

ORIGIN, EFFECTS AND TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS  
OF THE PURSUER-DISTANCER CYCLE IN COUPLES

by

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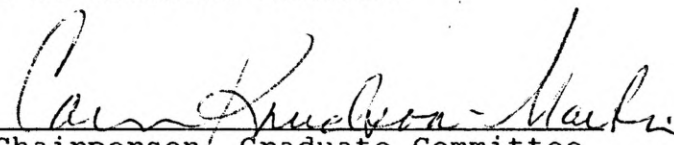
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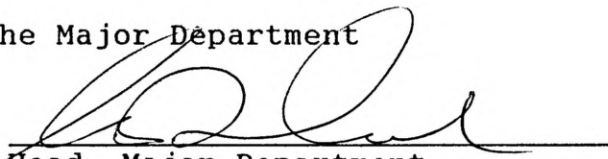
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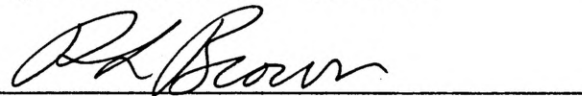
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## ABSTRACT

The Pursuer-Distancer (P-D) Cycle has been identified as a common pattern of interaction amongst heterosexual couples. The P-D cycle can be a destructive force within relationships and has been found to be associated with divorcing and distressed couples. It is common in couples presenting for therapy. However, there has been very little research regarding the P-D cycle within the context of couples therapy.

The purpose of this investigation was to further develop a theoretically based understanding of the P-D cycle's origin, effects on couples, and implications for therapy, as well as to discover areas needing further research. An extensive literature review was conducted. In addition, three couples assessed to be engaged in a P-D cycle and currently receiving treatment were observed during therapy for a total of fifteen sessions.

This investigation resulted in an integrative model illustrating the author's conceptualization of the development and treatment of the P-D cycle. The model is based on the integration of Family Systems Theory, Gender Theory, and Communication Skills Deficit Theory. The model was then applied to the development and treatment of three case examples drawn from the observations.

It is proposed that an individual's family-of-origin and larger social context (which includes gender socialization) are the primary factors, other than genetic, that determine a person's interpersonal relating style. The author concludes that when two individuals come together in a relationship, their interpersonal relating styles as well as levels of differentiation, communication skills and (un)resolved gender issues determine, in part, whether they are involved in a P-D cycle and to what degree. The author suggests there is a continuum of severity of P-D cycles, based on a couple's level in these three areas. Therefore, it is concluded that when treating P-D couples, a therapist must assess the severity of the P-D cycle. Treatment should address the three areas of differentiation, gender issues, and communication skills. Lastly, based on this investigation, the author offers nine hypothesized relationships and other issues deeming documentation through further research.

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Marital therapists are often confronted with couples stating they have "problems communicating," or that they simply "are not getting along." The root of these common presenting problems is often an interaction pattern that has become dysfunctional and is referred to in the literature as: demand-withdraw, nag-withdraw, rejection-intrusion, and pursuer-distancer (Christensen & Shenk, 1991). For the purpose of this paper, these patterns of interacting are referred to as the Pursuer-Distancer cycle (P-D cycle), and will be defined as a repeated sequential pattern of interacting wherein one partner (the pursuer) attempts to get closer emotionally through overt (i.e., discussion, activities, affection, nagging, etc.) or covert (manipulation, favors, etc.) means and the other partner (the distancer) responds by withdrawing emotionally. Although there has been quite a bit of research done on the P-D cycle as it relates to marital satisfaction, there is a paucity of research addressing the cycle specifically with regards to marital therapy. This paper and investigation



are exploratory in nature, with the purpose of exploring the P-D cycle in general and more specifically, within the context of marital therapy. It is hoped this investigation will generate a more comprehensive explanation of the P-D cycle that is grounded in theory as well as better questions concerning the P-D cycle to be addressed in future research.

### Background

The P-D cycle is based upon different styles of relating, comfort levels, and expectations of emotional closeness or intimacy. There are many different levels of intimacy and everyone's comfort zone changes to some degree depending upon a variety of factors such as situation, time and other people. For example, one partner may particularly enjoy sitting together on the couch while reading, and from time to time sharing what each is reading. On the other hand, the other partner may prefer to read in separate rooms without interruptions. Over time a couple must negotiate how they will handle this and many other situations; in other words, they must negotiate how they will accommodate each other's "comfort levels" and needs. Couples usually develop patterns of relating that incorporate these needs. The patterns are either comfortable or uncomfortable and likewise the couple is correspondingly happy or unhappy. One such pattern couples

adopt is the P-D cycle .

The P-D cycle itself is not necessarily dysfunctional. In fact, it is very likely that this cycle exists for almost all couples to some degree, since it is impossible for two people to have the exact same intimacy needs all the time. However, it does have the potential to escalate to painful extremes. For example, if the couple is unable to negotiate a new pattern of interacting, the pursuer may resort to more implicit or even hostile ways of engaging the distancing spouse (i.e., talking about the kids, complaining about chores around the house, shouting degrading remarks). These attempts may cause the distancing partner to distance even more. Eventually the couple is "at a standstill" or polarized, unable to untangle themselves from the vicious P-D cycle. At this point, it is likely that both partners are unhappy with the relationship and resentful of the other.

John Gottman (1991) and his colleague, Robert Levenson did a very impressive longitudinal study examining what particular marital interaction patterns are characteristic of couples whose marriages improve over time, and of those whose relationships worsen over time. Gottman and Levenson found that divorce could accurately be predicted for approximately 90 percent of all couples involved in the following interaction sequence: (1) the husband does not attend to or "stonewalls" the wife when they are engaged in

some sort of conflict; (2) she gets increasingly emotional, and then tries to re-engage her spouse, who then completely emotionally withdraws from her; (3) the wife then expresses criticism and disgust, and withdraws herself, to which the husband responds with more stonewalling, and/or distancing.

A study by Christensen and Shenk (1991) compared communication, psychological distance and conflict amongst nondistressed, clinical and divorcing couples. The study found significantly more P-D behavior amongst the clinical and divorcing couples than the nondistressed couples. These findings suggest that the P-D cycle may be associated with distress and even divorce.

### Statement of Purpose

In the past decade a considerable amount of research on the P-D cycle in couples has been conducted. However, most of the research has studied the cycle as it relates to marital satisfaction, predisposition for divorce, communication patterns, and marital distress. There has been very little research on the P-D cycle within the context of couples therapy (i.e., the effectiveness, outcome, obstacles, and process of therapy with P-D couples). Because this is a common pattern that can be so destructive to a couple it would be highly beneficial to better understand how therapists might best approach this

situation. Due to circumstantial limits, this study will focus on heterosexual couples only. The issue of the P-D cycle within homosexual couples certainly deserves attention and is an area with a paucity of research.

The purpose of this paper is to further develop a theoretically based understanding of the P-D cycle's origin, effects on couples, and implications for therapy. The P-D cycle has been explained from several different theoretical approaches. This paper will attempt to integrate and expand on the explanations provided by the following theories: Family Systems Theory, Gender Theory and Communication Skills Deficit Theory. More specifically it is hoped that the following will emerge: special considerations, issues, situations and interventions therapists might need to be aware of when working with couples stuck in the P-D cycle. The observation process will serve to provide a better understanding of the clinical implications of the P-D literature in order to develop a therapy-oriented model as well as questions deserving be investigated more thoroughly through further research.

### **Procedures**

In order to fulfill the above goals, three main approaches will be taken. First, the pertinent literature will be read. Second the literature will be studied, read

again and notes will be taken in an attempt to integrate the relevant concepts and theoretical constructs in an original and insightful manner. Third, the therapy sessions of three couples stuck in the P-D cycle will be observed for five consecutive weeks in order to observe the relationship between the P-D cycle and therapy from a standpoint that is more objective than that of therapist in the midst of working with a P-D couple.

The couples observed will be currently receiving treatment at the Human Development Training and Research Clinic. All marital therapists will be informed of the purpose of this investigation as well as an explanation and definition of the P-D cycle. Therapists with couples fitting the definition will meet with the investigator to confirm this. The therapists will be asked to fill out the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) (See Appendix A) according to their perceptions of their clients and to engage in informal discussion with the investigator as guides for selection.

Couples selected as appropriate for the study will be informed by their therapist of the purpose of the investigation and then asked if they are willing to participate. If they are willing to have their sessions observed, they will be asked to sign a consent form and reminded of their right of exit from the study. The couples will be observed live through one-way glass when possible,

and on videotape otherwise. All content information of the couples' sessions will be kept confidential. Videotapes will be erased after observation.

The focus of the observation will be times when the couples are behaving in a P-D fashion or talking about P-D issues. The process of how the therapist intervenes to such situations and how the couple responds to interventions will be recorded. The following chart will be utilized to facilitate this process:

**FIGURE 1** Observation Chart

| Couple's P-D Interaction                   | Therapist's Intervention                                       | Couple's Reaction<br>(outcome re:P-D)                                             |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| i.e., wife complains of "no time together" | therapist attempts to get husband to commit to "together time" | wife pushes harder in alliance with therapist and husband withdraws his attention |
|                                            |                                                                |                                                                                   |

The information gathered through the three processes outlined above will be organized in order to first present a more thorough conceptualization of the P-D cycle in general. Second, the relationship between the P-D cycle and marital therapy will be presented from a theoretical standpoint. Third, implications for therapists working with P-D couples will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the P-D cycle from three theoretical perspectives: 1) Family Systems Theory; 2) Gender Theory; 3) Communication Skills Deficit Theory. Each theoretical perspective offers insight regarding a) the origin of the P-D cycle; b) the effects of the P-D cycle on couples; c) the P-D cycle in the context of therapy (i.e., techniques, strategies, outcome, effectiveness).

Perspectives on the Origin of the Pursuer-Distancer Cycle

Three prominent perspectives attempting to explain the origin of the P-D cycle found in the literature are: Family Systems Theory, Gender Theory, and Communication Skills Deficit Theory. As each of these perspectives is reviewed and discussed, it will become evident that none of these explanations seems sufficient alone. Rather, all of them appear to be an important part of an integrative explanation of the P-D cycle which will be offered later.

Family Systems Theory

Rules Family Systems Theory holds that individuals in



relationship with one another form a system defining rules and roles concerning how to behave within the relationship (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). These rules and roles develop from what each individual brings into the relationship. Over time, some sort of compromise and/or combination of the two partners' different and similar rules and relationship values is created. In order to function efficiently and with stability, couples eventually exclude many possible interactions from their relationship and thus define the rules of the relationship (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). Boundaries are determined by the rules the system adopts. Boundaries are the implicit rules regarding emotional closeness and how people relate in general and although there may be many rules within a system (i.e., "one must not be lazy") the boundaries of emotional closeness are some of the most important of a system. The important point is that the two individuals develop a set of norms for their specific relationship. These norms then determine what kind of interaction patterns the couple enacts.

According to Hof and Treat (1989), couples work together to define their desires for intimacy and strive to fulfill these desires. However, if one partner's desires are significantly different than the other's, hurt, rejection, decreased satisfaction, and marital distress are likely. The P-D cycle may stem, in part, from such differences and the emotions that result.



Equilibrium Relationship patterns tend to maintain equilibrium; that is some sort of stability and continuity exists even though it may not be a healthy or happy equilibrium (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). The P-D cycle is perceived as one such pattern (Fogarty, 1976). Although it may or may not be comfortable, it serves the purpose of maintaining an equilibrium regarding intimacy by defining levels of closeness and distance.

Larger Social Context Multitude levels of systems affect individuals and families (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). Beyond the nuclear family or couple, the following systems also exist: the neighborhood and work place with which the couple interacts; the community in which the couple lives; The economical, political and legal systems; and the society in general, as evidenced in television, newspapers, etc. These other systems affect the couple's system to varying degrees depending on the individual couple. For example, in some communities it is very common for a couple to be married quite young and to celebrate with an elaborate wedding. This may have some effect on the couple's decision about when and how to be wed.

Hence, for couples engaged in the P-D cycle there may be factors within any of their other systems that contribute to or encourage this behavior. In some communities or families it may be that women are consistently wanting

greater closeness with their partners, but it is believed improper for men to express this desire. Television and advertisement may suggest acceptable gender roles which individuals then try to attain in their own lives. Norms present in outside systems with which the couple has contact may also influence the rules and roles that they adopt in their relationship.

Differentiation , according to Bowen describes the degree to which one can separate his/her thoughts from emotions and therefore be able to choose between behavior guided by either emotion or thought (Papero, 1991). Another aspect of differentiation is the ability to maintain a sense of one's own identity while being intimately involved with another (Bowen, 1981).

Bowen (1988) asserts that there are two opposing forces in humans, the force to be close with others and the force to be separate or autonomous from other humans (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). When anxiety enters into the couple system, one partner may seek togetherness and the other, separateness, setting the P-D cycle in motion. Depending on the level of differentiation, it may only take a small stressor for the couple to begin pursuing and distancing. This conceptualization of differentiation's role in the P-D cycle is very similar to Satir's (1983) explanation of couples' interactions. Satir (1983) explains that people

with lower levels of self-esteem are apt to be more anxious. Hence, the P-D cycle may have its origins in intrapersonal anxiety and self-esteem. Depending on these two factors, individuals may feel the need to be close or distant with another.

Hof and Treat (1989), in their discussion of the P-D cycle do not focus on general anxiety. Rather, they attribute the P-D cycle to fears of (or anxiety about) intimacy which stem from a lack of differentiation and social skills. Hof and Treat assert the P-D cycle serves to protect the couple from their fears of intimacy, a shared goal of both the Pursuer and Distancer, and moreover is actually a substitute for genuine intimacy.

From a Family Systems perspective differentiation appears to be a significant factor contributing to the P-D cycle. Lower levels of differentiation may contribute to greater difficulty in the following areas; separating emotions from thoughts, preserving sense of self while relating with another, managing anxiety, self esteem, and ability to be intimate. A likely outcome of these difficulties is the P-D cycle, which may relieve some of the anxiety in either or both partners.

