



Factors Preventing Gridlock in Chilean Couples' Relationships Based on the Discourse of Couples Therapists and Highly Adjusted Couples

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The term gridlock describes the occurrence of rigid patterns in couples' conflict. This study aimed to describe strategies of conflict resolution and gridlock prevention from the perspectives of couples and couple therapists. Participants were couple therapists and highly adjusted couples scored by the dyadic adjustment scale (DAS), distributed according to traditional and non-traditional position in life and duration of relationships. Conflict gridlock scenarios were used to create video stimulus that were presented to participants. A qualitative methodology was used to analyse couples' and therapists' commentaries on the scenarios. Results showed differences in preventing conflict gridlock among sub-groups of couples. Long-term traditional couples focused on loyalty to a common project and value sacrificing to a higher good; long-term non-traditional couples prioritised caring and validating the bond in the relationship. Short-term traditional couples focused on mutual love and the relief of hurt while short-term non-traditional couples supported the value of equity.

Keywords: conflict, couples, gridlock, intimacy, relationship, therapy

Key Points

- 1 Conflict is a normal part of couples' lives, enabling partners to redefine relational patterns and the overall sense of the relationship.
- 2 Problematic situations emerge when conflicts cannot be resolved, generating repetitive, inefficient, and dysfunctional behavioural patterns that transform conflict into gridlock.
- 3 Differences regarding the duration and traditional and non-traditional aspects of the relationship produce different challenges in the trajectory of the bond.
- 4 Therapists refer to strategies of breaking the interaction pattern to resolve severe gridlocked conflict and opening up new forms of interplay.
- 5 Different types of couples emphasise different strategies to prevent a gridlock situation, i.e., loyalty to a common project, passionate love, caring and equity.

During the second half of the 20th century, with the increasing predominance of individual liberties over traditional behavioural models, the human couple underwent deep changes. Today the human couple is placed in an unprecedented setting characterised by the occurrence of fast social and technological transformations that develop speedily even within the same generation. These changes produce tensions in couple interaction which can be conceived as an emotional space where these tensions must be regulated by its members in a way to achieve the vital objectives of wellbeing,

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avoiding the appearance of destructive tendencies (Gross, 2007; Solomon & Tatkin, 2011; Tapia, 2007).

This study was conducted to describe the ways of perceiving conflict resolution and relational gridlock prevention, from the perspectives of Chilean couples therapists and different types of highly adjusted Chilean couples, with regard to the duration of the relationship (long and short term) and traditional and non-traditional positions.

Couples' Conflicts Background

Couples are often faced with misunderstandings. These situations can be resolved by clarifications, i.e., by talking again and checking the meanings of messages. A different situation is the appearance of disagreement, i.e., when each member of the couple thinks, feels and/or acts differently with respect to an issue. If the disagreement is accompanied by emotions such as anxiety and fear, it is referred to as a conflict (Tapia et al., 2009). Conflict is a normal part of couples' lives, enabling partners to redefine relational patterns and the overall sense of the relationship. Conflict avoidance hinders development, reducing couples' capacity to face and resolve difficulties (Schnarch, 1991, 2009). Problematic situations emerge when conflicts cannot be resolved, generating repetitive, inefficient, and dysfunctional behavioural patterns that transform conflict into gridlock (Gottman, 1999, 2011; Schnarch, 2009; (Tapia et al., 2009). Gottman (1999) found that only one-third of explicit conflicts in highly satisfied couples referred to problems that could be solved. Hence, couples do not resolve most problems. The well-being of couples thus depends on the capacity to distinguish problems that can be resolved and to maintain affectionate dialogue regarding perpetual problems (Gottman, 1999, 2011).

Gottman (1999, 2011) determined that couples' wellbeing depends on the regulation of emotional negativity and encouragement of emotional positivity during conflict, as well as on attempts at, and mutual acceptance of, post-conflict emotional repair. Partners' connections with their needs for attachment and care, and their acknowledgement of each other's emotions, are means of conflict resolution (Johnson & Lebow, 2000). Coping with conflict implies a couples' protection of their bond (Klein & Lemm, 1996; Ripley, Worthington, Bromley & Kemper, 2005), practice of mutual legitimacy, openness to feelings, willingness to listen to each other, an experience of relational trust (Schnarch, 2009) and achieving equity in the relationship (Kluwer, Heesink & Van de Vliet, 1996).

