

Fostering Connection in Couple Work: Softening a Blamer

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Individuals bring into their couple relationship the responses they developed in childhood and beyond to deal with pleasure and pain. These responses play out, magnified over time, in response to situations in their relationship that restimulate those responses. Two people together can create, and repeat, a play of responses in which they sequentially restimulate each other's pain responses, and, over time, seriously fray their couple connection. Then they come to counselling, bruised and battered by their fray.

In this article, I consider a common fallout of these couple battles, which is the blaming stance one or both partners can construct towards the other. I consider navigating the blame stance through the theoretical and practical lens of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), as developed in North America by Susan Johnson and Leslie Greenberg, and in Australia, by Michelle Webster. The practical side is explored using two couples as case studies.

My inquiry into the three strands of EFT (Johnson's, Greenberg's and Webster's) finds that all three have the same understanding of the "blaming" partner – that the stance is a fear-based defence system that has built on the individual's earlier conditioning. This stance is no longer useful, but clung to because it is habitual and still feels safest. All three approaches have a somewhat different, but similarly focused process for "softening a blamer" – by attending to the emotional underpinnings of the stance.

In addition to the above, I also analyse how my treatment of the two couples could be viewed within the North American approach and the professional benefits of this analysis. The article also briefly considers, using my own experience, whether the therapist's reaction to the blocking can interfere with the couple work and concludes that it can.

"Defences will not hold if people feel understood"¹

For this article, I reflected on what I find most difficult in counselling – dealing with some clients' tenacious blaming of their significant others (whether they are the children, parents, partners and, especially, ex-partners) around problem situations. I decided to consider two couples with whom I have worked, whose identifying details I have altered to protect their privacy, and to consider how EFT in its various strands² would understand those clients, what interventions they would suggest, how the North American approach would view what had happened in the sessions with my two blamers, and how my own reactivity might

¹ Greenberg, L. S., & Goldman, R. (2008). *Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy: The Dynamics of Emotion, Love and Power*. Washington: The American Psychological Association (p. 41).

² EFT, as a discrete approach, emerged from Greenberg and Johnson's work with couples in the 1980s. Three strands of EFT have emerged in that time, which are in core agreement about the efficacy of focusing and experientially working with clients' presenting emotions to resolve their distress, but differ in the intervention structures and methods they use to achieve this. The two strands in North America are being developed by Susan Johnson and Leslie Greenberg and their associates, and in Australia, by Michelle Webster and her associates.

be playing into my couple work with them³, with particular reference to Webster's concept of the emotional signature..

In the first couple the male partner, Andrew, is the blaming partner. This couple fell into a relationship because they got pregnant and they now have two children. Jenny, his partner, is battling illness and needs a considerable amount of his help at home. In this situation he feels unable to assert, or even speak his needs and, despite efforts to the contrary, often becomes passive-aggressive. Jenny is hurt that he seems uncaring and unappreciative of her and is beginning to see him as selfish. In our sessions, Andrew is more able to speak his needs and wants, which are in part around relationship expectations (he would like more space), and in part around differences in their values (eg his strong wish, for environmental reasons, that she not drive her car). Jenny listens, sometimes defends, and at other times owns her part. He does not respond to her softening – just persists with his complaint. He seems trapped in his story of blame, unable to own his own part, or to contemplate the possibility of either of them changing, and Jenny is slowly withdrawing from him.

In the second couple, Renee leads the blaming while her partner, Alex, counterattacks. Their differences are focused on their expectations of relationship, rather than any broader ideological beliefs. After a holiday romance, followed by a long distance relationship, Renee came to Australia to marry Alex. She now feels let down by him –relegated to fitting in with his life and interests – and wants him to spend more quality time with her. They do not share many common interests – neither is prepared to join the other in their respective activities – and their time together is unhappy because they continue to struggle over how to spend it. In this couple it is Alex who is running out of hope for the relationship. In our sessions, Renee complains, through tears, and Alex defends, sometimes conceding and apologising for his behaviour, and offering changes. Like Andrew in the first couple, Renee does not own any part of their problem, seems unable to accept his offers of change, and has not been softened by the acknowledgements.

³ Given the reflective, as well as comparative nature of the topic, this article is written in a personal style.

