

Co-Creating Reality: Acquiring Mutual Validation Skills in Couple Therapy Using Theatre Improvisation

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Abstract

In Part I, two dissimilar definitions of mutual validation (MV) in the marriage and family therapy literature, one used by Cognitive-Behaviorists and the other used by therapists informed by a Social Constructivist paradigm, are first explicated and contrasted. Next, a contemporary position challenging the desirability of MV in healthy relationships is set forth. Research supporting the rationale underlying the social constructivist position on MV and its greater utility in predicting couple satisfaction is then reviewed. In Part II, the practical contributions of Rehearsals for Growth, a social constructivist-based approach that uses theatre improvisation in couple therapy to teach and enhance MV skills are described.

Keywords: couple therapy, mutual validation, improvisation, marital satisfaction, cognitive behavioral; social constructivism.

1. Part I

In the marriage and family (MFT) literature, the construct of “mutual validation” (MV) has been ambiguous, both in its definition and in its perceived contribution to good relationship functioning. In recent years, MV is more frequently defined from a cognitive-behavioral perspective while a less frequently-encountered, contrasting understanding of MV derives from social constructivist theory. Possibly because each definition is derived from deeper assumptions, authors often fail to specify which definition they are using, or, more frequently, fail to acknowledge that more than one definition exists.

1.1 Mutual Validation according to Cognitive-Behaviorists

For cognitive-behaviorist theorists, MV occurs when each partner (1) has an accurate perception of the other’s intended meaning and (2) conveys non-judgmental acceptance of the other (Gottman, 1993). MV is observable as a series of behaviors that one partner executes in order to make the other partner feel heard, understood, and worthwhile. According to the earlier behaviorist practice of applying Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), a relationship is satisfying to the degree that the good interactions (rewards) outweigh the bad (costs). Working straightforwardly from this rationale, the therapist’s job is to help couples diminish costly interactions while increasing beneficial ones (Jacobson & Martin, 1976). For early behavioral couple therapists, MV appears to have been viewed merely as a desirable, intermediating step that facilitated the satisfactory negotiation of mutually rewarding behaviors between partners.

Later cognitive-behaviorists have viewed MV as directly contributing to marital satisfaction by improving relationship functioning. Therapists espousing Cognitive Behavioral Couple Therapy (Baucom, Epstein, LaTaillade & Kirby, 2008) regard MV as a key component in developing and maintaining interpersonal satisfaction.

These more recent behavioral and cognitive-behavioral therapists have focused on altering couples' communication patterns, noting that verbal exchanges could either be experienced as 'critical or hurtful' (in short, "invalidating") or as 'praising or approving' (in short, "validating"). Although proponents of Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (Dimidjian, Martell & Christensen, 2008) view the problems of distressed couples as resulting from dysfunctional process over inevitable differences or ensuing conflicts rather than from the absence of MV itself, they also work in couple therapy toward the goal of increasing MV by intervening to change couple communication.

1.2 The Social Constructivist view of Mutual Validation

Social constructivist theorists broadly define MV as occurring when partners mutually and actively contribute to co-creating their mutual reality, an act of meaning-creation. MV occurs when two people support each other's interpretation of unfolding experiences in such a way as to co-create their reality (Berger & Kellner, 1964). Marriage therapy theorists who build on a social constructivist foundation may differ slightly in their definitions of MV but their criteria for good relationship functioning all include MV as a component.

For social constructivists, MV is more than a desirable strategy to enhance relationship satisfaction. They posit reality in all domains to be collectively created by social process, rather than existing independently or perceived objectively. We validate hypothesis about ourselves and our world through the continual conversations and interactions we have with others. "Every individual requires the ongoing validation of his world, including crucially the validation of his identity and place in this world, by those few who are his truly significant others" (Berger and Kellner, p.4). Note that in this view such validation does not imply that the validated world-view or identity is useful or desirable.

