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❖ A Social Constructionist Approach to Counseling Religious Couples

by
Marsha Wiggins Frame

This article describes the challenges couples and family counselors may encounter when working with particular religious clients, presents a rationale for integrating religious beliefs and counseling, suggests a social constructionist perspective as a means of viewing the dilemma, and, by way of a case illustration, offers practical strategies for enhancing couples counseling with this population.

Historically, psychology has often been at odds with religion. There has been an element of mutual mistrust between the scientific, objective, psychological endeavor and the transcendent, subjective aspects of religion (Lovinger, 1984; Pattison, 1978; Prest & Keller, 1993; Rayburn, 1985; Reisner & Lawson, 1992; Wallwork & Wallwork, 1990). In addition, few therapists, with the exception of pastoral counselors, have received training in working with religious issues in counseling (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1994; Jensen & Bergin, 1988; Shafranske & Malony, 1990).

Marriage and family counseling, however, has some concepts compatible with religion (Frank, 1974; Humphrey, 1983; Pattison, 1978; Torrey, 1986). It has made its mark in the mental health arena by departing from psychology's individual, intrapsychic, pathology-driven perspective. Instead, its theorists and practitioners have viewed human behavior in the context of human systems (Anderson, 1994; Smith, 1993).

More recently, under the influence of postmodern thought, a paradigm shift is occurring. Advocates of constructionist thought suggest that all knowledge about the world is the result of our own perceptions of the world and "not the result of our discovery of how the world really is" (Smith, 1993, p. 94). Thus, some marriage and family therapists are "abandoning modernist assumptions of observer–independent objectivity, empirical knowledge, regularity, certainty, and universal truth . . . The emphasis is on the intersubjective and interpretive nature of human behavior, meanings, and identities" (Anderson, 1994, p. 146). As a result, marriage and family trainers are responding to these changes by helping students examine their notions about clients' reality, and to recognize that the clients' "assumptions, thoughts, feel-

ings, and experiences with the family color that reality" (Smith, 1993, p. 94).

This intersubjective and contextual approach means that counselors must then wrestle with the meanings and beliefs the couple or family brings to counseling. Consequently, counselors often discover they must give up their roles as experts (Hoffman, 1988). Therefore, although religious clients can pose a dilemma for secular counselors, the current trends in marriage and family counseling and therapy demand that practitioners develop skills to work with religious clients. (*Reader's Note.* The term *religious* refers to persons whose inner search for meaning is grounded in the tradition of a particular denomination, church, or synagogue.) The purpose of this article is (a) to describe the difficulties marriage and family counselors may encounter when working with religious clients, (b) to present a rationale for integrating religious beliefs and counseling, (c) to suggest a social constructionist perspective as a means of viewing the dilemma, and, (d) to illustrate through a case study the practical strategies for enhancing couple therapy with this population.

WORKING WITH DOGMATIC CLIENTS

The focus of this article is on working with couples whose primary religious identification is within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Within this tradition, there is considerable variability. Genia (1995) proposed a five-stage developmental model of religious faith with certain identifiable characteristics. The five types include (a) Egocentric Faith, (b) Dogmatic Faith, (c) Transitional Faith, (d) Reconstructed Faith, and (e) Transcendent Faith.

This article is aimed at assisting counselors in their therapeutic work with clients who fit Genia's stage two, dogmatic faith. Genia characterized these clients as people who are oriented toward pleasing God. The are afraid of disappointing their Creator and others and thus are compulsive in their conformity to religious codes. This legalistic stance results in rigidity and emotional constriction. According to Genia (1995), "the religiosity of these people is characterized by self-denial, submission to authority, and intolerance of diversity and ambiguity" (p. 17). They are the targeted group because their compulsive religious activity, extreme intolerance, attitudes of moral superiority, and reliance on religious authority are precisely the ones that arouse confusion, irritation, or apprehension in many counselors.

ROADBLOCKS TO ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN COUNSELING

Religion and Spirituality as Pathological

One of the major challenges marriage and family counselors face in attempting to integrate religion into the counseling process comes from within the field of psychology. Freud (1913/1950, 1939/1958) saw religion as an indication of repressed events and internal conflicts inhabiting individuals and society. Since Freud, other mental health practitioners have pointed to the authoritarian and repressive aspects of some forms of religion (Butler, 1990; McNamara, 1985; Pittman, 1990) and do not perceive it as a healthy means of coping with human problems. This perspective has become generally accepted by many psychotherapists in the United States (Prest & Keller, 1993).

