

CHAPTER 13

Searching for Mutuality

A Feminist/Multicultural Approach to Couple Therapy

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Family therapists often do not intend to become specialists in couple therapy. As Gurman observed in the introduction to the *Casebook of Marital Therapy* (1985), the family therapy field has historically treated couple therapy as a kind of “ambivalently valued stepchild” (p. xiii), technically under the umbrella of a family systems approach, but of less interest (and less value in staking out unique family therapy territory?) than the problems of families with children and adolescents. Many graduate training programs, as well as master’s and doctoral internships, leave us far more prepared to work with an entire family system than with two people in an intimate relationship.

I (SMA) had learned some basic cognitive-behavioral techniques such as those used by Markman and his colleagues in marriage enhancement (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988), some basics of Kaplan-style sex therapy (1988), and Schnarch’s (1991) adaptation of Bowen’s work for couples’ sexual problems, but I lacked an overarching sense of how to deal with the day-to-day issues of typical self-referred couples. I was competent enough at a general systemic approach not to make most of the mistakes Doherty (2002) identifies—taking a passive stance better suited to individual work, focusing on “clarifying” individual issues, taking sides with the more sympathetic partner, avoiding intensity, or pathologizing relationships. But I didn’t have a theory of love, intimacy,

or partnership. Thinking back, while I was in school I had probably seen one “master therapist” video of couple work for every 10 to 20 videos of family work. When it came to couple therapy, my world was full of “unknown unknowns,” to quote a former U.S. Secretary of Defense.

And yet when I (SMA) opened my small private practice shortly after becoming licensed as a marriage and family therapist, I quickly found that the majority of my clients were couples. I advertised myself as seeing “individuals, couples, and families,” with expertise in “gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT), and multicultural issues.” Many of my early callers wanted therapy for problems like anxiety, depression, anger, or grief and loss. My systemic training taught me that when a potential client called complaining of an individual problem, I should always ask about their couple and family relationships and look for the possibility of involving other family members. Because many of my clients were young adults who hadn’t yet started families, I suddenly found myself doing a great deal of couple therapy. (And as I write this, it occurs to me that sexual minority clients are somewhat less likely to have children than heterosexual clients; as a systemic therapist working with the GLBT population, I unwittingly set myself up to see a great many couples!) After I started taking insurance a year or two later, I learned from callers that very few providers on panels mentioned “couple therapy” as a service they offered, perhaps a result of the insurance focus on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and its medical model. As a result, couples came to be upwards of 60% of my private practice.

I (SMA) quickly became a practitioner in search of a better theory. I don’t think my early work with couples was bad (and I hope my clients would agree)—I relied mostly on Bowen intergenerational principles; basic family systems (with the feminist critique of circular causality’s limitations and an attention to power dynamics); knowledge about the influence of oppression and marginalization; and a curious, respectful, collaborative stance with couples. My therapeutic stance, then as now, is what I call “the love child of Carl Whitaker and Virginia Satir.” I frequently rely on use of self as a therapeutic tool, combined with both a playful and nurturing attitude with my clients. One could, I think, do much worse.

The more couples we (SMA and VT) have seen, the more they have taught us about how complex their deceptively simple-sounding concerns really are and how hard it is to treat each other in a way that is congruent with the desire for love, trust, and intimacy they express. As we have listened to tales of lovers who lash out with words or withdraw into stony silence, driving themselves and their partners to tears of rage and frustration again and again, concepts like “homeostasis” seem inadequate to help understand why it is so hard for them to change.

One other guide for our early work with couples was the influence of a multicultural, social justice perspective, even if it wasn’t specific to couple work in particular. We were both familiar with the work of various feminist family

therapists (McGoldrick, Anderson, & Walsh, 1991; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1991), who critiqued rigidly gendered family roles and the influence of power in relationships, and advocates of multiculturally competent therapy, who stressed the way that ethnicity, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and other contextual factors always enter the room (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002). In our promotional materials, we both mentioned that we work with GLBT clients and “diversity issues”; over time, our practices saw many same-sex couples and a significant minority of mixed-race couples as well. The more work we have done with them, the more they have validated our belief that all therapy is, to some degree, cross-cultural, and that couples are always negotiating their relationships across boundaries of difference, whether of gender, race, religion, geography, class, or age. We have yet to see any who did not, at times, find themselves facing off across a gap of lived experience and expectations.

STRUCTURE OF THERAPY

Most of the couples, in our experience, naturally organize their therapy in a way that is remarkably consistent with Gottman’s research (1999)—weekly therapy up front, gradually decreasing the frequency of sessions to every other week, eventually fading out the therapist via longer and longer gaps between meetings or a planned therapy “holiday” followed by one or two more meetings to consolidate gains. A typical couple might do 3 months of weekly meetings, followed by 3 months of biweekly, with one or two concluding sessions; a more distressed couple often met weekly for 3 to 4 months, with 4 to 6 months of biweekly meetings after. We do not impose this structure on couples, but have noticed over time that most of our cases fall into a similar “arc” from the beginning of work to the therapeutic denouement, if you will. Some couples preferred to begin therapy on a biweekly basis because of constraints on money, time, or energy. Our feminist/multicultural orientation means that we emphasize to clients that as the therapy consumers and the experts on their own lives, they are the ones who ultimately dictate the terms of our work together. If asked, we will offer “expert” observations that very troubled couples particularly seem to benefit from weekly meetings at first, but we have found that allowing the timing of sessions to emerge from the couple, rather than from us, results in more empowered and invested clients than if we dictate the terms of engagement.

Some couples seem to be afraid to terminate, unsure that they can go it alone without the structure of therapy. In these cases, we validate their fear of returning to “the bad old days,” highlight how much they’ve been able to change their patterns in and out of session with less and less help, and offer to meet once a month (or even less frequently) until they are “ready to be fired from therapy.” Usually we have no more than two monthly meetings before the couple agrees

that it's time to cut the cord, although we always let them know that they are welcome to return at any point in the future. A few couples do an initial round of therapy for 6 to 9 months, take a break for a year or more, and come back for another round that inevitably turns out to be shorter.

INITIAL CONTACT: RAPHAEL AND AMRITA

The message on my (SMA) voice mail was from a young-sounding woman who had been looking for a couple therapist on her insurance panel. Amrita told me that she and her fiancée, Raphael, were having problems and wanted some help. When we spoke on the phone to set up the appointment, her story was fairly typical—they “fought all the time,” both were “under a lot of stress,” and their relationship had gotten to the point that she felt they needed outside help. “What does he think about coming to therapy?” I asked. “He thinks it's kind of a waste of time, but he said he'd come,” she told me. As she asked me the usual new-client questions about fees, scheduling, and my experience with couples, I wondered about their respective ethnicities based on their first and last names, but she didn't raise the issue. My experience is that few clients of color ask white therapists about cross-cultural competency, which I believe results from the taboo around openly discussing race in the United States, as well as a lifetime of dealing with white professionals who often don't handle questions about cultural competency well.

A week later, Raphael flopped indolently onto the couch, critically eyeing my artwork, in particular a large, colorful poster of dark-skinned women dancing. He wore a slightly rumpled black button-down shirt, open at the neck, and a flashy watch. Amrita cut a more anxious figure in a muted blue sweater set, perched nervously at the other end of the couch. Neither looked very pleased to be coming to therapy.