While such reality-checking and reality-creating goes on throughout life in all personal interactions, interactions between marital partners serve a special function, since "...marriage occupies a privileged status among the significant validating relationships for adults in our society" (Berger and Kellner, p. 5). When two individuals come together in marriage, they are engaged in "a *dramatic* act in which two strangers come together and re-define themselves" (Berger and Kellner, p. 5).

To form an enduring union, a couple must merge each partner's initial reality (which reality is most likely heavily influenced by their families of origin) into a subsequent new reality that defines their identities, both as individuals and as a couple. Marital success will depend not on whether some form of new reality is created, since that result is itself inevitable. Rather, success will depend on whether the couple creates a shared reality that is mutually adaptive. This process of co-creating reality through mutual testing and validation is a universal aspect of human interaction, engaged in without either the necessity of overt awareness or of intentionality.

Wiley (1985) developed Berger and Kellner's ideas further, noting that the "conversation" between husband and wife had become more nuanced and complex in the post-feminist world. In the past, Wiley argues, theorists and therapists focused on cognition and verbal communication, but the reality-forming exchange happens non-verbally and affectively, also. Family conversation is "...more subtle, complex and charged than in Berger and Kellner's version" (Wiley, p. 31). In adding emotion and non-verbal communication to the sequences under consideration, Wiley broadened Berger and Kellner's original understanding of how MV occurs between a couple to include behaviors and feelings. Mutual validation occurs through the exchange of words, behaviors, affect, intended meaning, and symbolic interpretation. 'I-statements' and reflective listening may play a part in this reality-creating drama, but those techniques comprise only a few of the myriad ways a couple creates their shared and unique world view. Mutual validation happens at the level of meaning-creation, as the couple collaboratively interprets their unfolding experiences and co-creates their own shared view of themselves-in-relationship. As we shall see in Part II, extending therapy into the domain of action and expressiveness beyond verbal discourse holds promise for increasing MV.

1.3 Opposition to MV: Self- versus Other-Focus

More recently, two prominent MFT theorist-practitioners, David Schnarch and Richard Schwartz, have characterized MV negatively, linking MV with other-dependence. For both, the quest for MV robs individuals of self-esteem and saps marriage of vibrancy and healthy risk-taking.

According to Schnarch (2003), seeking MV from others means “your identity and self-worth hinge on how your partner (and other people) views you and treats you” (p. 110). Schnarch is objecting to an MV defined in the behavioral marital tradition already discussed, arguing that rather than being a desirable marital ingredient, this kind of MV can poison true intimacy.

Schnarch’s idea of a healthy relationship is derived from Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978) according to which human relationships are characterized by the tension between individuality and togetherness. When confronted with difficult social interactions, well-differentiated individuals are able to think and reflect before taking action, maintaining their own sense of self in the presence of strong emotions expressed by others. Individuals with poor differentiation of self, by contrast, respond automatically and reactively to situations to seek or maintain emotional comfort. The genesis of marital dysfunction, in Bowenian theory, arises from undifferentiated adults choose equivalently undifferentiated spouses. Lacking a solid sense of their own value, neither can tolerate conflict, responding to relational problems with either isolation or dependency. Regardless of whether they appear detached or fused, the underlying problem for distressed couples is a lack of self-differentiation (Nichols, 2009).

Thus, Schnarch distinguishes “other-validated intimacy” (which he equates with MV) from “self-validated intimacy,” which he views as resulting from “...confronting yourself, self-disclosing even if your partner *won’t* accept, empathize, validate, or support what you’re saying, and providing your own validation.” (Schnarch, 2011, p. 54). To Schnarch, the goal of marriage therapy is to increase the self-differentiation of each partner. Seeking MV becomes a false ideal that gives all the power to the least intimate member of the dyad. Since undifferentiated people seek validation from the other, he argues, whichever partner holds back the most wins, since the other partner will be too fearful of rejection to risk exposing potentially unwelcome aspects of self. Schnarch’s therapeutic approach starts with de-coupling the partners’ sense of self from the other. Neither partner should seek validation from the other; validation should come from within each individual (Schnarch, 2003, 2009).

