Psychotherapy Subscribe today for just 3 months!
Read the Magazine Online!
Join the Mental Health Innovation/Spoken Movement with Podcast Subscriptions!
Access Premium Journals, Short Lectures, Interviews & more for one low fee!
Only $45 per year
ITR
SIGN UP NOW
Be the first to know... Discounts, Deals & News
Email*
By "opting-in", you will be subscribed to our mailing list and agree to receive emails from us. You can be the first to hear about exclusive CE offers, special discounts & more. We promise to never share your email.
SIGN UP NOW
THE 80/20 MARRIAGE
Discover the 80/20 Marriage Principle and Other Powerful Tools for Lasting Love
Revitalize Lasting Relationships
Understand the Dynamics of Intimacy
Cultivate Mutual Respect and Boundaries
Navigate Challenges Together
FEATURED EVENTS
Friday, Saturday, and Sunday
Online Event
Tuesdays - Live and Recorded.
Click here for all events

Case Study

Psychotherapy Subscribe today for just 3 months!

Case Study
Trauma Mapping®: Navigating the New Couples Therapy Frontier
by David Wexler
Psychologist, DBT

Relationships have always been unendingly complex: a tricky dance of interacting personalities, attachment issues, and personal histories. But in recent years, political and cultural realities have permeated relationship bonds in new ways, affecting the way partners react each other's comments and actions, and at times, severely undermining trust.

In my practice, politics of gender has become paramount in a way that we haven't seen since the 70s. Some clients have even told me it's become the linchpin for whether or not the relationship can be saved.

Mika and Michelle are Korean-American professionals in their early 30s, who've been married for three years when they started seeing me. Through psychology, I grew our culture's renewed focus on sexually abusive behavior was a trigger for heated arguments and blistering recriminations that were tearing their marriage apart.

We were a few weeks into therapy when Mika laid off consequence for inferences #MeToo accusers like Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein. Michelle, who felt Mika was interested in agreement, any punishment the men faced should be severe.

But not everything Mika's case was straightforward. Mika's father, who I'd talked to on the phone, was a Congressional candidate in New York cities after admitting to masturbating in front of women in the workplace. Mika's mother had emigrated disengaged.

Mika's trauma to me and said, "I know that what he did was messed up, but, wow, not as horrible as Michael Jackson or R. Kelly. They went after children. That's the worst!"

Michelle shot back, "Your dad's lucky he wasn't prosecuted as front-line of the #metoo stuff." Shaking her head and sliding farther away from Mikes on the couch, she turned to me and said, "I can't be with someone who doesn't know right from wrong."

Old Roles Die Hard

Mika had grown up with some old-school ideas about gender roles, but he was politically progressive and very verbal in session. On their initial visit to my office, I'd noticed that though he watched Michelle carefully as we worked, she avoided her eyes.

When I asked my standard opening question—"So, what are the two of you doing here?"—it was Mikes who dove in first.

"I was really controlling when we first got married. We've come a long way since then."

He turned to Michelle with a beseeching smile, "Right, honey?"

Michelle, who'd mouse that there was space between them on the couch, didn't look at him. To me, she said, "He thinks we're over it more than I do."

Mika smiled sweetly. "Michelle still has hidden feelings about how I treated her that I think we need to straighten out," he said.

When I took the family histories, both cited critical of the treatment they'd received at the hands of their domineering and sometimes physically abusive fathers.

Mika sang, "Dad was kind-of-a-jerk-ass-hole-a-lot" I didn't assess the session rights, and he expected my clients to take care of him and do what he asked him to do. I knew that I kind of did the same of those patterns early on with Michelle. I'd never dreamt of hiring her."

Still, like many men of his generation, he participated in his own home plenty of the old-school gender role expectations that I grew up with, and he spoke about his respect for women's rights, I noticed that Michelle was staring at the wall.

"Michelle," I said. "Know what you're bearing right now feeling to you?"

She leaned a bit forward and said, "I know he's trying, and I know he's trying a lot, but, like a lot of men, he doesn't see the ways he's sexist. And it's getting to the point that sometimes he scares it all I can see."

