



Internalized Other Questioning with Couples: The New Zealand Version

By David Epston

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This paper owes a great deal to the editing of Carole Samworth.

I devised a practice around 1985 which I then referred to as a cross-referential questioning. This practice of questioning owes a great deal to Michael White's (1989) innovations relating to both the purposes and methods of questioning in therapy. In particular, I am indebted to his "hypotheses regarding the couple's prescription for the therapist and the outcome if the therapist inadvertently conforms to the couple's prescription" (White, 1984). From discussions with Karl Tomm from between 1981-91, I have taken his designation of "internalized other questioning" to describe this practice, although he has certainly elaborated what I refer to as cross-referential questioning to many other therapeutic contexts.

This format of questioning was invented to disrupt those warring couples who construed couple counseling as a venue to contest their differences. These couples seemed to lack any conception of themselves bound together, for better or for worse, in a relationship. It seems that without a "relationship," they can only act out of individual interest and contest their differences within one or more domains, each of which allocates certain practices and specified roles for the participants. In addition, each domain assigns the therapist/counselor both a role and specified functions. These domains of practice are (1) the juridical, (2) the ecclesiastical/moral, and (3) the politics of reality. These prototypes are derived from cultural institutions and have rather obvious analogues in the courtroom, ecclesiastical courts of the Inquisition, and the psychiatric/neurological interview.

Those practices and stances modeled on the courtroom are usually pale reflections of tactics of attack/defend, counter-attack/counter-defense, and discredit/discredit. In this domain, the therapist is required to adjudicate the competing claims submitted to him or her and find parties innocent or guilty or to establish that neither has a case to hear or establish that no ruling can be made. Should either party to a relationship have recourse to this model, he or she will work hard preparing a "case" and gathering supporting evidence to undermine the anticipated counterclaims. A partnership soon dissolves into prosecuting and defense attorneys.





Those practices modeled on the ecclesiastical court or Inquisition also position the partners in opposition to each other. The only difference between the court of law and the ecclesiastical court is that the “case” is argued not on the issue of lawfulness, but rather on the morality of innocence versus sinfulness. Here the therapist is positioned to adjudicate the competing claims in order to find between innocence and sinfulness. The sinful party in the dispute is assigned penance and the innocent party is morally elevated.

Those Couples who have been organizing their differences according to the psychiatric/neurological interview assume not only a “world” that is objectively present but also one to which one can have direct and persistent access. Furthermore, it is taken for granted that others experience the “world” in an identical fashion. So what happens when persons responding to the same “world” experience and/or describe it in disparate or contradictory ways? The solution is to question the adequacy of the methods through which the “world” is being experienced and/or reported on by the other. One then calls into question the mental capabilities of the other by either critiquing his or her method of observation or by attributing pathology. The partner in the couple who assumes the role of the psychiatrist/neurologist claims a privileged and uncontestable view of the world. Accordingly, any counterclaims or counterexperiences must be due to specious or inadequate perception or an underlying pathology. In such a situation, you have either a reluctant or recalcitrant opinions at odds with each other. Here the therapist is positioned as the consulting expert in the field in order to add greater weight to their junior colleague’s prescriptions for his/her “patient” partner.

I have found that if I don’t do something to the contrary very quickly, many of my meetings with couples rapidly assume the shape of the courtroom, ecclesiastical court, or psychiatric/neurological interview, with me being recruited very unwillingly into one of the above-mentioned roles. Such couples often become both perplexed and vexed if I decline to participate accordingly. With an interest both in avoiding these recruitments and in disrupting the couple’s familiar relationship tactics, I have devised a format of questioning that allows me to decline these roles and permits each partner to experience something of the other’s experience.

I have found it necessary to add both a prologue and apology prior to embarking on what was then referred to as “cross-referential” questioning. The prologue goes something like this:

If you aren’t a “one in a million” couple with a problem, I believe I can safely predict that you both have been asking each other a lot of questions and that those questions and that those questions have not relieved the situation in any appreciable way or brought you closer to a mutually satisfying solution. My guess is that, if anything, you have found the situation deteriorating right before your eyes. I can safely predict, too, that you have been asking yourselves a lot of questions and those questions have not brought relief or





a mutually satisfactory answer. I base these conclusions on the fact that you are here. Am I right in thinking that all your questions have not so far provided an agreeable answer?