In these and similar cases, I have been puzzled and subsequently dispirited when the more “blaming” partner fails to soften when their partner accepts blame or explains the vulnerability under their offending behaviour, and I worry that their partner could lose hope. My strategies for handling that worry have been to reframe the partner’s explanation to emphasise its link to the need for connection, in the hope that the blamer hears it and that the partner will feel validated – at least by me. I remind myself that couples have often experienced worse at home, and that their attendance speaks of hope for the relationship. Sometimes, I default to the comfort zone of psycho-education to normalise these kinds of difficulty – although that takes us away from the actual problem. These strategies right the process, but I would prefer to better understand the blamer, so I can work more purposefully.

Understanding the “blamer” in relation to EFT

How does EFT explain what might be happening to a blamer? All EFT is based on the understanding that a person’s presenting problems are usually a surface presentation⁴ – an emotional cover that the person has constructed to deal with an experience that was too hurtful hence it was covered over. This experience is covered over in a habitual way⁵ that might have helped at earlier times but is now problematic. EFT works with the individual to access the underlying layers of emotion and meaning, and rebalances the individual by having them, when they are ready, fully experience and express those underlying emotions.

Greenberg explains the rationale as:

EFT proposes that emotions themselves have an innately adaptive potential that if activated can help clients change problematic emotional states or unwanted self experiences. This view is based on the belief, now gaining ample empirical support, that emotion, at its core, is an innate and adaptive system that has evolved to help us survive and strive.⁶

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “surface” emotion to cover what Johnson refers to as “felt” or “secondary” emotions; Greenberg as “secondary reactive” or “instrumental” emotions (omitting subcategories); and Webster as “secondary” emotions. I use the term “undercover” emotions to cover what Johnson refers to as “unfelt” or “underlying” feelings; Greenberg as “primary adaptive” and “primary maladaptive” feelings (omitting subcategories); and Webster as “primary” and “past primary” feelings.

⁵ This response is usually developed in childhood, or in an adult trauma experience, when the individual is very vulnerable and the hurt experience would be particularly acute.

⁶ Greenberg, 2007, p. 20

This shows us that we need to process the presenting experience and access the emotions below, which are adaptive if experienced⁷. It indicates that a blamer's stance is a surface presentation, and that the usual process needs to be followed to uncover and then allow the experiencing and expressing of the undercover emotions.

EFT also works with the core beliefs that accompany the emotional experience.⁸ Andrew seems to have a belief that relationships only work if the parties see eye-to-eye, while Renee believes that if a partner loves you, they always knows what you want. Because beliefs are not necessarily based on evidence but serve the person's overall narrative about their life and its meaning in some way – that is, becoming part of their identity – they are likely to be held on to, even if damaging to the relationship. Like surface emotions, however, they cover the authentic emotions, and need to be explored. In this area, the therapist may need to be particularly respectful and patient around the uncovering, trusting that the process will produce a more open engagement with the belief over time.

These understandings point to the need, in the EFT process, to work with the individual, but how do we do that given that we are working with a relationship system? EFT works intra and inter-psychically, and all three EFT approaches explain a couple's problems by reference to the relationship system as well as each person's emotional experience of the relationship, with the intrapersonal constantly being drawn back to the interpersonal, in the course of work with the couple.⁹ Drawing from systems theory, EFT examines and identifies relationship patterns between the couple, based on each person's reactivity to the other, such as dominance/submission or closeness/distance,¹⁰ and identifies these for the

⁷ “From the EFT perspective, change occurs by “making sense of one’s emotions through awareness, expression, regulation, reflection and transformation of emotion” (Elliot & Pos, 2007, p. 21).

⁸ Webster notes that “A client’s thinking is deeply entwined with their feelings about matters, other people, and about themselves. ...when people are blocked, they are unable to access their true feelings and thoughts or take authentic action... In Emotionally Focused work, we believe that patterns of behaviour and thinking change when we feel differently...”. (Webster, 2010e, pp.136-137 and pp.139-140; in the couple context, Webster, 2007, p. 8).

⁹ My notes of Greenberg’s comments at the workshop ‘The Transforming Power of Emotion in Individuals & Couples: Dr. Leslie Greenberg in Dialogue with the IEFT,’ hosted by the IEFT in North Sydney on 12-13 February 2010.