In a similar vein, Schwartz (2008) sees the dangers of making the widespread assumption that couples who learn the right communication, accommodation, and other-validating techniques will develop happy relationships. In his view, all this aspiring for MV drives couples to try harder and harder to take care of the other, or find caretaking from the other, while leaving each individual ill-equipped to find validation from within. Schwartz’s IFS therapy focuses on helping each partner to “unblend” from his reactive “parts” and respond to his/her partner in a more “self-led” way (Schwartz, 1995, 2008). Although Schwartz’s language is different, his goal is similar to Schnarch’s. His therapeutic approach seeks to help individuals find strength and self-worth from within rather than interpersonally.

The view of MV to which Schwartz and Schnarch object assumes that other-generated validation is an immature or unhealthy way of determining one’s personal value. But Schnarch and Schwartz’s criticisms don’t necessarily nullify the value of MV. Rather, their positions suggest that an antecedent of beneficial MV might be the established presence of self-esteem and self-soothing abilities within each partner. Schnarch (2003, 2009, 2011) argues that if a person is willing only to take risks when (s)he feels assured of validation by the other, then (s)he may never take risks willingly.

1.4 The Role of MV in Couple Therapy Conflict Management

How couples handle conflict is often a key focus of Cognitive-Behavioral couple therapy.

By contrast, Social Constructivist-informed couples therapists appear to regard conflict as a byproduct of the absence of MV, and focus on restoring MV instead of intervening to focus on conflict itself. Behavioral couple therapists train couples how to engage in mutually validating behaviors during conflict. For instance, individuals in dialectical behavioral therapy are taught reflective listening techniques, validating the other through verbal and

While spouses who engage in this kind of mutual validation often have stable marriages, research on marital satisfaction has shown that the *presence* of conflict itself is not predictive of marital instability; rather, how couples *handle* conflict better predicts long-term stability and satisfaction (Gottman, 1993). Gottman found that validating couples have stable marriages; in these, each partner has an accurate perception of the other’s intended meaning and conveys non-judgmental acceptance of the other, although not necessarily agreement (Gottman, 1993).

These couples might argue as much as other couples, but arguments include verbal and non-verbal reassurances that convey, in essence, “ ‘I’m interested and I’m listening to your feelings.’” (Gottman, 1993, p. 10). A significant proportion of marriage therapists have adapted this research to their work by teaching their clients how to behave like these validating couples, encouraging them to offer each other statements of accurate empathy and cognitive understanding. “It is fair to say that the validating marriage has implicitly been the *sine qua non* model of the ideal couple in behavioral marital therapy” (Gottman, 1993, p. 14).

But in discussing his research supporting the desirability of MV, Gottman suggests that caution is warranted when considering its necessity. His research suggests that validation as a means of conflict resolution is only one of three stable coping strategies available to couples. In addition to ‘validating’ he defined two other stable typologies: ‘volatile’ and ‘avoidant.’ In volatile relationships, couples fight openly without engaging in any mutually validating language. After arguments, these couples engage in repair behaviors. Disagreements aren’t necessarily resolved, but the couple accepts them as part of the marital reality. The couple’s relationship is flexible enough to tolerate difference, and their self-differentiation strong enough to tolerate disagreement.

By contrast, avoidant couples handle disagreement by bypassing it. Although relationships governed by this conflict strategy might lack the juice and passion of other stable couples, the arrangement works for many. Again, these couples are not engaging in the behaviorist’s version of verbal MV, yet their marriages last. Gottman’s research thus points to a more nuanced and complex viewpoint regarding the necessity of MV in good relationship functioning.

1.5 Re-defining MV: Mutually Creating Reality

There is considerable support in the MFT literature for the importance of reality-creation in marital satisfaction. In co-creating a reality, couples interpret their world with a shared lens and create a unique relationship worldview. “This ‘relationship world view’ defines the meanings which will be given to behaviors when they are enacted within the context of the relationship” (Stephen, 1984, p. 397).

