

Using Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory and Vulnerability as a Foundation for Couples Counseling

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Introductions

My History- My Story

- Everyone has a story. Why are you here?
- Form the connection and create rapport
- 8th Grade teacher- South Junior HS, Newburgh
- Began teaching online for a for- profit university. First generation college students
- Became a social worker
- Transitioned to counseling to specialize
- Teach counseling and supervise clinicians
- Training/education and wellness
- Advocate all the way, especially for families (Parent, teacher, now social worker and counselor).

Where Do We Begin?

- Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory
- Vulnerability

Equality and Diversity

- Most practice equality and assume that because there should not be power differentials or stereotypes, there are none.

[Equality and Diversity](#)

Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory (SERT)

- Looks at Gender, Culture, Personal Identity & Relationship Processes
- Where is the client now and where are they coming from?
- SERT is different because it begins with **attunement** to socio-cultural experience.

(Knudson-Martin, Wells & Samman, 2015).

Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory (SERT)

- It acknowledges that there are power imbalances.
- Others proceed as though partners are equal.

Examples:

- Head and Heart
- Woman are from Mars, Men are from Venus
- Stigma of strong women, weak men

(Knudson-Martin, Wells & Samman, 2015).

Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory (SERT)

- SERT looks for trouble in the larger context, not in the individuals or couples.
- At the beginning of the work, SERT therapists listen for socio-cultural differences:

Examples:

- Give her a pill
- Household Jobs
- Men's groups vs women's groups
- Families who don't talk
- The elephant in the room

When men quickly solve or take charge, it can be viewed as dominating
Women's emotions are viewed as negative

(Knudson-Martin, Wells & Samman, 2015).

SERT

- The socio-emotional relationship therapy (SERT) focuses on the intersection of larger societal dynamics being played out within couple relationships (Knudson-Martin and Huenergardt 2010)

Why is it that comedians all say the same things?

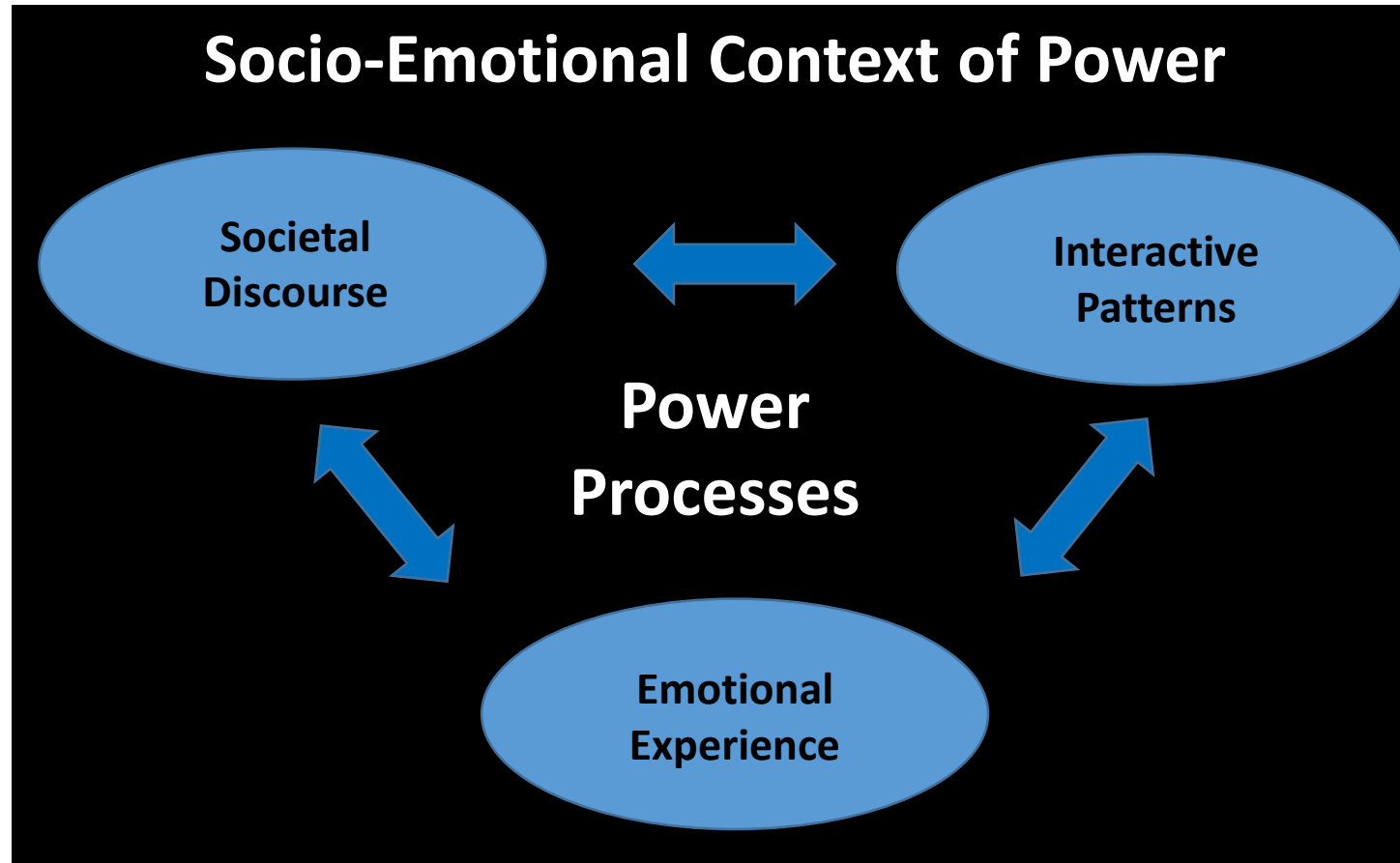
[Comedians](#)

