

Effective Strategies for Helping Couples and Families

John S. Carpenter

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Dedication

To Debra, an intelligent, gifted, and beautiful woman whom I love and enjoy as my best friend and fun-loving partner in life. She is the inspiration and loving support behind this work.

About the Author

John S. Carpenter has been a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the field of Psychiatry for over 23 years. Having obtained a BA in Psychology from DePauw University in Indiana and a Masters in Social Work from Washington University in St. Louis, John began his practice in Springfield, Missouri, in 1979. John has worked in a variety of settings including outpatient clinics, in-patient hospital units, day treatment programs, and private offices. John has offered therapy services to individuals, couples, families, and groups for a wide assortment of mental health disorders, behavioral problems, and relationship issues. His therapeutic approach was influenced by a mixture of Psychodynamic Theory, Transactional Analysis, Gestalt Therapy, Family Systems, and Psychodrama.

John was also trained in Clinical Hypnosis at the Menninger Clinic which led to a greater interest in the power of imagery, sensory experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. His willingness to conduct professional research into paranormal phenomenon led to international recognition as a responsible hypnotherapist, researcher, writer, and speaker worldwide.

John combines this interest in how the mind perceives, learns, and remembers with his desire to explore relationship issues in couples and families. Having worked with hundreds of couples and families over the years, John has found the approaches and techniques which seem to yield the best results. Presently, he has offices in both Branson and Springfield, Missouri. John lectures to other professionals nationwide every month for a few days on working with couples and families.

About the Author

John also has enjoyed volunteer activities such as working with Parents Anonymous and several adoption agencies. He helped to found Worldwide Love for Children, Inc. in Springfield, Missouri.

John's father was a well-respected and well-known Methodist minister in the state of Indiana. John's mother was dedicated toward the family and her husband when he suffered many years of disability from Multiple Sclerosis. John's brother has worked for years in New York City as an attorney. John's sister and her husband gave up careers in the medical field to pursue wilderness photography in northern Michigan and the Great Lakes region.

John enjoys music, playing piano, photography, traveling, writing, computers, water sports, and family activities. He and his soul mate Debra share so many common interests, activities, and beliefs. He is a proud father to Josh and Bobby in Springfield and to Megan, Katie, and Ben in Dallas.

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Preface

This is a book about helping people in relationships. Although couples and families represent the most intimate, emotional, and satisfying kinds of relationships, these effective strategies will help all kinds of relationships in all kinds of situations. These techniques are visual, metaphoric, and experiential—all of which promote clear understanding, efficient learning, and a lasting memory. This book is a challenge for therapists to begin trusting their own eyes, intuition, and creativity. These approaches will lure therapists from their chairs and into a more experiential and revealing form of therapy.

Solutions are developed from emotional positions and perceptions—not from verbal contracts. Changes occur from *feeling* the correct directions rather than guessing at them. Images stay in our minds for a very long time; words are forgotten tomorrow. Words are misleading, misunderstood, misrepresenting, and mistaken for other meanings. An image can capture a perspective in one unforgettable moment. An experiential exercise may stay with us the rest of our lives. Every person can *know* what feels comfortable or *feels right* for him. As professional counselors helping people, we need to use whatever is going to be the best teacher, best experience, and best help for those troubled in relationships.

The original title of this book was going to be:

Smart Eyes, Silent Mouths, Knowing Hearts, Wiser Paths

However, this title—being just a bunch of words—could have confused, misled, or repelled potential readers. These words do not acquire their true meaning until *after* the reader has completed this

Preface

book. Readers may *assume* that they might know what this book may be about, but they would likely guess wrong from these words alone. Meaning is acquired with the *experience* of absorbing the contents of this book. Then, these words finally gain the full meaning that was intended for their selection and use as a title.

Until the reader has completed this book, the title shall remain *Effective Strategies for Helping Couples and Families*. At that time the reader can return to his world, using his eyes more wisely, listening more than speaking, trusting his intuitive and creative directions that *feel right*, and, as a result, choosing wiser paths for helping his clients.

Effective and Experiential Therapy

1

The Endless Search For New, More Effective Interventions (Somewhere Over the Rainbow)

Life would seem a whole lot easier if therapists could find that “silver bullet” or one fantastic technique which would solve many difficult situations that couples and families face. Despite reading countless books on various approaches, studying the published research, and attending numerous workshops, we often keep looking for that magical solution. Sometimes, after attending a professional conference, we arrive home feeling disappointed, disillusioned, or even angry because we did not find what we were looking for or needing. Many seminars focus on philosophy, research patterns, and statistics. Although this may be interesting information, it does not really serve the therapist in the trenches with the difficult families. The therapist feels ill-equipped and not confident in tackling these families. And because he or she obtained a professional degree, it may be difficult to admit that he or

Effective and Experiential Therapy

she does not know what to do with a particular family. It certainly was different from the role-play situations rehearsed in graduate school. One may have marveled at the videotapes of the masters in the field, displaying their best work—not their hair-pulling errors. Therapists often expect their clients to *want* to change and are baffled when they seem to be content with not making any recommended changes. Families who are non-verbal, resistant, less motivated, less intellectual, or of a different ethnic/cultural background may find many therapists unprepared and inexperienced in recognizing or meeting their needs.

Does the therapist “burn out,” quit, or move on to a different job position when tired of being unable to effectively meet the needs of couples and families? Is the search for the new and improved technique merely a hope toward feeling more adequate and confident? Are therapists working too hard to solve the family’s issues while the family seems to just be waiting for answers? Do all of the therapist’s techniques make sense intellectually but fail in actual practice? Or do the therapeutic approaches *only* work for the “right kind” of family? What *do* we need as therapists to feel confident and effective in *all* therapeutic situations?

Perhaps these answers are *not* beyond our own backyards in the next book published or *over the rainbow* at the next professional seminar. Perhaps we need not look any farther than within ourselves and what is available to us in *every* couple or family with *every* session. Perhaps we need to look at the invisible elements, influences, and tools which are constantly available to us if we only knew how to see them and make use of them. Some therapists will recognize these tools but may quietly admit that they let go of them—or traded them in for more comfortable, less risky, cognitive approaches. Some of the famous family therapists like Peggy Papp and Virginia Satir emphasized in their workshops to focus on the simple basics that exist right in front of you in every session. By stating less, listening more, and watching how a family or couple operates, the therapist begins working at the “feeling level.” These action-oriented therapists were less

conventional but frequently more effective because they were working directly on the emotional level with couples and families. All that a therapist needs—even without a history—exists right before your eyes.

However, the therapist has to be *willing to look* and step outside of his or her comfort zone by performing tasks which help to elicit and illuminate these hidden family dynamics, emotions, and powerful influences. Therapists are no different than any other human beings who seek security, “comfort zones,” predictable routines, safety, and emotional stability. Therapists who venture daily into the unpredictable jungles of various family networks truly seek to survive emotionally as well as succeed professionally. The offices of therapists often become that “safe” territory which offers constancy, stability, predictability, and security to the therapist who dares to enter endless tangled webs of family dynamics all day long. Therefore, therapists like to have their offices arranged predictably—perhaps with a certain number of chairs, a desk for the professional, and favorite locations for that coffee mug, pad of paper, and client file. Though the family may squeeze themselves into the safe domain of the therapist’s office, it may innocently serve to “hide” the family from the hard-working therapist. Even though the therapist may have learned some of these “risky,” action-oriented techniques, he or she may choose to “play it safe” by *just talking* about their issues and stated problems. Even active therapists often become less so with the passing of years and settle into “sit and talk” approaches again as they become complacent and secure with an office routine.

This entire book is dedicated to the belief that therapists can be more effective with making use of many creative ideas, invisible tools, and imaginative techniques which work within the emotional level that couples and families operate from. Many of these approaches will bypass intellectual defenses and sidestep resistance. Some of these approaches enable non-verbal families to *show* their emotional positions in a loud and unmistakable manner. Whereas some couples have spent years trying to comprehend each other’s views, some of these

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techniques help them to see each other's perspective clearly *for the very first time*. These approaches also offer a great deal of safety in that clients are often speaking indirectly or one step removed from painful realities.