Stephen dubbed this shared meaning “symbolic interdependence,” hypothesizing that the level of symbolic interdependence will correlate with how satisfied partners are with a relationship (Dufore, 1999, Stephen, 1984). Studies conducted by Stephen and Dufore found symbolic interdependence correlated positively and significantly with both relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction (Dufore, 1999, Stephen, 1984). Such interdependence appears similar to social constructivist-defined MV and to intimacy when defined as occurring at those times people coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual shared meaning-making (Weingarten, 1991).

MV based on shared-reality creation requires both flexibility and creativity. Levine and Busby (1993) reasoned that flexibility would be necessary to co-create a reality in which differences could be accepted and tolerated and hypothesized that flexibility would be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. In their analysis of data from over a thousand couples the hypothesis that level of flexibility played a critical role in the co-creation of a shared reality (and, by inference, relationship success) was supported. As they also hypothesized, the magnitude of perceived differences between partners was not related to their relationship success. Unhappy couples have “...established a reality characterized by a lack of flexibility in their relationships. The goal in therapy would then be to challenge the couple’s inflexible frame of reality” (Levine & Busby, 1993, p. 416). Such unhappy couples have mutually created an invalidating, dysfunctional reality; the effective therapeutic intervention, then, is to help couples shift their reality-creating process toward MV, rather than train them to validate the self-worth of the other. More specifically, this work engages the couple in the creative, risky project of formulating and enacting a shared worldview that encompasses the unique character and outlook of each partner.

Note that Levine and Busby’s research supports the notion that MV either is predicated upon, or co-exists with a solid sense of self. Flexibility, then, is a component of MV, which allows for the couple to integrate their differences into a shared dyadic identity. This approach is founded on the belief, shared with Narrative therapy approaches (e.g. Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993), that what most determines personal happiness is how people interpret the events of their lives. Accordingly, each spouse’s perception of the relationship and of one’s partner should be more predictive of marital satisfaction than the desirability of the actual behaviors of that spouse. Further evidence supporting this hypothesis is cited below.

1.6 Further Empirical Support for the Utility of the Social Constructivist MVConstruct

Segrin, Hansal, and Domschke (2009) examined whether either (a) perceptual accuracy or (b) bias concerning spouses' communication behaviors during conflict was more predictive of marital satisfaction. They found that accurate perception of one's partner is largely unrelated to marital satisfaction. The more positively a spouse interpreted his or her partner, the greater the marital satisfaction, regardless of the spouse's self-report of action and intent. No correlation was found between accurate perception and marital satisfaction. What matters to marital satisfaction, this study demonstrates, is how each member makes meaning of the other's behaviors. Changing behaviors matters less than changing the interpersonal meaning-making process. When couples co-create a benevolent dyadic identity, they are more likely to experience relational satisfaction.

Other studies also have shown that couples' behaviors are not as important as the narrative interpretation of those behaviors (Gergen & Gergen, 1987; Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha & Oregate, 1993a). Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha and Oregate (1993b) hypothesized that marital quality could be predicted by narrative assessments of marital experience. Couples, "...in telling a story about their relationships, are making meaning out of the flow of their relationship history, whether it is about good or bad events that happen" (p. 441). These authors created a joint narrative storyboard indicating nodal relational events such as "how we met," "becoming a couple," "planning to get married," and "the future." They recorded 344 couples in their first year of marriage as they told the story of their relationship, then coded the stories using three systems: one that examined affect; one for interaction (such as confirmation, laughter, continuation, non-response, conflict); and one that coded for thematic and stylistic elements, such as an individual versus relational orientation. The researchers then returned to the couples during their third year of marriage and assessed marital quality.

