

Advanced Marriage Counseling Concepts: An Algorithm For Intimacy

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Over recent decades, the psychology of relationships took a prominent place in popular culture. True, television and magazines serve grossly distorted versions suitable for parody or selling soap. However, many people now pursue more sophisticated reading and scientific understanding than found in sit-coms or advice columns. In that spirit, for those committed to learn more about relationship dynamics, here's a more challenging essay on theoretical and practical approaches you may encounter in marriage counseling. So, hang on for a quick tour through one thin sliced but crucial aspect of human development. Closer attention may reward you with insight into resolving the anger and alienation that frequently builds up even in our most highly valued relationships.

Practical and Theoretical Approaches To Marriage Counseling

First, a few comments about practical, scientifically based recommendations. John Gottman, the lead scientist evaluating thousands of couples' conflicts, used blood pressure and heart rate monitors along with video among other tools to predict divorce 93% of the time after 5 minutes of observation! Unfortunately, that map of how couples made a mess of their marriages didn't translate into equally sure fire methods to help couples turn marriages around. Gottman's ubiquitous books do chart a number of patterns evident in successful marriages that he condensed into learnable behaviors: e.g., 1) say what you want rather than what you don't want, 2) express positive feelings, words, or touch at a ratio of 5 to 1 over negatives, 3) start in softly when bringing up specific complaints, and 4) avoid ballooning complaints into criticisms of character flaws. It can only help to make those behavioral changes. However having read, understood, and intended to incorporate Gottman's obviously reasonable and scientifically validated suggestions, many very smart people aren't able to do so. Fortunately, many other researchers have uncovered intricate patterns (though not so easily quantified) that skilled marriage counselors may use to help couples incorporate the kind of patterns Gottman outlined; and much subtler and satisfying levels of intimacy as well.

Towards understanding those subtler relationship dynamics, it helps greatly to examine how each partner's identity forms. As this essay clarifies, **nature put us in a Catch-22**: our individual identity serves as the lens through which we look out at our partner; yet the very way we represent our self to our self, *only forms through relationship to an 'other'*. That identity grows in stages, each a more complex recipe of relationship dynamics than the prior stage. Now let's zoom in closer to what an identity is, its functions, and how it forms and reforms as we progress through life all the way into marriage or other primary relationships. The most rudimentary evidence for identity is the phrase, "I am ___", e.g., a two year old saying "I am Maria". That level of identity serves a critical function, much like a psychological GPS system. Once a child has a firm identity, mom can yell out the backdoor on a cold day, "Maria, come in for some hot soup"; and that little mind body organism homes in for food and warmth. Even brain structure growth depends on such interactions.

Developing Movements, Emotions, and Identity: All Require 'Mirroring'

Robert Kegan, an educator and therapist in a virtual lineage of developmental psychologists at Harvard, traces how identity forms and reforms through the life cycle ^[1]: How I represent myself to myself is completely "embedded" into how mom responds to me at two, into cultural identity and the rules of the games at 10, and so on until 20 when it deeply embeds into how boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse sees 'me' (single people, of course, devote a great deal of RAM to finding a relationship or staring into the empty space where the relationship should be). While lots of learning begins even

before birth, individual identity doesn't emerge until roughly 15 months to 36 months. Until that age, babies are learning sponges for sights, sounds, words, emotions, comforts and dangers but they don't yet have a unique identity. How does identity form?

Facial Movement and Mirroring

A mechanism called 'mirroring' plays a big role in development of our ability to move our face, regulate emotions and grow an identity just as it plays a critical role for couples. Hundreds of studies ^[2] tracked the call and response of the facial expression of mothers and infants with photos and videos down to every 1/30th of a second. Though ability to move the face is inherent and emerges in infants sometime in the first weeks to months of life, mom's mirroring (goo-gooing back to an infant's goo-goo) is a necessary transmission mechanism for the infant to eventually download that ability--to recognize and respond to other faces--onto it's own hard drive/brain. When babies don't receive enough focused attention to their facial expressions, movements, responses, etc, they simply won't internalize that capacity and may grow up with particularly flat affect. Of course, reading and responding to others' expressions is a critical human skill all the way into adult relationships. While "mirroring" usually refers to those literal reflections back to an infant, the term is used here synonymously with 'attunement' which may fit better to refer to mirroring to complex developmental needs of adults. (Note that, as used here, attunement or acknowledgment imply neither agreement or praise.)