Therapists need not look any further than their own back yard. Everything you have needed is right there in front of you, ready to be discovered and utilized. Sessions without any written history or referral data may be some of your best sessions ever because you *had to* depend upon your eyes, ears, and instincts rather than someone else's opinion or perceived goals. What is lacking to achieve this glorious success may simply be your own resistance or complacency. You must be willing to do things differently. You must be willing to get out of your chair with confidence and purpose. You must be willing to trust your eyes and feelings so that you can follow your intuitions without fear. You must be willing to be creative and fun so that your clients can see their issues safely. You must be willing to *act* rather than talk in order to create a "family portrait" for all to see. You must be willing to take risks and do things in a different manner with each hour—like an talented artist who never will paint the same painting twice. And if all of this sounds too hard, you have come face to face with your own resistance. (We can work with that! Put your resistance in a chair and talk to it . . . if you dare.)

It has been said that the *only* way to change another person is to change what *we* do. If you are engaged in a game of chess, you will force your opponent to make different moves if you begin to make unpredictable and uncharacteristic moves with your game pieces. Nobody can do the same dance with us if we change our style of dancing. If we want our clients to change, we should worry less about their resistance and more about our own. When we start saying that "our clients seem boring or uninteresting," perhaps that is a reflection of ourselves as therapists—similarly becoming uninspiring or not interesting. Being content, organized, and secure as a therapist does not necessarily mean that one is effective or interesting. Going outside of our "comfort zone" and creating memorable sessions by being effec-

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Couples: The Core of Family Systems

The Family as a System

No human being exists in a vacuum of isolation. Each person is greatly affected by the emotional climate—good, bad, or indifferent—among the members of his family. Even with great distance, separation, or even death, each member of a family feels the emotional impact in varying degrees. These emotional effects may create an imbalance or dysfunctional solution to re-establish a balance. A family is like a delicate mobile hanging in the air, trying to maintain a degree of balance while in motion. Take one part away or add an additional burden, and all parts of that system will feel the change. Families are no different in that every change to the system is experienced by each member with different degrees of stress. As an imbalance begins to occur this produces more stress on at least one member of the system. This additional stress may cause this part of the system to falter or “break,” becoming the “identified patient.” Mother may become overwhelmed and depressed. Son may start failing in school and stealing from stores.

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Father may start working more late hours or hanging out more frequently at the bars.

To focus *only* on helping the stressed member of the system who has become the identified patient is to miss viewing the whole system and learning *how* it became burdened or out of balance. If a part in an engine keeps wearing out from stress placed upon it, replacing that part does not ultimately solve the overall problem. The part will keep wearing out and needing to be replaced until the reasons for it being under such stress within the engine is eventually understood. In the same fashion problems will keep reoccurring in the family until the true issues which cause this pressure are finally discovered and resolved. Mom may keep returning to the hospital year after year for individual therapy until somebody finally *experiences* the kind of emotional climate and political system she lives in at home. Hearing about it is never the same as experiencing it! Words can be so deceptive, misleading, and concealing rather than revealing. An identified patient never seems as “crazy” when finally viewed in the crazy system he or she lives in. Then, and perhaps only then, a clear and more meaningful solution becomes evident.

Often the family has created a new cohesion and balance through dysfunctional behavior as a means for survival. For example, when Mother became crippled from an automobile accident and could no longer meet her husband’s high drive for sexual intimacy, the teenage daughter sensed Father’s loneliness and sadness. He would not go beyond the boundaries of the family to have an affair because of his pride and religion. But the daughter—as part of the system—allowed Father to have intercourse with herself as a means of saving the family from divorce. In other words, sometimes families will do anything to stay together and re-balance even if it is in a dysfunctional mode and socially unacceptable to others outside the system. The drive for family cohesion and survival as a system can be incredibly strong. And to fully understand these dynamics one can *only* view the *whole* system

in order to comprehend the *whole* picture, which then explains the individual actions and behavior of each family member.

Couples: The Foundation of a Family

Couples face many challenges from the very beginning and through every phase and stage of family life. How they handle each challenge directly affects the emotional climate, stress level, and ability to succeed and grow within the family. Here is a general list of challenges that each couple is likely to experience.

Separating from Family of Origin

Establishing independence and identity as a couple

Establishing power and roles within the couple

Willingness to let go of learned patterns and negotiate new paths

Adjusting to 1st child's entry into the system

Accepting parents in new role as grandparents

Adding children while preserving the couple

Becoming victims of routines and schedules

Grieving the deterioration or death of one's parents

Emptying the beloved nest

Re-discovering your spouse and yourself

Becoming grandparents

Problems develop when a couple gets stalled in any of these stages. Each one is a challenge with numerous pitfalls, but healthy couples tend to find a path through and around the various obstacles. A

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healthy couple helps each other with those challenges and communicates needs, wants, fears, doubts, and goals. However, this sounds much easier than it is to actually accomplish. It is easy to get lost along the way, distracted, or misled—thinking one is on the right track. A good therapist will help the couple examine what hurdles they have successfully surpassed and which ones they may be still stumbling over without fully recognizing it.

Awareness is the first key to any attempt to change a behavior. Without seeing and understanding what it is that needs to change, few are likely to navigate that dark maze by chance alone without some guiding light from insight. Playful strategies like metaphoric imagery exercises make it easier to see, comprehend, and envision the essential dynamics and necessary changes required to move effectively through those inevitable hurdles of the family life cycle. Because of its visual and experiential nature, imagery also makes those hurdles easier to comprehend than just words alone. With imagery it is no longer as much of an intellectual process as it is a visual and emotional process that becomes both genuine and enduring.

Troubles which are neither surpassed nor addressed tend to keep the couple bogged down in that problem area. Since the couple is the foundation of family life, these problem areas tend to directly affect, color, and characterize the quality of interactions, emotional expressions, and types of issues among family members. For example, if a couple is still caught up in selfish, competitive, immature power struggles, the children may either act-out (to elicit attention) or become parental themselves, sensing that nobody is really leading the family effectively.

Another example is the family whose parents do not communicate with each other or do not have much contact due to emotional distance. The children tend to choose sides and align themselves with either parent. Often the children will then openly wage the war between themselves on behalf of the side they have chosen to represent while the parents remain silent. Children can sense the emotions

and frustrations of their parents and, therefore, may come to their defense or rescue. The warring children may appear to be the obvious problem initially while the quiet parents are aloof in the background.

Parents may frequently present their child as the problem or “identified patient” when, in fact, the couple has hidden troubles which are triggering their child’s behavior. Only when the family is seen all together in therapy is the real picture likely to emerge. *Somebody* always knows the real story of what is happening in the family. Little children are often the quickest to tattle on their parents’ behavior at home. When a therapist works carefully with the couple, many of the family problems begin to melt away if the therapeutic goals are on target. For example, in a family with four children, all four kids had been in trouble for various reasons all in the past week. The family session revealed that Mom was overworked at home and Dad was neither connected nor involved much. The children were trying to find ways to attract Dad’s attention and involvement in order to bring him back into the heart of the family again. He agreed to participate in activities with each of the four children the next week. By the next session all the children were behaving wonderfully even though no attention had really been focused on each of their individual acting-out issues.

Sometimes the parent will find that they cannot deal with one of their children at a certain age. This may represent the fact that this parent, himself or herself, had trouble coping at that particular age. For example, the mother who simply cannot get along with her 13-year old daughter had much difficulty with her own parents at that same age and never dealt with those issues well nor progressed emotionally past that age successfully. Other parents are simply *emotionally younger* and cannot deal with children who are actually “older” than they are, emotionally. How can a “younger” child be expected to parent an “older” child?