If meaning-creation is a primary activity of marriage, then couples who ascribe a positive trajectory in their relationship narratives should have greater satisfaction down the road. Building upon Stephen's previously-cited work, the authors further hypothesized that some couples would ascribe the source of their affect to be the relationship itself, rather than the individual spouse or others as the source of their feelings. In essence, these couples were creating a mutually validating reality in which the relationship itself had become a positive character. This relational attribute would predict long-term marital satisfaction because it indicates the relationship has been given a starring role in the couple's reality. Couples who had a relationship orientation in which they ascribed affect to the couple as an entity (using words like "we") are engaging in the sort of reality-making hypothesized by Berger and Kellner. Couples who began this reality-creation in the first year of marriage put themselves on a trajectory for greater marital satisfaction as measured at three years (Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha and Oregate, 1993b). In sum, meaning trumps actions as a predictor of marital satisfaction.

MV, in this view, serves to create a dyadic reality that is more influential to their relationship than are the thoughts, actions, and feelings of each individual. This conclusion undercuts the cognitive-behavioral approach to marital therapy, which teaches client couples behaviors designed to increase accurate perception of empathic and cognitive intent and to communicate that accurate perception through mutually validating language.

In the social constructivist understanding of how relationships function, MV is not an individual act, but a dyadic one. The reality being created, tested, and mutually validated is not merely each individual's sense of him- or herself, but rather the partners' sense of him or herself-in-relationship and the relational reality. When couples perceive benevolently this dyadic reality, they report greater relational satisfaction. Although not part of the research design of Veroff, Sutherland, Chadiha and Oregate, their findings may, in part be attributed to Gottman's typology of conflict resolution style. The avoidant and volatile couple types may have more benevolent interpretations of their relational interactions than do the research coders. Or, those volatile couples may have a mutually validated reality in which fighting is an appropriate, even welcome, way to express intimacy. Since a couple's reality is, to some extent, unique to that couple, then a variety of behaviors might be happily contained within the couple's repertoire, regardless of whether those behaviors look desirable or functional to outsiders.

When partners interpret their actions through the lens of a shared dyadic reality they establish and strengthen a sense of "we-ness." Where the presence of fighting did not predict marital instability in Gottman's research, the husbands' and wives' lack of "we-ness" did. In Krokoff and Gottman's Oral History Interview (Gottman, 1999) the "we-ness" scale reflects the degree to which each spouse uses terms that indicate unification.

In scoring the interview, unification is demonstrated by the participants when they attribute actions or intentions to the couple, rather than the individual. For instance, the wife might say, “We enjoy hiking,” rather than saying “he” or “I.” Couples who scored low on “we-ness” during the oral history interview were highly likely to divorce within ten years (Buehlman, Gottman & Katz, 1992).

In addition to serving as an assessment tool, the presence of we-ness and relationship narrative have also been the basis of therapeutic intervention. Systemic-constructivist couple therapy (SCCT) is designed to increase a couple’s sense of we-ness, where we-ness is defined as “the identity that each partner establishes in relationship to the other” (Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006, p. 243). Stated another way, we-ness is the dyadic identity of the couple, created through mutual meaning-making. In order to have we-ness, partners must develop and maintain an identity within the relationship. “A key requirement for the couple to remain happily married is for each partner to conjointly validate a sense of who each is within the relationship” (Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006, p. 243).

In SCCT, the therapist’s job is to help individuals collaboratively modify their interpretive lens to introduce relational identity. The therapeutic intervention increases MV not through rote use of communication techniques but by applying new interpretive lenses that add a sense of “we-ness” to the couple’s reality-making activities. We-ness is created by MV. The couple’s MV activities help build a dyadic identity. When this dyadic identity is solid, flexible, and benevolent, the couple experiences satisfaction. But secure dyadic identity doesn’t equate with two individuals becoming fused into one. Rather, the relationship becomes a third entity that forms a flexible base for the adventure of marital life. SCCT works with the couple to enhance each partner’s sense of self-in-representation and relationship-as-entity. Their research found that increases in we-ness were accompanied by increases in marital satisfaction (Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2006).