In that case, this leads me to a conviction that it would be folly for me to ask you the questions that you have asked either of the other or of yourselves. So I propose that I ask you questions that it is very unlikely you have asked each other or yourself. If you had, I would guess that you wouldn't be here today. And if by any chance I slip up and ask you a question already asked, please draw my attention to this so I won't waste your time by asking a question that has already been tried and found fruitless. I give you full credit for having tried your questions and, given the state your relationship is in, it would be unwise for us to employ the selfsame questions that have not stopped your relationship from being brought to its knees. Do I have your agreement to depart from the divorcing direction these questions are leading you to and to experiment with some questions that conceivably could lead to a reunion in your relationship?

The apology is very necessary to prepare the respondents for the difficulty in first construing the questions and then answering them. For that reason, they are forewarned as to how they might experience these questions.

As these questions are very likely questions that you have never thought of before or never asked yourselves before, I need to warn you of their difficulties and to seek your permission to pursue a course that may cause you discomfort. You might not have quick or ready answers. If you had either a quick or ready answer, I would distrust your seriousness, as these questions will require you to think what you never or rarely thought before. You can expect to take a while to get the gist of these questions, but you will if you persist. And I think I can guarantee you that it will take a minute or two or even more to think up the answers. In fact, the longer the better. So I apologize to you now for their difficulty. You may be stretched in ways you have never been stretched before. Do I have your permission to go ahead with this questioning process?

After having received the couple's permission to proceed, I ask: "Who would like to go first?" I request that the person who goes second listen to his or her partner's answers. I make it clear that they both will be subjected to the same line of questioning, after which both will be provided with equal opportunity to inform the other to what degree (or how close) their partner came to understanding their experience.

Assume that I am interviewing a hypothetical couple, Jack and Jill, whose relationship has been deteriorating over the last 10 years. Jill has offered to go first, so I direct my questions to Jill:





Jill, what do you think Jack would say if I asked him the following question: “Jack, how do you account for the deterioration in your relationship over the past 10 years?”

In very adversarial and other-blaming couples, the form of this question seems to have the effect of taking the vindictiveness out of the answer. Essentially, Jill is invited by the question to render Jack’s complaints about her, even though the question is directed at their “relationship.” In this instance, it is very likely that Jack will be restrained from reacting by jumping to his defense. Instead he may seem spellbound and curious as to how Jill will represent his complaints (or, in fact, blame herself). Even if Jill’s answer is self-condemning (e.g., “Jill isn’t giving me enough love.”), I then ask a further question of Jill: “Jack, what effect has this ‘lovelessness’ had on your relationship?” If Jill should find this question hard to answer, I would assist her with some questions to introduce some ways of assessing the impact on their relationship of this externalized version of the complaint, condemnation, or accusation: “Do you think a loveless direction is good or bad (healthy or unhealthy, adds to or takes away from, increases or decreases) the share value of your relationship?”

With some practice (and it is surprising how rapidly people can respond to these questions if the interviewer is comfortable with them), the interviewer can delete the preamble and merely direct his or her gaze at Jill and inquire: “Jack, you have come up with three theories for the shape your relationship is in. There must be more than that! Are there any little reasons you think are too small to mention out of embarrassment or any big reasons you think are so big you are reluctant to mention them out of fear?”

As the nature of the questions leads respondents (especially men) to reflect in unusual ways, the answers come slowly, cautiously, and are carefully couched. The listener is extremely attentive. Since their complaints are being heard, the partners seem willing and curious to hear each other out without interruption. There is little need to defend against one’s own allegations. Even if the mood at the beginning of the session is extremely combative, this is soon replaced by a contemplative ambience, with each person digging deep into his or her experience of the other.

On the single occasion that one party couldn’t answer the questions (a couple who had been married 27 years), the interview was called to a halt and questions were asked of the unknown wife. “Judy, were you aware that, even though you have been married for 27 years, Dick doesn’t know anything about you? Is this a surprise to you?” She replied that it wasn’t at all. “Judy, what effect does this knowledge that Dick doesn’t know anything about you have on your relationship to your ‘relationship’?” Judy then went on to say that she had known this all along but she needed to hear it and that she was ending the relationship right there and then. I then asked Dick: “If it is now Judy’s intention to end this relationship, when did you think it would end?” Dick thoughtfully it would have lasted for another 20 years.