Neurological Growth & Emotional Regulation Require 'Mirroring'

If we advance the clock to 10 to 18 months, many studies ^[3] show children need attunement from parents to help them name emotions and learn to regulate those emotions, another critical skill in a long march toward adulthood (and the eventual ability not to make a complete mess out of a marriage). "Wow, sweetheart, you are so angry, that must hurt" is an attuned response to a toddler, naming the emotion and providing a soothing voice tone the child downloads to eventually master a repertoire of self soothing abilities. Science recognized the role of mirroring at least 80 years ago but in the last 15, "mirroring neurons", critical to interpersonal abilities, were discovered and found to activate in the frontal cortex on cue at mom's mirroring.

Identity Forms and Reforms Through Mirroring

While parents obviously need to oversee, direct, and protect a child 24/7 until teen years, for an identity to sprout there also needs to be a parallel course of acknowledgment or attunement to the child's emerging "independence and willful refusal". Imagine a 17 year old teen mother with a two year old proudly basking in the reflected glory of her mother's (just out of rehab) *riveted attention* on the toddler. The child may balk when teen mom says "give grandma a kiss goodnight" because baby has an ear ache, is tired or repelled by grandma's alcohol fueled breath. A teen with a high need for attunement from *her* mother will pick up and thrust baby at grandma, and shout "kiss her goodnight". That communicates, in effect, "you're just an extension of my need (to be mirrored by my mom), so you will *not* be issued a unique identity (requiring my acknowledgment of your need).

Mom can win battles of will with baby, but without some mirroring to baby's perspective and preferences two year olds can't give birth to an identity, a necessary developmental achievement. They will, however, just like their 22, 42, and even 62 year old married counterparts, keep acting out to get acknowledgment or oscillate back into a self protected, resigned withdrawn shell. Of course, many teen moms do respond with perfectly timed maternal instinct, "Ok sweetheart, maybe grandma will have better luck next time". That recognition, in 10,000 iterations, conveys to the toddler that it's ready and entitled to tastes and choices different from mom who, by attuning to the child, transmits uninterrupted

love and connection; whether or not mom interrupts or allows the baby's behavior, mom's *recognition of the child's unique preferences nourishes the child's incipient identity*. Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni writes ^[4], “**mirror neurons in the brain of the perceiving self process the perceived self as the other...**”. In other words, we're in way deeper doo-doo than co-dependence.

By 10 years of age, the mirroring of parents and peers for a child to assimilation of cultural rules and mores is critical. A simple identity might sound like “I am... “a soccer goalie”, “an Italian”, “a Muslim”, “a Catholic”, etc. That entails tears if she isn't picked for the role in a play or if his soccer team loses in the first round. Aside from the occasional 50 year old who has a heart attack when their team loses the super bowl, we generally grow into broader identities to value ourselves in other ways. From 15 to 25, the cutting edge of our identity steers toward a primary relationship. Kegan named that the “**interpersonal**” **stage of development** because then our psychological compass points the cutting edge of our identity toward the primary “Other”.

Bridging Individual Identity to Couples Relationship Dynamics

That sets up the Catch-22-crucible where couples encounter counseling. The whole developmental process through the life cycle helps each partner **differentiate** their own unique, individual tastes, preferences, emotional expression, political views, and spiritual orientation **from mom, dad, culture, sub-culture, and friends**. That is, each individual consciously identifies as an autonomous individual though the core nature of that identification is simply a mental construct of “who I am” wound around my tastes, my opinions, my abilities, etc. Remember that very identity only emerged through the **mirroring from others** and is **still embedded in it and dependent on it for further development**. So at two, “I” is more accurately written as I/Mom, at ten as I/culture/mom, and at 25, I/partner. Let me repeat, mirroring is not optional though on the surface we mistakenly refer to “I” or “me” as if we're little autonomous Pentagons of command and control.

