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Family Therapy and Civilization and Its Discontents

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Abstract

Myth or history, the origin of civilization was ascribed in the Hebrew scriptures to the first couple, Adam and Eve, and to the intergenerational saga of their descendants. Civilization has been a concern of psychoanalysts since the time of Freud and Jung, the fathers of depth psychology. In their mature years, they applied their theories and observations of human nature to the tumultuous events of the First and Second World Wars.

Taking their cues, the author utilizes key concepts and insights from family therapy on couple conflict as a lens for analyzing international relations, with the goal for finding their parallels on the dynamics of strife and turmoil in our time and with the premise that the world could be seen as the human family writ large. The article explores how principles for couple analysis — respecting differences, boundaries, history, recognizing stress and transitions and congruent communication — can be transposed to international relations.

Keywords: family therapy; civilization; couple conflict; war; international relations

Adam and Eve

To utter in one breath “civilization discontents” and “family therapy” seems like a long stretch. But is it? If we look back, the Hebrew scriptures first observed that the rise and fall of civilization found their origins in the first couple, Adam and Eve, and the intergenerational saga that evolved with their descendants.

The discord in Adam and Eve’s union ended up with their mutual finger-pointing when banished from paradise, tricked and triangulated by the serpent, and with their refusal to admit to personal responsibility for their actions (Genesis 3). Adam and Eve defied the boundaries set by God in eating the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil (dichotomized thinking) in the Garden of Eden.

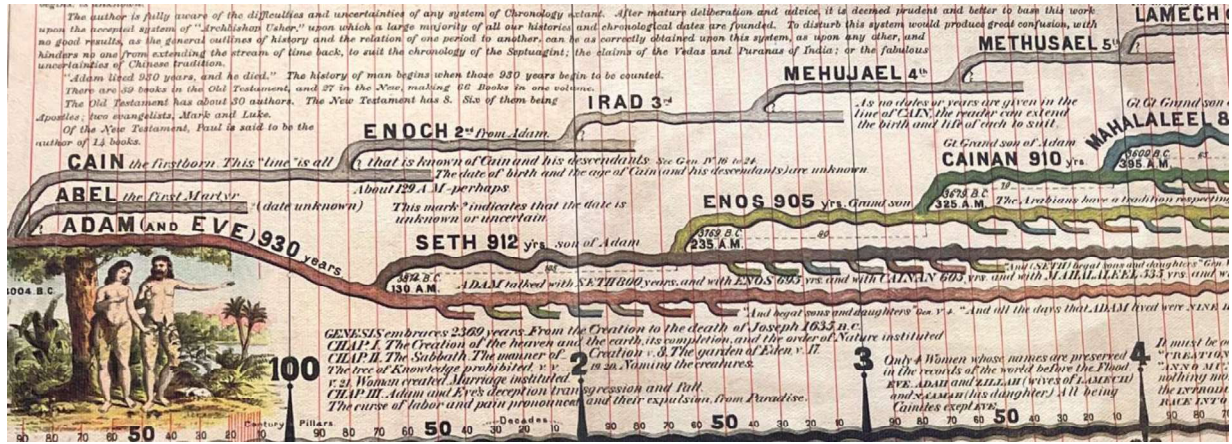


Figure 1. The Origins of Civilization (photo: BKL; World of Wine (WOW) Museums, Porto)

From then on, sibling rivalry arose between Cain and Abel due to favoritism by God for Abel’s offering, leading to Cain’s jealousy and the murder of Abel (Genesis 4: 1-18). It was said that Baal-worshipping Canaanites descended from Cain, a contentious tribe and challenger of Israel.

The marriage bond was not what it was intended, as two people dedicated to each other become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:21-25), but betrayals and deception ensued when Sarah (Genesis 12:10-20) was given to the harem of the pharaoh for political expediency. The banishment of the illegitimate son Ishmael out of Sarah’s human connivance to give Abraham an heir was said to have given rise to the religion of Islam, whereas Isaac who was given to Sarah by God was in the legitimate lineage of God’s favored people (Genesis 16-17).

