



Breaking the Mold: Sculpting Impasses in Couples' Therapy

PEGGY PAPP*
MICHELE SCHEINKMAN*
JEAN MALPAS*

In the fall of 2009, we the authors started a project at the Ackerman Institute for the Family in New York City that focuses on understanding and transforming impasses in couples' therapy. In experimenting with various interventions, we discovered the power of sculpting to capture and transform stalemates in couples relationships. In this article, we describe the ways in which sculpting brings forward the gestalt of a couple's impasse, highlights nuances of emotions and feelings, and reveals elements of both present and past. We also discuss the ways in which sculpting illuminates the partners' sense of self in the relationship as they feel constrained within their reciprocal dynamics. Through three different cases, we outline a protocol for sculpting. We demonstrate how the therapist invites the partners to create a visual/sensory narrative of their impasse, guides staging of their metaphors and images, and utilizes their enactments to unpack emotions, beliefs, and patterns that are typically on the periphery of awareness. We also articulate how sculpting offers a platform for the process of change.

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WHAT IS SCULPTING?

Sculpting is an experiential technique that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s during a time of ferment and experimentation in the family therapy field. Rather than relying exclusively on explanatory verbal language, family therapists began to explore visual, physical, and sensory interventions to understand and change family systems. Kantor, along with the Duhls (Duhl, Duhl, & Kantor, 1973) and Satir (1972), were pioneers in the development of expressive techniques for dealing with families, including the development of family sculpting. According to this technique, the therapist asked each family member to physically place the other members in a spatial relationship with one another to symbolize their relational positions in terms of boundaries, interactions, conflicts, closeness, and distance.

Papp, Silverstein, and Carter (1973) used the technique to trace intergenerational themes in the nuclear and extended family contexts and to realign the families' transactional patterns. Several other therapists, including Minuchin (1974) and Madanes (1980), orchestrated "enactments" in their sessions. In these pieces, family members acted out brief scenarios of their problematic family dynamics and thereafter experimented with alternative solutions and patterns.

*The Ackerman Institute for the Family, New York, NY.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Peggy Papp, The Ackerman Institute for the Family, New York, NY. E-mail: ppapp999@yahoo.com.

Authors have equally contributed to this manuscript and are listed in order of seniority.

In the early 1980s, Papp (1982a,b, 1983) also developed a specific form of sculpting designed for couples that she referred to as “couples’ choreography.” These choreographies were aimed at cutting through the partners’ intellectualizations, denials, and accusations and they placed the couple’s relationship in the realm of the metaphorical instead of the literal. In doing so, these silent performances robbed the couple of their familiar verbal cues and challenged them to communicate instead through symbolic and visual language.

Couples’ choreography was introduced in the process of therapy by asking the partners to imagine themselves in symbolic forms that expressed the way they experienced themselves in the relationship when they were having a problem. Then, as if they were actors in a short silent movie, one partner at a time was asked to pantomime his or her fantasy. Uncensored by rational thinking, each partner came up with highly theatrical, idiosyncratic, and frequently complementary scenarios such as: David and Goliath, a cop and a criminal, a lion and a lion tamer, or fire and ice. When enacted, these images captured each partner’s perception of the self, the partner, and the relationship. As these images were projected outward in these mini performances, they became available to be seen, touched, moved, and altered. In addition, these choreographies diagrammed the problematic interactions that were blocking the couple from changing. As Papp originally worked from a strategic model, her original mode of intervention was centered on reprogramming the couple’s reciprocal roles and changing their patterns of interaction (Papp, 1982a,b). Over the years, sculpting has been used in many models of therapy for different purposes. As new modalities have entered the field and brought with them their own unique interventions and techniques, the prominence of sculpting has gradually diminished.

WHY SCULPTING TODAY?