Couple Conflict: Duration and Type of Relationship

Newlyweds and long term couples

The differences regarding the duration of the relationship give rise to different stages and challenges in the trajectory or cycle of the relational bond. Thus theoretical proposals of romantic love show different positions, some showing the inevitable diminishing of love over time (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969; Sternberg, 1986), while others support mechanisms and functions for the maintenance of romantic love in long-term relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986; Berscheid, 1983; Buss, 2006; Fisher, 2006).

Research findings support differences across the couple life in the nature of the bond. The short-term couples have been characterised by deep connection, intensity

and sexually alive relationships. At the same time intrusive thinking, uncertainty, and mood swings may be present (Tennov, 1979). A widely accepted finding is the linear passage over time of passionate love into companionate love (Hatfield & Walster, 1978). Companionate love, less intense than passionate love, combines attachment, commitment and intimacy. It is a deep, friendship and easy companionship, that shares common interests and activities, but does not necessarily include sexual desire or attraction (Grote & Frieze, 1994).

There are strong and similar associations between romantic love and satisfaction in short and long-term relationships. Companionate love was moderately correlated with satisfaction in short-term relationships and slightly more so in long-term relationships. For passionate love the pattern was the reverse, with short-term relationships displaying a significantly larger association with satisfaction than long-term. This suggests that passionate love is closely tied with relationship satisfaction at all phases, but somewhat more so in the early stages. In long-term relationships, calm, friendship-type and attachment has a greater relevance (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). Accordingly, it is possible to expect that long-term and short-term couples have different strategies to deal with gridlock conflicts.

Traditional and non-traditional couples

Since the second half of the 20th century, there have been marked changes in people's attitudes about marriage. The number of relationship breakups has increased, resulting in high rates of separations and divorce (Chilean Vital Records Office, 2012; The 2012 Statistical Abstract, 2012). Despite this data a UK study shows the institution of marriage has a very high degree of popularity with a marriage rate of 75% and 40% of all marriages are re-marriages for one or both partners (Flouri & Buchanan, 2001).

Regarding traditional and non-traditional couples, the mentioned changes have different sociocultural backgrounds. Studies have identified changes in traditional beliefs about couple life and family roles, such as wife employment, have been found to liberalise attitudes toward marriage, and women compared to men have more egalitarian and less conservative attitudes toward marital roles (Flouri & Buchanan, 2001). Other findings show how divorce and non-marital childbearing have increased the legitimacy of monoparental families, highlighting the single life as an option (Trend & South, 1992). Considering this scenario, it is expected that changes in practices and beliefs will influence the way couples face and resolve gridlock and has inspired the researchers to focus this study on the traditional and non-traditional life positions of couples.

Aims of the Study

Relating to couple's difficulties, it has been reported that about 23% of stable couples in the US show high rates of adjustment during their entire life, maintaining romantic love, sexual satisfaction and high self-esteem (Olson, 1993). These couples develop skills preventing divorce risk and improving positive feelings about their relationships (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Gottman, 1999, 2011). This evidence encouraged the aims of our study that attempted a description of the perceived ways of conflict resolution and relational gridlock prevention through the exploration of different types of Chilean highly adjusted couples (short and long term,

traditional and non-traditional) and the reports of couple therapists. Expert couple therapists were included to describe the concept of gridlock conflict and complement the perspective of conflict resolution and relational gridlock prevention in couples from a professional point of view.

Methods

A qualitative approach based on *Grounded Theory* was used. This methodology allows access to subjective processes, from the perspective of the actors involved. The design of this study was descriptive and analytical adopting an inductive approximation that employs a systematic set of procedures to elaborate a conceptual framework for the human processes under study (Flick, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach attempts to increase understanding of the object of study and generate guideline questions that orient the data collection and analysis.

