

Reflective Listening and Negative Enquiry: Two Exercises to Enhance Couple Communication

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This paper outlines a series of concrete steps within two distinct exercises that can help couples communicate more successfully in co-constructing better understandings of each other and of their experiences in their relationship. The structure of each exercise enables a shift away from self-centeredness toward other-centeredness in a joint process of co-constructing more consensus in their realities.

Keywords: listening, communication exercise, couple therapy, co-construction of understanding

The primary purpose of this paper is to describe two communication exercises that are compatible with a variety of approaches in couple therapy (Bodenmann 2010; Jacobson & Christensen, 1998; Johnson, 2004; Jones & Asen, 2000; White, 2007). When working with a couple, it is sometimes useful to provide structured exercises to help them expand their usual patterns of communication (Nichols, 2007). These exercises may be regarded as an outer “scaffold” within which the members of a couple build better understandings of each other’s experiences and priorities. Along with improved understanding comes the possibility of easier movement towards greater commonality in values, activities, and lived realities (Monk et al 2004, Winslade & Monk 2008, Zimmerman & Dickerson 1993).

While these exercises draw upon existing knowledge about basic skills in interpersonal communication (Koch-Sheras & Sheras, 2008; Watzlawick et al, 1967), we present them here within a social constructionist perspective (Gergen & Gergen, 2004; Lock & Strong, 2010). In other words, we endeavor to create conditions for the members of a couple to co-construct an enhanced and fuller awareness of each other’s experiences. Typically, we describe the exercise

and then actively coach the couple to enact it for the first time within an actual clinical session. Once the structure of the exercise has been internalized, it can be implemented at home when conflict emerges, and when there is a desire to understand and/or be understood more fully. In our clinical work, these exercises have been quite beneficial in helping couples escape points of “stuckness” in their well-intentioned efforts to communicate better. They are especially helpful when the usual efforts to clarify conflict inadvertently triggers reactivity, defensiveness, and even more conflict. Needless to say, any drift towards reactive defensiveness typically makes it more difficult to move the conversation forward. Either of these exercises can interrupt such escalation and proactively enable new understandings, consensual agreement, or perhaps an agreement to disagree.

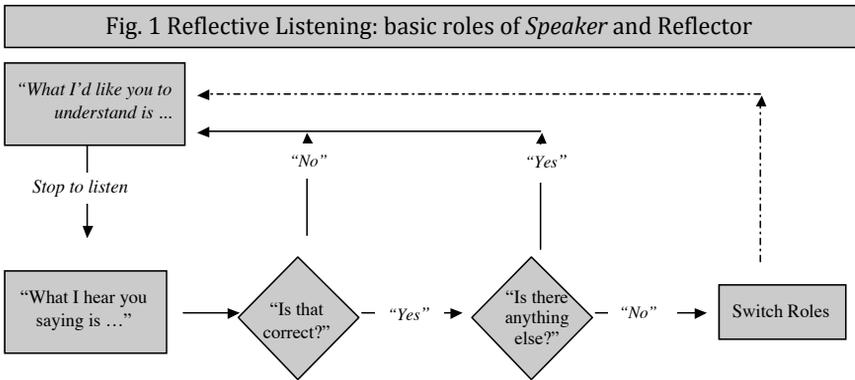
The primary and preferred exercise, *reciprocal reflective listening*, requires a significant amount of cooperation between the couple to be implemented successfully. Both members need to be committed to foster a better relationship, and be prepared to engage in the reciprocity required for reflective listening to succeed. In contrast, the second exercise, *negative enquiry*, can be implemented unilaterally. Only one member of the couple needs to decide to give the other an experience of being fully heard. Thus, *unilateral negative enquiry* is a useful backup initiative that can be taken when one partner is highly motivated to communicate, but the other person is in too much emotional turmoil to cooperate for reflective listening. After a brief process of negative enquiry, it may then become possible for both partners to re-engage in the preferred process of reflective listening, to move the communication further forward.

These exercises can be applied in other kinds of close relationships as well. For instance, parent-adolescent distress, or tension between peers in a work situation, may be deconstructed with the use of these tools. The participants in any problematic pattern of communication could experiment with either exercise to try to move the conversation forward. In our hands, these exercises are not prescribed as required or necessary in any situation. We never insist that any dyad enter into these processes when they are reluctant to do so. The most we do, is to claim that other clients have benefited from their use and leave it to the partners in the relationship to decide whether they are willing to experiment or not.

