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Article 25

Helping Couples Reconnect: Developing Relational Competencies and Expanding Worldviews Using the Enneagram Personality Typology

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Couples counseling is both challenging and rewarding. Helping two people develop strategies that support their relationship can have a far reaching impact. For example, the strength of a family is largely influenced by the strength of the parental relationship (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). When couples are relationally strong, there is greater camaraderie, relational connectedness, and resiliency among family members (Harden, 2004). Relationships thrive when couples consider the needs and desires of both partners. When couples share personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, they experience deepened intimacy and satisfaction (Duffey, Wooten, Lumadue, & Comstock, 2004). By increasing self-awareness and by understanding diverse worldviews, couples are better positioned to expand their relational skills and increase their relational competencies toward this end.

At the same time, research illustrates that feelings of fear, frustration, and resentment build when couples are not able to effectively understand and support one another (Duffey, Wooten, et al., 2004). Many relationship issues result when couples are not sufficiently self-aware and lack adequate understanding of each other's world views (Duffey, Wooten, et al., 2004). Thus, it is particularly salient for counselors to identify intervention strategies supporting relational growth and mutual understanding.

However, establishing a safe relational environment where these issues can be explored is not a simple task, particularly when one or both partners experience mistrust or appear relationally disconnected. Nonetheless, counselors working with couples are in unique positions to help their clients develop a skill set to promote reconnection and repair relational ruptures. In a time when divorce is as prevalent as it is, exploring interventions for working with couples and strengthening families is increasingly relevant. One such intervention is the Enneagram Personality Typology, an age old tool

used to illustrate diverse points of view across a broad spectrum of development. Employing the Enneagram in couples counseling, in conjunction with *Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT), is a working model that provides a context for how relational growth occurs, and is detailed below.

Relational-Cultural Theory is a progressive theory that provides counselors a framework to support relational development and connection among people (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT is especially appropriate when considering issues of diversity and multiculturalism because of its focus on power, privilege, and oppression. In this article, we will briefly discuss salient RCT tenets, describe a Relational Competencies model adapted to conceptualize relational skill development among couples, and illustrate how the Enneagram Personality Typology can be used within a relational context to help couples negotiate their relationships.

RCT: A Theory in Motion

Although RCT was first introduced into mental health practice over 20 years ago, it is more recently receiving attention within the counseling profession (Comstock et al., 2008, Duffey & Somody, in press). Duffey, Comstock and Reynolds (2004) introduced the idea of linking RCT with Enneagram Studies to promote an understanding of diverse worldviews. Louden-Gerber and Duffey (2008) discussed using the Enneagram in Counselor Education. And the Association for Creativity in Counseling, a division of the American Counseling Association, was founded on the principles of Relational-Cultural Theory because of its emphasis on creativity in service of relational development (Duffey, & Kerl-McClain, 2006/2007).

RCT proposes that, for growth fostering relationships to occur, both people in a relationship must have the opportunity and capacity to relate authentically. According to RCT, authenticity is the ability to represent oneself accurately and fully in relationships (Jordan, 2004b; Miller & Stiver, 1997). RCT also recognizes that environments elicit feelings of fear, shame, and self-doubt; feelings of defectiveness, powerlessness, or oppression, create barriers to authenticity (Hartling, Rosen, Walker, & Jordan, 2000; Jordan, 1997, 2004a). When we are unable to be authentic, or when we must hide personal qualities or characteristics from people with whom we are in close relationships, we disconnect from fundamental aspects of ourselves. Ironically, we also become disconnected from the people with whom we desire connection (Jordan, 2001; Miller & Stiver, 1997). RCT refers to this as the *central relational paradox* (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 2001). That is, in spite of our desire to form connections, we behave in ways that perpetuate experiences of disconnection. According to RCT, healing occurs as we develop growth-fostering relationships, with mutual empathy and self-compassion serving as catalysts. RCT also acknowledges that disconnections are inevitable since all relationships experience disconnection (Jordan, 2000, 2001, 2004a; Miller, 1988); growth occurs as we work through them.

Relational Competencies

In an effort to explore counselors' perspectives on how this growth occurs, researchers conducted a qualitative study involving over 100 members from the Association for Creativity in Counseling (ACC; Duffey, Haberstroh, & Trepal, 2009).

