Narrative Ideas for Working with Men in Couples Therapy[1]

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Abstract

This paper uses a narrative perspective to propose that therapists working with heterosexual couples think about masculinity as the "performance" of culturally specified ways of being male. This view is described as a reflection of the ideas that have come to be associated with narrative therapy (e.g., social constructionist thinking, the narrative metaphor, and an emphasis of the operation of meaning and power). Examples are discussed that demonstrate how this view can enable therapists can respectfully explore and challenge the problematic effects and uses of power that the performance of masculinity sometimes "encourages." A narrative approach to couples therapy is outlined and the place that this thinking occupies within it described. Finally, examples of work with couples based on these ideas are provided.

In the twenty-five years that John[3] and Judy had been married, John's experience was that he had done everything he "should do" to be a good husband. Shouldering the responsibility as the family's wage-earner, he had made decisions unilaterally about the family's finances. This included things like what major purchases would and would not be made and whether or not there was sufficient money for family vacations. He had provided well for the family, been faithful to his wife, saved for their retirement – and she was furious with him. This anger he attribute to his wife's emotional instability. She had been helped for awhile by antidepressants, but no longer wanted to take them. Judy's experience was that for years John had been controlling, distant, and uncaring. She was furious and felt that she could no longer put up with it.

Debbi experienced herself as depressed and angry and came to therapy with her husband Doug at the urging of her individual therapist. Doug explained that they constantly argued and that he felt rejected. Debbi said that her reactions to her husband occurred because she was depressed. Perhaps she should try a different medication. Both of them viewed her to be helpless and dependent. When they argued she would express sarcasm and anger about which she later felt horrible. In each of these couples, the effects of gender and power could be understood as key to the distress that the couple experienced.

This paper focuses on how therapists working from a narrative perspective[4] can approach men and women about the overt, subtle, and (for many persons) invisible ways that men's

understanding and enactment of "masculinity" operate to support problems in couples and in couples therapy. My intent is to describe how revisions in the ways masculine gender and power operate on the man and woman in a couple support the resolution of the problems that couples present.[5] In focusing on masculine gender my intent is not to view men as the source of all problems. Within the approach I describe, the complementary "fit" in the relationship with which systemically oriented therapists are so familiar is between the cultural gender "discourses" that support each person's interpretation of themselves, each other, and the cultural practices that support the problem. And while many of the gender requirements that organize women's experience and behavior also support the dilemmas that couples face, much has been written about this (c.f., Hare-Mustin, 1994; Weingarten, 1991, 1992). In comparison, men's experience and performance of masculinity (including masculinity's prescribed uses of power) has been relatively ignored in couples and couples therapy.[6]

This orientation to the cultural within the personal experience of persons distinguishes a narrative approach to couples from most other ways of thinking and working (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996; Neal, 1996; Pare, 1995, 1996). Individuals in couples usually locate the source of their problems in the other partner[7] – which is why they want us to "fix" the other person. Many systems therapists locate the problem in the interactional patterns that "maintain" the problem. This can be seen in John and Judy as an anger/withdrawal and punishing/distancing

pattern. This construction of the problem supports the therapist's efforts to change the interactional patterns (e.g., to get the woman to approach differently and the man to stop withdrawing). Other therapists tend to locate the problem in the individual psychologies (or other characteristics) of one or both partners as in Debbi's instance and "explain" the interactional patterns as a result of the combining of individual psychologies.

Men's relationship with masculinity is mostly invisible, and thus its influence in relationships tends to be invisible too. I am not suggesting that men must embrace self-hate or view themselves in a self-deprecating way. I am suggesting that it is useful to notice how cultural specifications of masculinity operate on men, their partners, and their relationships. Within couples, many men unknowingly participate and support problems by not understanding how their position as men and their performance of masculinity negatively affects them, disempowers their partner, and disqualifies their partner's experience. When these culturally supported uses of power are made visible to men within their experience of themselves and their relationships, the effects are often transformative. Individual and relationship problems usually understood in terms of personal defects, inadequacies, and other individual characteristics become understood as effects of culturally prescribed ways of being and ways of relating that are thus accessible for revision.

The man who doesn't "get it" when his wife explains that she experiences his angry outbursts to be verbally abusive is no more "incapable" of understanding and assuming responsibility for his

behavior than any other person (c.f., Jenkins, 1990). He is, however, under the influence of ways of thinking about "maleness" and the cultural practices that support and reproduce them. These ways of thinking specify how he is supposed to be and understand himself . "Just do it" Nike says in its advertisements. Implicit in this is the mandate to "not think" about what you are doing. This is male gender discourse in action. The message supports and legitimizes cultural practices that specify the nature of how men should behave and understand personal experience (Don't think, just do it.). This injunction to avoid self-reflection or concern for the effects of one's actions on others also supports male entitlement. To assume men are incapable of accountability and responsibility toward their partners and the relationship is to support dominant ways of thinking and patriarchal cultural arrangements. It takes men off the hook in ways that keeps certain negative effects of men's ways of being invisible to men and supports views of men as needing to be "protected."

This paper is divided into three sections. The first summarizes a narrative approach to masculine gender and couples. This is necessary in order to understand how an analysis of male gender discourse "fits" in narrative therapy. In the second section, a narratively informed approach to couples is outlined. The third section illustrates some of the problems of gender and power that therapists typically face in couples therapy and discusses how they might be approached from this perspective .