SERT

- Therapists with knowledge about the cultural socialization of emotions and close relationships of both partners are better able to help them to relate to each other in a more supportive, caring, and comforting way that is also culturally appropriate.
- By doing so, the partners can develop closer, more intimate relationships with each other, which will increase their feelings of connectedness and decrease their feelings of loneliness.
- Therefore, the goal of therapy is to help improve couples' or family members' capacity to regulate emotions, solve problems, and communicate by promoting security in their relationships.

(Karakurt, G. & Keiley, M. 2009)

SERT



(Gao, T., & Gurd, B, 2019)

Use Humor

It's ok to ask questions that bring out a “silly” answer or draw clients to tell stories about how they are different

[My Big Fat Greek Wedding](#)

SERT

- Mutual **attunement** can be seen as each partner being aware of and interested in the needs of the other. This type of awareness contributes to the partner's experience of feeling important and supported in the relationship.
- Mutual vulnerability involves bringing a spirit of openness, curiosity, and self-honesty to the partnership. When positive vulnerability is valued in the relationship, each partner can experience the other in a flexible, adaptive way that permits space for admitting one's own mistakes and still being accepted and worthy of love. (Knudson, 2012).

The therapist should also step out of it and encourage private, emotional intimacy.

Break: 10:15- 10:30

What is vulnerability?

Write it down and share with a partner!

Ted Talk #1

[Brene Brown Ted Talk 1](#)

Vulnerability

How does this resonate with you?

- At the beginning, she talks about her work, her marriage, her family and being a parent
- She immediately builds connection
- “Life is messy” allows people to connect. It validates that we all have “stuff.”
- Her example of an employee only seeing the “opportunity for growth” is what a spouse hears in couple’s counseling

(Brown, 2012)

Vulnerability

- The ability to share shame is what brings people together
- Allow the other spouse to show up and be seen
- A sense of love and belonging comes from believing you are worthy
- The “science” of life allows people to avoid vulnerability
- Couples who practice vulnerability are willing to invest in the relationship when it may or may not work out.

(Brown, 2012)

Ted Talk #2

[Brene Brown on Shame](#)

Vulnerability and Shame

- She reports that exposing her vulnerability felt a lot like fear. This is how couples feel when they want to run.
- Vulnerability is courage. It is emotional risk and exposure.

”To create is to make something that has never existed before.”

- Encourage couples to share this emotional intimacy that cannot be shared with anyone else.
- This is the new spark in the relationship!

(Brown, 2012).

Adding this to practice

- Show the Ted Talks after the first session
- End with EFT and their “marriage story”
- Encourage them to talk about their families, the patterns of behavior and the stories that make them different
- Use humor

Examples: No one talking about the language difference

Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory

Mutual Vulnerability: Your struggles are our struggles and they just “are”

[This is US](#)

Socio-Emotional Relationship Theory

“Vulnerability is a spirit of openness, curiosity, and self honesty, willingness to admit mistakes and having safety to express needs”
(Knudson-Martin, Wells & Samman, 2015).