Participants in the study, “A Grounded Theory of Relational Competencies and Creativity in Counseling: Beginning the Dialogue”, discussed how working through disconnections becomes particularly challenging “when one person is unresponsive, unwilling, or unable to discuss and accept the experiences of the other and move toward a more mutually empowering experience” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 92). Participants also noted that when people feel powerless in their relationship, they “may become unable to keep perspective on their experience and carry feelings of shame, isolation, self-blame, a sense of defectiveness, and immobilization” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 92).

These themes are relevant to couples who report feeling frustration, anger, decreased self-esteem, and confusion; couples who feel mischaracterized, unseen, or misunderstood (Weger, 2005). People who deepen their understanding of their own fears, desires, and motivations, while seeking to understand their partner’s worldviews make tremendous progress toward mutual understanding, deepened appreciation and shared respect. Effective counseling involves a counselor’s willingness to be creative, in addition to accessing the creativity and flexibility of both members of the couple.

Participants in the ACC study discussed how creativity involved “thinking beyond current frameworks and exploring new views and ways of thinking about their work and clients” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 102). We propose that counselors using RCT as a philosophical base and the Enneagram Personality Typology as an innovative intervention have two viable tools that, when used in unison, may support the relational growth and connection of the couples they serve.

Relational Movement

A principal goal for couples is to foster mutual understanding and develop new ways for the couple to authentically relate (Duffey, Comstock, & Reynolds, 2004; Duffey & Somody, in press). According to RCT, mutual empathy is a growth-fostering experience that deepens understanding and increases the potential for deepened self-empathy and relational empowerment. As people develop their relational competencies and increase their level of self-empathy, they develop what RCT refers to as relational resilience (Jordan, 2004b). According to Jordan (2004b), relational resilience involves movement toward mutually empowering, growth fostering connections in spite of adverse life situations. People no longer seek to have “control over” others. That is, the focus shifts from the needs of one person to the needs of both partners and the relationship. Mutual growth is encouraged through constructive conflict. Meaning is made from a broader relational context rather than from one that is self-focused (Jordan, 2004b, p. 32).

Jordan (2004a) discusses how expanded relational competency involves:

1. Movement toward mutuality and mutual empathy (caring and learning flows both ways), where empathy expands for both self and other
2. The development of anticipatory empathy, noticing and caring about our impact on others
3. Being open to being influenced
4. Enjoying relational curiosity
5. Experiencing vulnerability as inevitable and a place of potential growth rather than danger. (p. 15)

These skills, which were supported in the ACC study, are important therapeutic goals for many couples seeking counseling.

ACC Relational Competencies

Relational competencies in the ACC study were characterized as “a circular, sometimes challenging, and developmental process whereby a person negotiates personal and professional relationships” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 95). As seen in Figure 1, competencies from the study included: (a) Mutuality and Awareness, (b) Other and Personal Growth and Promotion, (c) Authenticity and Honesty, and (d) Social Connections. Participants related how relationally competent individuals actively seek to understand their own perspectives, challenges, needs, fears, and desires while openly seeking others’ perspectives and worldviews. They also had an understanding of human vulnerability and an appreciation for how challenging negotiating life can be and they participated in direct and open communication and empathic listening. Participants discussed that relational strategies were based upon a foundation of perseverance, respect, and self-awareness. Relationally competent persons are willing to invest in difficult conversations rather than avoiding them or denying problems exist. Finally, relationally competent persons are able to release relationships that are not sustainable (Jordan, 2000; 2001; 2004a; 2004b).

Assuming personal responsibility through introspection and self-evaluation was reportedly reflective of relationally competent behavior. People become increasingly relationally aware when they “objectively evaluate themselves and their current relational challenge” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 101). Alternatively, when people are unwilling or unable to reflect on their roles in problems, they are more likely to “control, exploit, and dismiss” others (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 108). Participants described these behaviors as a form of “abused power” (Duffey et al., 2009, p. 104). No doubt, couples negotiating a relationship cannot thrive when one person wields power over the other (Duffey et al., 2009). Couples counseling involves helping both members of a relationship to create equity in their relationship and develop self and other compassion.

While the ACC relational competencies study and RCT outline the process and characteristics of relational competence, tools are needed to assist counselors help clients develop self and other awareness. The Enneagram Personality Typology can be used to assist counselors in this quest in several important ways.