Narrative Ideas and Practices

Narrative ideas and therapeutic practices provide a way to approach problems that is appealing for many therapists. The conversational practices referred to as the "externalizing" of problems enable clients to experience problems as outside and separate from them – as influences upon them and their relationships – and to experience a sense of collaboration with the therapist and other family members against the problem. These conversational practices have been interpreted as powerful clinical technique that can be applied within different clinical theories or frameworks (e.g., Eron and Lund, 1993). The externalizing of problems offers the non-pathological orientation that systemic therapy originally promised, and the focus on solutions are attractive to therapists in the same way that the practices of previous methodologies (e.g., "paradoxical" interventions) were experienced to be so exciting and potentially powerful. What is often misunderstood by therapists (in the similar way that "paradox" was misunderstood) is that the practice of "externalizing" problems is an effect of a way of thinking about problems, speaking about problems, and positioning oneself in relation to the culturally structured nature of persons' experience of themselves and their relationships. The practice is founded on a postmodern social constructionist understanding of persons' individuality and the problems they face (c.f., Neal, 1996; Zimmerman & Dickerson, in press).

The Location of Problems

Narrative ideas and practices locate the problems clients face in the cultural practices and forms of meaning that "invite, rationalize, and justify" persons to interpret their experience and behavior in ways that support problems (c.f., Gergen & Kaye, 1992). This understanding of persons and problems is very different from the kind of understanding that is implicit in most approaches to therapy (c.f., Gergen, 1992; Kvale, 1993; Pare´, 1995, 1996; Weingarten, 1991). The power of exploring problems through these conversational practices is that they not only "separate the person from the problem," they enable therapists to make visible the effects of power, the cultural beliefs and practices that reproduce these effects, and how clients' participation in these practices inadvertently serves to support the problems they wish to escape or resolve.

From this perspective, problematic interactional patterns are understood to reflect the effects of complementary forms of discourse on the individuals who participate in them. For example, a common dilemma in which many couples find themselves occurs when a woman is more concerned than her husband about their relationship or the children. A woman's experience of culturally encouraged and supported forms of responsibility for others makes her feel pressured and yet helpless to deal with certain relationship matters that her husband ignores. In turn, her husband's constant experience or expectation of self-evaluation invites him to avoid the things he

believes he can do nothing about. What the therapist informed by individual psychology might "see" is an angry and critical women who attacks an increasingly evasive and passive man who views his wife to be "irrationally" angry. What an interactional therapist might "see" are a "pursuer-distancer" pattern, or the "attempted solution" of the "customer" (wife) who's behavior "supports" avoidance and distancing in the husband, or a variety of other patterns linked to the therapist's description of the interactional politics in the couple. What the narrative therapist might "see" is the influence of culturally dominant forms of gender discourse (a woman's sense of emotional responsibility and a man's sense of constant evaluation by self and others) and the operation of power that supports the conflict in the couple. That is, the operation of power enables the disqualification of the woman's experience and concerns and justifies the husband's view that her anger and "irrationality" make her experience and thinking suspect. In other words, one might also say that she is expressing something about her experience that he does not understand and that he interprets as critical of him.

Gender and the Narrative Metaphor

The popularity of books like "Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus" (Gray, 1992) attests to the commonalties of men's (and women's) personal experience of themselves and in relationships. Men are becoming aware of the ways they try to fix problems rather than listen to their partners; how they suppress their feelings, avoid discussing things, or retreat when they are

uncertain or when they feel hurt. Men perform masculinity in these ways because they implicitly understand this is how men behave. When asked, they will explain a set of common reasons for their behavior that are familiar (and justifiable) to other men and familiar to women. For both men and women, it is assumed that this is how men "are."

These views of gender emphasize differences and/or the characteristics of men (e.g., detachment from and inability to express feelings, overemphasis on the "rational," etc.) and women (e.g., "co-dependence") as relatively fixed sources of relationship problems (c.f., Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1989). Some therapists have found the self-help literature on the differences between men and women useful for avoiding the blame and misinterpretation that commonly overtakes couples. This is very helpful for many men and for many couples. However, this focus on differences and on the individual characteristics of men obscures (if it does not completely ignore) the operation of power between men and women and the contradictory forms of experience and behavior that dominant forms of masculinity and femininity specify. As Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1988) have pointed out, analyses focusing on gender differences risk overemphasizing or underemphasizing similarities between men and women and obscure issues of power. I would add that they support a view of masculinity and femininity as only martian-like or venetian-like. As a consequence, such approaches invite the interpretation of masculine ways of being as given, unquestionable, or immutable traits. This lessens opportunities for men to become

accountable and responsible for their effects on themselves and others. The cultural stories that justify, for instance, men's uses of anger or "rational" thinking as power remain invisible to them.

For example, there is a cultural story and set of conversational practices that stem from it that justifies and reproduces the use of "logical connotation" as a tactic of power. In a culture where "rational thinking" is believed to mirror the objective world, the ways that men claim their experience to be "rational" and "logical" operates as a tactic of power. This use of rhetoric as power is largely invisible to most men. When a man understands something, it is thought to be "rational" and "logical." When he does not understand it, is thought to be "irrational" and "illogical." This practice invites, supports, and justifies the man's stance that he has greater access to the "truth" when he does not understand the experience of a woman. The man's claim may be made that the woman's argument is "irrational" if her experience is different from his own. The man may think her argument makes too much of a "little thing" (e.g., "faulty premises") or he may think that what is expressed doesn't make sense ("illogical"). A related form of this "tactic" occurs when a woman's expression of her feelings is upsetting to the man. This upset may make it difficult for him to try to understand why she is upset or what she wants him to understand. In this instance, the cultural story about "rationality" and "truth" convinces him that he is entitled and justified to end the conversation (i.e., to "stonewall"). Conventional approaches to gender as difference (c.f., Gray, 1992) suggest that the man who withdraws needs to be left alone (in his

"cave"). However, this ignores how the man's withdrawal operates to disqualify the experience and concerns of the woman and enables the man to avoid responsibility for trying to understand the woman's experience.