The lack of we-ness associated with low marital satisfaction or marital instability speaks to the limitation of approaches which aim to improve marital satisfaction by increasing each partners’ level of differentiation. Couple therapy focused only on individual differentiation may fail to address the pair’s need to develop a shared dyadic identity. Two people who haven’t mutually created a sense of we-ness “are probably living parallel lives, in the same home, but never really joining together any more” (Buehlman, Gottman & Katz, 1992, p. 311).

The role of MV in marriage, then, is not to supply each individual with a sense of self-worth, a formulation which Schnarch and Schwartz rightly argue can lead to intimacy-crushing dependence. Rather, a mutually validating marriage is a shared playground for ongoing experimentation with and development of reality-creation. Conflicts can be tolerated, engaged in, or even avoided satisfactorily based on the couple’s preferred unique reality. In the social constructivist view, the individual partner is using her/his spouse to test her/his own self-in-representation perception, but not in the narrow way behavioral therapists detail. Rather, self-in-representation is a piece of the reality-creating drama of marriage. For MV to occur, both partners are engaged in the back-and-forth process of shaping a meaningful reality that makes sense for them together. Indeed, we can detect the presence of MV by the willingness of partners to take creative leaps and accept the dramatic reality-making offers of the other. This doesn’t mean individuals can only risk when the partner is approving, but it does suggest that risk-taking is more likely within the framework of a mutually validating relationship.

2. Part II.

In following the social constructivist tradition, we assert that MV may be said to occur when partners both (1) mutually and actively contribute to supporting each others’ perceived reality, and (2) engage in the co-creation of new, shared realities. In this view, MV entails risk-taking and differentiation. The reason partners seek validation is not to bolster their flagging self-esteem, at least not exclusively. MV serves the goal of relationship satisfaction by generating coordinated meaning of life’s events. Were there no differences in outlook, temperament or experience between partners, MV would add nothing. On the contrary, it is precisely the differences between partners that necessitates the development of a new, unique worldview that draws from both individuals’ perspectives while at the same time making room for the co-creation of their shared worldview, or “we-ness.” This definition of MV assumes that reality-creation is an important component of intimate relationship.

2.1 Rehearsals for Growth

If marital satisfaction and stability arise from the successful, ongoing co-creation of an adaptive, flexible dyadic reality, then how can therapists best help couples develop the skills necessary for such creative acts? Rehearsals for Growth (RfG), a praxis which uses theatrical improvisation in relationship therapy, offers distinctive and effective methods both to assess and to promote MV in couples, ones that go beyond the exclusively verbal techniques of SCCT.

2.1.1 Qualities of Theatre Improvisation

Theatre improvisation is a near-ideal practice for learning the process of validating others. As noted by Wiener (1999b): “Most conventional social transactions permit or even encourage persons to encounter a present situation guided predominantly by expectations derived from known roles, habitual performances, and intended/anticipated outcomes. By contrast, effective improvisation requires that players give up their conception/expectation/script concerning what is supposed to be there and to attend to what is happening here and now, both intra- and interpersonally. When stage-improvising, participants learn to reduce their reliance on controlling the future and experience a risky aliveness-- i.e. spontaneity-- in the present moment” (p. 52).

Improvisational enactment, it should be noted, can be challenging to do well, as it is far from an artless, random, or haphazard activity. To improvise competently, players must be fully attentive and responsive in the moment to cues on multiple levels both from their stage partners and from their own impulses, all while remaining oriented to those time, place, and plot elements already introduced in the scene. Theatre improvisation performance is governed by the fundamental imperative, “accept all offers,” meaning that participants are to validate the existence and meaning of whatever is said or done onstage. Failure to accept offers is termed “blocking,” manifestations of those deeply ingrained habits of avoiding or resisting the influence of others, particularly when facing an unknown future.