Myth or history, this rendition of the strife among tribes at the dawn of civilization suggested their origins in the human family as the foundational unit. In short, the intrigue and intergenerational unfolding saga of the family was the story of civilization.

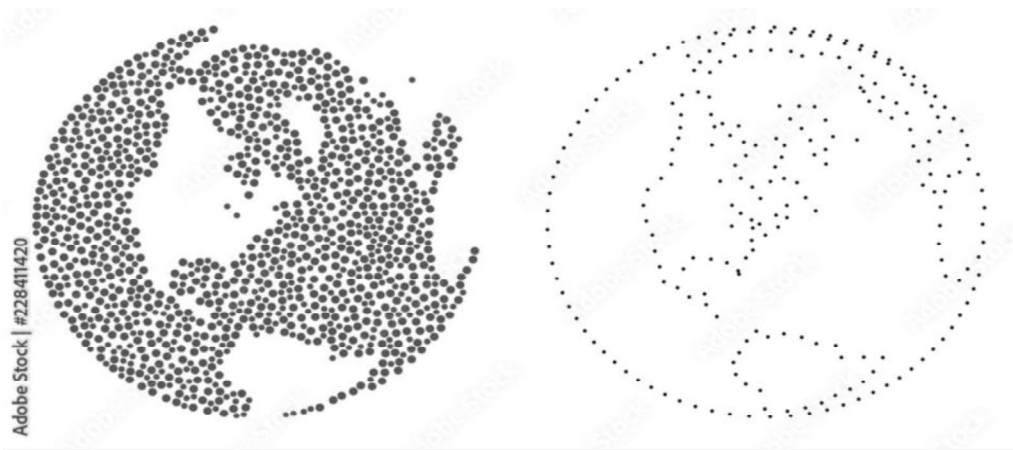


Figure 2. Mirror images of family and civilization

Freud and Jung

Civilization has been a concern of psychoanalysts since the time of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the fathers of depth psychology. As they reached their later years, they applied their theories and observations of human nature to the tumultuous world events of the First and Second World Wars. Taking their cue, I will be utilizing key concepts and insights as a family therapist to shed light on the dynamics of strife and turmoil in our time, with the premise that the world could be seen as the human family writ large.



Figure 3. Freud Museum, London (photo: BKL)

Freud (1856-1939)

Freud spent his life studying the archeology of the human psyche. He observed that humans have conflictual tendencies that he eventually boiled down to two instincts or principles: Eros, the unifying principle or love instinct, and Thanatos, the destructive principle or death instinct. In order to keep in check the death instinct and to channel human drives to reduce social conflicts, civilizations evolved to regulate and control the propensity of humans for aggression and destruction, but these restraints also create discontent and guilt, which is in itself a form of death.

In the end, Freud succumbed to the futility of solving the human predicament, as ultimately civilization is not a satisfactory solution. Even under the command and sanctions of the superego, which views as evil that which humans want for pleasure, the conflict of the individual continues and is played out on a larger society scale; hence society also suffers from neurosis.

It is from the title of his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud, 1930) that I derived the title of this paper.

Carl Jung (1875-1961)

In his later works, Jung was gravely concerned about the collective fanaticism of the world, including the rise of Nazism. In his provocative book, *The Undiscovered Self* (Jung, 1957), Jung warned that to resist the tide of mass hysteria and ideological forces embraced by the masses, individuals must bring to consciousness and come to terms with their own “shadow”, facing the duality of their own psyche and their capacity for both good and evil.

Failing to do so, the projections of our individual “shadow” coalesce into the collective “shadow” that can wield unimaginable destructive power. In Jung’s words: “...mankind always stands on the brink of actions it performs itself but does not control. The whole world wants peace and the whole world prepares for war... Mankind is powerless against mankind” (Jung, 1954, CW 9).

The Individual and the Collective

It is therefore well to be reminded that insights from psychology, and psychotherapy as a remediation, are not only a matter of private concern, but they can orient us with a lens to view larger conflicts and crises in civilizations based on our understanding of human nature.