Another way this story about the relationship between logic and truth operates is to invite women to disqualify themselves and their own experience when a man articulates his experience in a way that possesses "logical connotation." The story invites the woman to believe that because she does not play this language game in the same way the man does, that her thinking and experience must be inferior, less true, or somehow less valid. She is invited to believe that she should defer to him. In each of these cases, and in an infinite number of other instances, it is a "taken-for-granted" "truth" that he is "objective" and "rational," and that, as such, he has a greater claim to truth than those persons **he** deems to be less "rational" and "objective." This story about "rationality" and "truth" justifies ignoring the experience of the woman. While all men are under the influence of these cultural stories and participate in their reproduction, fewer men are comfortable with them once the harmful effects of them are made visible.

In short, men interpret themselves and behave according to the cultural stories about how to be men. What is usually invisible to men in these performances of masculinity (and in popular books on gender) are the interpersonal politics and the practices of power that these ways of being support. These politics and practices are less visible to most men in the same way any culture's

assumptions and practices are invisible to its members and more visible to those from other cultures. These politics and practices may be ignored or handled awkwardly by therapists who typically view them as reflecting deficits of one kind or another, as inseparable from the man's character, and as relatively unchangeable. For example, withdrawal, refusal to discuss certain issues, or the invalidation of concerns expressed with emotion, each represent the exertion of a kind of power that is either unacknowledged or unnoticed by most men and tacitly accepted by most women. Therapists who view men as incapable of dealing with feelings inadvertently support these politics, albeit often with frustration.

Masculinity, Power, and Problems

The influence of Foucault's thinking on White, Epston, (c.f., White & Epston, 1990), and on narrative ideas and practices is well known. This orientation to power emphasizes how the internalization of the dominant narratives of the culture is experienced as reflecting the truth about one's subjective identity, as organizing of social institutions, and as legitimizing the "naturalness" of particular social practices. Foucault's (1985, 1980, 1977) thinking has made visible how the processes of determining what is and is not legitimate "truth" reflect the operation of power and that it is these "truths" that persons use to interpret their own and others' measure of moral worth. The present application of gender, narrative ideas, and narrative practices relies upon these ideas as well as upon postmodern "discourse analysis" as explained by Hall (1986, 1988)[8].

Hall's (1986) thinking explains how cultural ideologies and practices (e.g., the forms of masculinity men *should* perform) specify and reproduce themselves within the ways people think and feel about themselves, how they interpret their experience, how they behave in personal relationships, and how they participate in social practices and institutions. Applied to gender, Hall's work suggests that social interaction is the source for men (and women) to achieve the momentary experience of masculinity (and femininity). This point of view also suggests that a sense of masculinity (or femininity) can be achieved only on a moment-to-moment basis, that "being masculine" is realized by our performance of the different and contradictory forms of experience and behavior thought to be "masculine" within the multiple, simultaneously overlapping (and contradictory) cultures within which we each live. One implication of this perspective is that masculinity (and femininity) are constituted as a set of subjective experiences and behaviors that must be performed in any given moment to achieve a sense of masculinity (or femininity). If one agrees with Hall's thinking, it follows that masculinity *must be and is constantly reproduced, negotiated and renegotiated, again and again* within social interaction.

When a narrative therapist explores men's experience of marital problems as cultural discourse, the forms of thinking, feeling, and behavior that are culturally specified and prescribed become visible *in* the problems presented for therapy. For example, a man's attempt to fix what *he construes* to be the "problem" rather than attempting to understand his wife's experience is one

way men tacitly privilege their points of view and interpretations over those of women. This "social practice," so to speak, of problem solving when someone is upset is experienced by many men as a responsibility (and burden). It is a relationship practice men construe to be caring, believe is expected and wanted by others, and which justifies their interpretations and their behavior. And *because* the man feels responsible (or entitled) to problem solve, the negative effects of this practice remain invisible to him and criticism feels unwarranted. By carefully exploring the effects of this "responsibility,"[9] the unwanted effects upon others and upon themselves become visible and engender interest in other forms of thinking and behaving. The cultural prescriptions that tell men how to be men begin to be experienced as "foreign," "strange," and engender discomfort in comparison with other (preferred) ways of being (e.g., attempting to understand his partner's experience on her terms). What used to feel *natural* begins to feel unacceptable. For example, when frustrated or hurt, a masculine discourse tells men it is *natural* or *justifiable* to use anger (with an implicit or explicit threat of violence) to reestablish control of the situation. Masculinity is constructed so that men's expression of anger is thought to be *uncontrollable*. It *erupts* much like a volcano while the man helplessly or passively witnesses. When men are asked to reflect upon these uses of anger, threat, and other ways of exhibiting strength, they may describe them as *natural* or perhaps *automatic*. Only after these relationship practices are *unpacked* – their implicit meanings, assumptions, and prescriptions made visible – do they become seen as a kind of cultural narrative that specifies how men

ought to experience, understand, and behave. It is these stories about how to be a man that men, as narrators of their lives, so to speak, often wish to revise once their effects become visible to them. It transforms the inexplicable and invisible into something visible and a matter of choice, a choice that, not taken, maintains problems at their own expense and at the expense of those they care about.

In practice, many, if not most, therapists approach individuals' narrative constructions (clients' "storied" interpretations) as if they represented reflections of individual histories and characteristics that each person "brought into" the relationship. This use of the "narrative metaphor" is consistent with individual psychology and distinct from the use of narrative metaphor in narrative therapy. Within a social constructionist interpretation of narrative it is understood as a "constitutive frame" (c.f., Gergen & Kaye, 1992; White, 1993). As such, narratives (and, for purposes or our discussion, gender) specify "forms of life which they invite, rationalize, [and] justify. They are not so much reflections of life already lived as they are progenitors of the future" (p.173). When we do not keep in mind this view of narrative and its implications for how power operates, we participate in keeping the operation of power invisible, and our approach to gender and power in couples therapy is made more difficult.