The answers are then cross-referenced. “Jack, Jill thought that you would explain the downfall of your relationship by way of an ‘I’m all right and you’re all wrong’ patterning. How close is her representation of your experience to your actual experience of how your relationship is declining?” An ambience of thoughtfulness, curiosity, and a degree of generosity is usually sustained throughout the interview.

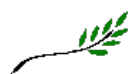
I respond by “marrying up” the different versions of the story of their relationship at the end of our first meeting. This brings the story of their relationship up-to-date, customarily concluding in some sort of dilemma for the future of their relationship.

An example of a letter to a middle-aged couple summarizing the information derived from this format of questioning follows:

Dear Terry and Gloria

From what you told me yesterday, your relationship has come to something of a cross-roads. Gloria, from your point of view, you were “black-mailed” into the marriage in the first place; Terry, you must have wondered what hit you when Gloria, soon after you married, became dismayed and was called “depressed.” My guess is that at that time you both would have found it very difficult to understand what was happening to you, especially as it was quite contrary to the images you had of what your married lives would be like. Gloria, without wishing to discount your suffering, those events in your life could now be considered teachings. Your tuition was a long and grueling ordeal but look what you have made of yourself. When I asked you to tell me about yesterday’s person, you described that person as lacking in assertion, “not knowing what I wanted and how to get it,” “totally revolving around the needs of others,” so much so that you became an other-sensitive person at the same time as being insensitive to yourself. This led you into what they called “depression” and you thought the way out was a chemical life-style. So weaning yourself off that was just one more struggle that had to be overcome. One of your most important learnings was that you had “grit” and that was there for me to see.

At the same time, Terry, you became Gloria’s nurse and looked after and cared for her the more she became dismayed. There was a price you paid for this and that is the neglect of your own pursuits. You cared for, supported, and promoted Gloria into self-discovery, so much so, in fact, that yesterday’s person has almost been eclipsed by today’s person. I wouldn’t be surprised, Terry, if you were wondering if you didn’t do too good a job. You have been so successful at promoting Gloria that you may have fallen behind her. As you put it, “She’s hard to keep up to... I’m being left behind... I’m still back doing the same old job... I feel stuck.”





Terry, I wonder if you aren't feeling dismayed in the sense that things haven't worked out at all in the way you might have thought they would. In addition to all this, it would have been inevitable that you both would have been required by the departure of your children to turn and face each other again without them in the way. All couples need to, if they are going to last the distance, go through a period of review and reevaluation. I got the impression that that was exactly where your relationship is, with each of you wondering whether you want to do the next half of the marathon together or on your own or with someone else? I can see, too, that you Terry, have also started to feel the pinch and have started taking some initiatives on your own, firstly joining a men's group and coming here to couple counseling. Both of these ventures are quite new for you.

You tell me that your relationship is imperiled and that if left to its own devices, according to your, Gloria, will go on to the rocks in six months or so and, according to you, Terry, could survive for a few more years. You could let your relationship drift and find out whose estimate is closer to the mark. ON the other hand, you could, if you desired it, take your relationship out of the water and survey it. It may require a refit if you wish to sail in deep waters. If you do so, will you restore it to the fashion of the '60s or bring it up-to-date by the appropriate modifications.

I await your decisions on behalf of your relationship and I cannot conceal my curiosity as to what you will make of it or by continuing of a divorcing course, break up on the rocks. However, despite my appreciation of the dangers to your relationship, I found it very easy to like and respect both of you as persons.

Yours sincerely,
David

Such an account entails a "double externalization," as it externalizes both the problem(s) the partners are experiencing and the relationship itself. This paves the way for a triologue between, say, Gloria, Terry, and their relationship, replacing Gloria versus Terry. The latter only allows for the establishment of guilt, sinfulness, or pathology. The process of therapy from here on can now become a meta-commentary on the direction of their relationship as it heads for the metaphorical rocks or, by their determining a new direction for it, gets out of danger or departs from the problem(s). This is achieved by the deployment of some newfound or recovered relationship tactics or the reorganization of their relationship according to some other "recipe," "design," or "plan."