Exercise 1: Reciprocal Reflective Listening

There are two basic roles in the structure of reflective listening: Speaker and Reflector. When both members of a couple are familiar with the specific sequence in the exercise, either one can introduce the idea by proposing: *“Could we try reflective listening for a while?”* If the other agrees, the person suggesting the exercise adopts the role of Speaker and proceeds with a preamble like; *“What I’d appreciate you understanding is...”* and offers a succinct statement in one or two sentences. The Speaker could also initiate the process directly by saying; *“I would like to say something that is really important to me, and ask you to reflect back your understanding of what I am trying to say”*. If the other person accepts the request, the Speaker continues with a brief statement about her core concern. (In our use of pronouns in this description, we arbitrarily begin with a female as the Speaker and a male as the Reflector. In actual practice either partner in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship could initiate.) She ends her brief opening statement with an expectant stop, perhaps even adding a *“full stop”* or *“over to you”* marker to deliberately open space for the Reflector to respond, and listens carefully to determine if his response resonates with what she had in mind. The Reflector tries his best to reflect the gist of the Speaker’s concern but in his own words, starting with the opening preface: *“What I hear you saying is...”* and concluding with the closing question: *“Is that correct?”* The Reflector does not include his own opinion on the content issue during his reflection (his turn for this comes later). He falls silent after his ending question and waits for her evaluation. The original Speaker then has the opportunity to evaluate the reflection and answer with *“Yes”*, *“No”*, or *“Partly”*. If the reflection is not adequate and the Speaker says *“Partly”* or *“No”*, she proceeds to try to articulate her core concern more clearly to help him understand precisely what she would like to be understood. The Reflector then responds in a similar fashion: *“What I hear you saying now is...”* and ending with the same question; *“Is that correct?”* When the reflection is eventually deemed sufficiently resonant or *“correct”* for the Speaker to answer *“Yes”*, the Reflector asks: *“Is there anything else?”* If the answer to this second question is *“Yes”*, the Speaker provides further elaborating statements and the Reflector responds in the same manner, *“What I hear you saying is... Is that correct?”* and so on. This interaction continues until Speaker and Reflector become fully coordinated in a consensual understanding of the Speaker’s opinion regarding the content issue. The process may be regarded as an instance of social construction in action: he gradually constructs a *“reality”* of her experience in his mind that *“resonates”* or *“fits”* for her.

When the answer to the second question (“*Is there anything else?*”) eventually becomes “*No*”, the members of the couple switch roles and he becomes the new Speaker while she becomes the Reflector. He then takes the initiative to make a succinct statement (often, but not always, related to the same content issue) for her to reflect back, and they follow the same sequence. The overall process continues back and forth until each Speaker feels clearly understood by the other.



There are some useful side-steps that sometimes help the process move along when complications arise. For instance, if the Speaker’s statements become rather long or too difficult for the Reflector to understand, he could make a request to focus or simplify, e.g. “*I would greatly appreciate it if you could summarize your main point, perhaps in one or two sentences*”. The Speaker should then strive to do so. If the Speaker appears to be struggling to formulate her thoughts clearly, yet the Reflector intuitively understands what she might be trying to convey, he could interject: “*Are you trying to say...?*” to which the Speaker can respond “*Yes*” or “*No*”, etc. If, after several attempts to reflect and to clarify, the Speaker’s position is still not understood, there are several options. The Speaker could selectively affirm the Reflector for what he has *partly* understood and focus on clarifying only the other part that is not yet understood. Alternatively, the couple could switch roles, or they could take a break and come back to the same issue later. If the Speaker becomes so absorbed in trying to elaborate a complex perspective, that she does not notice that she is taking up a lot of time, the Reflector could interrupt and say: “*This feels a bit one-sided to me. I’d like to switch roles and say something*

now”. If the other accepts this request, the Reflector assumes the role of Speaker and proceeds with his own opening statement: “*What I’d appreciate you understanding is...*” to which she responds with a reflection and asks: “*Is that correct?*” etc. It is possible that the original Reflector may have nothing to say as a Speaker, or simply chooses to not take that role on a particular occasion. In this case the reflections remain unidirectional but they are still often very helpful. The original Speaker will have had the opportunity to hear her partner generate an understanding that is at least close to what she had in mind, and that she wanted understood.