Of course, at the first in-love-stage of a burgeoning relationship, both partners glow at each other fueling a delightful sense of wonder and completeness. In that flush of good feeling comes such an ease of being that we don't even notice how much we invested in how the other sees us. Therein is also the dark side of that in-love-stage because it carries a psychological Trojan horse type virus. Let's playfully call it 'Openness Disease' because it keeps us from noticing that along with blissful highs of connection, that 'openness' is also leaking out a very large investment of our very identity into how the other sees us.

A similar process happens throughout development. When a toddler first gets an identity (think a high tech GPS toy) it can interact with mom in a whole new level of efficacy. So, when mom refuses a third cookie even though the child only played with the second one, the child's new found sense of agency/identity effectively gets punctured like a popped balloon suddenly flying zig zag around a room. The child isn't angry but may be so inconsolable it's hard to bear. At 10, not getting a cookie isn't a big problem though being scapegoated about games devastates. At 25, neither the cookie nor games are an issue but the sharp criticism from a significant other can collapse an otherwise healthy adult's identity - - *imploding* into empty, unloved feelings with no self worth or *exploding* against the partner's perceived power *over his or her identity and worth*.

The Verbal Surface Structure of Couples Conflicts

Marital conflicts fixate onto verbal content, let's call it the surface structure of their conflicts. E.g., she comments, “Are you going to wear that shirt to my mother's?” He responds testily, “What's wrong with this shirt?”. Note that her first statement uses “shirt” as does his response. She responds

derisively, “Oh, it's too much to ask to dress like an adult once a year for my mother?” He counters on cue, “You know better than anyone that there's nothing I do is ever good enough for you or your mother”. She uses 'mother', so does he. It doesn't matter if both partners are PhD's, they'll go around the same lock step, argumentative loops like a flea infested dog chasing its tail. Many such exchanges turn into escalating rebuttal matches that go on for hours or days **until** exhaustion or a **recognition and reconciliation of the driving force behind the argument** -- the need to be seen, to be tuned into.

Deep Structure of Couples Conflicts

Peeling back the surface layer of that conflict, every utterance of one partner reveals a desire or need to be mirrored for “my perspective”. That's what drives the deep structure. **'Specere', the etymological root of 'respect' as well as 'perspective', means 'to look at', the same concept as mirroring.** Neither combatant in the argument above stops to invite elaboration of the other's perspective. Instead, each *reflexively* tries to bring the focus of the argument back to 'my perspective' (even though the tactics failed a thousand times). Because each responder's identity is so embedded into their accuser's perspective on his/herself, they virtually can't *not* respond in a tit for tat, word (shirt, mother) for word (shirt, mother) rebuttal match. Conflict avoidant couples report the same internal dialogues. Without identities we aren't viable psychological entities.

As in every soap opera, their arguments turn on something much deeper than who likes what shirt, a favored activity, or a particular purchase. Frequently, couples don't remember what the last argument was about (shirt, laundry, parenting, etc) except it left both feeling disregarded, dismissed, or disconnected. That's because Partner No. 1's identity floats moment to moment on Partner No. 2's responses while neither realize Partner No. 2's identity depends on Partner No. 1's reaction to No. 2's responses. **Each is a double agent without knowing it.** They're in a recursive loop. **Because their identities hang in the balance,** their responses are **emotionally overamped.** One responds negatively, the other responds in kind. Gottman charted those surface rebuttal matches, called “**negative affect reciprocity**”, and found them to be a high predictor of divorce when in concert with other factors.