¹⁰ Susan Johnson identifies five basic negative closeness/distance patterns – pursue/withdraw; withdraw/withdraw; attack/attack; complex cycles, which usually involve a trauma survivor; and a reactive

couple, together with their circular causality.¹¹ Externalising the couple's problems into a common couple pattern makes it less personal, gives it some distance and clearly indicates the change the couple – not just one individual in it – need to make. While vivid, it is a gentle, settling intervention. In EFT, the individuals' behaviours in the pattern are also linked to attachment-related needs. This reminds the couple of their relationship bond, provides hope and is settling – that is why my reframe interventions, following a potentially distancing blaming moment, have worked to right the couple sufficiently to keep them in the process.

EFT places attachment-related needs at the core of connection and hence, their lack as the core of disconnection. Johnson says attachment needs are always the fundamental basis of connection¹² while Greenberg and Goldman add identity needs and physical attraction to this.¹³ Michelle Webster accepts the mix of connection factors identified by Greenberg and Goldman, and sees people's reactivity in the relationship as being driven by their "emotional signature". Her typologies of the "abandoned" and "annihilated" emotional signature, appear, from my observation, to correlate to Greenberg and Goldman's attachment and identity related needs.

All three EFT approaches emphasise the importance of understanding the feelings and thoughts around and underneath each person's problematic disconnects, including a blaming stance, and the attachment or attachment/identity issues associated with that disconnect. Because couples are a system, each person's part in their interactions needs exploration. All three EFT approaches have maps for doing that work that is sensitive to the need for both partners to be heard and worked with, and for both to be held through the inherent difficulties of expressing their concerns, and hearing their partner expressing their concerns.

pursue/withdraw cycle, when a couple reverses a long standing pursue/withdraw pattern (Johnson, 2005, pp. 146-147).

¹¹ This is where the elements in the pattern reciprocally determine each other as in "I withdraw because you nag, and you nag because I withdraw" – example given by Susan Johnson, 2004, p.16.

¹² Johnson & Whiffen, 2003, pp. 3-17.

¹³ Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, p. 61. About identity needs, they note that... "Couples often struggle with definitions of who they are.... power and control, which are often the most difficult interactions... arise out of struggles to maintain and enhance identity" (Greenberg & Goldman, 2009, p. 284).

The North American models: a step-by-step approach

Johnson and Greenberg structure their couple work in line with the nine step couple counselling model they developed together, although Johnson now works with it through three stages and nine steps and Greenberg through five stages and fourteen steps. The models that Johnson and Greenberg and Goldman currently use are set out in Appendix A.

The change assumptions in both the North American models are that *individual* change starts to occur through accessing and re-enacting emotions that were present but not felt in the problem situation; and that *couple* change happens through the mutual sharing of each person's newly discovered vulnerabilities and needs. The couple system changes because both parties now understand themselves and their partner better, the behaviour of each is understood as having been an (ineffective) attempt to meet their relational needs and each accepts the other's vulnerability and needs,¹⁴ and how to attend to those needs becomes the focus.

How would these two models work with a blamer? That work begins at step 3 in the Johnson model and step 4 in Greenberg and Associates' model, through the process of finding the undercover feelings in the problematic interaction for both partners. Johnson's advice is to work first with the partner who seems more likely to soften in the hope that their partner will soften, as they begin to better understand them. Generally this indicates working first with the non, or less, blaming partner. The expectation is that encouraging and validating the partner who is opening up, will help contain the person who has been taking the risk of exposing themselves;¹⁵ and the therapist asserting the usefulness of what that partner is seeking to do within the attachment frame will help hold the listening partner, who is then more open to the process of seeing their partner being different and probably less dangerous, if uncomfortably unpredictable. The blamer then "begins to be confronted with his or her difficulties in becoming more accessible and responsive."¹⁶

¹⁴ The partner's *acceptance* of the other's expressed vulnerable feelings is seen as paramount to the change – it is that which sets up a new interaction (Greenberg & Goldman, 2009, p. 290)

¹⁵ Johnson identifies four 'dragons of fear' the disclosing partner faces. These are: fear about exposing themselves; exposing something they are unsure of and uncomfortable with; fear of their partner's anticipated negative reaction; and the fear of unpredictable change (Johnson, 2004, pp.141-2).