These questions include the following:

- How do high adjusted couples of short and long term duration, and representing traditional and non-traditional positions in life, perceive the resolution of conflict situations?
- How do these couples prevent relational gridlock?
- How do expert couples therapists perceive the resolution of conflict situations?
- How do expert couples therapists think about preventing relational gridlock?

Participants

Two groups of participants were recruited: (1) seven systemic couples therapists with more than 25 years of clinical experience with a mean age of 56 years. All seven were accredited to practice as couple therapists, and (2) twenty-two couples with no psychiatric disorder and high levels of dyadic adjustment. Participants were selected from a population with a limited range of ethnic, socio-economic and cultural features, representative of the Chilean middle class. Therapists were invited to participate by communicating with the institutions at which they worked, and couples were recruited

TABLE 1

Characteristics of the Couples

Couples	N	Mean Age (Years)	Mean Number of Children	Mean Relationship Duration (Years)	Socio-economic Level
Traditional (≥ 10 years)	8	M: 43 W: 40	3	15.1	
Traditional (≤ 7 years)	5	M: 38 W: 36	2	5.2	Middle class
Non-traditional (≥ 10 years)	4	M: 45.3 W: 45.3	1.3	15	
Non-traditional (≤ 7 years)	5	M: 34 W: 30.4	1	3.5	

Note. M, men; W, women.

using a snowball sampling technique. All participants signed informed consents that explained the study aims and characteristics, and described the protection of confidentiality and participants' rights.

Therapists were assigned randomly to two groups: one for the definition of gridlock and identification of gridlock situations (three therapists), and the other for the discussion of conflict resolution and gridlock prevention (four therapists). Couples were distributed in four groups according to the traditional or non-traditional positions and duration of the relationship (Table 1). Couples meeting the following criteria were classified as *traditional*: support of the institution of marriage as a first option, active religious observance, conservative political ideas, and conservative professional career (e.g., engineering, law) for the male partner and no work outside the home for the female partner. Criteria used to define *non-traditional* couples were: cohabitation as a first option before or instead of marriage, no active religious practice, liberal political ideas, and non-conservative professional careers (e.g., arts, humanities) with women working outside the home.

Procedure

The first group of couple therapists participated in focus group meetings to define typical gridlock situations (Morgan & Krueger, 1988; (Tapia et al., 2009) and develop scripts for four clinical vignettes of couples' interactions in such situations. Four short screenplays of these gridlock vignettes were then created for the following themes: (1) sexual desire, (2) power, (3) education, and (4) family of origin. These scenarios were acted out, videotaped, and used as working material for interviews and discussion groups.

The second focus group of therapists viewed the scenarios and discussed how they believed the couples could overcome the conflict situations and the factors that could have prevented gridlock occurrence, based on their clinical experience. Data were collected during all focus group discussions.

Couples were first asked to complete the *dyadic adjustment scale* (DAS) (Spanier, 1976), adapted and validated in Chile (Tapia et al., 2008), to measure their levels of relational adjustment. Each couple demonstrating a high level of satisfaction (DAS score >114) was asked to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted by an interviewer (expert couple therapist) in which the participants commented on the videos depicting couples' scenarios. These interviews aimed to confirm the DAS results and exclude couples with risk indicators of negative emotion regulation (Gottman, 1999), as well as to gather data for the study. The videotaped scenarios were used as stimuli to enable discussion while ethically protecting the couples from direct observation and recording of actual conflict. The use of dramatisation assumed that couples could identify with the scenarios without facing their personal problems directly, and thus were able to manage any emotions that arose. The therapists asked open questions related to the scenarios, inviting couples to discuss how they believed the couples could have prevented or resolved the depicted situations. These conversations were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

Data collected from therapists' and couples' discussions were fragmented, conceptualised, and analytically articulated. A team of researchers blinded to participants' group assignments first performed open descriptive coding of transcribed interviews, then

integrated the information by analysing each group of couples and therapists and each vignette separately. Comparison data from vignettes revealed no main conceptual difference, enabling global analysis using axial coding by a different team of researchers. The results of this analysis were then presented to the first team of researchers to enable triangulation of the information according to the new evidence.