My first couple session follows a fairly predictable path. After we handle the “boring paperwork part of things,” I asked the couple to tell me what brought them in, even though we had discussed the presenting problem on the phone. As much as any specific content, I want to see how the couple communicates with me—whether one person does most of the talking, whether they take turns or speak over each other, whether they seem to agree or disagree about the definition of the problem. The process of answering my opening questions gives me an early sense of the couple's dynamic—are they a team united against the problems plaguing them? Or are they facing off across a battlefield?

Clearly, one of the central mechanisms of change in couple therapy involves the fact that so much of the problem is “in the room,” to be addressed directly. So the

therapist's noticing and observing clinically relevant partner behavior is an invaluable component of the process.

Question: How much “observing” of the couple’s interaction do you usually do? How do you decide (if it’s a conscious process) when you have “seen enough” to intervene? And how do you decide when you think it best for the partners to speak to you and when to speak to each other?

Raphael spoke first: “Amrita said we should get some help because we fight all the time.” “What do you think about that?” I asked him. “I think it’s a waste of money. No offense, but I don’t think a therapist is going to tell us anything we don’t already know. She just needs to calm down and not get so wound up, and she knows it—she’s got to get control of her temper.” He directed the first part of his reply to me, and the second to Amrita, both in a confident but not aggressive tone. “Well, I appreciate you letting me know up front that you’re not sure about this therapy thing,” I replied. “I’m glad you’re willing to be honest with me.” He laughed. “I’m a straightforward guy, and I tell it like it is.”

I turned to Amrita. She was clearly angry. “How would you describe what’s brought you here today?” “Raphael likes to think that it’s all my fault, but he needs to take part of the blame,” she retorted hotly. “I do have a temper, and I get too mad sometimes, but he never wants to admit how much he’s part of the problem, too. He teases me and gets me going, and then laughs when I get angry.” Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, whether of sadness or of rage I couldn’t tell. She described a pattern of quickly escalating fights, usually over a trivial disagreement of some kind, that usually culminated with them screaming at each other. While Raphael sat smirking, she shamefacedly reported that they both resorted to name-calling (“He calls me fat, stupid, crazy bitch . . . He says no man would want me because I’m crazy, and then he laughs in my face. I usually call him an asshole and threaten to leave him, but once I called him ‘limp dick,’ and that made him really mad”), and admitted that once or twice a month, she would attack him with slaps and fingernails.

“Does she manage to hurt you when she comes at you physically?” I asked Raphael with concern. “Are you kidding? Look at her—I can pick her up with one hand,” he scoffed. “She scratched me once or twice but now I can tell when she’s gonna come at me, and I just hold her arms until she agrees to behave.” “Does he hurt you when he’s holding you?” I asked Amrita. “No, he just makes me calm down until I stop acting crazy,” she said. I asked about any other physical violence and was assured by both that this was the extent of it, but I made a note to myself to later follow up with an individual assessment with both (which, in fact, turned up no other violence.) Both agreed that this cycle of escalating

combat was unacceptable, but just as in their opening statements, Amrita saw the problem as mutual while Raphael laid it squarely at her feet. “I don’t want to get so mad,” she said miserably, “but I sometimes feel like he loves making me angry.” “You just gotta grow a thicker skin,” he retorted. Both were concerned that their increasing anger and hostility was enough of a problem that it had caused them to postpone their planned wedding.

A BRIEF HISTORY

My (SMA) next step in an initial couple session is to take a brief family history from each client, including their family of origin’s cultural, socioeconomic, and religious background. My sense was that Amrita was more comfortable talking to me than Raphael was, as she had already disclosed her shame over her violent outbursts, while he maintained a detached, almost amused posture that revealed little about his true feelings. I turned to him first in hopes of engaging him more.

I learned that his family was proudly Italian American, his grandparents on both sides having emigrated as young adults to New Jersey. With relatives already established in the United States, they acculturated easily and prospered, one grandfather running a lucrative bookkeeping firm while the other became a successful physician. Both sides lived comfortably, and by the time their children came along, spoke only English at home although they remained practicing Catholics and deeply loyal to “the old country.”

Raphael saw his parents as having a “dysfunctional” marriage, held together only by religious conviction and his lawyer father’s frequent purchases of expensive jewelry for his mother, whom he idolized. “My dad could be a real jerk,” he reported. “If he didn’t like what you were doing, he was quick to lay into you until Mom put a stop to it. By the time I got to high school he spent most of his time at the office, which was OK by me.” His only other sibling, an older sister, was a high school dropout and a source of family stress, but Raphael had “made good” by going to law school himself and opening a fledgling firm specializing in corporate transactions. His own history was marked by an abortive 3-year marriage that “was a mistake from the beginning,” in which “she just used me like a checkbook,” but he would elaborate no further other than to say that his mother had loved his ex-wife “like her own daughter.” I asked if he still followed his family’s Catholic faith; he said he was an “Easter and Christmas type of guy” but hid this from his mother, who was more devout.

Amrita, college-educated but working as a nanny, was the oldest daughter of Punjabi immigrants, but her family’s experience in America was radically different from Raphael’s. Both of her parents became part of the immigrant working class in California’s Central Valley, her father putting in long hours at an

agricultural plant while her mother worked as an elder-care provider, sometimes for 24-hour shifts. With five daughters, the family struggled financially, and tensions at home were often high. Amrita and her mother bore the brunt of her father's regular violent outbursts. Amrita vividly described watching her father beat her mother until she attacked him herself so her mother could escape.

She was close with her mother and sisters, but also angry with her mother for remaining in an abusive relationship. "He ruled us by terror," Amrita said. "I never understood why she put up with it—she is so strong, and she taught me to be strong, but she never even threatened to leave." Like Raphael, she had an ambivalent relationship with her family's religious faith, in this case Hinduism. Though raised with a Hindu belief system and values, as a young adult she said Hindu tradition had become "less important than it used to be," and she was often not very attentive to rules about diet and morality. She also kept this from her mother.

The couple met at a nightclub in Toronto when Raphael was on vacation and Amrita was spending a semester at the university there. He approached her because he found her attractive, and sparks flew. After a brief courtship, Amrita moved to Colorado to be with Raphael. She was finding the transition difficult—she spent most of her time at work or home alone when Raphael was working long hours and had made few local friends. She was lonely for her mother and sisters, and for the Punjabi community she had back home. The couple had little community support, spending most of their time at home watching movies or going out to trendy bars and clubs where they would spend \$100 or more on drinks. On these outings, the cost, the alcohol, and their flirtatious behaviors with others all fueled intense arguments. "He gets touchy-feely when he drinks," she complained. "She's worse!" he countered. I observed that the couple didn't seem to have agreed on their mutual expectations when it came to boundaries around the relationship. "What mutual expectations?" Amrita asked. "He wants me to be submissive to him, let him be the boss and make all the decisions." "Why shouldn't I make the decisions? It's my money we're out spending!" snapped Raphael.