Needless to say, if after initiating the exercise, a spontaneous conversation emerges that is mutually respectful, it is reasonable to abandon the exercise and continue with their usual patterns of talk. If misunderstanding and/or conflict re-emerges, the exercise could readily be resumed through a request like: “*Could we go back to reflective listening again?*”

A core aspect of this exercise is the *structured turn-taking*. It provides each party with several opportunities to express their views and several opportunities to reflect their emerging understandings of the views of the other. As a result, the understandings of both parties become progressively more coordinated and consensual. The process may feel somewhat like playing tennis where there are frequent returns of the “clarifying ball”. Each individual has one or more turns to convey and elaborate on her/his perspective while the other person has one or more turns to respond with his/her understanding of the Speaker’s perspective before “the serve” is changed, and the second person then takes the conversation further by stating his/her perspective and/or concerns for the other to reflect back. The deliberate turn-taking slows down the communication process, balances the exchange, and allows for deeper listening. More space is created to co-construct genuine understanding.

A second important aspect of this structured process is that it *shifts the focus* from trying to convince the other person of the validity of one’s viewpoint, to understand the emerging understanding of the other. The Speaker gives more priority to *listen to the listening* of the Reflector to determine if he has heard and understands her meaning as it was intended. It is usually very gratifying to feel that one’s point-of-view has been clearly understood. And it is even more rewarding when mutual understanding can be achieved. The whole process enables the progressive co-construction of consensual clarity.

When the Reflector eventually comes to a “correct” understanding of the Speaker’s point of view, this does not necessarily mean that the Reflector agrees with that view. Indeed, the Reflector’s own perspective on the content issue could be at significant variance from what he has come to understand as the Speaker’s view. Such disagreement usually becomes crystal clear after the roles are reversed (i.e., when the Reflector becomes the Speaker) and then reversed again, back and forth. The primary goal of the exercise is not to achieve agreement on any particular issue; it is to provide a structure for more generous listening and for *progressive co-orientation* as the exercise unfolds. In actual practice, it is often the case that agreement does emerge as the conversation progresses. However, this is never guaranteed. Sometimes the outcome is simply an acknowledgement of differences with an implicit, or explicit, agreement to disagree.

We have found it very important to coach the couple in enacting the process during an actual therapy session so that they can embody the sequence and internalize the key phrases. The probability of them implementing the full process entirely on their own is quite limited. To subsequently follow through and actually use the exercise at home, the members of the couple would have to identify for themselves at what points in their typical patterns of interaction it might be useful to deliberately initiate an interlude of reflective listening. These could be at moments of confusion, frustration, increasing tension, or when one or both parties raise their voices. Any of these events could become markers and be taken as a possible signal for an invitation to sit down and engage in the structured reciprocity of the exercise.

Exercise 2: Unilateral Negative Enquiry

The two basic roles in negative enquiry are Enquirer and Protestor. When the emotional turmoil is too intense for one of the parties to engage in the mutual process of reflective listening, it might be useful for the other party to enable the release of tension by listening deeply and actively through a series of questions. In this second exercise the listening is intended to be purely one way and there is no reflecting back; there is only respectful enquiry that is grounded in compassionate curiosity about the painful experiences of the other. The enquiry is described as “negative” because the questions deliberately focus on experiences of emotional pain, suffering, and distress in the other. There is no intention to try to turn those experiences into something positive, since doing so could disqualify the person’s experience and add to the pain. The Enquirer not only accepts the legitimacy of the negative experiences of

the other but also acknowledges the possibility that the other may have been offended by something in the Enquirer's prior behavior or attitude. The negative feelings of the other are deliberately taken as a legitimate protest against some perceived injustice: hence the second role as Protestor. The negative feelings in the Protestor may arise, not only because of what the Enquirer said or did that was deemed inappropriate and/or hurtful, but also because of a possible failure to act when some kind of action was expected or hoped for. Thus, the enquiry should include questions about acts of omission, as well as acts of commission that may have been hurtful.