Communication Family Systems Theory holds that it is impossible to not communicate (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Communication takes place on many levels

and in many forms: direct, indirect, verbal, nonverbal, through our actions as well as our absence of actions.

Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson propose that humans desire and need to be confirmed by others for who they are and can become. The authors state that a great deal of human communication revolves around this issue in that through our actions, interactions and nonverbal behavior we communicate who we think we are and how we perceive others.

Confirmation, like communication, can take place in many forms-implicit and explicit.

Watzlawick, et. al. (1967) state that when a person communicates, "This is how I am," there are three possible ways for another person to respond. The first possibility is to confirm and hence accept the person's definition of self. According to these writers such confirmation is "probably the greatest single factor ensuring mental development and stability that has so far emerged from our study of communication" (p. 84). The second possible response is to reject the other's definition of self. When a person rejects the self-definition of another, they are disagreeing with the definition, but also are recognizing it so at least the person was "heard." The last possible reaction to someone who has expressed a definition of self is disconfirmation. In this last case, the second person is essentially negating the other's existence and reality. Disconfirmation can be subtle as in the case of indecision,

ignoring, or constant disagreeing or "squelching" another's feelings, actions, etc.

It is interesting to speculate which of these reactions occurs in P-D couples. It appears that to some degree each partner confirms the other's definition of self (i.e., I need more/less closeness), but that each is unable to reciprocate the definition by saying something like, "Me too!" Among poorly differentiated couples especially, differences are difficult because it reminds them of their separateness and often results in conflict, i.e., trying to make the other more like self, arguing over "what's right," etc. (Lerner, 1989; Satir, 1983). Conflict is often then interpreted as proof of being disconfirmed or unloved.

So perhaps in Watzlawick et. al. terms, P-D couples in a sense reject one another's style of relating or preference for emotional closeness. It could be that in couples with less differentiated individuals, when one member says "This is how I am," he/she expects not only to be confirmed but for the other person to respond with "I am that way also." When the individual does not receive that response, the stage could be set for the P-D cycle to begin. The differentness could signify rejection or even worse, disconfirmation, and trigger feelings of not being loved and then the individual could begin to either pursue or distance from the other in response.

This suggests that among some P-D cases each partner is

disturbed by his/her perception of the other's definition of self. Over time their distressed reactions amount to disconfirmation which according to Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson (1967) can be very dysfunctional and damaging. P-D couples whose relationship has deteriorated over time are likely to feel disconfirmed, and hence resentful and angry with one another (Hof & Treat, 1989; Napier, 1978; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987).

Watzlawick et. al. (1967) state that healthy relationships have both symmetrical as well as complementary interactions. In other words, when one partner acts, the other partner reacts or behaves in an opposite manner (complementary) at times and in a similar manner at other times (symmetrical) (1967). The P-D cycle is a complementary interaction since as one partner acts to distance emotionally, the other acts to get closer emotionally. It has been observed that in some couples the P-D pattern becomes the primary way of communicating or interacting regardless of the content (Betchen, 1991; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Lerner, 1989; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983). In this case, a couple's primary, possibly even exclusive, manner of interacting is complementary. Perhaps, the P-D cycle is less destructive as long as the couple also engages in symmetrical interactions.

Communication is an inherent and significant aspect of



any relationship, and certainly of P-D couples. Communication could play a major role in instigating and maintaining the P-D cycle. Through the various forms of communication, an individual may perceive or receive messages that then cause them to react in a certain way, possibly by pursuing or distancing. This may be especially true in couples with lower levels of differentiation wherein the individuals expect more similarities in identities, needs and ways of being in general. Moreover if the P-D cycle becomes the couple's main style of interacting and communicating regardless of the content, it could be especially harmful.

Object Relations Taking the concept of self-esteem or self-perception a step further, there is a group of theorists who suggest that humans choose their partners for specific, unconscious reasons. This explanation is found amongst writers from many different backgrounds but is commonly referred to as Object Relations Theory. Object Relations Theory proposes that depending on circumstances and relationships experienced in the family in which one grows up, a person has repressed parts of self and of relationships (Kilpatrick & Kilpatrick, 1991). For example, a woman may feel fairly comfortable with men, but due to an experience in childhood may question their sense of motivation or initiative. Therefore, she may be expecting

and fearing that her mate will lack motivation. When selecting a mate, we tend to choose someone that will allow us to "test" those unowned or repressed parts and corresponding fears (Kilpatrick & Kilpatrick, 1991; Satir, 1983). One or both partners may even induce the feared/repressed behavior in order to define self in relation to that behavior (Napier, 1978; Satir, 1983).

In a healthy relationship, the repressed parts and relationships are allowed to be expressed, negotiated and are integrated into one's life. If it is not possible to express and work through the repressed parts of self and others, these parts and relationships will simply be repeated. Therefore, along this line of thought couples caught in the P-D cycle may be reliving or even recreating a pattern of relating they experienced as children, but are unable to overcome as adults. Eventually in a P-D couple the Pursuer may be perceived as the only one desiring closeness and the Distancer the only one fearing closeness, when in fact, both desire and fear closeness (Lerner, 1989).

For couples in the P-D cycle, it could be that the Pursuer's driving fear is that their partner will abandon them and for the Distancer the deep fear is that the partner will engulf or overwhelm them. Hence the Distancer withdraws emotionally and the Pursuer pushes for the opposite, closeness, and actually ends up driving their partner away--both end up inducing what was feared in the



first place. This is not to say that either partner is responsible for the breakdown in the relationship, as it actually is a result of the system the two individuals create and is not the fault of either one exclusively.

Family-of-Origin Family Systems Theory proposes that the family in which individuals are raised (family-of-origin) has a significant influence on their adult life and relationships (Betchen, 1991; Bowen, 1981; Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). Betchen bases much of his explanation of the P-D cycle on the family-of-origin. He suggests that the first ingredient is two people who do not take responsibility for themselves. This is congruent with Satir's idea of self-esteem and Bowen's concept of differentiation, or a low level thereof. Betchen then asserts that the couple repeats some of the behaviors learned from their families-of-origin, often resulting in the P-D cycle.

More specifically, Betchen (1991) claims that as children P-D individuals were often caught in an ongoing triangle with their parents. For example, in a couple where the husband is unavailable emotionally for the wife, she may come to rely on her son for companionship and attention. She may focus excessively on him, the result being that as a grown man he is fearful of too much attention from women, and behaves much like his father. Napier (1978) suggests that the roots of the P-D cycle consists of one person who

was abandoned as a child (the Pursuer), and one person who was intruded upon or smothered as a child (the Distancer). The result of this triangle is that as adults they have expectations and beliefs about themselves, relationships, and the opposite sex in general. Moreover, they may have adopted a specific role within their family-of-origin that they then repeat in their adult relationship. More specific descriptions of various family-of-origin triangles leading to Pursuer or Distancer styles are discussed in Betchen (1991) and Napier (1978).

Summary In summary, Family Systems Theory utilizes the concepts of rules, equilibrium, multiple systems, differentiation, object relations, and family-of-origin in explaining the origin and development of the P-D cycle. This approach emphasizes the influences of systems such as the family in which one was raised, the culture in which one lives, and the system that two individuals in a relationship create together. Depending on these systems and the experiences they offer, a couple may be more or less likely to become involved in a P-D cycle.

### Gender Theory

A number of theorists suggest that men and women develop different norms for emotional intimacy and

expression as well as styles of conflict resolution (Christensen, 1987; Gilligan, 1982; Knudson-Martin, 1993; Notarius & Johnson, 1982; Tannen, 1990). It is suggested that these differences are the result of socialization, that males and females are treated differently and therefore develop differently (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Knudson-Martin, 1993; Notarius & Johnson, 1982). The socialization process appears to result in gender differences in the following areas: needs and desires; social structure and power; communication; and physiological reactions. Each of these areas will be discussed as they relate to the P-D cycle.

Needs and Desires Gender theory includes a perspective presenting women as being more comfortable with and desiring greater emotional intimacy and men being more comfortable with greater autonomy (Christensen, 1987; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gilligan, 1982). Christensen (1988) and Jacobson (1989) suggest that the different desires for closeness (due to socialization of men and women) results in gender differences in the roles men and women take in marriage. These researchers purport that it is typically more common for men to assume the distancer role and women the pursuer role. Moreover, it is suggested that men and women desire different types of intimacy (Knudson-Martin, 1993; Notarius and Pellegrini, 1987). Men seek

intimate connections through being active together and simply near one another; "doing together." Women on the other hand desire intimacy based on sharing inner thoughts, feelings and experiences; "being together." In other words, perhaps men and women both desire to be intimate, but go about connecting intimately in different ways. Men and women's different approaches to intimacy could be interpreted as the precursors to the P-D cycle.

Deborah Tannen (1990), in her discussion of gender differences in communication, claims that men and women are raised such that women mostly seek connection and affiliation whereas men mostly seek status and that attempts to meet these ends are evident in communication. Tannen describes many examples which highlight the differences of men and women. One of these differences which may be related to the P-D cycle is that in communicating, as with many other areas of life, men seek to compete or to gain status. Hence when a woman pursues closeness and appears comfortable with being close, the man may feel unable to compete, or to "keep up" with his partner in the intimacy arena and opt to withdraw from it. For example, a woman may be very clear and comfortable in expressing how she thinks and feels about an issue, but when her partner observes her ability to do this he may choose to not even try to express in a similar way because it won't be as clear, intense, comfortable, etc. because of the pressure men feel to "do

good" if not better than what exists. So, in other words males may end up withdrawing from interactions in which they believe they can't compete. Differences in needs and resulting differences in ways of communicating may contribute significantly to the origin of the P-D cycle.

Social Structure and Power Men are consistently found to be in the Distancer role and women in the Pursuer role (Christensen, 1987; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987; Notarius & Johnson, 1982). It is suggested that this may reflect the fact that women tend to desire more change in their relationships and therefore raise issues and pursue involvement of their partner (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Turgeon, 1992). Although the majority of women are now employed outside the home, other "duties" remain unchanged and are still fulfilled by women (Brehm, 1992). Not only are women the "emotional overseers" of their relationships, but they also take care of the majority of the household work and it is in these two areas that women desire change (Braverman, 1991; Christensen and Pasch, 1993; Lerner, 1985; Levenson & Gottman, 1985). However, in both of these situations, change requires agreement and action on behalf of the male partner. Hence women are often in a position wherein they must ask for, or pursue change, which is a

position of lesser power.

This hypothesis was supported in a study by Christensen and Heavey (1990) who propose that the P-D cycle arises out of gender differences in the social structure. In a study involving thirty-one couples, these authors found significant differences between genders in Pursuer-Distancer interactions. When discussing something they wanted to change in their spouse, women were significantly more likely to take the Pursuer role. However, when the issue being discussed was a change in the woman, there was no significant gender difference in the Pursuer role.

If one accepts that men and women are socialized differently such that women want more closeness and men want more autonomy, it would then follow that it is easier for men to win the battle of the couple's closeness level because it only takes one to be autonomous but takes two mutual agreeing participants to be emotionally close. Hence, the social structure puts women in a less powerful position, that of the "wanter," desiring change in the relationship. In order to achieve the desired change, a woman may become the nagging, complaining, pleading Pursuer, setting the cycle in motion. Moreover, it appears as though the different needs and desires of men and women reinforce the social structure and power within heterosexual relationships.



Communication Notarius and Johnson (1982) found that women's communication was more negative and less neutral than their spouse's based on nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, body language and tone of voice. The fact that women are placed in a less powerful position due to the structure of society and the difference found between men and women regarding intimacy may help explain why women's communication has been found to be more negative than men's (Notarius & Johnson, 1982; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987).

In the same study, Notarius and Johnson (1982) found another difference between the genders in communication. These researchers observed that women reciprocated their partner's behavior more often than did men. They pose that women may reciprocate more because they may be better at understanding (decoding) their spouse's emotional responses and messages. This finding supports the idea that women are the emotional overseers of relationships and as such, pay more attention to the communication of others.

A consistent finding in the literature is that gender differences in communication are somehow related to marital satisfaction (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). One such discovery was that in less satisfied couples the husbands had greater difficulty decoding their wives' nonverbal messages (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981). The authors suggest that this



decoding deficit on behalf of the males could be due to general sex differences regarding emotionality and communication, i.e., that women are "emotional" and men are "rational," and that the more husbands perceive their wives emotionality as being "irrational," the more they will discount their communication and not respond, or simply be confused by it. In other words, in less satisfied relationships, the men are not as responsive to their partners' emotions (Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). Another explanation of this decoding deficit is that in dissatisfied relationships, the men have already withdrawn emotionally and hence have lost touch with their partners' communication and emotions and therefore have difficulty reading the messages (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981).

Notarius & Johnson (1982) propose that couples get engaged in the P-D cycle due to their social learning and corresponding skills. They suggest that women perceive emotional expression from their partners, although it may not be explicit or intense because women are better decoders of messages. Reciprocating, women then send back an emotional message to their partner who then does not respond to, nor reciprocate the message. This failure to respond is attributed to men being either unaware of their own feelings or attempting to limit their emotional responses due to their somatic reactivity which again is due to their socialization as men. When their partner does not respond,

women then increase their emotional expression in order to elicit a response. The increased intensity of emotion causes a man to attempt to control his emotionality as well as his partner's by shutting down, or in other words, withdrawing.

So, communication and satisfaction appear to be a chicken and egg phenomenon. Do some men have difficulty decoding nonverbal/emotional messages? Do some men attribute these messages to irrationality, discount them and therefore not attend to them? Or, do men in unsatisfied relationships withdraw emotionally and in doing so lose the ability to understand their partners' nonverbal messages? At this point, it remains unclear what happens first, the inability to decode, the withdrawal, or the dissatisfaction, but that somehow in dissatisfied relationships the males have more trouble understanding the females' nonverbal messages and tend to be more withdrawn. With regards to the P-D cycle, it makes sense that if a woman is trying to convey an emotional message and for whatever reason, her partner does not respond, she may try to convey it louder, again, more explicitly, etc. in attempts to gain an understanding and/or a response from him, and potentially beginning a P-D cycle.

