emily has also been using Power Over tactics in the marriage. I encourage Emily to speak up to John about her needs and experiences, so she can stop feeling so resentful of him and can feel more equal in the relationship. She has to confront her gendered lack of entitlement in the marriage. For both partners, learning to hold their own in the relationship through Power To skills challenges their old interactive patterns that were informed by constraining gender roles.

Imagery techniques can facilitate self-regulation. If partners are escalated and reactive, the therapist might suggest that they imagine their prefrontal cortex calming their rowdy amygdala (Fishbane, 2008). Clients find this metaphoric use of brain function to be empowering; “neuroeducation” (Fishbane, 2008) allows clients to identify their own brain processes and to make more informed and thoughtful choices. A similar technique involves the client imagining a good parent within soothing the frightened inner child (Schwartz, 1995). As partners become more confident with regard to their own emotion regulation, they become less desperate for the other’s capacity to soothe them. This is not to suggest that one should be totally self-sufficient and not need the other. Rather, being able to self-regulate and self-soothe means that when one’s partner is unavailable or disappointing in a given interaction, one does not become dysregulated, but can gain perspective and become calm enough to address the issues with the partner. Other techniques for self-regulation include mindfulness meditation (Davidson et al., 2003), focused breathing, and journaling.

Differentiation

Differentiation of self is a key aspect of Power To. With differentiation one can see the partner as a human being, and relate with respect and generosity despite differences or disappointments. Differentiation often necessitates moderating and nuancing one’s survival strategies from childhood, and addressing unfinished business from the family of origin. Resolving old intergenerational issues can release resources for relational empowerment in the couple relationship. Emotional memories from childhood frequently get activated in the couple’s current relationship, a process, as noted, that involves the amygdala. Identifying and working on old wounds with parents and others from the past can release partners from the hold of these old.
injuries and memories, and allow for a separation of the present from the past (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004; Fishbane, 2005). I often include work on each partner’s relationships with family of origin as part of couple therapy. Change in the couple, in the individual, and in intergenerational relationships can facilitate synergistic change in all three arenas. When clients feel more empowered in themselves and with their family of origin, they can be more relationally competent with their partners.

Differentiation requires good boundaries. With clients who have difficulty separating self from other, where the boundaries become blurred, the “fence exercise” (Fishbane, 2005) is helpful. For example, Emily gets agitated and impatient with John’s difficulty expressing his emotions. This makes him even more tongue-tied. I ask Emily to imagine a picket fence between her yard and her neighbor’s; the neighbor, I suggest, is planting in a way that Emily thinks would not succeed. Despite the neighbor’s imperfect garden, Emily can still enjoy her garden on her side of the fence. If the neighbor is planting poison ivy that will damage Emily’s garden, she needs to speak up and address this; but otherwise, Emily’s summer does not have to be ruined because of her neighbor’s less than perfect flowers. Having a better boundary allows Emily to be more compassionate with John, because she is not responsible for his ability to communicate. In the past Emily used boundaries to shut John out; now she experiments with accepting him as an other, and she can be more patient with his process. Her more adaptive boundary also allows her to challenge John when she experiences him as intimidating.

Making a relational claim

Power To includes the ability to speak effectively to one’s partner. Clients are encouraged to make a relational claim (Fishbane, 2001), to speak their own feelings, beliefs, and needs, in a manner that also holds concern for the other and for the relationship. It is a complex relational skill, requiring good boundaries, the ability to have a voice, and openness to the other’s point of view. It is often necessary to challenge gender-based assumptions when learning to make a relational claim in heterosexual relationships. John was socialized for dominance; he has to learn to share power and airtime with his wife. He also needs to learn to identify and articulate his own needs and experience while being open to Emily’s. While Emily is more adept at emotional expression, she needs to confront her gendered assumptions about her right to speak and be heard. She also needs to confront her contempt over what she perceives to be John’s limited emotional intelligence, since contempt is a particularly toxic force in unhappy marriages (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Making a relational claim challenges both partners’ assumptions about voice, entitlement, and gender roles.

