

# Engaging Power, Emotion, and Context in Couple Therapy: Lessons Learned

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Power, emotion, and societal context come together with force in couple interactions. The chapters in this book describe what members of the Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy (SERT) team have learned about engaging these issues. As part of the SERT study group (see Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt, “[Bridging Emotion, Societal Discourse, and Couple Interaction in Clinical Practice](#),” 2015; Knudson-Martin et al. 2014) and editors of this book, we have learned that doing so requires courage, vision, and persistence (e.g., Samman and Knudson-Martin, “[Relational Engagement in Heterosexual Couple Therapy: Helping Men Move from “I” to “We”](#),” 2015; Waters and Lawrence 1994), especially when entering into the dynamics of gendered power with heterosexual couples. We have had to recognize what we were socialized not to see and confront ideas about what it means to be “neutral” when the playing field is not equal (Knudson-Martin 1997). The work is inevitably personal as well as professional.

## The Three I’s: Guiding Strategies

As women, we see male colleagues sometimes more able to challenge gendered power processes directly or have their interventions more readily received by clients. Each of us sometimes experiences internal trepidation as we enter the potent

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confluence of gender, power, and context at play in couple therapy. Three I's—Identify, Interrupt, and Invite—help us focus and engage. In this chapter, we discuss our lessons learned as we challenge the legacies of patriarchy.

## *Identify*

Gendered power persists because it is embedded in gender norms and its processes often seem normal as part of taken-for-granted realities. Equality is an ideal difficult to translate into day-to-day reality (Coontz 2005; Deutsch 2007). Therapists need a critical contextual framework to recognize power processes and track them with couples (Estrella et al. “[Expanding the Lens: How SERT Therapists Develop Interventions that Address the Larger Context](#),” 2015; Pandit et al. “[SERT Therapists’ Experience of Practicing Sociocultural Attunement](#),” 2015). The questions in Table 1 (Knudson-Martin, “[When Therapy Challenges Patriarchy: Undoing Gendered Power in Heterosexual Couple Relationships](#),” 2015) and the Circle of Care (Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt, “[Bridging Emotion, Societal Discourse, and Couple Interaction in Clinical Practice](#),” 2015) help bring unexamined ideas about equality and mutual support from the shadows to the forefront.

**Melissa:** Identifying invisible power is a process that usually begins for me with sociocultural attunement to the couple. As I go “larger” into context, I have discovered that this promotes a sense of safety between me and each partner that is foundational to the more powerful partner’s subsequent expression of emotional vulnerability, accountability, and experimenting with new relational approaches beyond gendered ways. I am explicit with my clients about the importance of examining the impact of the larger social context on their identities and relationships. As we engage in these socio-contextual conversations, I sense that they experience freedom from fear of being judged and instead feel understood and validated.

For instance, in the process of socioculturally attuning with a man<sup>1</sup> who identifies as Latin American and readily acknowledged a need to fit the “machismo” image, we were able to recognize a major societal influence. He shared a story of the pressure of this cultural demand in order to meet the expectations of his traditional Latina mother. Later in the session, when it was time to interrupt the flow of power in his interactions with his wife, he seemed to “feel safe, and as a result we could start getting somewhere” (D. Huenergardt, SERT group notes, 9/23/2009). Indeed, in our SERT clinical group, we realized early on that “you have to do the socio-emotional attunement before you challenge the power structure directly ... you can’t really (interrupt power) too much until (clients) feel felt” (C. Knudson-Martin, SERT group notes, 10/07/2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Identifiable details in case examples have been removed or modified.

**Carmen:** As a woman in a “senior” position, I’m still getting used to the power that I hold in relation to students and clients. Opening myself to take in my client’s experience and identify power processes can feel vulnerable to me, too. It’s easier for me to see women’s vulnerability. I sometimes have a harder time with men’s, especially if they seem to resist my empathy or seem particularly invested in “being right” or knowledgeable. These male responses can inspire gendered feelings of both helplessness and challenge for me. And, as Melissa pointed out, creating a context of safety for both partners means I also need to facilitate relational accountability. When I think about helping new therapists identify how sociocultural and power processes are part of a particular case, being able to understand and engage with the more powerful partner while also making visible the effects of his actions on his partner and the relationship can seem like juggling a lot of relationship balls at once.