¹⁶ See Johnson, 2004, p. 167.

Naturally, amongst these steps there is tricky territory.. In particular, there is a risk that as they hear more, the blaming partner is triggered and responds with more blame, as happened with my two couples. The instruction at that point is the same as before: for the therapist to work intra-psychically with both parties and lead them into a new dialogue.¹⁷ When the therapist attends to the blamer's defensive reaction by expanding, clarifying and exploring it, they feel understood and settle. This process makes the blamer

Very helpfully, noting that blamer softening is the most challenging part of Johnson's EFT couple work,¹⁸ John Bradshaw and James Furrow have developed a six step map to guide the practitioner to attend to the blamer's defensive reaction.¹⁹ In the first step, after the couple pattern around the blaming has been laid out, the practitioner asks the blaming partner to imagine him or herself reaching out to their partner from their attachment experience in the blame event. In the second and most crucial step, their fears about doing so are explored within that attachment frame. In steps 3 and 4, the blaming partner is directed to tell their partner those fears, and their doing so is validated and processed. In the last two steps, the practitioner turns to the "engaged withdrawer" to check out their emotional response to their partner's vulnerable sharing, and shapes that partner's secure response, again within the attachment frame.

Within both North American models the practitioner holds and explicitly works with the couple system through attachment (Johnson) or attachment/identity (Greenberg and Associates) frames. This framework guides the practitioner's interventions and fundamentally holds both parties through the process. This is because each of the parties desires connection, and once each understands their partner's behaviour as a clumsy or counterproductive attempt for connection or avoidance of rejection, they are more open to looking at the behaviour with understanding and possibly acceptance – rather than continuing to see it as a personal affront. They are then more able to engage with their partner around it.

¹⁷ See Johnson, 2004, pp.162-169.

¹⁸ Bradshaw, B & Furrow, J (2007), p. 42.

¹⁹ Bradshaw, B & Furrow, J (2007), pp. 27-33.

This review of how the two North American strands of EFT might deal with a blamer shows me that they advocate understanding the blamer by working on the undercover feelings. Within a couple framework, it's worth noting that people who are highly defended are defended for a reason, and that the tighter the defence, the longer it is likely to take to uncover the reason. Greenberg and Goldman state the overall approach as:

If the couple is ever to move beyond talking about their feelings to true revealing, they have to feel safe enough ... to overcome their usual avoidance of their core feelings, and their fear of revealing them. One of the main methods for dealing with interruptions and avoidances is to treat them as needing protection and to understand their protective function. ... The therapist needs to focus on the fear of reaching out or of letting the other in.²⁰

The assumption is that it is fear that protects a blamer's underlying emotions, and that fear needs to be validated, but brought out, so that the client can look beyond it to the primary (attachment or identity related) need it is covering. Both models have a respectful, open approach to exploring this with any individual, including a "blaming" individual, within their general couple counselling models.

In regards to my two couples, I believe the two North American couple counselling models could say that I worked too quickly. I jumped into Johnson's step 7 (facilitating the expression of attachment related wants) before I had fully completed either step 3 (accessing the unacknowledged emotions) or step 5 (promoting identification with disowned emotions, needs and aspects of self, within the relationship context).

Accordingly, I think I encouraged Renee, in particular, to restate her needs prematurely – the same needs she had often restated at home, to the bemusement of her partner – without making any headway, because we had not compellingly unearthed information about her underlying vulnerability for her to begin to experience or for her partner to begin to understand why their system is functioning as it is and how it can be changed. Her father had left the family when she was a toddler, and I now think that the fear that prevented her from softening may have been a fear that if she did reach out she would be too vulnerable,

²⁰ Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, pp.149–150.

and she feared that Alex was not really there for her in a “through thick and thin” kind of way, as her father was not.