The couple had wildly disparate incomes—they agreed that Raphael made "probably ten times" what Amrita earned—but they handled their expenses separately, each contributing 50% of their bills and paying for their own entertainment, clothing, and hobbies. Amrita spoke bitterly of having to phone Raphael and ask him for money in order to get a manicure, but being criticized for not "keeping herself up" if she left her nails natural. "Raphael always wants to go out, but I have to ask him to pay my way or I can't afford to go," she said with exasperation. "I feel like a little girl always having to ask my daddy for money. And I think he likes it, he likes me having to come to him. He likes holding it over me." Raphael's expression and body language seemed to confirm her suspicion—he looked almost satisfied as she spoke.

Amrita saw herself as “between two worlds” culturally, with one foot in her family’s Punjabi identity and Hindu traditions, and the other in a largely white, secular world, especially after moving to Colorado. Her mother was worried about her dating a white Catholic and complained that she didn’t think Raphael was “a family person.” She knew her father disapproved, but he never expressed this directly to her, only through her mother. Amrita said she felt hostility from Raphael’s mother at first, whom she saw as loyal to his first wife, but said she had “come around” and they got on quite well now—so well that Raphael’s father was jealous of how close the two had become. At the same time she felt caught between the two men, attempting to mediate their lifelong conflict. Raphael’s view was that “we have more in common than not,” and saw no point in focusing on the topic of culture. “It’s not an issue,” he said, rolling his eyes. “People are the same all over.”

SESSION I, CONTINUED

As I took the couple’s history, they both softened somewhat. I asked what they liked about the relationship, what worked for them; they agreed that most of the time they got along, and could really laugh and enjoy each other. Raphael praised Amrita for her willingness to cook his favorite foods, keep up with his dry cleaning, and tidy up after his admittedly sloppy habits. “She’s a good woman—she spoils me,” he remarked fondly. But it was hard for them to talk about anything but the problems, to which they quickly returned. They agreed that screaming and yelling was destroying their relationship from the inside out, and that they both took part in the mutual verbal combat. They wanted to end the conflict, including the screaming and name-calling, and Amrita agreed that she wanted to handle her anger without getting physical—in fact, she committed in the first session to a “hands-off policy” when she was angry. They both admitted that once conflict was joined, they had trouble backing down. Their descriptions of their troubles got less polarized.

Still, the degree of responsibility each was willing to take differed noticeably. “Look, I sometimes can’t resist poking the bear,” Raphael said with a laugh. “She gets mad about the littlest things, and it’s just funny sometimes, you know, she gets so upset she’s funny. But she knows I don’t mean those things.” “Are you sure she knows that?” I asked him. “Do you think she finds it funny when you ‘poke the bear?’” He shrugged. “She needs to lighten up.” Amrita looked miserable. “He’s so disrespectful to me,” she protested.

Toward the end of the session, I asked them to identify specific goals for therapy, after confirming that their overall goal was, indeed, to make the relationship work. “What would you like to see change? How will we know when we’re done with therapy?” I asked. Their list was ambitious, though not unreal-

istic: end the screaming by learning to fight in a safe, civil way; increase mutual respect by ending the name-calling, mocking, and provoking; find a way to admit when they were wrong and apologize with honor; increase trust; agree to disagree and let things go; and get “a sense of perspective” rather than making every difference a battleground. As I wrapped up the list, Amrita added a goal of her own: “I want to talk about his treatment of women,” she said. “I want him to understand how he comes off to me.” Surprisingly, Raphael didn’t argue with her, didn’t even comment with a sigh or eye-roll. I loaned them a copy of Gottman’s *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* (1994) and suggested that they look through some of the self-evaluations in it for next time.

My perspective on this couple was informed by a family systems, intergenerational, and feminist/social justice perspective. For example, I suspected that Amrita’s occasional violence had its origins in her experiences with her violent father. And I suspected that Raphael’s “pokes” at Amrita were much closer to his father’s habit of “laying into you” than friendly banter—I detected an undertone of aggression and contempt in his “playful” description of his role. Their habitual ways of relating to each other seemed to reflect patterns from their families of origin and were likely to be habitual ways of managing anxiety and lack of differentiation.

I was particularly concerned about issues of power in this couple, especially their dynamics around gender, money, and culture.

Truth be told, female therapists are, on average, probably more sensitive to/tuned into implicit relational themes involving gender and culture than male therapists.

Question: Female readers: How do you guard against or take action to deal with tense moments in couple therapy when a male partner may be starting to feel “ganged up on” by you and his female partner, especially when talking about matters of cultural conditioning about gender? Male readers: What do you do or can you do to be better able to notice and address subtle, disguised gender themes in working with couples?

It was clear that Amrita felt their current unequal financial arrangement was deeply unfair, which fed her anger and resentment at Raphael. It was also clear that Raphael was very invested in the status quo. Although Amrita’s low-level violence was a concern that was easy to identify, there was a covert dynamic of power and control that benefited him enormously, and he readily admitted that at times he provoked her into rage in a way that was almost frivolous or amusing to him. However, I suspected that while the advantages of their current arrangement were obvious to him, there were “hidden costs” that undermined his ability to have an intimate, trusting relationship with his female partner (Rampage,

2002), a need that he was currently reluctant to acknowledge. Attending to “the costs that privilege [has] exacted from men” (Rampage, 2002, p. 537) is a common feminist approach to the problem of maintaining an alliance with men in heterosexual couples, so I made a note to myself to foreground these concerns as a way of opening up conversations about gender and power.

I was certain that the influences of culture in this relationship were more significant than either partner acknowledged. Amrita, I guessed, would be more willing to talk about their ethnic and religious backgrounds than Raphael, who seemed to see discussing their differences as irrelevant at best, possibly even threatening. I wondered how each person’s family of origin really felt about their cross-cultural relationship, and how Punjabi and Italian cultures influenced the couple’s expectations of what love, intimacy, gender roles, and marriage should be like. I was also aware that the balance of power in their relationship, with Raphael controlling most of the money and decision making, reflected the historic dominant–submissive relationship between whites and people of color (and, indeed, between men and women in the United States as well as in India and Italy). I was concerned about what appeared to be some “rigid asymmetry” in the relationship (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2002), and how this might be reinforcing their distress while preventing them from changing the relationship in ways that would be more satisfying to both.

I wasn’t sure whether this couple would make it. In the next few sessions, it became clear that identifying Amrita’s concerns about the relationship seemed to have raised doubts for her about whether this could be the kind of relationship she wanted, although she wanted to give it a try. Raphael appeared to be comfortable with the structural inequalities of their current arrangement, and I suspected that encouraging him to see the benefit to the relationship in giving up some of the inequality would be an uphill battle, but one that was necessary if they were to continue as a couple.

SESSION 2

Amrita and Raphael came to therapy reporting that the previous week had been better—they still fought, but they did so safely, without any violence. “She didn’t yell so much, either,” reported Raphael. “But I still went to bed mad and got up mad.” “But he came to me to make up when he got home from work,” Amrita added, apparently pleased with this development. The topic of the fight, who would pay for a dress that Amrita wanted to wear to a party for Raphael’s mother, touched directly on the unequal distribution of power in the relationship. Amrita felt pressured to wear something new for the occasion, but had no money in her account to go shopping. According to her, she asked Raphael if he could pay for it, and he replied that he would, but “if I do, you better appreciate

me more.” She was insulted and hurt, particularly, she said, because he had taken money out of her account the week before without her permission.