**Sarah:** Like Melissa and Carmen, I believe it is imperative to identify the nuanced ways sociocultural contexts and experiences impact the couple relationship in order to make sense of the couple’s desired outcomes (Knudson-Martin et al. 2014). I cannot understand power dynamics without empathy and understanding of both partners’ contexts. Compassion for the client’s sociocultural experience (as well my own) goes a long way when working with powerful partners who may, and often do, trigger feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and doubt in my ability to successfully work with difficult and pervasive patriarchal legacies.

Recognizing the many ways patriarchal legacies challenge me personally and professionally is an ongoing learning process. My research on how therapists can increase and sustain male relational engagement in heterosexual couple therapy (Samman and Knudson-Martin, “[Relational Engagement in Heterosexual Couple Therapy: Helping Men Move from “I” to “We”](#),” 2015) has made me keenly aware of how difficult it can be to identify power inequities. In those moments of uncertainty, I’ve found it helpful to explore the couple’s experience of mutual relational responsibility, or lack thereof. Focusing on the degree to which partners share a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the other and the relationship and mutually engage emotionally brings hidden power differences to light and helps me recognize opportunities to interrupt the flow of power by intentionally working with the more powerful person first (Knudson-Martin et al. 2014).

**Carmen:** I’ve watched Sarah and Melissa beautifully join with the experience of powerful male partners while still making the power disparities visible and highlighting the consequences for their female partners. Often, it is only when processing our experiences after the session that it becomes obvious how much internal apprehension we may also have experienced when allowing ourselves to engage as vulnerable women on one hand and influential therapists on the other. Working from a relationship model based on shared relational responsibility and mutual support helps us maintain focus and makes it easier to identify and interrupt clinically relevant power processes.

## *Interrupt*

Once we developed an “eye” for power and other sociocultural processes, our SERT group started to recognize them regularly; in fact, it became almost impossible not to see them. Learning how to use our power as therapists to interrupt the usual flow of gendered power was more challenging. We had to take the balance of power into account when crafting a clinical response (Estrella et al., “[Expanding the Lens: How SERT Therapists Develop Interventions that Address the Larger Context](#),” 2015). A useful rule of thumb is to begin by encouraging the vulnerability and relational responsibility of the male or more powerful partner (Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt 2010; Knudson-Martin et al. 2014).

**Melissa:** Interrupting power can be daunting for me. Overcoming my trepidation typically is embedded in mustering my courage to “stretch” in order to connect with the more powerful partner in a way that is validating while also challenging power processes. For instance, with one Jewish-identified male client who avoided expressing his own vulnerable emotions by shrugging his shoulders and saying, “it doesn’t matter,” I persisted. Had I not been willing to follow my own understanding of how male gender socialization often limits the expression of emotion to anger for most men, I would have missed an opportunity to help my client claim more of his emotional world. Instead, I wondered out loud what else he might possibly have felt in the situation that we were exploring. He listened intently as I softly elaborated my sense of how fear and sadness may have had a strong hold on him in that situation. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he nodded his assent. Accessing these vulnerable emotions then facilitated our work on gendered power interactions of the couple.

Importantly, not all of my attempts to interrupt power meet with success. I can often find myself wondering what just happened when I miss an opportunity to recognize and interrupt invisible power. It is at times such as these that my SERT supervision is so helpful. “This is how we learn from our clients. We don’t just learn from our successes, but the (times) that don’t go the way we thought it would” (D. Huenergardt, SERT group notes, 10/21/2009).

**Carmen:** Interrupting power processes is never just a one-time strategy. Perhaps the most important thing I’ve learned from our years of research is that, like Melissa, therapists have to be willing to play this role over and over again. We need to find creative ways to engage so that habitual societal discourses cannot take over (ChenFeng and Galick, “[How Gender Discourses Hijack Couple Therapy—and How to Avoid It](#),” 2015). Sarah and I were especially interested to find that validating men’s relational intentions and then *immediately* highlighting the impact of their behavior on the female partner is particularly effective in catalyzing heterosexual men to break power patterns that discourage attunement to their female partners (Samman and Knudson-Martin, “[Relational Engagement in Heterosexual Couple Therapy: Helping Men Move from “I” to “We”](#),” 2015). In supervising new therapists, I find that once they experience how interrupting the usual flow of power facilitates positive relational change, they are more willing to take the risk (see Esmiol Wilson, “[Relational](#)

Spirituality, Gender, and Power: Applications to Couple Therapy,” 2015; Wells and Kuhn, “Couple Therapy with Adult Survivors of Child Abuse: Gender, Power, and Trust,” 2015; Williams and Kim, “Relational Justice: Addressing Gender and Power in Clinical Practices for Infidelity,” 2015).