In my work with Andrew and Jenny, their conversation was tough on her at times, because it still repeated Andrew’s story of blame and my concern around Jenny distracted me from further understanding him. Andrew sees a link between his reactivity to demands from Jenny and his abuse history, but that has not, so far, softened his complaints. I wonder now if his fear is that if he did soften to Jenny (that is, let her in emotionally), she would see his underlying sense of inadequacy/shame, or, even more scarily, that she would gain information she could later use against him, repeating his experience of being dominated.

Reviewing what I did against these models has given me useful information about the sequence and pacing of work with blamers in a couple. Even more usefully, because it helps me to better hold myself in the process, it has reinforced my awareness that the blamer tendency is fear-based and will not be loosened until the individual feels safe – which happens in therapy or counselling, when they are fully “understood”.²¹ Trusting in the process takes persistence, backed by a strong belief in process, based on theory. This holds true for all counselling modalities, but is an absolute imperative in EFT work, which works at the emotional level where a clients’ experiencing can very easily set up a reaction in the therapist, that can very easily have them slide out of the process, as discussed later in this paper.

Webster and couple work

How would Webster’s EFT approach, which I am seeking to apply to individual and couple work, understand and work with blamers in a couple? Webster shares Greenberg and Johnson’s views about the nature of change and healing – that “presenting” emotions and thoughts represent incomplete processing, and that change, or healing, requires the uncovering and a full experiencing of the underlying emotions.²² It also shares their view that couple work involves a dance between understanding the couple and individual

²¹ Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, p. 41.

²² See Webster, 2010b, pp. 7-8.

patterns in a relationship.²³ It accepts the Greenberg and Goldman view of couple connection as meeting attachment, identity and physical attraction needs. However, while the direction of the work is the same, its intervention methods are different.

Webster uses the “couple talk” process to examine the couple interactions and their respective interior individual reactions²⁴. The couple is invited to start discussing their issues together from their second session, and the therapist intervenes as they see appropriate, with either party, or both. The couple talk platform induces a level of experiencing, which is fanned at charged moments by the therapist working directly with the individual, as discussed below, to uncover the underlying vulnerability. A further level of experiencing occurs when, after that uncovering, the individual is asked to imagine their partner’s reaction, or to imagine themselves telling their partner about their experience. If they do not wish to take the risk of engaging with their partner at that time, even when coached, the therapist offers to do so for them. Either way, the partner and their reactions are then drawn in for examination, either lightly at first or more deeply. Because therapy with couples often fails to follow any neat progression²⁵, Webster does not have a sequential model,²⁶ but has protocols for the first (assessment) session²⁷ and all the interventions, and her approach gives wide discretion to the therapist to judge their next intervention.²⁸

The active work of uncovering underlying emotions and imagining interactions with a partner in this couple model has the same emotional focus as the North American models, but uses a different platform, and unearths the underlying fears differently. It does not overtly use the attachment bond frame or empathic conjecture,²⁹ but uses couple talk to reintroduce emotional experiencing, and verbal unpacking and visualisations to heighten

²³ See Webster, 2010b, pp. 28-29.

²⁴ See Webster, 2010b, pp. 11-13.

²⁵ As Greenberg & Goldman also note – see Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, p. 155.

²⁶ Discussed in Webster 2003, pp. 8-9 and 2007, p. 13

²⁷ First couple sessions are summarised at Webster, 2007, p. 4; in detail in Webster, 2010a, pp. 123-135.

²⁸ See Webster, 2007, pp. 5, 8 & 13.

²⁹ See Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, p. 148

emotional recall,³⁰ as well as creative techniques such as drawing or sculpture work,³¹ or multiple chair work with cushions to examine different players in, or aspects of the problem.³²

In therapy, with individuals or couples, the Australian and North American methodologies diverge. The Australian approach draws from the Gestalt/transactional analysis tradition to work with adult and child parts, and uses regression techniques for deeper experiencing³³. The two North American approaches use their usual heightening techniques turning more to one or two-chair work for deep experiencing.³⁴

Working with emotional signatures

In individual and couple work, Webster's approach also incorporates the concept of a client's emotional signature, which explains and is predictive of the client's typical patterns of reaction in emotional difficulty, and helps the therapist adjust their presentation, pace and interventions to work as effectively as possible with that client.³⁵

An emotional signature refers to the type of reactive emotional pattern an individual develops in their formative years as their attachment needs are met, or not, by their significant others. If the individual experiences their caregiver as absent, or only intermittently available, they are likely to develop an "abandoned" signature, with a diffuse outer boundary, and behaviour that aims to please, or look after, to draw the caregiver back to them. If the individual experiences their caregiver as intrusive, or critical of them, they are likely to develop an "annihilated" signature, with a tight outer boundary, and behaviour calculated to forestall or defend from criticism, but still, at a deep level, seeking connection with them. Clients frequently have a mixed pattern, and whichever pattern is triggered depends on the type of stressor encountered. These habitual ways of reacting re-enact in

³⁰ See Webster, 2010e, pp. 34-73.