I asked Raphael if he could clarify his remark. “She needs to ask me whether I’ll buy something for her, not tell me to buy it.” I observed that he felt used by his first wife, who didn’t work and expected him to maintain an expensive lifestyle, and he agreed that it upset him to feel that he was “just a paycheck.” “It seems like it hurts you,” I reflected, and he agreed.

At this, Amrita began to cry. “He says that every day—‘You don’t treat me right, you don’t appreciate me, you’re not loving.’” Raphael laughed, and I asked him what was funny. “There she goes getting upset again. She takes things so seriously—I’m just kidding with that stuff. She should just tell me to shut my big mouth.”

Continuing on the theme addressed in the previous question: Here, the therapist has clearly gotten behind Raphael’s machismo defenses and exposed his vulnerability (in an empathic manner). And he is now vulnerable in the presence of two women.

Question: If you were the supervisor of a female therapist in this situation, what would you suggest to her to help her keep Raphael feeling safe enough to be willing to continue in couple therapy since his feeling so vulnerable so early in therapy could easily lead to his dropping out?

I moved my chair closer to him and asked him what it was like to see his partner in tears over his “kidding” comments. His tone softened, and he admitted he didn’t often give her credit for being a good girlfriend. “I get too emotional—I focus on what she’s doing wrong rather than what she does that I like.” Nervous at this admission, he tried to backtrack, claiming that Amrita made too much of his offhand comments, but I pointed out to him her obvious distress—clearly what he said had the power to seriously hurt and even frighten her. “You say, ‘Be good to me, or else.’ Or else what?” I asked. “Or else nothing,” he said. “I’m just spouting off.”

“Or else he’ll leave,” said Amrita through more tears. “Do you hear how afraid she is?” I asked Raphael. “How scary it is for her that you might leave her?” “I’m not leaving. Let’s move on,” he said brusquely. I decided to back off on the emotional intensity, since it seemed he wasn’t ready to go there quite yet, so instead I observed that several times, he had said he wanted Amrita to be “tougher” or stronger, to stand up to what he thought of as his teasing. He agreed. “You know, she’s grown up seeing what happened when her mother stood up to her father,” I remarked. “What does that have to do with me?” he asked. “Well, I’m guessing that Amrita learned that it isn’t safe to stand up for

herself, except when she's so angry that she doesn't care what happens to her," I suggested. "Maybe it would be great if she could learn to be stronger with you, and to tell you to back off when your kidding is too rough, but I think she'd have to really trust you in order to do that. And right now, she doesn't seem to think that's safe." "It's true," he said. "I can be kind of a pain in the ass."

"You're not always a pain in the ass," said Amrita as she wiped her eyes. She talked for a while about Raphael's "softer side," the one she fell in love with. "When we can just talk about things, I do feel safe with you. But then you go and say something mean, and that softness goes away." "And you get hurt and scared, and you cover it up with anger and yelling," I suggested. She nodded. "And he takes off, and I don't know when or if he'll come back." "And you'll do anything to keep him from walking out that door, even attack him if that's what it takes to keep him from shutting you out."

Raphael looked thoughtful. "I guess I never saw it like that." "Standing up to you when you're being 'a pain in the ass' makes Amrita vulnerable," I said. "And this relationship has to feel safer for that to happen." "Well, I don't want a relationship based on a bunch of BS," he argued. I pointed out that there was a difference between a relationship that was honest and intimate, versus one where he just said whatever came into his head even if it might be hurtful. And if he didn't want Amrita to hide her true feelings from him, she had to know that she could share them without getting "whacked"—laughed at or criticized.

By the end of the session, the couple was sitting closer together on the couch, and Amrita was talking to Raphael directly about her concerns over the financial imbalance. When he began to shut her down, I encouraged her to validate his hurt and anger over feeling taken advantage of by women in the past. "It's hard," she complained. "I don't want to see it from his perspective." All three of us laughed at her honesty. Once she validated him, I helped him acknowledge her frustration and shame at having to go to him for money, and how vulnerable it made her to not have resources of her own. He did more parroting of my words than genuine reflecting, but his earlier resistance was nearly absent. "This feels a lot better," said Amrita at the end of the session. "How is it for you?" I asked Raphael. "It's not my natural way, but I can tell she likes it," he allowed.

Thinking about the session, I decided that acting on my hypothesis had paid some dividends. Raphael's domineering and brusque style was getting in the way of what he wanted—a relationship of equals, where the two could spar without hurting each other and disagree without exploding. And the "men earn it, women spend it" paradigm left him feeling used and taken advantage of. Acknowledging these disadvantages to the gender roles the couple was playing out got him interested in changing the relationship's structure, while also laying some groundwork for improving Amrita's position and creating a safer, more respectful relationship between them.

SESSION 3

Ten days later, they reported more improvement. A death in Raphael's family had delayed their appointment, but Raphael came in reporting how supportive Amrita had been for him and his parents, complimenting her on being "sensitive and loving," which made her beam with pleasure. Although there had been some disagreements, the two were working on taking time-outs to self-soothe when they felt tensions getting high, although they were better at recognizing when the other person was escalating than they were at acknowledging their own negativity. "But we're getting better," said Amrita. "Even Raphael—he's listening to me more, instead of trying to just tell me what to do when I have a problem."

"I'm trying not to be Mr. Fix-it and just get on her case," he agreed. "But I haven't even been trying that hard—it's just easier to be there for her when she's not so mad." I observed that she seemed to feel more valued by him, and suggested perhaps that helped her to be more inviting. Raphael was skeptical—he was more interested in talking about Amrita's changes than his own. But after reviewing how much he liked her softer tone and her less explosive way of handling anger, I broached the subject again. "It sounds like you're really pleased with her efforts, but I'd like to see you get some credit, too," I said. "Today you seem gentler and friendlier toward her, even when she says the two of you still have work to do. You seem to be taking her more seriously as a person, and it sounds like she's noticed that at home too, and she likes it." "I guess," he replied.

Amrita commented that they were able to be more lighthearted at home, even when there was a disagreement. "We're not so dead serious about everything." "Do you think Raphael could be serious with you if you needed to talk in a more serious way, without it turning into an argument?" I asked. She wasn't sure, but indicated that's what she wanted from the relationship—to be able to tackle tough issues head-on while feeling as connected as they felt when they were more playful. "What do you think, Raphael," I asked him, "does that sound like the 'no-BS' relationship you said you wanted?" He agreed it did. He said he was willing to have Amrita bring up a more difficult issue in session to see if they could work on it with my help.

Hesitantly at first, then more directly, Amrita talked about being unhappy with their financial arrangements. Raphael had recently asked her about her spending in a way that felt very aggressive, "like he was grilling me for information," she said. "I feel like you want to check on me all the time," she said to him. "Like you want me to feel like I'm not my own person, so I have to account for myself and every dollar I spend." Raphael sat quietly while she talked about how she disliked feeling controlled by him, as if he saw her as untrustworthy, with

none of the eye-rolling or laughter he showed in previous sessions. When she finished, I asked if he could validate what she'd said before giving his response, and he did so in a way that seemed genuine, if not very deep. "I get that you're upset," he began. "Look, I forgot that we had already transferred money for the rent, and I just wanted to find out where we were at. I didn't think you were being untrustworthy." Amrita pushed back, challenging him about his tone during the conversation. "You came off really harsh. You could have just asked me, 'Did you pay me for the rent?' but instead you barked at me, 'How much money do you have left?' like I was your teenage daughter coming home from the mall!" I waited for him to criticize her for being sensitive, but instead he backed down. "I didn't mean to. It came out wrong."