The Family Therapy Shift: from Individual to Relationship

Freud and Jung came on the scene in an era of ascending individualism that they drove further with the inward focus of psychoanalysis, giving primacy to the individual and the forces within. Since the 1950s, this atomistic view of human problems has been challenged by a group of psychiatrists and clinicians working with schizophrenia (Nichols & Schwartz, 2012). They have observed that the psychosis did not reside within the individual, but rather it was a symptom of the crazy-making double-bind communication occurring between the individual and other members of the family (Bateson et al., 1956).

These systemic observations gave birth to the field of family therapy. Family therapy is based on systems concepts such as communication, reciprocity, boundaries, hierarchies, alliances and coalitions (Nichols & Schwartz, 2012), spurring further insights into human interactions and behaviors beyond the single individual. One could say family therapy is a cross between psychology and sociology.

Small Stage and Large Stage of Human Conflict

I will now present the case of a couple's entanglements as a drama on the Small Stage of human conflict to extrapolate some principles and to shed light on the Large Stage of world affairs, drawing on some principles of family therapy.

You may want to attune your ear to the transactions on the small stage of the couple's conflict and see how their flashpoints are translated in analogous fashion to what transpires on the large stage of international tensions and rhetoric between countries.

The Small Stage: Frida & Finn

The honeymoon phase

During the first two years after their marriage, Finn and Frida were still in their honeymoon stage, when stress was low, and the sky was blue. They enjoyed each other's talents, amused by each other's quirkiness, stimulated by the novelty of each other's culture; they had fun in their shared leisure activities. Frida, born in Mexico, started to develop a taste for jazz and country music that Finn, born in Canada, enjoyed. Finn developed a liking for Frida's Mexican meals.

After they moved in together, Finn even went along with Frida's taste in decorating their house in bold colors, with rugs of Mayan designs thrown on their floors, evoking the warmth and vibrancy of Mexico in cold and drab Canada. Borrowing an observation of economists, trade adds value to goods, and for that matter, to ideas and practices, through added parts and input, modifications, and applications (Vazquez-Cognet, 2022).

Life transitions and stressors

Conflicts started to escalate after their daughter was born. The birth of a first child is one of life's most stressful transitions. The couple had to adjust to the 24-7 demands and schedule of the baby, so they had less time to themselves and each other. Finn felt neglected as his wife did the nursing and recovered from childbirth. Frida also suffered from postpartum blues. Lots of adjustments had to be made. Family life is dynamic, like a river that is ever-changing its course over different terrain, with its twists and turns and the seasons of each life stage.

Frida and Finn argued about the mess in the house, dirty dishes piled up in the sink, no meals on the table when Finn came home. Finn was uncertain whether to soothe the baby every time she cried, how to bathe her, what kind of food she was allowed to eat, and what safety considerations needed to be observed. One wrong move and Frida would blow up, leaving Finn walking on eggshells.

History, social and cultural differences

Add to this the fact that Frida and Finn came from different cultural backgrounds. Frida was vocal about her needs and feelings. Her family escaped to Canada because of the cartel and her father was a prominent figure in the village. She was in favor of a strict and authoritarian style of parenting. Her extended family members were straight to the point, no need to finesse a message. That was accepted in the culture.

Finn grew up in Canada and was pampered by his middle-class parents until his parents divorced. His mother declared that she was a lesbian when Finn was 14. After that he was pretty much left to his own devices. He played music with a band and with some money from his father, he opened a music store; the business did very well.

He was the youngest in his family with two sisters more than six years his senior; so he said he was always treated as the baby in the family, without a voice in the company of three older and stronger women.

Finn and Frida also differed in religious orientations. Frida is Catholic and her religion connected her to generations of her ancestry. Her religion gives her continuity and solace through religious rituals and practices, icons and narratives of miraculous happenings. Further, her religion was a resource to her and her family during times of social unrest, threats and violence in their village.

On the other hand, Finn has little use for religion in a country like Canada. He has not experienced any war or social or political turmoil and there is always a strong social safety net he could fall back on if needed. He is proud of being a staunch atheist, especially given the atrocities toward indigenous people in the name of religion that have been coming out in the news.