When family therapy was being taught intensively in the 1970’s, there were few if any courses on either marriage counseling or the dynamics within couples. As I travel around the country I ask groups

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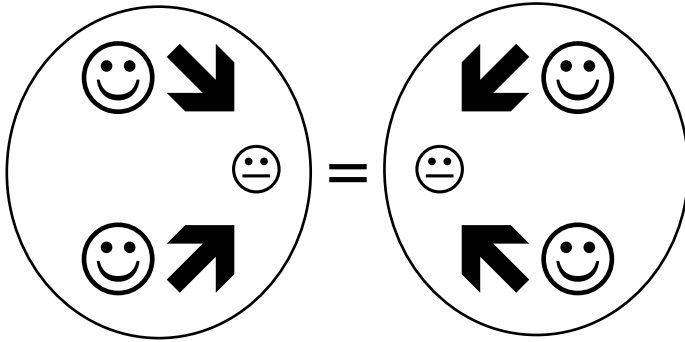
of professionals if they have ever received much in the way of marriage counseling courses, and they consistently reply, "No." As I began working with families in the 1970's, I soon realized that a family's behavior is a direct result of the couple's unresolved emotional issues, absence, coping strength, or inability to handle either daily stress or the endless challenges in the family cycle of life's situations.

Nobody had ever presented a model that outlined the types of couples that commonly exist, resulting from various dynamics, pressures, and life situations. Eight types of couples are offered in this book to demonstrate the different degrees of difficulty in forming emotional bonds and an identity as a true couple. Each type of couple represents a different form of emotional distance and bonding. All couples exist on a continuum based upon the principles of emotional space. One extreme represents being pulled apart by many forces and the other extreme represents becoming too symbiotic and co-dependent. Somewhere toward the center is the "ideal" couple which seems to balance well the fulfillment of all needs. Each couple will be considered throughout the entire family life cycle in order to appreciate how each emotional configuration copes with each new challenge. The resulting systemic effects upon the children should become apparent as well.

Although many of these dynamics and challenges may be quite familiar to the reader, each type of couple is basic and simplified to illustrate how couples become entrenched in various struggles and either unable or unwilling to move forward. They usually have been lacking the knowledge or awareness of their own dynamics in order to effectively make wise and successful changes. As each type of couple is presented, the therapist will learn how to reveal the couple's emotional configuration and dynamics visually as well as how to work with each couple spatially and more effectively. The whole process becomes a more visible and memorable form of therapy for both the clients and the therapist alike.

Couple #1: “The Family Feud”

Family Map:



The “Family Feud” Family Life Cycle

One of the first hurdles any newly forming couple faces is the breaking away or letting go from each person’s Family of Origin. This seems to be especially difficult the younger the couple is. As the couple attempts to carve out their own dreams, goals, and needs, they can be met with a contrary set of expectations and goals from each set of parents. The couple can quickly lose sight of *their own* desires as each partner is heavily pulled and influenced to follow the desires and traditions of his respective parents. Of course each set of parents believes that they “know best” and may actively campaign for their set of expectations for this couple. The couple may also begin to argue as each believes his/her parents are “probably right.” This could cause further division and even permanent failure in the couple’s quest to unite. The parents may launch verbal attacks both directly and indirectly at each other as well.

Assuming the couple does marry and begins their life together, arrival of the first child renews the intense interest from each Family of Origin regarding how the couple plans to raise “my new grandchild.” Again, different views on parenting, discipline, health care, feeding, clothing, baby-sitters, baptisms, etc. all create the potential for another war to arise between the family camps. And once again,

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the couple could be torn apart as each side campaigns for its representative in the couple dyad to further its cause. The kids begin to take sides as well, depending upon what each “family camp” offers them! Grandparents can be especially vocal and interfering because they believe they certainly knew how to raise their own child—and, therefore, automatically *know* what is now best for their grandchild. Does anybody *dare* to argue this point? How can either member of the couple possibly disagree? The grandparents may be effective and manipulative with “blackmail” or threats regarding the couple’s inheritance, rights to property, etc. if that grandchild is “not raised right!”

With each arrival of a new child to the family system each set of grandparents may make a move to win over that grandchild especially if they feel they “lost out” on the last one. This may continue to polarize and divide the couple between the family camps. Now the children may also be “taking sides” as well, knowing what each grandparent is promising or doing for them. The children then may fight among themselves, reflecting the bigger division that the two Families of Origin perpetuate. The couple has their hands full with battles breaking out all around them and eventually between themselves.

If the couple has survived all the previous challenges, then launching their children into the world may again be met with strong opinions and direct confrontation over what these kids should do with their lives. Topics of college, career choice, marriage, where to live, what kind of housing, money, etc. will all become potential battlegrounds. Even if a grandparent has died, their effect may still be felt strongly with the words, “This is how she would have wanted it” or, “How can we deny his deathbed wish?” or, “They willed this large sum of money for your college career—*only* if you attend UCLA!”

Basic Solutions

1. The couple must decide how they want to live their own lives in their own home.

2. Each member of the couple must stand up to his/her family and establish boundaries without fear.
3. The couple must learn how to support and give strength to each other.
4. The couple may need to live at a greater physical distance from families.
5. The couple must agree on plans for parenting children, finances, etc. while resisting clever bargains, influential manipulations, or threats from families.

What the Mouse in the Corner Hears . . .

(This is a 20 year-old couple announcing their engagement to both sets of parents.)

- Sam: "Hey, Mom and Dad—I asked her to marry me!"
- Sam's Mom: "Oh, honey! You are being too hasty—you can't be serious!"
- Sam's Dad: "You did *what*? But I haven't even met her yet."
- Julie: "Mom? Dad? I'm engaged!!"
- Julie's Mom: "Oh, no you're *not*. Just forget that silly idea right now!"
- Julie's Dad: "Over my dead body. My little girl is *not* going to marry *anyone* right now."
- Julie: "Oh!!! I just *knew* you were going to say that!"
- Sam: (to his parents) "But I really love her. I know what I am doing."
- Sam's Mom: "She just won't be able to keep house for you like I do."
- Sam's Dad: "I have heard stories about her and her family . . ."
- Julie: (to her parents) "Quit treating me like a little kid. I am a young woman now."

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- Julie's Mom: "That's because we love you and know what's best for you, dear!"
- Julie's Dad: "You are *not* marrying *anybody* without my approval."
- Julie's Mom: "A young woman would use better judgment and wait for the right man."
- Julie's Dad: "He cannot provide for you, my dear princess, like he should."
- Sam: (to his parents) "You don't *really* know her like I do. She's great!!"
- Sam's Mom: "Honey, we are older, and we know what's best for you."
- Sam's Dad: "Besides, her Dad is a drunk, and her Mom is too stupid to leave the jerk."
(to Julie's Dad:) "Hey—checked out the new pub downtown yet?!"
- Julie: (to his parents:) "Don't you dare judge me or my parents!!"
- Sam's Mom: (to Julie's Mom:) "You shouldn't let her act like this until she is older."
- Julie's Dad: (to Sam's Dad:) "You keep your pushy boy away from my little girl!"
- Julie's Mom: (to Sam:) "I am glad that you are friends, but she is just not all grown up yet."
- Sam: (to her parents:) "You both just *control every little thing* that she does!"
- Sam's Mom: (to Julie:) "Now, sweetie, you just go back home until you can grow up."
- Sam's Dad: (to Julie:) "You come from the wrong side of the tracks—GO HOME."
- Julie's Mom: (to Sam's Mom:) "You shouldn't let your boy put such ideas in her head."

- Julie's Dad: (to Sam:) "Don't you come near my girl. She *never* thought like this until *you* came along. You are a *bad* influence!!"
- Sam: (to Julie:) "Why don't you just tell them to go to hell, or I just might!"
- Julie: (to Sam:) "I don't think it's going to work with *your* parents acting like this!"

Wow . . . Confused? Frustrated? Tense? Angry?