Physiological Differences Another gender difference discussed in the literature as possibly contributing to the

P-D cycle is a difference in physiological factors (Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Notarius & Johnson, 1982; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987). These researchers assert that men and women differ in their reactions to stressful situations. This difference in reactivity causes men to withdraw from highly negative interactions and permits women to function more effectively when negative affect is high.

There is some discrepancy, however regarding why men are more physiologically reactive to stress. Gottman and Levenson (1988) hypothesize that men simply have stronger, more aversive biological reactions to stress, and moreover, require more time to recover from this arousal than women. Therefore, men may become more uncomfortable in stressful situations and for a longer time than women and hence, avoid or withdraw from them. Notarius and Johnson (1982) on the other hand, attribute men's reactivity to a suppression model of emotional expression which suggests that suppressing emotion increases physiological reactivity. They cite other studies wherein the most physiologically reactive individuals were also the least expressive. Compatible with these other studies, Notarius and Johnson (1982) found men to be less expressive but more reactive physiologically than women. They hypothesize that this may be due to men's socialization that emotional expression is not acceptable. Notarius and Pellegrini (1987) suggest that men may indeed be quite emotional, but do not express it as

much as women.

Regarding physiological reactivity, another study found that for both men and women a higher physiological reaction at time one was related to a decrease in marital satisfaction three years later (Levenson & Gottman, 1985). This finding suggests two possibilities. First it may support the argument that less differentiated individuals, those more likely to react strongly and more anxiously, have trouble resolving conflict and maintaining a satisfactory relationship. On the other hand, along the suppression model, these findings may suggest that for whatever reasons, when couples do not express, dysfunction follows--or at least dissatisfaction.

To summarize gender differences regarding physiological reactivity, it appears that men respond more strongly to stressful situations than women and require more time to return to a non-aroused state. Exactly why men become more aroused is not yet certain although hypotheses have been proposed. Nonetheless, their higher reactivity may cause men to withdraw from stressful interactions with their partners, precipitating the P-D cycle.

Summary Men and women are not alike. This we all know. It appears that many, but probably not all, of our gender differences arise out of the process of socialization. Gender differences in needs or desires,

communication, and physiological reactivity have the potential of creating difficulties, misunderstandings and distress in intimate heterosexual relationships, with a P-D cycle as a potential outcome. A possible interplay of these gender differences might include women perceiving and reciprocating an emotional interchange (because they are better decoders and more in tune to the emotional aspect of relationships), men (due to difficulty decoding, perceived need to contain emotion, and/or in an attempt to limit physiological arousal) communicating inattention or insensitivity to their spouses behavior. Women then interpret this inattentiveness/neutral behavior as unresponsive or unemotional and pursue the men seeking understanding from their partner, because as women they desire this sort of communication and are comfortable with it. At some point in the cycle, women may begin to employ negative behavior in order to obtain some understanding and connection, which causes further discomfort in the men and results in further withdrawal. It is not yet known what contributes to men's difficulty decoding, their containment of emotional expression, or their physiological arousal. If a couple is unable to move beyond this interaction, the result is that both the man and the woman feel ignored, invalidated and in need.

Communication Skills Deficit Theory

A less prominent explanation of the P-D cycle's origin found in the literature is that referred to as communication skills deficit. This approach proposes that the P-D cycle stems from a couple's inability to communicate well (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Markman, 1979). The communication skills deficit theory is essentially a behavior-oriented approach. In other words, it does not focus on something inherent in the individuals (i.e., personality, family-of-origin, etc.), but rather on what they do, and therefore is also present-oriented. This approach essentially proposes that when differences and/or problems arise, couples lacking sufficient skills to negotiate solutions often end up in a vicious P-D cycle (Christensen & Pasch, 1993). Some of the major studies supporting this perspective will be examined as well as some alternative explanations and interpretations of their results. Although poor communication appears to be a necessary ingredient of marital dissatisfaction and the P-D cycle, it does not appear to be sufficient by itself to explain the roots of the P-D cycle.

Markman (1979) asserted that unrewarding patterns of interacting precede marital conflict. From his two-and-a-half year longitudinal study of couples' communication and relationship satisfaction, Markman concluded that marital



dissatisfaction was a result of an inability to develop satisfying and rewarding ways of interacting and communicating. He suggested that the unhappy couples may simply be unable to create more positive interaction patterns and negotiate solutions to relationship problems due to a deficit in their communication skills. In his five-year follow-up, Markman (1981) again suggested that unrewarding patterns of communicating are fairly stable over time. Moreover, he asserted that communication deficits contribute to marital distress.

In another study proposed to support the Communication Deficit Theory, Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank and Yoppi (1976) had distressed and nondistressed couples discuss issues relevant to their relationship and code both the intent and the impact of messages sent and received. They observed that the distressed couples tended to receive messages as more negative than the nondistressed group. Gottman et al., (1976) concluded that these results support a skills or communication deficit model for distressed relationships. It seems to them that the distressed partners are less adept at decoding the meaning of messages than are nondistressed couples. Although this explanation seems plausible, it could also be that over time the distressed couples have come to perceive their partner and the relationship in a negative way in general and that this attitude, rather than a skills deficit, prevents them from



receiving messages more positively.

Many of the studies on communication deficits (Gottman, et. al., 1976; Gottman & Porterfield, 1981; Markman 1979, 1981; Roberts & Krokoff, 1990) show a relationship between communication skills deficits and lower levels of satisfaction, but fail to convincingly demonstrate that the skills deficits cause the dissatisfaction, or how this might occur. Therefore some studies offering a more complete explanation of how communication deficits lead to relationship distress and the P-D cycle will be discussed.

Some studies suggest that when problems and/or differences arise and the couple lacks the skills to negotiate a satisfactory solution, one or both partners may resort to coercive means to get needs fulfilled (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983) . Although this tactic may have short-term advantages, they claim the result is a P-D cycle that can escalate out of control.

Gottman and Levenson (1988) believe that a combination of negative affect, or an inability to communicate "positively," and physiological arousal is at the root of the P-D cycle. More specifically,

negative affect during marital interaction and the concomitant physiological arousal may interfere with higher order cognitive functions such as problem solving, planning and creative thinking. Such a reduction in the flexibility of cognitive functioning may result in a reliance on automatic and over-learned cognitive routines, and thus a tendency to resort to well-rehearsed, but highly maladaptive behaviors that adversely affect the couple's ability to resolve conflict (pp.191).

The reasoning offered by Gottman and Levenson (1988) appears to involve a chain reaction of poor communication skills resulting in high levels of negative affect which in turn may cause the male to withdraw and the couple to engage in the "well-rehearsed, but highly maladaptive," P-D cycle.

Christensen and Shenk (1991) compared communication patterns among nondistressed, clinical and divorcing couples. In this article, Christensen and Shenk believe their findings support an alternative model of the P-D cycle. They state that a more accurate explanation of the P-D cycle would be a combination of a deficit in communication skills and individual incompatibility regarding emotional closeness.

Notarius and Pellegrini (1987) scrutinize the communication skills deficit explanation of marital conflict suggesting that some interaction inherent and specific to the relationship itself causes conflict. In other words, it could be that it is not so much a skill deficit as it is an inability or lack of desire to use the skill in their marriage. It could be that as men feel pressured to respond to their wives demands for communication or response, they withdraw. As they withdraw, they pay less and less attention to their wives cues and, therefore, become less adept at interpreting them. Notarius and Pellegrini conclude that longitudinal research is needed to clearly explain this selective decoding ability among men.

Summary Many studies have demonstrated a relationship between poor communication and marital distress and/or dissatisfaction, and/or the P-D cycle. Nonetheless, these studies do not seem to prove a causal relationship between these factors. It does not seem certain whether the communication skills deficits cause the discontent, or vice versa. Although communication skills certainly are an important aspect of a relationship, deficits in this area do not seem sufficient, by themselves, to start a P-D cycle. Other factors such as gender differences, conflicting rules learned in the family-of-origin, physiological reactivity, or couple interactions are most likely involved as well.

#### Perspectives on the Effects of the Pursuer-Distancer Cycle

One of the effects described in the literature of the P-D cycle on couples is relationship dissatisfaction (Betchen, 1991; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman, 1991; Gottman et al., 1976; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983). While the P-D cycle can be functional and healthy, and can provide some stability to the relationship, when it becomes the primary interaction between the partners, the couple becomes polarized with neither person getting his or her needs met (Guerin, Fay, Burden & Kautto, 1987; Lerner, 1989; Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987). Moreover, the P-D cycle can serve as a substitute

for real intimacy, which may or may not be comfortable for the individuals, or may be comfortable only until stressful situations arise (Betchen, 1991; Guerin, et. al., 1987; Hof & Treat, 1989; ). Dissatisfaction, rigidity and a limited relationship are common effects of the P-D cycle according to all three of the approaches studied in this paper. However, each approach has a different focus and some interesting specific points which will be presented and reviewed in the following section.

#### Family Systems Theory

From a Family Systems perspective the effects of the P-D cycle on a couple are quite extensive. If a couple is unable to interact in other ways or to negotiate their differences, the cycle progresses, becomes more severe and the couple may become stuck in this interaction pattern. During stressful times or if the couple does indeed become stuck in the P-D cycle, the individuals and relationship itself may be defined by the cycle. When this happens, the roles, rules, equilibrium, boundaries, and communication all become rigid, and the couple is basically limited and has less options in the relationship. Although the P-D cycle can be so restricting, it also serves some purposes, both functional and positive. All of these effects of the P-D cycle will be reviewed next.

Roles By being stuck in the P-D cycle, one person may have the role of the emotional pursuer and one the role of distancer. When these roles become rigid, it is hard for either to step out of them, possibly because the role becomes a sort of a habit, or it may be a function of the pattern itself. As one spouse takes on the role of the pursuer and is pursuing whenever an opportunity arises, it may leave no room for the other to pursue and likewise to distance. Hence, the roles about initiating emotional closeness and distance can become quite fixed.

Rules Moreover, the couple's unspoken rule about intimacy might become, "you pursue and I'll distance." If this rule becomes embedded in the couple's life, it reinforces the accompanying roles and further limits the couple's options in their interactions. If for example, in a couple wherein the rule above is obeyed and the female has adopted the distancer role, when she has an urge to approach her partner for a quiet walk through the park, she may think, "It's not even worth asking him, it wouldn't work." She may not even be aware that the couple's rigid rule about emotional closeness is influencing her behavior and limiting her experience in the relationship.

Equilibrium By adhering to the roles and rules as described above it appears an equilibrium is established in

the relationship. A very predictable, stable "status quo" about who does what and approaches whom develops according to the rule. All couples have rules about who cooks, cleans, writes the letters, cleans the garage, etc., but in extreme P-D couples the rule(s) about intimacy and emotional closeness are fixed such that the couple does not experience much mutuality or intimacy--factors found important in marital satisfaction.

Boundaries Moreover, the boundaries of each individual regarding intimacy become more extreme. The Pursuer's boundaries become more open and the Distancer's more closed. The intensification of the boundaries makes it even more difficult for the two to connect as a couple or be flexible as individuals. As the cycle progresses further, more distance grows between them as they fail to truly connect.

Communication At some point in the cycle, the P-D cycle may characterize all of their interactions, regardless of content. For example, Pursuer: "Would you like some of the dinner I cooked?" Distancer: "No, I'll cook for myself later." At this point all of their communication and interactions would be complementary and the individuals are likely to be discontent. Furthermore, at advanced stages of the cycle the communication is apt to become quite negative and attacking, so much so that it may be hard to tell who is



the Pursuer and who the Distancer (Guerin, et. al., 1987). At this point, the couple's communication does not facilitate trust nor the needs of either person.

Limited Options From an Object Relations point of view, the couple has come to rely more and more on the differences in each other in their relationship and are unlikely to develop their own "weak" part (Guerin, et. al., 1987). In other words, the Distancer is relying on the Pursuer exclusively to initiate closeness and connection, and the Pursuer is so wrapped up in achieving connection that only the Distancer is able to function autonomously. Moreover, each is probably receiving reinforcement for their projections (i.e., "I knew he didn't love me," or "I knew she'd try to boss me") onto the other.

Guerin et. al., (1987) suggest that the very roles that have served to provide some sort of balance become the source of escalating conflict. These authors also argue that the P-D cycle exists to some degree in all couples. The difference is that some couples are able to make a connection and reestablish stability, whereas for other couples high levels of stress and anxiety exist such that the cycle continues to escalate and results in hurt, disappointment, anger, frustration, and bitterness (Guerin, et. al., 1987).



Functional Purposes For many couples the P-D cycle provides an equilibrium and stability that is comfortable and that does not lead to intense conflict. Although the cycle can be very frustrating and painful when it leads to conflict, Napier (1978) and others propose that it also serves some functions (Betchen, 1991; Hof & Treat, 1989). First, the cycle may be somewhat comfortable and acceptable because it is familiar. Second, being involved with someone whose manner of handling emotional closeness is opposite of one's own allows each individual to rebel against their family-of-origin. Lastly, being involved in a P-D cycle protects each partner from examining, or even becoming aware of deeper seated fears and anxieties related to intimacy.

Moreover, for some couples involved in a P-D cycle that does not escalate, the P-D cycle may serve as an impetus for growth. Perhaps as Napier (1978) suggests, each individual rebels against their family-of-origin rules and roles in order to create their own. Or, the partners may learn from one another and the couple may create new ways of interacting by expanding their roles. For example, the Distancer may become more at ease with emotionally close situations and the Pursuer may discover the benefits of being more autonomous from his/her partner. It is not certain what allows some couples to grow and prosper from a P-D cycle while others struggle within it. However, it would seem that elements such as commitment, trust,

flexibility and stability in the relationship would allow each individual to risk stepping outside the familiar role, as well as communicating honestly about one's own experience within the relationship in order to develop additional interaction patterns. The question of what differentiates problematic P-D cycles from productive ones merits research as knowledge in this area would greatly enhance therapeutic effectiveness.