The Enneagram Personality Typology

The Enneagram Personality Typology is an ancient tool used for self-discovery; one that has become increasingly popular in recent years (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003). This typology differs from many other personality assessment typologies. It is dynamic and is used to assess an individual’s optimal functioning, points of dysfunction, and goals for growth. Thus, clients can be conceptualized according to their type as well as their level of psychological and relational development within their type. These stages of development are well outlined within the Enneagram literature. Although the

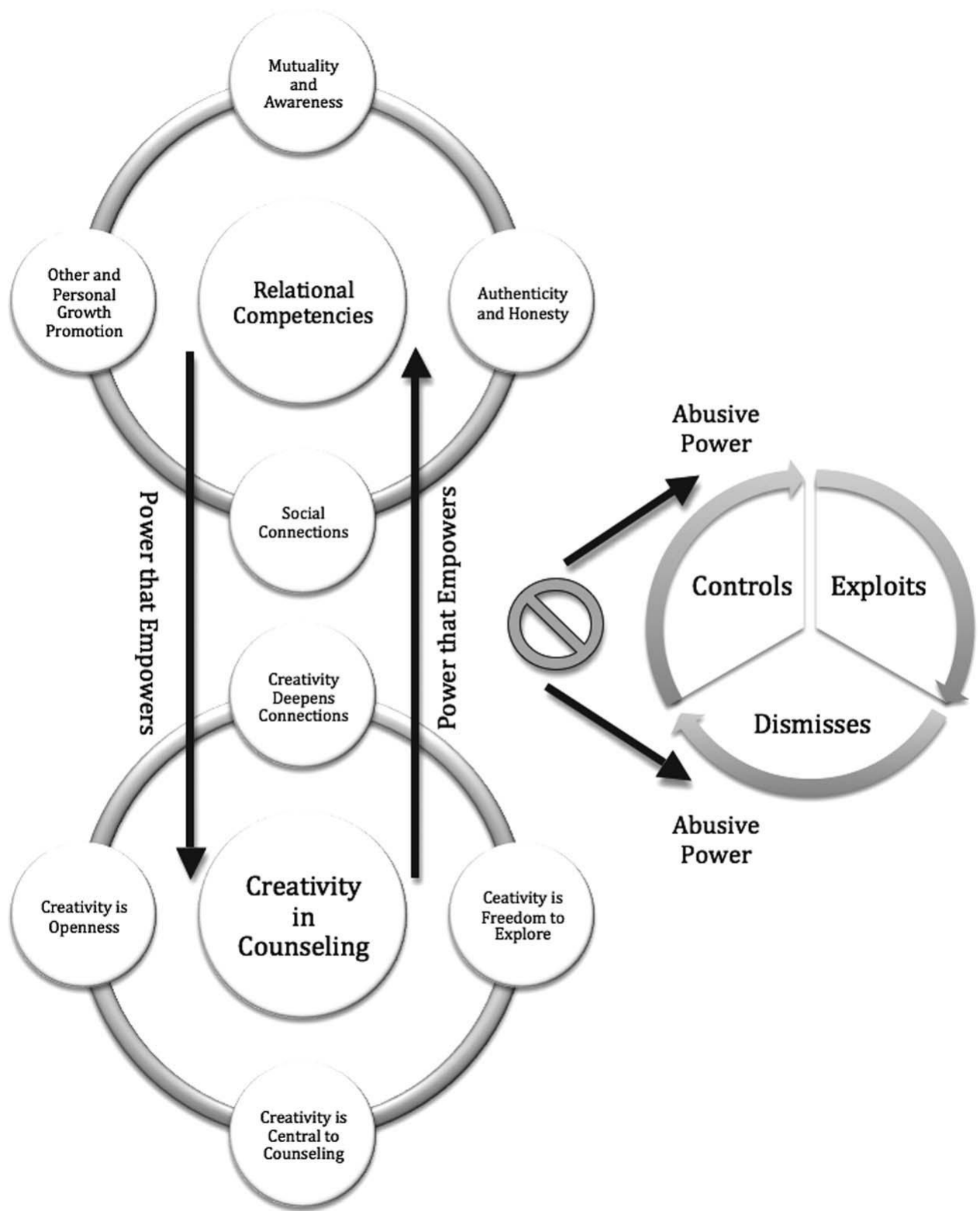


FIGURE 1: Relational competencies and creativity.

