Time in Family and Couple Therapy

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Introduction

All behavior – human or otherwise – in fact, everything in the universe, the movement of the planets, the life and death of the stars, the seasons, our heartbeats and the smooth coordination of our bodily systems, occurs in time. Systems theories and practices, whether focused on mechanical, biological, or human behavioral systems, seek to discern patterns of growth and movement among their elements, and when those patterns are dysfunctional, seek to change those patterns. There are no patterns more basic than temporal patterns. In couples and families, struggles around such common presenting problems as money, housework and homework, in-laws, amount of energy dedicated to work versus personal life, preferred leisure activities, communication, sex, and religion, all have a “time side” to them. In some instances, families (including here couples) argue explicitly with issues around time: One partner insists on the importance of being punctual, because it’s a sign of being responsible and organized, whilst the other cares not about being on time and thinks that punctuality is a sign of being rigid and conformist. A child insists he has only fifteen minutes of homework each night, whilst his parents believe he should dedicate one hour to studying no matter how much homework he’s got to complete. One partner wants more gentle foreplay, kissing, and hugging, and sex that last for hours, whilst the other wants it fast and fiery from the start. But most dyssynchronies in time operate out of awareness and drive seemingly unresolvable issues: Differences in time perspective (focusing mostly on the future versus on the present, or on the past) underlie one partner’s insistence on saving for retirement, whilst the other wants to enjoy life in the present moment and spend more money now; one wants a weekend (or vacation) filled with lots of activities, requiring a fast pace to do them all, whilst the other wants to kick back and lay on a beach, or a couch, revealing different predilections regarding fast versus slow life tempo. Kids want to sit on the living room floor immersed in playing with their Leggos or building blocks without end, while parents want to get them up and into a wide range of extracurricular activities such as karate, piano lessons, playdates, and the like – all requiring careful adherence to the clock and the calendar, and chauffeur-ing them around. One partner wants to make babies now, whilst the other insists they’re not ready – she feels the relationship, or their careers, aren’t yet in the “right place,” when actually, it’s more that she feels “it’s not the right *time*.” Such a couple often seems to be arguing about *whether* to have a child, but the actual issue is not whether, but *when*: Helping them see that they are aligned in their goals for having a family but differ in their ideas about *when* to initiate that lifecycle change can go a long way towards relieving their emotional estrangement – or can help them realize that their “personal life chronologies” (Fraenkel, 1994, 2011a) are irreconcilably mismatched, and they’d each do better to be with someone else more matched in time.

Analysis of a couple or family’s temporal patterns and struggles provides a ready window into patterns and preferences around closeness/connectedness and power/hierarchy, the two dimensions that characterize all human relationships. The family member who controls the time controls much of the other members’ lived experience and reality; the partner who wishes for more connection wants more time, whilst the partner who allocates time elsewhere may wish for less intimacy.

Prominent Associated Figures

The present author has been recognized as the major contributor to understanding the place of time in couples and families (Fraenkel 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2001a, 2001b, 2011a, 2014; Fraenkel and Capstick, 2012; Fraenkel and Wilson, 2000, 2012). Although there is much attention to temporal patterning in arts, humanities, social sciences, medicine and physiology (Dunlap, Loros, and DeCoursey, 2004) – even in comedy (see George Carlin’s brilliant metaphysical routine on the non-existence of the present moment and the absurdly imprecise language that we use to describe the passage of time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaR3sVpTB98>), past contributors to the family therapy literature have tended to provide one publication with either general statements that time plays a central role in the patterning of family life, or have provided one specific idea or technique related to time. For instance, Alan Cooklin (1982) wrote that "Patterns all have a shape, and patterns of human interaction all are events in time, and thus have a shape in time" (p. 88). Adams and Cromwell (1978) introduced the distinction between “morning and night” people and the effects of these time/energy preferences on family functioning; Boscolo and Betrando (1993) discussed the role of time in the practice of family therapy and consultation, especially the need to shift between the past, present, and future in a reflexive fashion. Similarly, Jenkins (2016) provides a thoughtful discussion of the challenges of disentangling the past from the present and future, especially when clients have experienced severe trauma, and of the need to create a “liminal space” of transition that escapes chronological time, sometimes using rituals, in order to effect change. And the early Milan group suggested the technique of assigning a change-invoking ritual of “odd days and even days” to distribute responsibility fairly between partners (Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata, 1978). Missing is this literature is a comprehensive theory about time and family systems, an analysis of the temporal aspects of couple interaction, an assessment taxonomy, and set of systematic therapeutic practices.