Mike's jaw tightened, and he looked down at the rug as the conversation

"He reads me to pay attention to him above all else. It doesn't matter if I'm trying to work to get a bride for myself. I have to stop what I'm doing and listen everyone he has something to say.

"He's also consistently pressing me for sex, and if I tell him I'm tired or can't do it at the moment, he'll get angry and stay that way for days. I'd been going in him to bed avoid the fallout, but I don't been asking myself, why should I? Why does I even have to happen when he wants it? I mean, I am a right? What about my right to have it only when I want it?"

I would see Mika turning from Michelle, nodding in response, I'd hear the hurt in Michelle, and the continued, this time explaining that Mikes rarely helped around the house. Now, she wanted to know why was that egalitarian behavior?

"You know, I grew up in a family with these kind of patriarchal values, just like he did, so I pretend I come at it first to the cooking and cleaning. Some of the time, I do it the same thing, but more and more of them don't. Their husbands are genuinely enlightened. Your dad just pretend to be. And I've been asking myself why should I do so much more around the house? And why does he think I should?"

I turned to Mikes, who, to his credit, had leaned back in his chair and was focused on listening to Michelle.

"Mike," I said. "You've heard Michelle's stories, the pressure she feels, the inequality she sees. What do you think?"

Mikes looked from me to Michelle, and quite sweetly began to express genuine remorse for pressuring her and blindly expecting her to behave like a 50s housewife.

We ended that first session on a productive high note by brainstorming ways Mikes could implement new behaviors, and Michelle could feel how to express her needs.

When we met next, they were sitting a little closer. Michelle reported Mikes was doing the dishes more regularly and buying on the weekends, and had begun taking his demands for sex: I was struck by how quickly these changes had taken hold and how genuinely open Mikes seemed. Things happened so quickly that I felt a little congratulated them both.

When I failed to see was that as Michelle was finding a stronger voice in her marriage, she'd come to believe that Mikes could be capable of empathizing with her experience of being woman in the world. But the reality was that he still had a long way to go.

A Broken Mirror

A few weeks later, when Mikes found himself defending Louis C.K. in our session, and drawing that line where he thought the #MeToo movement should stop and the defense of supposedly lesser offenders should begin, of Michelle's side was that his sexist attitudes hadn't been extinguished. The possibility that he might minimize the assaults that endured in her own life, that maybe she couldn't trust him with him, he her hard.

At first, Mikes was defensive. "Why are you trying to control my opinions?" he asked, dropping his head into his hands. "You're not listening to what I'm saying. I don't do anything to you!"

Perhaps, in a court of law, Mike's argument would be worth pondering. There's a continuum of sexual offenses, just like there's a continuum of offenses that carry theft to armed robbery. But intimate partner relationships are governed by more nuanced rules than courts of law.

I heard in Mike's emotional, defensive response a phenomenon I call the Broken Mirror. Based on the concept of a mirroring self, it describes the defensive maneuver capable of when another person leads us to feel incompetent, otherness, or insignificant.

When the Broken Mirror is activated, there's almost always a moment when I called "empathic accuracy." Mikes could hear was Michelle accusing him of being sexist again and of falling short of being the trustworthy man he needed. Mike expressed this as a threat, so he went into survival mode, and was blocked from accurately empathizing with her pain.

I saw this as the most important element of the blowup, and zeroed in on helping Mikes get his perspective back and into Michelle's unspoken attachment and emotional pain. I asked him, I said,

"Mike, what do you think Michelle was feeling when she said she can't feel safe with you?"

Mike thought about it. "She was feeling critical of me, like there's something wrong with me, and she was judging me."

I gently chuck my head and told him that this wasn't a feeling. He took a breath, looked up at the ceiling, and gave it some more thought. "Maybe scared? Like she couldn't trust me?"

Bingo.

"I know you love her and want to do right by her," I said. "So how would you respond if she turned to you and said she doesn't feel safe, and worries she can't really count on you?"

He didn't hesitate. "I'd want to comfort her, to reassure her that she could."

"Good! Let's do it. Turn to her and ask how this made her feel."