Results

The analysis generated two types of result: couples therapists' definitions and characterisations of conflict gridlock situations, and a conceptual framework of therapists' and couples' perceptions about factors facilitating conflict resolution and preventing gridlock.

Couple therapists' definition of conflict gridlock situations

The couples therapists defined the following characteristics of gridlock: rigid patterns, repetitive sequences of interaction, negative emotions, loss of emotional connection, absence of meta-communication, and inability to leave the pattern. They identified the following elements of couples' interactions during conflict gridlock: unwillingness to find a solution, negative attribution of intentions, failure to consider the other's position, assignment of responsibility for change to the other, and power struggle. They characterised relationship patterns in such situations as chronicity, lack of proximity, rigid roles, and double-bind messages. The therapists concluded that emotional disconnection between partners is the most serious consequence of gridlock situations and the main factor in their maintenance.

TABLE 2
Elements of Conflict Resolution Identified by Therapists

Category	Component
Willingness to change	Taking flexible positions
	Taking the situation seriously
	Taking responsibility
Addressing the problem	Exploring the situation
	Revealing to the partner what is going on
	Not letting time pass
	Accepting negative emotions
	Accepting disagreement
Creating a suitable atmosphere	Creating a calm ambience
	Using honest and direct language
	Avoiding attacks and ironies
	Developing emotional intimacy and establishing the legitimacy of each other
	Changing the pattern
Changing the pattern	Allowing meta-communication through self-awareness
	Generating new understanding and changing the discourse
	Modifying the sequence of the conflict
	Generating a change that can lead to a new emotional state

TABLE 3
Elements of Conflict Resolution Identified by Couples

Category	Component
Willingness to change	Being flexible
	Admitting failures
	Taking responsibility for problems
	Yield
Addressing the problem	Detecting the problem
	Focusing on the problem
	Recognising that the problem belongs to both members of the couple
	Exploring what is going on with the partner
Creating a suitable atmosphere	Not avoiding debate
	Finding the time and the space to be alone
	Listening attentively
	Showing mutual respect and acceptance
	Trusting
	Showing emphatic understanding
	Being honest
Willingness to jointly search for a solution	Self-expressing feelings, expectations, and needs
	Negotiating personal positions
	Agreeing
	Constructing a solution that can be achieved together
	Providing mutual support

Therapists’ perspectives about elements facilitating conflict resolution

Therapists identified the following elements that facilitate conflict resolution (Table 2), presented here with relevant quotations:

- *Willingness to Change.* ‘It is necessary to explain that it’s not a competition of who is right and who is wrong, or who is the best. One needs to be generous, to make concessions, to be tolerant of the other’s stance and be influenced by it.’
- *Addressing the Problem.* ‘She could maintain the invitation to him that she made before, for example saying “what’s wrong?” “why are you reacting in that way?” “what’s bothering you?” “what has hurt you?” “what do you prefer me to do?”’
- *Creating a Suitable Atmosphere for Communication.* ‘Engaging with each other on an emotional level, not attacking each other, not speaking ironically, not treating the other as silly’.
- *Changing the Pattern.* ‘In terms of the process, it seems that anything that intervenes in the sequence will change it. A moment in which there is no defensiveness would be the time to introduce the change into the pattern’.

Couples' perspectives about elements facilitating conflict resolution

Because no substantive difference was found among groups of couples, unified results are presented here. Couples identified the following elements that facilitate conflict resolution (Table 3), presented here with relevant quotations:

- *Willingness to Change*: 'When I get that his argument is about something that I'm not seeing, not merely because he is angry, then I listen to him. . . That involves believing in your partner. Sometimes I admit I'm wrong and it hurts, and I have to accept what he says to me.'
- *Addressing the Problem*: 'But the problem has to be addressed, that means to talk and find a solution, otherwise the issue will come back again and the couples' problem will persist.'
- *Creating a Suitable Atmosphere for Conversation*: 'Talk is complicated. In such a situation they have to regulate themselves, the conversation must be open, the two have to be mature enough to see what happens, and to show respect to each other, feeling that the person that I love wants to say something important to me.'
- *Willingness to Jointly Search for a Solution*: 'They have to reach agreement, the first agreement is to say "okay, we disagree, we have different views and let's start from that basis." It is necessary to talk about everything and just agree about things.'