Description

Drawing on interdisciplinary study of anthropology, sociology (especially the literature on work/life balance), physics, music theory, chronobiology and physiology, as well as developmental, personality, social, and clinical psychology, Fraenkel proposes that there are six basic temporal elements around which couples and families become out of sync or “arrhythmic:” time orientation, pace, punctuality, daily and weekly rhythms, time perspective, and time allocation. Importantly, partners often unconsciously pick one another for their temporal differences: the fast-paced person is attracted to the slow-paced one because he calms her down, whilst the slow-paced partner is drawn to the fast-paced one because she’s exciting and gives him energy. The present-focused partner admires the ambition, forward-looking vision, and planning abilities of the future-focused one, whilst the future-focused partner likes that the present-focused one seems happy just being himself in the present moment. The partner who allocates so much time to work envies the other’s “better balance” between work and hobbies, whereas the other admires his partner’s career dedication and achievements. Even the punctual partner, so conscientious and concerned with responsibility, at least secretly admires the other’s irreverent, “devil may care” attitude towards appointments, whilst the temporally laid-back one may acknowledge that it’s sometimes good to be on time. Choice of a temporally-different partner is often intertwined with seeking a partner who will help one “regulate” (or, a better word, “modulate”) ones arousal state: One partner seeks another to either “up-regulate” (arouse, excite) or “down regulate” (calm, soothe) the other. However, over time, these temporal differences may become more extreme and polarized, such that the fast-paced partner becomes annoyed at the other’s perceived sluggishness and laziness, and the slow-paced partner views the other as pushy, “hyper,” and unsettling to be around. Likewise, the future-focused partner comes to view the present-focused partner as an irresponsible “slacker,” whilst the present-focused partner views the future-focused partner as obsessed with “progress” towards uncertain goals, and unable to enjoy her life in the now. In other words, we pick a partner to complement us in time style and then struggle with them about the very role we’ve recruited them to play in our emotions and behavior. These personal time styles usually result from a complex combination of biological temperament, larger systems allegiances and pressures, and family- and culture-of-origin influences.

Fraenkel proposes four steps to handling both implicit and explicit time dyssynchronies: *Reveal* the underlying time dysjunction; *Re-value* the temporal differences – recognize the ways in which partners were initially attracted to the ways in which each other “inhabits” and uses time, and how those differences may still represent a useful balance; *Revise* the temporal patterns such that the differences become less extreme, and so that the couple or family achieves a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” temporal stance (for instance, they can have one weekend day that is filled with fast-paced activities linked closely to the clock, and another day for immersing in a sense of timelessness; they can allocate time for work *and* time for play; they can spend money now *and* save for the future; they can choose to be punctual when it really matters, *and* “fashionably late” at other times); and the couple must then *Rehearse* the new temporal patterns. Just as musicians often change the tempo and rhythmic feel of a tune, and must practice this new version, couples and families need to practice their revised rhythms.

Time Frame Focus is also one of three “primary colors” -- along with Degree of Directiveness (from high to low) and Change Entry Point (thoughts/beliefs, emotions, behavior, and physiology) of Fraenkel’s integrative approach to couple therapy (see this volume for a summary: also, Fraenkel, 2009, 2011b). Jenkins (2016) has also provided a detailed analysis of the ways in which therapy helps clients distinguish between past and present, and aids them to release the grip of the past on both present and future. He also discusses how therapy engages clients to enter into a “liminal” space outside of all three of these temporal foci, a space in which change can occur that alters how they traverse the rest of their lives.

Relevance to Couple and Family Therapy

Attention to the temporal dimension and underpinnings of common presenting problems of couples and families provides a novel, effective means of addressing the underlying issues around closeness/connection and power/hierarchy. Without this temporal investigation and change in basic time patterns, other more “surface” problems cannot be resolved. As noted above, time plays a central role in all systems, living and nonliving, and therefore provides a unifying theme through which thinking about family and couple functioning and therapy can realize its initial cross-disciplinary scope, as envisioned by Bateson and other early theorists.