He took a deep breath and with tender sincerity said, "I don't think I can really know what this is like for you, but I want to. It bits me that things I've done or said have made you feel unsafe. I never want that to happen again."

That's when the spectar of Michelle's observation chair, who once trapped her in his office and insisted on our sex, entered the therapy room. With tears in her eyes and, and touching from me, Michelle told Mike the whole story of her encounter with the Hollywood Mogul.

"He looked my boy in his office when we met. And he'd get my hopes up, like he thought he was God's gift to women and I should jump at the chance to be with him. He unzipped his fly and pointed at his crotch. I thought he was going to tell me what to do, so to get out of it I laughed and talked about my fake boyfriend and my Catholic upbringing.

"I had to keep dealing with him, and I didn't sleep for months. I blamed myself for somehow seducing him. I was terrified he'd sabotage my dissertation. I never thought about telling myself.

"And I had no one to turn to. My brother wouldn't understand, and would probably try to kill him. I didn't want to hurt my parents so: I was ashamed. I worried if I told any of my friends at school, the story could leak out, and he'd find out and retaliate. I'd never felt so alone. I never want to feel that alone again."

Empathic Accuracy

Tears filled Mike's eyes, and as they sat in silence, I could see it sinking in that Michelle's earlier reaction was bound up in a history much bigger than him. Right now heard this story in detail before. It was a history she'd shared with many other women, and in retelling it in the therapy space, she helped him transcend his hurt and her compassionate instead.

He reached out and put a hand on her forearm.

"I never understood how much you went through with your professor. All I could see was your anxiety now. Now I want you to tell me about this teacher. I'm sure he's a low-truth-giving scum-bag. Maybe he's old-school. Maybe he's scary. I'm ready to learn more about something that has been so hard for you."

Michelle went on to explain how much of a trigger this initial comments were, or the sex intimidating sexual harassment and pressure. She walked up to Mike's couch closer to her on the couch, listening his wrist with her fingers, she gave him a soft smile.

She Spoke Up and the Make Up

Over the last few years, men's empathic accuracy has repeatedly been disabled because they feel misunderstood or attacked. I'm finding that restoring empathic accuracy begins on placing the locality of a partner's experiences with men in the context of a continuum of #MeToo treatment. When Mike said, Michelle's pain, it's much easier for men not to feel attacked personally, and to respond in ways that can support her appropriate love and respect.

It occurred to me, as this moment of healing filled the room, that I was essential for Michelle to speak up in a way that included her husband, rather than pitting him against her. I wanted the signs that some of these men were the was trying. Could she see that?

I never told Michelle that what Mikes had said about the continuum of offenses was true, but I did tell her that I understood why he felt that way. I wave it to encourage her to try to recognize this truth, so Mike doesn't remain for you in the same category as your college professor—or Louis C.K., for that matter.

For a long moment of deep silence the air seemed to leave the room.

Then Michelle, who'd been leaning into the shared space between us, recoiled from me, pushed back into the couch, and stared at the ceiling for a hard moment before raising her voice.

"Neither of you get it! You don't know what it's like!"

She accused me of trying to minimize both what Mike had said and the legitimacy of her mistrust. She was right, and I knew it immediately. I'd become just one more guy who didn't take her experiences seriously enough.

A quote from the actress Minnie Driver about the supposed relativity of #MeToo offenses bloomed in my mind. She said, "I realized that for many men, a pat on the ass, I now, there's a scuffle in their ability to understand. It's all fucking wrong, and it's all bad, and until you can't seeing it under one umbrella, I'm not your job to comprehension or judge what's worse and what's not."

Michelle's response wake me up, and I launched myself back into the crucial track of helping Mikes appreciate her anxiety and insecurity. This needed to remain paramount if their relationship was going to have—not his feelings of being the misunderstood victim.

Mikes reassured Michelle that he'd never tolerate any man treating her badly, and then said, "If Louis C.K. ever mistreated in front of you, I'd kick his ass."

Michelle looked at him for a full beat and laughed. "I actually believe you would."