His lack of defensiveness seemed to embolden Amrita further. "OK, maybe, but it's not just that one conversation," she went on. "You have this double standard. You say you want us to save up for the future, pinch our pennies, but then you want to go do expensive things, you want me to wear new clothes all the time. So I have to ask you to pay, and it's like you like me being dependent on you so you can tell me to be grateful. You say we should pay off our school debts so we can have a secure future, but the only loans we pay off are yours. You make ten times the money I do, but I have to pay half the bills, and I always pay my share, but you always act like I'm going to stiff you." "You sound afraid and hurt," I observed. "What are you afraid of?" "I'm afraid . . . afraid that this is the kind of marriage he wants. With me dependent on him, to keep me from leaving him." Tears came but she blinked them back.

"What's it like for you to hear her say that?" I asked Raphael. "She's afraid you want her to be dependent on you, so you can keep her close. Is that what you want?" "No, it's not," he replied. "I want her to be strong. I don't want to keep her if she doesn't want to be with me." He looked worried, and Amrita reached out to him. "I do want to be with you, but I want to be able to be independent." He made a face—not of contempt, but something else I couldn't quite identify. "What does 'independent' mean to you, Amrita?" I asked. "It means that we're two people who are equal," she said. "It means that after we take care of our financial obligations, I can make my own choices, and he'll respect them." "I just worry you'll do things you can't afford," Raphael responded. "And you worry you'll be left holding the bag?" I asked. He agreed. "Just like with your first wife?" He nodded. "I'm not your first wife," said Amrita. "That's not who I am. My parents didn't raise me like that." "I know," he admitted. "You're a good girl."

We talked for a while about the messages they got from their parents about work, gender, money, and marriages, which I suspected were related to the racial and cultural "context and templates" (Lee, 2008) that were present for both partners, if unacknowledged. As the child of immigrant parents, Amrita was taught that everyone had to work hard in order to keep the family afloat. While the

women in the family were expected to fulfill gendered duties like cleaning and cooking, they all also held down jobs, and the daughters worked to succeed in school in order to be able to leave behind their parents' blue-collar labor. As the oldest daughter in a family with no sons, working as a nanny was something of a disappointment to her parents, who wanted to see her pursue a better-paying field, but at least she was employed. She had also seen the disastrous results of her father's total control over the family finances: her mother's inability to leave a violent marriage.

Raphael's Italian family, in contrast, preferred more separate spheres for men and women. Most of the women in his mother's generation were homemakers, as were his cousins' wives. He felt great pressure to live up to the white-collar standards set by previous generations of men, and to demonstrate to his family that he and his fiancée were living "a good life." But the expectation that he would be the sole provider clearly chafed at him, and he felt himself drawn to Amrita because she didn't fit the mold of a dependent, materialistic woman. While his attitudes toward her could seem paternalistic, he liked that she wanted a career and income of her own. As we talked, I observed that he seemed caught between two competing preferences—on the one hand, he liked to feel taken care of by her, just as his mother cared for his father; on the other hand, he prized her independence and strength even as he found them frustrating and even threatening at times. "It's almost like you're stuck between two generations—you don't want your father's marriage, but you're not too sure about this new-fangled women's liberation thing either," I joked. "Ain't that the truth," Raphael replied with a laugh. Amrita looked pleased at the fact that I'd pointed out this covert inconsistency.

"Have the two of you ever talked about these things before?" I asked. "Not really," Amrita replied. "I guess we thought we had so much in common that the differences didn't matter." "I just see us as people," said Raphael. As a white clinician, I didn't want to push the culture angle too hard and make it my agenda, but I knew that interracial couples often minimize their differences as a coping strategy (Killian, 2003). While this might have benefits for the couple's survival in a racist world, denying their cultural connections could also take a toll on their well-being and could mask the culturally related dynamics of their conflict, causing them to blame themselves and each other for their unresolved problems. In this case, both partners' families had traditional views of gender. Amrita's struggle seemed to be that she wanted to push back against her culture's gender message, but a cross-cultural relationship, rather than helping her expand her role, was putting her right back where she least wanted to be: caretaking for a man.

The conversation about culture seemed to embolden Amrita to bring up another subject: an upcoming visit from her mother. Raphael had offered to pay for some outings for the three of them, and Amrita wanted him to promise that

he wouldn't hold it against her. "OK, I promise," he replied. "But will you promise not to get mad that it'll be a tight month other than that?" Amrita readily agreed. "It's hard for either of you to believe there won't be some cost down the road, isn't it?" I observed. "We're always waiting for the catch," replied Amrita.

Nervously, she brought up her other concern: she wanted them to curb displays of affection and intimacy while her mother was around. "I want us to be respectful of her," she said. "No kissing on the lips, no getting frisky. We can hold hands and you can kiss me on the cheek, but that's it." Raphael looked annoyed, but he said he was willing to respect this boundary. "You're willing to give up something you like, being close to your fiancée, because her mother is important to her," I reflected. "I guess so," he said. "Just like your mother is important to you," I emphasized. "Yeah, yeah," he replied, waving me off with a laugh. "Sorry, am I too pushy?" I joked. "You're too smart for your own good," he replied, leaving me reflecting on what this comment might suggest about our therapeutic relationship.

SESSION 4

The following week began on a more difficult note. The couple had had a rough weekend, one in which Raphael said Amrita was "making scenes, picking fights." "You were just as bad," she retorted, and the next several minutes of the session degenerated into a confused attempt to convince me that the other person was clearly at fault. I sat back to let them do their dance for a while, noticing their pattern of her attacking and interrupting, him rolling his eyes in contempt and raising his voice to talk over her, an endless, frustrating loop. Each blamed the other for "ruining the night" in question.

I made a few attempts to redirect them, but they were having none of it. Since they seemed in no danger of escalating to the point of being dangerous, I opted not to take a firmer stand until they were ready to get off the argument merry-go-round. Finally they started to wind down a bit. "It must be frustrating for you guys," I observed when I could get a word in edgewise. "You've had a few weeks of improvement, and now you've had this setback." They agreed. "What do you think happened?" I asked. "Once we get going, neither one of us can back down," said Amrita. "We both want to be right, and we can be jerks about it," Raphael agreed.

Our discussion turned to how a couple might back up or reconcile once conflict began, something they both agreed they were unskilled at. "What's so hard about backing off?" I asked. "Once we're arguing, sometimes I want to slow things down," said Amrita. "But I can't trust that he'll back off, too. I feel like I have to keep yelling, or he'll just run me over." "So it's not safe to show him your softer feelings, just your angry ones?" "Exactly. I can't tell him 'You really

hurt my feelings' or 'You're scaring me' or 'Can we just let this go and make up?' I have to keep fighting."

