

WORKING WITH COUPLES

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Having reviewed the literature on Personal Construct therapy with couples, a brief 5 session model, derived from the work of Ernesto Spinelli, for working with couples, is described. A clinical example of working in this way is then provided. The advantages of working within this framework are discussed.

Key Words: Relationships, couples, individual sessions, separate sessions, Spinelli.

Kelly himself is almost totally silent about couples. Where he does mention them it is mostly to use couples as an example of something else, e.g. in a section about Sociality he says:

For the more complex interplay of roles- for example , for the husband-and-wife interplay - the understanding must cover the range of domestic activities at least and must reach at least a level of generality which will enable the participants to predict each other's behaviour in situations not covered by mere household traffic rules (Kelly, 1955, p. 96).

Again in a section about control, marriage is discussed as a possible source of threat and anxiety, as presenting a problem to construe, as an issue of control, and as a way of providing “an opportunity to enlarge or secure his anticipatory system” (Kelly, 1955, p. 523). Amid several other uses of the idea of marriage to clarify his thoughts about choice he suggests that:

A man will choose to marry if that appears to provide him with the opportunity to enlarge or secure his anticipatory system (ibidem).

He goes on to observe that:

The uncertainties and vicissitudes of married life require a breadth of viewpoint and an open-mindedness toward certain kinds of things (ibidem, p. 523-524).

Without this kind of permeability in one's construing system, one's tolerance of incompatibility will be so limited that he will not attempt marriage, or if

he does acquiesce, may soon seek to dissolve it in divorce (ibidem, p. 524-525).

Other uses of the idea of marriage can be found in a section on culture defining procedures where he says:

Mating Behaviour. The client's description of courtship activities and conjugal patterns of behaviour may help the clinician understand some of the important ethnic constructs which may underlie personal conflicts (ibidem, p. 699).

and in a section on Analysis of a person's family history:

The kind of persons whom the relatives married may be indicated (ibidem, p. 731).

Within the wider PCP literature there are a large number of places where the issue of couples is dealt with. e.g. Duck (1985), Neimeyer (1983), Procter (1986, 2007), Leitner (2000), Winter (2005). Neimeyer (1983, p. 138) suggests that “satisfied couples are better able to understand one another, especially along more important constructs. They also show more mutual understanding.” He suggests therefore that the emphasis in marital therapy should be on facilitating sociality. He suggests that marriage should be seen as an ‘elaborative choice’. Relationships can be seen as offering opportunities for validation and Extension. Neimeyer suggests that marital dissatisfaction stems in part from not feeling validated on a day-to-day basis in the relationship.

However he goes on to say that:

Some implications of these findings for therapeutic interventions also are noted. But no attempt is made to embed these techniques within the context of a more complete approach to marital therapy... no work to date has described in detail the nature of marital therapy from a personal construct perspective. This is surprising because marital relationships provide a "living laboratory" for the design of social experiments. (Neimeyer, 1983, p. 138)

Despite this statement, Epting (1984) describes a procedure for conducting couple counselling, which he attributes to Neimeyer (1983). This procedure has four steps:

1. Assessment: repertory grid completed by each partner
2. Clarification: try to understand the other
3. Elaboration: trace out the implications of the couple's systems
4. Sociality: couple develop a system of mutual construing

Epting sums up this procedure by suggesting that it allows ...

... participants to step outside the confines of the nature of their relationship and see what is happening to them, rather than just being caught up in it. (Epting, 1984, p. 177)

As Kelly put it:

The uncertainties and vicissitudes of married life require a breadth of viewpoint and an open-mindedness towards certain kinds of things. Without this kind of permeability in one's construing system, one's tolerance of incompatibility will be so limited that he will not attempt marriage, or if he does acquiesce, may soon seek to dissolve it in divorce (1955, p. 524-525)

A FIVE SESSION MODEL

In our experience almost always couples come to see a therapist because their relationship has become impermeable. So how can we explore this impermeability without getting involved in the impermeability? We found a way of working which allowed this, in the work of Ernesto Spinelli (1997).

