

Navigating the space in between us

Exploring obstacles
and opportunities in
bicultural relations.

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Working as a psychotherapist in a cultural diverse environment?

Brussels is after Dubai the most cultural diverse city in the world

1. Historical economical migration (South Europe, Marocco, Turkey, Congo, Rwanda)
2. Capital of European Institutions, NATO and headquarters of international companies
3. Arrival city for refugees (Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Somalia,...)

We need to develop skills and good practices challenging this international demographic context

We meet bi-cultural couples

Additional aspects to work on in couple therapy

I. The circles of Motives Model

Origine of this model

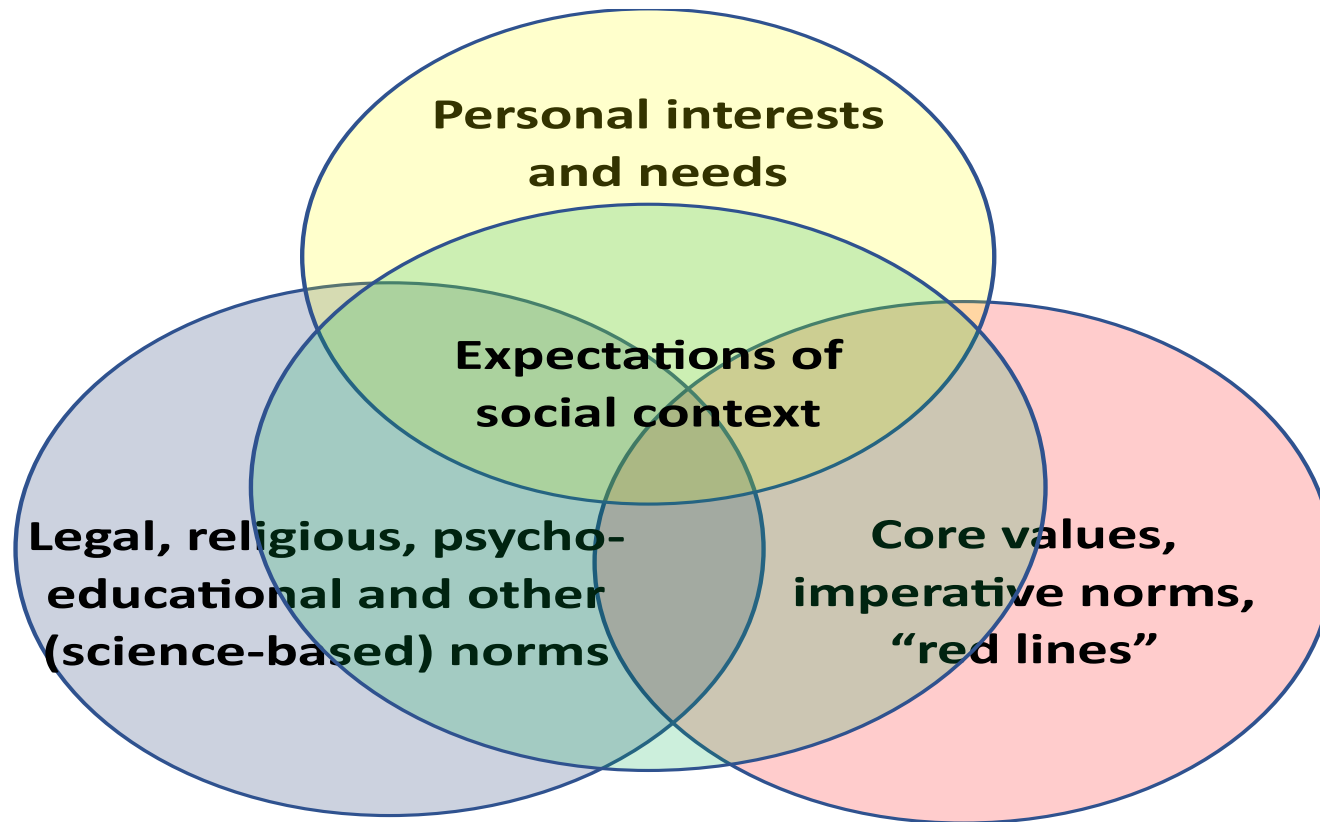
While originally designed for mediation and conflict intervention in communities, the enduring relevance of Abdalla's work lies in a more fundamental insight: **human interactions and tensions cannot be understood—or constructively engaged—by focusing on individual needs alone.** Especially in contexts shaped by collective identities, normative commitments, and strong value orientations, conflicts and disagreements are driven by qualitatively different kinds of motives that call for qualitatively different forms of intervention.