Therapists' perspectives about factors preventing conflict gridlock.

The therapists provided limited responses regarding factors that could prevent the situations depicted in the videos. They were more productive in analysing gridlock situations and only identified process indicators related to preventive factors. These data were organised into four categories (Table 4), presented here with relevant quotations:

TABLE 4

Factors Preventing Conflict Gridlock Identified by Therapists

Category	Component
Differentiation	To be aware of personal feelings and thoughts
	To manage closeness and distance in difficult moments
	To distinguish one's own from the other's views, feelings and expectations
Intimacy	To self-express to each other
	To acknowledge one's own and the other's fragility
	To maintain a state of mind open to emotional support
	To initiate personal and sexual encounters
Identity as a couple	To construct a mutual self
	To develop shared projects
	To strengthen shared values
	Be loyal to their bond
Openness to novelty	To break the routine
	To search for new forms of activity
	To gain perspective to think about the relationship

TABLE 5
Factors Preventing Conflict Gridlock Identified by Couples

Category	Component
Caring for the bond	To meet together alone on exclusive occasions To express feelings of affection, trust, and understanding To talk about concerns in good time
Knowing one another deeply	To try to know each other more To talk about different views, feelings, and expectations To distinguish one’s own from the other’s views, feelings, and expectations
Shared values	Responsibility for emotional commitment Aspirations Concept of family Parenting Sense of the couple’s bond
Openness to novelty	To break the routine To search for new forms of activity To find new ways to accomplish domestic tasks To create moments together to talk and share
Sense of humour	To be flexible and take new perspectives on oneself To laugh at oneself To develop a sense of humour To engage in playful and erotic interactions

- *Differentiation*: ‘Now it is interesting to explore the alternatives that they offer to each other just in the way the other receives it, because the issue is differentiation, the issue is also his fear of his own identity.’
- *Intimacy*: ‘If they had intimacy they would speak in a different tone, getting away from the routine and having other intimate moments, have fun and sex, the conversation would be in an emotional climate so they could talk about their fragilities.’
- *Identifying as a Couple*: ‘They have to turn to ask each other “why did you choose me?” “what do we want of our relationship?” “how can we distance ourselves from our parents?” “because we have to go on projecting us.”’
- *Openness to Novelty*: ‘If she is annoyed by the routine, it’s necessary to be open to other ways of doing things? It seems that their worlds are very restricted, with a reduced scope of possibilities, with few alternatives. They have to talk about why this is happening.’

Couples’ perspectives about factors preventing conflict gridlock

Couples identified five categories of factors preventing conflict gridlock (Table 5), presented here with relevant quotations:

- *Caring for the Bond*: ‘After some time of being married, one has to be willing to make an effort to keep the marriage going. I guess she knows that I love her very

much, but it is not enough. I need you to tell me you love me, even though it is obvious.’

- *Knowing Each Other Deeply*: ‘I think that the courtship has to be longer and they should know each other more because they [the couple in the scenario] are totally different. Or perhaps he could be more interested in her duties or things.’
- *Commitment to Shared Values*: ‘To have a common frame of values and life project that can support the partners in their decisions and plans. In that way you will be more connected.’
- *Openness to Novelty*: ‘I think it’s important to return to another state of the couple’s life. Do something together as partners, and have times to talk and to share, creating those moments that often you inevitably leave off and in their place you stay in the daily, the weekly routine.’
- *Sense of Humour*: ‘It would be useful to stop criticising each other and I think that laughing helps to get out of the roles and to view each other with humour, finding a way to reconnect.’