Summary From a Family Systems perspective, many aspects of a couple's relationship are affected by the P-D cycle. If a couple interacts primarily in a P-D fashion concerning intimacy and possibly other areas as well, the individuals and consequently the relationship are limited in many ways. The couple's roles, rules, equilibrium, boundaries and communication all tend to become rigid or fixed such that the relationship of such couples would probably be experienced as unlively, stiff, and basically not too enjoyable or fulfilling. However, the P-D cycle can also serve the functions of providing stability and the opportunity to rebel against one's family-of-origin, as well as protecting each person from looking at more deep seated fears. In some cases, the P-D cycle for many couples can allow for growth and relationship as well as personal enrichment.

Gender Theory

Since the literature shows that the P-D cycle is generally a gender system with a male Pursuer and a female Distancer, it is important to address the impacts of the cycle within the context of gender. When couples engage in the P-D cycle, gender differences are usually accentuated and may cause the partners to become polarized. When the Pursuer is the female and the Distancer the male, the cycle can inhibit each partner from developing their "other side", her masculine side (if female) or feminine side (if male). Along with limiting the relationship as discussed in the Family Systems section, the P-D cycle also appears to restrict each person's behavior and growth in reaching potential as a man and woman.

Moreover, when the cycle is female Pursuer, male Distancer, the result is that social structure and power differences are reinforced and exacerbated (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In a gender-typical P-D couple, the woman is in a position of asking and the man in the more powerful position of holding what she wants, namely connection. Many experts purport that men are consistently more satisfied with the status quo in a relationship while women desire more change (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Turgeon, 1992).

In fact, when the female Pursuer finally gives up and the Distancer begins pursuing, the latter may be an attempt

to regain the equilibrium and the more powerful position with which he was comfortable. When the woman is pursuing she is essentially in a position of asking for something that her partner has and therefore is in an inferior position to him. The man is in a more powerful position of "having" what is wanted and deciding when and if to "give" it. Therefore, when the woman quits pursuing, the man may feel powerless and out of control and pursuing her may be an attempt to return to the former pattern where he felt in control and powerful. Therefore, when the Distancer is the woman and the Pursuer is the man, the meaning of the P-D cycle could be quite different. The impact of a "non-traditional" P-D cycle is an area deserving of future research.

Notarius and Pellegrini (1987) suggest that men and women may indeed both want an intimate connection, but behavioral interactions between them may prevent them from having their needs fulfilled. Gender differences regarding needs, desires, styles of communication, and power may all contribute to the interactions that prevent both men and women from obtaining what they want, probably validation, when a P-D cycle is operating.

Summary Therefore, from a Gender Theory perspective, the P-D cycle has the effect of accentuating and reinforcing any existing gender differences, polarizing the couple, and

limiting development. When the P-D cycle is traditional with the female pursuing and the male distancing, the P-D cycle reinforces the social structure of men as more powerful and women as less powerful and exacerbates limits inherent in traditional gender roles.

### Communication Skills Deficit Theory

Communication theory holds that the P-D cycle arises out of communication deficits and as the P-D cycle progresses, whatever communication skills a couple had at first disintegrate and dissatisfaction follows. It is argued that couples with poor communication skills can not resolve problems nor differences in needs, both of which are bound to arise. Therefore their problem areas grow and create significant stress over time resulting in dissatisfaction which contributes to negative and unrewarding communication (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Markman, 1979; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983). The increased level of negative affect or communication can lead to even more dissatisfaction which causes more negative affect and the cycle continues (Markman, 1981, 1979; Gottman et. al., 1976).

In studying satisfaction and communication, there appears to be a relationship between dissatisfaction and the P-D cycle (Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Sullaway &

Christensen, 1983). In a study comparing nondistressed, clinic (currently receiving marital therapy) and divorcing couples, Christensen and Shenk (1991) found that the two distressed groups engaged in P-D communication significantly more than the nondistressed couple. Moreover, these authors found that the distressed groups had significantly greater discrepancies in desired closeness or independence than the nondistressed group. Christensen and Shenk (1991) suggest that the distressed couples may not communicate as well because they have a greater problem, a bigger discrepancy in desired closeness. Moreover, they propose that the greater the discrepancy in desired closeness, the more advanced communication skills needed to resolve the difference in desires. It is interesting to note that there was little difference between the divorcing and clinical couples, especially with regard to tendencies to engage in P-D communication.

In another study of communication patterns amongst couples, Sullaway and Christensen (1983) found that two patterns of relating were significantly related to a lower level of relationship satisfaction. The first pattern is termed Demand/Withdraw, and appears to essentially be the P-D cycle. The other distressing interaction is termed Emotional/Rational and seems related to the P-D cycle since many descriptions of the P-D cycle include the factor that the pursuer is more emotional and the Distancer is more



rational. A possible conclusion from this study is that different styles of interpersonal relating makes it difficult for needs to be met which in turn results in dissatisfaction and then communication breakdown.

Summary When reviewing the literature on communication skills deficit, what seems consistent is the relationship between dissatisfaction and P-D communication. From this perspective the main effects of the P-D cycle are dissatisfaction and a further breakdown of communication which perpetuates the P-D cycle. It has also been suggested that poorer communication skills may be related to a greater discrepancy in desired closeness. The P-D cycle is conceptualized as one that can "snowball" and become quite destructive. As couples fail to communicate successfully about their differences, these differences can intensify. Furthermore, when attempts to negotiate differences fail, there may be less of an incentive to try and communication frequency and intensity decreases.

#### The Pursuer-Distancer Cycle Within the Context of Therapy

Little empirical research of the P-D cycle within the realm of therapy has been conducted. Nonetheless, discussion based on theoretical orientation, personal experience, or some combination of the two of how to treat



an unhappy P-D cycle is found in all three of the areas addressed in this paper: Family Systems Theory; Gender Theory; Communication Skills Deficit Theory. Because it appears that all three of these aspects contribute to and are affected by the P-D cycle, it follows that each should be addressed in therapy. A discussion of each area as it relates to therapy with a P-D couple will be presented.

### Family Systems Theory

The P-D cycle has been identified as one of the most common problems among couples presenting for therapy (Fogarty, 1976; Guerin, et. al., 1987; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; Napier, 1978; Sherman, et. al., 1991). Although a variety of treatment approaches are discussed in the Family Systems Therapy literature, five clinical issues emerge. These issues include: 1)Facilitating Differentiation; 2)Addressing family-of-origin issues; 3)Utilizing Confrontation; 4)Facilitating a deep emotional experience; 5)Avoiding triangulation and adopting a neutral stances. In the following section, each of these issues will be addressed as they relate to therapy with a couple engaged in a destructive P-D cycle.

Facilitating Differentiation Increasing differentiation is proposed by many to be an important aspect of treating a problematic P-D cycle (Beavers, 1985;

Betchen, 1991; Bowen, 1981; Guerin, et. al., 1987; Israelstam, 1989; Lerner, 1985; Napier, 1978; Sherman, et. al., 1991; Waring, 1988). Facilitating a higher level of differentiation decreases the level of reactivity for the individuals. For example, when the Distancer withdraws, a Pursuer who is more differentiated would not react as strongly and therefore would feel less need to pursue and the P-D cycle would be less likely to escalate. Similarly, a more differentiated individual is better able to identify his/her needs and make requests instead of resorting to obtaining them indirectly, such as silently moving into the other room. Also, at a higher level of differentiation an individual is more likely to take responsibility for his/her actions and avoid blaming the partner. From an Object Relations perspective, more differentiated individuals are less likely to project their own inner fears and problems onto their partners. Such projection results in a denial of personal existence and responsibility (Beavers, 1985).

One way for a therapist to facilitate differentiation is to encourage each partner to see and understand his/her own part of the cycle and to quit blaming the other (Betchen, 1991; Bowen, 1981; Hof & Treat, 1989; Johnson & Greenberg, 1988; Napier, 1978). If a person can understand and focus on their own contribution to the situation, rather than the partner's, more productive work can take place.

A more specific and structural technique for helping

individuals understand their partner and communicate with them without blaming is to teach and use communication skills, especially the use of "I Statements" (Bowen, 1981; Hof & Treat, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Lerner, 1989; Levine, 1991; Markman et al., 1987; Sherman, et al., 1991). Another manner of enhancing differentiation is to help each individual define and ask directly for what they need, perhaps using communication skills (Israelstam, 1989). Many times each partner is unaware of what the other needs because it hasn't been asked for, but is acutely aware that the partner is upset about "something." Lerner (1981) suggests that each partner focus on themselves in attempt to clarify values, beliefs, life goals, needs, etc. and that then real closeness can occur. It may also be beneficial for the couple to access and share the deep emotions surrounding various issues in their relationship (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988).

Another aspect of enhancing differentiation is to help the individuals distinguish between thoughts and feelings (Bowen, 1981). Moreover, cognitive factors have been presented as playing a significant role in couples' interactions (Beavers, 1985; Floyd & Markman, 1983; Groome, 1989; Guerin et al., 1987; Hof & Treat, 1989; Israelstam, 1989; Markman, et al., 1987; Napier, 1978; Nugent & Constantine, 1988; Weeks, 1989). Therefore it seems important that a therapist address the cognitions of each

partner. More specifically, when working with P-D couples it might be helpful to address each individual's cognitions in the following areas: 1) expectations; 2) perceptions of self 3) perceptions of partner; 4) perception of change; and 5) perception of therapeutic process.

What a person expects of a relationship is quite significant since it is probably the reason the person is in the relationship in the first place. Expectations of self, partner, and relationship are often not met, usually because the expectations are for "perfection," or something close. When expectations are not met, resentment and bitterness are often the result which then lead to relationship dissatisfaction and often a P-D cycle (Guerin, et al., 1987). Nugent and Constantine (1988) propose that individuals have "marital paradigms," or expectations of what a relationship should be like. Couples wherein the partners have differing paradigms may require more commitment and work. These authors propose that by addressing the partners' marital paradigms, the therapist can help the couple develop skills necessary to cope with any differences; develop a more appropriate treatment plan; show respect for individual differences; use relevant images and language (Nugent & Constantine, 1988).

It has been recommended that therapists explore expectations (especially those related to closeness and distance) with couples as well as the underlying

disappointment that usually accompanies them, eventually linking them to the family-of-origin which is often their source (Guerin, et al., 1987; Markman, et al., 1987; Nugent & Constantine, 1988; Sherman et al., 1991). Based on the results of a study involving couples' and observers' ratings, Floyd and Markman (1983) concluded that couples can become "perceptually set" over time and end up in a vicious interaction cycle. In other words, behaviors that the observers perceived as positive were not necessarily perceived as positive by the spouses. If a spouse thinks a message or behavior of his/her partner is negative, they may be much more likely to respond negatively. Therefore, it appears to be important to address the partners' perceptions of each other, as they may not be aware of how each perceives the other, and their perceptions are likely to be different than the therapist's as well (Israelstam, 1989). Likewise, one partner may believe he/she is very considerate, clear in communicating, affectionate, etc., while their partner does not see them this way; so it is important to check out each individual's perception of self regarding many issues.

Moreover, from an Object Relations perspective, based on what Israelstam (1989) has termed "Individual Belief Systems," (IBS) partners may expect certain responses from their partner and behave in a way such that the responses are elicited. Israelstam suggests that therapists primarily

address and work towards developing new interactions that disconfirm unhelpful IBS and confirm helpful IBS.

Israelstam (1989) asserts that in order to achieve this goal, differentiation must be enhanced by: 1) increasing awareness of self and other; 2) taking responsibility for projections; 3) focusing on changing self vs. partner; 4) understanding the purpose of projecting and certain behaviors.

In addressing the cognitive aspects of a relationship, it could be beneficial to assist the couple to respect subjectivity and accept ambivalence as this is almost a necessary condition of any relationship between two different people (Beavers, 1985). It is also suggested that "healthy" couples believe their partner's motives are for the most part neutral (Beavers, 1985). Therefore, therapists may want to address the degree of "mind reading" occurring within a couple regarding motives. Moreover, throughout treatment the therapist may want to check out how the couple perceives any changes in their relationships, and how they believe these changes came about since it is much different to believe one's partner has become more honest and open vs. believing he/she changed at the therapist's request (Floyd & Markman, 1983).

Addressing Family-of-Origin Issues Addressing each partners' family-of-origin is thought by many experts to be



highly beneficial for couples engaged in a painful P-D cycle (Betchen, 1991; Bowen, 1981; Fogarty, 1976; Guerin, et. al., 1987; Hof & Treat, 1989; Lerner, 1985, 1989; Napier, 1978, 1987a, 1987b; Sherman, et. al., 1991). One of the main reasons of looking at the family-of-origin is to give the couple some distance from, or a new perspective on, the problem in order that they can then make new choices. In other words, instead of seeing their cycle as the result of some horrible flaw inherent in their very being, they can come to perceive it as something they have learned and/or unconsciously decided to repeat or rebel against. This is a much more workable perspective than, "Our relationship is impossible, and maybe we weren't meant to be together." Another reason for addressing a couple's families-of-origin is that some of the P-D cycle occurs due to unresolved family-of-origin issues which get acted out and reacted to in the couples relationship.

There appears to be three different approaches to doing family-of-origin work which are relevant to treating the P-D cycle. One approach to incorporating family-of-origin work in couple therapy is to simply inquire about each partner's family when certain issues arise. So, when the couple is talking about their patterns of interacting, the therapist might ask, "How did you observe your parents' interacting," or "How close were your parents?" Or when one partner is blaming the other, a question might be, "What did your



father/mother do when he/she was upset?" Assisting the couple in understanding some of why they interact as they do can be helpful.