The Circles of Motivation Model (Abdalla, Lecoyer) emerges from a **non-Western epistemological perspective**, informed by traditions that emphasize relationality, moral responsibility, and community-oriented approaches to conflict. Within this perspective, human action is understood as embedded in social relationships, normative commitments, and ethical horizons that extend beyond individual preference or interest.

From Wheels of Conflict to Circles of Motives

Each person involved in a situation—including clients, family members, and professionals—can be understood as operating with a specific and dynamic configuration of motivational domains. These domains are not mutually exclusive; motives may overlap, shift over time, or become more or less salient depending on context, information, or relational dynamics. What matters for practice is not categorizing individuals, but developing insight **into which motivational layers are active and how they shape meaning-making, expectations and behaviour** in the situation at hand.

The circles of motives



II. “How my collective history stands between us”

Case study : Brenda and Paul

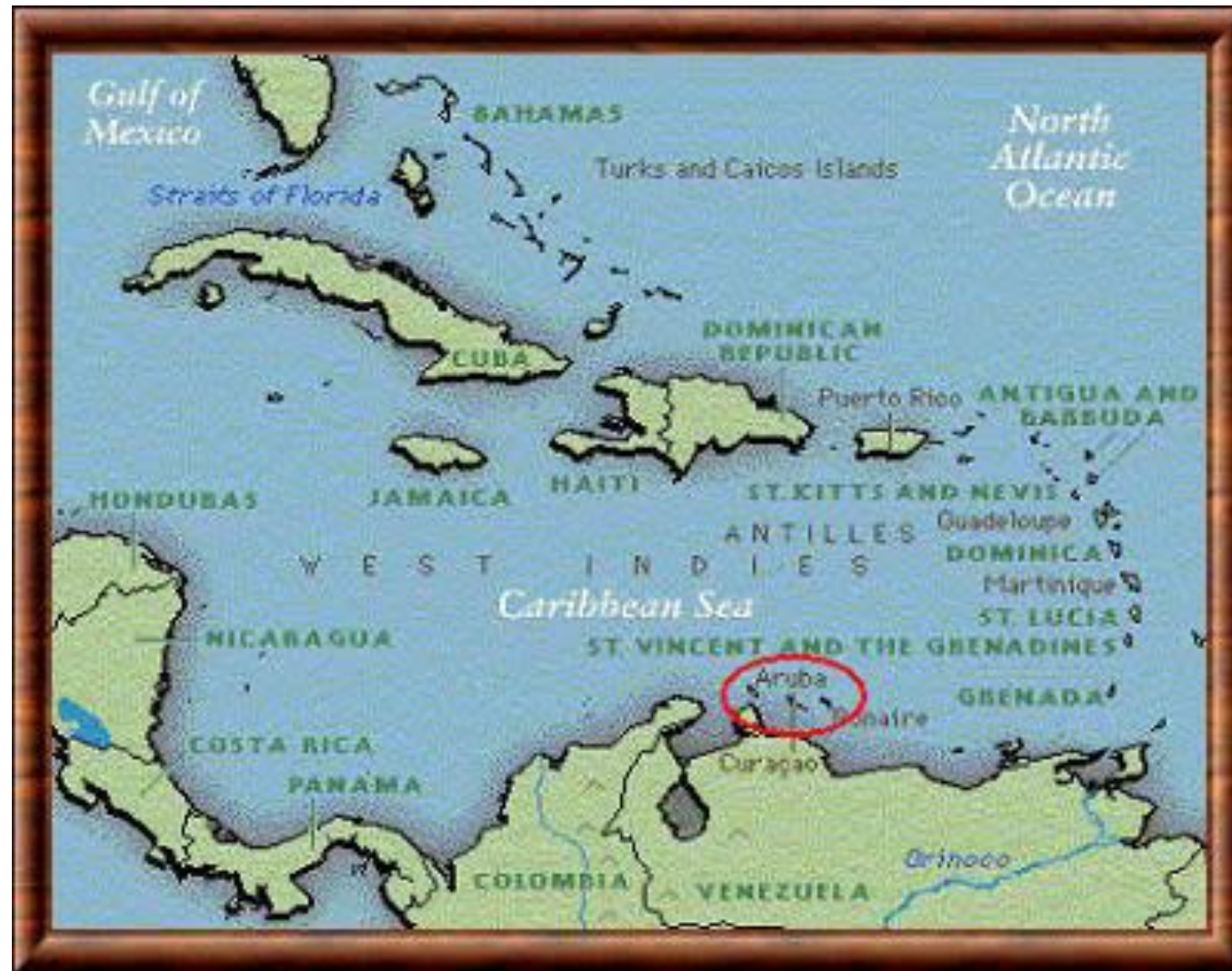
Brenda : a young mother and partner

Oldest daughter in a family with 4 children

Grew up in Curaçao (Caribbean) until 15th year

Both parents lived in Curaçao and have West-African roots.