Such paradigmatic questions can inquire about anything but always invite the respondent to answer from his or her experience of the other's experience. This has the effect of undermining those cultural practices that affirm an objective reality. It seems to me that when a problem is





understood in terms of an objective reality, most couples immediately seek recourse in practices that are detrimental to their relationship. The problem-solving practices derived from the analogues of the courtroom, ecclesiastical court, and psychiatric/neurological examination tend to divide partners rather than reunite them. It is hoped that the practices described in these pages can serve to offer a remedy to this less than useful way to conduct a relationship and the prescriptions for the therapist that follow from it.

Commentary: Systems of Understanding, Practices of Relationship, and Practices of Self from Michael White

Have you met couples whose relationship seem dominated by interactions that are of an adversarial nature?* Have some of these couples been so locked into these interactions that they couldn't extricate themselves long enough to allow space for you, the therapist, to comment on their situation? And, when meeting with these couples, have you ever experienced the very real risk that you might get caught up in these interactions, or overwhelmed by them in some way? If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, chances are that you have, from time to time in therapy sessions, experienced yourself:

- (a) entering into unwanted roles; for example, the "adjudicator" or the "magistrate,"
- (b) going comatose,
- (c) wondering whether you might be hypoglycemic,
- (d) starting to clock-watch
- (e) wishing that there was a real therapist in the room who might intervene and save the situation, or
- (f) trying to figure out how on earth you got into the therapy business in the first place.

Very few therapists would consider these sort of outcomes of their interaction with these couples to be desirable. And I doubt very much that such outcomes are ever considered desirable to the couples who feel so locked into adversarial interactions. If therapists are recruited into and contribute to the patterns of interaction that dominate the relationships of these couples, or if they find themselves overwhelmed, frustration and despair will be experienced by all parties.

*Although this essay primarily addresses work with couples whose relationships are dominated by adversarial interactions, and when there does not appear to be significant imbalance in these relationships with regard to power, the practices of David Epston's "internalized other questioning" do render power imbalances more explicit and provide one avenue for redressing such imbalances.





What sort of analysis of such predicaments might save therapists and couples from this fate? How could such an analysis assist therapists to engage with couples in a manner that might bring about preferred real effects for all parties to the interaction? How might this analysis contribute to the desire that these couples have to interact with each other around possibilities in their relationships, rather than around the “settled certainties” that have so paralyzed them?

Here, I will briefly review one approach to the analysis of these predicaments. This approach will focus attention on the extent to which the interactions that so dominate the relationships of these couples are constituted or shaped by particular systems of understanding, practices of relationship, and practices of self.

Systems of Understanding and Practices of Relationship

Do you have a sense that there is something entirely predictable about how things go in these adversarial relationships, and about how these couples explain their predicament? Has it occurred to you that relationships that are characterized by these adversarial interactions are not uncommon in the world at large? Have you noticed strong parallels in the relationships of these couples, and in the relationships of persons whom you know outside of the therapeutic context – perhaps even in the relationships of some distant relatives? Have you ever had the suspicion that these adversarial interactions are common enough to be represented as institutional practices of relationship?

If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, might it be reasonable for you to assume that each couple who feels locked into these interactions did not totally dream up or invent these ways of being together? And would it also be reasonable for you to assume that there could be common systems of understanding and relationship practices that relate to these scenarios, and that these might be of cultural nature? If so, would it really seem all that farfetched to assume that these systems of understanding and practices of relationship may actually be constitutive or shaping of these relationships?

Do these considerations have you searching for ways of describing and naming the systems of understanding in the relationship practices that constitute such adversarial interactions? Do these considerations have you thinking about ways of engaging these couples in other systems of understanding and relationship practices that do not constitute such adversarial interactions: Systems of understanding that initiate alternative explanation of events, and practices of relationship that are not so polarizing and paralyzing?





Practices of Self

Have you found that partners whose relationship is dominated by adversarial interactions seem to find it almost impossible to step into each other's experience even for a second? Have you ever observed that partners who are locked into such interactions are in pursuit of individuality that denies relationship? Have you had the thought that these couples conflate differentiation and separation and juxtapose individuation and connection? Have you sensed that the version of individuality that is performed under the circumstances is one that distances and isolates partners from each other, and that this is a form of individuality that is somewhat familiar?