Accept the highs and lows

[Marriage is Real](#)

Dr. Brene Brown Quotes

- “Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen”
- “If you trade your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief.”
- “Through my research, I found that vulnerability is the glue that holds relationships together. It’s the magic sauce.”

The Power and Positivity of Vulnerability

- ▶ No one is perfect
- ▶ Admit there is work to be done
- ▶ Enjoy the ups and downs
- ▶ If you don't know what to say, just say that



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"If you want a positive outlook, you're going to have to turn your chair around, Walter."

Lunch 12:00 – 1:00

Some Couple's Therapy Humor

Mr. and Mrs.

Ted Danson

Let's Put it All Together

SERT, Vulnerability, Humor and Having a Plan

Case Study Examples:

- The Target Story
- The bridge/flight to Florida
- The story I am playing in my head
- “I feel statements”
- “Good intent”

I can work with almost any couple if they are both committed to being honest and vulnerable

Another theory....

- According to Licensed Mental Health therapist and author, Dick Rauscher, the motivation or unconscious reason people get married is to heal the wounds of childhood.
- We look for another person to save us and make us better or whole! We look for the perfect fit or the perfect person.

(Rauscher, 2012)

The ACES Study: Adverse Childhood Experiences

- 67% of the population has at least one ACE, 12% had 4 or more
- According to Dr Robert Block, former president of American Academy of Pediatrics, ACES are the single greatest public health threat facing our nation today
- We marginalize the issue because it DOES pertain to us

(Understanding Trauma, N.D.)

- According to Rauscher, your childhood experiences in your family of origin are usually filled with either enmeshment or individuality
- When individuals don't do the self-work, they blame the other person for not feeling happy or for what is going wrong.

(Rauscher, 2012)

The Velcro Loop



Enmeshed Family

- People telling you what to do
- Highly involved
- Becomes the Distancer
- Needs appreciation, not attention
- Fears criticism
- Defense: withdrawn/shut down



Invisible Family

- Not noticed
- No one listens
- Becomes the pursuer
- Craves closeness and intimacy
- Fears abandonment
- Defense is anger, aggression

The work is in healing the childhood wounds

- ACES Study- trauma, we all have it!
- Self awareness
- Be vulnerable about the wounds. Be honest and then you can move ahead.
- We cannot help/heal one another or grow together unless we have done the individual work
- An extension of “love yourself first”
- Self awareness and ability to accept constructive feedback
- Your job is to make the other a better person
- This works in those who marry young or marry later. It is just dealt with differently.

The Velcro Loop

If we understand what is happening and we are vulnerable, we can fix it
Couples must listen to one another without getting defensive or placing blame

Listen without taking it personally. It is not always about you. It is about your partner doing their personal, individual work.

Relationships are not perfect and in couple's counseling, it's not usually about the details, it's about putting in the work.

(Rauscher, 2012).

“When you see two old people walking down the street holding hands, remember, they are not lucky, fortunate, or a perfect couple. Instead, they have chosen to do the work. They have chosen to be together” (Rauscher, 2012).