In our current project, we have revived sculpting as a valuable technique that illuminates the emotional gestalt of a couple’s impasse, in addition to earlier focus on the partners’ roles and interactions. We use sculpting to highlight each partner’s subjective experience—their emotions, beliefs, and assumptions, both present and historic. The partners’ performance of their pantomimes inevitably brings forth and makes visible their unacknowledged expectations, vulnerabilities, and yearnings as well as their projections and distortions. Our way of utilizing sculpting reflects our multidimensional approach to couples therapy and the trend in the family therapy field toward integration of models (Brewster & Scheinberg, 2012; Fraenkel, 2009; Fraenkel & Pinosof, 2001; Lebow, 2003; Malpas, 2011; Pinosof, 1995; Scheinkman, 2004, 2008).

FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE OF IMPASSES

Our work utilizes the construct of the vulnerability cycle (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004) to describe how impasses are formed and maintained in couples’ relationships. We typically initiate therapy by understanding if and how the couple’s recurrent impasse might be related to vulnerabilities and survival strategies activated in the relationship. We consider that core impasses are usually initiated when one partner, feeling hurt or disappointed by a specific behavior of the other, begins to relate in self-protective and defensive ways that in turn activate the defensiveness of the other. When this happens, the couple ends up in a mutually reinforcing cycle that keeps them polarized and reactive. As partners attempt to make sense of their recurrent dynamics, they typically rely on “old files” that contain perceptions, beliefs, and feelings belonging to their individual and common pasts. In those moments, there is usually a collapse of meanings between present and past that can contribute to the entrenchment of the couple’s impasse. The trajectory of the

couple is usually predictable—they go from spontaneous and loving exchanges toward increasingly defensive postures that reduce them to impoverished versions of themselves.

As we began to introduce sculpting into our sessions, two additional ideas expanded our understanding of the vulnerability cycle. The first is the notion that when couples are caught up in impasses, over time they tend to experience their relationship as increasingly narrow. As the partners repeatedly relate to one another reactively, their feelings and behaviors become confined within rigid parameters. They end up cutting off a whole range of experiences that once energized their relationship. We refer to this narrowing of possibilities as the “couple’s mold.”

The second, interrelated idea has to do with each partner’s sense of self as the couple finds themselves constricted in the context of the impasse. We believe that the way individual partners feel about themselves in their intimate relationships—if they like and/or do not like who they become with one another—is pivotal to their happiness and viability as a couple. In these moments of impasse, the couple’s cocreated “mold” becomes a template that reinforces each partner’s negative self-perception. Although both partners contribute to the shaping of this mold with their respective personalities and expectations, the dynamics of the impasse eventually become more powerful than the individuals within it.

When we introduced sculpting in our project, we discovered the powerful ways in which each partner’s generated images provide access to the couple’s constraining mold. These metaphorical images also capture a more nuanced articulation of the individual’s sense of self within the dynamics. The following vignette illustrates how sculpting helped each partner articulate visually this constrained sense of self. Their newly found images allowed them to create a new joint narrative and move in a new direction.

Since the onset of their marriage, arranged by their families 15 years earlier in Pakistan, Kareem and Leila struggled to find a romantic connection, to no avail. Leila explained that her lack of romantic feelings and her distancing were based on the fact that Kareem did not take charge of financial and practical responsibilities. Kareem justified his passivity by casting Leila as unloving and sexually unavailable. For years, as each waited for the other to change, they both felt constricted in the relationship. However, given their cultural and family norms and their dependence on each other as immigrants, they were stuck in an impasse in which they were unhappy together but frightened of separation. To better understand their dilemma, the therapist sculpted what they described as a “no-exit situation.”

In her sculpture, Leila portrayed herself as “a spirit tied down and pegged to the ground by several ropes.” The ropes, drawn by her mother and husband, represented her sense of obligation and dependence. This image contrasted with another image that she shared about the way she wanted to see herself: a bird that flies away.

