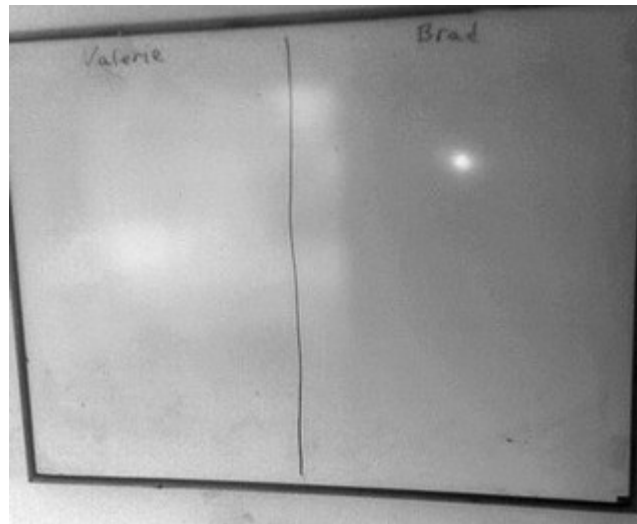


The Split Board Technique

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A couple that I am seeing walks into my office and says, "We had a terrible fight, Saturday." I usually respond, "Oh wow! A glorious fight! How cool! Shall we use that to learn how to do better?" Doing better is, after all, what they are here for. Now, I want to help, but it can seem as if they are trying to get me to solve their problem for them – dropping their responsibility for the solution to "their problems" into my lap. I think this is a trap to be avoided at all costs. So this is one technique I use.



I start out with the white board I have in my office, and draw a line down the middle. I call this the Split Board Technique, though it can be done at home with two sheets of paper set side-by-side, or using any other similar medium. There are just two primary principles:

1. Both partner's witness that their partners view is getting thoroughly recorded, and that their point of view will also get thoroughly recorded.
2. Both partners get to share while looking at the other point of view; and cannot, by their sharing, erase or stop seeing what their partner has shared.

When teaching Empathy to the people who come to me, I have found over the years that I would draw many charts to help them visualize the situation before them. Almost all charts would have two sections representing the existing perspective of one person, while I am directing attention to the existing perspective of the other. The concept is so clear to me, but seems baffling to people who are trained to be non-empathic. (What I call self-psychology is all about there being only one point of view.) Over and over I try to share the idea that "whatever you are thinking/feeling/perceiving, your partner is thinking/feeling/perceiving something else at the same time – and you can either deal with this or be blind to it." Non-empathic people seem to be pretty blind to this. Learning Empathy involves becoming comfortably aware of this.

Since we cannot simultaneously share our point of view and hear their point of view, we have to take turns sharing how we see things. But notice that the very act of sharing changes our points of view. I change my point of view as I listen to, and get information about, yours.

Story: A 35-year-old man was sitting at home one evening watching TV. His wife had gone to a gathering. She said she would be home at 10PM. At about 9:55, the man started looking at the clock. His wife was three blocks from home with a flat tire on her car. At 10:00, the man got up and looked out the window, nervously. His wife, had found the jack, removed the spare tire from the trunk and was locating where to put the jack. At 10:10 the man was pacing back and forth,

grumbling and acting like a 15-year-old. His wife had the flat tire off the car and was moving the spare into position. Her hands were quite dirty. At 10:20 the man was frantically walking back and forth, cursing, waving his arms, looking out the window, and acting like a six-year-old. His wife had the new tire on, had cranked the car down onto it, and had put the flat tire into the trunk. Her hands were now filthy. At 10:30 his wife drove into the driveway, jumped out of the car and rushed into the house and headed toward a sink with her dirty hands. Her husband exploded like a two-year-old, yelled at her, followed her closely pointing to his watch, the clock, the moon, and asked such silly questions as "Do I need to strap a watch to your butt so that you know what time it is!"

Now, if we stopped the scene when the wife walked in the door, gave the husband all the information about where she had been, would the situation have changed? She had some information. He didn't. His behavior, while extreme, made a lot of sense. So did hers. What would have been a better way to share? By the way, in the story this cool lady said, "My my! I left the house at 7:00 and it contained a mature husband. I arrive at 10:30 and find a two-year-old having a tantrum. Mmmmm. Maybe next time I should leave you with a babysitter."

I love the phrase that being together is a "participative mystique," where we are both involved in what is going on, but no one is completely sure what it is. And I love the phrase "How much structure do you need, so that you can breathe calmly while looking at the chaos around you?" Put these two phrases together and you can see why we need good structure when we start to talk with each other. Dialogical communication, the practice of empathic connection, seems to me to be just a matter of using the correct, and right amount of, structure to ensure that all people present are relaxed.