By attempting to help the couple understand their behaviors as they relate to their families-of-origin, the therapist is not placing blame on the family-of-origin. Rather, the therapist is suggesting that the present situation makes sense given their experiences in the past. For example, upon discussing the spousal relationship of a female pursuer in which the mother was a pursuer, the therapist might offer the following, "So while growing up you saw your mother often trying to get closer to your father. It is only natural that when you desire more closeness with your partner you would go about it in much the same way as your most prominent female role model." This statement is basically an attempt to make the woman's behavior understandable. Napier (1987a) suggests reframing the couple's struggle as a combination of loyalty to, and incomplete interactions in the families-of-origin. Hence, when a client is expressing strong anger (or other emotions) to their partner, the therapist might pose, "Could some of the reason you're so angry at (partner) be that you are still mad at your mother/father?" Increasing understanding in this manner often frees the clients of some guilt and feelings of being overwhelmed by this "monster" problem. The result is that they are now more able to address and

work on the present situation and make some choices and changes.

A more systematic and thorough way to focus on Family of Origin issues for P-D couples is to conduct a genogram. A genogram is a family map drawn on paper highlighting demographics as well as relational aspects of families. When working with P-D couples, the therapist would probably focus on the characteristics of the spousal relationships paying special attention to closeness and distance issues, rules, and conflicts. The genogram makes the family systems of both partners clear, more concrete, and contributes to forming a new perspective, that of "We are not alone, we are part of this interconnecting web," and therefore further increases understanding. Moreover, it can lead to an enhanced sense of identity, which helps in the process of differentiation (Lerner, 1985).

Another approach is to actually invite the families-of-origin into therapy to process with them rather than about them (Napier, 1978). This allows the therapist to observe and expose family patterns and history which are being repeated by the presenting couple. Moreover, there is a chance that some ongoing conflicts or old issues can be resolved. This would most likely decrease tension in the P-D relationship and allow the couple to better work on their issues.

Moreover, should the P-D couple have children Napier

(1978) proposes bringing them into therapy as well. When there is marital strife, children are almost invariably affected (Brehm, 1992). Seeing the children in therapy allows the therapist to assess to what degree the children are involved in, or affected by, the conflict. For example, it is possible that one or both partners may have formed a very close bond with one child, going to the child for support, companionship, conversation, or sex in extreme cases. In Family Systems terminology, the child(ren) has been triangled into the spousal relationship in order that it be more stable. If this takes place consistently and over an extended period of time, the child may be placed in an adult role rather than that of being a child. This process is referred to as parentification and depending on the circumstances can be relatively harmless or quite devastating for the child. When it appears that either triangulation or parentification has occurred, the therapist must act to break down these cross-generational inappropriate relationships. Napier (1978) argues that in some cases it may be necessary to detriangulate a child before effective work on the spousal relationship can be done.

Utilizing Confrontation Confrontation is often cited as an important behavior of therapists working with P-D cycles (Beavers, 1985; Betchen, 1991; Bowen, 1981; Guerin,

et al., 1987; Hof & Treat, 1989; Israelstam, 1989; Napier, 1978; Sherman, et al., 1991). This skill would prove effective in the following interventions: pointing out and covert patterns, rules and behaviors; encouraging each partner to take responsibility for their behavior; facilitating an exploration of emotions; confronting their significant differences; pointing out faulty assumptions or cognitions; interrupting destructive (i.e., blaming) interchanges; making projections overt. All of these interventions have been discussed as being helpful when working with P-D couples. As Napier (1978) asserts, "While it is tempting for the therapist to focus on overt behavior and to try to get both partners to 'see' the other person or to conform to their needs, pushing the partners to face their own internal struggles and their family-of-origin conflicts is probably more productive" (p.11). Hence, although it may not be comfortable for all therapists, confrontation on many issues appears highly significant in treating P-D couples.

Facilitating a Deep Emotional Experience It has been proposed that facilitating a deep emotional experience is therapeutic when working with P-D couples (Fogarty, 1976; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988; Napier, 1978, 1987a, 1987b; Sherman et al., 1991). In other words, by allowing individuals to access and express their deep emotions, a

pattern can be broken and the partners experience one another differently (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988). In fact in one of the few studies of marital therapy outcome, Johnson and Greenberg (1988) found that couples who experienced a deep level of emotion and disclosure in therapy had a more successful treatment outcome than those who did not. These researchers suggest that by getting in touch with deep emotions and sharing them, individuals then become more aware of their needs that were perhaps previously hidden in the subconscious (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988).

Moreover, "The accessing and exploration of key emotional experience is directed not towards ventilation or insight, but towards the experiencing of new aspects of self which then evoke new responses from the partner" (Johnson & Greenberg, 1988, p.176). What seems important is that instead of reacting to one another, the partners become aware of their responses and share them. For example, instead of yelling, "How dare you come home late without calling," one might explain, "When you were late it triggered my fear that you might leave me." The latter of these two statements is not only more accurate and complete, but easier for the partner to hear, understand, and respond to. Furthermore, the latter statement demonstrates a higher level of differentiation than the first. Perhaps by exploring and expressing one's deep emotions rather than reacting emotionally differentiation can be enhanced.

Moreover, by experiencing and sharing one's feelings, one might then be better able to distinguish them from thoughts and behaviors which can help increase differentiation.

Napier (1987a) suggests that in coming together, couples are looking to "correct" an emotional experience from their past. Hence, he suggests that the therapist allow partners to cathart deeply while the therapist support them. Then these emotions are explored as they apply to conflict and issues from the family-of-origin, creating a "cognitive map." Napier (1987b) proposes that eventually each individual should deal directly with his/her family-of-origin in the therapy setting to resolve these issues.

It should be noted however, that an open expression of emotions when treating couples is thought to be contraindicated by some, especially in certain cases (Bowen, 1976; Guerin, et al., 1987; Waring, 1988). When a relationship is particularly chaotic, emotionally reactive and explosive, it may not be helpful to draw out emotions with the possible result of more "explosions." In these situations, it may be more helpful to attempt to decrease emotional reactivity in order that the couple can focus on working on the relationship, and later in treatment return to the emotional undercurrents.

Therefore, by facilitating a deep emotional experience and expression individuals may become more aware of their own and their partner's needs, conflicts, family-of-origin



issues, incongruencies, responsibility. Moreover, differentiation may be increased. There seem to be many benefits in facilitating emotional work with P-D clients and in fact this process may enhance other interventions.

Avoiding Triangulation/ Neutrality When working with P-D couples, it is very important for the therapist to maintain as neutral a position as possible (Betchen, 1991; Guerin, et al., 1987; Hof & Treat, 1989; Israelstam, 1989; Napier, 1978, 1987a). It is very likely that the couple is quite polarized by the time they present for treatment, therefore "siding" the least bit with one more than the other could alienate the other (Napier, 1978). In order for the therapist to remain neutral, it may be helpful to label the problem as "the P-D cycle" in order to send the message that it takes two for this cycle to exist. Moreover, by presenting the problem as one that involves an equal contribution of each, the partners may then begin to take responsibility for resolving as a couple rather than blaming each other (Betchen, 1991).

Hof and Treat (1989) discuss neutrality and balance on behalf of the therapist as being essential to successful treatment. They suggest that the therapist approach both partners, support both partners, and confront both partners regarding fears. So, after intervening with one partner, it appears helpful to intervene with the other in an equal or



similar way to maintain neutrality. Co-therapy is suggested as another manner in which balance can be maintained (Israelstam, 1989; Napier, 1978, 1987a). In this case each therapist can focus more (in supporting, confronting, etc.) on one of the partners, and as long as the therapists are balanced between themselves, neither partner will feel alienated.

Both partners must be given equal attention, support, prodding, etc. However, in doing this the therapist must be careful not to pursue the Distancer (Betchen, 1991; Fogarty, 1976; Napier, 1987a) which could send the message that the Distancer is "the one with the problem." Instead of pursuing the Distancer to move in closer or get more involved, it has been recommended that the therapist help both the Pursuer and Distancer get in touch with and gain control over their fears regarding intimacy (Fogarty, 1976; Lerner, 1985; Napier, 1987a). It is likely that one session may focus more on one partner than the other. The therapist may want to acknowledge this fact and that next session the focus will be on the other partner. Whatever the case, the therapist must be firm in their stance as therapist and confront any attempts by one partner to sabotage or stop the work of the other (Napier, 1987a). When one partner appears to be making changes, the other may need help in supporting them because changes are generally threatening (Hof & Treat, 1989).

Hence, in attempting to remain as neutral as possible, the therapist should present the problem as a couple issue, rather than one partner's. It is also helpful to attend to and focus on each individual as equally as possible. Bringing in a co-therapist may be quite effective in maintaining balance. Moreover, assisting both partners to see that underneath their behaviors each has a similar fear, one related to intimacy. Lastly, it would prove beneficial for the therapist to assess his/her own values, beliefs and behaviors regarding closeness and distance. In some cases, the P-D pattern may be a significant issue for the therapist in his/her personal life. In this case referral may be the best option.

Summary From a Family Systems perspective, there are five main areas to address and treat when working with P-D couples. Facilitating differentiation would seem valuable as it contributes to a decrease in reactivity and projection, an increase in personal responsibility and awareness of self. Because much of how partners behave is a reaction to, and/or was learned in their family-of-origin, addressing these issues appears essential in breaking down a destructive P-D cycle. Confronting the couple regarding covert patterns, blaming, faulty assumptions, and defensive behavior is discussed as very important since P-D couples are often entrenched in, and unaware of such patterns.

Moreover, by allowing and encouraging the partners to tap into and share deep emotions, they can become more of aware of self, personal needs, and experience one another differently. Lastly, because P-D couples can be very polarized, it has been proposed that therapists should avoid triangulation and remain neutral in order for a successful outcome with a P-D couple.

### Gender Theory

The gender literature offers a contextual framework for understanding and treating many aspects of the P-D cycle. Whether an individual grows up and develops as a man or a woman, impacts his/her identity, ways of being and interacting but may be over-looked as playing a critical role in marital systems (Knudson-Martin, 1993). As was discussed in the section on origins of the P-D cycle, traditional socialization of men and women appears to contribute to and perpetuate the P-D cycle. Therefore addressing issues of gender is important when treating a P-D couple. There appear to be four issues stemming from the gender literature that are pertinent to treating P-D couples; these are: 1) Socially Learned Roles; 2) Power and Control; 3) Expectations and Resentments and; 4) Choices.

Socially Learned Roles The literature has consistently shown that men and women tend to behave in different ways as

prescribed by society. As was discussed earlier, the socialization of men and women may be a precipitating factor to the dynamics that cause the P-D cycle. In fact, based on a review of research Feldman (1982) proposes, "Sex-role conditioning promotes the development and expression of certain dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors in men and women, and these have negative effects on marital intimacy and problem-solving." Gender socialization information could be very useful to a therapist working with P-D couples in many ways. Gender differences and corresponding typical behavior could serve the therapist as a guide, or basis for understanding, interpreting and explaining the couple's behavior. For example, it has been suggested that men tend to communicate inattention and women tend to interpret this behavior as unresponsive (Notarius & Pellegrini, 1987). Moreover, it has been suggested that women like to perceive their relationship as serious (Siavelis & Lamke, 1992). Perhaps when women perceive inattentiveness, they assume the man is not serious about the relationship which in turn upsets women. This information could set the stage for appropriate interventions by the therapist. For example, the therapist could ask the woman, "I wonder if you ever think that he isn't paying attention to you and how that makes you feel?" Or as in Friedland's (1982) study, the finding that women tend to be emotionally and verbally expressive while men tend to be verbally reserved and

emotionally controlled could be used in a similar way. For example, the therapist might query, "I wonder if you have a hard time knowing how to respond to her emotionality since that doesn't seem to be your style?" Many of the other gender differences and trends discussed previously can be implemented as a guide for the therapist's interventions and understanding of a P-D cycle, depending on the individual case of course.

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) suggest that men and women interact outside of typical roles in order to maintain a satisfactory relationship. Based on their study, these researchers suggest the following: women should confront disagreement (vs. being very compliant, fearful or sad); women should express anger; men should also participate in conflict (vs. withdrawing or being stubborn); that neither partner should get defensive. In discussing effective therapy, Beavers (1985) also suggests allowing women to be open, angry and assertive, and men to be tender, frightened, and uncertain.

These prescriptions are somewhat outside of what has been found to be typical roles and interactions for men and women. Some may propose that this is an argument for androgyny or some sort of gender revolution. Rather, it seems more productive to receive these assertions as arguments for honesty. In other words, when a man does not know the solution to a conflict, instead of withdrawing it

may be more beneficial to state the uncertainty. Likewise, when a woman is angry, instead of bottling it up and becoming sad or nagging, perhaps she should express her anger.

Perhaps couples have a difficult time with conflicts and expressing themselves honestly because they do not know how to do it, or are unable to remain unreactive and see the other objectively. If this is indeed the case, then some of the treatment strategies discussed earlier such as teaching communication skills, enhancing differentiation, etc. may be appropriate. Moreover, educating the couple about the gender differences and interactions commonly found in our society and their social origin may provide them with a reframe of the problem that alleviates guilt, self-anger and blame.

Power and Control It appears that part of what the P-D cycle is about is power and control in the relationship, some of which is tied to gender issues. It has been proposed that a portion of the P-D cycle stems from socially learned gender roles, and that when women are in the role of pursuing they are in a less powerful role (Turgeon, 1992). This argument continues that in general, men are more satisfied and gratified in heterosexual relationships than are women and therefore women are in a position of asking for change and men are in a position of resisting a change



from their state of comfort, and are often successful because of their more powerful position. Women become pursuers, naggers, sad and if something doesn't change, the entire relationship can begin to resolve around who will "give in," essentially an issue of who has more power or control in the relationship.

Although many couples today like to believe that their relationship is one of equality, few truly are (Knudson-Martin, 1993). Women still perform the majority of household chores and child care even in homes with both partners working and generally are not satisfied with this situation (Braverman, 1991; Brehm, 1992; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Napier, 1987a; Turgeon, 1992). At the same time many women still expect their men to perform well in the economic arena (Knudson-Martin, 1993). Therefore, when working with P-D couples, it seems important to assess how power and control fit into the cycle and the couple's difficulties.