He doesn't perceive her comments as simply an opinion about his shirt though given a moment he can logically assess her concerns. Psycho-logically, he takes her comments as if she means he doesn't count as an adult and needs mom to dress him. He may further react as if she's declaring he's a morally deficient person for not considering her mother's displeasure (which, he should know, means her mom will negatively mirror her for marrying such an aesthetic disaster). Rather than hear his response as information about *his* frustration, she extrapolates his comments to a belief that he doesn't value her input as worthy to be considered. In marriage counseling, it becomes clear that common grievances wend their way through a sequence of complaints against a spouse such as “I might as well be invisible to you” or “I don't matter to you at all” all the way into the default identity (“I'm not worthy of mattering”).

Very successful, high functioning adults remain intellectually blind to how they invest their self representation into how the primary other mirrors back. Emotionally, however, their responses vary wildly depending whether the other's mirroring aligns, distorts, or entirely misses how they see themselves. This is virtually literal--when adults largely in normal ranges of development are rejected, cheated on, or divorced, they frequently have suicidal thoughts. Physically, psychologically, and neurologically, we're entwined in the other. That phenomena goes beyond education and culture. Many Western philosophers value Plato's Socrates above all others. Yet, when facing his accusers who had “hardly spoken a word of truth”, he said “they almost made me forget who I was”^[5]. No matter how self assured, smart or hip, **in the psychological season of life** everyone still faces the **task of distilling**

out their unique identity from embeddedness in others.

When she says “You tell me you want to do things with me but you're impossible to pry off your computer or TV”, she's leaning on him **to tune into her perspective, her joy and vitality**--with the main person in her life rather than sit deadened in front of the TV. When he responds disgustedly with “when was the last time you spent an evening at home with me”, it isn't just a logical request for info. He's feeling an intense internal spike of emotion because he wants acknowledgment (mirroring) for more than her interest in him as a companion for *her* favored activities -- not to speak, perhaps, of the depth of *his* fears of being an active participant in the world (dancing, learning a language, etc). Intellectually he may be quite at home with his account of the details but emotionally feel as if life itself doesn't find him worthy to have a partner who stays home with him or make love to him. He reacts first to the fact that she doesn't show interest in his perspective. His surface response “when was the last time...” is a failed attempt to get her to see his perspective. But since his response doesn't show any indication that he'll attend to hers, she's unlikely to respond except with external sarcasm and an internal spike of “feeling disconnected”.

And so it goes from one reactive response to the next. **Neither ever empathizes with the other's perspective. Neither invites the other** to elaborate. **Neither sustains focus** for an extended set of inquiries into the other's feelings. Neither feels the other cares to see, attune to, or respect their perspective as worthy of consideration. At times, like Socrates, each doubts the validity of their existence. **All of their available RAM instantly and reactively** goes to groveling or rage, which are unskillful attempts to get their perspective seen heard, and felt—and desperate attempts to keep their identity intact. If only they knew how to hold each other's tender heart.

Now, let's further examine the real driver behind endless rebuttals match because it gives crucial clues toward skillful alternatives. Gottman's research shows a man's heart rate can go up 20 beats per minute within one beat during some marital conflicts. So how is it that this husband responds so precipitously when his wife comments negatively on his choice of shirt? **Biologically**, that allotment of metabolic resources is normally reserved for encounters with life endangering events. **Physically**, he's safe as a baby! But **psychologically** his very identity--what he calls “me” or “I”--is up for grabs. After all, his self representation is thoroughly embedded into how his wife sees him at the “interpersonal stage” of development. Her attitude about his shirt effectively threatens to tear his identity into little pieces and throw them up in the air like confetti. No wonder his heart rate and blood pressure shoot up followed with hyper **defensiveness, anger** to dispel the alien invader or **withdrawal** to stop the threat (to his identity).

Ironically, to keep the relationship vital **both need to be more defensive, in a healthy way**. They need “**boundaries that breathe**”-- allowing love and connection to flow while filtering out what doesn't belong to their identity. In fact in the example above, her identity is typically invested in how her mother evaluates her based on how he's dressed. So for lack of her own boundaries to maintain her self esteem in the face of her mother's attitude, she tries to get him to change his shirt--so mother will mirror her in a positive light. Then, when mom sees her positively, she'll see husband positively so he'll like mother-in-law who will affirm her daughter's choice; and around and around.