Religion and Spirituality as Nonscientific

From its inception psychology endeavored to identify itself as a scientific enterprise. The emphasis on the scientific method as a research and therapeutic paradigm culminated in quantifiable "facts," assessment tools, and unbiased, objective views of clients. The subjective, unquantifiable, mysterious aspects of human life often were dismissed as nonessential distracters from truth. Thus, religion was ignored or criticized by psychology and the modernist epistemological stance. Until recently, with the introduction of constructionist thinking and the emphasis on context in dealing with couple and family issues, marriage and family counselors were trained with this psychological mindset (Prest & Keller, 1993). They learned to minimize or discard the role of religion in clients' meaning systems. When these issues arise in counseling, therapists often are ill-prepared to address them.

Counselors' Lack of Training in Religious Issues

Other than what they may have learned as children in religious education, many marriage and family counselors have little or no formal training in religion. Although pastoral counselors possess training in both religion and counseling, many secular counselors may not have been taught how to deal with religious issues that arise in counseling (Collins, Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Genia, 1994; Jensen & Bergin, 1988; Shafranske & Malony, 1990). Some marriage and family counselors may fail to connect with

religious couples or to counsel them effectively unless they make special efforts to do so.

Counselors' Own Unresolved Religious Issues

In addition to the professional and scientific disparagement of religion, counselors' own presuppositions about the nature and importance of religion may create barriers in working with religious couples (Stander, Piercy, MacKinnon, & Helmeke, 1994). Counselors who feel confused, afraid, uncomfortable, ignorant, or oppressed by religion may find themselves reacting to their own personal issues, rather than to the clients' concerns.

A RATIONALE FOR INCLUDING RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN COUNSELING

Surveys reveal that approximately 90% of Americans report they believe in God (Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Gallup & Newport, 1991), and more than 75% described themselves as religious (Cadwallader, 1991). Indeed, the majority of families adhere to some religious system for the expression of their spirituality (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). Although the nature of their religiosity is not clear from these statistics, it is evident that the religious realm is a significant component of many contemporary lives. Given the prevalence of religious beliefs and expression, it follows that marriage and family counselors must take seriously these aspects of clients' lives and prepare themselves to make use of them in the therapeutic process. In addition, there appears to be a renewed interest among counselor educators and practitioners in exploring the interface between religion and psychotherapy (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Grimm, 1994; Hinterkopf, 1994; Ingersoll, 1994; Kelly, 1990; Mack, 1994; Maher & Hunt, 1993; Mattson, 1994). Indeed the entire field of pastoral counseling provides excellent resources and literature upon which secular counselors can draw for developing knowledge and expertise in this area (Strunk, 1985; Wimberly, 1994).

There are ways in which religious faith and counseling intersect. They are similar in that both religion and counseling focus on a transformation of the mind and emotions (Bianchi, 1989). Stander et al. (1994) described overlapping roles for family therapy and religion. These writers suggested that both religion and family therapy "foster a sense of identity, give meaning to life, provide rituals that transform and connect, provide social support networks, support families, facilitate positive change in individuals, and look out for the physical and emo-

tional welfare of its members" (p. 29). Because of the similarities between religion and therapy, marriage and family counselors may choose to view themselves as partners with religion in enhancing meaning and life satisfaction for clients.

Another reason for integrating religion into counseling is that clients often seek more than one solution to life's difficulties. Worthington (1989) noted that many people, even those who are not involved in organized religion, turn to religion as a means of dealing with their difficulties when they experience emotional stress or struggle with other life crises. Religion can provide for them a context in which some of the broadest and deepest searches for meaning may occur. Thus, counselors can maximize the benefit of multiple solutions by working with a client's belief system rather than conflicting with it.

Finally, given the influence of both postmodern, constructionist thought and a growing sensitivity to the concerns of non-White and non-Western clients, marriage and family counselors should integrate religion into counseling because it is an expression of some clients' meaning systems and their culture. Pate and Bondi (1992) argued that the counseling profession's commitment to multicultural awareness demands that religious beliefs of clients be considered "if cultural and value diversity among clients is to be truly respected" (p. 109). To ignore or discredit clients' religious orientations or belief systems is akin to neglecting their ethnic background, denigrating their gender, or assaulting their indigenous values.