He develops Freud's metaphor of the therapeutic encounter being like a game of Chess. Spinelli suggests that working with couples is like three dimensional chess. Spinelli suggests that the best way of seeing couples is to adopt a five session format. In this format the couple are seen together twice. This allows the couple to "clarify the underlying assumptions, biases, values and beliefs of the currently existing couple construct (Spinelli, 1997, p. 104). Each partner is then seen separately. Within this individual session each person can explore the couple construct without having to worry about the immediate reaction of their partner. It is an agreed part of the process that "whatever clarifications emerge during this session will , at least be attempted to be conveyed to the other partner" (*ibidem*). Finally the couple are seen together for the fifth and final session. This process can be repeated as appropriate. Spinelli himself describes working on his own, and providing all five sessions. While one of us (HJ) follows this way of working the other (PC) has adapted Spinelli's model to one of working with a co-therapist. The two therapists see the couple together for the first two sessions. They then ask the couple to choose which therapist they would like to see individually. While the most common occurrence is for the couple to see the therapist of their own gender, about 20% of couples choose to see the opposite gender.

This process facilitates what Neimeyer describes:

It is often useful for the therapist to assist couples in uncovering their own 'relationship pentimento' - that is to understand how it is that each of their earlier renderings of marriage show through and disrupt the composition of their current relationship. A therapist begins by helping them gain perspective in examining their own personal theories of marital relationship (Neimeyer (1985b, p. 205)

SPINELLI'S COUPLE CONFLICTS

Spinelli suggests that conflicts in relationship are seen as having existed from the beginning of the co created Couple Construct, calling them "Couple Conflicts". Spinelli suggests that the source of couple conflicts can often be seen under the following headings:

1. The other is doing something that is dangerous, undesirable or unacceptable
2. I have changed and he cannot accept this
3. Both dissatisfied with relationship but either do not know how to change or are afraid of change.

EXAMPLE OF A COUPLE CONFLICT (H.J.)

Gabriel and Annette, joint session

When Gabriel and Annette came to see me I think all the possibilities described earlier in this paper were around for them. There was a feeling of impermeability that their constructs were not open to change, they were not able easily to see the other's point of view they were not communicating well anymore and there was a tendency in one person's case to think that everything was related and that everything would have to change before even a scrap of movement could be contemplated. This was constellatory thinking. They were not a happy couple.

They told me their story over two meetings together. They had been married 20 years and had met shortly after leaving school and had been together ever since. They had three teenaged children to whom they were both devoted. They cared about them, they enjoyed activities with them, they each coached a junior football team in which their children took part.

Annette was a junior school teacher herself and Gabriel had a Public Service position in which he took some pride. He had worked in a busy office until recently when economic cuts had caused the numbers in his office to be reduced radically. His close friend Liz was one of the casualties of the system and no longer worked with him. Annette believed that Gabriel and Liz had been having an affair although Gabriel said she was just a very good friend, and that he missed her company enormously when she left.

Two years ago when Liz left the organisation Annette and Gabriel had taken stock of their marriage to try to put things right and as a result they had sold their house to move to another city, so that their finances would go further and they could renew their relationship.

But Gabriel was very depressed and had found this hard and spent a lot of time alone, hiding away or

going for long walks. Annette felt that Liz was always in the background and even recently in the foreground when Gabriel had gone for a long walk with her together with his own children. Annette was not happy about this.

Together they jointly expressed concern that the children were being affected by their endless small quarrels. Annette was genuinely concerned about Gabriel's depression and the way this was cutting him off from their own and extended family. They both agreed they wanted to explore their own attitudes. Annette was tearful, Gabriel quiet but both wanted to talk to me in an individual session before we met again together.

They did have areas of agreement.