Individual and systemic approaches to men may inadvertently obscure the operation of gender and power on men's experience by assuming that the characteristics of masculinity are inseparable from the characteristics of men. Within these approaches the influence of the cultural

requirements of masculinity on men's experience and relationships remains unexamined and invisible. This leaves therapists in the position of observers theorizing about men's experience of gender and uses of power. As Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1994) observe, this leads to an oversimplification of the relationship between the effects of male gender practices and men's experience and understanding of the forms of masculinity in which they participate. In the absence of accounts about men's experience of the operation of gender and use of power, their experience and behavior remain largely unexplained — except for interpretations that are provided by observers who are aware of their effects on others. This inadvertently requires female partners and the therapists working with men to "theorize" about the sources of men's behavior from the point of view of observers who can see the effects of men's behavior and are left to attribute intentions to men on the basis of these effects. Men often experience such theorizing to reflect a lack of understanding of them. But by not making their experience visible they support its occurrence. Also, by not making their experience visible men can justify that the problem in their relationships is that others do not understand them. As a consequence, men's experience of masculinity and the effects of their performances of masculinity on others remains invisible to men and women alike.

That the focus of the focus of this paper is placed upon men and men's experience should not be construed to imply that masculine gender discourses are solely responsible for the problems in

couples. As was mentioned in the introduction, the systemic "fit" with which systemic therapists are familiar occurs between masculine and feminine discourses. When the operation of power remains invisible, men and women alike participate in the overentitlement of men and the disempowerment of women. The complementarity is found or constructed, depending upon how you look at it, in these culturally shared discourses and social practices. The focus on men's experience of masculinity, its effects on men and relationships, and its relationship to power is highlighted because it has been neglected in the past, and not because it is the "real cause" of problems.

Due in part to the work of White and Epston (1990; Epston & White, 1992; White, 1995) to make the operation of power visible and a part of therapy , the visibility of men's experience of gender and power has begun to be addressed among those writing from a narrative perspective. Alan Jenkins'(1990) and Nylund and Corsiglia's (1993) work with men who are violent, White's (1992) analysis of the "men's movement," and Maisel's (1994) description of his work with a man in therapy are notable examples of narrative approaches to the operation of masculine gender practices and men's uses of power.[10] Yet, the "how to" of a narrative approach to masculine gender remains difficult for male and female therapists. This is the focus of the remainder of this paper: How to think about and approach the operation of men's experience of gender and the overt and more subtle uses of power that men use in the context of their relationships and in

couples therapy.

Narrative Couples Therapy and Discourse Analysis

The approach to couples therapy described below follow along lines described previously by Zimmerman and Dickerson (1993a, 1993b, 1994) and the thinking of Hare-Mustin (1991, 1994), Weingarten (1991, 1992), and Kazan (1994) on the operation of gender and power. Couples therapy typically begins by constructing an understanding of the problem in collaboration with the clients. However, to minimize and ameliorate for contextual influence of gender and power, it is important for the therapist to begin by acknowledging his or her own context in some way. With heterosexual couples, particularly, the acknowledgment of the effects of the therapist's gender is important (since the therapist can only match the gender of one of the partners). In the instance of myself as a man, I routinely announce that it will be helpful if we remain attentive to the fact that as a man I am likely to misunderstand or not notice some of the woman's experience; that I know that I "do not know" and will make the effort to frequently check with the woman to ascertain if there are things I am "missing." In order to avoid the error of assuming that gender similarity guarantees understanding I will add that while I may have some ideas about how the man in the couples struggles with things men must deal with, that I will not assume that I know what this experience is either and that I will probably ask frequently about this as well. These points can be made directly or indirectly, depending upon the language and context of the

couple. Once some acknowledgement of this kind has been made, the therapy proceeds.

Narrative Therapy Process

The therapy process begins by exploring each person's experience of the **problems** in the relationship and/or the other person. In the course of this conversation, the **effects** of these problems on each person's experience are explored very carefully, thoroughly, and respectfully. This is done in order to establish a shared understanding of the problem's influences upon each of them, its influence on their views of themselves and each other, and its influence on the relationship. Each person's experience of the problem, as they view it, is understood as a socially constructed narrative – an understandable if not inevitable effect of the problem as interpreted within the dominant gender discourses that define the nature of men, women, relationships, persons, and problems. There is a subtle reversal of conventional thinking by the therapist in the conversation described here that a lot of therapists initially do not notice. While the initial exploration of the effects of the problem occurs in many therapeutic approaches to problems, the focus of the effects of the problem on each person's experience is not so typical. More often therapists tacitly search for the subjective experiences of clients that the therapist believes might "cause" problematic behaviors. This is opposite of what narrative social constructionist thinking suggests. Narrative therapy explores the effects of the problem on persons' experience of themselves, each other, and the relationship. This moves the interview in a very different direction

from therapies that leave clients feeling hopeless and pathologized and and is key to the experience of separating problems from persons.

In what follows below, this process is outlined in some detail. This description should not be taken as a prescription on how to approach every couple, but as reflecting a sense of a process informed by the above ideas. With this in mind I would like to preface the following description of therapeutic practices with two provisos. The first is that the interview process described below should be adapted to fit the experience and needs of clients and always should remain subordinate to these concerns. To privilege this process at the expense of clients' experience is to reproduce the practices of power a narrative approach is attempting to make visible and challenge. Similarly, it is important that therapists remain sensitive to clients' language and experience. As narrative ideas and practices have become more popular, it is sometimes the case that therapists "borrow" language from other therapists they have observed or by whom they have been supervised. When this occurs at the expense of using clients' language and experience, clients may have the experience that something is being done "to them" rather than along with them. A sensitivity and subordination of the therapist's language to that used and understood by clients helps to avoid this problem.