CASE ILLUSTRATION

Charles and Nancy sought marital counseling because of Nancy's depression. When the counselor inquired about the pattern of behaviors which preceded a depressive episode, the couple described a repeated conflict between them regarding sex roles. Both Nancy and Charles had been raised in and continued to participate in a Christian tradition which placed high value on Biblical teachings and traditional sex roles. However, Nancy had become bored and restless in her role as a homemaker and wanted to return to college and seek a career in nursing. Charles was adamant that he was to be the family breadwinner and interpreted Nancy's new ideas as a threat to his manhood. When Nancy raised the issue of returning to school, Charles hurled Biblical injunctions against her. Nancy reported that she then felt guilty about her desire to expand her horizons, and when the arguments escalated, she withdrew and became depressed.

Case Discussion

Encountering a couple like Charles and Nancy often causes marriage and family counselors to feel frustrated, angry, or uncertain of how to proceed. Typically, such counselors choose one of several alternatives to avoid addressing the religious issues which are at the root of this couple's conflict.

The most expedient option is to refer the couple to a clergyperson, pastoral counselor, or a "Christian counselor." Unfortunately, some clergy have little or no formal training in counseling and their interventions may only compound the difficulty by reinforcing ineffective patterns of interaction and increasing guilt. Moreover, some "religious" counselors or clergy may wear their own theological "blinders" and assume that there is only one way of understanding the couple's religious perspective. When counselors automatically refer out religious clients, they are giving up the opportunity to open up multiple ways of viewing the couple's problem and of ultimately making "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972).

Another common, but rarely effective, alternative is to attempt to change the couple's beliefs. This approach may include pointing out logical fallacies in the couple's belief system or subtly pressuring the couple to adopt the counselor's viewpoint. This method is similar to one used with gay or lesbian clients wherein counselors attempt to convince clients to change their sexual orientation, rather than dealing with the couple's presenting problem. Besides violating the ethical standards of not imposing their values on clients, such an approach communicates judgment rather than acceptance and often leads clients like Charles and Nancy to terminate counseling prematurely.

A compromise response is to divide up the couple's problems and to treat those that are psychological in nature and to refer the couple to another helper to deal with religious or spiritual issues. While this procedure may be appealing, the line of demarcation between what is psychological and what is religious or spiritual often is not clear. Moreover, if the couple were seeing both a marriage and family counselor and a clergyperson or another religious counselor, the two helpers there could be cross-purposes and might exacerbate the couple's problem. In the case of Charles and Nancy, their struggles for power and control are intimately related to their beliefs about sex roles. These beliefs, in turn, are deeply grounded in an authoritative Biblical theology. To attempt to address sex roles without addressing the couples' reli-gious views would inevitably miss the crux of this couple's dilemma and most likely would be futile.

Another popular method for working with a couple like Charles and Nancy is to reframe religious issues in psychological terms. Thus, marriage and family counselors wishing to avoid the religious issues may choose to focus on the couple's circular pattern of approach and avoidance, their issues regarding power, and the way in which their religious beliefs triangulate them. This approach, however, only serves to meet the couple on the counselor's terms. Moreover, religious clients may mistrust psychology as much as psychology has mistrusted religion (Rayburn, 1985). Thus they may be resistant to psychological language and interventions based on its concepts.

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH TO WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS CLIENTS

Many previous attempts at working with religious couples and families, such as those described above, can be reduced to dualistic, either/or approaches. That is, either the clients change their views, or counselors divide up the problems or clients into more manageable packages. Implicit in all of these approaches is a set of counselor beliefs about how to view religious couples and how to evaluate their religious beliefs. None of these models addresses the whole person nor the multidimensional aspects of couple problems. What is needed is a perspective that allows counselors to adopt multiple frames of reference vis-à-vis religious clients.

The theoretical framework of social constructionism provides a refreshing alternative to the either/or struggle for truth often waged between secular counselors and religious clients. The constructionist position, based on a Kantian rather than Lockean worldview, maintains that individuals do not discover reality, but rather invent it (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). One's mental images are subjective creations, rather than representations of objective reality outside oneself (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1988). Anderson and Goolishian (1988) described the human enterprise in general and the therapeutic one in particular as one of "languaging." That is, humans connect to each other and make sense out of their experience through language. Furthermore, the creative power of language is a theme throughout Biblical literature. In Genesis 1 God spoke creation into being ("And God said . . . and it was so") and gave Adam the power through language to name the creatures and thus determine their character. In other instances in the Biblical narrative, God changed peoples' names to indicate

a different disposition or a new purpose in life. Thus, the languaging and the stories religious couples construct and disclose to counselors may be precisely the vehicles by which new ways of behaving and relating are co-created and change is allowed to happen.