Areas of agreement

- Gabriel's affair had been the catalyst
- Annette had been strong and supportive after affair ended in trying to help Gabriel through his depression
- Annette's suggestion of moving house helpful in resolving financial difficulties
- Their long friendship before and during marriage was a strength in their relationship
- Both loved and cared for the three children

Difficult areas

- Annette's fear that Gabriel was becoming more and more isolated from friends
- Gabriel's feeling of being cramped with no space
- Children's comments on their lack of harmony
- Annette's family - large, hospitable, judgemental,
- Gabriel often needs to escape for peace, solitary walks
- Liz is a constant shadow - is Gabriel still seeing her? Can he be trusted?

Separate sessions

Because spouses often feel disconfirmed in their relationship, they are not likely to feel open to hearing one another's differing viewpoints (Neimeyer, 1985, p. 207-208)

Annette's individual session

When Annette came to see me she said how concerned she was that her husband had shut himself off from old friends and that they now rarely saw anyone outside the family. She said he felt cramped by their new home which was much smaller than before. Their children were beginning to comment on the lack of harmony between them and she herself was lonely at work having few friends herself. They spend quite a lot of time with Annette's family by the sea in a large house with a swimming pool where the children like to visit but where Gabriel feels pushed aside amongst a large noisy crowd and he escapes on isolated walks to escape the crowds. So visits are not very easy any more for Annette who believes that Gabriel is still in touch with Liz and is even still seeing her. She can't trust her husband any more.

She did not hide her feelings. Will Gabriel become more depressed? Will she lose her friend, lover, partner, will he destroy their family?

She cannot see a way that they could do things differently and cannot tolerate the idea of Liz in the background even as an occasional friend. She feels lonely having lost her confidant and is sad for both of them. She does not feel that Gabriel should need other people than herself to fill his life.

Key points of Annette's individual session:

Will Gabriel become more depressed, will she lose her friend, lover, partner, will Gabriel destroy their family?

She is very clear about what is right and wrong and not keen on seeing ways of doing things differently

She cannot tolerate the idea of Liz in the background

She is lonely, feeling her loss of Gabriel very acutely

She is sad for him as well as herself

Gabriel's individual session

When Gabriel came to see me on his own he was in a different frame of mind. He said that "Yes" he is in love with Liz and will always remain so. But that he had chosen to stay with Annette and wants to make that work. He feels lonely missing his former work colleagues, not just Liz, and is sad to be working in an office alone now with no personal communication with others. He admits to being depressed and that Annette is very supportive of him.

We did an ABC exercise (Tschudi, 1977):

Gabriel's ABC

Staying with Annette

Advantages

Always be friends, keep kids

Disadvantages

Have to be secretive, depressed

Moving in with Liz

Disadvantages

Lose my family

Advantages

be open,,,loving.passionate, happy

It was not difficult to see where Gabriel's dilemma lay and his depression stemming from the ambiguity facing him.

Key points of Gabriel's individual session

He is in love with Liz and whatever happens this will not change

He owes Annette and the boys his time, love and support, and has chosen to stay with them

He is often depressed and misses his former work colleagues, especially Liz, now that he works alone

Meeting together as a couple

So what happened when we met together again?

They agreed that the meetings had helped them clarify their situation even though it was not resolved. They agreed that Gabriel would benefit from some individual therapy which Annette would accept even though she could not see any possibility of change in herself. She was determined to "make things work again".

What Annette could say to me but not in front of Gabriel was that although she was supportive she could no longer trust Gabriel and was not open to his having other friends or other people in his life which did not include herself.

What Gabriel could tell me but not Annette was the dilemma exposed by his ABC exercise which implied that to be with Annette he would always have to be secretive and could never be fully open and happy in his personal life. He was a man who needed to disperse his dependencies more than he could just living with Annette

Themes

Different levels of dependency; Constellatory vs Propositional thinking; Different views of community of selves; Spinelli's view of couple conflict: both dissatisfied, the other doing something dangerous, he has changed and I can't accept this

What may come next.....?