Differences in factors preventing conflict gridlock among sub-groups of couples

Long-term traditional couples considered support through a common project (adherence to common values and plans) and the maintenance of a romantic relationship to be principal resources for couples (Table 6). They also emphasised self-sacrifice and the prioritisation of commitment to the marriage over individual goals. Additionally, they felt that the nurturing of love implied not taking the partners’ wellbeing for

TABLE 6

Differences in Emphasis on Factors Preventing Conflict Gridlock Founded Among Sub-groups of Couples

Type of Couples	Emphasis
Long-term traditional couples	Common values and plans Loyalty to common project Self sacrifice Prioritisation of commitment
Short-term traditional couples	Bond of mutual love Admiration and mutual seduction Emotional regulation of the problems Be sensitive to pain partner
Long-term non-traditional couples	Protect the identity as partners in a couple Validation each partner individualities Have fun together
Short-term non-traditional couples	Strengthening equity Differentiate roles Differentiate personal and common decisions Avoid decision based in gender roles

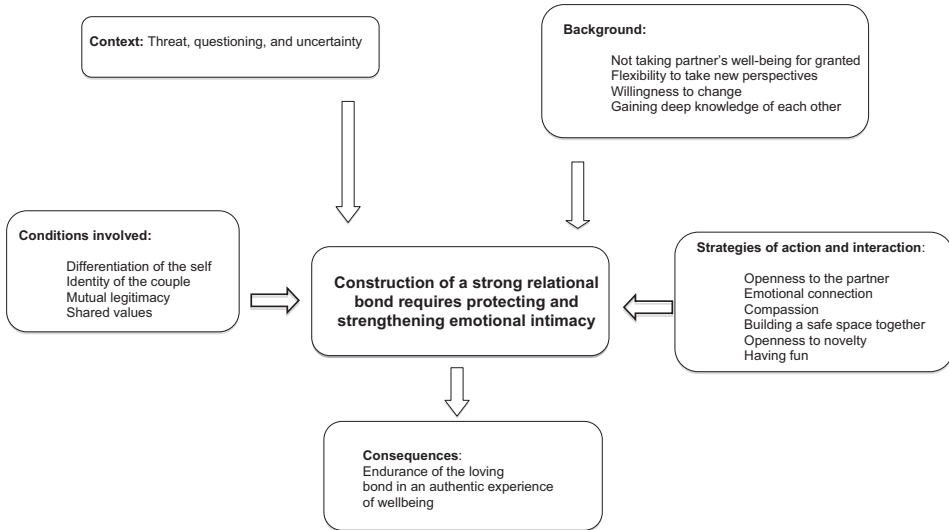


FIGURE 1
Factors preventing gridlock, based on axial coding analysis.

granted and reinforced the sense of the relationship: ‘Definitively marriage is about love, about wishing to stay in the marriage, to continue with the project and to try to be faithful to the initial idea of the project.’

Short-term traditional couples perceived that the bond of mutual love supported couples and that caring focused on the relief of hurt. They emphasised addressing the core of the union, enhancing admiration, and mutual seduction. This group highlighted the ability of emotional regulation to enable the pondering of problems, as well as attentiveness and care about what may cause pain. One partner said:

If you admire and love your partner, you will respect him, you will believe in him, and his opinion carries weight. The engagement is mutual, where sometimes one is right, sometimes the other, we don’t need to worry about being right or not.

Long-term non-traditional couples emphasised the relationship as the core and base of life together. This perspective prioritises the bond, the identity as partners in a couple. These couples felt that relationship development implied caring for the bond through the validation each partner individualities and having fun together: ‘The issue of being a couple and how to be it, is an issue for us. In everyday conversations it is something that is constantly emerging.’

Short-term non-traditional couples noted that couples needed to strengthen their bonds and equity. They felt that equity implied the definition of roles and the taking of personal and common decisions without partiality based on gender or qualification: ‘The decisions and responsibilities must be taken by both, where collaboration and what each thinks is equally important.’