Kareem described himself as “a roaring lion waiting for the princess who will turn me into a powerful prince.” The team observed that, as a roaring lion, Kareem came across as angry and authoritarian, which might in part be “roping” Leila down, thereby preventing her from giving him the kiss that would transform him into the prince. The session ended with the team asking them to think about who they each would ideally like to become.

In the following session, Leila came back with a smile saying that, rather than wishing she was a bird that could fly away, she thought of herself as a rooted flower. As she thought about herself through this new image, she realized that for the flower to flourish it had to be watered every day. She raised her hand above her head as if pouring water on herself and said that rather than waiting for Kareem to nurture the plant she would have to be the one to do so.

Kareem had thought of himself as a leopard who was free to run in many directions. Although he was sad to let go of being the prince, he was relieved and energized to pursue

his individual dreams. These metaphors revealed how they perceived themselves and each other as well as the ways in which they felt restricted in the relationship. They also provided a new language for the changes they could embrace. The flower could flourish if it kept nurturing itself. The leopard could move around in search of his dream rather than angrily wait and roar. Both reaffirmed that they needed to become more independent before deciding if romance could emerge between them.

THE SCULPTING PROTOCOL

Our Work Procedure

We meet once a week and observe each other's sessions behind the mirror. While each therapist is responsible for his or her case, the two other therapists observe, call in, and function as a reflecting team. Toward the end of each session, the therapist meets for a brief consultation with the team behind the mirror after which the three therapists convene with the couple to share observations, ask questions, and make suggestions.

Protocol

Sculpting is introduced with a short description of what it is meant to accomplish, such as: "Sometimes it's difficult to put our thoughts and feeling into words. This is an exercise that is designed to help couples communicate on a different level. Rather than talking about your relationship, you communicate through images, fantasies, metaphors, and movement. It's imaginative and playful. Are you willing to try it?"

If the couple agrees, the therapist creates a calm reflective mood by asking them to close their eyes and get very relaxed. "First, take a deep breath, then go over your body and relax your muscles and let your mind go free. When you are feeling relaxed, think about the impasse you have described and the feelings that are stirred up. Is it anger, despair, frustration, fear? Now if you were to have a daydream or fantasy about your problem when you are feeling this way, what symbolic forms would each of you take in the fantasy? (The therapist may give examples.) Then imagine what the movement would be between these two images when they are trying to deal with the problem between them. How would they interact? And where would this take place? In a forest, the kitchen, a circus? Take as much time as you like and then open your eyes."

When both have opened their eyes, the therapist stands up, initiating the idea of movement, and asks the couple to stand also. One partner at a time is then asked to describe the symbolic forms and their interactions in detail. Each partner directs his or her own fantasy and tells the other partner what to do. The other partner is asked to follow the directions given even if he/she does not agree with the way the partner imagined him/her.

Pivotal Questions

The following are suggested questions for therapists to use in guiding the sculpting:

- What is the problem between the two forms?
- What is the interaction that takes place between the two forms when they try to solve the problem?
- What are the solutions each form keeps trying that don't work?
- Do they try anything else?
- What is your worst fear if the problem is never solved?
- What is your greatest hope?
- What is your ideal fantasy of the relationship between the forms?

These questions can be elaborated on or changed to serve the goal of the therapist. An example of a variation can be found at the end of the chapter.

CASE EXAMPLES

The three cases that follow illustrate how we have used sculpting to grasp and transform couples' impasses. The first case, Jeff and Diane, illustrates the details of the sculpting protocol and shows how the therapist is able to address metaphorically topics which are otherwise difficult for the couple to talk about. The second case, Peter and Mary, illustrates how sculpting can bring forward and illuminate the overlaps of meanings between present and past in a couple's impasse. The third case exemplifies a different protocol of the sculpting exercise. It highlights how sculpting can reveal unforeseen power dynamics in the couple's relationship and open up new directions in the therapy.