The Setup

Back to the Split-Board Technique. As I was saying, I use the white board in my office. I stand up and go to it, which places me above my clients, and puts me in a position of increased visible structure. I draw a simple line down the middle and put their names on the top of each section. I am implying that the structure is for them.

The structure of all my couple's sessions is that I know "who's day" it is when they enter the office. (I check their record.) I am very clear about maintaining this structure of turn-taking. Even when I make exceptions, I try to be very clear to model how I value knowing "who is the one we will start with today." So in this situation usually I put the name of person I start with on the left side, though I am not sure that is very important.



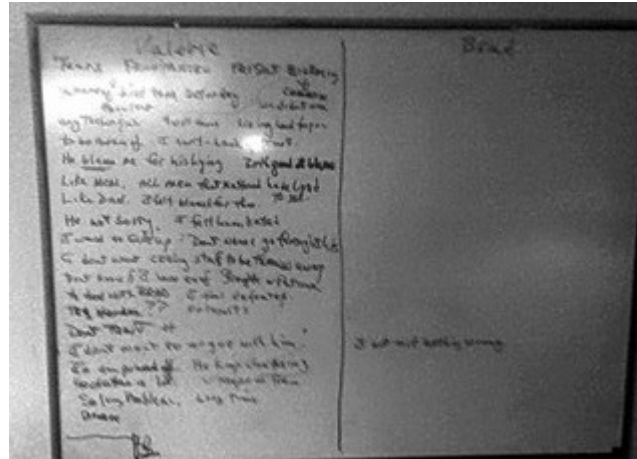
A board, I find, is very useful. I want the couple to focus, with me, on hearing/seeing each person's points of view. I want them to "get their point" up onto the wall. With a board, I can back off, alongside of them, and then three of us are looking, together, at whatever is there. It becomes a kind of a physical representation of reflecting on a situation. Remember, I am trying to teach them the value of reflection over reaction.

The Process

The bottom line is that I am using the board to visually mirror each person's point of view. I think this is one way of demonstrating Mirroring, Validation, PreValidation at their best, and to use additional structure to contain the reactivity and passion they have. My intention is that both people get to experience being on the receiving end, watching their partner on the receiving end, and witness the mechanics of it being done. Occasionally during the process I will make a "side-bar comment" explaining what I am doing. It depends on whether I am

only interested in demonstrating the power of Dialogical communication tools. Often, I have already taught the couple the tools and want to reinforce those teachings.

Starting with the first person, I dialogically interview them, all the time making notes on the board of anything, that seems to me or to them, important to be written down. I write their words as much as possible.

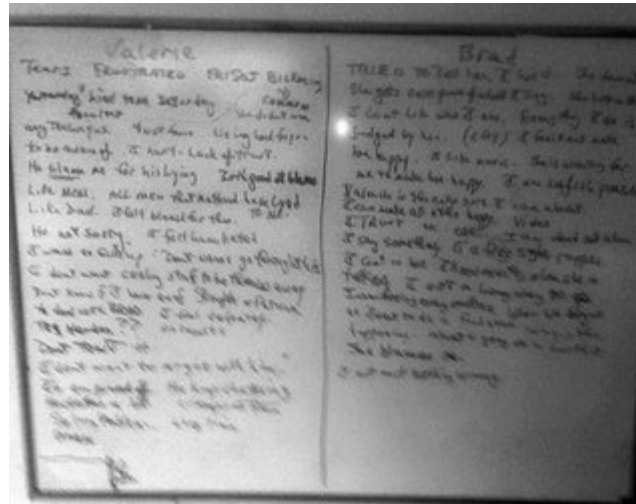


I Pull them so that I have their sense on the board. More than their words, I want their "validity" on the board when I am done. If they don't share enough, I PreValidate them, and try Pulling some more.

When I think they invalidate their partner, I will reflect out loud on their partner's validity, PreValidating the silently watching partner. Then I will Pull them toward what they "thought" their partner is doing. This sets up a chance for their partner, later on, to share their side of this situation. In this way I treat both invalidation and lack of knowledge about your partner as something that can be fixed over time.

When they refer to their recollection of their partner's words, I write those words down in quotation marks – and I point out that I am writing that on their side of the board not their partner's side. "You can't write on your partner's side. All your thoughts end up on yours."