The second proviso concerns the therapeutic exploration of the problem. During the process in which clients' experience of problems is explored it is important for therapists to keep in mind

that their own ideas about the operation of power are not likely to match those of their clients. A narrative social constructionist perspective reminds us that whereas power is always operating, individuals' experience of its operation can only be understood within the context of their unique experience. One couple I worked with, for instance, understood what I experienced to be an invalidation of the woman as justified on the basis of her (individualistic) Anglo background, which they jointly devalued relative to the community orientation of his Hispanic culture. Because he was Hispanic and she was Anglo, the preference they shared for Hispanic values inadvertently supported a sense of entitlement to privilege his point of view over hers. However, when this inadvertent operation of power became visible the couple joined together against this individualism that had gotten him into this expert role and the problem was ameliorated. In short, narrative social constructionist thinking assumes that problems always involve the visible or invisible operation of power and that the therapist's interpretation of its operation is less important than the understanding of the clients' experience of its effects. It is out of the pursuit of the **effects of these effects** and, in turn, the pursuit of **the effects of those effects** that the problem will be defined within the language and experience of clients.[11] With the acknowledgment of these provisos, here is a summary of how a therapist might proceed.

1. The therapist begins by exploring each person's experience of the problem as an effect of the problem on him or her. In a non-blaming and respectful way, this line of inquiry makes the links

visible between each person's reactions and behavior as an effect of the respective interpretation of the problem; that is, a link is made visible between the interpretation of the other's intentions and behavior and one's own reactions and behavior with regard to this interpretation.

2. This line of inquiry also separates these respective interpretations of the problem from each person and from the relationship and relocates them within some prescription of how each person feels and thinks he or she should **be** or should **do** in the relationship. Within heterosexual couples therapy, these ways of being almost always (within this form of thinking) represent some personalized form of culturally prescribed gender discourse that promotes, justifies, and reproduces subjective experience and behaviors that are enlisted in support of the problem. This relocation of the problem within gender discourse is accomplished by exploring the effects of the problem on each person's experiences, what these effects do to each person, and what these effects get each person to do. This also includes what the problem makes them feel and think; how it encourages or invites them to interpret the other person's intentions; and how it makes them think and feel about the relationship and about themselves as persons. As a consequence of pursuing this inquiry, each member of the couples begins to experience the operation of cultural gender discourse – and the uses of power that go with it – as potentially separate from their identities as persons and from the relationship. This process opens up each member of the couple the possibility of proactively choosing ways of being "masculine" and "feminine" that prevent rather

than support problems.

Such a conversation typically provokes interest in cultural assumptions and "truths" as the sources of the problems that exist within certain culturally defined forms of interpretation (i.e., about the nature of masculinity and femininity, for instance). In short, there occurs a reversal between what was formerly experienced as "cause" (the other's behavior) and "effect" (their reactions): Instead, what becomes experienced as culturally imposed interpretations of themselves and each other are seen as having inevitable effects leading to interpretations and behaviors that support the problem.

3. The cultural sources of the problem that enable new possibilities for interpreting and behaving as a man or woman become visible by **deconstructing** the **discourses** that have to this point been invisible in the operation of the problem[12]. The importance of **externalizing** of problems from persons and the relationship cannot be underemphasized (Madigan, 1996). It is this aspect of the conversation that enables clients to reverse their experience of cause and effect. That is, the characteristics of the other person and the relationship that were understood and experienced formerly to be the causes of the problem are now experienced as effects of the problem; effects that exist separately from each person and the relationship and that stem from certain ways of being they have been taught to perform upon themselves and each other. This is accomplished in a number of ways, including:

(a) Exploring the tactics that the (externalized) problem uses on each person to convince them to experience themselves, the other, and the relationship in ways the problem "wants" them to;

(b) Comparing the problem's "view" of each person, the other, and the relationship with the clients' views of themselves, each other, and the relationship;

(c) Asking each person if the ways of being supported and encouraged by the problem are preferred, or if the ways of experiencing the other and the relationship and these ways of experiencing themselves are to their liking. Although it might seem obvious that they are not, it is not always the case, and by answering this question the members of the couple are declaring their shared opposition to the problem.

(d) Drawing attention to the ways other persons have been affected by the same ways of being and exploring whether the person is aware that the effects of these ways of being are shared by many. Those familiar with the work of David Epston and Stephen Madigan (Epston, Morris, & Maisel, 1995; Madigan, 1994) will recognize this use of others' experience as a form of "archive" that helps persons to view dominant cultural knowledge as such. This can help clients to challenge these dominant views and separate them from their own identities as persons (i.e., to "deconstruct"them).

4. When the problem's "prescriptions" begin to be experienced as alien, the process of "reauthoring" begins. Sometimes this occurs without "externalizing" the problem at all and at

other times a very careful and gradual separation is necessary. Sometimes this reauthoring process is woven into the conversation that separates the experience of the problem from the persons and their relationship. At other times (e.g., when the problems have been present for a long time or are more pervasive in the relationship), the experiential space, so to speak, obtained by the externalizing of problem discourses seems to be required for the reauthoring process[13].

Reauthoring questions are asked to explore the potential meaning and significance of preferred events in the relationship and preferred experiences of self, other, and the relationship. This is not necessarily a focus on the "positives," but an exploration of events and experiences that exist outside the influence of the problem or that might not be predicted to have occurred given the range of influence of the problem. As has been explained elsewhere (White, 1993), these questions help persons elaborate an alternative story about self, other, and the relationship.

This "emplotment" (Epston, 1995), the mapping of events and experience, into an alternative and developing "counterplot," is key to persons' sense of coherence within the reauthoring process. Without it clients have more difficulty making sense and holding onto developments that are in contradiction to the problem. There are a potentially infinite number of questions that support the experience of a developing counterplot.

What is the developing story that might explain such an event and what is each person's experience of it?

How might one best think about or name this preferred way of being?

What kind of story about the relationship does this point to?

What might this development suggest about the future?

How might each partner's understanding of oneself, the other, and the relationship be changed if they were aware when this was occurring?

What other events have occurred in the past that are like this?