It is assumed that the intensity of the negative emotion in the Protestor is making bilateral communication too difficult, or even impossible. It is also assumed that it would be more helpful to give the protest a full and honest hearing, without any evaluation or disapproval for how specific events have been construed or are being experienced. It is not necessarily assumed that the Enquirer actually "caused" the Protestor's negative feelings in a direct linear manner; rather it could be that something in the Enquirer's behavior simply "triggered" negative feelings because of the Protestor's personal system of meanings, values, and beliefs. The Enquirer initiates a series of questions that are grounded in genuine curiosity about the Protestor's negative experiences, and enquires about how these experiences may be connected to the Enquirer's actions. The Protestor is given an opportunity to fully vent her feelings and to clarify how they may be related to specific actions of the Enquirer (or failures to act when actions were expected). If the Protestor appears to become irritated or offended by the Enquirer's initiative to ask such questions, he should simply abandon the exercise for the time being. Indeed, whenever significant escalation erupts, it is usually more prudent to disengage temporarily, i.e. walk away from the escalation (not from the relationship), and allow the emotional intensity to subside.

To engage in a negative enquiry successfully, the Enquirer needs to muster up sufficient courage, compassion, and curiosity to hear the Protestor's criticisms fully, and without taking them too personally. The Enquirer does not focus on his own reactions or feelings but gives priority to a stance of genuine curiosity about, and compassion for, the Protestor's negative experiences. This entails a significant *shift from self-centeredness to other-centeredness*. If the Enquirer is not able to maintain at least some compassion towards the Protestor, it is probably wise to break off the interaction temporarily, lest he slip towards reactive defensiveness or even begins mounting a counterattack. Unfortunately, breaking off the interaction (after the Protestor's complaints

have commenced) could be perceived as an offense in itself. In order to reduce the degree to which the Protestor might take offense when he decides to abandon the enquiry, the Enquirer could acknowledge his own difficulty in restraining his reactive impulses and express a desire to take a step away from the risk of escalation in order to protect the relationship in the long run. An explicit commitment to resume communicating later, when cooler heads prevail, could provide further reassurance to the Protestor.

The procedure to implement a negative enquiry begins with an explicit acknowledgment by the Enquirer that he may have said or done something that was hurtful, and then proceeds with a series of clarifying questions. “*I obviously must have done something that upset you pretty deeply. What was it?*” ... “*What exactly did I do that offended you?*” ... “*What else did I say or do that hurt you?*” ... “*Was there something that I failed to say or do, that was upsetting as well?*” It is important that these questions are asked in a gentle and respectful manner; hence the value of adopting a stance of genuine compassion. There should be no demand for answers, or pressuring with the questions: just invitations to clarify. The tone should be soft and kind, and the pace slow and measured.