Some partners, caught up in Power Over thinking, assume that they have two choices: they can either dominate or be dominated. John noted that for years he had gone along with what his wife wanted, ending up feeling like a doormat. At one point he rebelled against this arrangement, and became stubborn, angry, and determined not to let Emily win in arguments. He was stuck, seeing only two options, neither of which was bringing him any relationship satisfaction. I said to John, “You see two doorways. What if there’s a third? Doorway #1 is you are a doormat; Doorway #2 is you have to win, you become domineering with your wife. Doorway #3 would look something like this: You could speak respectfully to your wife and be heard, while...
hearing her at the same time.” Doorway #3 is essentially making a relational claim. John was fully in support of trying Doorway #3, as it was framed as relational empowerment. Over time he learned that being a doormat and domineering were both behaviors of disempowerment. He liked the idea that with self-regulation he could have a voice and still be respectful and collaborative with Emily. She—who had oscillated between over-concern for her husband’s emotional wellbeing and resentfully holding out on him—learned to navigate their differences more explicitly, and welcomed his newfound relational competence.

Navigating conflict

Conflict is an aspect of all relationships, including healthy ones. In happy marriages, partners turn toward each other rather than away from or against each other—even in moments of conflict (Gottman & Driver, 2005). The ability to turn toward one’s partner when upset or angry is undermined by emotional flooding. When flooded, heart racing, one cannot think straight (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Indeed, stonewalling can be seen as an attempted solution for flooding, a temporary refuge from biological overarousal. The problem is that for the other partner, stonewalling feels like abandonment. Rather than unilaterally walking out on the partner, one can negotiate a time-out, a break to regain physiological regulation and calm, in order to resume a more productive dialogue later. During the time out, activated partners are instructed to focus on calming techniques—breathing, taking a walk, meditating—and not to keep revving up with angry thoughts (Gottman & Gottman, 2006). The time-out break is framed as neither abandonment nor an admission of losing the fight; it is rather a step toward greater self-control and relational empowerment—and a step toward constructive reengagement. John finds the time out especially helpful when he begins to feel agitated; he learns to identify the early cues of his own anger and comes to see the time out as a way of regaining his own composure and personal power so he can hold his own with Emily with more respect and collaboration.

Change: The fork in the road

After a failed interaction, when partners have become reactive or defensive, I invite them to do some “Monday morning quarterbacking,” to review their own reactive behavior, and to rewrite their own script in the interaction. Rather than blame each other for what went wrong, I encourage both partners to reflect on what they might have done differently. We visualize a fork in the road (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004): One well-trodden path leads to automatic reactive behaviors, while the other path represents a more thoughtful choice of self-regulation and openness to the other’s claim. Clients have come to a session rejoicing in their choice of the new path at a given moment with their partner. I rejoice with them, as this moment of choice constitutes a step toward relational empowerment and a more compassionate, respectful relationship. Practicing the new behavior over and over again is necessary for the new habit to become wired into the brain (Doidge, 2007) and for the couple to nurture relationship plasticity. Sharing this bit of neuroeducation is important for clients to anticipate and plan for setbacks, when the old interactions reappear. The hope offered by neuroplasticity is anchored by a realistic awareness of the power of habits and the amount of work it takes for new behaviors to become automatic.
Power With

Working as a team

Power With focuses on the couple sharing power and responsibility for nurturing their relationship. By working as a team to create a safe context, partners are less likely to experience danger with each other, and thus less likely to be dominated by their emotional reactivity. Mutual respect is key here, as couples learn to accept and work with their differences without resorting to Power Over tactics. When a couple in therapy is fighting over what really happened in a fight, or debating about what each should be doing or feeling, they can be encouraged to make room for multiple realities in their relationship. A zero-sum game is a poor model for intimate relationships; in marriage, either both win or both lose. In a nonzero-sum approach, both partners take responsibility for their relationship, and both partners are enhanced by the positive aspects of generosity and appreciation.

Research has found that couples who use the pronoun “we” and have a “we” consciousness experience greater satisfaction (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009). Partners’ ability to think of the “we”—while maintaining the integrity and safety of each one’s ‘I’—nurthes a sense of shared responsibility for the relationship. I encourage a “couple observing ego” (Wile, 2002), a joint platform as partners consider their relationship goals. One way to foster this is to use the Vulnerability Cycle Diagram (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004). As John and Emily fill out their own cycle of mutually recursive vulnerabilities and survival strategies, they externalize their dance and come to see both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal dynamics fueling it. Each is encouraged to “look behind the scenes” at the other’s vulnerability when the partner’s survival strategy is triggered. John sees that his periodic rages make his wife feel unsafe, much as she felt as a child with her volatile mother. Emily identifies how her contempt and criticism of John, alternating with her tuning him out when he gets angry, keep him feeling inadequate and insecure with her, much as he felt with his critical father. This use of the Vulnerability Cycle Diagram allows the couple to look at their stuck impasse—and at each other’s vulnerabilities—with more sympathetic eyes.