Mother-speech : Creole language : Papiamentu



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Family of origin

Father left her family (after an affair) when Brenda was 7 years old.

Grew up in a single-parent household with her mother, brothers and sister.

Her family moved to the Netherlands when Brenda was 12 years old.

Brenda obtains her diploma VWO and continued her studies for Master in Sociology in the Netherlands

Absent father

Intergenerational transmission by her mother of a strong negative perception and low expectations of men and father.

Hurt caused by infidelity and underlying rejection and mothers pain over infidelity of father.

Generalization based on the stereotype of the » **untrustworthy man** ».

No internalized positive image of men and her father.

Her current family

Lives with a Belgian partner.

Mother of two children (2 and 4 years). When she gave birth to her first child, she became more aware of her cultural roots.

Family moved to Brussels for work opportunities in European Institution.

Stable family life (socio-economical, education, network, relation...)

Her work confronts her

Obtained her master diploma in Sociology and works as a consultant in mental health sector.

To a limited extend, her work confronts and questions her own cultural background in Curaçao.

Strong positive identification with the Netherlands by her studies, work and extended social network.

1. The personal layer

The **personal layer** concerns clients' individual experiences: their needs, emotions, desires, fears, and immediate concerns.

This layer is often the first entry point into understanding what feels meaningful, painful, or urgent for a person at a given moment.

Deconstruction of needs, expectations and pain : « détricoter » (unravelling)

1. Personal needs : Both partners have a strong need to connect more and share intimacy. Both express they're supportive to each other and have clear shared (core)values. No important conflicts, they have a **Stable relationship**.
2. Brenda's need is strongly embedded in old cultural patterns, partly unconcious. Paul legitimates his affective and emotional needs in a more Western concept of romantic love and affection and emotional connection.
3. Both partners amazingly express the same needs. Why they can't bridge the gap ?
4. Therapist needs to explore in an open and non-judgmental attitude to create a space where both can express their expectations and needs.

When the personal layer is active

Concerns located in the personal layer call for **attentive listening** and **curious, non-judgmental exploration**.

Here, practitioners focus on **what the situation feels** like for the client, what they hope for, fear, or find overwhelming. The aim is to create space for emotions and meanings to surface, supporting trust and clarity before moving toward broader contextual or normative influences.

Brenda

Brenda is experiencing **feelings of guilt**, because she thinks she cannot respond the intimacy and needs of her partner within the relationship.

She experiences this as a shortcoming towards her partner.

She is not focused on her own individual needs in the relationship.

2. The socio-cultural layer

The **socio-cultural layer** reflects the influence of family, community, and social networks—sources of belonging, pressure, obligation, or strength. These influences are not stable cultural traits but lived, relational dynamics shaped by context, migration histories, and changing circumstances (Lee et al., 2018). But also family history.

Work with families in diverse settings shows that **meaning emerges through these relationships**, and practitioners must explore them carefully (Gottlieb)

Socio cultural layer

Which **expectations, loyalties and responsibilities** we have and how they're embedded in our cultural network.

Concerns the actual constellations, but also the **cultural roots** as an underlying framework.

Family, transnational networks, community where we live have a strong influence.

Brenda and Paul

Exploring her childhood: Brenda and the therapist are encountering the tough reality in which Brenda grew up: the context of migration, infidelity, divorce and also a single parent situation.

Intimacy within relationships is an unknown topic because she grew up in a single parent family.

This brings a lot of **fears about a relationship** in general.

But also to other men. She was brought up by her mother, in a **negative image about men in general**. Especially about men of color.

Different images of relationships

Conflicts raise due to different image of couple-life and the importance of sexuality in the relation. Intimacy is for one partner (Brenda) a potential source of infidelity and rejection. Even inducing pain and anxiety that treathens the relation and family-life. For Paul intimacy is an important and inherent dimension of emotional connection within the couple.

Need to make more explicit the expectations of both partners and the image they build up of an ideal relationship.

No individual works but working with both partners

Colonial context of Brenda 's fears?