Because of the size of the 1/2 board, usually they will begin to come to a conclusion. If not, I will begin to act restless to hear the other side and decrease the detail in the notes I am writing. I may say, "We've got no more room here! Let's go to their side." This rarely happens. Most often the speaker, who is getting visually mirrored, validated, and PreValidated (getting to feel heard, understood, and valued) will spontaneously sense the absence of hearing from their partner. Remember, this is how to deal with argument, which I see as usually a process based on continual interruption and extremely shallow listening.



When I start on the other side of the board, i.e. the other partner's points of view, I am apt to say, "I'd like to hear your side. But of most interest to me is any reaction you have to hearing anything your partner said. Take a look at their side and please share." In this way, I focus on sharing disagreements rather than avoiding them. I make it normal to be agreeably sharing disagreement.

Also I want the second partner to be speaking based both on their history of the event and on their experience of what their partner has just said. I think something major happens in a person when they can say, "So while I was thinking this, you were thinking that. We both made sense."

I recall a couple who has a strong fight on a Saturday, and who were telling me about it on Tuesday. Because their passion/feelings seemed so high, I used the Split Board Technique. She went first. I obtained her view pretty deeply, writing down the "notes" on her side of the board. When it was his turn to share, he began to tell me about his view of what happened. After a moment, I stopped him. "I am glad to hear your recollections about that time, but I am more interested in how you now view Saturday, using your recollections and in addition your awareness now of your partner's point of view. See it is on this side of the board." Based on what he now had heard – and could see on the board – his view of Saturday had now completely changed. Originally he was sharing without including those changes. He became aware that on Saturday he was handicapped precisely because he had not had access to his partner's point of view then. Now he was no longer at that disadvantage. He said, "If I had known then what I know now, I would not have acted the way I did." I wrote this in big letters on his side of the board. Seemed to me a big learning for him, and also for her.

If I have plenty of time to go back to the first speaker, I erase their side, speaking of how sad I am to lose that information. Then I encourage that person to share reactions and thoughts to what their partner has said on their side of the board.

I continue back and forth with the visual mirroring, validations and PreValidations for both, until we have used up our session time. Frequently in a 90 minute session we get to hear thoroughly from both once and maybe get to add a 15 minutes summary of "looking at the situation" together.

Sometimes the silent, witnessing partner, may blurt something out. I will hold back the partner I am interviewing for a moment. Then I will mirror and PreValidate the interrupter and make a note of their point on their side of the board. Then I will go back to the original person I was interviewing. (I am using what I call the Cat Principle.)

Example (from last week!): Partner A says, "He called me a bitch." Partner B blurts, "I did not!" I

say to the both, "Hang on a moment while I get this down." On my first side of the board I write the word "bitch" in quotation marks – indicating that this represented that person's memory and is worth writing down. Then on the other side of the board I write, "I did not say 'bitch.'" I reflect on how wonderful it is to share such strong language and such strong differences. I usually ask the interrupting partner, "Can I finish with your partner, and then get your side of this?" Then I go back to the original person I was interviewing.

Conclusions

For the couple I will often just point out a few things.

- Using this technique, allows them to be clear that they cannot erase what their partner thinks. It is durable. The choice is to be aware of what they are thinking or to be blind, but you cannot erase it. This seems to me one of the primary learnings in moving toward empathic relating.
- You can sit with your partner's views and be curious rather than reactive.
- Getting closer and non-reactive often means just learning to use some simple structure.
- There are good alternatives to arguing. Usually in an argument, both want to feel heard and understood. They just have to take turns.
- Everyone makes sense all the time, even you.

Let me add a couple of benefits for the therapist guide.

- By focusing on facilitating the couple sharing their points of view, you help them vastly, without becoming in any way entangled.
- Writing things down serves several functions:
 - Slows everything down to a level you can control (by your writing)
 - Allows you to strongly value phrases that are said
 - Allows the speaker to feel very thoroughly heard
 - Forces the listener to sit quietly in the presence of ideas they disagree with
 - Allows you to reflect on various parts of what is said out of order. "Help me understand better. Up here you said this, but down here you seem to be contradicting yourself. Could you say more?"
- Your role is in providing structure for them to deal with their relationship challenges
- Couples often bring an event to you for your solution. Don't fall for this! Use it as a teaching experience for how to solve their problems at home.
- They can take this process home and use out of their presence.
- You can teach and re-teach Dialogical skills in another way.
- Amazingly, you can slip in your point of view, referring to it as material for a third half-board. Couples often value your sharing of your self in this format.