Empathy

A key aspect of Power With is empathy. Mutual empathy helps partners feel secure and connected (attachment needs), as well as validated (identity affirmation) (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Empathy involves several neurobiological components: Resonance, a subcortical, automatic process in which one feels in one’s brain/body what the other feels; cognitive empathy, in which one consciously puts oneself into the other’s shoes; and self-regulation and a boundary between oneself and the other, so one does not become overwhelmed in the face of the other’s pain (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Oxytocin, a hormone and neurotransmitter that is released with empathy, reduces the stress hormone cortisol. There are individual differences in human empathy capacity. Some of this may be affected by biology; women have greater exposure to oxytocin (Uvnas-Moberg, 2003). In addition, individual differences in empathy reflect socialization and family-of-origin experiences. Males tend to be socialized away from feelings, and from the skill of empathy. However, research indicates that with motivation, both men and women can increase their level of empathic accuracy (Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000; Klein & Hodges, 2001).
Differences in empathic capacity can pose clinical dilemmas for couples. While Emily is highly skilled at empathy, John is empathy-challenged; both partners feel frustrated with this discrepancy. Framing empathy as a set of skills that can be learned, I offer to coach John. He is relieved as the components of empathy are operationalized and practiced in the laboratory of the relationship. John was discouraged from identifying his own feelings as a child both in his peer group and by his parents, so he has difficulty naming his feelings, especially vulnerable feelings. For him the work focuses on tuning into and resonating with his own body cues and emotions as well as Emily’s. John’s initial attempts to understand Emily’s experience seem wooden and awkward, and Emily becomes impatient and contemptuous of his slow progress. I encourage her to be more patient, indicating that the payoff is substantial on the other side of this process. For her part, Emily has difficulty with cognitive empathy due to her anger at John, which blocks the natural curiosity of empathy. Furthermore, in the past, Emily has lost herself in her concern for John; her overcorrection has led to a rigid wall that she has built to keep John out. Our work helping her build more flexible boundaries allows Emily to witness John’s experience without either taking responsibility for it or shutting him out.

Other blocks to empathy include defensiveness, blame, and guilt. When a partner is feeling defensive, I offer a bit of neuroeducation, normalizing that we are wired to defend ourselves when attacked. I further suggest that one can make a choice about defensiveness. Thus, for example, John is feeling defensive in a session. I ask if he can put his defensiveness down on the table for a moment, so he can listen to his wife with an open heart. I make it clear that he can pick up his defensiveness at any time; it is a shield that he can choose to put on or put down. In this way, John is in charge of his defensiveness rather than his defensiveness controlling him. At the same time, I coach Emily to speak with a softer startup (Gottman & Gottman, 2008), which is less likely to activate her husband’s defensiveness. This reframe of choice about defensiveness is empowering for couples. Choosing to lower one’s defensiveness opens the path for empathy. Defensiveness is further disarmed and empathy heightened when partners speak from their vulnerabilities rather than from their self-protective survival strategies (Scheinikman & Fishbane, 2004).

**Blame and guilt**

When couples are caught up in a cycle of blame, Power With and Power To have yielded to Power Over struggles. I encourage the couple to create a Blame Free Zone in their house; if blame shows up, they can invite blame to leave. Couples find this language empowering, as they externalize blame in their relationship (White, 1989) and take ownership of their own process. Sometimes a partner will blame the other in order not to blame the self. People who were raised with blame and shame in childhood tend to assume that when things go wrong it’s their fault. The blame game may be fueled by the desire for the blame not to land in one’s own lap. Identifying blame as relational disempowerment invites partners to take a new stand toward their own blaming instincts.

Guilt can block empathy. As John says, “If I allow myself to feel bad for you, Emily, it means I am bad, because I am the source of your pain.” John is allergic to all guilt. I suggest that rather than framing guilt as a bad thing, we can look at it as a relational resource. Healthy guilt is our conscience; it is appropriate to feel bad when we hurt someone. Separating healthy from neurotic guilt (Buber, 1957), partners can honor...
their guilt feelings as a sign that they care, that they are not sociopaths. We are wired to care about each other (Keltner, 2009) and to care if we hurt each other. Relational empowerment makes room for healthy guilt as a resource.

**Care and repair**

Power With includes taking responsibility for processes of care and repair in the relationship. Careseeking and caregiving are both central in intimate relationships (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Taylor’s (2002) work on the tending instinct identifies “Tend and Befriend,” not just fight–flight, in response to stress. Perhaps more salient for females due to both oxytocin and to socialization, Tend and Befriend, in which people turn to each other in times of stress, is a powerful relational resource. I encourage partners to actively develop their skills of generosity and care with each other, of giving and receiving nurturance. Tend and Befriend for couples includes making opportunity for loving physical contact. Sex, massage, and gentle touch all trigger the release of oxytocin, which reduces stress.