³¹ See Webster, 2010b, pp. 27-35.

³² See Webster, 2010d, pp. 66-8.

³³ See Webster, M. 2011, pp.196-236.

³⁴ As described, in the context of depression, by Greenberg & Watson, 2006, pp. 225-280.

³⁵ Webster, 1999, pp. 3-5.

relationships with others³⁶ – very strongly in the case of partners, who, in emotional terms substitute for early caregivers in a client’s needs for attachment or identity support.

How would the Webster approach understand Renee and Andrew (that is, the blaming partners)? In this approach, the therapist builds up a picture of the client’s interior world over time using an experience triangle³⁷ to map out the client’s layered emotions and self-beliefs and interaction sequences³⁸ to understand how they respond to problematic situations with others. In the process they form a view of the client’s emotional signature. This information guides the direction (working with the presenting emotions first) and orientation (adjusting the pace and interventions to the signature). Applying this to an understanding of my two couples, from what they had told me of their habitual interactions and the history of their emotional experiences, I concluded that the two chronic blamers had different emotional signatures, and that was surprising. Renee, with a childhood history of loss, has an “abandoned” signature, and Andrew, with a childhood history of abuse, an “annihilated” signature.

It surprised me that an abandoned person could be a blamer. The orientation of an “abandoned” person is more commonly towards enticing an unavailable person back to them, so their presentation and behaviour is usually winsome, not confrontational as Renee’s was. Thinking about its antecedents, however, it can be seen as a very young response: harkening to the loud complaints of a baby or toddler trying to get their caregiver to hear their distress, and resembling a tantrum – a sad more than angry tantrum. This understanding made sense of Renee protesting through tears, where she sounded powerless rather than assertive. From this, it seemed to me that abandoned people can superficially present like annihilated ones, especially if their abandonment occurred when they were very young, as Renee’s did. The very young quality of the response also explained its overt expression – babies and toddlers are not subtle, and their complaints are about attachment, rather than identity needs.

³⁶ See Webster, M., 2011, pp. 101-109, & 2010c, pp. 34-39.

³⁷ The “experience triangle” is the roadmap for this form of EFT work and gets added to over time. See Webster, M. 2009, at pp. 185-175.

³⁸ For a description of interaction patterns and how they are used, see Webster, M. 2009, at pp. 165-175.

It also surprised me that an annihilated individual could blame covertly. An annihilated person will usually fight back directly if their attempts to forestall attack fail. Again, thinking of its antecedents, as a child Andrew was humiliated by his father and bullied at school. In his relationship, he wants to assert his sense of self, or his identity (he wants time to pursue his interests and passions), but his history tells him he is too weak to prevail, so his protest is indirect (like not answering the phone when Jenny calls). He will only protest if cornered, or if he is very sure his voice will be heard – as in the counselling room. This showed me that the annihilated presentation can also have unusual features.

Recognising the emotional signatures of the other two individuals in my couples was more straightforward. Jenny, having experienced abandonment from her father and some nurture from her mother, has a strongly abandoned signature. Alex had a good degree of nurture and acceptance from both parents and developed a mixed signature, where he is primarily oriented to attachment bonding (the abandoned side), but is quick to show his annihilated aspect if his sense of self is threatened, as by unfair accusations.

Emotional signatures show that individuals are always trying, in the ways they have learned, to keep themselves safe – in all relationships, but acutely in the case of their intimate relationships, where their partner has such power to satisfy or frustrate their needs. It reinforces that blamers blame for a reason. My two chronic blamers indicate that blaming can be a strategy adopted by people with abandoned or annihilated signatures – seeking to satisfy different relationship needs. It is interesting to me, in passing, to see an apparent alignment between Greenberg and Goldman's view that attachment and identity needs are at the basis for connection, and Webster's typology of two emotional signatures, one pursuing attachment, and the other, identity needs.