"Look, you can tell me if you're unhappy," replied Raphael. "Just tell me! Just tell me what you're feeling instead of yelling it at me!" "Do you hear how she's afraid of being 'run over' by you?" I asked him. "Do you know why she feels that way?" "No!" he replied, exasperated. I asked Amrita if she could explain it to him. "Not when he's upset," she said. "I've tried and he doesn't listen." I asked if I had her permission to try to tell him in my words, and whether she would correct me if I got something wrong; she agreed.

Therapist passivity in working with couples is usually quite problematic, and couples in such therapy situations often think, "Hey, we can do this (fight) at home by ourselves; what's the point of being here?"

Question: Note that, despite not speaking much for the moment, the therapist here was not really "being passive." She was being overtly inactive for a purpose. What was her purpose? How might the couple actually benefit by the therapist's *apparent* passivity?

I spoke to Raphael about my guess: that for Amrita, a woman of color from an abusive family background, his intensity could be quite frightening. "I'm not trying to scare her!" "That may not be your intent, but consider what she saw all her life growing up: when her father got angry enough, he would hurt her and her mother," I said softly. "So she's giving you the message: back off, you can't scare me, don't push me too hard or I'll give it right back to you, I won't be pushed around by you, and I won't let you turn into my father." "That shouldn't matter any more. It's over," he scoffed. "So, it's pretty hard for you to think that when you two fight, she's not just fighting with you—she's fighting with her memory of her father, too," I reflected. "I'm not him!" he objected. "I didn't hit her; I've never hit a woman. My mother would kill me if I hit a woman. But she treats me like I'm her father." "It feels unfair to you," I reflected. "And it would be better if she could just get over it, just change, so she wouldn't think of you like she thinks of her father." Raphael agreed. "What if change doesn't happen so fast?" I asked. "What if she needs time to trust you? What if you need to show her that you're trustworthy before she can let go of her fear?" "I don't know," he said. "You have an opportunity here," I said. "Amrita has grown up with one view of men—angry, violent, dangerous. You have the chance to show her that men can be different, that you aren't that kind of man. But you can't gain her trust by yelling at her, you have to share that softer part with her," I urged him gently.

His response surprised me. "Women don't want to trust anybody. They just want to boss you around and make you feel guilty over everything. They like

being bitches.” Amrita, who had been sitting quietly with a softer look on her face, looked like she had been slapped. “What do you think it’s like for your fiancée to hear you say that?” I asked. “I have no idea what she thinks,” he retorted. “Well, what do you think it would be like for any woman to hear the man she loves say that women ‘just want to be bitches?’” He shrugged. “Well, you know women, you talk to women sometimes . . .” I started, but he interrupted me. “I try not to,” he asserted with a smirk.

I sat back in my chair. I imagine my face registered some of the shock I felt, and I needed a moment to think about how to proceed. Finally, I opted for self-disclosure. “So, it’s really hard for me to hear you say that,” I told him. “I’m a woman, too, and when you say that, you’re talking about me. And yet every week you come here for help with your relationship, you pay for my time, you seem to like what I have to offer, so I don’t get it. You say you love Amrita, you want to marry her; you want her to trust you enough to be strong with you. You love your mother; you think the world of her. And we’re all women. So what’s going on with that comment? If I pissed you off, just tell me ‘Hey, you pissed me off,’ don’t take a swipe at every other woman in the world while you’re at it.” “You didn’t piss me off,” he said. “Then what?” “I don’t know. I’m just running my mouth.” “Well, do you want to talk about what it’s like for you to have me as a therapist? To have me challenge you like this?” “No, you’re OK,” he said. “I don’t have a problem with you.”

“When you talk like this, I don’t know how we can ever get married,” injected Amrita, her anger obvious in her tone and her face. “You don’t respect women, and you don’t respect me. You’re not just running your mouth—that’s how you really feel, and you never let me forget it!” “I don’t know, Amrita,” I replied, mindful that it wouldn’t be helpful to take sides. “It seems like Raphael really values some of the women in his life, including you—you’ve said you felt more respected the past few weeks. I didn’t like his comment either, but I don’t think that’s the whole picture. Maybe it’s like the issue over work and money—he’s a product of his family’s culture, where men aren’t very encouraged to see women as equals, but he’s also a product of our generation, where men and women are expected to be friends and colleagues and companions. Maybe this is another one of those gaps for him, where he’s trying to find his place.” Raphael looked grateful. Amrita just looked angry. “I’m not marrying someone who disrespects women,” she stated, and the session was over.

This session bothered me because it was such a change from our previous meetings, and it seemed to end badly for all three of us. I thought Amrita and Raphael had been doing well in their tentative search for mutuality, and I wasn’t surprised that they’d had a setback—the systemic principle of homeostasis is tough to overcome at the best of times. It had seemed as though framing their struggle as one with change, rather than with each other, was helping both of them to move toward accountability and a less polarized stance. The risk Amrita

took, of sharing how her arguments with Raphael triggered feelings about her father's violence, seemed a prime opportunity to reach out for Raphael's empathy and what I sincerely believed was his desire to be a good partner to her, and to overcome legacies of the past. I was unprepared for the openly contemptuous comment about women, uncertain of how our therapeutic relationship could move forward, and worried that I'd made a terrible miscalculation.

At the same time, I was impressed with Amrita's self-advocacy. Our previous conversations often suggested that she felt guilty and responsible for the discord in her relationship, even though she sometimes objected to Raphael's domineering behaviors. Equating relationship distress with women's personal failure was, I suspected, a cultural message even more deeply ingrained in her South Asian family's culture than in the dominant American discourse (Rastogi, 2008). Her flat declaration of her "bottom line," that she would not tolerate a husband disrespectful of women, cut across gender and culture messages and showed that there were limits to how much she would compromise in order to keep the relationship intact. But I was once again worried about whether their original goal of preserving the relationship was really one we could achieve.

SESSION 5

A week later, they were back. Their weekend was "miserable." They were fighting about everything—relocating Raphael's office, travel they each wanted to do, flirtatious behavior on their last evening out, money . . . I kept trying to reflect their underlying process, which I termed "mutual assured destruction" in a nod to Cold War politics (and an attempt to lighten the mood a bit) but they were locked in a series of content-based battles. If one of them was miserable, they were determined the other would be miserable, too. At least they were united in their suffering, I thought.

They rebuffed my validations and argued with my challenges. "I trust her!" insisted Raphael, while telling the story of looking through Amrita's bank account online for evidence of misspent money. "He was the one who was stressed out and yelling!" accused Amrita, just after admitting she'd thrown a sack of burgers across the room when he complained she didn't get his order right. The relationship seemed about to disintegrate in front of my eyes. "Forget getting married; I should just put my energy into going to grad school," snapped Amrita. "Fine, go to grad school, I don't care, but I'm not paying for it!" Raphael retorted.

I felt like the worst therapist in the history of therapists—here was this couple who had made tentative progress, nearly at each others' throats in the therapy session, and I felt powerless to stop them. I felt as much at the end of my rope as I imagine they did. Finally, I resorted to a tactic I had used only once

before: I got up and walked out of the session. “You two seem determined to battle with each other today,” I told them as calmly as I could manage. “And you don’t need me for that—you’re experts at it already. I’m going to be out in the waiting room. If you need me for something, let me know.” As I closed the door behind me, their voices were still raised.