Jeff and Diane

This couple sought therapy "just to straighten out a few little things before our wedding." They took great pains to assure the therapist they loved each other and that their problems were not serious. In the first few sessions, they brought up common concerns such as maintaining boundaries with their extended families and also their need to make room in their crowded schedules for time together. At one point, Diane cautiously ventured that she sometimes felt she was taking on more than her share of the domestic responsibilities. Jeff brushed the issue aside by pointing out his long working hours and Diane quickly withdrew her complaint. It was not until the fourth session that Diane imidly suggested, "Maybe next time we should talk about our sexual relationship?"

In the following session, both expressed puzzlement as to why they had gone from having sex several times a day to currently once a month. They circled the subject with tentative speculations. Diane thought maybe she was to blame for the problem because she had lost her sexual desire but had no clue as to why. In spite of her attractiveness, she and her individual therapist were working under the assumption that the sexual problem had to do with her poor body image, or perhaps she was afraid of closeness. Jeff's continuing reassurance about her body had no impact on her so he had given up trying to "turn her on" and he "smoked pot instead." The sculpting was introduced at this point to cut through the fog of confusion and self-blame surrounding their sexual relationship. What follows is a verbatim dialogue of the sculpting process with explanations of the interventions in parentheses.

Therapist (to Jeff, who opened his eyes first) *What symbolic form did you take in your fantasy?*

Jeff *I saw myself as a sponge and she was a bottle of water.*

Th *What is the problem between the sponge and the bottle of water? (Focus on interaction.)*

J *The sponge can't open the bottle of water.*

Th *What are the different ways you have tried? (Attempted solutions.)*

J *I get on top of it and try to unscrew the top.*

Th *Show me physically. (Enactment of attempted solution.)*

(Jeff throws his arms around Diane's head indicating unscrewing a bottle cap. She winces and pulls back.)

Th Show me all the different ways you have tried to open the bottle of water. (Enactment of failed solutions.)

(Jeff keeps trying different ways of unscrewing the bottle cap, reenacting failed attempts.)

J It's not all up to me. The cap belongs to the bottle of water.

Th So what do you do when you can't unscrew the cap? Do you try anything else? (Exploration of other solutions.)

J I follow her around.

Th Show me what happens when the sponge follows the bottle of water around. Tell Diane what to do. You are the director of your fantasy. (He directs Diane to move in a circle and he passively follows her.)

Th Is there anything you do with the bottle of water while following her? Reach out? Touch it?

(Search for other solutions.)

J I push against it. (He indicates pushing but it does not work.) I know the bottle of water is going to do what it wants to do. I don't have a problem with that but I want to be in contact and be ready for the opportunity.

Th What would happen to the sponge if it never got the cap off the bottle of water? (Exploration of worst fear.)

J The sponge would dry up and not be able to move. Just dry up and die.

Th So the sponge can't live without the water?

(Exploration of vulnerability.)

J That's right.

Th OK, now show me the ideal relationship between the bottle of water and the sponge.

(Visualization of a solution.)

J Getting some water—maybe not fully dripping but just wet.

Th Describe what that would feel like. (Description of sensual experience.)

J It's cool, refreshing.

Th Ok. Let's leave that there for now. Diane, what was your fantasy?

D I'm a huge column of ice. I'm just standing there frozen. He is a big blazing flame that keeps following me around. I keep moving away.

Th So what's the problem between the ice and the flame? (Description of problem.)

D The ice wants to melt but is afraid of doing so.

Th At what point does the ice decide to melt? (Identification of turning point.)

D I don't know. I don't know when or how I want to melt.

Th What is your worst fear if you melt? (Identification of vulnerability.)

- D* *I would turn into a little pool of stagnant water.*
- Th* *Describe what it would feel like to be a little pool of stagnant water. (Sensual experience of vulnerability.)*
- D* *I would be nobody, nothing.*
- Th* *If you did not let your fear take over, what would be your ideal solution? (Description of ideal fantasy.)*
- D* *That I would no longer be frozen; that we would just be together.*
- Th* *Show me how you would do that. (Enactment of ideal fantasy.)*
- (She moves toward him and they embrace.)
- Th* *Let's sit down and talk about your fantasies. (End sculpting on a positive note with ideal fantasies).*

In the discussion that followed, the therapist guided the couple in exploring the way their metaphors reflected their current relationship as well as the way they resonated with their respective pasts.