When addressing power, the therapist should be careful not to impose her or his own values on the couple, but rather to help them become aware of what their values are and how much of the P-D cycle is a power struggle. As Beavers (1985) explains, control is not a bad thing and to consider it such "is to condemn people to neurotic guilt" (pp.56). Instead, he suggests that control is benign, inevitable and can be helpful when it involves the choice of



the individuals. Moreover, he recommends that power issues, including differences, ought to be made overt in order that covert power does not develop. Making power issues overt may help prevent what some scholars warn against: reinforcing traditional power/gender systems and structures, and/or avoiding a major cause of the problem: inequality (Knudson-Martin, 1993; Turgeon, 1992). Moreover, it has been suggested that some interventions or ways of conducting therapy are advantageous for men and detrimental for women. This raises another aspect of gender roles and power issues: that therapists need to be aware of their own values and what they promote overtly and covertly. For example, should therapists promote and work towards equality? Is differentiation achieved when someone functions separately within relationships, and handles emotional issues at an intellectual level (typical male attributes) (Knudson-Martin, 1993). Certainly this is ethical issue each therapist needs to seriously consider. Perhaps, helping the couple identify their own comfortable balance of power, and working to help them achieve that would be the most helpful.

Napier (1987a) points out that many power struggles between partners may actually be attempts to resolve an inequality observed in the family of origin in the past (The reader is referred to the work of Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1978; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, for an indepth

discussion of this concept and therapeutic implications).

Expectations and Resentments As discussed previously, when working a couple on issues of power, the therapist should explore the couple's values and expectations. The same holds true for expectations and resentments regarding gender roles, orientations and interactions (Guerin, et al., 1987; Sherman, et al., 1991). The therapist ought to address what each partner expects from his/her partner as a man/woman, as well as how they have been satisfied and disappointed. When partners are unable to bring up disappointments or to resolve disagreements in expectations, resentment often develops and must be addressed. For example, if when a couple married the husband never expected his wife would work, but twelve years later she did begin to work, he may be deeply unsatisfied with this situation but unable to express these emotions.

It is important for the therapist to reframe such a situation so that the situation requires change more than the person (Weeks, 1989). Moreover, the therapist should not assume what a partner might want or expect, but should assist the couple in exploring gender-related expectations together. It has been asserted that many expectations have their roots in the individual's family-of-origin experiences, and that therefore considering family-of-origin issues may assist the therapeutic process when addressing

gender expectations (Napier, 1987a).

Choices The goal of many modes of therapy is to allow the client to be aware of options and empowered to make choices. With regards to gender, by addressing socially learned roles, issues of power and control, expectations and resentments the couple can then be better able to make choices of how they want to live (Beavers, 1985). Through the therapy process, they can be encouraged to try on new roles in an "experiment" fashion while being supported by the therapist in taking such risks and processing the "results."

Summary In summary, the role of the therapist then seems to consist of first, making the couple aware of their present roles, rules, expectations, and power struggles. Then, the therapist can help the couple assess how much of their current situation is in reaction to their pasts, expectations of society, and how much is congruent with their true needs, desires and selves. Lastly, the therapist can facilitate the couple in making choices based on what they've learned about themselves, and support them in any changes/risks they choose to try.

#### Communication Skills Deficit Theory

Communication Skills Deficit theory holds that if a

couple does not have strong communication skills, they have trouble resolving conflicts, become dissatisfied and often become entangled in a P-D cycle. Therefore the treatment approach suggested by supporters of this theory is generally "skills training" (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Markman, 1979; Markman, 1981; Markman, Duncan, Storaasli & Howes, 1987). However, as was discussed earlier, it remains uncertain whether unrewarding interactions and poor communication skills are a cause or a result of the P-D cycle.

Nonetheless, it does seem clear that a relationship exists between poor communication skills and the P-D cycle (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983). Moreover, communication has been described as one of the main components of a relationship (Guerin, et al., 1987). In their discussion of the "nag-withdraw" pattern among couples, Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) attribute the cycle to a couple's inability to metacommunicate about the pattern. In other words, that although they certainly communicate, they are unable to talk about their way of communicating. Waring (1988) proposes that one of the main aspects of intimacy is understanding one another through self-disclosure.

Moreover, working on some of the issues discussed in previous sections could be enhanced by effective communication skills. For example, once a couple has

identified their goals, areas of disagreements, needs, etc., it may be easier to discuss these more thoroughly using well-developed skills. Furthermore, it has been suggested that using "I statements" can facilitate differentiation and reduce conflict (Bowen, 1981). Waldo's (1985) model of relationship enhancement includes teaching and practicing the following skills: speaking, listening, feedback and confrontation, and conflict-resolution. These skills have been suggested as helpful for P-D couples (Hof & Treat, 1989; Markman, et al., 1987). Perhaps more than the skills themselves, the experience of carefully attending to and listening to one's partner and attempting to communicate very clearly and deliberately offers couples a different perspective. Most likely they have never interacted exactly in this manner, and therefore using the skills offers them a new experience of one another and their relationship. Hopefully, this new experience allows the couple to see that they have options, and that there are other ways of interaction. Therefore it follows that teaching P-D couples communication skills could be a very helpful aspect of treatment.

## CHAPTER 3

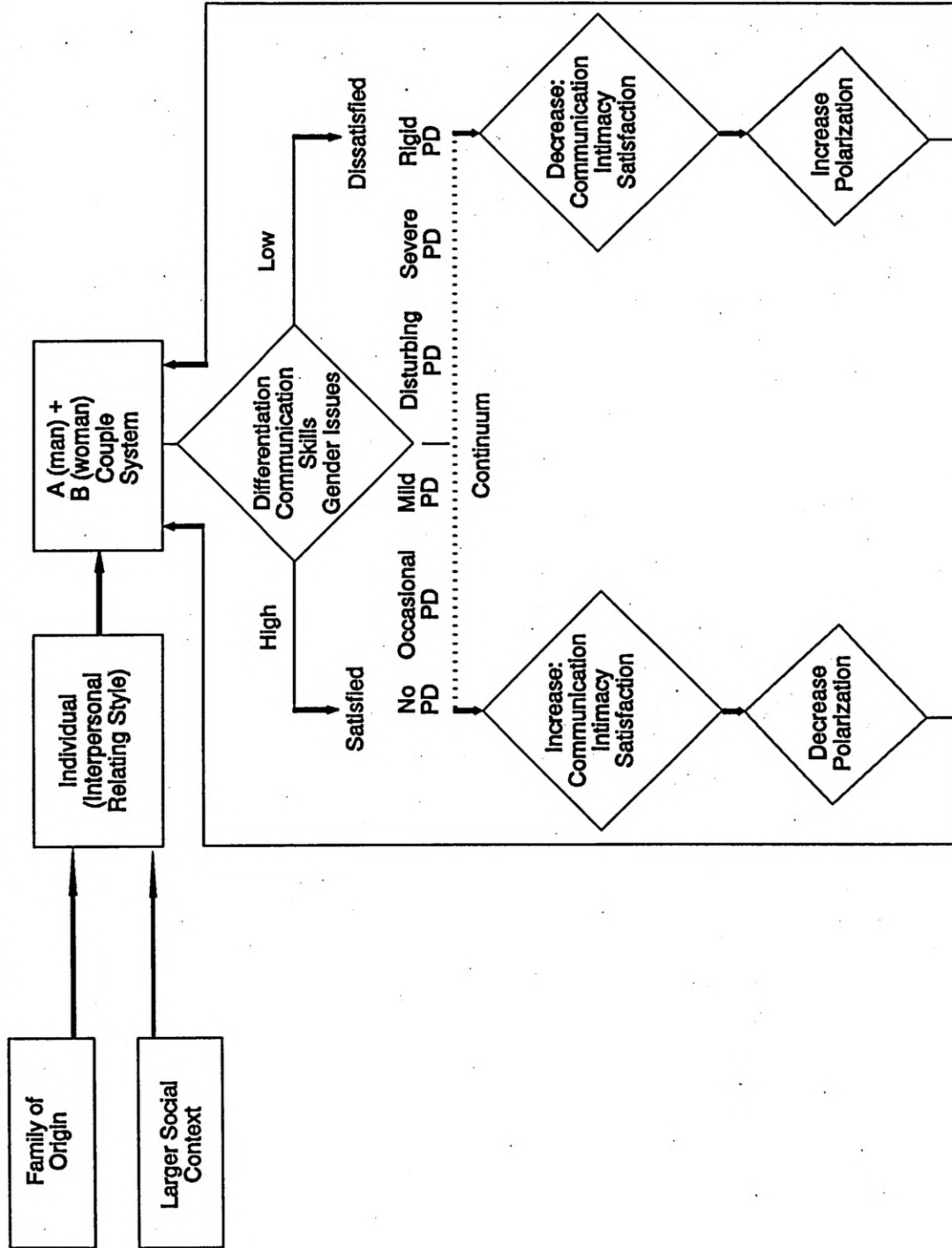
## CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND APPLICATION TO CASE EXAMPLES

This section first presents a model explaining the development and treatment of the P-D cycle based on an interpretation and integration of the previous literature review. Second, three case examples based on observations of P-D couples in therapy will illustrate how to apply the model. The names used in the case examples are not the actual names of the couples observed and the situations have been altered somewhat to protect their privacy.

Model of P-D Cycle Development and Treatment

The model presented below provides a conceptual framework for conceptualization and intervention of the P-D cycle (see page 73 for visual model). The model shows that the P-D cycle originates primarily from the family-of-origin and the larger social context. Although it is not stated in the model, the medium of transmission from these two sources include roles (gender and otherwise), rules, boundaries and communication learned in the family-of-origin and the larger social context (ones neighborhood, school, work place, culture, and society). Experiences with ones family-of-origin and larger social context interact with ones genetic

Figure 2. Conceptualization of the Development and Treatment of the P-D Cycle





and biological factors. The result is a personal identity and a style of relating with others. When two people come together in an intimate relationship, their interpersonal relating styles may precipitate their engagement in a P-D cycle.

Once a couple has formed an intimate relationship, the three factors contributing most to the development of a P-D cycle are differentiation, communication, and gender issues. There is a continuum of P-D experience since couples are bound to have a wide variety of levels in these three areas. Whether a couple ends up in a severely dysfunctional P-D cycle, no P-D, or somewhere in between is determined by the interplay of these three factors.

At the far left end of the continuum is the experience of no P-D cycle. Individuals having high levels of differentiation, communication skills, and few disturbing gender issues, would probably fall on the left end of the continuum. Such a couple will probably not engage in a P-D interaction unless, perhaps, they are under stress. At this point they may enter a P-D cycle for awhile until equilibrium is stabilized. This sort of P-D cycle is not dysfunctional and may actually help the couple cope with stress. On the other hand, should more stress enter the system, the couple could move further to the right of the P-D continuum.

Towards the other end of the continuum, the right end,

are couples who have lower levels of differentiation, communication skills and more disturbing or rigid gender issues. In these couples, the Pursuer has more diffuse boundaries and the Distancer has less permeable boundaries having withdrawn more than Distancers closer to the other end of the spectrum. Moreover, if these couples are unable to disengage from the P-D cycle they are likely to experience a decrease in communication, intimacy, and satisfaction. These decreases, if left unattended, then lead to an increase in polarization of the couple and perpetuates the cycle to further extremes, with the boundaries becoming even more severe. Once a P-D cycle has intensified and the couple has become more polarized, a couple's differentiation, communication and resolution of gender issues determine whether the cycle stabilizes, continues, or changes for better or worse. Therapeutic intervention at this point could prevent the cycle from becoming more dysfunctional.

Hence, the P-D cycle is influenced by differentiation, communication skills and gender issues. A couple may also move along the P-D continuum depending on a variety of other factors (i.e., level of stress, changes in the couple system, or therapy intervention). In some cases the cycle can escalate in an infinite loop resulting in one partner becoming suicidal. Implications for treatment according to the model will be discussed in the last chapter.

### Applications

Observations of therapy with P-D couples were made with the purpose of supporting and clarifying the literature review and the model developed therefrom. In addition, it was hoped that this preliminary observational study might help identify issues deserving more systematic research in the future. Three couples who were identified by their therapist as engaged in a P-D cycle based on the CPQ (See Appendix A) were observed for a total of seventeen 50 minute sessions. Notes were recorded regarding couples' P-D interactions, the therapists' interventions, and the couples' reactions to the interventions in a columnar fashion in order that patterns might emerge (See appendix B). The notes and sequences of interactions were then studied, and examples were drawn from each couple in order to clarify the model and the literature review. Therefore, what follows is an application of the model to each of the three couples' cases. Due to the individuality of each case and limited space, only the most pertinent aspects of each case will be discussed.

#### Conceptualization of Cathy and Rod's P-D Cycle Based on the Model

When Rod and Cathy came for therapy Rod, the distancer, was considering leaving the relationship and Cathy, the

pursuer, was fairly depressed. During one of the earlier sessions, Cathy claimed, "We just don't communicate, we don't make each other feel loved. We both shutdown." Hence it appeared that this couple had been caught in a P-D cycle somewhere on the right-hand side of the continuum. It seemed that their communication, intimacy and satisfaction had declined significantly. The differentiation, communication skills and resolution of gender issues were so low that this couple was unable to negotiate a new pattern of interacting.

Differentiation appeared to be low as it was difficult for each partner to ask for what he/she needs (vs. simply reacting when the need is not met) and to take responsibility for his/her self. In fact, when the relationship was no longer fulfilling, Cathy attempted suicide. This behavior may have been indicative of an extreme inability to maintain a sense of self outside of the relationship, or in other words, a low level of differentiation.