These and other questions that gradually help clients to "reauthor" themselves and their relationship should not be neglected.[14]

Examples of the Work

Carol experienced her husband's behavior to be personally *disrespectful*, *disqualifying*, and *controlling*. Norm viewed Carol's behavior as reflecting *mistrust* of him and his judgment, *irresponsibility*, and as making no sense: What she does is *illogical*, *irrational*, and *senseless*. While each member of this couple understands their experiences as reactions to the other's behaviors, the therapist imagines some kind of link between each person's experience and interpretations of the other's experience and behavior (1, above). By exploring the effects of Carol's experience of her husband upon her (1a), it becomes visible that she becomes questioning of herself, fearful of his reactions, unwilling to speak up, and periodically blows up at him. In exploring these effects with respect and a genuine curiosity in regards to how they create and support other experiences, the effects come to be understood as "reasonable" reactions to her experience (1b). Norm and Carol are in agreement that this is how she behaves. Similarly, by exploring the effects of Norm's experience of his wife, we discovered that he becomes frustrated, tries to deal with the issue

directly, attempts to explain his position logically or in a different way, or gives up and withdraws out of exasperation and concern that a fight will ensue. In these instances, he may remain "distant and upset" for days. As an effect of this exploration of the problem, Carol, Norm, and I explore whether Norm's "logical style" seems to have the effect of "disqualifying" Carol's experience and whether Carol's reactions invite an intensification of his attempts to "help" her to understand. We have made visible that his attempts to be "more logical" stem from his interpretation of Carol as "not understanding" his logic, from her withdrawal, and from her blow-ups that stem from her experiences of being disqualified and criticized. Both sets of behaviors are understood to be reasonable reactions to the respective interpretations of the other's intentions and behavior. Step 1, above, has been accomplished.

By then turning to Norm and exploring how the experience of Carol's "not understanding" got him to become more logical, I am *deconstructing* his view of *logic as truth*, women as *irrational*, and men as *knowing better* (3a, above). At the time I began to explore Norm's understanding of the "logical" I did not know which aspects of gender discourse would emerge, only that they would emerge (They always do.)[15] By exploring how logic *got Norm* to do the things he was doing, certain forms of gender discourse became visible. I did not have to challenge Norm on any of these ways of being because once he reflected upon the effects of these implicit notions in his thinking about himself, Carol, and logic as truth, he understood Carol's and his own experience

differently (3b, above.) “I use logic to make me feel secure,” he explained. “Without it, I feel scared and insecure, like things could get out of control.” So Norm began to consider the intensity of his efforts to logically persuade and to be under the influence of fear that got him to inadvertently disqualify his wife. This discovery was upsetting to Norm because he viewed himself to be a pro-feminist man. In response to my question (about preferred ways of being (3c)), he acknowledged that he did not want to have these effects on his wife and the relationship. Nor did he want to feel that he was making choices out of fear.

What was important here was Norm’s discovery that Carol’s experience made sense as an unintentional and previously invisible effect of what he felt compelled to do. His understanding as a man of how to be a good and competent person (and her as an “irrational” person) required (in his mind) that he should privilege his own views at the expense of her experience. Once he began to question the usefulness of logic by exploring its effects, he began to separate its role from his identity as a person. We facilitated this separation by pursuing the effects of the “problem” on each other’s experience and on the relationship (which enabled Carol’s experience to become visible to Norm), through the discovery that other men also experience the “responsibility” to be “objective,” and as a consequence of exploring the effects of these “natural” ways of being. This also helped to make the equation of his logic with objective truth visible to him. The link to other men’s experience was also facilitated by speaking about my own experience of feeling responsible

for problem-solving. By speaking about my own experience and inquiring whether it would surprise him if other men had the same experience Norm could reconsider his undertanding of logic, truth, and his feelings of responsibility more easily. Sharing of other men's experience and the revision of the way responsibility operates to get men to disqualify others' experience often helps men to separate these way of being from their identity as competent persons.

A similar process of "deconstruction" then occurred with Carol in which we looked at how her reactions to her interpretation of Norm reflected the way women are supposed to put others ahead of themselves, to "be for others," and to be "more trustful" of the "man's thinking" than her own thinking. When these ideas came out in the interview, she and Norm agreed that this way of viewing the other and themselves was simply "not true."

Sometimes therapists report that their male clients are not as forthcoming as Norm. These men may feel quite comfortable or justified in the use of knowledge as power (i.e., their authority and opinions are believed to be -and are expressed in a way that suggests that they are – more valid than those of their partner) and the use of certain practices of power (i.e., influencing others through the escalation of anger, implicit (or explicit) intimidation, or the threat of violence – to name a few of the more common practices). In these instances the task is no different. By carefully exploring these men's experience and intentions and by detailing the effects of these practices, most men choose alternative practices of influence.[16]

How a therapist begins the process summarized above depends on the presenting problem. Sometimes the couples therapist may choose to initially focus more on the effects of an "interactional pattern," while at other times the same therapist may initially focus on the effects of an individual problem. For example, if the couple presents with the problem of depression, violence, an affair, or other individual behaviors that are problematic, it makes more sense and is more respectful of their experience to focus initially on the effects of the individual problem. If the couple presents with a "relationship problem" such as constant fighting, distance, arguing, disagreement, then it makes more sense to focus initially on the effects on the relationship. In either case, their subjective distress is viewed by the therapist as effects of the problem. Either way of pursuing the problem tends to result in a shared understanding of being trapped by a problem and an agreement that each person does not want these effects perpetrated on either of them personally or on the relationship. This facilitates an alliance against the externalized problem.