I (A.S.G.) once watched a college soccer game in which one team had been playing truly horribly the entire first half. At the halftime whistle, the coach gathered all his players around him, as he always did at halftime, looked around at each of them for a moment and then, without saying a word, walked off the field and sat in the bleachers.

Question: What were the coach and the therapist up to? What is the most unusual/unorthodox thing you have ever done when working with a couple?

Several minutes later, the door opened. “We’re tired of fighting,” said Raphael. “Will you come back in?” I took my seat, noting Amrita’s face was streaked with tears. Raphael looked deeply troubled. We sat for a few moments in silence as I waited for one of them to speak; finally Amrita spoke up, addressing her comments to Raphael rather than to me. “We talk things to death on our own and nothing changes. I’m tired of talking. I need space to think. I need to talk about things differently. I don’t want to live like this any more. I want to get out of the house more. I want to have my own friends and interests. I don’t want to depend on you to make me feel happy.” I waited silently to see how her partner would respond.

“I don’t like it when you’re unhappy,” he told Amrita. “I don’t like it when we fight. I want things to change . . . and it’s easier for me to tell you how to change, but I know I have to change, too. I’m just gruff sometimes, and it’s no good. The fighting, it has to stop.” I looked to see how Amrita was receiving this rather tentative admission of responsibility, and saw that she was reaching for his hand. “I’m sorry I was so miserable this weekend.” “I’m sorry I yelled at you about the hamburgers, and blamed the weekend on you being in a bad mood. We were both in a bad mood,” said Raphael.

I was quiet a bit longer as they sat together, holding hands. “How does this feel?” I asked them finally. “Better,” they both replied. “Then let’s talk about what’s underneath all the hamburgers and bank accounts and arguments. Because I think at the bottom, what it all boils down to is that you’re both terrified that the other person doesn’t truly love and respect you, that you don’t have a place in their heart, that it doesn’t feel safe.” They nodded, and we spent the rest of the session working on acknowledging the feelings that were too vulnerable to talk about directly while I helped them witness and validate each other.

I decided maybe I wasn't the worst couple therapist in the world, though I still wasn't sure what I could do in the future to keep a session from going so far off the rails.

SESSION 6

The next week, they came in upset again—they'd had a good weekend but spent the previous evening in a fight over household chores. Amrita had spent her day off cleaning the house, so when Raphael came home, tossed his shoes in the middle of the floor, and asked, "What's for dinner?" she was furious. "I've been doing your chores because you've had to work late on a big case, which I understand," she said to him. "But do you have to treat me like I'm the maid? Like you expect me to run over and pick up your shoes after you?" I knew we were headed in a different direction than the previous week when Raphael laughed, but with embarrassment rather than contempt. "It's true, I kind of expected you to take care of it," he admitted.

We talked for a while about how he developed such an expectation—living at home, unsurprisingly—and he acknowledged that when Amrita cleaned up after him, he felt cared for and loved. "You used to be better about doing your part!" she objected. "Yeah, I was kind of faking it, and hoping you'd take over," he acknowledged. Amrita told him she had no intent of working a "second shift" her whole life: "I saw my mother live that life and it broke her body and her spirit. If that's what you want, to be treated like a baby, you need to find another woman."

Raphael looked almost ashamed. "I don't want to be like a baby," he said. I observed that Amrita was unlikely to find herself very sexually attracted to him if she felt like she was his mother. "I know, I know," he said. "I know it isn't like my parents used to be—and I know my dad took advantage of my mom doing every little thing for him. But it showed how much she loved him." We talked about other ways Amrita showed love and caring, but he kept returning to the model of his parents. "But you don't want to treat Amrita like your father treated your mother," I replied. "Or like her dad treated her mom." He agreed he didn't, and surprised both Amrita and me by admitting that he was afraid that if he did some things for himself, he'd eventually have to do everything—he would wind up the caretaker for Amrita, a job he would not only resent but would have no idea how to do.

"That's not what I want," Amrita told him. "I know. I didn't say it was a rational fear," he replied, smiling. "Look, I get why you don't want to baby me. Can you just tell me what you want me to do, instead of yelling at me when I don't do it?" She looked surprised. "It's OK if I say, 'Hey pick up your shoes?'" she asked uncertainly. "Yeah, just tell me to do it!" I asked Amrita if she felt safe

enough to push him in this way, given their history of explosive conflict. She said she did. “I know he’s not like my father. He’s not going to turn on me if I tell him to put his socks in the hamper.” I expressed my concern that policing Raphael’s behavior was just another kind of chore to do, but Raphael explained, “I don’t think she should chase me around forever. I’m just not in the habit of doing things for myself. If she’ll bring my attention to it, I’ll learn to do it for myself.” And since his answer seemed to please and satisfy Amrita, I decided to chalk it up as progress. “You know, I’m writing this conversation down,” I teased him. “If you’re back here in two months, angry because Amrita told you that dinner was your job last night, I’m going to read this back to you!” “That’s fair,” he laughed.

Earlier the therapist spoke to Raphael about “this new-fangled women’s liberation thing,” and to both the partners about their “mutual assured destruction” process. Here, she once again skillfully calls upon humor for therapeutic purposes.

Question: Do you use humor in working with couples? For what reasons?
When is it appropriate to use humor in working with couples?
What risks does using humor carry with it?

SESSION 7

We had a 2-week gap between sessions because Amrita’s mother and sister finally had their planned visit. Initially, the couple said the visit went well, although Amrita complained that Raphael was “testing limits” with her the whole time, particularly about displays of physical affection. “We set some ground rules, but he had a temper about it all weekend, every time I wouldn’t kiss him,” she complained. Raphael admitted she was right, but reported that “we were all tired and cranky at times. But it wasn’t the end of the world. We managed not to get in a fight.” I tried to get them to talk about how they successfully avoided a blow-up, and asked about what went well, when Amrita suddenly started to cry.

“I’m trying to be nice about it, but I felt sad and lonely all weekend,” she sobbed. “I felt like you disrespected me! You told my mom I eat beef—you ratted me out and she got so mad at me!” I reflected that she seemed to feel like her privacy was violated. “I can’t trust him with anything.” Raphael looked surprised. “I didn’t realize it was such a big deal. I was just trying to tease you a little.” “I told you how important it was!” she replied. “As usual, you didn’t listen to me! You thought I was just making a big deal out of nothing. How can I trust you when you won’t even listen to what I say?”

"I guess . . . this is one of those culture things we're not good at talking about," he said slowly. I asked how it felt to hear that she didn't trust him. "I feel bad," he said. "I feel like I'm always screwing it up—if I show her she can trust me in one way, I do something else to upset her. Nothing I do helps." I reflected how trapped he seemed to feel, certain that Amrita's displeasure was inevitable. He seemed to feel like he didn't know how to be a good partner to her. "I can't seem to make her happy," he agreed miserably.