Assessing One's Own Thoughts About the Case

After hearing the couple describe the pattern of interaction that is keeping Nancy depressed, the counselor may find it useful to monitor his or her own thoughts and reactions to the couple's presentation. For example, initially the counselor may be thinking, "Charles and Nancy are fundamentalists. They will never change. I will be beating my head against a wall attempting to work with them." At this point, the counselor, making use of a constructionist approach, would want to apply it to him or herself and ask, "How do my beliefs and my own thinking about this type of couple organize how I might tend to work with them? How can I step outside my beliefs to work with this couple? What will I need to do to keep myself from working against their religious meanings but rather to use their language to co-construct new meanings?"

The answers to these self-addressed questions may signal to the counselor that he or she will have to give up his or her own fundamentalism about the therapeutic enterprise in order to be effective with this couple. For example, a counselor undergoing such a self-assessment may realize that his or her assumptions about counseling include viewing the counselor's role as one of "expert" who identifies pathology and uses specific interventions to "fix" the clients' problem. Applying a constructionist approach, the counselor may then take a position of "not knowing" (Andersen, 1991; Anderson & Goolishian, 1988, 1991) but of willingness to risk a venture with this couple into a strange land and unfamiliar language system.

With this new posture, the next step is for the counselor to begin reflecting on a place to start that both makes use of the religious language and metaphors Charles and Nancy present, and moves them into a conversation about the beliefs that have paralyzed their relationship. The counselor may then think to him or herself, "It seems like Charles is clubbing her with Bible verses. His approach has the power to shut her down. Their religious beliefs are important to them, yet these beliefs are polarizing them. How can I create a space for them to talk about this in a way that brings them together?"

The following dialogue illustrates a counselor's initial responses to Charles and Nancy in an effort to honor their religious meanings and to join with them therapeutically.

Counselor: "It sounds like the two of you have shared some important religious beliefs which have been the cement for your marriage and life together."

Charles: "Yes, and Nancy is rejecting them. She's turning her back on the Lord and his commandments."

Nancy to Charles: "I'm not turning away from the Lord. I just need a new direction. I want to serve God by helping His people. Why can't you understand that?"

Counselor: "It seems to me that both of you are deeply committed to your faith, but you seem to be developing different ways of understanding what it means to live that faith in your marriage. It must be frightening to think that the very thing that has held you together over the years is now driving you apart."

Nancy: "That's it! I think Charles is worried that I'll become some flaming feminist and try to tell him what to do. Somehow, by wanting to become a nurse I am a threat to his manhood."

Counselor: "In your marriage you have always had clearly defined roles which you both believed were ordained by God. When Nancy suggests more flexible roles, then Charles, you feel angry that she is violating God's plan. You are afraid she will take over an arena that really belongs to you as the head of the household. When Charles quotes the Bible to you, Nancy, you feel trapped. Our challenge is to figure out a way you can be faithful to God, maintain your marital partnership, and that both of you can become all God wants you to be."

EMBRACING THE CONTRARIES

In the previous dialogue, the counselor began working from a constructionist perspective by adopting a caring, compassionate, unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) for the couple despite their beliefs. When counselors honor clients and their stories without censure, they create a safe place for clients to explore the meanings they make. Relatedly, the next challenge is to be self-reflective enough to receive clients' meanings and worldviews, synthesize them, and feed them back in ways that communicate understanding. The counselor's comments in the dialogue above demonstrated the ability to analyze the meaning conflict between Charles and Nancy and to offer it back to them without disapproval or disdain.

When marked differences in beliefs or values occur between client and counselor, the counselor must be skilled at tolerating and holding the tension in contradictions, uncertainties, and conflicts in meaning (Inger & Inger, 1995). It involves inclusion, described by Inger and Inger as "Tak[ing] the position of the other in order to imagine what the other is experiencing, feeling, intending, thinking, and believing. At the same time, the person who is practicing inclusion does not give up his own feelings, beliefs, thoughts, or intentions" (p. 22).