But why would a blamer persist in blame when their partner has softened? I considered this in the looking at the interaction sequences I had done for the two couples. That showed, for each couple, that the blamers had experienced years, and many instances, of the kind of behaviour they found hurtful. It could be therefore, that they would need more proof to accept that their partner could change – that words in one session would not be enough to

soften them. Further, to understand and accept their partner's view, they would have to accept or empathically experience it, thereby confronting their fear of connection – which is what they are stoutly defending.

As the therapist in couple work

If clients have an emotional signature, so do therapists, and I wondered how mine had become activated, and how I interacted with my clients at the moments that I have found difficult – essentially when the blamer failed to soften in response to their partner softening. My signature is a mixed annihilated/abandoned one. The abandoned aspect is vigilant to signs of others being upset or angry, looks after others, and is terribly upset if she has hurt them. The annihilated aspect strikes at significant others who are experienced as invasive, critical, or dismissive, or at herself when she has made a mistake that shames her.

In my work with clients, my abandoned side is to the fore. That helps with empathy and acceptance, but does not help when I think I may have inadvertently been hurtful or if either partner is hurtful to the other. I can then flush with shame against myself at having created the situation which led to hurt and/or projected shame – my own shame on behalf of the blamer. So when Jenny, for example, said that she recognised she may sometimes be too demanding and wanted to change that, I felt regard and warmth for her and expected that Andrew would too. When he ignored it and complained further about the tone she used in her demands, I was shocked. I looked at Jenny, who was listening with a “set” look, and felt, in turn, very sorry for her, personally responsible, and ashamed of my professional lack. My annihilated aspect, which is highly critical of those who hurt others, then diverted from me, and I mentally blamed Andrew also for what I briefly saw as his self-absorbed disregard for his partner. My therapeutic experience has long shown me that critical judgments damage the process, so I quickly jettisoned my criticism of him. Because I have been noticing my self-criticism for a while, I was also able to quarantine it. That left the abandoned part back at the helm, and it kept us on track.

How might my reaction have impacted my clients? Because I had managed my reactions so fast, I do not think Andrew noticed the criticism of him, but I cannot be sure – he is

highly alert to criticism and has picked it up from me in the past. And because my self-critical reaction was not acute, I do not think it was picked up either. However, this reflection indicates that my emotional signature does carry those risks.

Bradshaw and Furrow have identified five common ways in which EFT practitioners weaken their work – softening attempts in particular.³⁹ Four of these centre on the practitioner slipping away from their clients’ emotional experiencing either by talking about emotion, overlooking emotion (attachment-related fear, in particular), not adequately recognising different and often conflicting aspects of emotional experience, and not giving a blamer the experience of expressing their vulnerability to their partner. These seem highly relevant to all forms of EFT work. The fifth common error they identify, which is more relevant to the Johnson EFT process, occurs when reframes based on the attachment bond are abandoned.

Testing my experience of working with my blamers against these categories, the first most encapsulates it: when I experience the blamer persisting in blame, I worry about their partner, and instead of continuing to help them uncover the reality of this component of the relationship, I move away from the blamer into rescuing the other – and the relationship which they have come to repair and heal, which I worry may suffer because of the honesty that is being displayed with my encouragement. So I frame the issue in a broader positive relationship context, or talk about the pain that underlies blame, or praise the blamer for identifying part of the issue. But that glosses over and diminishes a real experience, however hurtful or unreasonable, that needs to be safely unpacked – not just for the expresser, but also the listener. I think my growing edge is how to hold the listener in particular, in that difficult emotional space where they can hear their partner’s reality without losing sight of their broader and more hopeful relationship context.