Any **quick survey of well known couples counseling theorists** will turn up many approaches addressing rebuttal matches and stonewalling as in the examples above. Harville Hendrix, author of the best seller, *Getting the Love You Want*, recommends rotely repeating what your spouse just said: “So what I heard you say is [here insert word for word what spouse just said]. Gottman criticizes that because research doesn't support it's efficacy and certainly many couples react to such a stilted format.

Dr. Ellen Bader^[6] from Stanford teaches couples to inquire into each other's experience similar to an old do-it-yourself therapy method, called co-counseling, where each person takes a turn at listening while the other holds the stage as a speaker. That may seem too scripted but holds a tremendous advantage, if adopted, of breaking a couple's current habit.

Gottman famously declared that communication is rarely the problem yet what he recommends goes exactly to what most of us call good communication: Notice and respond in kind to your partner's repair attempts, stay calm, avoid global criticism, soft startups into difficult discussions, etc. Ironically, Gottman called Dan Wile, PhD the world's best couples counselor though Wile's method, "Colaborative Couples Therapy", emphasizes communication, particularly speaking more than inquiring. Emotionally Focused Therapy [EFT] puts emotions front and center in theory. In practice, as taught by Susan Johnson, EFT aims to stop "demon dialogues" towards cultivating each partner's ability to speak without triggering the other's overamped emotions; just as Wile continually models for couples to speak but in a way their partner is more likely to listen.

As outlined in this essay, the nature of our entwined identities lays at the deep structure of those over the top emotions and out of control dialogues. That view sheds light on all the different theoretical models outlined above. The rest of this article presents a tremendously condensed model of communicating that includes benefits of those models but with a behind the scenes look into the 'deep structure' *providing an even more generative model for navigating conflicts through healthy differentiation.*

Alternative Dialogue Structures :: An Algorithm For Intimacy

The actual words spoken during conflicts evidence the most empirical evidence for 'breathable boundaries'. Those boundaries aren't there when couples' dialogues quickly degenerate into rebuttals and/or withdrawal and are internalized into negative self images. Learning alternative dialogue structures helps couples from slipping into "negative affect reciprocity". It is useful to consider separate skills for speaking and listening and how they help couples to spiral upward rather than devolve into alienation. In the example above, had he responded by keeping the focus on her by inquiring into how she felt disconnected, then **she may feel invited in that very moment of inquiry to connect.**

That's convoluted so let's review it in finer grain detail. Though her surface verbiage features the word "disconnect" to describe her "negative affect", his inquiry about her disconnected feelings **instantly demonstrates** that **her experience is welcome** into an open, connected field of attention. **That mirroring** of her concerns **dissolves the glitch** between them because it addresses the deep structure of the **disconnect—remember, it follows from the lack of mirroring to her experience.** Initially and without any coaching, she may take his invitation to rip into him for his whole history of neglect, selfishness, laziness, or the criticism du jour. Designate her as the speaker in this case: When any 'speaker' does that, it's as doomed as the flawed strategies the speaker vilifies in their counterpart. Further, it inevitably derails the inquiring partner's intention to sustain inquiry onto the speaker's concerns. So, the whole exchange spirals down the tubes again.

Return To Sender With Love and Empathy

As a general rule *if criticized* responded with an inquiry; if invited to talk, responded with an "I message". When criticized or judged, *hand an inquiry back with empathy*: Start with "Do you..." or "Would you like...". Don't waste time defending yourself ("I never said that") or alienate with counterattacks. Then nobody feels listened to. If your partner does show some genuine interest in your

experience, then speak in “I messages”. If you start in with 'you' as in “You never leave room for anyone else to say anything when the neighbors come over” communication comes to a screeching or screaming halt. If your partner manages to ask about you in an interested way, keep to “I messages” such as “I can't seem to find the moment to talk when the neighbors come over; I feel left out”. Yes, that's tedious, circuitous **and** much more likely to have a satisfactory ending. Gottman found that when people begin with a “harsh startup”, 96% of the time the conversation went to hell within 15 minutes! Don't worry, you won't forget how to do to harsh criticism and defensiveness.