Clinical Example

Sunita and Bhanu, an Indian couple – he born in Delhi, immigrated to the US at 18, she born and raised in California -- were both fourth-year medical residents at a high-pressure medical school and hospital, who presented with complaints of constant fighting and a sense of growing apart, only three years into their marriage. Sunita was unhappy with the amount of time Bhanu spent at work and writing research papers. She had chosen to avoid research and decided to become a dermatologist, which allowed her a regular, predictable daily schedule, whereas Bhanu specialized in oncology and was viewed by his professors as a promising academic. Sunita also complained that when they reunited at the end of each day, Bhanu would tell her the details of his work day, which she found redundant, boring, and which took up time they might otherwise spend in pleasurable activities. She also resented the amount of time he spent on the phone with his mother. For his part, Bhanu felt Sunita was unsupportive about his career and work stress, and unfair about his relationship with his mom, reminding her that as the eldest and only son, it was traditionally his responsibility to take care of his mother now that his father had died two years ago.

Along with these explicit conflicts around time allocation and differing daily work/life rhythms, the couple implicitly differed on each of the other temporal elements, which underlay their growing sense of disconnection. They reported “lifestyle differences,” which were due to Bhanu being fast-paced and wanting to get lots of things accomplished on the weekend, always concerned that their off-work time be spent productively, whereas Sunita was slow-paced, liked to relax more and “go with the flow.” She was an avid meditator and yoga enthusiast, whereas Bhanu preferred activities with a clear goal, like training for marathons. Their pace differences also led to difficulties with sex: Bhanu approached sex with the same linear, fast-paced style that he approached the rest of his life, whilst Sunita longed for a slower, more languorous tempo -- which she viewed as reflective of the Indian tradition of Tantrism. Interestingly, while it might have been expected that Bhanu would be the more future-focused of the two, he was in fact so caught up in the day-to-day pressures of work that he couldn’t really envision life beyond a week at a time; whereas Sunita thought more long term – about when they might take a vacation, start a family, and move to a larger home. And again, although in most respects Sunita was the more easy-going of the two, she was also the most punctual, and was greatly annoyed when Bhanu frequently showed up late, always because he was overwhelmed with work.

Therapy first addressed their explicit time disjunctions. Banhu agreed to get home earlier two nights a week so that they could dine together and watch a movie. They instituted an end-of-the-day “decompression ritual” (Fraenkel, 1998a), in which, with mobile phones turned off and put out of site, they would talk for ten minutes maximum about their respective days, and Banhu would limit his reports to “just the headlines” unless there was really something new and important to discuss. To maintain a sense of connection despite their busy work schedules, they agreed to do six “60 Second Pleasure Points” across the day (Fraenkel, 1998b) – two in the morning before they separated, two during the day when apart, and two when they came together at the end of the day, with each initiating one of those pleasurable contacts in each of the three time periods. Sunita came to better appreciate and respect Bhanu’s tradition role in his mother’s life, and Bhanu agreed to limit his calls to his mom to three times a week. These changes helped them better synchronize their daily rhythms and ideas about time allocation to work, mother, and the relationship.

Therapy then moved on to reveal their different ways of inhabiting time in regards to time orientation, pace, time perspective, and punctuality, and to re-value their differences. They decided to have one weekend day devoted to fast-paced activities and one to just “hanging out,” free of time pressures. Banhu recalled that one source of his attraction to Sunita was her ability to “stop and smell the roses,” and her sensual nature, tied to her slower pace, and Sunita acknowledged how she enjoyed Banhu’s “high energy” represented by his faster pace, and they brought their respective tempos into the bedroom by starting slow and speeding up once both were aroused. Banhu agreed to join Sunita’s yoga class, and Sunita agreed to train with him for marathons, at which she came to excel. They agreed on which events were most important to be punctual for – time together -- and which they could be late for if lateness was unavoidable (and Banhu reduced to influence of his work life on this issue). And they came to re-appreciate their respective time perspectives, and instituted a monthly long-range planning meeting while still attending to the here-and-now pressures and enjoying the present moment, as well as relishing memories of their increasingly pleasurable past.

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