

# USING ACTION METHODS WHEN WORKING WITH COUPLES

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Couples frequently arrive at a therapist's door as a last gasp attempt to salvage a relationship, often blaming each other for why the relationship isn't working (Leveton, 2005). Often, one partner will try anything and everything to "save" the relationship, while the other partner has reluctantly come to the session. In many cases, "...each partner expects the therapist to join in blaming the other person. Without active intervention from the therapist, blame can easily dominate the therapy sessions, and verbal intervention alone is often insufficient" (Leveton, 2005). Sociometric techniques can help engage clients somatically, inviting deeper affect and greater authenticity, and additional action techniques—especially doubling and empty chair work—can encourage empathy and vulnerability, facilitating cooperation rather than antagonism and blame.

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### Using Sociometry

Sociometry, a tool created by Dr. JL Moreno, (Blatner, 2000; Hale, 1985) is an action exploration of the underlying attitudinal and relational structure of an individual, couple, family, group, etc. An initial sociometric intervention with a couple, for example, is simply to shift seating arrangements. Rather than sitting side by side, having couples face each other in session (Hendrix, 2001; Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1973) can provide diagnostic information through their body language. Are they making eye contact or avoiding each other's gaze? Do they smile at one another? Are their shoulders down and relaxed or tensed up around their ears? Are they holding their breath? Are they sitting forward in their seats or leaning back, as if moving away from their partner? How close together are their seats? Does either of them change body pitch when the other is speaking or raising their voice, etc?

Other sociometric tools ask couples to, in effect, "vote with their feet." The therapist poses questions (or criteria) which individuals answer through action, allowing the couple and therapist to explore questions they have been afraid to explore, as well as helping them and the therapist to quickly reveal connection, or lack thereof, in their relationship. From an array of sociometric exercises available, this article focuses on spectrograms and locograms.

### Spectrograms

The spectrogram is an imaginary line or continuum set up on the floor of the office, with the ends of that continuum defined by polar opposites (Hale, 1985). The couple is asked to stand and physically place themselves on the continuum to represent their response to the criterion question posed. This simple exercise can quickly reveal to the couple many aspects of themselves and their relationship.

Because couples often arrive at therapy with very different levels of willingness to engage in the process, one of the issues to address head on and from the start is how invested both members of this couple are to not only maintain this relationship, but to ensure that it grows and flourishes.

### Case Example

Ken and Dennis (all names used have been changed to protect confidentiality) had been married for five years (together nine), with two adopted children. They presented for couples therapy after Dennis was caught having his second affair during the course of their relationship. I asked them to place themselves on a spectrogram with the following polar opposites: "I'm willing to do anything to better this marriage." "I've already got one foot out the door." Ken walked immediately to the end that represented maximum willingness, while Dennis hesitated. I invited Dennis to start at one end of the continuum and slowly walk it, noticing what he was feeling in his body and allowing that to guide him. At Ken's urging, Dennis started at the end representing willingness, slowly moved further and further away from Ken, and ended up "landing" on the spot of already having one foot out the door.

As painful as it was for both of them, a single question revealed the reality of their relationship. Dennis was able to share honestly with Ken that he hadn't been invested in the relationship in years, was no longer in love with him, and was only staying because of their children. Although Ken was devastated, he expressed gratitude at Dennis' honesty and relief that he finally knew the truth.

Utilizing talk therapy alone, it could have taken months to get to this reality: this exercise served as an effective shortcut. Having the couple stand and move engaged their bodies in the process, which propelled them more quickly from the cognitive into the affective, and therefore, into increased transparency. In the case of Ken and Dennis, they quickly realized that couples therapy was not going to bring them closer together; but rather the goal was to assist them in letting go, ending the marriage cooperatively, and learning how to best co-parent their children.

From an unlimited number of spectrograms that can be utilized with couples, here are additional examples:

- *I always feel like my partner supports me/I never feel like my partner supports me*
- *I feel like we always fight fair/I feel like we never fight fair*

- *Our parenting styles are totally similar/our parenting styles are totally different*
- *I forgive quickly/I never forgive*

Moreno also intended for sociometry to serve as a research tool (Hale, 1985): spectrograms can be utilized at the beginning of treatment as a baseline and then, during the couples process, to address shifts and progress in treatment.

### Locograms and Case Example

Locograms are an additional sociometric tool wherein multiple locations or spots on the floor can be identified utilizing scarves, index cards, or other location markers to identify criterion (Hale, 1985). Again, members of a couple stand on the location (or in between more than one location) that corresponds to their answer.

Roy and Jackie were exploring their recent engagement and their future together. When the topic of having children arose, rather than just talking about it, we used a locogram to explore the issue, with different spots for each of these criteria:

- *I'm excited about having children right away*
- *I'm excited about having children, but want to wait a few years*
- *I'm not really excited about having children*
- *I'm clear I don't ever want to have children*
- *Other*

Note that "other" is always offered as an option with locograms because it is impossible to anticipate every potential response. Clients are instructed that when they select "other" they must be able to name what it means for them (this is not an indifference or unwillingness to disclose spot).