Jeff reported that he felt like the sponge attempting to “unscrew the cap off the bottle” whenever he tried unsuccessfully to pressure Diane into having sex. After his overt attempts failed, he tried to make himself physically attractive. He took a shower, shaved, put on clean underwear, splashed his face with her favorite cologne, and “followed her around.” All of these preparations triggered Diane’s anxiety and she froze into a column of ice at the prospect of having to meet what she perceived as his “flaming” expectations. Although she was desirous of melting, her fear of becoming a “little stagnant pool of water” kept her frozen. Jeff was left feeling like the dry sponge that would shrivel up and die if it did not get the cool refreshing water of love. These perceptions of themselves and each other, when acted upon, formed the mold that trapped them.

To challenge Jeff out of his passive role and encourage him to assume responsibility for a different solution, the therapist suggested that he experiment with different ways of “melting the ice” other than becoming a passive sponge or a dangerous flame. The therapist used their theme of water to help Diane overcome her fear of turning into a stagnant pool. She asked Diane to consider the many different forms water might take such as a powerful river, a sparkling brook, an elegant fountain, a splashing waterfall, or a peaceful lake.

In subsequent sessions, the couple described the many different associations and insights that resulted from their sculpting experience. In contemplating a totally new way to approach Diane, Jeff remembered that she was always more relaxed when he took responsibility for running the household. While she was away on a business trip he decided to clean the house, do the laundry, cook dinner, and have it on the table with lighted candles when she returned. Diane was deeply moved by his act of caring and experienced a burden being lifted from her shoulders. She acknowledged her resentment of the uneven division of domestic responsibilities and how this resentment had interfered with her sexual desire.

Jeff, reflecting on the experience, said, “After dinner we sat on the couch holding hands and talking. It was nice to think the sponge doesn’t have to be saturated all the time. I don’t need to be about the end all the time. There is all this middle satisfying area that exists—like caring and affection.”

Diane reported that the different images of water were helpful in overcoming her fear of becoming a stagnant pool. She shyly said that she had come up with her own image but wanted to keep it a secret. The sessions that followed were spent connecting the metaphorical images with prominent themes in each of their lives. Jeff connected his sponge image with feelings of being thirsty for love and affection whenever his parents traveled

on business and he was left behind to dry up and wither away. Diane related the stagnant pool of water to her having lived in a family of high achievers and feeling she could never live up to any of them. The sculpting stirred up many associations with the past that gave them new perspectives on the present. Three months after they left therapy, we received an announcement of their wedding.

Peter and Mary

The following case illustrates the way in which sculpting reveals the gestalt of the couple's impasse, including central themes belonging both to present and past. The partners' vivid images about their current impasse illuminated feelings and perceptions informed by experiences with their families of origin.

Peter and Mary came to therapy soon after they moved from the Midwest where they had 2 years of couples therapy. They acknowledged that even though they had learned to talk about their problems, they continued to feel stagnant and unable to change their patterns. Their major complaint centered around a pervasive lack of joy in the relationship, which greatly affected their sexuality and intimacy. A few weeks after starting the therapy, they separated but continued in therapy trying to work on the relationship. Although both partners were quick and clear at identifying the necessary steps to change their interactions, week after week they came back frustrated, taken over by mutual inertia. Sculpting was introduced to explore this sense of stagnation.