**Sarah:** Though I have been working on gender and power issues with the SERT clinical research group over the last two years, I still often find it difficult to feel competent or comfortable interrupting power inequities. It is one thing to identify power inequities and the sociocultural contexts influencing their expression in therapy and quite another to strategically and successfully interrupt the process!

For example, I worked with a couple identifying as Italian American who had been living together for five years. The male partner had only recently been diagnosed with a chronic illness, and his female partner, who was very religious and relationally oriented, willingly took on the caregiving role. It took a few sessions to work through the many sociocultural expectations that influenced their interactions and reinforced power disparities through his sense of “entitlement” and her feelings of “responsibility.” I found it much more difficult to interrupt these processes and bring them into their immediate awareness, particularly when the male partner would insist it was her *choice* to provide care at all hours. It was only through my own courage and persistence that I felt confident enough to highlight the ways his underlying sense of need and fear of abandonment distanced him from the woman he loved through its presentation as a sense of entitlement and silencing of her needs. Once we created the space for her to speak up about her desires and needs of *him*, the conversations began to shift and slowly rebalance the inequities in the relationship.

## *Invite*

We have also learned that it is not enough to track power processes and make them visible. Therapists must find ways to invite partners to enact alternative gender discourses. This requires therapist leadership (Williams et al. 2013), either by identifying and expanding upon what partners are already doing that resists unequal power or by inviting them to experiment with another way of relating, such as asking the male partner to listen to and take in his partner’s anger or supporting a less powerful partner to stick with a thought that she is doubtful about expressing and helping the couple experience a positive outcome from enacting something new.

**Melissa:** I have noticed that discovering an opening from the more powerful partner on alternative ways of relating is a key aspect of changing gendered power interactions. With male clients, it can often be that we need to expand beyond a common male gender-stereotypical “fix the problem” discourse to helping him listen to his female partner and validate what he has heard. This attunement exercise sounds simple enough, but is a quick way to encounter the taken-for-granted sociocultural messages that men draw upon in their approaches to their couple

relationship. With one male partner who practiced listening to his wife's story that inferred her wish for them to buy a horse, I needed to help him set aside the discourse of "what's the point of this conversation if we can't afford to do this?" to consider how to simply take in her perspective and reflect back what he heard. He struggled to move away from engaging in a defensive mode of who's right and who's wrong, yet discovered in this enactment (replete with therapist coaching on reflecting) that it opened the possibility for the couple to connect in a new way. "The work then is about how to attune him to her so that he can actually hear her, respond to her not out of his guilt (or defensiveness), but from his own connection with her" (D. Huenergardt, SERT group notes, 8/05/2009).

**Carmen:** One of the things I was surprised to learn is how much men like invitations that help them successfully engage with their partners. I should not have been surprised. When partners are able to share relational responsibility, men no longer feel incompetent in the relational arena. This is true for same-sex partners as well (Richards et al., "[Building a Circle of Care in Same-Sex Couple Relationships: A Socio-Emotional Relational Approach](#)," 2015). It's not just about learning the right skill. New skills can be helpful, but if the power balance has not changed, they are met with skepticism by less powerful partners. Repeatedly demonstrating an ongoing attitude that you matter and your needs or opinions matter to me is what creates success. Part of supervising new therapists is helping them develop a vision of possibility so that they can persist in making space for couples to experiment with and positively experience alternatives that create new neural pathways that help men and women resist societal gender and power processes (Fishbane and Wells, "[Toward Relational Empowerment: Interpersonal Neurobiology, Couples, and the Societal Context](#)," 2015).

**Sarah:** I've had similar experiences. Though I value the benefits of developing specific skills that may be useful for both partners, the reality is these skills can also be used to continue to reinforce inequity in the relationship. For example, in the Italian couple in which the male partner was diagnosed with a chronic illness, he often interrupted his partner with, "*I feel that you talk too much and it drives me nuts.*" It comes as no surprise that his partner often shut down in session. Clearly, this is not how a skill such as I-statements is used in an equal relationship and why it is fundamentally important for the powerful partner to engage differently with the less powerful partner for the skills to work successfully toward a mutually supportive relationship.