Break: 2:30 – 2:45

Relationships are not perfect,
they are work

Friends

Considering the Intervention

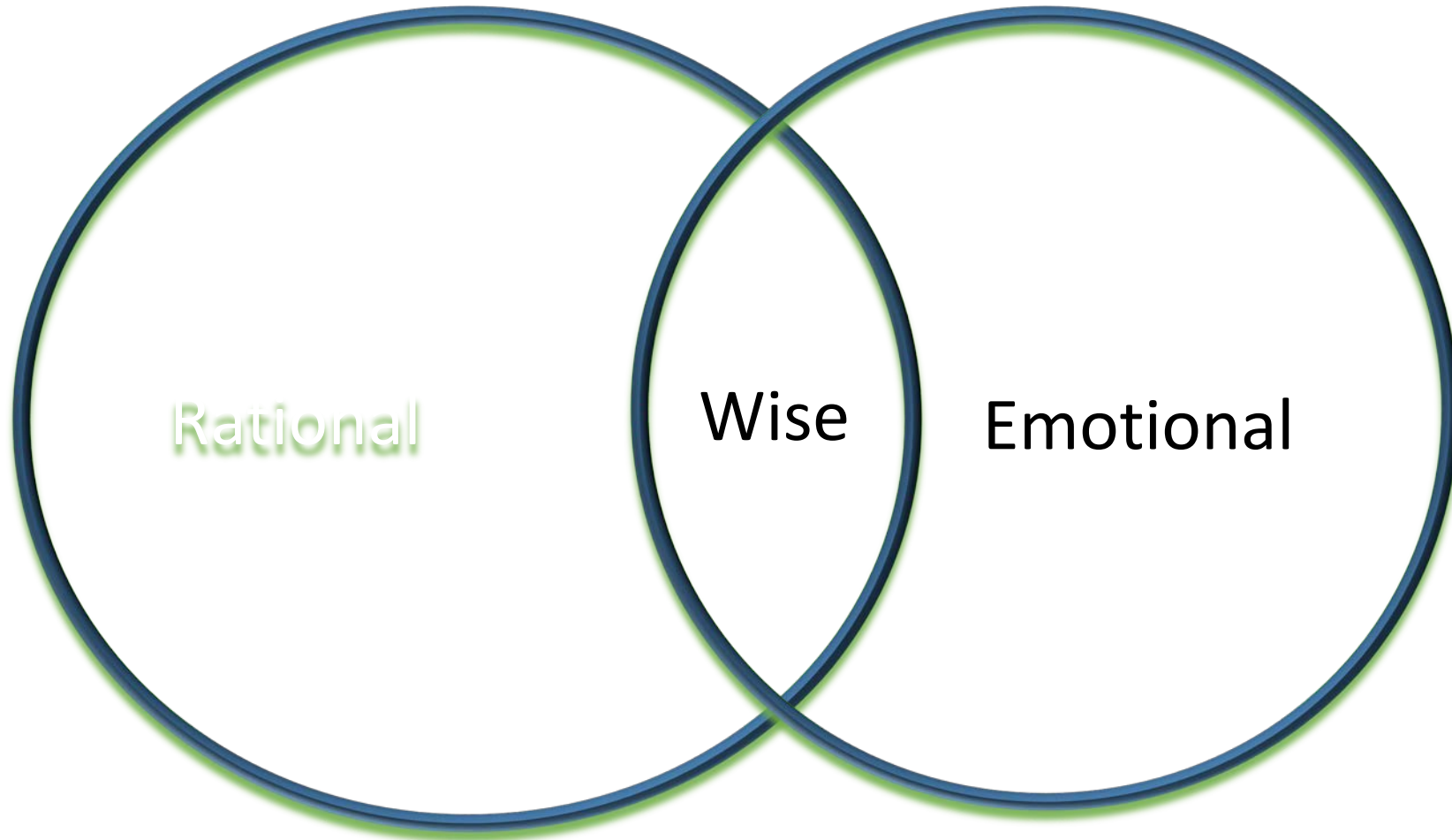
- Show the Ted Talks
- Talk about EFT and the marriage/wedding experience
- Talk about the Rational and the Emotional Brain
- Teach the basics of DBT

The Basics of DBT

1. Mindfulness- Helping clients to focus their mind and attention. Relaxation, breathing exercises
2. Distress Tolerance- Teaching clients to self soothe. Provide a roadmap based on what they know about one another.
3. Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills- Helping patients communicate and deal with emotions, ask for what they need, say no, “I feel” statements
Use I instead of you statements. Very little room for “should”
4. Emotional Regulation Skills- Help clients to understand their emotions. (feeling the body tense, feeling from the bottom up, I feel inner voice statements, crisis situations, ER examples, impulsivity examples).

(Bein, 2014).

Teach clients to recognize their state of mind



The Purpose of DBT (Bein, 2014)

Andrew Bein (2014) explains:

- Acceptance fuels a sense of compassion for ourselves and for others
- No need to run and avoid (creating anxiety). Just embrace and accept
- Mindfulness and acceptance are at the core of emotional regulation
- Accept and don't add judgment

“Throwing yourself into life, getting up to bat and hitting the fastballs that life keeps throwing at you” (Linehan 1993).

Concluding Thoughts

“To love someone fiercely, to believe in something with your whole heart, to celebrate a fleeting moment in time, to fully engage in a life that doesn’t come with guarantees—these are risks that involve vulnerability and often pain. But I’m learning that recognizing and leaning into the discomfort of vulnerability teaches us how to live with joy, gratitude, and grace.”

(Dr. Brene Brown, 2012)

Concluding Thoughts

[The Secret of Life](#)

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