Gender Issues Some of this couple's struggles appeared to be connected to gender issues. For example, Rod had difficulty understanding why Cathy wants him to say "I love you," daily, or why she wanted to spend all her free time with him. Rod had other activities and companions he

enjoyed as well as spending time with Cathy. These differences are consistent with what the literature has found to be traditional gender orientations. Moreover, power and control seemed to be somehow connected to gender for this couple as well. Cathy complained that Rod had recently bought a new motorcycle without asking her opinion, but that she had to talk with him before buying a forty dollar outfit. Cathy apparently felt less powerful, not only in making financial decisions, but in having her needs met.

Communication One of the examples Rod gave of his experience was that Cathy questioned his love for her "all day." This questioning disturbed him so much that he would withdraw (which undoubtedly disturbed Cathy, and in the process she did not get what she needs). Hence, communication was not clear. Somehow Rod was not communicating his love for Cathy such that she could receive it, and Cathy did not know how to ask for what she needed in a way that was not annoying to Rod.

#### Explanation of Therapeutic Interventions With Cathy and Rod Based on the Model

Facilitating Differentiation During one session, the therapist successfully attempted to illuminate how the interpersonal relating styles of each affects the other. It

appeared as though they both had an insight regarding mutual effect, and they began to talk with one another. The therapist then had them reflect what they heard the other say, and they both seemed to gain a better understanding of the other and began to make suggestions of how to change their cycle. Later in the session, Rod blamed Cathy for some of his unhappiness. The therapist commented on how Cathy appeared to have shut down after this blaming and asked Rod to tell Cathy how he was feeling (also an example of confronting). The therapist was pointing out how what Rod said affected Cathy, and at the same time did not allow him to continue blaming. Rod was then able to be clear and honest in stating his perception which then lead to Cathy stating what she needs.

Addressing Gender Issues What appeared to be one of the most powerful interventions was a structural/behavioral homework assignment consisting of the following: the couple was allowed only two phone calls per day; Cathy would wait for Rod to call (attempt to reverse roles a bit); Cathy would substitute "I know he loves me," when she had negative thoughts; if they fought, Rod (often in a blaming mode) would take time to think and then apologize. This intervention was directed towards Cathy taking a less active role in the relationship (women are typically caretakers of the relationship) and Rod (men are typically less active in

this area) taking a more active role in initiating contact. This intervention seems to address this couple's specific P-D cycle, which was composed of gender-typical components, and therefore also addresses gender issues, namely roles.

In the following session both Cathy and Rod reported the relationship had been quite satisfactory during the previous week. When asked what had been different, Rod reported Cathy was questioning his love less. Cathy reported that she pressured Rod less and that this felt fine and that actually the relationship had been "really different and really good." Perhaps this attempt to disrupt the equilibrium of a vicious P-D cycle was successful and both partners experienced the relationship differently. Rod had room to initiate closeness, Cathy was not busy pressuring him, so she was able to receive his initiations and hence feel more loved. Therefore, by changing the roles of each partner, satisfaction and intimacy were enhanced and polarization decreased.

Enhancing Communication Skills In the next session, Rod complained again saying, "She calls me all the time." The therapist encouraged him to use communication skills to state what he thinks, feels, and wants. The couple then appeared to calm down and began to talk with one another (vs. to the therapist). Another example of enhancing communication skills is provided above when the therapist



has each partner reflect what the other said.

Summary Although these are only a few examples from the sessions with Cathy and Rod, they demonstrate a few significant points. This couple was at the extreme end of the continuum, their levels of differentiation, communication skills and resolution of gender issues were apparently low. When Cathy didn't get the attention she needed from Rod, she resorted to attempted suicide. Most of the interventions by the therapist were directed towards increasing differentiation and addressing gender roles. The couple appeared to gain an understanding of how they affected one another, of their responsibility and roles in the cycle, and of how it could be different. Moreover, they became somewhat more balanced in gender roles and experienced less polarity and an increase in intimacy. Therefore, the P-D cycle had decreased in intensity and the couple had moved towards the left along the P-D continuum.

#### Conceptualization of Beth and John's P-D Cycle Based on the Model

John and Beth presented for therapy with problems "getting along." It seemed as though they had differing values and were fairly dissatisfied with their relationship. However, they were still communicating on many levels and intent on working through their current difficulties. This

couple did not appear as polarized as Cathy and Rod, and were probably somewhere in the middle of the continuum. Some factors influencing the couple system from the larger social context included: Beth had recently joined Alcoholics Anonymous and had quit drinking and was attempting to create new ways of interacting and of coping in general; John had just begun a new career and was very busy with it; Beth was currently unemployed and struggling with career issues.

Differentiation Beth was one of four children in a family that "did everything" together. Due to her family of origin experience, she expected to spend much time with John. John, on the other hand, was raised in a family that valued independence and he did not seem to hold the same expectations as Beth regarding time spent together. Due to somewhat lower levels of differentiation, this couple was unable to successfully negotiate these differences. Beth felt that John did not want to spend time with her and that he did not support her. John, on the other hand, believed it was Beth who must change, and was not aware of his part in the dilemma.

Gender Issues Some of this couple's P-D cycle does appear to be related to gender issues. John had stated that he had difficulty expressing feelings, something that males are not traditionally socialized to do. Moreover, John was

work-oriented while Mary was relationship-oriented. This difference seemed to fuel the P-D cycle and was also representative of typical female and male orientations.

Communication Although this couple's communication had not shut down completely, they were experiencing difficulty understanding one another's perspective. Moreover, it became clear that at times John completely would withdraw and they would reach a point where they are unable to communicate and negotiate or problem solve. This couple also had a tendency to assume rather than stating their own needs and asking the other questions.

#### Explanation of Therapeutic Interventions With Beth and John Based on the Model

Facilitating Differentiation At one point in a session the couple was talking about their different perspectives on time spent together. The therapist facilitated the discussion and asked some questions. Beth eventually stated that she did not perceive John wanting to spend time with her and this scared her. It became clear that this was the first time they had openly talked about what they wanted in the relationship and their differences in this area.

John explained that he wished Beth could trust that he loves her and that he was doing what he needed to do (by being busy with career), and not intentionally pushing her

away. Moreover, he stated that he wished they could be close and both do what they need. Beth eventually came to realize and share that she was disappointed with herself for being unemployed and going through some stressful transitions (career, addiction). Gaining this realization and expressing it were an example of a higher level of differentiation. The therapist pointed out that perhaps at the time she was more needy than John due to the stressors of being unemployed and recovering from alcohol abuse. Beth agrees with this view of her situation.

Through this process, the couple seemed to adopt a new perspective on their problem, a view that was less condemning of one another and more accepting of their individual circumstances. Moreover, the couple began to explain the situation in terms of self rather than by blaming the other, which demonstrated a higher level of differentiation.

During a session wherein the focus was on how the couple gets engaged in the P-D cycle, John talked of his past "sneaking up on" him and "sticking with" him. The therapist then addressed how John's past influenced his behavior in the relationship, particularly to his role in the P-D cycle. Eventually John stated that he could see how some of his behaviors may not have been productive, and that he had seen how different behaviors result in different reactions and feelings. It appeared that by addressing the

connection between his family-of-origin and his current relationship, John became more aware of his role, responsibility and choices in the relationship, decreasing his need to distance.

Addressing Gender Issues For this couple one of the main gender issues contributing to their P-D cycle was the question of affiliation vs. individuality. The first step towards resolving this issue was taken during the session described above wherein each partner stated her/his needs. They also began to blame one another less which appeared to allow them to express more warmth, and feel closer to one another, perhaps because the "couple climate" was less caustic.

Feeling close to one another is something Beth desperately wanted and something John appeared to shy away from somewhat. Moreover, John stated more than once that he wanted to be with, and loves Beth. These are feelings that Beth had been assuming and fearing did not exist for John. Therefore, by addressing their needs and allowing them to respond to one another, they discovered that their polarization was unnecessary and that their needs could be met. Beth realized that John did indeed want to be close. And John was allowed to express some of his emotions and experience how this effected the relationship. The impact on the P-D cycle was that intimacy seemed to be increased

and polarization decreased.

Enhancing Communication Skills In another session, the therapist was attempting to clarify the assumptions held by each regarding the other and to increase their ability to communicate so that they did not rely on assumptions. Beth claimed that when John gave her "the silent treatment" it made her mad. The therapist facilitated Beth expressing this without blaming. So, when John withdrew, Beth perceived it as him giving her punishment in the form of the silent treatment. The therapist asked John to talk to Beth about his perception of what was going on when he withdrew. John responded that it was not "silent treatment," but that it was an honest need for space. Shortly after this exchange, Beth moved closer to John and reached for his hand. It was as though having the couple practice communicating clearly, and taking responsibility for their actions and opinions resulted in increased understanding and feeling more loving to one another. Thus, it seemed that polarization was decreased and intimacy and communication was increased by this intervention.

Summary It appeared that these two individuals came together in the relationship with differing needs and expectations for togetherness. Moreover, recent changes had potentiated these differences. The couple was unable to

work through their difficulties and ended up pursuing and distancing. The therapy facilitated differentiation primarily by addressing each partner's needs and encouraging them to take responsibility for them. Moreover, assumptions were made overt and clarified. Open communication was facilitated and encouraged. Intimacy appeared to be enhanced by the honest communication as well as by interventions aimed at facilitating differentiation. Family-of-origin issues were addressed as they related to the present concerns resulting in insight, especially regarding choices in behavior.

#### Conceptualization of Bob and Marsha's P-D Cycle Based on the Model

Bob and Marsha presented for therapy concerned about troubles with intimacy. They stated they had "grown apart" and had noticed a "critical distance" that they maintained between them. They were moderately dissatisfied in the relationship. Money was a concern, as was Bob's health. They both reported being extremely exhausted and that it was difficult to find time to spend together. This couple's level of mutual concern was still fairly high. Nonetheless, they had become significantly polarized and stuck in their roles as Pursuer (Marsha) and Distancer (Bob).

Differentiation Bob was from a reserved family of



English descent wherein emotion was not overtly expressed very often. Marsha, on the other hand, was from a large Italian family that expressed emotions and concerns quite openly. Moreover, Marsha had a very distant relationship with her father who worked away from home a great deal. These factors appear to influence the P-D cycle for this couple as they have been unable to accept each other's interpersonal relating style.

Gender Issues Marsha stayed at home raising the children. Healthy eating was important to this couple, so much of her time was spent shopping, gardening, and preparing healthy meals. This couple lived in a rural setting and Marsha felt somewhat isolated from other adults. Bob's job as a ranch hand often left him exhausted and in physical pain. Bob's way of showing love was to "do, do, do," which is consistent with gender theory regarding male socialization. Marsha wanted to be "treated like a woman," to be "swept off on a romantic vacation" and to be pampered by Bob, while she also wanted to take care of the children and Bob who had trouble discussing his pain. Some of these traits seemed rooted in the socialization of men and women, and appeared to contribute to the P-D cycle of this couple.

Communication Although the communication within this couple had not shut down completely, it did appear that

Marsha was much more vocal than Bob. She had become somewhat hostile due to frustration, with occasional "volatile" explosions. During sessions, Bob would periodically shut down and become silent. It sometimes seemed that he had given up on being able to communicate with Marsha.

#### Explanation of Therapeutic Interventions With Bob and Marsha Based on Model

Facilitating Differentiation The P-D cycle of this couple was especially difficult to work with or penetrate. Perhaps there was a secret, or a serious pathology in one or both partners. Nonetheless, there were some interventions that were notable in addressing the P-D cycle. During an early session, the therapist was attempting to understand more about their self-named "critical distance." Bob stated that he feared he would react by withdrawing and any closeness will be gone. He continued to explain, "No matter what I do, she won't be content." This lead to Marsha sharing her perspective that she made all the decisions. The therapist checked this assumption out with Bob who declares that in his opinion she actually didn't want to let him in on the decisions.

This discussion eventually lead to Marsha (the pursuer) admitting that she was afraid to let Bob in too close, out of a fear of losing him. Bob then claimed he had thought of

leaving, which seemed to make Marsha aware of her responsibility in their struggles. A few minutes later after some honest problem-solving, Marsha blurted out sobbing, "I want a Dad, I never had one." It then became apparent that part of why Bob had been unable to satisfy Marsha was because he was not her father, and that part of Marsha's overreaction was due to pain regarding her relationship with her father. Bob responded by walking over to Marsha and hugging her. This discussion facilitated by the therapist seemed to enhance the differentiation of both partners, and to increase the intimacy between them.

At the beginning of another session, the therapist acknowledged Marsha and Bob's different styles of interacting and suggested that some of this may be connected to their families-of-origin. The couple agreed and then began to make jokes about their differences, Bob being quite reserved and Marsha being almost explosive. The therapist then connected how these different styles effect their P-D cycle and the pain they were currently experiencing. During this discussion, Marsha suggested, "Maybe if I nurtured me, I wouldn't be so volatile..." It appeared as though Marsha had begun to consider her choices, and may have realized pursuing Bob was not her only option.

Addressing Gender Issues At one point in their therapy, it was discovered that Bob showed his love by doing

things for Marsha. The therapist then shared some information regarding research on the differences between men and women, which related to this couple very well. The couple seemed relieved to hear they weren't "the only ones," and began to laugh and joke. They then moved on to talk about the positive aspects in their relationship. At this point it might have been helpful if the therapist had facilitated a discussion of how their gender roles effected one another and their relationship. The next step might have been to ask the couple if they were satisfied with their current gender roles, or if they would like to discuss or experiment with new ones.

Enhancing Communication Skills Communication skills were not taught to this couple. It seems that these skills would have been particularly helpful in decreasing the polarization of this couple. When discussing stressful topics, it was common for Marsha to become explosive and for Bob to withdraw. Therefore, helping this couple learn other ways of communicating may have been quite effective.

Summary Although this couple remained fairly stuck in their P-D cycle during the observation period, there were interventions that appeared to make an impact on them. Attempting to make their P-D cycle apparent, confronting assumptions, and allowing expression of deep emotions, such

as fear of abandonment, all seemed to enhance differentiation. By addressing family of origin issues the couple seemed relieved of some self/other blame and began to consider other options in behavior. When the therapist educated the couple about "typical" gender roles in our society, the couple again seemed relieved of some gloom.