If your response to these questions is in the affirmative, might you consider it fair to assume that there are some cultural practices of the self at work here that reinforce a particular version of individuality and that discriminate against other versions of individuality? Might be reasonable to assume that these practices of self mitigate against the possibility of partners' "stepping into" each others experience?

Certainly, approaches to the constitution of the self that conflate individuality and separation our pervasive in this culture. One example of this is the extent to which the isolated or detached individualities dominate accounts of developmental processes (consider, just for a moment, the part that the isolating individualities play in the structuring of adolescent stage of development). Indeed, so pervasive is this dominant approach to the self that it is constantly being reproduced into "new clothing". For example, consider the patriarchal reproduction of this practice that is performed by a dominant form of the men's movement in North America, which emphasizes differentiation through separation from women .

Are you stirred by such considerations to assist couples to challenge the practices of the isolated individualities and to explore, in the constitution of the self, alternative individualities - individualities that are not completed with separation, individualities that are not canceling of connection? The alternative individualities that I am referring to here are those that are in league with affiliation, individualities that are derived through a collaboration between persons in the identification, articulation, and acknowledgement of aspects of each other's preferred identity – including desires, preferences, qualities, purposes, values, goals, comitments, and so on.* Relationship is not a contradiction to these alternative individualities; connection does not subtract from them but contribute to them.

*I have no doubt whatsoever that women have traditionally been better at performing the practices associated with the affiliative individualities, whereas men have traditionally been better at performing the practices associated with the isolated individualities





Internalized other questioning

David provides an important contribution to the breaking of the impasse or the predicament referred to at the outset of this essay. He does this by first describing and naming the systems of understanding in the relationship practices that constitute adversarial interactions in couple relationships and that often recruit therapists into particular roles that contribute further to frustration and to despair.

He's name is the systems of understanding the "juridical," the "ecclesiastical/moral," and the "politics of reality," and typifies their associated practices of relationship. Once these practices are named and described, therapist will find it easier to know how to avoid participating in these highly institutionalized and culture-specific forms of interaction.

David then introduces a prologue that explicitly disrupts the systems of understanding in the performance of their associated relationship practices. This prologue makes it possible, often for the very first time, for couples to step back from their institutionalized ways of being with each other, and to experience a degree of alienation from these ways of being. This is an important first step in encouraging couples to draw a distinction between the relationship, on the one hand, and what they experience about their interaction that is so problematic to them, on the other.

The apology that follows the introduction open space for persons to experience alternative systems of understanding in relationship practices. The discomfort that couples might expect to experience as they depart from habitual interactions is acknowledged, and is associated with new possibilities.

Following this, David proceeds to introduce a system of questioning- "internalized other questioning" – which not only effectively disrupts the institutionalize systems of understanding and relationship practices as named and described by David, but also those practices of self that constitute the isolating individualities. These questions require that each partner enter into an experience of the other partners experience of him or her. In response to these questions, and atmosphere of thoughtfulness, generosity and curiosity is established.

I believe that the cross-referencing of the answers to these questions provides an important opportunity for the evolution of other individualities – those that are affiliative rather than isolating. This is a particularly the case if these questions and falls in the direction of reflecting on events in the relationship to determine what these might say about the preferences, desires, qualities, wants, goals, values, beliefs, and so on, of the internalized other. The discussion that is initiated by the cross-referencing of the answers to these questions makes it possible for partners to experience a mutual contribution to the identification, articulation and





acknowledgment of these aspects of the “self”. For these couples, individuation and connection are no longer juxtaposed, differentiation and separation are no longer conflated.

Comment

When David first introduced me to the practices associated with his internalized other questioning, I did not find these at all difficult to enter into – they seemed almost familiar. For sometime I had been exploring what I have referred to as “experience-of-experience” questions, such as, “What do you think these difficulties have talk to your partner into about you?” But David’s internalized other questions do more than stike a familiar chord – to interview each partners internalized other in this way is something else, a distinct development in this work.

Collaboration with some couples who have felt locked into the institutionalized interactions that David describes and names in his paper, I have been experimenting with prologues, apologies, and internalize other questions. In this process, I have been re-casting experience of experience questions and coming up with “internalized other” versions of these like:

(addressing Jill) “Jack, what has this conflict been talking you into about Jill, and about your relationship?”

We have all been enjoyinh the outcome of these questions. So why don’t you and the couples who meet with you, give them a try?

References

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