They may choose to come back for another series of meetings as time goes by.

I have yet to hear from them.

CONCLUSIONS

There is very little written about the length of time that Personal Construct therapy should last. Chiari and Nuzzo are very clear that:

Constructivist psychotherapy, as we conceive and practice it, lasts for a minimum of one year to a maximum of three to four years, exceptionally more, at which time Kelly suggests rapidly arriving at the conclusion ; after one to two bi-weekly sessions. (Chiari and Nuzzo, 2010, 158-159)

In his initial clinical work Kelly worked in a very short term, focused manner, often only seeing the school child for one session. The restrictions of time and distance prevented any other form of intervention. The resulting travelling clinic in rural Kansas became a model on which much future rural school psychology was based. "It offered mainly diagnostic and consultative services" (Fransella, 1995, p. 9).

This is a way of working which was greatly elaborated by Ravenette. He developed what he called "the one off interview". Within this structure

the one off interview needs to have a structure, i.e. a beginning, a middle and an end, in order to promote the meaningfulness of the event for the young person, but also to maximise the efficient use of time. (Ravenette, 1997. p. 219)

In his later writing, Kelly is very clear that some estimate of therapy duration should be made:

Difficult as it is for the diagnostic clinician to make a precise determination of the duration of therapy, he should, nonetheless, make the very best estimate he can. If the client cannot reasonably invest in a drawn-out psychotherapeutic series, the clinician should recommend one of the approaches which is more likely to permit an earlier termination. (Kelly, 1979, p. 179)

Our experience has been that couples are able and prepared to commit themselves to a five

session process. This was particularly true of two couples who had previously experienced long term couple counselling, which had not resolved the underlying issues in their relationships. One of them was very reluctant to repeat this lengthy process. By providing such a clear structure we make it very clear that what we are providing is more diagnostic and consultative than ongoing therapy.¹

We provide the opportunity and the framework within which the couple can reflect and act on their own construing. This process can be very clearly seen in the clinical example described earlier where:

... they agreed that the meetings had helped them clarify their situation even though it was not resolved. They agreed that Gabriel would benefit from some individual therapy which Annette would accept even though she could not see any possibility of change in herself. She was determined to "make things work again".

This is precisely what Neimeyer (1983), whom we have quoted earlier, meant by:

Marital relationships provide a "living laboratory" for the design of social experiments.

The framework we provide allows for the design of such experiments by each couple. The full range of personal construct psychotherapeutic methods and concepts can be used to elaborate the couple's construing.

A large part of the therapist's task is aimed at helping partners to realign each of their relationships in a way that is more mutually elaborative (Neimeyer 1985, p. 207)

Or as Kelly himself put it:

One may find a personal construct psychotherapist employing a huge variety of procedures- not helter-skelter, but always as part of a plan for helping himself and his client get on with the job of human exploration and checking out the ap-

propriateness of the constructions they have devised for placing upon the world around them (Kelly, 1979, p. 222)

In our opinion the combination of couple and individual sessions and the clear 5 session structure acts as a focus to achieve this.

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¹ Although in a workshop on this framework, facilitated by Peter Cummins and Dina Pekkala, one of the participants described the 5 session framework, we were describing as: 'Therapy on steroids"

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Peter Cummins first became involved in Personal Construct Psychology as a Probationer Clinical Psychologist, when he was supervised by Miller Mair, at the Crichton Royal Hospital, in Dumfries, Scotland. He then worked as a Clinical Psychologist in the NHS and completed the PCP diploma at the Centre For Personal Construct Psychology in 1986. After 34 years in the NHS he retired, and continues to work privately as a PCP Psychotherapist and Supervisor. He has developed the way of working with couples described above, in conjunction with Helen Jones, Dina Pekkala and Diane Allen.

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