Even if you hold to radically different facts than your partner's account, there's no law of nature that you must rebuttal, counter, clam up, get angry, or explain yourself whether you're objectively correct or completely out to lunch. When emotions run hot, **explaining or defending yourself will leave you feeling frustrated at the very least** because she or he's not listening to a damn word you say. But that's not a reason to simply shutdown. If she's fixated on being listened to and her partner's not mirroring her concerns, she's very unlikely to turn on a dime and invite her partner to talk. However, if both **learn a response set of inquiries into the other's perspective** then the **feeling of disconnection dissolves** (again because it's an internal response to that lack of interest). “Being disrespected”, “devalued”, “feeling invisible”, “feeling disconnected” have the same deep structure root—a lack of mirroring. A new response set takes awhile to assimilate though the basic building blocks couldn't be simpler: e.g.s, “tell me more”, “can you elaborate”, “what's it like to feel disconnected”, “you just said that you feel totally dismissed. That sounds crazy making, anything else you're willing to say about that?”. Try on those questions like trying on new clothes and soon enough they'll be more natural and varied.

Let me put it dramatically to get your attention: The skill of **sustaining an inquiry on the concerns of the beloved is the algorithm for intimacy** and reconnection. If he says, “I agree with you” or “I do understand”, he's making conciliatory statements **about himself**--not invitations to her to talk about her. If she softly interjects to say she wants him to know she didn't intend to hurt him, her comments, though benign, bring the focus **back to her**. Imagine a pipe made of light with an arrow on every photon pointing from you to your partner. Rebuttals abruptly snap the light back to you when you might have kept to the inquiring mode. Completely benign interjections such as declarations of guilt or offers to make amends also bend the light back away from the speaker; that risks sending the conversation into rapid frequency rebuttals that like bad bearings on a car wheel which will fly off when oscillations rev up too high. Simply focusing on one person at a time gives the couple a much better chance to feel listened to and respected in their exchanges.

Men, in particular, often get tagged with trying to find the “solution”. But a woman or man asking “*what could I do do differently?*” also turn the focus back to the “me” of the questioner rather than keeping it on the speaker. Notice “I” is the star of suspect questions that bend the light back to “my concerns” and away from “you”. There are all sorts of other questions that subtly and otherwise draw attention back to the questioner. Those questions will be received as an inquisition not as deep invitations to reconnect. Of course, the patterns here are equally applicable across gender or sexual orientation. There certainly are places for practical solutions but they are unlikely to work until there is some recognition of the built up pain.

A Different Kind of Solution

A slight tweak to the concept of solution makes all the difference. In math a solution comes out of a formula: Plug in numbers, add, divide, or multiply to generate the solution. In marriage 'logical' attempts at solutions typically propose to resolve resentments by sticking to the same page about the

kids, doing the household tasks as decided upon, and keeping to rules for fighting. That approach presupposes that if we keep to agreements, we'll live happily ever after. Agreeing, however, is a big order when we harbor treasure troves of distrust and resentments. Very intelligent people, stuck in repetitive conflicts, rarely dissolve a history of strife with that logical approach to solution. Gottman found that *successful couples only resolve 69% of their differences* (“perpetual issues”) but talk about those differences much better than unsuccessful couples. Instead, think of solution like a chemical solution, e.g., a liquid solvent that dissolves a congealed solid. Hot water thaws ice. Hot coffee melts a sugar cube into a tasty solution. In the chemistry of relationships, **a sincere sustained inquiry dissolves a partner's reactivity** (*because the reactivity is to the lack of interest/mirroring*). Thinking of “solution” as a repertoire of 'inviting inquiries'--delivered with unconditional friendliness to your partner's congealed fears, and judgments. They almost always respond because the hardest thing in this life is to keep your heart closed (and at root we build resentment because we want to be connected).