Just listening to the pressures and manipulative statements surrounding this couple certainly explains the difficulty they would have in just making a simple decision *of their own*. Each partner's Family of Origin has strong ties and an overwhelming influence on any move the couple attempts to make. As this scenario began, the couple seemed excited and confident. By the end of the discussion, the couple is tense, doubtful, and argumentative. Both sets of parents are not only interfering with the couple but also fighting with each other. It is truly a family feud! Not only are the parents strong-willed and influential, but each partner in the couple is still rather dependent and non-assertive. Therefore, even though it may appear obvious that the parents are interfering, the couple actually may be too dependent and attached to their Families of Origin.

Clinical Case Example

Finding me in the phone book, Rick and Sue called to talk with me about having a joint therapy session. "We got a divorce, *but we're not sure why*," was their opening concern. There was a strong interest in reuniting, but they thought they ought to talk first about doing so. I agreed, and they made an appointment. On that day I opened the door to the waiting room and invited Rick and Sue to come in for their session. Six adults got up out of their chairs and walked toward me. (I wondered if by chance there had been three Rick's and three Sue's in

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the waiting room!) I soon learned that both sets of parents had come with Rick and Sue to *make sure that therapy went the way they thought it should!*

Knowing I was in trouble if both sets of parents were going to try to direct or influence the therapy process of this young couple, I had to think quickly about how to eliminate them gracefully from the therapy room. I complimented their constant and dedicated commitment toward overseeing this couple's progress—and emphasized how exhausting that *must* be for them every minute of the day. They agreed that they were all worn out from being so involved. When I suggested that they certainly deserved a break, they agreed. I then kindly offered them a one-hour “vacation” in the waiting room while I filled in and worked hard on their behalf. Surprisingly, they liked the sound of this offer and retreated to the waiting room.

At last the couple could talk and share some feelings without being interrupted or influenced by either set of parents. Now that they could be clear in their thinking, they quickly decided that they had never wanted a divorce—that it had never been *their* idea! Allowing them to make *their own* decisions based upon *their own* feelings was not so difficult now that all of the parental interference had been removed. They now wished to remarry and move far away from their families. However, I indicated that this physical distance would not resolve their lack of emotional distance. Families can still emotionally “pull your strings” and “push your buttons” from a distance by phone, by mail, and now by e-mail as well. Over the next few months we worked closely with each partner and each set of parents in various sessions. Rick's parents backed off rather quickly, not having realized before what an impact their actions had placed on the couple. Sue's mother clung to her relationship with her daughter to avoid having to deal with Sue's father. Sue had to learn and practice assertiveness in order to tactfully untangle herself from Mom's emotional grip. And she learned much more as well about her own “hanging on” to her parents for reassurance and security.

Visual Sculptures

- (1) Position the couple facing each other with one hand reaching out toward the other partner. Each set of parents stands behind their child with at least one hand on each shoulder of their child. The other hand could connect the parents to each other or be used to represent additional influence upon their child (grabbing an arm, holding around the waist, etc.). Have each parent exert the amount of pressure, pull, or grip that he or she *feels* appropriate. Have each partner in the couple exert the amount of pull, resistance, or connection that *feels right* for each of them with their own parents. Ask every person involved if this is how it feels for them in this family—or how it could be represented more accurately.
- (2) Position each partner of the couple sitting in chairs facing each other. Each set of parents stands behind their child's chair with one or two hands each pressing firmly down on their child's shoulders. The couple should feel trapped in their chairs and unable to move out of them. The parents remain in a controlling, superior position above and over their child, "putting them down."
- (3) The addition of props are crucial toward enhancing the visual and experiential quality of the emotional sculpture. The parents can make use of jumprobes, plastic chains, or a string of scarves tied together to represent their "ties" that "bind" them to their child. Double or triple ropes may be utilized until the strength of that bond *feels right*. To speak for their child, interrupt, or silence him, a scarf, towel, or bandanna could be used as a gag for his mouth. If the parents do not wish for their child to see the other partner, a blindfold captures that feeling. One therapist suggested using a string of many neckties knotted together to metaphorically represent the "ties that bind."
- (4) Missing members: Whether expected or unplanned, missing family members can be represented by empty chairs posi-

tioned at the same emotional distance. Ropes can be tied to the chairs just as easily so that the couple can feel the “weight”, “resistance”, or “emotional burden” upon them. A client can sculpt this same emotional configuration using play therapy dolls from a dollhouse and represent the same emotional distance, ties, and struggles. Other therapists claim success using coffee mugs, wooden blocks, or paper clips on a desktop to represent every family member and the distance between each of them. It just does not matter *what* is used to represent family members as much as *how* the relationships are represented in terms of emotional space.

Experiencing Dynamics and Changes

Once established in the initial formation of a visual sculpture, therapeutic work can begin. This couple’s challenge within the “Family Feud” configuration is to somehow free themselves appropriately from their respective Families of Origin and form a clear identity as a couple with their own goals. Yet secret issues of loyalty, dependence, or insecurity may cause them to hesitate, doubt, or blame someone else. Denying, minimizing, avoiding, or rationalizing dynamics are much more difficult to accomplish within visual sculptures. Just stating that you are “rather close” to your parents can become a powerful emotional experience when you are sculpted into a submissive position in which you find yourself held back, tied up, gagged, and essentially powerless to move, speak, or act on your own! And, sheepishly, you may have to admit that this is *exactly* how it actually feels in this situation. Even if you try to deny such dynamics, all others may still place you in this position because *they* all agree that is exactly *how it feels* to them.

Of course, gathering everyone’s perceptions, opinions, and unique perspective are essential toward closing in on a genuine and truthful consensus of the emotional realities. The therapist should also take a turn on how he or she views it—if differently than how anybody else may have visually portrayed it already. Please refer to the chapter on

“Utilizing Personal Space to Work on an Emotional Level” for many suggestions about working visually with this couple and their sets of parents.

Specifically, a therapist would want the partners in a couple to explore options for becoming less connected or entrenched while acquiring more power and assertiveness toward establishing appropriate distance with their Families of Origin. As a couple finds restricting hands on their shoulders or ropes binding them to their parents, the couple can experiment with actions that could reduce that pressure or create a healthier set of connections. Whatever sculpted solution they visually produce that *feels right* can then be processed and translated back into the reality of their lives. Clients often do not know *how* to change or *what* to change until they understand emotionally what would *feel right* or *feel better* for them. Then they can examine their situation to comprehend what it will take in their lives to produce this same particular emotional configuration and satisfactory solution.

Sample Scenario of Interventions

1. Bob and Julie find themselves sculpted into positions with their parents in which the parents have hands on their shoulders, around their waists—as well as a jumprope around each, tying them to their parents.
2. Julie finds a scarf being used as a gag for her mouth when she commented that she felt like they don’t ever let her talk. She gets frustrated very quickly with this familiar feeling of powerlessness but does not know how to free herself.
3. The therapist explores how the gag got there, who claims responsibility, who benefits, and who will allow it to be removed. Perhaps Julie *assumed* how her parents felt and placed it in her mouth, herself. Perhaps Julie benefits from “not having a decisive voice.”