I invited the male partner to resist his tendency to impose his perspective and try a listening position. This worked best when I also highlighted his relational desires and successes, "I know how much you care about her. Did you notice how she sat up straighter and her eyes lit up when you asked her to tell you more?" Over time, he learned to genuinely acknowledge his automatic self-focused behaviors as well as take relational responsibility and extend relational repair: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you. I really do value what you're saying." The female partner eventually felt confident enough to block his tendency to interrupt her by saying, "I would like to hear you out as soon as I finish what I was saying." Upon reflection, the male partner shared how differently it felt for him to

acknowledge his automatic silencing of her voice and to recognize the positive impact their changes were having on their relationship as a result.

**Carmen:** In the example above, Sarah provided leadership that helped the couple create a new, more mutual relationship experience. Several of our research projects have found that this is critical to transforming unequal power (Samman and Knudson-Martin, “[Relational Engagement in Heterosexual Couple Therapy: Helping Men Move from “I” to “We”](#),” 2015; Williams et al. 2013). Many in our group learned to interrupt unequal power dynamics by pointing them out. “Sean, I notice that you vigorously express your point. Have you noticed how Shana seems to shut down when all your energy comes at her like that? What do you think makes that happen?” But the next step of inviting something new can challenge our ideas about therapist roles.

Therapists may not have a vision of what would help couples step out of limiting gender and power patterns, or we may fear being too directive or imposing our values. We also come up against anxiety or discomfort when trying to undo societally reinforced gender and power patterns. I have found that my supervisees often need help actually thinking about other possible options. This is an example of how latent power associated with gender norms limits the choices people consider (see Knudson-Martin, “[When Therapy Challenges Patriarchy: Undoing Gendered Power in Heterosexual Couple Relationships](#),” 2015). My supervisees also often seem to need a “green light” and support from me to cross over an invisible line that keeps them from actively engaging with their clients to provide leadership that catalyzes something new.

## The Three C’s: Keys to Engagement

The inevitably personal nature of our professional work demands attuning to our own vulnerability as we resonate with our clients to provide a safe space for them to identify and practice new relational approaches in their couple relationships. Staying true to our social justice, social constructionist view of our couples’ problems when challenged by a powerful partner in session is not easy. The reasons for being derailed in our work with gender and power can be many. All too often we have found ourselves tempted to put on a pathologizing lens when confronted with gendered power dynamics. Yet, we continue to discover how to hold onto our relational values that inform us of the need to resist patriarchy, both professionally and personally.

The three C’s—Compassion, Curiosity, and Courage—are a good reminder for what we hold dear as we enter into the active process of undoing gender inequality. Bringing compassion to our therapeutic conversations is the heart-connecting aspect of our work. It helps us want to experience each partner’s humanity and their desires to be known and valued and to build relationship. Curiosity helps us better grasp and resonate with each person’s sense of identity and ways of relating. We want to know the details of what happens for them, how it feels, and how each

partner responds to the other. Approaching with curiosity minimizes the therapist–client hierarchy and communicates respect and interest in the unique aspects of each couple’s sociocultural story. It invites multiple realities and begins to liberate both therapist and client from the taken-for-granted to activate what might be.

Most importantly, summoning courage to empathetically draw attention to power disparities evident in session provides the key to opening new possibilities for our couples. We find that when we persistently resist patriarchy *with* couples, our courage is contagious. As interpersonal neurobiology indicates (see Fishbane and Wells, “[Toward Relational Empowerment: Interpersonal Neurobiology, Couples, and the Societal Context](#),” 2015), emotional attunement and compassion can be bidirectional. Couples may invigorate their own three C’s. The neuroplasticity involved in the brain’s capacity to change and the corresponding relational plasticity can help the couple explore and process where they are now, what they would like to do about the influence of larger social contexts, and where they would like to be in the future.

Taking the steps to identify and perform the relational processes involved in experiencing a mutually supportive relationship is an act of both social resistance and creativity. It is always challenging and even more so when gendered power imbalances intersect with the effects of poverty, race, and other inequities, and when the consequences include or are related to complex issues such as depression, addictions, or violence. The research and practice models offered in this volume provide an important foundation from which to confront and transform destructive power disparities and are fertile for continued exploration, integration, and development. We invite researchers and clinicians working across the many factors that contribute to relationship distress to further expand our growing understanding of how to undo, rather than reinforce, societal power processes and engage with clients to catalyze the relational possibilities inherent in the connections among emotion, societal context, and couple interaction.

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