Contrary to the interpretation many persons have about the practice of externalizing conversations, this alliance against the problem does not reduce individual responsibility for the effects of each person's participation in the problem. On the contrary, the hurtful effects of a husband's philandering, for example, are not avoided within this way of working. The hurtful effects of actions are carefully explored. The critical aspect of this process is to explore these effects in a way that (a) helps the man to begin to understand what aspects of men's ways of being

have been involved in his decisions to have an affair(s) and that (b) helps the man to appreciate the experience of those persons he most cares about. Usually, this is his wife or partner, but also children who are old enough to understand infidelity and who often are profoundly hurt.

In my experience men rarely enter into a conversation about their infidelities with an understanding of what has informed their behavior, nor have they had a significant appreciation of the hurtful effects of their actions. For example, one man came to therapy after his wife discovered that he was having an affair with a female colleague. This led to the admission that he had been engaged in a series of affairs with different women over a period of years. He had justified his behavior to himself by telling himself that it did not matter much to anyone other than himself and that his wife wasn't interested in him much anyway. In the course of exploring the effects of the affairs upon him, he came to understand that the affairs had occurred at times when they were an attempt to deal with feeling inadequate in his work and irrelevant to his family. Of course, he had hidden these feelings from himself and his wife. His experience had been organized by the idea that his wife was disinterested in him and in her "obligaton" to sense and suport him in his struggles. This idea "justified" his infidelities. As has been often the case in my work with men who have had affairs, a recommitment to the relationship with a genuine appreciation for the profoundly hurtful effects of his behavior occurred as a consequence of (a) coming to understand the ways men have been taught as men to avoid making sense of their own

experience and (b) as a consequence of understanding how their behavior affected those for whom they care most.

The reauthoring with this couple occurred in the context of his willingness and commitment to accept the hurt and anger that his wife and children felt, to try to genuinely make sense of how he could have not known this would be so hurtful to them, and how he was able to "justify" his behavior to himself during the period of his infidelities. Ironically, the genuineness of his participation in this process reawakened an appreciation of an openness and willingness to work at the relationship for both members of the couple that, although absent for many years, had been one of the central reasons for their commitment to each other.

This "openness and integrity" was the initial inspiration that seemed to organize the events that occurred in the therapy room into a "counterplot." When a really meaningful event was pursued, it turned out these events had been present also in other areas of the relationship in spite of the avoidance that had separated them. There was the distant history to this counterplot (one of the reasons they got together) and periods of the relationship that had continued to reflect his openness and integrity. The joint struggle with the hurt and pain that occurred in the therapy room and at home in the months after the initial revelation of the affairs also was experienced by them as reflecting the recommitment to and rediscovery of their relationship together.

One of the injunctions of men's culture mentioned in the introduction is for men to avoid

thinking about the personal experience that suggest to them that they are vulnerable. Not that men can successfully do this, but, because of this injunction, when vulnerability is experienced it has implications for how men feel about themselves. Men are not supposed to be taken over by their feelings, and to have this occur is to risk feeling out of control, unable to cope, or some lessened ability to function competently. This avoidance often makes the connection between their feelings of vulnerability and their experience of sexuality less visible, if not completely invisible, to men. Most men are unaware that they may become “attracted” or interested in women other than their partner, when they are feeling less secure and more isolated. The source of the attraction is often thought to exist in the characteristics of the “other” woman, and the sources of dissatisfaction are thought to exist in one’s partner. Again and again men have been surprised to notice that their interest in other women coincided with a time in their lives when they felt inadequate and alone and that wanting to be “desired” sexually was a vehicle for making them feel better about themselves as persons.

Another couple presented in distress about what they called a pattern of “distance and pursuit.” The man experienced his partner to be “critical and judgmental” and she experienced him to be “distant and rejecting.” Her “criticism” and “judgmental nature” “made” him want to distance. She had experienced him as becoming more and more distant and found herself feeling”rejected”and “angry” as a consequence. By exploring how this experience of the other and

the ensuing conflict affected their respective understanding of the relationship, we saw that "distancing" got him to feel convinced that she was "critical and judgmental" and that "pursuing" got her to feel convinced that he was distant and rejecting.

In this instance, a link was not created – as a "systems" therapist might be tempted to do – between "distance" and "pursuit," but between the interpretations (stories) each person used to interpret the other person's motives that in turn explained and justified their respective stances of "distance" and "pursuit." Of course, these *interpretations* of "distance" and "pursuit" were initially described by each member of the couple as responses to the other's behavior. However, by examining the effects of this experience on each of them, "distance" and "pursuit" eventually became experienced as effects of *interpretations* (i.e., narrative constructions about self and other in this context) of the other that were seen as understandable reactions to the problematic pattern. Of course, the experience and understanding of these effects had been initially attributed to the other's intentions and behavior.

Further, by exploring each person's experience of the *tactics* that "distancing" and "pursuing" used to get them to believe what they did not want to believe about themselves and the their partner, they were able to notice how the problem used feelings of *over-responsibility* in the woman and the practice of *self-evaluation* in the man got them to believe and behave in ways that made the relationship worse. Both felt that the woman should carry the emotional responsibility for the

relationship, and both felt that neither of them could not speak of the man's vulnerability out of fear that what *self-evaluation* told him would be *true* (i.e., that he was a failure as a man). When both of them began to question what they had previously felt to be the *truth* about themselves and the other, the knot weakened. He had began to become "suspicious," he said, of *distancing* when he noticed that it required him to feel "pressured" to be "one hundred percent present." He knew, he said, that his wife did not expect this of him and that *self-evaluation* just wanted him to feel badly about himself and blame her. Similarly, she found herself wondering why pursuit could only "get a hold" of her when she questioned her own judgment and then tried to seek reassurance from her husband about which a part of her knew she didn't need to be reassured. Noticing this helped her to understand "pursuit" as a ploy of *over-responsibility* to others.