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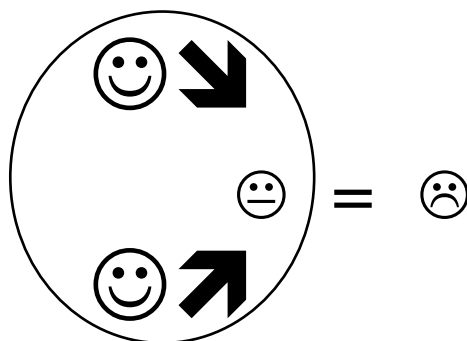
4. The therapist allows her to remove the gag and speak so that she can assert her feelings and needs. The therapist notices that despite her verbal efforts she makes no real *physical* move to change her predicament. “Talk is cheap.”
5. The therapist may employ a paradoxical approach, suggesting that Julie *stay tied* to her parents for at least the next five years as it “keeps her safe and secure.”
6. Julie breaks free from the parental hands and jumprope out of frustration and faces her husband with her back to her parents. The therapist asks Julie if she now wonders how her parents are doing—behind her back, where she cannot see them. Julie admits she *does* worry about her Dad’s health and how her Mom will handle things without her.
7. The therapist asks Julie if she would like to face her parents and “keep in touch” or “keep a finger on their situation” by taking hold of the rope (that they each hold one end of) with one hand or even just a finger.
8. The therapist notes that Julie faces her parents, grips the rope, but *now* has her back to her husband—still too focused on the welfare of her Family of Origin. Keeping one hand on the “ties to her parents,” Julie turns halfway around so that she can grasp her husband’s hand also. She now can see her husband and keep one eye on her parents as well. At least she no longer feels smothered, trapped, or controlled!
9. The therapist notes that when Julie removed herself from the “ties” of her parents and left them each holding one end of the jumprope, they became anxious. Mom let go of her end and took several steps away from Dad. At the same time Dad turned and looked away.
10. The therapist can comment on the quality of the connection between Julie’s parents as represented by the jumprope. It could be asked as to why one of them let go or moved away when Julie left their grasp. Was Julie the necessary distraction

that actually connected her parents to each other? What kind of anxiety is created when Julie's parents are alone to face each other? Is Julie the "missing link?"

11. The therapist can experiment with the quality of space between Julie's parents. Was Dad always focused on his little girl more than on his own wife? What happens if Mom is asked to pick up her end of the rope again? What reaction occurs if the therapist asks Dad to "reel Mom in" with the jumprope? What do Julie's parents experience if the therapist insists that they try facing each other or standing right next to each other? Do they become like repelling magnets?
12. What is Julie's reaction or comment as she observes her parents' process? Does this help her understand why they clung to her constantly or why she felt so compelled to stay close to them? Did she *feel* at some level that they would not survive as a couple without her?
13. The same kinds of interventions can be used with Bob and his parents in another therapy session. Julie would probably be present as well—as the couple *needs* to be represented.

Couple #2: "Odd Man Out"

Family Map:



The “Odd-Man-Out” Family Life Cycle

The dilemma with this situation is that one member of the couple has successfully detached himself from his Family of Origin while the other half of the couple still remains strongly attached to theirs. This places a great deal of pressure on the “odd man out” as he/she becomes triangulated with the spouse and the attached family. The family continues to pull the strings of their child while minimizing or ignoring the wishes and opinions of the new spouse. The new spouse may directly confront the family which may embarrass or anger his partner, or, the new spouse may get frustrated at his own partner’s passivity, dependency, or reluctance to be assertive with their own family. The family’s puppet feels pulled intensely in two directions between the beloved spouse and the beloved parents. The family may ultimately insist that this new spouse is “just not the right person for you, sweetheart.” The new spouse may also offer the unfortunate ultimatum of the partner having to choose between the marriage or the parents.

With the addition of children the dynamics of this triangulated situation essentially remain the same while the battlefield shifts to the topics of parenting, day care, baby-sitters, schooling, fad clothing, etc. The spouse grows weary of his partner’s looking toward his own parents, who are “always knowing best,” for guidance, ideas, and suggestions. The attached family may also begin brainwashing the children into disapproving of or doubting the words and actions of the “odd man out.” Other children may adopt the opposing side, supporting the “odd parent out,” thus creating battles among the children, reflecting all sides of the triangulated configuration. The children may also get blamed as the troublemakers while the grandparents look on “innocently.”

If the couple has not divorced by the time of the children’s natural departure from the home, then the likelihood for divorce may become greatest at the “empty nest” stage in the family life cycle. Many times the frustrated spouse waits until the children have grown and left home before he/she will finally depart this totally frustrating triangulation. If

the family's puppet has not matured enough by this point in life to make a healthy detachment from the family, the frustrated spouse may decide to find another mate. The absorbed partner may agree to stay with the family anyway since they are aging or near death.

Basic Solutions

1. The spouse with the lingering attachment to the Family of Origin needs help to learn how to make a healthy separation.
2. The couple needs to make the transition from individual positions of "Who's right?" to a marital position of "What do we want?" as a couple.
3. The couple may need to live physically farther away from that attached family.
4. The partner with the attachment needs to explore what benefits he/she is getting from staying attached and why the spouse cannot or will not meet those needs.
5. Issues of guilt, fear, low self-esteem, money (inheritance), property, or failing health may be some of the ties that perpetuate the unbreakable bond.

What the Mouse in the Corner Hears . . .

(30 year-old boyfriend comes to 26 year-old girlfriend's home before a date, meeting parents.)

John: (to Sandy's parents) "Hi there. I've come to pick her up for the party tonight."

Sandy: (to her parents) "We will be back rather late—not sure when."

Her Mom: "Come on in, young man. I don't really know you very well."

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- Her Dad: "What kind of a party is this? I need some specifics, young man."
- John: "It is at my friend's home—while his parents are gone for the weekend."
- Sandy: "I *trust* him—even though I don't know anybody else at this party."
- Her Mom: "Now, let's not be in such a hurry. Stay and have some cookies here."
- Her Dad: (to Sandy) "Where did you meet this guy? How long have you known him?"
- John: "We really need to get going. I promised the others."
- Sandy: (to parents) "Why can't you guys trust me for once? I know what I'm doing!"
- Her Mom: "You are not going *anywhere*, young lady, until we get to know him better."
- Her Dad: "You are *not* going to any party tonight with somebody I don't know."
- John: "We don't have time for this—I can E-mail you my life history later!"
- Sandy: "Mom! Dad! Stop it! You treat me like a baby! I *have* a brain!"
- Her Mom: (to John) "I think *you* had better leave. Come back when you have some time."
- Her Dad: (to wife) "I think I know *his* type, alright—all-night parties, alcohol, drugs, wild sex!"
- John: (to Sandy) "I don't deserve this kind of crap from them. You've got to decide whether you're going to listen to *me* or *them*."
- Sandy: (to John) "You have to understand my parents. They're just *very* cautious!"
- Her Mom: (to Sandy) "Come on, honey. Our favorite TV show just started."

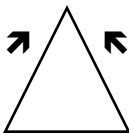
Her Dad: (to John) “You are not allowed to see her ever again—ya *hear* me?”

How long do you think John will keep trying to date Sandy? How many guys has she seen come and go? But why is she still home with her parents at her age of 26? Does she have financial difficulties? Is she recovering from a failed marriage? Is one of her parents in poor health? Is she actually fearful of another relationship and subconsciously glad that her parents screen each guy? Or is she just submissive to their control and afraid to anger them?

This type of emotional configuration reflects the classic “nasty triangulation” of interpersonal dynamics among three positions: Persecutor, Victim, Rescuer. Try having a conversation with two other people *at the same time*. One person is always going to be excluded for at least a moment if not for many minutes. Nobody enjoys feeling like the “third wheel” or the “odd man out.” How many single people look forward to hanging out with married couples? Within families, couples and groups of people, triangulation causes countless problems, hurt feelings, and misunderstandings.

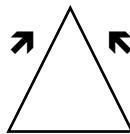
Within the scenario just presented one can observe the typical shifting or rotation among the three emotional positions. Sandy’s parents initially confront John, and Sandy comes to John’s rescue, confronting her parents (figure A). John then confronts her parents, and Sandy somewhat defends them (figure B). Finally, John confronts Sandy, and her parents attempt to rescue her and reel her back into their secure home (figure C).

A. John: V



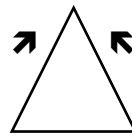
parents: P Sandy: R

B. parents: V



John: P Sandy: R

C. Sandy: V



John: P parents: R

Clinical Case Example

Often the dynamics of this configuration lie hidden and only blossom into a full dysfunctional bloom later, after this couple gets married. Just because a set of parents may accept that their child will marry does not mean that they will *ever* accept that outsider into the family. Many years of a slow poison and pervasive torture may follow.