## CHAPTER 4

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

This paper has attempted to provide a theoretically based explanation of the origin, effects, and treatment considerations/implications of the Pursuer-Distancer cycle. Although aspects of the P-D cycle have been explained and studied from Family Systems Theory, Gender Theory, Communication Skills Deficit Theory perspectives, little empirical research regarding the P-D cycle within the context of couples therapy has been conducted. Yet, the P-D cycle is one of the most common situations found in couples presenting for marital therapy.

This paper has integrated three theories (Family Systems, Gender, and Communication Skills Deficit) to explain the P-D cycle and in considering therapeutic interventions with P-D couples. The P-D cycle appears to stem primarily from a complex interplay of factor from the individual's family of origin and larger social context, although not exclusively. Biological factors are most likely involved, but investigation of them is much beyond the scope of this paper. When two individuals join in a relationship, they bring with them rules, expectations,

gender roles, communication skills, unresolved issues from their family of origin, and a basic level of differentiation. This joining results in a couple system.

Influenced primarily by the levels of differentiation, gender issues, and communication skills, the couple will establish ways of interacting within their couple system. They must negotiate how to combine what each has brought into the relationship. In some cases, the P-D cycle is one of their interaction patterns. This pattern can be constructive or destructive depending on its severity and rigidity.

The literature discussion, model and three case applications suggest the following relationships:

- 1) Higher levels of differentiation, resolution of gender issues and communication skills seem to indicate a higher level of satisfaction within the relationship.

- 2) Higher levels of differentiation, resolution of gender issues and communication skills seem to indicate less chances of a P-D cycle developing, or a less rigid P-D cycle.

- 3) Lower levels in these three areas appear to lead to a more dysfunctional P-D cycle.

- 4) Lower levels differentiation, resolution of gender issues and communication skills appear to precipitate a lower level of satisfaction within the relationship.

- 5) A more rigid P-D cycle is associated with a lower



level of satisfaction within the relationship.

6) Factors within the couple system such as birth of a child, loss of a job, etc., effect the level of satisfaction within the relationship.

7) The effect of these changes on the P-D cycle is contingent upon the levels of differentiation, gender roles and communication skills to determine how the couple system is effected with regards to satisfaction and P-D cycle outcome.

8) The introduction of stress into the couple system leads to an increase in the rigidity of an existing P-D cycle, or to the development of a P-D cycle.

9) Couples therapy can be one such factor that effects the level of differentiation, gender issues, and communication skills and therefore the level of satisfaction.

The literature review, model conceptualization and application suggest the above relationships. The next step in the research process is to develop these relationships into hypotheses and to systematically research and test them. Such an endeavor would be a great contribution to the field of couple therapy.

### Implications

The P-D cycle is a phenomenon marital therapists must often treat when working with couples. In doing so, it appears important for therapists to consider the families-of-origin and the larger social context in understanding the origin of the P-D cycle in couples. A treatment plan for a P-D couple, would to address differentiation, gender issues, and communication skills. Global goals include decreasing polarization, increasing intimacy and or course, satisfaction. In order to fulfill the global goals, more specific treatment objectives include: 1) to facilitate an increase in differentiation; 2) to resolve and gender issues (i.e., power and control, roles, etc.); 3) to enhance communication skills. Intervention techniques pertaining to each of these objectives, are discussed in the previous section on treatment of P-D couples.

In order to best facilitate differentiation, Family Systems Theory suggests that therapists may particularly want to work on family of origin issues, confront blaming, allow expression of deep emotions, address expectations and maintain a stance of neutrality. A higher level of differentiation will allow the couple to move towards the left, or more satisfied, end of the continuum.

Gender Theory suggests that roles, expectations, power issues and choices relative to gender are key issues to

address and treat with P-D couples. If a couple has struggles with one or more of these issues, it is more likely that they will be in a more rigid P-D cycle. Therefore, assessing and then addressing any of these issues would lessen the severity of the P-D cycle.

Communication Skills Deficit Theory demonstrates that deficits in communication skills are related to dissatisfied P-D couples. It remains unclear whether poor communication skills contribute to or are a result of a P-D cycle; perhaps some combination of both possibilities is most accurate. Nonetheless, when couples lack effective communication skills, a P-D cycle is more likely to develop, or an existing one to worsen. Therefore, teaching couples communication skills and allowing them to experience effectively conveying and receiving information with one another is recommended as an important element in treating P-D couples. The result should be an increase in quality and quantity of communication which would then contribute to a less severe P-D cycle and increased relationship satisfaction.

Following the model illustrated in Figure 2 (page 73), it is evident that there are several different approaches to take when treating P-D couples. Of course, a couple's individual case would determine the most appropriate approach. However, there do appear to be some general guidelines a therapist could follow.

The degree of severity in the P-D cycle could determine the issues of most pressing concern. For example, couples at the far right end of the continuum might merit crisis intervention if one partner is suicidal, or suffering extreme distress. If there is no crisis, but the P-D cycle is extreme, working towards some of the more global goals temporarily may be most effective. In other words, the therapist may first need to open the lines of communication, probably by acknowledging each partner's position, attempt to decrease polarization by finding an area of mutual agreement, and attempt to increase the level of intimacy, if only minutely. These efforts would be aimed more at establishing an atmosphere in which further work can be accomplished. Once this atmosphere has been established, and the couple has moved to a slightly less severe P-D cycle, the therapist would then intervene to increase the level of differentiation, communication and resolution of gender issues within the couple.

Successful interventions should be aimed at establishing a working environment as well as addressing the three core areas. Interventions that achieve these goals should contribute to an increase in intimacy and satisfaction spontaneously. In other words, if polarization is decreased there should be some increase in satisfaction and intimacy, perhaps not to an ideal level, but to an improved level. Nonetheless, the therapist should continue

to intervene to enhance these elements as well. If a homework assignment is given that results in the couple feeling closer to one another, it is more likely that the couple will be willing to work even further on differentiation, for example. The critical point is that the P-D cycle is interrupted such that it does not continue to worsen.

Another key aspect of working with a P-D couple as demonstrated by this model is that issues will most probably need to be revisited repeatedly. It could be conceptualized that the therapist guides the couple backwards through the dissatisfied feedback loop as illustrated in Figure 2, until they reach a satisfactory mode of interacting. For example, if a higher level of differentiation is reached, the woman (pursuer in this case) may decide to focus more energy on herself and begin to pursue a career. This may precipitate a temporary low level of satisfaction for the man as well as less communication. Thus, the therapist may readdress differentiation by facilitating communication about gender roles.

This model demonstrates some of the key aspects of the development and effects of the P-D cycle. Moreover, the model suggests considerations when planning treatment interventions based on an assessment of the couple's P-D cycle and its severity. However, this model is not intended to be the sole guide in treating P-D couples.

### Further Research

Like many investigations, this study has produced more questions than answers. Some of the questions generated by this study would be very appropriate for further research. It is optimal for mental health professionals to base their treatment plans and interventions on explanations based on research as well as those based on theory. The ability to treat a presenting problem relies a great deal on ones understanding of the problem and underlying issues.

The hypotheses suggested previously need documentation through research. Documentation would enhance the efficacy of therapeutic interventions. Another possible area of investigation is the realm of biological influence. It is not yet certain to what extent biological or genetic factors affect our interpersonal relating styles. Perhaps some individuals are simply biologically determined to be more or less expressive. The extent to which gender issues are associated with biological differences has only begun to be investigated and documented, and would certainly be a contribution to those working with couples, not to mention the general public.

This professional paper has addressed some gender issues and how they might influence a P-D cycle. However, it would be very helpful to better understand how a gender typical P-D cycle with a female pursuer/male distancer

differs from a male pursuer/female distancer. For example, with a non-typical P-D cycle, are there different treatment issues? Along this vein, it seems that the gender of the therapist would interplay with the dynamics of a P-D cycle and there's a possibility that a male or female therapist, or a team of one male and one female might be more appropriate in certain circumstances. Moreover, although this study has focused on heterosexual couples, it is very likely that homosexual couples engage in P-D cycles as well. The effects and treatment considerations of a P-D cycle within a homosexual couple needs to be investigated.

One area in which further research might be especially fruitful is comparing and contrasting different therapeutic approaches and interventions with P-D couples in order to have a better understanding of what might be most effective and with whom. It seems possible that different approaches and interventions will be most effective with different levels of P-D cycles as discussed in the previous section, or with gender atypical P-D couples. Research in this area would advance the field tremendously. Lastly, ethical issues that are especially pertinent when working with P-D couples need to be identified and included in the development of guidelines.

Thus, in formulating an optimum treatment plan when working with couples, there are a variety of factors to consider. Some of these factors have been researched and



documented, but many remain uninvestigated. One common and complex factor is the P-D cycle. A more complete understanding of the P-D cycle in couples would greatly enhance the field of couple therapy.

APPENDICES

A. WHEN SOME PROBLEM IN THE RELATIONSHIP ARISES,

B. DURING AS DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

|                                                                                                                                   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. <u>Mutual Blame</u> . Both members blame, accuse, & criticize each other.                                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 2. <u>Mutual Expression</u> . Both members express their feelings to each other.                                                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 3. <u>Mutual Threat</u> . Both members threaten each other with negative consequences.                                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 4. <u>Mutual Negotiation</u> . Both members suggest possible solutions & compromises.                                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 5. <u>Demand/Withdraw</u> .<br>** Man nags & demands while woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss matter further. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| ** Woman nags & demands while man..1<br>refuses to discuss matter further.                                                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |

|                                                                                                                           | Very<br>Likely |   |   |   |   | Very<br>Unlikely |   |   |   |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---|---|---|---|------------------|---|---|---|--|
| 6. <u>Criticize/Defend</u> . Man critici-<br>** zes while woman defends self.                                             | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| ** Woman criticizes while man de-<br>fends himself.                                                                       | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| 7. <u>Pressure/Resist</u> . Man pressures<br>## woman to take some action or<br>stop some action, while<br>woman resists. | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| ## Woman pressures man to take<br>some action or stop... while<br>man resists.                                            | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| 8. <u>Emotional/Logical</u> . Man expres-<br>## ses feelings while woman offers<br>reasons & solutions.                   | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| ## Woman expresses feelings while<br>man offers reasons & solutions.                                                      | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| 9. <u>Treat/Back down</u> . Man threatens<br>## negative consequences & woman<br>gives in or backs down.                  | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| ## Woman threatens negative conse-<br>quences & man gives in or backs<br>down.                                            | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| 10. <u>Verbal Aggression</u> . Man calls<br>## woman names, swears at her, or<br>or attacks her character.                | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| ## Woman calls man names...<br>or attacks his character.                                                                  | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| 11. <u>Physical Aggression</u> . Man push-<br>es, shoves, slaps, hits, or<br>kicks woman.                                 | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
| Woman pushes, shoves, slaps,<br>hits, or kicks man.                                                                       | 1              | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6                | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |

## C. AFTER A DISCUSSION OF A RELATIONSHIP PROBLEM,

|                                                                                                |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1. <u>Mutual Understanding</u> . Both<br>feel each other has under-<br>stood his/her position. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |  |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|

2. Mutual Withdrawal. Both with- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 ## draw from each other after the  
 discussion.
3. Mutual Resolution. Both feel 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 that the problem has been  
 solved.
4. Mutual Withholding. Neither 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 partner is giving to the other  
 after the discussion.
5. Mutual Reconciliation. After 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 the discussion, both try to  
 be especially nice to ea. other.
6. Guilt/Hurt. Man feels guilty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 for what he said or did while  
 woman feels hurt.
- Woman feels guilty for what she 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 said or did while man feels hurt.
7. Reconcile/Withdraw. Man tries 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 ## to be especially nice, acts as  
 if things are back to normal,  
 while woman acts distant.
- ## Woman tries to be especially.. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 ..while man acts distant.
8. Pressure/Resist. Man pressures 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 woman to apologize or promise to  
 do better, while woman resists.
- Woman pressures man.....while 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 man resists.
9. Support Seeking. Man seeks 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 support from others (parent,  
 friend, children).
- Woman seeks support from others 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9  
 (parent, friend, children).

N.B. \*\* indicates the subscale devised by Christensen

## indicates items the author believes merit further  
 consideration in measuring the P-D cycle

## Appendix B

| Couple's P-D Interaction                   | Therapist's Intervention                                       | Couple's Reaction (outcome re:P-D)                                                |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| i.e., wife complains of "no time together" | therapist attempts to get husband to commit to "together time" | wife pushes harder in alliance with therapist and husband withdraws his attention |
|                                            |                                                                |                                                                                   |

## Appendix C

SUBJECT CONSENT FORM FOR  
PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN RESEARCH  
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

You are being asked to participate in an observational study of couples in therapy. Couples often get stuck in their ways of relating with one other. This study may help us better understand the process of marital therapy. Because you are currently in marital therapy, you are being asked to participate. The investigator has completed all clinical/counseling work at the Clinic and is a graduate student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program currently working on a professional paper, for which this research is being conducted. If you agree to participate, the investigator will observe five (5) consecutive sessions of your marital therapy. This observation will be done through the observation room or camera monitor when possible and videotapes otherwise. All personal information will be kept confidential. Videotapes will be erased after being observed. Videotapes will not leave the Clinic. Your name and other identifying information will not be used. **The focus of the study is not on you, but rather on the therapy being done with you.** The study is of no direct benefit to you. You have the right to exit the study at any time. If at any point in the observation you become concerned or uncomfortable this should be addressed with your current therapist. Please feel free to ask questions at this time or at any time in the course of the research.

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AUTHORIZATION: I have read the above and understand the nature of this study. I,

\_\_\_\_\_  
&  
\_\_\_\_\_ agree to participate in this research. I understand that I may later refuse to participate, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

& \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



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