A general conceptual analysis of the principal factors that therapists and couples identified as preventing conflict gridlock is presented in Figure 1. The main element identified was the construction of a strong relational bond through the protection and

strengthening of emotional intimacy. The contexts represented the difficulties and uncertainties that couples must deal with in a time in which couple permanence is not granted. The strategies to accomplish this aim were the expression of openness to one's partner, promotion of an emotional connection, and openness to novelty (implying a positive attitude toward potential future uncertainty). Differentiation of the self and mutual legitimacy were identified as conditions permitting the endurance of the loving bond in an authentic experience of well-being.

Discussion

This study aimed to describe the ways in which conflict can be resolved and gridlock situations prevented from the perspectives of therapists and long/short term and traditional/non-traditional highly adjusted couples.

Couples' and therapists' views of principal conflict resolution strategies have different emphasis. Therapists referred to strategies of breaking the interaction pattern to resolve severe conflict, and couples emphasised partners' willingness to jointly seek a solution. Therapists were more inclined to consider interaction patterns, including moments of breaks and openings to new forms of interplay. However, couples were productive in proposing strategies related to beliefs and attitudes related to the contents of interactions and meanings of the couple's life, rather than to the structure of the relationship. The clinical utility of this issue is about the position of the therapist in approaching the conflict. Perhaps the therapist intervention in the pattern could be more efficient across a re-signification of these belief and attitudes. Nevertheless there are some similitudes like a willingness to change and address the problem, and the creation of a suitable atmosphere for conversation, which involves carefully selecting the context for an encounter and being attuned to its emotional and cognitive aspects. The challenge to the therapist is to promote and create an encounter atmosphere.

Participants' identification of the need to address the problem to resolve conflict, regardless of the confrontation and negative emotions involved, is consistent with the findings of Gottman and Krokoff (1989), who documented the positive effects of anger and disagreement in long-term relationships and the risks of entirely negative or positive features with respect to satisfaction and stability. Maintaining a balance of negativity and positivity is thus an important issue for relationship stability, and can entail the regulation of intimacy and autonomy, and of closeness and distance. Therefore, the presence of conflict is not a risk factor for couples because it can provide a basis for change and progress.

Differences in factors preventing gridlock situations by different groups of couples

Analysis of the participants' perspectives about factors preventing gridlock situations show different emphasis in the different groups. Long-term traditional couples focused resources in the loyalty to a common project and the value of sacrifice to a higher good (family, child bearing, divine nature of the marriage). The therapy could use these resources to strength the bond avoiding the interventions that threaten those beliefs. Other studies have confirmed that shared values provide an important source of support for satisfied long-term couples (Clements & Swensen, 2000; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Roizblatt et al., 1999).

Short-term traditional couples are in the beginning of the relationship where passionate love is the resource that strengthens the bond. The utility for couple therapy

is to focus interventions in those resources. The clinical attention to sensuality and the prompt treatment of sexual desire problems are a priority. These results are in line with research that shows the importance of passionate love specifically in the beginning of a relationship (Langeslag, Muris & Ingmar, 2013).

Long-term non-traditional couples prioritise the care and validation of bond in the relationship. These couples focused on the need to develop intimacy (knowing each other more, recognising the other's feelings), supporting evidence for the evolving position of couples from the focus on a common project to a basis in the development of emotional and sexual intimacy (Bromley, 1997; Kim et al., 1994; Ripley et al., 2005; Schnarch, 2009; Triandis, 1995). In this context emotional differentiation is a psychological tool that becomes a relevant focus of therapeutic interventions. Therapeutic interventions emphasising a mutual validity and legitimacy as well as addressing relational bond injuries (neglect, abandonment, betrayal) could be central in treatment.

Short-term non-traditional couples needed to strengthen equity. The frequent dual career in this type of couple produces a tension between house work and financial issues equity. Previous studies have shown that symmetry between partners' perceptions of work, whether inside or outside of the home, is a sign of satisfaction (Benin & Agostinelli, 1988; Kluwer et al., 1996; Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). The fair balance in domestic and emotional issues and open discussion about financial issues are resources to deal with problems in these couples.