Communication postures and conflict

Finn felt Frida has a habit of “summoning” him when he was in the middle of something. Being the adapting one, at first he would drop everything to avoid a criticism or confrontation to tend to Frida’s needs. No doubt Frida was an assertive woman. This has won her the position as head of cybersecurity in a major bank. She did not put up with nonsense and was a straight shooter. She had fired numerous incompetent employees, and she didn’t hesitate to point out Finn’s inefficiency and incompetence in many areas of running the family and household.

“Why on earth did you do that?”

“Can’t you come up with any ideas of what to do with the family for the weekend?”

“What do you take me to be? A three-year-old?”

“Do you expect me to eat that half-cooked meal?”

Her tone was superior, critical, and condescending. Sometimes Finn fought back, “Is that a request or a command?” and retaliated by mocking Frida’s hairstyle and fashion.

Triangulation

Out of exasperation and the build-up of stress, Frida complained about Finn to their friends, pointing out his faults. Finn started getting friendlier with other women. Sometimes Frida made fun of him with their daughter about his greasy hair and shirts he had been wearing for weeks. Triangles tend to form when emotions are too high for two individuals so that a third party is roped in to diffuse the tension (Bowen, 1993).

A further triangle was formed in their parenting of Fatima, who is now 10. Frida wanted Fatima to be baptized but Finn wanted nothing to do with religion. As Fatima grew, she sensed that she was the cause of her parents’ discord. She became quiet as she did not want to add to the feud. The parents argued about her schooling, her allowance, her friends and whether certain behaviors were acceptable according to their own set of rules and values. She was caught in the middle of triangle with her parents. When Frida set limits for Fatima such as throwing her socks out the window after she left them on the floor for weeks, Finn rushed out to pick up the socks for her so she wouldn’t be upset. Both parents postured to be the virtuous one to win Fatima’s affection. A contest ensued to establish the villain and the villainized and Fatima felt torn and fragmented in the war zone.

The Large Stage: International Relations Seen through Family Therapy Principles

I will highlight five principles that inform the work of a family therapist for the analysis of the dynamics of a conflicted couple. These principles for couple analysis can then be transposed as a lens for analyzing international relations with their parallels.

Respecting differences

Differences between people and nations are more the norm than the exception. Once we become aware of the reality of differences by virtue of genetics, gender, history, culture, religion, society and political contexts of people and nations, we become more tolerant and acknowledging of these differences. Autonomy is an important feature of true relationship, allowing each party to be a free agent and a decision-maker for themselves. Knowing each other’s history and make-up, empathy makes their relationship viable through negotiations and understanding.

Respecting differences also means knowing one’s strengths and limitations that constitute each person’s unique profile. Nations are “prisoners of geography,” as Tim Marshall titled his fascinating book on geopolitics.

Each nation has its strengths and limitations stemming from inherent constraints dictated by geography and climate, and I might add history and injuries from past collective traumas and the cultural values and rules that helped survival over millennia. Cultural values, practices and customs are different across cultures; they form the glue that has kept each society functioning. Any change needs to come from within the person or nation, through self-assessment and awareness, and cannot be coerced or imposed from the outside to disrupt an internal system that would otherwise create resistance.

In working with conflictual couples, the family therapist elicits the stance and emotions of each side of the dyad without taking sides, or the therapy will not go beyond the first session. For one person, it could be fear, humiliation, hurt and injury, unmet expectations, thwarted hopes and wishes, angst and so on. These are acknowledged. Then the therapist elicits with the same degree of interest and curiosity regarding the other side, acknowledging that two people legitimately can have two vantage points. The legitimization of differences is essential to form a balanced therapeutic alliance in order to progress.

Respecting boundaries

Boundaries refer to each person or nation owning and taking responsibility for their distinct set of fears, anxieties, values, beliefs and aims and desires while respecting others' freedom to choose what is suitable for them.

Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist and esteemed theorist of the family therapy tradition, coined the term "differentiation" to indicate someone who can stand on their own two feet as a solid self that is formed slowly from within, as opposed to a pseudo-self that is acquired from gaining acceptance by others and is dependent on others for approval and definition (Bowen, 1993).

Bowen saw the strong emotional flow between and among members of a family that can lead to fusion and triangles to temper strong anxieties and insecurities. After all, we are not just rational creatures. According to Bowen, a balance between thinking and feeling, rationality and emotion, ensures better differentiation and boundaries between people and nations to reduce reactivity and impulsivity of action and responses.

When emotions run high between two people or nations, the need is strong to bring in a third party to defuse the tension within the system. The third party can become the scapegoat or the villain to combat; this serves the purpose of diverting attention and energy from within the system, but the real problem remains unsolved. Hence triangulation can become a recurring mechanism to cope with intractable problems within a system incurring outside damage.

Bringing in a third party as an arbitrator who is not well-versed with another's culture disturbs the equilibrium of a country.

In family therapy, each partner can speak for themselves but cannot speak presumptuously for the other. The respect of boundaries helps to clearly differentiate "self" from "other". Blurring and overstepping of boundaries creates resentment, misinterpretation and anger, which in turn could incite retaliation.

Respecting history

As discussed, people are inherently different, by virtue of the many factors discussed earlier, including traumas that they have suffered, and where they are currently situated in their life circumstances. Failure to acknowledge these differences and jumping to take sides or pronounce a verdict is detrimental to any resolution of conflict. Such divisive rhetoric creates camps and factions such that negotiations become difficult if not impossible.

Much of what we read in the news constitutes a piecemeal, sensational, atomistic rendition of what is happening in the present moment, colored by the political persuasion of the media, and devoid of a balanced analysis of historical layers of what led up to events in the present. Without a sense of history, it is presumptuous to come to a verdict of who is the hero and the villain and neither is it necessary to do so, as grievances and injuries need to be understood, not condemnation of each other.

As John Perkins in his self-revelation in the story behind the making of a modern-day empire admonished, we need to get to know "the story behind the story" (Perkins, 2016).

With the couple sharing with each other their history of trauma and injuries in a safe space moderated by the therapist, couples often soften in their mutual indictment and are more considerate and compassionate in their actions and communication towards each other with considerable improvement in their relationship.

Recognizing stress and transitions

Family therapists, with their attention to contextual elements, are particularly attuned to the stress of family transitions, whether normative or unexpected, such as loss and death, bankruptcy, divorce, chronic illness, or an empty nest. Life transitions are stress points because emotions run high at these junctures, and a reconfiguration of roles is needed. Adaptations of expectations due to a role-change of family members with the addition or loss of a family member in the system require negotiations and flexibility of operations.

Larger societal stressors such as riots, high unemployment, war, financial crisis, inflation, climate change and pandemics can impact families and nations. At such times, honest, frank and collaborative communication becomes more important than ever for people to come together to navigate adaptations to these passages into a new environment.

The build-up of stress and angst in a family or a country needs to be channeled constructively through acknowledgement of the real issues, rather than blaming and finger-pointing that polarize stances. The rage and anxiety within a system can spill over into aggression, addiction, bullying, and crime just as social unrest domestically can lead to fueling a target of war with another country. Acknowledging stress and facing it squarely could help countries avoid triangulating a third party, just as the warring parents triangulate a child. Ownership of one's insecurities could prevent one parent trying to undo what the other has done in order to gain points and divert their own couple and personal issues. The innocent sufferer is the child, the weakest member, who is the victim of warring parents just as millions of innocent people suffer the destruction of war.

Learning congruent communication

Congruent communication is a balanced form of communication that makes equal room for representation from both sides of a communication, Self (S) and Other (O) (Figure 4) to address the problem at hand, represented by C for Context (Satir et al., 1991; Lee, 2017/2021).

Imbalances in representation or privileging of self over other or minimizing self to defer to the other are incongruent communication postures that will create tensions that could boil over in time. Paying attention to context is also important as contexts are dynamic and the balance of power in the world is shifting (Mahbubani, 2018). Oblivious to the context of global dynamics and issues, changing environments, shifts in balance of power could blind-side the parties and create panic when unsolved longstanding problems erupt into crises.