Donna arrived in our office very depressed—tearful about her marriage woes. She stated that her husband, Randy, had chosen his mother over her. She added that his mother was even trying to turn her young children against her. She had married him years ago because she had believed that he and his family would offer a solid, stable background for raising children. Now she was weary, disillusioned, angry, and very sad. When this “city girl” married Randy, she had moved to his home far out in the countryside. His parents lived right next door on the same tract of land which had been owned by the family for years. There were clearly no boundaries as the parents would enter their home, unannounced, without knocking, any time of the day or night. Randy’s parents would even boldly enter the couple’s bedroom while the couple was engaged in sex. His Mom would say hateful, sarcastic, and demeaning remarks about Donna to her face behind her son’s back. When Donna would beg for her husband to support and defend her, he would deny, disbelieve, or minimize his mother’s comments—suggesting that Donna was simply mistaken or overreacting to his mother’s behavior.

Despite what plans the couple might decide, once Randy had told his parents, his opinion would now reflect their wishes instead. With the influence of a strong, Baptist, religious faith, Randy’s parents began telling Donna what to do, how to do it, and when. And, no matter what Donna might do for her husband, his mother would competitively outdo her to stay #1 in her son’s heart. Despite her desire to leave and divorce him, her damaged self esteem and lack of confidence kept her from making any definite decisions. After some individual counseling and a refusal by Randy to be involved in any

marriage counseling, she decided to finally make a break from this frustrating marital situation. Had he been willing to experience marital therapy, he may have understood better how much he is tied to his parents. But Randy essentially chose his mother over his wife—probably because he did not dare anger his parents and risk losing his inheritance, property, and family possessions.

Visual Sculptures

- (1) Position the couple facing each other with one hand attempting to reach out toward each other. The one set of parents grips their child from behind with two hands on each arm. Or they could tie them from behind with one or more jumpropes to symbolize a strong attachment. If the parents have any free hands, they could point a finger at the “odd-man-out.”
- (2) Position the attached partner *facing* his parents while in their grasp or tied to them with the jumpropes. This means that he will have his back to his partner—the “odd-man-out.”
- (3) Position the parents in front of their child, protectively, facing the “odd-man-out” while the attached partner peeks through from behind the protective “wall” that his parents have formed with their body positions. This makes it clear that the parents are the gatekeepers.
- (4) Position the attached partner facing his parents just outside of the jumpropes, but gripping the ropes with both hands. His back is to his partner still while focused on his parents’ needs.
- (5) Position the attached partner seated in a chair with both parents holding him down with their hands on his shoulders. A gag (bandanna) may represent “a *lack of say* in the matter.” If that partner is not allowed to see any potential mates, then blindfold him. If it is not easy to leave the home, tie his legs to the chair. This is a fairly dramatic picture—bound, gagged,

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blindfolded, and held down! Yet, maybe that is exactly *how it feels* to them.

- (6) Another way to illustrate the “vicious circle” or triangulation among the independent partner, attached partner, and the set of parents could look like this: Parents are chasing the intrusive partner away, the independent partner is chasing the attached partner, who is chasing after her own parents—who are chasing him away . . .
- (7) Position the partner who is “torn” between his parents and his mate with his parents tugging on one arm while his mate is pulling on the other arm from the opposite direction in a true “tug of war.”

Experiencing Dynamics and Changes

This couple’s challenge within the “Odd-Man-Out” configuration is to expose the triangulated dynamics and the excessive, unhealthy ties to the one set of parents. The attached partner often verbally minimizes his own attachments to his parents and excuses their actions. The parents will similarly deny that their child is that attached to them. Yet they will *all* place the “odd-man-out” much farther away. Many techniques described within the “Family Feud” configuration will also work in this similar family arrangement.

One of the typical differences is that the attached partner often *likes* or *wants* his or her attachment to the parents. Find out if the attached partner actually hears manipulative cues or just senses or assumes that his parents are wanting him to stay at home. The therapist also wants to see how the parents react if their child is freed into more independence. Did they *need* those close ties (binding their child to them) to avoid their own issues and anxieties? Do the parents prefer to only connect indirectly with each other *through* the ties to their child? Once the child is pulled from their clutches, do feelings intensify when left to deal with each other *directly*? Even the “odd-man-

out” may offer a healthier perspective from his detached and more objective position. It can be surprising that somebody will not be aware of how he or she was “unknowingly” rejecting a third party. With the appropriate emotional space displayed (according to *how everyone feels*) the visual awareness of the harsh effects of a triangulated situation becomes painfully clear.

Examples of Triangulated, “Odd-Man-Out” Situations



(1) Courting/Married
(new mate is intruding outsider)
“He’s not good enough for you.”



(2) Married/New Mate Favored
(In-laws favor new mate over own child)
“We now have the son we never had”



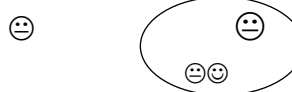
(3) Stepparenting
(new parent’s ideas not accepted)
“We don’t have to listen to YOU.”



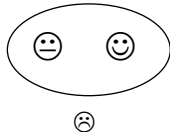
(4) Married/Live-In Parent
(Elderly parent influences his own)
“We’d better change our plans for Dad’s sake—he can’t be left alone.”



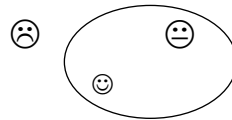
(5) Grandparent Replaces Parent
(Live-in Grandma takes Mom’s place)
“Grandma has *much more* time for us.”



(6) Single Parent/Live-In Elderly
(Grandparent becomes other parent)
“Grandpa says it’s really okay, Mom.”



(7) Single Parent/New Prospect
(New boyfriend consumes Mom’s time)
“I hate him. You don’t care about *me*! He is just another one of your losers.”



(8) Divorced Parents/Spoiled Child
(Ex-spouse spoils child, breaks rules)
“Dad lets me do it—on the weekends. He says I follow *his* rules at *his* house.”

Sample Scenario of Interventions

1. Larry finds himself sculpted into a position where his parents have both hands on his shoulders, a scarf gagging his mouth, and a plastic chain around his waist, holding him back. His wife, Linda, is standing about eight feet away with her hands on her hips, looking at him disgustedly and shaking her head in doubt.
2. The therapist can ask Linda how much longer she feels she can tolerate this type of arrangement. The therapist then allows Linda to sculpt the situation into what she feels would possibly work better.
3. When Linda removes Larry from the bonds of his parents and positions him out and away from them, the therapist should get all of their reactions to this move. Note whether she allowed him to retain any level of physical contact or even eye contact.
4. If Larry and his family are unwilling to allow him that much freedom yet, the therapist can place Linda alongside her mate *within the same bonds* of his parents, emphasizing to the parents that they should include Linda and *not leave her out* if they want their son to stay so close. Of course, gathering all of those reactions should be interesting!
5. Assuming that Linda would not be comfortable that “tied” to his parents—even if they agreed to include her, she could demonstrate for Larry the kinds of assertive messages that could be said to his parents. Position Larry outside the “family ties” for this modeling intervention of role reversal.
6. Larry gains a unique perspective watching his mate, Linda, held and chained to his parents and trying to free herself. He can see how absurdly confining it appears as well as how difficult it is for her to work herself free—even with her best efforts. Because she has *already succeeded* in freeing herself

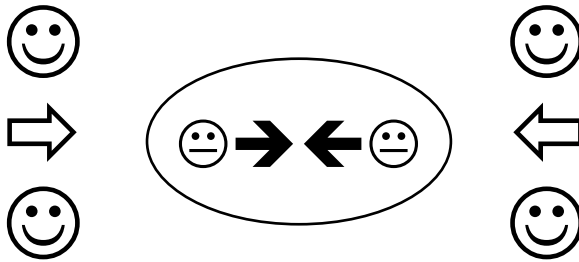
from her own parents, there is a good chance that he may gain some insight into watching her efforts with his own parents.