Going through the multi-layered historical context, brings a lot of information, knowledge and insights in how her fears might be related to the colonial context of Curaçao.

What happened in the colonial time has possibly come in the relationships between men and women. The distance between men and women, the instrumental view on sexuality (to make children), but also the segregation, all came along with the time and survived the generations.

Impact of slavery

going through the historical layers

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Impact of slavery

A strong impact of slavery on contemporary gender relations.

Intergenerational transmission of stereotypes about the untrustworthy man.

High rates of infidelity among men and high rates of divorce/separation and single-parents families.

Impact of slavery

Dutch slave-traders have strong control by strategy 'Divide and conquer'.

Men and women are forced to work on different places and lived apart.

Sexual contact was only tolerated in the interest of reproduction and underlying economical interests.

Intimacy and living together as partners has since then been separated.

Western Romantic image of a relationship

Physical intimacy as a proof of “true love”.

Intimacy is legitimized through romantic love.

“Hollywood-image” made it seem that this image of relationship is universal, true, natural and aspirational.

These are cultural scripts that actively constructs and normalize a certain model of Western romantic sexuality.

How and why are these power dynamics reproduced within this couple ?

Reflection

3. The normative layer

The **normative layer** includes legal rules, religious teachings, moral expectations, professional guidelines, and informal social rules that shape what clients see as possible or appropriate. Norms often operate implicitly and can strongly influence tensions in cross-cultural encounters. Discourse-analytic research demonstrates how normative assumptions shape inter-ethnic and inter-cultural interactions in subtle ways (Lee et al., 2018).

Providing contextualized information about norms can support clearer, more collaborative decision-making (Frey et al., 2020).

Brenda

She sees her partners desire as a legitimate demand in a relationship.

She internalises the dominant perspective of the Western society she lives in. She thinks she should adapt to these dominant norms.

How The therapist supports

The therapist explores the norms, and searches for a norm-enhancing position:

What are their norms about intimacy & sexuality?

What are their expectations for one another?

In which circle does it fit for the partner?

What does it mean for the relationship?

(for Paul it is a personal layer, for Brenda it is social and cultural layer, but also a normative layer)

Paul is in the yellow and red layer

Paul is looking from a Western individualised male perception to intimacy and sexuality: from the individual needs of a person, as a fundamental basic for a relationship.

Without sexuality a relationship doesn't exist for Paul, and so it belongs to the red circle. His idea of a relationship is non-negotiable.

Couples are sometimes stucked in a vicious cycle of negative interactions, through these differences.

Brenda is in the green and blue layer

Brenda: experiences this topic from a broader, historic, social intergenerational perspective:

Internalised racism: Brenda believes that, in order to be a good Dutch woman, which she perceives as superior, and thus she thinks she should adapt to the norms of her partner.

It also confirms the reality of what was once colonial power-dynamics where her ancestors had to survive.

She has internalised the mainstream Western norms about relationships, sexuality and intimacy, but also the needs of her partner.

4. Core values or red lines layer

The **core values or red lines layer** involves deeply held convictions that clients—and practitioners—experience as non-negotiable: identity commitments, moral beliefs, or protective boundaries.

Cultural humility approaches underline the importance of recognizing and respecting such values without moralizing or imposing one's own frameworks (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Gottlieb, 2013).

Brenda and Paul

The therapist explores how both partners can look what is non-negotiable, what can help them come closer to their needs to experience intimacy in their own way.

Acknowledging what is a red line or core value:

Paul convinced norms are obvious. From his **privilege position** he thinks he is aloud to impose his own red lines as a legitimate norm. (racialised, collective unconsciousness)

For Brenda intimacy means also: **sharing personal feelings and thoughts.**

Each couple is embedded in **broader contexts.**

Recognising Boundaries and Safeguarding Rights

Practitioners must approach the conversation with **careful recognition** of what these commitments mean for the client.

With cultural humility

At the same time, therapeutic work practice is also shaped by **professional and legal red lines**, particularly in situations involving safety, rights, and welfare.

Realist perspectives highlight that these boundaries help determine which actions are ethically possible within a given context.

When this layer is active, practitioners may need to be transparent about limits, responsibilities, or consequences — while continuing to validate the meaning and significance of the client's values.

Some reflections

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Headlines for support to bicultural couples

Slowing down the process

How can you be norm-enhancing?

How can you find connection in the multiple perspective?

From vertical to horizontal positioning within the relationship.

Listening to what is behind the norm.

Position of the therapist: navigation must also be done between therapist and couple.