Intimacy and Respect Require Both Mirroring and Differentiation

There are many subtleties entailed in skillful mirroring, if a couple is to reliably dialogue toward ever more intimacy rather than those crashes into negative reciprocity. That intimacy isn't enraptured togetherness aligned in every way. Differentiating one's identity from the other transcends the projection that the other is an extension of our needs and perspective. That's what happened in the transition from childhood to adulthood; and there's no sharp line when that ends. It takes a lifelong process of distilling out one's unique perspective, preferences, ideas, and predilections from the other--though with empathy and love. **Withdrawal and dissociation are not differentiation.**

Following here are a few specific example inquiries more likely to leave your partner feeling mirrored and your self worth and values intact: “Would you be willing to say more?” “What was that like for you?” “If you didn't feel listened to in that fight we just had, would you be willing to wade back in and say more about what and how you'd like to be tuned into?” Not just one pass, but many sustained focused questions are necessary to invite someone to fully express complex experiences/feelings.

“*What's that like for you?*” I call the Virtual Reality Question. In asking this question, “I”, the inquirer ask you, the speaker, if you'll lend me your special goggles allowing me to come inside your heart and mind to look at, feel, and be with your experience; all the nuances, pain and joy, intensity level, etc”. The question isn't geared to to a solution, or change you or ease your pain though that kind of intimate sharing often results in a change. The '*for you*' also serves to remind the inquirer to **differentiate their identity from the other**. Then with a *more differentiated identity in sharper relief, sustained interest in the other flows* freed of being on hyper alert to defend. Again, if at the first invitation, the speaker sarcastically spews resentment like untreated sewage, conversations quickly derail. When sustained inquiry happens, **two great benefits accrue**: First the **speaking partner actually feels listened to**. Secondly, when an inquirer resists bringing attention back to him/herself, the **inquirer exercises self esteem muscles** (by foregoing the need to demand, extract, or grovel for the other's attention). Through trying on this inquiring modality seems awkward at first, in the practice people often have 'ah ha' realizations that their self esteem doesn't have to depend on getting their partner's acknowledgment.

Often old “past” hurts keep bursting into current conflicts until both partners feel acknowledged about the hurts encased in the recurrent argument. Frequently, a little inquiry goes a long way toward reconnection. For couples drawn to nuanced intimacy, it goes better and better as a couple learns a refined dance of an inquirer sustaining open, active interest and a speaker skillful at expressing their

perspective without triggering the inquirer's defenses.

In summary, this article offered a connect-the-dots-tour of how individual identity oscillates between blissful connection and tyranny (identity dependent on a partner's perspective). A few examples outlines structures of dialogues conducive to connection because they're consistent with and oriented to two fundamental vectors of psychological health--**mirroring and differentiating identities**. If you read a book on how to play the violin, it doesn't mean you'll instantly sound good. There's much more to learn to master a full repertoire of skills and that will have to wait for next article going into much greater, learnable detail.

Individually we have blinds spots and so do couples who often dig the same painful reflexive grooves for years. That's when a professional counselor is helpful. Many theories advance seemingly disparate methods for working with couples. Some theories emphasize behavior, some search through family history, others teach communication techniques, and a few nurture an increasing degree of *differentiation* as a foundation to true intimacy and self-esteem. Irrespective of a counselor's favored theory, in practice effective counseling typically engages couples in fresh attempts to connect that will likely be consistent with all of those methods. Finally, if you are considering couples counseling, bear in mind the most frequently cited, research based predictor of success is the rapport you experience with the couples counselor.

Endnotes

1. The Evolving Self: Problem And Process In Human Development, Kegan, R, Harvard University Press Cambridge, Mass London, England 1982
- 2 .There are hundred's of experiments verifying this. For further info try a web search, e.g., "mother infant face to face interaction"
3. Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development Schore, A. N., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey 1994
4. Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others, Iacoboni, M Farrarr, Straus, & Giroux, New York 200
5. The Apology, Phaedo and Crito. From Dialogues of Plato, Jowett Translation. Ed. Kaplan, J. D., Washington Square Press Pocket
6. See link for recommended reading for books for most of the authors cited in this paragraph.