Within these examples there are some commonalties that are important. First, it is important that the therapist carefully explore each person's experience of the problem in the person's own words and on his or her own terms. At times problems are presented that are upsetting to us (e.g., self-destructiveness or abusive behaviors), and the exploration of each person's experience may require a kind of faith that respect, curiosity, and the pursuit of discourses that emerge out of the "effects" of the problems will succeed in making the operation of power visible and open to challenge . Second, it is often helpful if the exploration of one's experience of the problem occurs in the context of an externalizing conversation. Externalizing conversations are facilitated when the

therapist understands each person's experience as representing (1) an understandable (if not inevitable) reaction (effect) to the interactional pattern and –as discussed earlier– (2) when the source of each person's understanding and reactions is located within the dominant cultural discourse and relationship practices related to gender and power (or through some other process in which the operation of power occurs[17]).

As Alan Jenkins (1990) has described, when abusive or otherwise threatening behavior on the man's part is in question, locating the source of the problem in the ways of thinking and relationship practices that encourage these behaviors has the effect of helping the man choose responsibility and accountability for his behavior. This is counterintuitive to many persons who fear that "externalizing" problems decreases responsibility. In practice, when men are engaged in a close examination of the effects of "going along" with male cultural discourse, they become aware, like Norm, of their destructive effects, and instead choose responsibility and accountability.

A Second Example: Deconstructing Tactics of Intimidation

Frank would blow up in anger when Doris told him she was upset with him about something. If she expressed a request or complaint, he became mad, defensive, and attacking. She felt that she couldn't bring up anything serious for fear that he would experience it as criticism and vent anger at her *for getting angry*. Although no physical violence had occurred, Doris experienced Frank's anger as a tacit threat to her physical safety designed to intimidate her into backing down. The

threat of Doris leaving was what got Frank to agree to couples therapy. In this instance, the exploration of Frank's experience of how Doris' anger affected him made visible how *feelings of inadequacy* he experienced when she was angry made him experience himself as defective. When Doris got upset, these *feelings of inadequacy* took him over and told him he was a failure. His experience was that if he could just fix whatever was upsetting Doris, the feelings would leave him alone for awhile. Not surprisingly, Doris experienced Frank as wanting *her* to simply leave him alone. The turning point in the work came when we began to explore whether some of the requirements of what Frank thought were required in order to be a good husband and a good man were somehow supporting the problem. By sharing my own and other men's experience we saw that many men feel that they must be competent and adequate all the time, not let themselves notice if they are not feeling competent or adequate, nor let anyone else know. If others know, they will be humiliated and mocked, have it used against them, or be rejected by women[18].

Therapist's exploration of this kind of experience of how to be a man can (and often does) go badly if care is not taken to identify and separate the man's intentions from the culture's story about how to be male. It is the contradictory nature of gender – the conflicting requirements of how to be male or female – that become useful in this process. This contradictory nature of gender leaves much more space, so to speak, for men to find "masculine" ways of being that are

not at their partner's expense and that they also prefer. Through an "externalizing" conversation, Frank had the experience of separating himself from feelings of inadequacy that had him convinced were the *truth* (a "truth," that the culture requires men to privately hold toward themselves). This separation made it possible for him to rethink the significance and meaning (to "restory") events and experiences that documented his that he was a caring, well-intentioned person.

In retrospect, I believe there were a few elements that were tacit in this externalizing conversation that helped Frank to separate himself from ways of being that were problematic. These were: (a) the identification and acknowledgment of Frank's positive intentions, (b) a genuine and respectful exploration of the effects of how Frank experienced the culture's contradictory requirements for him as a man (e.g., wanting to be "strong" - invulnerable, and in control - *and* "sensitive" – respectful of other's feelings), and (c) the identification of the effects of Frank's performance of "strength" on Doris' experience and how things were between them when he was "strong" in these ways. This last thing enabled Frank to side with Doris against the pressure to fix and against forms of "strength" expressed at her expense. He now identified his sense of strength in terms of his willingness and commitment to understand his wife's experience *regardless* of how he was feeling. In taking a stand against and refusing to listen to what *feelings of inadequacy* tried to tell him about himself, he felt less pressure to fix, less reactive to Doris' anger,

and wanting to avoid using anger as a tactic of intimidation and control.

A key to this process was a careful exploration of *Doris' experience* of the effects of how *feelings of inadequacy* got Frank to behave. Without this understanding of Doris' experience of fear and intimidation that ensued as effects of the behavior that *feelings of inadequacy* justified, Frank would have remained in the dark about the ways masculine cultural practices affected her and their relationship. Exploring how *feelings of inadequacy* affected him, Frank noticed that they got him to feel entitled to use his anger to intimidate Doris. This understanding helped him not only to notice that his use of anger was unjustified, but also that he could *choose* to avoid using tactics of influence based on anger and intimidation. Previously, the sense of justification for being angry had kept these effects on Doris' experience invisible to him. And, without this understanding of Doris' experience, he was less likely to notice that the frustration caused by *feelings of inadequacy* encouraged Doris to believe dominant views about men and intimacy; that he was incapable of caring or even understanding her.

Conclusions

This paper has described a way of thinking and approaching couples that attempts to address men's experience of gender and power and their effects in couples and couples therapy. This thinking includes an orientation and understanding of persons and problems very different from other couples therapy approaches. In applying the linguistic practice of externalizing conversations

to the problems that couples present, it is important to takes seriously the view that problems exist *in the cultural views* through which we interpret ourselves and others rather than *in persons or as relationship categories.* From a postmodern narrative perspective, it makes sense to locate the gender beliefs and practices that influence clients within the cultural practices and beliefs that structure persons' experience and relationships. When therapists take on this perspective, they discover that there are no problems, no interactional contexts, and no heterosexual couples therapy that is not saturated by the influence of gender and power. The experience and understanding of it is always unique to the members of the couple, yet it is always in operation. When therapists separate persons from the influence of destructive practices and ways of being that derive from this operation of gender and power and make these visible as culturally based ways of being and behaving the amelioraton of problems couples present for therapy follows.

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