During the sculpting, Peter was the first one to open his eyes. He imagined himself as a "big dog, a big sad dog" who was part of a psychological experiment in which he was put behind a glass wall. Mary was on the other side of this wall as his "object of desire." When asked to pantomime their impasse, he kept extending his paw over the waist-high glass wall, trying to touch her. However, whenever his paw got close to her body he got a powerful electric shock, causing him to pull away. After several attempts he "stopped trying" and recoiled. He tried to find the lever that would open the door of the cage and let him out, but somehow he could not find it. When the therapist asked how his wife fit in this pantomime, he described her as "another dog sitting passively on the other side of the cage," making no efforts to connect with him. To figure out what the big sad dog wanted, the therapist asked: "What would happen to the big dog if he could magically open the cage?" With a laugh Peter said: "The dogs would do what dogs do, they would fool around and play..."

Mary could not come up with a metaphorical image of herself and Peter but she visualized the two of them sitting in a loveseat in the dark barren basement of the house she grew up. She located the two of them sitting several feet away from each other, their hands crossed on their laps, their postures sullen and inert. Although in the pantomime they talked about their issues, they remained stuck in the sofa incapable of getting up and doing anything different. Mary had an insight that this image was a carbon copy of what she had seen all her life in her parents' marriage. Her parents talked and talked but there was never action, "things never changed." She added: "This was the way they carried on until the day my father died."

As the therapist began to explore the couple's images in terms of their current problems, stories about their pasts spontaneously emerged. Peter explained: "Indeed, I grew up in a cage.... My parents were raging alcoholics and party lovers until I was 11 years old when they suddenly turned into abstinent fundamentalist Christians." Peter claimed that his parents were so frightened by their own substance abuse, they did not allow him to socialize. Peter saw himself as a big, sad, awkward child who spent most of his adolescence going to church events or isolated in his bedroom reading books. He talked with great sadness about his "caged life." He lived most of his life afraid of taking risks and

exploring his freedom and it was frustrating that Mary did not help him get out of his morass.

Mary associated the loveseat in the dark basement with her parents' marriage. Her father's alcoholism and her mother's martyrdom established an emotional distance and inertia from which they never deviated. Similar to Peter, she described an emotionally impoverished childhood full of restrictions where her mother was overwhelmed with the household responsibilities while her father spent his days drunk in a stupor. She grew up feeling neglected and with a pervasive sense of guilt and shame about her needs.

Comparing the two sculptures, the therapist identified their joint sense of helplessness. The "sad dog" did not know what to do to rescue the helpless woman on the sofa; the "lonely, shamed woman" on the sofa did not know what to do to help the sad dog. In an attempt to draw differences between the present and the past, the therapist challenged them to see themselves as bright people in charge of their lives instead of helpless children.

In the following session, the couple reported that they did not think about the sculpting. However, they had decided to look for an apartment and move back together. Peter said, "It's about time I take some risks." Mary was pleased with his affirmation and said playfully that she was looking forward being in a new sunny place sitting with Peter on a new big sofa.

Roberto & Thomas

The case of Roberto and Thomas illustrates a different protocol for sculpting where the therapist uses the couple's spontaneous metaphor as a jumping-off point to represent their impasse without leading them to generate a fantasy. The partners are asked instead to position their bodies in a way that physically and symbolically represents their spontaneous metaphor. This case also shows how sculpting can reveal power dynamics, reciprocal roles, and constraining molds may not emerge otherwise.

Thomas, 44, and Roberto, 52, are a White, middle class couple who have been in a committed, monogamous relationship for 20 years. Several months prior to starting therapy, Thomas discovered that Roberto had been having an affair for the past 2 years. Confronted with evidence, Roberto admitted the affair and confessed having fallen in love with his lover. While he felt grieved at having to let go of the other man, he quickly agreed to cease all contact with him and expressed an unequivocal desire to repair his relationship with Thomas and to renew their commitment.

When they entered couples therapy, Thomas was still consumed with feelings of betrayal while Roberto struggled to explain the nature of his other attachment. The first few sessions focused on processing the affair toward accountability and repair. Thomas was given room to feel angry and hurt. Roberto took responsibility for the hurt that he caused and responded constructively to Thomas' questions. They attempted to explore what led them to the affair. However, a few weeks later our therapeutic process felt stagnant. Thomas wanted to talk incessantly about the affair while Roberto remained vague and redundant and the couple failed to make sense of their crisis.