Roy stood on "I'm excited about having children, but want to wait a few years," whereas Jackie stood on, "I'm excited about having children right away." In sharing why she stood on that spot, Jackie expressed her fear that she and Roy weren't standing on the same location and that she was running out of time to have children (she was 36 years old), while Roy shared his fear about his job security and fear that he wouldn't be able to adequately support his family.

Because these exercises engage the body, not just the mind, and require that the couple

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own their choices and explain why they’re standing where they are, it motivates them to get honest and vulnerable with each other about their true feelings. Further exploration with Roy and Jackie, including doubling (see below), led to a compromise of waiting one year after they got married, which felt satisfying for both of them.

Possible additional locograms to use with couples are:

- *I feel like we’re emotionally close, but I’d like to be closer*
- *I feel like we’re emotionally close, and I’m fine with the level we’re at*
- *I really want to get emotionally closer, but something is getting in my way*
- *I don’t really want to get emotionally closer*
- *Other*
- *I am currently satisfied with how often we have sex*
- *I wish we had sex more often*
- *I wish we had sex less often*
- *Other*
- *When we argue, I tend to get angry and take charge*
- *When we argue, I tend to become compliant*
- *When we argue, I tend to shut down and dissociate*
- *When we argue, I can stay present and open*
- *We don’t argue*
- *Other*

### Doubling

When couples are fighting, they aren’t listening to or understanding their partner; they’re defending. A major goal of couples work is to teach them how to listen to one another with empathy and to try to understand their partner’s feelings as fully as possible.

“Doubling is a psychodramatic technique that allows unspoken dialogue to become explicit” (Leveton, 2005). I use doubling initially to forge a connection with clients, and to assist them in accessing their truth. It can quickly serve to help both members of a couple feel that the therapist “gets” them, and help them to change patterns of communication that haven’t been working.

In psychodramatic doubling, I stand behind the person who is speaking [with permission and attention to comfort level regarding physical proximity], “feel into” his/her experience and energy (Taylor, 1983) and make a statement as if I am that person. The person has the experience of that statement coming from inside herself, and can take a moment to “try it on” and see if it “fits.” I then invite her to repeat it in her own words if it does, or to change it so it “fits” for her. With one member of a couple, I may offer the statement, “I am feeling really anxious about this session.” She may then, for example, correct the doubling by saying, “I’m afraid that, whatever I say, he’ll jump down my throat.”

Doubling is a wonderful tool to help someone get to the feelings underneath what s/he is saying (or not saying), and give permission to say what’s really going on inside. One advantage of beginning with the double, especially when attempting to offer alternatives to blame, is that “it needs little explanation and can quickly transform a talk session into an action experience” (Leveton, 2000).

In the early stages of couples work, the therapist may do most of the doubling, in order to help break and change the blaming and/or communication patterns the couple has been mired in. It can expeditiously access the emotions below the surface that they may not

be aware of, and identify the fear that may be preventing them from expressing their truth to each other, or even to themselves. One important caveat is that because the role of therapist invites transference by its very nature, doubling only one partner can potentially set up the therapist to have additional transference applied to her. To help prevent a perceived sense of subjectivity on the part of the therapist, it is imperative that if the therapist doubles one member of the couple, she double the other. This will allow the couple to feel a sense of the therapist being on their team, as opposed to her taking sides.

### Teaching Couples to Double Each Other

In couples work, being able to double each other is an important step in the process of developing intimacy. “In the absence of data, we will always make up stories. It’s how we are wired” (Brown, 2015). Couples don’t necessarily have to agree with what their partner is thinking or feeling, but if they can put themselves in each other’s shoes momentarily, it will allow them to better understand the world from each other’s perspective. This can help break the conflictual patterns they may have been stuck in for years of “making up stories” about each other, and blaming one another. Moreover, each partner will have had the healing experience of feeling seen and heard.

To help couples learn how to double each other, one at a time I invite each party to stand up from his chair, stand behind his partner and make a doubling statement. As in all doubling, she then has permission to feel into her body, “try on” the doubling statement to see if it “fits” for her, and then repeat it or change it. His job is to then pick up on her last statement and continue doubling, with the goal of helping her to feel that he understands her from the inside out. This process continues with him sitting in his own chair and having her stand behind him and repeat the process, again giving permission for him to repeat it or change what doesn’t “fit.”

Because doubling also involves somatic attunement, I teach each member of the couple to pay attention to his/her partner’s body language—breathing, posture, tone and volume of voice, etc, and to adopt the same

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(Taylor, 1983). This helps the doubler “drop in” to affective as well as cognitive empathy with his/her partner. Having couples take the risk to tune into what their partner feels is in itself a powerful experience because it sends a message to the partner that the doubler cares and is genuinely trying to understand him/her better.