7. Because Linda is now actually dealing with *his* parents instead of her own, she may gain a better understanding, herself, as to how difficult, manipulative, guilt-producing, or insensitive his parents may actually be. Perhaps she will gain a clearer perception of what hurdles he has had to face. If two empty chairs are representing his parents, he can project what he thinks either of his parents would probably say to her or how they might react to her efforts.
8. Since the real work is his to do, Larry needs to return to the chains that bind him to his parents. Without the gag in his mouth he can now assert what he thinks he needs to say or do, having watched Linda role-model some ideas for him. But has he *earned* his voice back? Does he *believe* yet that he truly has a right to speak? Does he *fear* “talking back” to them? The therapist may need to place the gag back into his mouth until he grows weary of it and truly *wants* to change.
9. The therapist may note that he holds onto the chains or faces his parents without realizing that his back is toward Linda. Sensing that he may *not* want to let go of his close ties to his parents yet, the therapist may wish to employ a paradoxical intervention.
10. The therapist suggests that he tightly grip those plastic chains—or grab each parent with one hand each. The therapist then asks him to move around the therapy room—even down the hallway and back—and see if he can “make any move at all without his parents.” If two empty chairs are representing his parents, he can attempt to drag them around in the same manner—with plastic chains or jumpropes attaching him to the chairs.

11. Hopefully, Larry will feel that constant burden or “weight” of his parents’ close ties and now desire to make a change. The therapist can also ask the parents to move around, dragging Larry with them wherever they go, and see if they grow weary of that burden as well. The parents may recognize that it has been so exhausting to stay so closely connected with him. Perhaps they will encourage more independent activity on his part.
12. If Larry still wishes to maintain his close ties, the therapist can create a “tug-of-war” intervention in which the parents pull on one of his arms in one direction while Linda pulls hard on his other arm in the opposite direction. *Feeling* that constant tension and *torn* in two directions, Larry may need to make some decisions—quickly! He may need to tell each side *how* they are exerting pressure upon him. He may need to ask each side to “lighten up” or “let go” by stating good reasons for doing so. He may have to explore what he could risk losing in each decision. If he does not seem to mind losing Linda instead of his parents, then the therapist may need to have Linda move completely out of sight so that he can truly know that she may be gone forever and to *feel* what that loss would be like.
13. Linda may describe Larry’s “emotional age” as that of an eight year-old. The therapist should “shrink” him down physically to appear younger (sit in a chair, kneel or sit on floor). When Linda actually sees this picture, she may understand why he cannot let go yet of his parents. Now she may also understand *why* she has had occasional thoughts that he feels just like a child looking for *another mother*—and it’s HER!

Couple #3: “I am Right!”

Family Map:



The “I am Right” Family Life Cycle

This couple may not demonstrate any obvious difficulties as they move through the more superficial courting period of fun dates and occasional times together. Both Families of Origin have apparently launched their children successfully into an appropriate independence. The pair seems to be free and clear to come together as a couple. It is not until after they have married or begun living together that the hidden preferences in family beliefs and living styles erupt into conflict. Setting up house together, developing a budget, establishing a routine with chores and responsibilities, and falling into roles with potential power struggles all create many hurdles and challenges for the new couple.

Each young adult has grown up in a unique family situation with a potentially wide variety of beliefs, customs, cultural traditions, religious practices, communication styles, and unspoken expectations. No family style is entirely wrong or right—just unique and different. However, each young adult has been conditioned by their upbringing to think and believe in these ways with the assumption that this is “the correct way” to think and act. The conflicts can range from more obvious and predictable clashes such as religious preferences to the more subtle and less significant arguments over which cabinet the din-

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ner dishes are to be stored or which direction the toilet paper is supposed to hang!

It is never a matter of “Who’s right?” It is an opportunity to negotiate a new way of doing things instead of just repeating or regenerating each family’s traditions. This, however, elicits the first power struggle. Will a dominant spouse emerge and seek his/her preferences with determination? Will one spouse fold, passively, “out of love” for his/her mate? Or will the couple be willing to discard old habits in order to compromise and hammer out a joint agreement with mutual satisfaction? As in comparing apples with oranges there can be no absolute “right way” to do anything because each family of origin had practiced what was “right” for them in the unique context of their own situations. It just does not mean that these old patterns are *still* “right” for the new couple. Therefore, every couple needs to sit down together and re-evaluate their wants and needs for their home life instead of blindly fighting or mechanically regurgitating old customs without question or discussion. Although the Families of Origin have actually released their children for marriage, their teachings and conditioning behaviors linger like powerful ghosts within each spouse. These ingrained parental messages haunt the minds of each spouse toward some kind of reincarnation of that family’s beliefs and traditions into the new home. Failure to do so could create intense guilt, a sense of betrayal, or even failure.

If the couple continues their power struggle over “Who’s right?” in an endless fashion over every new topic or challenge, then the addition of children may see a division develop among the kids with alliances forming with whomever of their parents they choose to take sides. Then, one shall hear the kids fighting with the same “Who’s right?” mindset rather than a healthier attitude involving compromise and problem-solving.

After the children have grown and gone, one or both of the spouses may have had enough of the disagreements and may choose

to separate. Power struggles are exhausting. If one partner does not cave in and assume a more submissive role, then the other may leave. Sometimes a spouse will become depressed, having held in much unspoken resentment and silent disagreement. Or the couple may actually thrive on the challenge and energy of the ongoing feuds, spending many years stubbornly seeking an elusive victory on numerous battlefields—each one still trying to prove that his or her family's beliefs were correct.

Basic Solutions

1. The couple must learn that neither family style is “wrong” but rather unique.
2. The couple must learn to create their own style from a fair blend of the previous two styles with which they have grown up.
3. The couple must learn to accept that a new style is okay for them to adopt.
4. The couple must become aware of the little ways in which they promote or campaign for their respective Families of Origin simply to preserve *security* and avoid family disapproval.
5. The couple needs to understand that their resistance stems from *fears* of taking a risk toward trying something new and different. Why should they want to deviate from a familiar set of customs that have *always worked well* for each of them? “*If it ain't broke, why fix it?*”
6. The couple must be ready to face comments from their families regarding their negotiated, “new style” of family life and *support each other's* position.

What the Mouse in the Corner Hears . . .

(Couple debates arrangements for holiday visits to families, parenting, and household routine)

- Shawn: "I want to have a nice family reunion at *our* house this Christmas."
- Barbara: "You *know* that my family *always* gathers at Mom's house in Topeka."
- Shawn: "Well, we don't *always* have to do that, do we?"
- Barbara: "It is a tradition that I don't intend to break! Mom would be crushed!"
- Shawn: "I have a right to have my family meet here, don't I?"
- Barbara: "Yes, you have the right—but you are being inconsiderate to my Mom!"
- Shawn: "Besides, our son, little Ricky, misbehaves at your Mom's house."
- Barbara: "Well, if you knew how to discipline him *right*, that would not happen."
- Shawn: "You just yell and scream at him. You call *that* discipline?"
- Barbara: "Well, I am NOT going to hit him like your father did to you!"
- Shawn: "What that boy needs is swift and clear punishment—*not* empty threats."
- Barbara: "*Your* way is not always the best way or the *only* way to do things."
- Shawn: "Ah-ha! And so *your* plans for Christmas cannot *always* be *your* way either!"
- Barbara: "Oh!!! You make me so mad! Hey . . . uh . . . *where* are the coffee mugs?"

- Shawn: “You put them in the *wrong* cabinet again. They’re supposed to be on the left side of the sink in the other cabinet.”
- Barbara: “Here we go *again* . . . Mom *always* kept them on the *right* side at home.”

Who’s right?

They *both* are.

And, they are both *wrong*—wrong in thinking that there is only one way to do things.

How are they *both* right, then?