Enneagram has been described by a number of Enneagram scholars over the last century (Daniels, 2000; Ichazo, 1982; Naranjo, 1994; Palmer, 1988; Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003), the idea of using Relational-Cultural Theory with the Enneagram Personality Typology in counseling practice has been more recently discussed. RCT provides context for how people form optimal relationships while the Enneagram provides a vehicle for couples to increase their self-awareness and understanding of the worldviews of others. Together they offer counselors unique tools to help couples become more self-aware and deepen their understanding of each other.

About the Enneagram

The Enneagram is conceptualized as a tool for spiritual understanding and psychological development (Palmer, 1988). It includes nine basic personality types with nine levels of development within each type. The Enneagram is depicted by a nine-point figure that illustrates how the various types are connected to and influenced by each other. Each personality type is identified by a number. While an individual is primarily identified by their number (one through nine), they share characteristics of types that are adjacent to their type. These adjacent types are called wings and are discussed in detail below.

Contemporary Enneagram scholars, Riso and Hudson (2000, 2003), discussed ways the Enneagram can help us increase our capacity to view our behaviors more objectively, develop our personal understanding so we can respond more authentically in our relationships, and increase our capacity for empathy by helping us understand the worldviews of the people we love. The Enneagram details how people from each type are unconsciously motivated by a basic fear, need, and desire characteristic of their personality type. At the same time, while people who share the same personality type are triggered by the same fear, need, or desire, their responses to the trigger may vary.

These variations in behaviors result from a combination factors. An individual's type is complex and includes attributes of other types in the model. Unlike other personality typologies that may be considered simplistic or one-dimensional, the Enneagram provides a rich description of how each personality type can unfold and develop depending on these and other factors.

Wings

Another important element involved in distinguishing behaviors within type is the person's *wing*. Scholars note how we are all a unique mixture of our basic type and one or both adjoining types, or "wings" (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003). For example, people with a Type Three personality may be driven to succeed and "look good" while people with a Type Two personality may be driven to support others in their quest for success. This could create a conflict for individuals with a Type Two personality with a strong "three wing." Although they may unconsciously feel the need to shine, they may act upon their overriding need to "be loved or needed" instead. As a result, they could feel spite, resentment, or keen competitiveness; feelings they may not acknowledge, even to themselves. In another example, a person with a Type Nine personality will be more openly assertive when assessing the Type Eight wing, while a person with a Type Nine personality may be more covertly stubborn and inflexible when connected to the underdeveloped Type One wing.

Levels of Development

Within each type, individuals function within a developmental framework. That is, while a person operating from a healthier *level of development* will respond more consciously and responsibly to a painful stimulus, individuals of the same type operating from average or unhealthy levels of development will respond more defensively and less responsibly to the same stimulus. Levels of development greatly influence a person's response to challenging situations, and as a result, their relational options.

Attention Style

Palmer (1988) introduced the idea that people focus their attention on predictably distinct issues, reflective of their type. For example, a Type Four personality's attention focuses on what is missing, while a Type Seven personality's attention focuses on avoiding limits, or boundaries, since they perceive these as confining. Counselors working with couples can help them identify their attention styles and develop new capacities for working with them. These skills could, in turn, help couples decrease their inherently limiting responses to requests or other unavoidable relational needs.

Instinctual Subtypes

Another consideration involved in Enneagram study is the role of *instinctual subtype* or an internal drive or preoccupation. Subtypes include *one on one*, or a preoccupation with intimate relationships; *social* functioning, which relates to a person's position with others; and *self-preservation*, or a preoccupation with comfort and survival. While all three drives are important to each of us, there will be one overriding drive in each of us that seeks to be fulfilled (Palmer, 1988). Ultimately, a person's primary subtype colors the way the personality type unfolds and becomes expressed (Palmer, 1988).

Saving Grace

Indeed, Enneagram scholars discuss how each type has the potential to broaden their worldviews and develop healthy ways of coping by what is referred to as a *saving grace* (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003). In other words, we all have an inherent strength that remains within us even after we deteriorate; our saving grace is a unique positive quality possessed by people of each type that can help us recover from our downward spiral (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003). If we do not access this potentially redeeming quality, we create a "self-fulfilling prophecy" and lose the very thing we most desire, bringing about our basic fear (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003).

