

TEMPERAMENT STYLES, ONE ADULT COUPLE AND THEIR EFFORTS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

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I have been fascinated for years with trying to define people's unique characteristics as contributory to their style of interacting with others. However, these descriptions, for example, of one's intelligence, socioeconomic status, family structure, childhood experiences, amongst others, felt inadequate. When I was introduced to Stella Chess and Alexander Thomas' research on the importance of childhood temperament as a key variable in explaining behavioral interactions, I found a compatible theory that corresponded to my belief about people and expressed an intangible element about individual differences.

Reading extensively about childhood temperament led me to consider adult temperament, of which little was written, and prompted a curiosity as to its impact in couples therapy. As an adult has a rich developmental history filled with many layers of meaning and experiences, his or her temperament—the how of behavior—is more complex than that of a child's. Therefore, how do I define temperament in adults, and why is this important? To me, temperament is the style of behavior, the particular manner in which one interacts with another or reacts to different situations. Temperament connotes the set point derived from our pre-wiring at birth and is amenable to some change throughout one's life. Considering conflict in couples, which for many is fraught with problems, such as the fear of abandonment, power paradigms, win or lose positions, right or wrong, I wondered how can conflict be reconciled, when individuals' temperament styles clash and are incompatible.

One couple with whom I worked in couples therapy over a two year period provided a window into considering the impact of temperament to their different communication styles. Looking at each member's individual temperament and considering how this style interacted with one's partner's style in trying to resolve disagreements became a point of reflection for me. An intangible, unquantifiable element in determining helpful intervention approaches was the mood of the couple, or the goodness of fit, as experienced by the couple and by the couples therapist. The "mood in the room," or the "flavor" of the couple, informed my sense of them and served as a guide to helping them navigate the potentially explosive, indelicate attempts at resolving their differences. I call this "mood" the couple temperament.

Finally, the value of couples therapy as an important setting to shift the interaction to one of understanding and validating each partner's

temperament, and then to use this knowledge to help the couple forge a more harmonious relationship, cannot be minimized. A key component in treatment was my belief in providing a therapeutic “holding environment” for the couple and being a partner to help establish respect and appreciation.

Conflict in Couples

In my clinical experience working with adult couples, I note that they generally present for therapy in significant crisis. Often these crises revolve around difficulty “communicating”--being heard, respected and appreciated--and have resulted in their inability to resolve conflict and have left each partner frustrated, angry, hurt and hopeless.

One couple with whom I worked posed unique challenges, illuminated by the consideration of their temperament styles. I am focusing here on their temperament style of reactive/argumentative vs. calmer/more deliberate and use the case history of Sarah and Jim to illustrate their combustible style of interacting and their journey toward understanding and harmony.

Sarah and Jim

Sarah and Jim, a Caucasian couple married for 10 years with a five-year-old son, presented for treatment with longtime marital conflict, perpetuated by unresolved childhood feelings of each growing up in an emotionally unsafe home filled with parental rejection, lack of nurturing and disrespect. While Sarah’s depressive mother micromanaged her family from her bedside, Sarah suffered from her mother’s criticality. Sarah’s mother was competitive with her daughter, incessantly needed to have the last word and rarely encouraged her daughter’s growing self-esteem, competence or desire for independence. Her father and mother often verbally sparred, with mom’s strength overpowering and emasculating her retiring, conflict-avoidant husband.

Jim, on the other hand, endured familial fights including verbal and sometimes physical abuse, in which he tried to intercede and mediate, without success. Jim went to his room, kept his own counsel and “tuned out” his surroundings by “going into my head” (his words). Jim’s parents finally divorced when Jim was 10 years old, and this event gave him the calm he longed for. However, when faced with stress or emotional conflict as an adult, Jim retreated behind his wall of silence and needed to process his feelings in his own time. Sarah found this processing time intolerable and sank into deep feelings of abandonment, depression, anxiety and rejection. Sarah and Jim, 41 and 54 years old respectively,

were both employed full-time: Sarah as a writer with a magazine and Jim in a marketing capacity for a software company. Despite their successful jobs and good salaries, the couple continuously worried and fought about money. Sarah was anxious that Jim was not able to take care of her, and Jim agonized about his impending mortality and was evaluating a career shift.

Resolving conflict was difficult for them, as neither was willing to cede to the other, invoking a “win or lose” stance. Sarah’s temperament was reactive and anxiety-ridden, and when overwhelmed, she spoke passionately about her thoughts of divorce. Jim’s style was more aloof, deliberate and slower to react. Over time, it became clear (and the couple concurred) that they were re-enacting their familial styles of dealing with differences, and reacted to each other in kind—Sarah became the punishing mother, and Jim became the emotionally unattuned, unhappy father. However, their young son became the sensitive arbitrator, sensed brewing discontent and tried to calm and de-escalate the ensuing fights. The long-term effects on their son have been explored and discussed, and both realized the importance of attending to this conflictual family environment now.

The challenge for me in couples therapy with Sarah and Jim was de-escalating the heat of the arguments, so Sarah would feel heard and validated, and Jim would feel appreciated and respected, without criticism. The mood in the room was rarely calm—as one talked, the other interrupted, and no one was listening—and the emotional venom, particularly on Sarah’s part, exponentially doubled and escalated. Prior to the verbal sparring, which defensively energized Sarah, Jim emotionally retreated and appeared uninvolved, which enraged Sarah. Difficult for her to tolerate was Jim’s manner of resolving conflict, which was to process more slowly and methodically, in order to regroup, calm himself and consider options.

My regard for both members of the couple and empathy for their struggle kept me engaged and generous of spirit, and soothed the couple so that they could express their deep feelings and conflicts, open those wounds, elicit empathy from the other and realize that neither person deliberately wanted to hurt the other. They loved and cared for each other and admitted that they wanted their relationship to work and realized the importance of resolution for their young son. The “temperature” in the room needed to be reduced, and the environment needed to feel as if it could “hold” their intensity and different temperament styles. Respect and kindness were emphasized, and respect for differences was modeled by me. Apparent in most disagreements was the knowledge that neither Jim nor Sarah saw or felt a

calm, supportive atmosphere growing up and freely admitted to his/her lack of emotional guideposts in how to resolve conflict. Progress to this end was jerky, bumpy and inconsistent, but they were open and wanted to learn.

Conclusion

Sarah and Jim's story is but one example of adult temperament in a couple trying to resolve conflict. However, the idiosyncratic variable of "mood" was difficult to quantify and needed to be expressed in another manner, this I refer to as couple temperament. One can appreciate the individual's temperament and then can understand the intensity that could ensue when couples of these temperament styles interacted and attempted to resolve their differences. Consideration of the complexity of gender, race, cultural and socioeconomic differences, family and patient history of mood disorders, for example, may have an impact on temperament through the life cycle and likely can shed light on better understanding adult temperament styles and can help lead to more satisfying relationships. Sensitivity to the couple temperament adds to increased understanding of the couple and can lead to important discoveries not readily available otherwise.