

Strategic Conceptualization: Use of Containers

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Psychobiological
Approach to
Marriage Therapy®

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Therapeutic Containers

- A **container** is a **frame** that places the therapist and couple in a **time-limited, task-oriented exercise** that provides valuable and reliable information about partners to both partners and therapist.




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Therapeutic Containers

- These exercises are **often playful** yet are all to some degree stressful.
- Containers can also **provide a structural framework**, set of instructions, a task or goal, or a role the therapist plays.




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Therapeutic Containers

- These containers (be they tasks, games, or exercises) **help the therapist assess, elucidate, expose, or establish** – through real-time partner interaction – issues concerning **social-emotional function, attachment organization (or disorganization), arousal regulation, developmental delay, deceptive behavior or language**, and so on.



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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

Bending Metal

Declarations

Toward and Away

Partner Attachment Inventory (PAI)

Beckoning

Re-enactments

“Going back to the scene of the crime”

Staging

Difficult Partner Exercise

5-10 Minute Argument

Posing

Face-to-Face

Lovers Pose

Redemption Pose

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

The **therapist** is in this container as well.

Containers includes **a task, a goal, and roles.**

When staging a scene, the **therapist is to be an investigator** and not a therapist.

This **keeps the therapist on track** and **allows the couple to suspend disbelief** and to stay in the psychodrama without disruption.

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

Keeps everybody on task and more likely to achieve the goal which is clarity, insight, and awareness of the multitude of errors that are occurring at every moment.

These errors are in communication, perception, memory, and appraisal.

In the staging container, each partner is expected – after the detailed examination of a replayed event – to produce several course-corrections that would alter event trajectory and outcome.

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Strategic Conceptualization

The first session must include a lot of coverage, scanning as much of the couple's daily life as possible.

A full history of the couple is very important (three generation genogram).

Dates, ages, relationships, first names of relatives and exes, work, work satisfaction, medical history, medications, mental health history, etc.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- Lengthy observation of the couple in action is very important.
 - How they interact when under stress.
 - How they co-manage distress.
 - Hints about attachment organization.
 - Hints about self-state regulation.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- By understanding each partner's developmental history, their behavior while interacting with you and their partner, their areas of vulnerability, defensive patterns – you will soon be able to predict partner reactions to one another and to your interventions.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- Interventions are tested as a means of finding more information about each partner.
 - For example, partners who require supportive confrontation versus mirroring interpretations of narcissistic vulnerability.
 - Or partners who display a predictable pattern of defensive behavior.
- Learn to collect "tells" from each partner as a means of predicting what they might do or how they may be reacting to your intervention.

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Strategic Conceptualization

- Once you begin to understand how each partner will likely respond to interventions or exercises, you can begin to think more strategically by planning just a bit ahead.
- For example, if you believe someone is holding back important information, you might create a container that pressures them to speak up (by way of their partner pressuring them).

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Strategic Conceptualization

- If you want to get something out in the open, you might **create a container that pressures one or both partners to come out with it.**
- If you want one partner to stand up to the other, you might do an intervention that would **predictably cause them to react** by standing up to their partner.

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Bending Metal and Declarations

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Declarations of Commitment



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Declarations of Commitment

- Declarations are vital part of adulthood — they **support identity and purpose**
- **Declarations are ego-consolidating:** avoidance of declarations is ego-diffusing
- Declarations force partners into a **differentiated psychology**
- Marital vows are a type of declaration of commitment
- Many couples don't remember vows, let alone follow them
- Declarations of commitment can be found throughout history and in all corners of the world

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Declarations of Commitment

- Clarify where partners stand
- Expose insecure issues around self-activation**
- Work through insecure issues around self-activation
- Make partners be explicit** about forming a secure-functioning relationship
- Support insecure partners** who have difficulty expressing and/or receiving declarations of commitment
- A declaration **to leave a relationship** is as important as a declaration of **commitment to stay**

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Bending Metal

- A strategic way of dealing with resistance
- Follows the tradition of Peggy Papp (1980) and other strategic family systems thinkers (Imber-Black, 2007)
- Similar to paradoxical therapy strategies, such as prescribing the symptom

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Bending Metal Purpose

- Breaks through chronic ambivalence or strong resistance to moving toward or away from the relationship
- Clarifies where each partner stands when faced with the decision to fully commit or fully separate
- Intended to put an end to threats against the existence of the relationship

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Bending Metal

- Use only when partners express chronic ambivalence about being in the relationship
- Forces partners to take a stand in one direction or the other
- Helps determine partners' commitment to the relationship (and capacity for decision making).
- Moving with full conviction is more important than which direction is chosen

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Bending Metal

- Challenge the couple's position by taking a contrary stance
- If one or both partners consistently resist reunion-type interventions by threatening the relationship, bend toward separation interventions, and vice versa
- If resistance isn't expressed in response to pushing toward separation, then splitting apart can be seen as congruent

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Declarations + Bending Metal



- Provide a **declaration to bend metal** or to expose and amplify an insecure partner's defense against self activation
- Make declaration short with an **emotional punch**
- Make a declaration while **looking into partner's eyes**
- Observe somatic reactions**, blockages, resistance, and other issues in the sender and receiver

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BENDING METAL

Why don't you tell him you don't want to move to Texas?

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BENDING METAL

I don't want to tell him that.

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Therapeutic Containers – Examples

- Track errors in communication, perception, memory, and appraisal.**
- When in the **staging container**, make sure each partner **comes up with several course-corrections that would alter event trajectory and outcome.**
- And, make sure to **have fun!**

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Thank you!

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