2.1.2 RfG Enactments

RfG enactments number in the hundreds and are classified as either exercises or games. Exercises are unusual activities enacted by clients in their conventional social roles, used to discover how a relationship functions in some particular aspect or acquire skills; games are usually lengthier enactments that involve taking up dramatic roles while playing a scene that tells a story. ‘Players’ designates participants in RfG games when they intentionally take dramatic roles in circumstances acknowledged by all present as staged. Most of the improvisational enactments performed in RfG couples sessions are framed as recognizable fictions, altered from realistic situations. RfG enactments are embodied encounters that draw players into the active use of movement, gesture and emotional expression, engaging them far more vividly than does solely verbal discourse. Such enactments are performed in a separated physical space (the “stage”) from that space used for conventional therapeutic discourse to help heighten and maintain the distinction between clients’ habitual social identities and the realm of their fictional characters.

The offering of improvisational exercises by RfG couples therapists is designed first to assess and later to teach the practices of good relationship functioning. Characteristics shared by good improvising with good relationship functioning include the following interrelated qualities: cooperation; attending closely to one another; mutually pleasurable interaction; and mutual validation.

2.2 Learning to Co-Create New Realities in The Therapy Room: Examples of RfG Enactments

Two examples of RfG exercises, directly relevant to training couples to mutually validate, are: One Word-at-a-Time Story (Wiener, 1994, p. 65), in which successful performance occasionally requires blocking one’s own idea to allow oneself to go along with/validating the idea of one’s partner; and Directed Story (Wiener, 1994, p. 102), involving the welcoming of input from one’s partner to activate one’s own imagination during the narration of an invented-on-the-spot story. Two RfG games useful for the same purpose are: Puppets (Wiener, 1999, p.91-93), in which each partner supplies either speech or movement, coordinating their activities to perform the staged behavior of a single character; and Stop and Go (Wiener, 1994, p. 73), a scene in which the following format is repeated: Partner A makes an offer, Partner B intentionally blocks A’s offer, and A then accepts the offer of B’s block.

While couples are engaging in good improvising, they exhibit MV, mutually and actively supporting and building upon each others' offered reality while exploring new possibilities, both personal and interpersonal. Bringing improvisational enactments into the therapy room offers clinicians a method by which they can begin the process of training client couples to practice mutually validating alternatives to the dysfunctional habit of blocking one another. The predominant spirit of RfG enactments is that of playful adventuring, facilitating the MV of joining in fun-making. Mutual enjoyment of improvising together is recognized as one of the Seven Signs of good improvising (Wiener, 1994; 2012) and serves to encourage more widespread use of playfulness.

Other learnable components of MV include a distinctive form of communications training, offered to couples who, when first improvising, are assessed as having deficits in either awareness or expressive capability. This training, which usually precedes further attempts at improvisation, takes the form of practice in accepting offers on all three dimensions (denoted [verbal] content, intent conveyed by emotion, and context supplied by gesture and movement), separately and in combination. Partners are asked to give one another feedback on the impact of their communications—frequently, people are unaware of the impact they are having on the partner and don't realize how important gesture and tone are to the perceived meaning received. Such learning is further enhanced by coached instructions used to demonstrate the sizeable impact of intentionally varying emphasis or tone only slightly. Frequently, partners differ considerably both in their awareness of such cues and of their significance. While this activity superficially resembles communication skills training used to increase accurate perception in the cognitive-behavioral approach, its primary purpose in RfG-CT is to broaden the expressive repertoire of partners so that they can then improvise more effectively. Also, in this training the intentions of the communicator are de-emphasized relative to how such communications are received by one's partner.¹

In the improvisational moment, the therapist observes whether, and the extent to which, partners validate each other's offers. If, during their improvised interaction, either is observed to not fully accept/validate the other (readily marked by lengthy hesitation, outright blocking or avoiding), the therapist then has two broad options: inviting partners to repeat the task, coaching them toward fully collaborative co-creation; or, offering different exercises and scenarios that directly challenge their entrenched, non-validating habits. A RfG therapist's tactical options and roles (both as coach and assessor) are described in considerably greater detail in Wiener (2012).