In the case of Charles and Nancy, such an act of inclusion involved the counselor's restating the couple's beliefs in and experience of male-dominated families and traditional sex roles while simultaneously sharing alternatives such as the concepts of partnership or the notion of both men and women becoming all they can be.

EMBRACING THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Some counselors may feel Biblically illiterate and therefore uncomfortable dealing with this material in the therapeutic process. This approach, however, does not demand knowledge and understanding of religious texts, but simply an openness to them. When listening to clients' religious stories, counselors lay aside presuppositions and prior interpretations. This detachment frees them for hearing afresh language and story which have significant meaning and powerful authority for religious clients. Just as personal narrative is a means of shaping lives and relationships (White & Epston, 1990), so Biblical narrative, when joined to personal narrative, illustrates meanings and values of clients and offers potent metaphors for generating new meanings.

The following excerpt from the counselor–couple dialogue illustrates a way in which a secular counselor may make use of the Biblical narrative.

Counselor: "The Bible seems to be a powerful authority for both of you. Its stories hold meaning for you and seem to instruct you in how to live your lives."

Charles: "Absolutely! Nancy and I were both raised to search God's Word for answers to life's problems. We both believe that's what God wants us to do—to read His Word and obey it."

Nancy: "Charles is right about that. We *do* rely on the Bible to guide us. I'm just confused—I do not know anything in the Bible that says I cannot be a nurse in addition to my homemaking responsibilities."

Counselor: "Charles, what Biblical story comes to mind for you that shapes your beliefs about how you and Nancy should function as a couple?"

Charles: "We could start with Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and go from there."

[The counselor asks Charles to read this passage from the Bible.]

Counselor to Charles: "What stands out for you in this story that undergirds your beliefs about yours and Nancy's roles in your marriage?"

Charles: "The part where Eve eats the apple and disobeys God. That shows that women make bad decisions. It means that men should be in charge of things."

Counselor to Nancy: "What does this passage say to you?"

Nancy: "Well, it did say Eve ate the apple and brought sin into the world. But Adam ate it too. I am not sure I agree with Charles about what it means."

Counselor: "What if we heard this story in a new way? What would it mean for you to let the story say something different than it has always said?"

In the dialogue above, the counselor has been willing to stand with Charles and Nancy and to explore Biblical material which is an authoritative shaper of their shared religious meanings. By inviting the couple to explore a Biblical text, the counselor opens up the possibility that together the couple and counselor can generate multiple meanings and interpretations of the story. By setting aside his or her own biases about the text, the counselor is in a position to bring a new hermeneutic to the old story.

At this point, the counselor may suggest an alternative view. Trible (1978) offered this exegesis of the same story pointing out that

> Eve . . . Does not discuss the matter with her man. She acts independently, seeking neither his permission nor his advice. At the same time, she is not secretive, deceptive, or withdrawn. In the presence of the man she thinks and decides for herself . . . Throughout this scene the man has remained silent; he does not speak for obedience. . . The contrast that he offers to the woman is not strength or resolve but weakness . . . No patriarchal figure making decisions for his family, he follows his woman without question or comment. (p. 113)

Such an interpretation is replete with possibilities for having the couple view the Biblical story and their own story differently, thus creating a space for the couple to renegotiate the rules and meanings in their relationship. Because the Biblical narrative may hold more authority

for the couple than does the counselor, making use of its authority with a hermeneutical twist may provide counselors with unique opportunities to facilitate change.

This approach is especially useful for counselors to enable religious couples to reflect on and articulate the ways in which their beliefs shape their lives. Often these couples have simply assimilated the interpretations of a given church or religious leader without themselves examining the Biblical texts. Although some religious couples may reject the approach of generating alternative interpretations, counselors should know that interpreting Biblical texts is essentially the same process used by preachers in delivering sermons. Thus, a couple's desire to "live by the Bible" may provide the impetus for their discovering new meanings in it.

BEING OPEN TO LEARNING FROM CLIENTS

The social constructionist approach to working with religious clients inevitably requires that marriage and family counselors surrender their need to know and their hierarchical position in order to hear their clients authentically and enable them to reauthor their stories (Parry & Doan, 1994). It means being open to learning about clients' religious rituals, traditions, and stories so that one's naivete may be the catalyst for clients to rethink their beliefs and meanings. When counselors are vulnerable enough to put themselves in the role of learners, they can ask clients questions that enable deeper self-exploration. For example, the counselor in the following segment of dialogue with Charles and Nancy opens up a conversation that aims at having each partner reflect on his or her own meanings of religious language.