In family therapy, to reconcile conflicts both sides of the story are heard, acknowledged and allowed for differences. The therapist then helps each side propose a request to address the problem. The solution emerges in the communication and the mutual understanding of perspectives and is not something that is pre-conceived inside people's heads. There are multiple types of communication postures (Lee, 2017/2021), but the two most prominent ones are dominant and submissive, or superior and inferior.

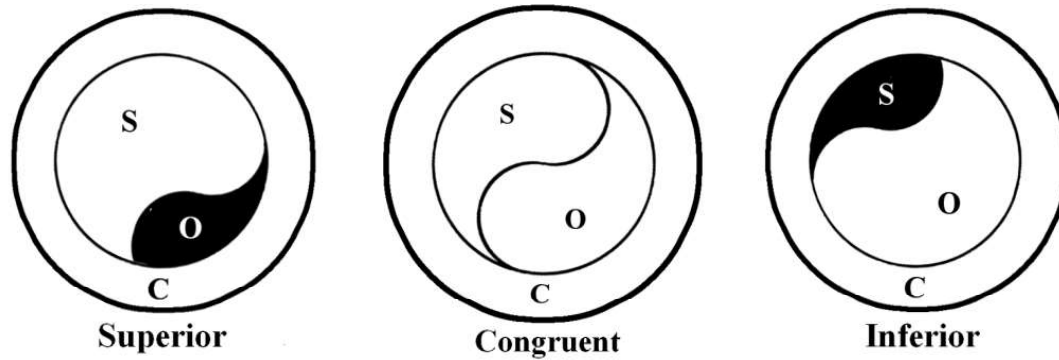


Figure 4. Congruent vs Incongruent Communication (Lee, 2017/2021)

In some instances, couples and countries settle into a superior-inferior alliance given the circumstances when one party is dependent on the other for livelihood and survival. In other instances, when one party is superior with blaming, finger-pointing, condemnation, aggression, the other party is likely to rise to the same posture. The result is war.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a systematic analysis of the rhetoric and statements of world leaders, although it would be an exercise worthwhile for future research. Here I would like to invite us to begin to listen to the type of communication when leaders of countries speak to other countries or about them on the Large Stage.

Consider the communication postures and what responses would be provoked. Who is taking the superior position? Who is silent? Who is cautious? Who is acquiescing?

Example 1

“States like these (North Korea, Iran and Iraq), and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.”¹

Example 2

“I believe this genocide is ongoing, and that we are witnessing the systematic attempt to destroy Uighurs by the Chinese party-state,”

¹ President Delivers State of the Union Address, Washington, DC, January 29, 2002. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement, adding that Chinese officials were “engaged in the forced assimilation and eventual erasure of a vulnerable ethnic and religious minority group.”²

Example 3

“As for China’s harassment of Taiwan with military aircraft, warships, unreasonable suppression and political actions, the one being most unreasonable is China...Taiwan does not want to close the door to China. It is China that has used various means to oppress and treat Taiwan unreasonably.”³

Example 4

“We request the US side to stop smearing and containing China. Stop interfering in China’s internal affairs. The bilateral relationship cannot improve unless the US side can do that,” Wei, dressed in the uniform of a general in the People’s Liberation Army, told delegates.³

Example 5

“No country should impose its will on others or bully others under the guise of multilateralism,” Wei said. “The strategy is an attempt to build an exclusive small group in the name of a free and open Indo-Pacific to hijack countries in our region and target one specific country – it is a strategy to create conflict and confrontation to contain and encircle others.”³

Example 6

“Once again, I appeal to the serviceman of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, do not let the neo-Nazis and ultranationalists use your children, wives and elderly as human shields. Take power into your own hands; it seems that it will be easier for us to agree than with this gang of drug-addicts and neo-Nazis who settled in Kyiv and took the entire Ukraine population hostage,” said Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling on the Ukrainian army to overthrow the country's leadership in a public address excerpt broadcasted by AFP.⁴

Example 7

"The idea of punishing a country that has one of the largest nuclear potentials is absurd.

