
Speaking From the Pained Place: Engaging With Frank Dattilio

Michelle Webster

It was with interest that I accepted the invitation to provide a brief response to Frank Dattilio's article on cognitive restructuring in couples therapy. My reading of the article initially was as a practitioner in couples work for the last 28 years, and who is always curious about what can be helpful with couples. However, I also bring to my reading an understanding of couples work using the framework of the Emotionally Focused Therapy perspective.

Frank Dattilio has provided readers with a well-written article exploring the place of cognitive restructuring in cognitive-behaviour couples therapy, and demonstrating how core beliefs or schemas are addressed using a clinical case example. He begins with a bold claim, supported by Probst (1988), that 'regardless of theoretical orientation', cognition is at the centre of therapeutic work. He elaborates the place of expectancies, beliefs, and attributions in the cognitive-behavioural perspective. Understandably, he states that restructuring of core beliefs facilitates perceptual and/or behavioural change, and cites communication skills training, examining perceptions and beliefs, and improving observation skills as methods of changing cognitions.

The case example that is the basis of this article is about an American couple, Ana and Arnie, of Austrian and German descent, living in rural North-eastern America. Dattilio argues that interactional change occurred when the couple discovered and then challenged their dysfunctional thoughts about each other by weighing up new evidence. He illustrates this by describing how an interpretation leads to a positive shift in Arnie's perception of his partner, and how homework tasks facilitate Ana's discovery of her beliefs about her husband.

The couple work caused me to reflect on the position of the therapist and the place of emotional experience. What initially caught my attention was the man's seemingly quick ability to interpret his anxiety

that resulted from encounters with a nasty and snarling dog, as symbolic of his anxiety with his wife of 40 years, yet his inability to deal constructively with her. It also interested me to read the examples of what was said by the couple and the therapist. For instance, when Ana said to the therapist, 'Ask him the last time that he's been affectionate with me' I found it to be an interesting response from the therapist, 'Why do I need to ask him, can't you tell me yourself?' I wondered how the therapist felt about the couple, with Ana being described as outspoken and saying whatever came into her mind, and Arnie being a tall, soft-spoken man. When I heard Ana's complaints about Arnie being too passive, not speaking up for himself, ignoring her and not displaying affection, I connected to the possible unspoken emotional experience of hurt and pain of a woman who may have felt unloved and alone. In a very moving account, Ana began to cry uncontrollably in relation to the therapist using other-focused questioning with Arnie regarding her perceptions of a car accident. Again, as an emotionally focused therapist I was drawn to the crying, and understood this as the client's primary experience (Greenberg & Paivio, 1997: 33–41). After a few minutes the therapist made certain conjectures or interpretations about what was happening for Ana that enabled Arnie to begin to see himself and Ana in a different light. In contrast to the central place that the therapist held, I wondered what would have happened if the empathic attention had been with Ana to invite her to speak from the pained place, and then to



Michelle is the Director of the Institute for Emotionally Focused Therapy, 83 Johnson Street, PO Box 97, Annandale NSW 2038, ph: + 61 2 9552 2977, E-mail: Michelle@EFTtherapy.com, web-site: www.EFTtherapy.com

speak to Arnie about her experience instead of having a therapist interpret and be her voice.

The centrality of the therapist again can be observed when working with Ana. Instead of benefiting from having the couple in the room together, and having Ana find ways of talking and making inquiry of Arnie about his reactions, Ana is set a number of homework tasks to discover these. Indeed, while it may be the couple perceptions that are problematic, is it not the couple's ability to talk together that makes the difference? While it is crucial for therapists to find ways to deal with dysfunctional thinking according to their theoretical perspective, what feels to be commonsense to me is to try the easy path first, by having a couple talk to each other and assessing the interactional pattern, and then employing simple communication interventions to see what can be achieved and what needs to be explored and dealt with. As this case can suggest, some initial talking together may have helped both Ana and Arnie discover something about each other. Further, some empathic responses and modelling about 'being' with emotional experience may have helped Ana feel accepted and cared for by Arnie. In his final remarks Dattilio begins to make some very bold assertions about other therapies, such as emotionally focused

therapy and behaviour therapy, that they 'do not believe that intellectual understanding is important ...' and focus on changing interactional sequences in contrast to insight. However, I would be remiss in not pointing out that emotionally focused work (Elliott et al., 2004; Greenberg, 2002; Greenberg & Paivio, 1997; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Webster, 2003) is about emotional experience, and deals with feelings, thinking and behaviour, according to what may be required and not what is determined by protocol.

References

- Elliott, R., Watson, J. C., Goldman, R. N., Greenberg, L. S., 2004. *Learning Emotion-Focused Therapy*, Washington, DC, American Psychological Association.
- Greenberg, L. S., 2002. *Emotion-Focused Therapy*, Washington, DC, American Psychological Association.
- Greenberg, L. S. & Johnson, S.M., 1988. *Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples*, NY, Guilford.
- Greenberg, L. S. & Paivio, S. C., 1997. *Working with Emotions in Psychotherapy*, NY, Guilford.
- Webster, M. A., 2003. Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: An Insider's Perspective. Formal paper at the National Symposium, Australian Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors, Brisbane. Publ. in *Interact*, 2003. ©

Advertising Information

Series discount

(4): 10%

Inserts

For A4 inserts (either single or double sided) folded to A5 going into copies excluding North America: \$400 (\$550 in 2006). For inserts of other sizes, contact the Editors.

Copy dates

01/02/06 (March issue); 01/04/06 (June issue);
01/06/06 (September issue); 01/09/06 (December issue)

Circulation

Print run 900
Europe (5%); North America (4%); Rest of the world 91%

Contact Hugh and Maureen Crago, 4 Jellicoe Street, Blackheath NSW 2785, Australia. Ph/Fax: (02) 4787 5522
Email: mhcrago@bigpond.com.

Contact the editors for the address of the mailing house

Dimensions and Rates

(black and white only)	price	depth & width
FULL PAGE	\$450.00	240mm x 178mm
HALF PAGE	AUS300.00	120mm x 178mm
OUTSIDE BACK COVER	\$1000.00 (\$1100.00 in 2006)	210mm x 178mm

Rates are for advertisers supplying camera-ready copy for standard black and white advertisements. 10% GST included.

Renting institutional part of subscriber list: Contact the editors