Power With does not flow constantly and easily. In any relationship there are breaks in connection and in attunement, cycles of connection–disconnection repair. Even in well-attuned mother–infant dyads, it has been found that 70% of the interactions are not in synchrony (Tronick, 2007). But repair quickly follows: “Normal infants and their mothers are constantly moving into mismatch states and are then successfully repairing them” (Tronick, 2007, p. 159). Similarly, happy couples have moments of conflict and misattunement, and they, like the well-attached mother-baby dyads, are able to repair and reconnect (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). The importance of giving and receiving repair attempts is central in happy relationships. Educating couples about the normal flow of connection and disconnection, of rupture and repair, facilitates the development of Power With, as partners understand the inevitability of hurt and disappointment in a close relationship and take responsibility for repair. Toxic ruptures such as affairs or abusive behavior require a different level of work, including assessing the viability and safety of the relationship in the context of violations of trust. If the couple decides to stay together, establishing safety and addressing relational wounds are vital therapeutic tasks.

**Apology**

Repair includes apology, a major tool of relational empowerment. Some partners are apology-challenged due to their early family-of-origin experiences. John and Emily report that after they fight, while John is quick to apologize, Emily is unable to own her part in the fight or apologize. This leaves John feeling disconnected and frustrated. Emily knows that it would be helpful to apologize, but she finds it impossible. I ask her, “Is this familiar to you, that someone close to you wants you to apologize, and you just can’t?” Emily replies by telling the story from childhood that when she and her sister would fight, her mother always blamed Emily and would beat her to try to force her to apologize. Not apologizing became the only shred of control and integrity Emily could find in her family of origin. She learned not to apologize as an expression of personal power. John knew that Emily’s mother had periodic rages, but he had never heard the story of the beatings around apology. The sharing of this story transformed this couple’s impasse around apology. The sharing of this story transformed this couple’s impasse around apology, as John, feeling empathy for his wife and her childhood trauma, stopped pressing her to apologize; and as Emily softened and became more flexible and thoughtful about taking responsibility for her
part in marital fights. The story also made John more protective of Emily with regard to his own rages, as he saw the connection between his behavior and Emily’s mother’s behavior, and resolved not to further hurt his wife in this way. As John changed, Emily became more able to separate the present from the past and felt safer in the relationship and less fearful of her husband’s anger—which he now was more adept at managing. And with less fear and disempowerment, Emily became less critical, which allowed John to feel safer in the relationship as well.

POWER AND THE THERAPIST

The therapist’s “expert” position can feel threatening to clients if it is held in a Power Over mode. We do have expertise, which is why clients come to us. But being mindful of the power aspects of this relationship is key to creating a safe working alliance. Working collaboratively and transparently places the therapist in a Power With position. Power With allows the therapist to feel deeply with clients, to join them in their limbic experience. However, through emotional contagion, the therapist can become dysregulated in the face of clients’ deep emotional pain. It is the therapist’s Power To capacities of self-attunement and self-regulation that allow for a safe entry into the couple’s limbic world without becoming overwhelmed. Clients need the therapist to be with them and to pose challenges for change while maintaining both respect and healthy boundaries. The interplay of Power Over, Power To, and Power With are as vital for the therapist as they are for the couple.

CONCLUSION: WHAT’S IN A PREPOSITION?

The prepositions we live have deep personal and ethical implications. Living in a Power Over mode constrains relational possibilities and satisfaction. Cultural values of Power Over pervade couples’ relationships, often unconsciously and despite partners’ egalitarian commitments. Partners resort to Power Over tactics when they do not know how to get through to each other, to speak and be heard. Developing Power To and Power With capacities opens up connection and competence in intimate relationships so partners do not have to resort to Power Over behaviors. Turning toward promotes intimacy and lowers defensiveness; turning away narrows the relational range and deadens one’s own vibrancy; turning against makes our partner into our enemy. These prepositions are not mere grammatical fine points. They delimit our relational and personal possibilities, and those of our partners. Developing the competencies and commitments of relational empowerment promotes thoughtfulness in how we position ourselves vis-à-vis the others in our lives. Recursively, how we position ourselves with others affects the self. Rethinking power to include relational empowerment facilitates greater self-regulation, connection, and generosity with others. It challenges constraining, unequal gender roles and a culture that prizes separation, individualism, and competition.

REFERENCES


www.FamilyProcess.org