One day in a session Thomas exclaimed: "I understand what this affair gave him but I can not make sense of it for us. What led us to it?" After a long silence he continued: "There was a gaping hole in our relationship. It made it possible for this other person to enter our lives."

While we do not assume that affairs are always caused by the relational dynamics, the "gaping hole" offered an entry point to explore the mold that might have been constraining the couple's life before the affair. It provided an opportunity to explore the relational premises and reciprocal roles that might have contributed to their sense of disconnection.

The therapist decided to ask the couple to represent the impasse physically. “Can each of you create a sculpture of your relationship that conveys the experience of the ‘gaping hole’ you just described? Without words, please place your body and your partner’s body the way you see fit. We will discuss your experiences at the end of the exercise.”

Their two sculptures revealed an uncanny complementarity as well as a power imbalance that contradicted their perception since the discovery of the affair. Roberto arranged Thomas like a statue, standing tall, arms crossed on his chest, chin up, looking out toward the horizon. He then positioned himself standing on tiptoe obviously making efforts to look as tall and as strong as Thomas. Although Roberto’s affair had portrayed him as the powerful one, the sculpture revealed Roberto feeling quite inferior to his partner. Roberto had to make great efforts to keep up with Thomas but never felt able to do so.

In his sculpture, Thomas kept trying to get Roberto to look in his direction but Roberto kept pulling away. Thomas revealed himself as a demanding partner. “I keep setting up expectations that Roberto can’t meet. I keep setting myself up for disappointment,” he explained. Expanding on his upbringing, he admitted how growing up gay and effeminate led to many disappointments both in his family of origin and his community. “I always think I will be rejected so I keep asking for proofs of love while setting up the stage for disappointment.”

Roberto’s sculpture revealed his experience of their relationship prior to the affair. For many years, he felt very proud of being with Thomas, yet unable to keep up with his expectations. Trying to “stand tall” on his tiptoes, he conveyed his sense of both admiration and inferiority. Inspired by these new insights, Roberto volunteered information about his relationship with his former lover. He had felt equal to him, if not stronger. “It was someone in need, more vulnerable, and I felt useful and protective of him. I can easily feel inferior, older or just not good enough. Unfortunately I have felt this way a lot in our relationship.” Thomas acknowledged this revelation with sadness and relief. He finally understood how this sense of inequality had contributed to Roberto’s affair and how their relationship would need to change to break the mold of the “gaping hole.” For the next several sessions, Thomas and Roberto explored their respective self-images as “demanding” and “not good enough.” They understood how these experiences had unfortunately fueled one another in a reciprocal complementarity.

Toward the end of treatment, Thomas declared that he did not want to continue exploring the affair and that it was time to focus on their own relationship. Roberto agreed and, uncharacteristically optimistic, said with a laugh: “Not to set up unrealistic expectations, but I think we can do better together.” The couple explored the ways in which they had lost touch with one another as well as the challenges of remaining sexually engaged after many years together. Both took responsibility to lighten up their social schedules and started rebuilding intimacy based on the newly gained perceptions of themselves as equal and committed partners.

CRITERIA FOR THE USE OF SCULPTING

There are many ways to use sculpting depending on the situation of the couple and what the therapist wishes to accomplish.

Breaking Impasses

When therapists find themselves at an impasse in the treatment and none of their usual interventions have produced the desired change, sculpting can be suggested as a different way of looking at the situation. The therapist might say to the couple: “We seem to be in a stalemate,” or “There seems to be something we are not fully understanding about your problem. Would you be willing to try something new?”

Creating a New Language

Oftentimes, couples are elusive about difficult topics such as sex, money, power, and infidelity, and it is difficult to understand their reciprocal behaviors and dynamics around those issues. When the therapist senses a certain evasion, sculpting can help access this sensitive area through metaphorical language rather than through a verbalization of the problem.