A gentle, encouraging and persistent push: keys to softening a blamer

Reconsidering why blamers fail to soften, the conclusion in this article, in the case of couples, is that it is because their personal needs within their mutual connection are not

³⁹ Bradshaw, B & Furrow, J (2007), pp. 33-41.

being met, so they are acting in the ways they learned at a more formative stage to get those needs met or to protect themselves – even if their actions do not get the intended relationship results or get negative results. As seen in the two case studies presented, the blamer’s feelings and the associated narrative are part of a system that has previously kept them safe, to some degree, and which they will only abandon if they are feeling very safe – that is, validated and understood. In order to soften the blamer, the therapist needs to understand and accept that, and, especially in the case of tightly held blame systems, be prepared to keep pushing gently – possibly for some time – to encourage the blamer to look more deeply. As discussed, the therapist’s reaction and personal belief system plays a key part in this process and is something the therapist must remain aware of throughout.

A consideration of how the three types of EFT work would understand and deal with the problem concludes that all would understand it the same way – as connected to unmet needs, with the secondary presentation requiring re-processing and re-experiencing – and all would pursue that intra and interpersonally with the same objectives, but using different couple therapy processes and intervention techniques.

Appendix A

Johnson Model⁴⁰

Stage 1 The De-escalation of Negative Cycles of Interaction

Step 1: Creating an alliance and delineating conflict issues in the core attachment struggle

Step 2: Identifying the negative interaction cycle where these issues are expressed

Step 3: Accessing the unacknowledged emotions underlying interactional positions

Step 4: Reframing the problem in terms of the negative cycle, underlying emotions and attachment needs.

(Cycle is framed as the common enemy and the source of the partners' emotional deprivation and distress).

(This is where some elements of the cycle change - creating first order change between the partners).

Stage 2 Changing Interactional Positions

Step 5: Promoting Identification with disowned attachment emotions, needs and aspects of self, and integrating these into relationship interactions

Step 6: Promoting acceptance of the partner's experience and new interactional responses.

Step 7: Facilitating the expression of needs and wants and creating emotional engagement and bonding events that redefine the attachment between partners

(The aim here is a change in the structure of the relationship - involving a second order shift in each partner.)

Stage 3 Consolidation and Integration

Step 8: Facilitating the emergence of new solutions to old relationship problems

Step 9: Consolidating new positions and new cycles of attachment behaviours

Greenberg & Goldman Model⁴¹

Stage 1: Validation and Alliance Formation

1. Empathize with and validate each partner's position and underlying pain
2. Delineate conflict issues. Assess how these issues reflect core problems in the areas of connectedness and identity

Stage 2: Negative Cycle De-escalation

3. Identify the negative interaction cycle and each person's position in the cycle, and externalize the problem as the cycle
4. Identify the unacknowledged attachment and /or identity related emotions underlying the interactional positions
5. Identify each partner's sensitivities and vulnerabilities and their historical origin to help broaden the understanding of the negative interaction cycle. (Greenberg & Goldman, 1988, p.143)

(New step, to help partners see that their difference predates the relationship)

6. Reframe the problem in terms of underlying more vulnerable feelings related to unmet attachment and identity needs

Stage 3: Accessing Underlying Feelings

7. Access unacknowledged feelings and needs underlying interactional positions and reveal them to the partner
 - Blamer expresses, fear, sadness, or loneliness
 - Distancer expresses anxiety or anger
 - Dominant expresses shame, fear or anger
 - Submitter expresses anger, boundaries or fear
8. Identify and overcoming intrapsychic blocks to accessing and revealing emotions
9. Promote identification with disowned needs, or aspects of self, integrating these into relationship interactions.

Stage 4: Restructuring the Negative Interaction

10. Promote acceptance of the other parties' experience and aspects of self
11. Facilitate the expression of feelings, needs and wants, to create genuine engagement, and restructure the interaction by
 - Softening the blamer
 - Distancer reengagement
 - Dominant going one- down (de-escalating)
 - Submitter asserting
12. Promote self soothing and transformation of maladaptive emotion schemes in each partner, to facilitate self change and more enduring couple change

(New emphasis, to take pressure away from the relationship as the emotion regulator)

Stage 5. Consolidation and integration

13. Facilitate the emergence of new interactions and solutions to problematic interactions and/or issues
14. Consolidate new positions and new narratives

⁴⁰ Drawn from Johnson, 2004, pp.113-200

⁴¹ Replicated from Greenberg & Goldman, 2008 pp.138-40

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