"Of course I'm not happy," Amrita replied. "Everything has to be your way, you're the only person who matters, and I'm not going to bottle up my feelings about it anymore." "I don't know how to do what you want!" Raphael said. "Stop being so self-centered!" Amrita told him. "I don't know how to do that!" he replied, looking more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him in session. "I thought things went OK with your mom!" "And what's it like to find out that she was unhappy with you about how you acted?" I asked. "It feels awful! I feel like I'm not good for her. Maybe we shouldn't be together after all."

His resigned words hung in the silence. Tears ran down Amrita's face, and Raphael looked near tears himself. "What would you lose if you lost each other?" I asked gently. "Nothing," Amrita said, stung by his suggestion of a break-up. "I'd be miserable but I'd survive. He'd just replace me." "I wouldn't replace you," said Raphael. "Would you miss her?" I asked. He agreed he would, but Amrita wouldn't even look at him.

I felt as if a terrible gulf had opened up in the room. I asked what they wanted to do at this point, but neither had an answer. Tentatively, we worked out a plan in which Raphael would go to a hotel for the night, promising that he would not go out and drink or flirt with any women as Amrita feared he would. Raphael feared he would come home the next day to find Amrita gone, and she couldn't promise him this would not be the case. I asked them to consider the following questions: First, were they at their limit with this relationship, or just near it? Second, if they were at the limit, what were the options? And third, if they weren't at their limit, what would they each need to have change in order for the relationship to work—what changes were essential?

They declined to make another appointment, saying they both needed "time to think." As they left, I wondered if I would see them again. I felt as if they had been caught by the confluence of two crises—one that pushed Raphael outside his comfort zone and demanded that he be more vulnerable and equitable in his relationship with Amrita, and the other, that pushed Amrita to set a limit on how much she would tolerate the power differential between the two of them, given her family history and her personal experience with gender, cultural, and socioeconomic oppression. Just as Raphael seemed to take tentative steps in Amrita's direction, her outrage at the unfairness she often experienced from him came to a head. Was this a relationship that a better therapist could have saved?

I wondered. Or were they simply too far apart to begin with—in their expectations, their relationship skills, their life experiences, their values?

I didn't get to find out in further sessions. They didn't call me back to reschedule. I wondered whether they'd broken up, or whether they'd decided therapy was making things worse. I wondered whether they'd agreed to look for a different therapist, perhaps one who was more experienced, or less of a feminist. Maybe they'd found someone who would encourage Amrita to accept Raphael's style more, or someone whom Raphael respected more, who could push him harder.

Four months later, I got a tiny glimpse into their outcome. They returned the book I'd loaned them, along with a note signed by both. "We have been doing really well," it read. "Counseling was the best thing we could have done for our relationship. We joined a gym since we terminated counseling and are trying to live a happy, healthy life. Thank you for your help and time. We are confident that we can manage conflicts on our own when they arise."

REFLECTION

I was lucky to get the note from this couple; most clients who terminate prematurely remain a mystery to us. Of course, I'm not certain about their eventual outcome; they signed the letter with separate surnames, suggesting the wedding still hadn't taken place (or, perhaps, that Amrita wanted to keep hers?). There was a stilted quality to the correspondence that made me wonder if they were putting on a "good face" for me, even in text. But given that our final session made it seem as if they might not last another week, 4 months seemed like quite an achievement. I couldn't imagine Amrita suddenly renouncing her bottom line and agreeing to the "same old, same old" dynamic.

I've (SMA) thought about this couple a great deal over the years, particularly about the moment when I confronted Raphael on his contemptuous remark about women, and the session in which I walked out because I couldn't stop them from battling. I still feel like both interventions were an OK choice—I agree with Gottman (1999) that clinicians shouldn't tolerate verbal abuse between clients in session, and his remark certainly seemed abusive to Amrita and possibly to me as well. And perhaps following in Carl Whitaker's mold, I have used the "shocking" choice of walking out of session with other couples in rare moments when nothing else works. I (VT), as a male therapist, have also thought about the outcome of this case for quite some time, wondering whether the female therapist (SMA) by taking a clear personal (not just professional) stance finally convinced Raphael that it was time for him to grow up and take responsibility for his behavior, if he really wanted a mutual partner-partner and not a baby-mother relationship. Of course, if Raphael really shifted his position after the last session

with the therapist, Amrita had to test his seriousness in order to overcome her lack of trust toward her partner. After a few more “test fights” they did not need the female therapist any longer: Amrita no longer needed a “female interpreter with authority” to convince Raphael; he no longer needed the “mother therapist” to give him what he missed getting from his wife. Thus the couple aligned in firing the female therapist and, one hopes, went on their merry way.

However, knowing what I know now, I (SMA) wish I’d responded more empathically to the (extremely well-hidden) pain behind Raphael’s comment. I’ve seen other therapists zero in on disowned attachment messages buried behind such off-putting rhetoric, and given that one of my goals was to connect with Raphael’s softer feelings, I wish I’d been able to see his outburst as hurt rather than just hurtful. I also wish I’d been more skilled at deescalating angry couples; I was moderately good at it when I saw this couple, thanks to years of working with intensity in families, but I believe it’s a skill that needs both time and more specific theory about couple relationships to really master.

On the other hand, I (VT) think that Raphael did not need more empathy (he had received plenty from Amrita); he needed a mother figure to clearly tell him to quit trying to get away with things, and to grow up and act like an empathic male partner in an equal relationship. The female therapist did not let him get away with his manipulations, to which Amrita could only respond with anger and hurt, and this accountability helped shift the couple’s dynamic.

I (SMA) think my hunch about the role of culture in this couple was correct, demonstrated by the difficulty they had with Amrita’s mother’s visit. Raphael just didn’t take in how important it was to his partner that her mother see her as a “good (Indian) girl,” one who respected her family’s traditions at least when her mother was around, even if she deviated from them on her own. And both of them believed that Raphael had rejected his family’s model of an unequal marriage, disregarding all the evidence to the contrary; his cultural upbringing had far more influence on him than he could readily acknowledge. The themes of power and respect that came up over and over were clearly related to their gender and cultural differences at least as much as their individual personalities and preferences. And the underlying theme of economic control versus independence resonated deeply with the history of colonization and domination that Amrita’s family attempted to escape through immigration, only to find themselves unable to grasp the promised brass ring of the “American dream.” Although I unfortunately lacked a strong theoretical foundation from my training to help guide my intervention with this couple, my feminist and multicultural perspectives served me well in helping to uncover these hidden themes, rather than leaving them disguised beneath the couple’s generic complaints of conflict and “poor communication.”

Over time, my (SMA) work with couples has become deeply influenced by the marital interaction research of John Gottman’s, and his “sound mari-

tal house” model (1999), and by Johnson’s (2004) attachment-based emotionally focused therapy. These days, my thinking is guided primarily by asking myself questions like “How sound is this couple’s underlying friendship?” and “How does this couple’s cycle of conflict cover up their deep longings and fears?”—questions I think would have helped me more openly explore ideas I was intuitively groping my way toward at the time I saw Raphael and Amrita. Reading back through the case file, I can see my work instinctively gravitating toward the understanding of relationships that Gottman and Johnson have provided. I eventually found that both Gottman and EFT techniques were very helpful with both same-sex and multicultural couples (Addison & Coolhart, 2008); we (SMA and VT) believe that it is beneficial in therapy with such couples to meld these approaches with feminist and social justice principles.

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