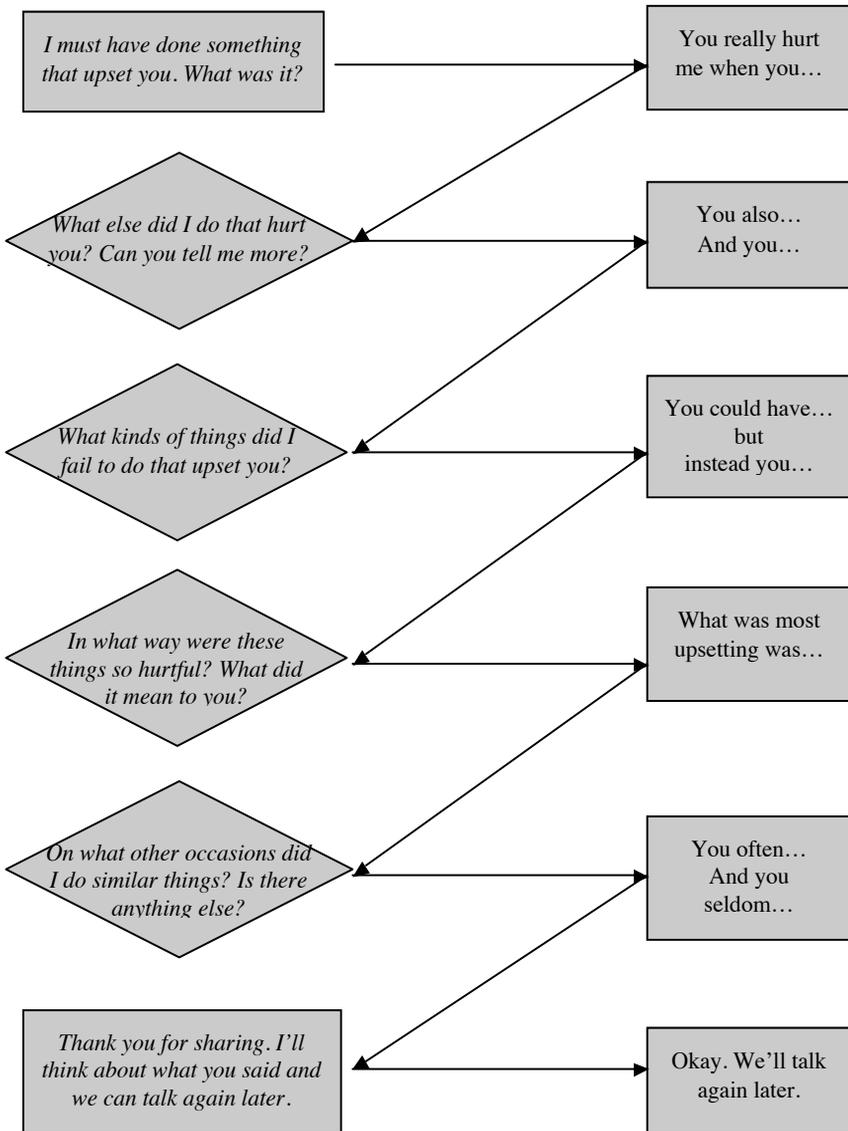
The content focus during the first part of this enquiry is on the Enquirer’s alleged behaviors that were problematic and on the Protestor’s negative feelings about these behaviors. The Enquirer does not ask about the Protestor’s thoughts about the Enquirer’s intentions, personality, or character. At the same time, however, the Enquirer should be ready for the Protestor to spontaneously express such thoughts. Indeed, if she is sufficiently annoyed or angry, the Protestor could easily resort to accusing the Enquirer of malevolent intentions, resort to name-calling, or even engage in some “character assassination”. The Enquirer strives to remain grounded in his compassion and curiosity, and does not object to any of these negative descriptions (at this point in their conversation); he calmly enquires about what behaviors may have triggered those negative descriptions: “*What did I say or do that made you think about me in that way?*” ... “*What else did I do?*” ... These questions help shift the content focus back onto problematic actions (or the absence of hoped-for actions). As noted earlier, if the Enquirer is not able to maintain a stance of curiosity in the face of such accusations, he breaks off the enquiry and perhaps returns to the issue later.

After the precise nature of the offending behaviors become clear, the Enquirer

moves to ask about what that specific behavior was taken to mean by the Protestor. “*In what way was me doing that (the offending behavior) upsetting for you?*” ... “*What did you take it to mean?*” ... “*Can you tell me exactly how/ what I said was so hurtful?*” ... “*Could you tell me more about what it was that made you feel it was so unfair?*” ... “*What were you hoping that I might have said or done instead?*” ... If the Protestor is talking freely and the Enquirer is confident that he can hold onto his compassionate curiosity, he could even widen the enquiry to ask about the past and/or other sources of frustration and anger. “*Have I done similar things in the past that have been bothering you all along?*” ... “*What and when?*” ... “*Are there other things that you are upset about as well?*” ... “*What else would you like me to understand?*” ... A successful negative enquiry ends with an expression of appreciation by the Enquirer for the Protestor’s willingness to provide whatever clarification was forthcoming. The Enquirer also makes an explicit commitment to think about what the Protestor said and offers to engage in further clarifying conversation on a later occasion.

Throughout the negative enquiry, the Enquirer does not defend himself or reflect anything back; he simply asks for further clarifying details about specific actions and the experience of those actions. If, during this exchange, there are some hurtful actions for which the Enquirer can authentically accept responsibility, it is extremely useful to *digress to offer an immediate acknowledgement, express regret, and/or extend an apology on the spot*. After an adequate pause, to allow the Protestor to take in the apology, the negative enquiry could be resumed. What is definitely not useful during a negative enquiry is any attempt by the Enquirer to explain or justify his actions or to challenge the Protestor’s interpretation of any aspect of the Enquirer’s behavior. The impulse to explain one’s good intentions or to rectify any misinterpretation should be deferred to a later occasion when a process of reciprocal reflective listening can be implemented. What is constructed during a negative enquiry is greater awareness and clarity (for both Enquirer and Protestor), about contingencies between specific behaviors and specific experiential wounds.