Counselor to Charles: "Tell me about your God. What is your relationship with God like?"

Charles: "Well, God is all–knowing and powerful—like a king or a father. He's in charge of the world and everyone in it. He has divine rules which must be obeyed. And if you don't believe in Him and obey him, you'll be punished."

Counselor: "It sounds like for you God is like an authoritarian Boss—always keeping people in line. How do you relate to your God?"

Charles: "Like a good son, I guess. I try to follow the rules so I won't disappoint Him. I guess you could say I am God-fearing."

Counselor to Nancy: "What is your God like? How is your God alike or different from the one Charles described?"

Nancy: "Well, my God is like Charles's God—powerful, like a ruler. But He's different, too. He's loving and kind and compassionate. I think He [God] wants me to be happy, not just to be a slave to all His rules."

In the preceding conversation, rather than avoiding God-talk or reframing it in psychological terms, the counselor invites God to be an active participant in the therapy (Griffith, 1986; Kudlac, 1991). The counselor uses the couple's religious language so that they relax and begin the task of serious self-exploration. No longer needing to defend themselves against the therapist who may condemn their beliefs, Charles and Nancy are free to begin exploring new meanings for their relationship.

Counselor: "What role does God play in your relationship with each other?"

Charles: "God has always been the one who held us together. In fact, one of the things that attracted us to each other was that we both believed in God. I'm ashamed to say that we've never really discussed what God was like before now."

Nancy: "I think maybe Charles believes in and identifies with one aspect of God—the powerful, ruler part of God. I'm more connected to the benevolent, sacrificing, all-loving God. But the Bible says God is like all of these things."

Counselor to Charles: "What would it mean for your relationship with Nancy if you believed in a more gracious, supportive, compassionate God?"

Charles: "I don't know. I guess I'd have to become more that way myself."

Again, the counselor steps into the couple's world and uses their language to begin addressing possible changes in the way the partners relate to each other. Counselors can experiment with a variety of questions, depending on the presenting problem and the way the couple speaks about their religious beliefs. Other possible questions to be used with Charles and Nancy include: "What would Nancy's God say to her about her need for involvement in the working world? Who would be the most surprised, upset, worried, or angry if you found new ways to look at what the Bible teaches you? What are the risks of hearing God speak to you in new ways about your relationship? How can God help you resolve this challenge to your marriage?"

Through these segments of the therapeutic dialogue, the counselor has managed to step outside of his or her own beliefs without negating them, to form an alliance

with the couple, to invite a discussion about Biblical texts and religious meanings, to give up the expert role and to learn from the couple, and finally to begin to challenge the couple to look at needed changes in their relationship within the context of their religious faith. This approach enables the couple to begin expressing what has not been expressed and to give new meaning to familiar and authoritative metaphors in the therapeutic movement toward change.

CONCLUSION

Given that religious beliefs are prevalent among two thirds of the population of the United States, it is likely that marriage and family counselors frequently will encounter couples with a high level of religiosity (Bergin & Jensen, 1990). In the past, secular counselors have been uncomfortable in opening therapy to the religious arena (Griffith, 1986; Lovinger, 1979). As a result, they have not developed the tools needed to address adequately couples issues that involve religious beliefs or content. The social constructionist approach described here honors clients' religious experiences as an expression of culture and as integral to the way clients construct meaning in their lives. Rather than referring religious clients, attempting to dissuade them of their beliefs, dividing their problems into psychological or religious ones, or reframing religious concepts in psychological language, marriage and family counselors have a unique opportunity to work with religious clients from a social constructionist perspective. This approach assumes the counselor's genuine interest and regard for the clients' worldview; embraces clients' religiosity, not only to hear their story, but to enable clients to construct other positive meanings; and offers multiple perspectives on clients' situations. Using a social constructionist approach affords counselors the occasion to enter the therapeutic dialogue, "not as a clairvoyant, but a co-participant in the construction of new realities" (Gergen, 1991, p. 251). From this vantage point, counselors can hear religious clients' perspectives while holding in tension their own, perhaps radically different, belief systems. They can dare to embrace the Biblical narrative (or other religious story), join with clients in generating alternative interpretations, and allow the narrative's authority to open up new and exciting avenues for change. ❖

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