Clients are often worried the doubling statement they make will be “wrong,” and could serve as fodder for conflict, so it is important to stress that no one doubles perfectly. I often will purposely double inadequately or be “wrong,” and allow the client to correct it to demonstrate that when there is an intention of respect and understanding (rather than one of manipulation or shaming), you can’t be “wrong.” Because the person being doubled has the opportunity to change what doesn’t “fit,” even if his partner gets it “wrong,” it allows him/her the opportunity to tune into what s/he is feeling or thinking. Moreover, having the right to correct what isn’t “right” can often serve as a repair from what may not have happened in his/her family of origin, or what may not have previously been occurring in their relationship.

### Out of the Problem and Into the Solution: Empty Chair Work

An additional tool that can be used with couples when they’re caught in the trap of arguing and blaming comes to us from the fourth step process of Alcoholics Anonymous (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2013). When completing a fourth step self-inventory, four columns are created on paper to represent the following four issues:

*Column one: With whom am I upset? (person or institution)*

*Column two: What happened?*

*Column three: What did it affect (self-esteem, pocketbook, relationship, sex relations, pride, ambition, security, etc.)?*

*Column four: What was my part?*

These four columns can be set up as four chairs that each member of the couple can take turns sitting in, and speaking from, to identify the issue at hand. (Note, this technique is not limited to couples where addiction is present, but can be used effectively to address

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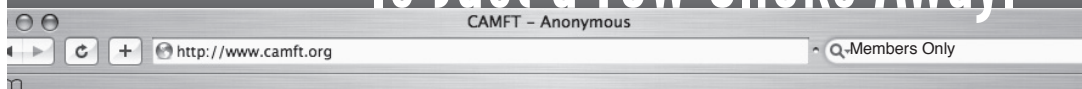
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any issue.) One at a time, each partner can sit in each of the four chairs and name whom he's angry with, what happened, what it affected, and what his part was. It is helpful to offer doubling, both by his partner and the therapist, particularly in the third and fourth chairs, as often, it will be easier for him to stay in blame and anger rather than admitting his fear or hurt. Moreover, it can be particularly difficult to identify his own behavior that has contributed to the problem, and so doubling can be essential to help him access that.

Mark and Beth presented for couples therapy after she had returned from inpatient residential treatment for her drug addiction. Despite his engagement in the family program, and both of them being engaged in 12-Step recovery (meetings, step work, etc.), they were steeped in conflict over the lying Beth had done when she was still using. Mark was struggling to trust her, even when she was telling the truth, and Beth, in turn, would get angry at him for not seeing her for where she was now, rather than where she had been. Since this couple was well-versed in step work, Mark was invited to begin.

When he sat in the first chair, he stated clearly that he was angry with Beth. In the second chair, he said he was angry at her for lying to him for years about her drug use and that currently, she often shows up late or doesn't call, leaving him to wonder where she is, and if she's using again. When he sat in the third chair, he stated that it affected his pocketbook (she used to steal money from him), his sex relations (her lack of interest in sex when using), and his security (not knowing the future of the relationship). With doubling, he was able to name his fear that she was going to die and the shame he felt at not being able to "fix" her (self-esteem), which he was just starting to uncover through his work in Al-Anon.

Softening into more vulnerable feelings of fear and shame in the third chair allowed Mark to more readily move to the fourth chair where, with the help of doubling, he was able to admit that he had enabled Beth for years by "pretending" it wasn't as bad as it was, by making excuses for her with family and friends, and even with himself, and by not being willing to put strong boundaries in place that


would have allowed him to take care of himself, including exploring the possibility of leaving the relationship.

Before returning to his seat across from Beth, he was asked to return to the first chair with the question, "Who is the ghost?" a psychodramatic term for the transference person from the past with whom similar energy hasn't been cleared (Aaron, 2015). He quickly recognized that it was his father, who had also been a drug addict, and who had lied to him for years. As he began to weep, Mark was able to further connect with the fact that although his father had gone for treatment, he never followed through with therapy or 12-Step and quickly relapsed into old behavior, including lying. Mark became aware that his fear and mistrust were being projected onto Beth even when she was telling the truth.

After witnessing Mark's vulnerability, Beth also sat in the four chairs, one at a time, and was able to identify how her shame about lying to him was impacting her ability to stay present with Mark when he got scared about her staying clean and sober. In the fourth chair, Beth was able to take responsibility for continuing to withhold information from Mark, rather than offering it, as an old habit from her addiction days.

Once each member of the couple has had these realizations, it can be extremely effective to then put out a fifth chair, in which each person answers the question, "What am I willing to commit to doing differently moving forward?" Mark committed to sharing his fear with his Al-Anon support network rather than with Beth; Beth committed to offering Mark details about her schedule and to call or text if she had a change in plans and/or was going to be late. In future sessions, we utilized both spectrograms and locograms to assess progress, offering visual proof that both of them were, in fact, changing.

Use of experiential techniques such as sociometry, doubling, and empty chair work can move couples who are stuck in the problem into the solution. Rather than focusing on blame it can move them into the feelings, especially fear, that are negatively impacting the quality of their life together.

In addition, action can help break the problematic patterns in the relationship and allow for new solution-based alternatives to emerge. Utilizing action can help shift their relational dynamics so that they, as a couple, can move forward on a path towards increased love, connection and intimacy. 



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