Uncovering Hidden Meanings

The therapist does not need to wait for an impasse to occur before using sculpting. The exercise can be used in the ongoing process of therapy to reveal idiosyncratic meanings contained in the presenting problem. Whenever partners represent themselves through a symbolic form, they tend to reveal unexpected perceptions of themselves and their relationship that might be interfering with the process of change.

Cutting Through Intellectualization

When a couple is particularly analytic but their intellectual understanding is blocking change, sculpting provides them with a way of connecting on an experiential level that circumvents their survival strategies and reveals their vulnerabilities.

Designate Life-Changing Events

If the therapist suspects the impasse is triggered or maintained by a major life cycle event, such as immigration, loss, or illness, the therapist may suggest sculpting the relationship before and after the event to better understand how it affected the couple.

Measuring Change

Sculpting is an excellent tool for measuring the progress that has taken place in the couple's relationship over time when it is used at the beginning, middle, and end of therapy. The changing metaphorical images that the couple produces give partners a sense of their own accomplishments and act as an encouragement for further progress.

When Sculpting is Not Recommended

Timing

It is best not to use sculpting until a supportive therapeutic relationship and alliance have been established with the couple. Each partner needs to feel comfortable with the therapist before they can participate fully in an unconventional exercise.

Emotional or physical crises

If either partner is in a crisis such as immobilizing depression, extreme anxiety, or grief, or the client is under the influence of alcohol or drugs, it is inadvisable to introduce sculpting. The therapist's initial goal must be to reduce reactivity and anxiety in their current situation. In order for sculpting to be effective, the couple needs to be able to reflect on the exercise.

Heated argument

Sculpting should not be initiated when the couple is in the midst of a heated argument. In heightened emotional states, couples are more likely to use the exercise as fuel for spite and vengefulness.

Variations on the Protocol

Physical positioning

Some clients might not be able to access a symbolic realm but can only imagine real life situations and characters, including themselves and partners. It is important to respect the client's resistance and shyness. The sculpting exercise can be done without the generating of fantasies. Couples can be asked to physicalize their feelings and positions with one another as a way of representing their problems and patterns of interactions.

Using a spontaneous metaphor

As illustrated in the above case of Roberto and Thomas, the therapist can use the couple's spontaneous metaphors as a jumping-off point for sculpting their impasse. In that case, they were asked to represent physically their metaphor of the gaping hole and its relationship to their stalemate.

Describing versus enacting

Some clients might not feel comfortable standing up to enact their fantasies. The therapist should respect their level of comfort and simply ask them to describe their images without acting them out.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we articulate the many ways in which sculpting can be a powerful and malleable tool to help therapists explore and understand the couple's experience while they find themselves caught up in recurrent impasses. Based on an integrative approach, we describe how sculpting brings forward emotions, perceptions, and beliefs, as well as interactional, organizational, and intergenerational processes, that maintain couples unable to move forward.

In the sculpting protocol, we demonstrate how the metaphorical images generated by the exercise highlight nuances of experience that are typically on the periphery of the partners' awareness. These unique images and performances are also fruitful platforms for stimulating alternative perceptions and narratives.

In the process of sculpting, we became interested in two interrelated ideas that expanded our understanding of impasses. When a couple is caught up in a recurrent impasse over time, the partners' feelings and behaviors tend to become constricted within limited parameters. They begin to relate to each other in type-casted ways, becoming impoverished versions of who they are and can be. We have referred to this process of confinement as the couple's "mold." When caught within these molds, it is common for both partners to dislike who they become. It is apparent from our limited clinical sample that when the partners began to feel badly about who they become with one another, they are prone to consider infidelity, to disengage, and to distance. We have come to believe that understanding the partners' "sense of self in the relationship" is pivotal to the couple's sense of fulfillment and well-being. As such it deserves more clinical, conceptual, and research attention.

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