² Wong, E., & Buckley, C. (2021, January 19). U.S. says China's repression of Uighurs is 'genocide'. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/us/politics/trump-china-xinjiang.html>

³ ‘China's Taiwan’: Beijing's defense minister rails against 'smearing and interfering' US. (2022, June 12). Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/12/chinas-taiwan-beijings-defence-minister-rails-against-smearing-and-interfering-us>

⁴ AFP. (2022, February 25). Putin calls Ukraine government 'drug addicts and neo-Nazis' | AFP. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkos-aWbo7w>

And potentially poses a threat to the existence of humanity," Dmitry Medvedev, who now serves as deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, said on Telegram.⁵

Parallels of the Small and Large Stage

Principles employed in family therapy to help couples work out of their conflict on the Small Stage could be useful for analysis on the Large Stage of world affairs. We can ask questions such as:

- Who is doing the finger-pointing, the acquiescing?
- Who is coming in when there is a dispute to form a triangle? How has this triangle contributed positively to the conflict between two parties or disturbed the equilibrium of forces for stability and co-existence? What are the consequences for the most vulnerable?
- How much attention do countries give to the history, culture and values of other countries and their readiness to adopt the lifestyle and values of a dominant country?
- Do world leaders acknowledge the rights of other nations without interfering and let each nation take responsibility for themselves?
- Who postures as the virtuous one and who is painted as a villain?
- Do nations take responsibility for their own troubles and try to remedy them responsibly, intelligently and strategically?

Lastly, consider the fate for Frida and Finn and Fatima if their family conflict is not resolved.

The Therapist Has Many Hats

To sum up, the family therapist dons many hats, depending on the occasion (Lee 2017/2021). Among them are:

Neutral Observer: Observes the interactive picture and the communication styles and delineates the back-and-forth dynamic that leads to conflict.

Translator: Translates negative messages and complaints into hopes and wishes that reflect universal human longings for nations and people. It includes peace at home, food on the table, sound finances, happy parents and happy children, free from deprivation, stress and war.

⁵ Reuters. (2022, July 06). Russia's Medvedev warns United States: Messing with a nuclear power is Folly. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/russias-medvedev-warns-united-states-messing-with-nuclear-power-is-folly-2022-07-06/>

Detective: Delves deep into the history and culture of each person and what made them who they are. For countries the same applies – history of war, famine, invasion, culture, geopolitical limitations and advantages, strengths and weaknesses, mindset, and values for survival.

Coach: Asks questions and invites new responses but structuring the interaction so dysfunctional patterns are interrupted.

Amplifier: Makes louder and more audible and visible positive messages and actions taken by each side.

Mirror: Maps out the existing patterns that spell the couple's downfall and names the consequence. Also mirrors the positive interactive moves to encourage a positive trajectory.

Choreographer: Provides opportunities for the couple to practice new dance moves while guiding the new movements along.

Role Model: Models congruent communication and sometimes that means telling the couple how the dynamic in the room affects them. No one has a magic wand, and the changes have to be assumed by each member of the couple and each nation.

Conclusion

Jonathan Sacks (1948 – 2020) Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain, used the terms “left brain politics” and “right brain politics”. Left brain politics refers to linear, either-or, the power play of domination-submission politics. Right brain politics is integrative, holistic, relational, a place for me-and-you (Sacks, 2012).

Sacks observed how civilizations have come and gone: “Mesopotamia, the Egypt of the Pharaohs, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, the Empire of Alexander the Great, and Rome. In the modern world, nations and empires rose to eminence and fell: Venice, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Britain.” What principles can we learn from family therapy if we consider nations are as families writ large? What parallels can we draw from the Small Stage to the Large Stage?

Can the world use a few more family therapists who are systems thinkers to speak for right brain politics? If anyone knows of job openings or wants to create a position, or knows of anyone for hire, please contact the author of this article.

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