As we continued our work, some of Mike's narcissistic issues and some of Michelle's issues surfaced and mainstreamed present. Their broadcast-quality fight-or-flight-or-freeze and miniature changes—but it helped. The conflicts lessened. They could see a new path had opened for them.

The issues raised by the #MeToo movement enabled Michelle to pay more attention to how her history has affected her. She was inspired to put words to her feelings with her husband in ways that she never could before. And despite his initial defensiveness and self-preoccupation, he got it. She spoke up, and Mikes listened.

My own path with these sexual issues in the clinical space has also become more visible. To follow it, I must encourage the women to speak up and the men to open their hearts and become better my ally. But also, I must focus on stabilizing their emotional states, not spotlighting what's right or wrong, and I must always remember how many ghosts and global issues have joined me in the therapy room.

CASE COMMENTARY

By Sara Schwebarber

Mike's couples in clinical practice have no models for creating and maintaining relationships not based on the dominance of one partner over another. Since the advent of the feminine movement, therapists have been proposing partner-centric conversations to help couples create a more collaborative and equitable relationship.

The #MeToo movement is another put forward in the direction of the profile we need for the sexes to sustain mutually satisfying partnerships. To become better partners, men need to redefine their masculinity and understand their female partners and relate to the world. Women, for their part, need to recalibrate how much tending and caretaking they want to do in service of self-exhaustion and resentments. Weeks, in his work with Mike and Michelle, deftly shows us a path that can help women speak up and men wake up. As therapists working with couples around gender and cultural issues, we need to help balance between our role as social reformer and our role as facilitators that can help clients see their relationship dynamics in a new light. Weeks's case study shows us there are six core tools and factors, gender-based rules, the mathematics, the roles, roots in the couples' own hands.

In the transition his clients are experiencing from traditional gender models to gender balance and equality, Weeks navigates the dilemma of role redefinition with care, compassion, and thoughtful interventions. In one of the first moves, Weeks tackle sign of the husband, "Like a lot of men, he doesn't see the way he's sexist," he helps the couple engage in a dialogue about Michelle's observation and Mike's response to a painfully patriarchal legacies. As Weeks admits that it seemed normal for him to do the cooking and cleaning, they explaining how she's still trying to fit into a traditional female gender role of tending and caretaking.

When women's voices were dismissed, women don't think about their roles because they couldn't, and men didn't think—much less have a dialogue—about who does what around the house, or whether or when to have sex. Mike doesn't realize that the ways in which he's exhibiting sexist behaviors because he doesn't have to. Not having to think about who does what domestically is one of the hallmarks of male privilege and an important aspect of male awakening. This is what a feminine-informed couples therapy is all about: the male partner's privilege is front and center of the therapeutic conversation, and make them explicit.

Next, Weeder helps Mikes become less defensive. When Michelle compains, Mikes, like many men, feels incompetent and compelled to defend his capacities and his worth. Men often struggle when they perceive their partners' disapproval—which results in their inability to hear well. This is at the heart of what leads to the Broken Mirror problem that Weeder describes.

Mirroring to help Mike see things from Michelle's point of view, along with using comforting words, has the powerful effect of achieving emotional regulation and alleviating Michelle's distress. When Weeder guides Mikes to listen to Michelle without his usual defensiveness, he's advancing his clients's capacities for understanding and reassurance, possibly even learning a lesson that he wasn't aware of. Mike's comfort Michelle right then and there, he's fostering an intimate moment that can serve as a blueprint for future dialogues.

Feeling heard and validated, Michelle gets ready for the next step: healing the traumatic effects of her experiences with sexual harassment. Being able to talk honestly from a vulnerable place about the traumatic episodes with her professor dissemination is a first for her. It can happen with when she feels safe and seen.

Sexual harassment and sexual trauma have the potential to derail a couple's bond. A big concept in dealing with sexual trauma in the context of an intimate relationship is to help the couple become partners in healing. Believe #MeToo, many women were so used to being blamed for supposedly provoking the harassment that they internalized shame and unworthiness. Michelle's desire to keep the episodes to herself is born of this feeling. She clearly wondered internally "Would you love me if you knew it's my fault?"