Common factors preventing gridlock situations

These are highlighted by the construction of a strong relational bond through the protection and strengthening of emotional intimacy. Participants believed this effort was supported by self-differentiation, equity, development of an identity as a couple, willingness to recognise mutual legitimacy, and setting goals about couple project. There is an emphasis on the attempt to re-encounter one's partner as a means of conflict resolution. This strategy highlights not only the value of emotional connection, but also its role as a strength of and resource for the relationship. These findings are supported by those of other studies (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman, 1999; Johnson & Lebow, 2000; Sexton, Alexander & Leigh, 2004), which have found that the prognoses of long-term relationships depend on dedication to the bond by promoting positive emotions, resolving disagreements, and emotional connection.

Love, humour and sexuality

Our results also showed that therapists rarely spoke about love, but couples did. This evidence reported by couples, is consistent with Gottman's (1999) finding that daily gestures of loving intimacy can be resources in moments of conflict, reducing the negativity of interactions and favouring the recovery of connection. The distinction with the therapists is striking but is concordant with research findings about scholar interest in including love issues implicitly in clinical perspectives, although definition of relationship in terms of love bond is an important motive of consultation (Migerode & Hooghe, 2012).

EBSCO, is an electronic database in psychology and behavioural sciences that has a content of 560 periodical journals. Making a search using the keyword *psychotherapy* obtained 29,807 results; using the keyword *love* obtained 7,409 results; using the keywords *love and psychotherapy* obtained 376 results and finally with *couple therapy and*

love we obtained 32 results (Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, 2014). These findings emphasise the need to incorporate a clinical perspective of love in couple therapists training and in psychotherapy research.

Couples also highlighted the role of humour in preventing gridlock, consistent with previous descriptions of the effect of couple's daily humorous interactions in reducing negativity during conflict (Driver & Gottman, 2004). However, therapists did not consider the importance of humour to deconstruct the rigid patterns and decrease negativity during resolution of conflicts. Probably therapist training in Chile is formal and more linked to a 'serious' practice of the profession. The incorporation of humour in psychotherapy training is suggested.

Therapists and couples rarely mentioned sensuality or sexuality, probably due to cultural and socio-economic homogeneity among participants, and the limited expression of sexuality in Chile. Furthermore, sexual issues are not sufficiently incorporated in Chilean therapists' training, which probably led them to make few explicit statements about sexuality. Further research should investigate the meanings of couples' love to contribute to the elaboration of a clinical theory in this area. Such an effort would require cultural studies assessing narratives about love and sexuality to explore cultural constraints.

Finally the findings of this study suggest that therapeutic goals for couples' conflict resolution can be established to create a context in which the partners can meet again in different emotional, behavioural, and cognitive states. To achieve this goal, couples therapy should focus on processes involving emotional regulation, self-awareness, and awareness of the other. The clinical definition of gridlock situations can contribute to the therapist's understanding of a couple's motivation for consultation, and to the definition of a focus for the elaboration of therapeutic goals and strategies. Differences between couples and therapists in the interpretation and prioritisation of aspects of conflict resolution and gridlock prevention offer a repertoire to keep in mind for therapeutic exploration with a particular focus on the couples' resources and potentiality.

The main limitation of this research is related to the use of simulated vignettes, rather than factual situations, to generate discourse among therapists and couples. In addition, the group of participants was culturally homogeneous, limiting the generalisability of our findings, which suggest the need for further transcultural research. The gender differences in couples and therapists groups were not explored because was not a focus of this study. Nevertheless further research is needed to better understanding of the findings of this study.

The results of this study highlight the diversity of ways in which couples live together and the meanings that they elaborate to give their relationships identity and meaning. The gridlock-preventing factors elaborated by participants point to therapeutic strategies that could be developed to protect couples' relationship. They also raise new questions about functionality and health. Therapists must be flexible and willing to adopt different approaches when working with couples. The diversity of ways of living together as partners requires much further exploration.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted with funds from the Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile.

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