Ego Fixation

It can be challenging to access our saving grace because each type also has a uniquely characteristic unconscious defensive response. Couples counselors can help clients identify their unconscious coping strategies, or the *ego fixations*, as they are commonly referenced, since these influence how they interpret the world (Riso & Hudson, 2000). For example, people with a Type One personality style may experience resentment (Ichazo, 1982) when situations unfold in a less than perfect way. Because they develop deep seated beliefs about how the world "should" be (ego fixation), and they offer advice or make efforts to improve it. This advice is not always solicited or

welcomed. In the meantime, their resentment of flaws deepens (Palmer, 1988; Riso & Hudson, 2000, 1996) and they develop anger toward themselves and others (Riso & Hudson, 2000).

For example, a Type Six personality is the most likely of all personality types to project negative intent onto others (attention style). In contrast, healthy Sixes identify their inclination toward paranoia and mistrust and their tendency to bring about their worst fear by acting in ways that others may experience as untrustworthy. If they develop the capacity to truly trust themselves and others, Type Six personalities can question the validity of their fears and projections and behave in a more believable, congruent, and in turn, trustworthy manner. This shift could help them develop the reliable, trusting relationships they so desire.

Points of Connection

Finally, it is important to note that each Enneagram point is connected to two other points along the spectrum, commonly referred to as points of disintegration and points of integration (Palmer, 1988; Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000). Each type assumes qualities of these two points (Daniels & Price, 2000; Palmer, 1988; Riso & Hudson, 1996) at various times. For example, a Type Five individual under stress could assume the reckless and self-serving characteristics of the lower functioning Type Seven. A higher functioning Type Five individual could also assume the strength based qualities of a high functioning Type Eight.

In other words, when people feel especially stressed, they may take on the unhealthy qualities of one or both connecting type. Or, alternatively, when they feel secure and life is proceeding well, they may take on the positive qualities of either type. However, when people are functioning in lower levels of development, they often assume the unhealthy characteristics of their points of connection. And finally, individuals who function well most of the time typically assume the higher functioning qualities of their points of connection (Riso & Hudson, 1996, 2000, 2003). These qualities coalesce to create the distinctiveness of each person, and in time, allows for each to experience greater freedom of expression, relationship, and resilience.

Couples Counseling Using the Enneagram and RCT

Mark and Sarah

Mark and Sarah attended counseling sessions following a number of losses and adjustments, including the deaths of Mark's mother and father and Sarah's mother the previous year. Both in their late 40's, Mark and Sarah married in their 20's and reported a happy and connected life together. They had spent much of their life helping Mark succeed in the family business he had assumed and raising their three daughters. By their reports, they sought couples counseling because the last four months had been atypically stressful, and they were, for the first time in their married lives, feeling estranged from one another.

Certainly, it is natural for couples experiencing high levels of stress to feel distance in the relationship. Each person experiences grief in a unique way, and Mark and Sarah had been recently inundated with grief. Moreover, they had launched their last child the month before and were experiencing an empty nest for the first time.

In talking to Mark and Sarah, however, it became clear that grief was not their only issue. As the sessions unfolded, Sarah shared her frustration with Mark for making decisions without consulting her and hiding his feelings from her but expressing them to other family members. Mark, too, was frustrated with Sarah for being critical and harsh in the expectations she had of Mark and their daughters. The sessions were tense and both partners bewildered.

Part of the work involved laying each person's perspective out in a way that both people could hear it. It also included providing enough context that Mark and Sarah could introspect without feeling shame or defensiveness. Our work involved helping them have compassion for their experience while deepening their understanding of each other's perspective. We used the Enneagram to assist us in this work. Although a full accounting of this work is not possible in the space allotted, we submit a brief description of the Enneagram's role in this couple's work.

The counselor introduced the idea of using the Enneagram Personality Typology and they agreed to learn more about it. Both Mark and Sarah read Enneagram books and the counselor gave them a brief description of the types. Their first response was complete relief that their unique fears, frustrations, and needs could be articulated in books and by their counselor. Later, they felt helpless about what to do. The counselor assured them that they would work together to access strengths they both had within them and develop coping skills that were challenges for their types.