But we're living in a time of reckoning that has the potential to shift the old pattern of giving a pass to men who become sexually forceful without consent. Despite Mike's reaction to aspects of the #MeToo movement, Weeder's intervention averts the possibility of retraumatizing Michelle or replicating that harmful relationship in some way. The successful resolution of sexual trauma involves creating a space for safe conversations, and Weeder makes that possible.

To deepen sexual healing, we can help clients like Mikes develop curiosity and the capacity to tolerate a partner's painful emotions. I can imagine gently asking, "Can formulate and articulate questions for Michelle that she can answer at her own pace—questions such as "Have the experiences with your professor affected you in your sex life? Are you afraid of sex? Do you feel ashamed? Do you want to know about what it's like for you to be a woman in the world? What's the best way to show you I'm interested in a sexual encounter in a way that doesn't make you feel pressured?" A loving, trusting relationship can be a powerful healing force in the life of someone who has suffered a lot of repeated sexual harassment.

In the end, Weeder even models humility by listening to Michelle and admitting a mistake after he recommended that she put her husband's offenses in the context of a continuum. Weeder's self-disclosure that even he has unknowingly fallen into the sexisms in his own upbringing. Carol Jones enough how important it is to women that the men in their lives acknowledge their actions and their impact on women, and how this resolution their male therapists.

And yet, for Weeder to assist his advocates for Mikes is actually not a bad idea. This can be done by operating from a more long-gently helping Michelle become more conscious about Mike's experiences with feeling incompetent, inadequate, or rejected, and better understanding how he has complexities.

Both men and women need to increase their curiosity about how they affect their partners. To recognize implicit and unspoken gender-based contracts will open up and doesn't come naturally to most people. Our job as clinicians is to help couples deal with gender tensions and gender dilemmas without resorting to aggressive, shaming, or a lack of kindness.

Empathic attunement, emotional safety, and successful problem-solving don't happen if there are winners and losers, dominance and coercion. Weeder hints as this when he recognizes his "must focus on stabilizing their emotional states." It's a gentle reminder to make sure neither client, whatever their gender, behaves badly toward the other. True empathy flowers in the context of respectful conversations based on mutual kindness and curiosity.

***

David Wexler, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, executive director of the Relationship Training Institute in San Diego, CA, and coauthor of the new book #MeToo Informed Therapy: Counseling Approaches for Men, Women, and Couples. He's also the author of When Intimacy Hurts: Healing Bad Sex, The STOP Symptoms Wellness Program, and Men in Therapy. He can be reached at www.RTIprograms.org, or dwexler@drwexler.com.

Sara Schwebarber, LMS, LMFT, LCPC, is founder of The Academy for Couples Therapists, an online training program for therapists who want to improve their work with couples, and of Couples Counseling Associates in Chicago, where she currently practices. Her numerous publications include the book Culture and Identity: Life Stories for Counselors and Therapists. Contact: sara@thecouplestherapist@gmail.com.

Let us know what you think at letter@psychmagonline.org. Want to earn CE hours for reading ITR? Visit our website and take the CE Quiz.

Want to submit a Case Study piece for an upcoming issue? Please see Submission Guidelines on our website.

ILLUSTRATION BY SALLY WERN COMPORT

Topic: Couples | Cultural, Social & Racial Issues | Families | Men

Previous: In Consultation
Next: Profile of Love

Read 32 times

Comments - posting users please login first!
Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *
Name *
Enter your name here
E-mail Address *
Enter your email address here
Website URL
Enter your website URL here
Message *
I'm not a robot
reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms
Submit Comment!

Psychotherapy Subscribe today for just 3 months! SIGN UP NOW!
Psychotherapy Magazine
P.O. Box 1081, Oceanside, CA 92049
Toll Free: 800-311-1515
Local: 760-433-0975
M - Friday, 9:00am - 5:00pm PST
About Us
Contact Us
Privacy Policy
Terms of Use
Rights and Permissions
Advertise
Jobs
Sponsorship
Directories & Resources
Online Learning Center
Our Authors