2.3 Displacement Scenes

One important subset of RfG games that challenge dysfunctional, habitual patterns is the *displacement scene*, a game in which the therapist proposes improvised, fictional scenes that offer couples non-familiar yet recognizable roles to play that differ from their actual, identified-with ones. Displacement scenes are most effective when constructed to evoke sufficient commitment from couples to play the scene, yet sufficient distance from the couple's familiar role relationships that encourage non-habitual choices. As an example, a married couple who repeatedly got into arguments over whether to permit the husband's mother to babysit their young child might be offered a displacement scene to enact in which they played the roles of two business partners debating the wisdom of hiring a business consultant. A displacement scene differs from the simulation of a couple's actual problematic situation in the following ways: (1) The clients play characters who differ noticeably from their real-life identities, have different problems and operate under different circumstances; (2) the therapist/director can coach clients during different "takes" of the scene to try out different choices and expressed affect, thereby expanding the possibilities experienced by each client for their character; (3) outcomes of the scene need not be realistic, fair, or consequential, permitting the scenes to evolve in unexpected ways. These features make displacement scenes particularly valuable in promoting MV, as the chief reason people invalidate (block) others is hypothesized to be their belief that accepting others' offers diminishes one's power to control one's life. Since the displacement scene is based on a fictional characters and premises, players are largely freed from the fear that their power, in their identified-with social selves, will be compromised by their character's acceptance of offers from their partner's character.

3. Conclusion

Clinical experience with RfG over the past 25 years shows that even couples lacking in special talent at, or prior experience with, improvisation can use RfG to improve their facility at validation, and are often able to generalize beneficially these skills to their lives (Wiener, 1994; 2009; 2012; Wiener & Cantor, 2002).

Recently, RfG has conceptualized the ultimate aim of MV to be the deepened regard partners have for each other, not the mere sharing of a co-created world view. Thus, relationship satisfaction is not brought about by a convergence of partners' viewpoints or values in itself; rather, good relationship functioning is characterized by: "...each partner: (1) demonstrating respect for, and upholding the right of the other partner to be different from oneself; [and] (2) offering one's partner loving support without conditions" (Wiener, 2012, p. 329). Correspondingly, at a more advanced stage of good improvising, "each partner (1) exhibits onstage support of other partner as a priority over gratifying one's own needs; [and] (2) demonstrates effort to make the other partner look good (i.e. competent as an improviser/actor) in the scene" (Wiener, 2012, p. 329).

Interestingly, there is anecdotal evidence from RfG practice to support the inclusion of couples displaying Gottman's (previously-cited) 'volatile' strategy of conflict resolution features among those having successful relationships. Such couples readily learn to accept offers during in-session improvisation training, but appear less likely to carry the practice of such acceptance over into their at-home interactions. Partners of 'avoidant' couples, by comparison, tend to display a limited range of emotional expressiveness when improvising with each other and often "shut down" when offered displacement scenes involving conflict.

Since RfG enactments are brief and, often, emotionally rewarding, rapid learning of how to validate takes place, often within only two or three sessions. To be sure, couples who enter therapy with predominantly antagonistic, traumatic or emotionally guarded dynamics and issues are initially unready to attempt RfG enactments until their experience of emotional safety in the therapy space is more firmly established. Approximately one-third of such couples never arrive at that point. For the remainder, however, fun, risk-taking, creativity, and benevolent interpretation can move from the play-space inside the therapy room to the couple's daily reality-creating exchanges. For such couples, new areas of MV can arise in myriad ways--verbally, physically, and affectively. In improvisation as in life, it is possible to accept what is offered and "go with it" even if one partner misunderstands the other's intent, as happens frequently. Yet so long as both parties feel permission to keep the scene going, then an adventure will unfold. Satisfying relationships are similar undertakings.

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ⁱ The perspective adopted by RfG is taken from the fundamental principle of dramaturgy (Brisset & Edgley, 1990), that "...the meaning of people's doings is to be found in the manner in which they express themselves in interaction with similarly expressive others." (p. 3.)