Each of them grew up in nice families with clear rules, successful relationships, and rewarding traditions. This gave each of them a great deal of security and knowledge about how a family can be very successful. *Why change anything* if it produced fond memories and rewarding relationships? There is great security in familiarity. There is trust in traditions and customs *that work*. *Why switch* to some manner of doing things which one has no personal, first-hand experience with or clear guarantee that it will succeed? There is such a strong need to cling to the security of the *known* and avoid the anxiety-producing *unknown*. This translates down to the simplest of behaviors or details—such as where dishes are stored in kitchen cabinets. All of these little things add up toward reproducing *the known* which promotes familiar surroundings and a regeneration of comfort and security.

If one partner grows up in a Russian culture, speaking Russian, and the other partner grows up in a Spanish culture, speaking Spanish, who is right? Neither, of course, in terms of one background being *better* than the other. Both families and cultural backgrounds may be quite successful in producing warm, happy, secure homes. The solution is to blend the best of both worlds in a negotiated, flexible, compromised blend of the two successful styles of living. This may be quite a challenge and a “scary risk” to the two partners. They may both feel that the other is trying to manipulate or control them. It can be misinterpreted as a power struggle or an endless philosophical debate

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regarding the different family lifestyles. Each will simply defend what he has always known to work well for himself—and why *wouldn't* he?

The challenge for the therapist is to help this couple realize what their struggle is all about—and why they attack each other constantly over the smallest of differences. Each is so focused on the partner's "wrong" or "ineffective" manner of doing things instead of *what* their struggle actually concerns. Neither mate looks at himself, his own lifestyle, or any considerations about changing anything of his own. Each mate *assumes* that his lifestyle is a blueprint for happiness—and that all other claims are mistaken or misinformed. The therapist needs to state that they are *both right* and also *both wrong*. But some visual techniques may also help to clarify this couple's challenge and put in a clearer perspective.

Visual Sculptures

- (1) Position the couple facing each other and pointing a finger at each other. Have each partner state repeatedly, "I'm always right—you're always wrong!" By exaggerating their claim in such a blunt and visual manner, they may back down and re-examine their actions.
- (2) Position the couple facing each other but holding a jumprope, plastic chain, or long beach towel around their waists from the front. Their hands pull backward as far as they can, putting pressure on their stomach or waist. They are essentially "holding themselves back" with the memorized teachings and ingrained customs from their respective Families of Origin. Their families are not actively present in their lives, but the learned traditions persist and interfere. The more they cling to their "old way of doing things," the harder they must pull backwards. This shows that they are creating pressure upon themselves—*not* on each other. Even though their families

are not present to “pull their strings,” the effect is still *felt* and *seen* through this display of “holding themselves back.”

- (3) Position the couple facing each other. The therapist (and possibly a co-therapist) stand behind each partner in order to act as that “voice in his head” which recites the “old traditions” of the Family of Origin. The therapist(s) whisper the “old messages and rules” behind each partner’s head to *keep each of them from making any changes*. This paradox can help illuminate the absurdity of the battle and the rigidity of each partner in an exaggerated and sometimes humorous fashion (See Sample Scenario of Interventions in this chapter).

Experiencing Dynamics and Changes

The challenge facing this “I am Right” couple is to become aware of how they are projecting their own internal battles for security outward onto their partner. They blame the partner and list all the ways that the partner is “wrong.” Once they become aware that the battle is actually *within* themselves between the security of the old, familiar traditions and the unfamiliar, “risky” ideas presented by their partner, the marital tension will decrease. Discussing this matter is not as clear nor memorable as it is when visualized and experienced.

Sample Scenario of Interventions

1. Robert and Laura are positioned facing each other. Each is holding a jumprope against his or her own stomach while pulling backwards.
2. The therapist states that he recognizes that they are in a conflict over “which customs” to adopt in their marriage. He acknowledges that he knows that they are not yet ready to risk any changes. The therapist asks them to *pretend* to negotiate and *pretend* to give in a little in a role-play situation. He

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emphasizes that neither of them is expected to believe in his or her proposed compromises.

3. As they begin to *pretend* to yield somewhat and develop a negotiated compromise, the therapist stands behind whoever is speaking. With a co-therapist involved, each therapist can stand behind a partner and remain there. Each will serve as the familiar “inner voice” which shall advocate *that* Family of Origin’s comfortable customs and trusted beliefs.
4. Here is an example of the interactions that might occur:

Robert: “Maybe we *could* visit your Mom in Topeka first and then have a family reunion later around New Year’s?”

R’s therapist: “How could you *even suggest* doing it differently?!”

Laura: “Well, and just maybe Mom could wait for once and not always have it her way . . .”

Ls therapist: “Mom’s gonna *kill you* for thinking like that!!”

Robert: “My family *probably* would be okay with that change.”

R’s therapist: “How *dare* you minimize their feelings and suggest such a change?!”

Laura: “Mom will be upset, but she will get over it.”

Ls therapist: “You’re doing it *wrong!* This is just *not* right!”

Laura: (to her therapist/herself) “You’re confusing me. How is this wrong?”

Now the conflict has shifted to the internal dialogue between Laura and her own thoughts (portrayed by her therapist). As the couple attempts to actually hammer out a new plan, the old familiar voices of trustworthy traditions (spoken by the therapist(s)) interfere and confuse matters. Now the couple can realize that the real conflict is NOT *between* themselves, but actually *within* themselves as they each battle

to break free from his or her own, old, dependable customs wrapped up in familiar security. And as they turn to *confront* the therapist playing this role behind them, they shall realize that *their back is now to their partner*—which underlines the idea that the conflict is *not* with him! The jumproles further illustrate how they “hold themselves back” from taking risks and making progress.

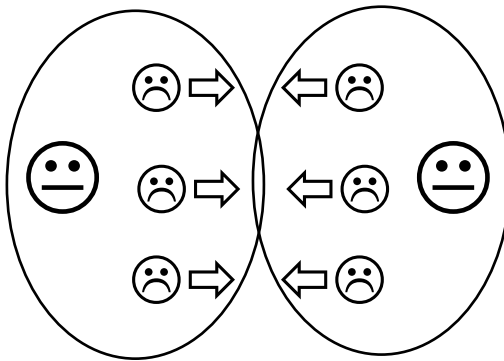
5. The therapist(s) should emphasize or exaggerate these old, internalized voices of tradition so that the couple realizes just how rigid, stubborn, unyielding, or even absurd they can sound. If there are two co-therapists—or even just one very energetic therapist, they can start battling each other verbally, allowing the couple to hear and watch what they actually sound like—one step removed and now outside of the conflict, looking in.
6. Each partner could even try to challenge the other partner’s “alter ego” or “inner voice” (played by the therapist) while the silent partner listens to how he is perceived and portrayed.
7. Role reversal is also helpful as each partner role-plays how he thinks the other partner sounds. The “inner voice” therapist(s) can remain *unchanged* so that each partner can now experience what internal pressures and conflicts the *other* partner experiences.
8. The jumproles could also be held by the “internal voices” (therapist(s)) and pulled tighter backward and away from the other partner with each time that the partner attempts to be flexible, compromising, and sensible—yet straying away from familiar traditions.
9. The verbal battle between the partner and his conscience is very important. Here the partners have the opportunity to really confront and challenge their old thought patterns and secure little customs with the help of the role-playing thera-

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pist—who shall present a tough and relentless challenge—almost to an absurdly stubborn and humorous extent! But at least the source of the conflict and confusion will be obvious and not likely forgotten any time soon!

Couple #4: “We are Right!”

Family Map:



The “We are Right” Family Life Cycle

This couple faces the classic clash between two family styles which they have previously formed and are still presently in operation. Usually both of the partners have been married previously, and, for whatever reason, their previous spouses are either divorced or deceased. As this new couple decides to unite, each brings an active family style (with children attached) to the new relationship. Not only are the family styles established, but there are children who are likely to be resistant, defensive, rebellious, fearful, anxious, adamant or even depressed about changing anything. Therefore, the battlefield is set for one of the most difficult and destructive battles a couple may ever encounter.

Just becoming an accepted “new” couple to both families may be one of the toughest hurdles of all. The couple finds itself entangled in a double, triangulated situation as each partner wrestles with being

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