Fig. 2 Negative Enquiry: basic roles of *Enquirer* and *Protector*



If the Enquirer is courageous enough to do so, he could proactively encourage the discharge of pent up feelings by offering reassurances to the Protector up

front: *“Please feel free to vent, fully, and say whatever you want to say. I really want to understand. I’m going to try very hard to avoid becoming defensive or angry while I listen. I only want to understand your experience as fully as possible.”* The Enquirer can also assist the Protestor by picking up on key words or phrases that might take the clarification deeper. For instance, *“You mentioned I left you out, what do you mean?”* ... *“Could you give me an example?”* ... *“What else did I do to exclude you?”* ... *“On what other occasions have I excluded you in the past?”* ...

The intention is to give the Protestor “full rein” to speak her experience more fully than she has been able to, heretofore, without any evaluation or disapproval from the Enquirer. Negative enquiry is especially helpful in a relationship where the Protestor has a propensity to keep her negative feelings inside and to bear grudges. Needless to say, anger that is contained or repressed (for whatever reason) tends to fester and contributes to chronic resentment. Implementing an active process of *facilitated venting* can go some distance toward preparing conditions for eventually talking things through so the resentment can be relinquished, and space may be opened for some reconciliation.

One common concern for Enquirers in such situations is the fear that by enabling such venting, they may be reinforcing negative thoughts and feelings. This is usually not the case. When the enquiry is enacted with *genuine compassion and sincere curiosity*, what is likely to be reinforced is her willingness to become more open and honest because she feels good in having been so deeply heard. What is reinforcing is the relief that follows upon discharging and relinquishing pent-up negative feelings. To be sure, the negativity sometimes gets worse before it gets better, that is, the negative feelings may intensify temporarily as she opens up. However, if she is not embedded in maliciousness, and the questioning process continues, the negative feelings gradually wane and dissolve as they become “fully spent”. What is ultimately co-constructed here is greater awareness of connections between specific actions on the part of the Enquirer and specific painful experiences on the part of the Protestor. This awareness sets the stage for possible future changes in specific behaviors and/or in the interpretation of certain behaviors.

Brief Example of a Clinical Application

An elderly couple presented for treatment after the wife threatened separation when she found her husband secretly visiting pornography sites on the Internet.

He was bewildered by the intensity of her reaction and became alarmed with the prospect of her leaving. As a result he sought out marital therapy. There was a past history of his sexual involvement with other women during the early years of the marriage. These boundary issues had previously been addressed in the past and the wife assumed they had been resolved many years ago.

At the beginning of this therapy she was far too distraught to engage in any reciprocal reflective listening. Given that the husband was highly motivated to stay together, he was encouraged to engage in a process of negative enquiry. Although it was very difficult for him, he was able to do so with the therapist's support during a session, and eventually at home on his own. Her disclosures and feedback about his behavior (in response to his questions) helped him come to a fuller appreciation of the nature and depth of her experience of betrayal through his secretive behaviors and his objectifying and disqualifying practices. As she gradually came to believe that he understood her experience, and that his regret and remorse was genuine, she began to get curious about his experience of her. This made it possible to invite them into a pattern of reciprocal reflective listening. During this preferred exercise he was able to convey his sense of loneliness and anxiety about abandonment, as well as express his fear of even disclosing this to her.

Subsequently when they were on their own, they found that implementing only a small part of either of the exercises was sometimes enough to get them past points of escalating conflict. On follow up, each of them felt that internalizing and implementing the structure of these exercises was beneficial in helping them improve their understanding of each other. It enabled their re-negotiation of a mutual re-commitment to an exclusive relationship with increased openness and honesty.

Concluding Comment

In most clinical situations, the reflective listening exercise is sufficient for committed partners to develop the communication competencies required to move their relationship forward. Thus, the exercise of negative enquiry may never be introduced. However, when one partner claims that he desperately wants to communicate, but she won't do so, inviting him to initiate the exercise of negative enquiry encourages him to shift away from blaming her (for not cooperating) toward becoming more accountable for their communicative impasse. Negative enquiry can be very affirming for those who tend to bottle up their anger and hang onto resentments, especially after having

been “silenced” in the past. In contrast, reflective listening may be especially useful for those whose anger flares too quickly, as they come to premature conclusions that ignite their frustration. Whether one’s frustration and/or anger is openly manifest or kept inside, co-constructing greater clarity about its origins is usually helpful in enabling partners to pinpoint specific ideas and/or behaviors where changes could make a significant difference to the quality of the relationship.

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