Mark identified as a Type Nine while Sarah identified as a Type One. Mark's behaviors were characteristic of a Nine under stress; uncommunicative, stubborn, inflexible, and passive-aggressive. Sarah's Type One under stress was overly critical, controlling, and angry. Both had enough reserves in their relational bank account to give each other the benefit of the doubt and to be open to a new experience. Even so, Mark and Sarah carried much more anger toward each other than either ever imagined. Their work involved sorting through these feelings while honoring each person's experience. It also involved calling a spade a spade regarding unacceptable behaviors. We explored the cultural considerations that contributed to each person's need to please, and the inauthentic relational patterns they had developed. Interestingly, both Mark and Sarah were relieved by this work.

Mark's work involved being upfront with Sarah and dealing with difficult conflicts directly. Sarah's work involved examining her expectations and coming to terms with the fact that neither of them is perfect. These are longstanding issues they both carry, so the work is taking time. However, the Enneagram helped create a roadmap for both members of this couple to become more self-aware and cognizant of each other's experiences. They are committed to one another and are making great strides in their work.

The Enneagram, Awareness and Mutual Empathy

By helping couples identify their personality type and its adjacent wings, their subtype, and level of development, they can better understand why they respond as they do to certain situations and each other. This awareness helps to deepen self awareness and encourage empathy for their partner. When both partners engage in this exploration of themselves and each other, they can develop mutual empathy and awareness. They then have an opportunity to retrain their psyches to process information differently and

respond in ways that support their well being and the health of their relationships. Additionally, because many problems in relationships stem from issues where members of the couple do not see themselves or each other clearly, the Enneagram can be an especially helpful tool for couples seeking this form of clarity. Couple counselors can help their clients develop the self-monitoring skills that will increase their understanding of how they function to particularly challenging stimuli, given their type, and help them hone relational tools to not only support their own growth but also one another's.

Authenticity and Honesty

In addition, the Enneagram can help couples identify what Riso and Hudson (1996, 2000, 2003) refer to as a "healthy sense of self" or who each personality type sees itself to be. Problems in relationships often develop when there is a discrepancy between how we see ourselves and others' perceptions of who we are. This is especially the case when our sense of self lies on two ends of the spectrum: overstated or self-condemning. To relate authentically, we must be realistic about who we are and about how others experience us. As we become more aware, we are better positioned to respond productively to difficult situations and to take the needs of others, as well as our own, into account. Thus, counselors can provide honest feedback to the couple about their individual and mutual ways of relating. The Enneagram can provide a framework for counselors to assess and plan interventions based on the couple's types and levels of development.

Unhealthy Functioning and Disconnection

In contrast, the greatest challenges arise when attitudes and behaviors activate a client's downward spiral into progressively unhealthy states. When operating from more average or unhealthy levels of development, a client may behave selfishly and unfairly toward others and toward themselves. In these cases, the counseling process can be facilitated by the Enneagram, by delineating the fundamental belief systems that activate this downward spiral. Likewise, counselors can address the relational systemic impact of a member's unhealthy functioning. In this regard, counselors can assess the causes of couple discord, each member's contribution, and how the system has adapted. Systemic interventions can be planned using the Enneagram as a tool to envision optimal functioning in the couple dyad by encouraging each member to move toward healthy functioning while gaining awareness of their unhealthy functioning. Couples can utilize the Enneagram as a roadmap to health and knowledge. This, in turn, can help them revise their automatic and unproductive responses to stressful life events.

Conclusion

Couples counselors are in unique positions to support the individual and relational development of couples and families. Problems within families are inevitable; helping couples learn to work through differences and difficulties can model increased empathy, compassion, and deepened commitment among family members. The Enneagram Personality Typology and Relational-Cultural Theory are two tools which can facilitate this work.

The impact of successful couples counseling can be far reaching, and in fact, self-perpetuating, given that children learn about the world through their interactions within their families. All members of a family have an increased opportunity to develop their relational competencies when they live in a connected, authenticity-focused and mutually supportive environment. Because intimacy in a relationship is greatly increased as couples experience deepened trust, emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and reciprocity (Timmerman, 1991), using resources such as the Enneagram Personality Typology and Relational-Cultural Theory could serve important familial and societal relational needs.

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