Navigating the space between us.

Norms and Expectations in bi-cultural couple-therapy Practice: Introducing the Motivational Dynamics Model.

1. Introduction

Brussels is after Dubai the most cultural diverse city in the world. Surprisingly even more than New York, London or Hong Kong. Brussels had an important wave of economical migration in the Sixties , mainly Moroccan and Turkish migrants. Since the last decades also more diverse groups of migrants/refugees arrived in Brussels from Sub-Sahara Africa, Asia and the Middle-East. A third important migration was related to the settlement of the European institutions in Brussels and the NATO headquarter in Evere. This migration had important consequences in the demographic structure of the city. This superdiversity reflects also in the daily practice of psychotherapists. Therapists need to develop specific skills and understanding of trans/intercultural dynamics. Couple-therapists receive more and more bi-cultural couples in their practice.

Psychotherapeutic work practice increasingly takes place in contexts marked by **superdiversity**, particularly in urban environments shaped by complex migration trajectories, legal stratifications, and intersecting social inequalities (Vertovec, 2007; Boccagni, 2015; Geldof, 2016). Rather than reflecting isolated cultural differences, contemporary practice situations are characterized by the simultaneous presence of personal needs, family and community expectations, different, sometimes conflicting normative frameworks, and deeply held values, all embedded in dynamic social, institutional, and relational contexts (Geldof, 2011; Asén et al., 2022; Julkunen et al., 2023).

Within this reality, psychotherapists report increasing uncertainty when navigating situations involving tensions around norms, values, and expectations. Research on urban and superdiverse therapeutical work highlights that such situations cannot be adequately addressed through standardized intervention models, as they require ongoing ethical judgment, relational responsiveness, and context-sensitive professional decision-making (Hendriks & van Ewijk, 2019; Asén et al., 2022).

Historically, **cultural competence** has been the dominant framework for addressing diversity in psychotherapy. Typically conceptualized as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, a cultural competence approach aims to promote effective cross-cultural interactions (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Sue et al., 2015). However, a substantial body of scholarship has documented the limitations of this approach. Critics argue that cultural competence models mostly frame cultural differences as a technical challenge for professional expertise, rely on static notions of culture, and insufficiently address power, positionality, and institutional inequality (Harrison & Turner, 2011; Käkelä, 2020; Boccagni, 2015).

In response to these critiques, theory has increasingly embraced **cultural humility** and related concepts such as cultural consciousness (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Azzopardi & McNeill,

2016). Cultural humility reframes diversity-responsive practice as an ongoing, relational process grounded in openness, self-reflection, and the decentering of professional authority, rather than as the acquisition of definitive cultural knowledge (Gottlieb, 2013; Danso, 2018). Within this perspective, clients are engaged as co-constructors of meaning, and attention is directed toward the relational, emotional, and power-laden dimensions of practice encounters (Gottlieb et al., 2017).

This shift reflects a broader **relational turn** in couple-psychotherapy, emphasizing dialogical engagement, reflexivity, and ethical presence in contexts of difference (Julkunen et al., 2023). While these approaches offer a compelling ethical orientation, practitioners continue to face challenges in translating them into concrete professional action (Danso, 2018; Greene-Moton & Minkler, 2020). Existing frameworks offer little guidance in disentangling different domains of meaning, increasing the risk that professionals either impose dominant norms, moralise clients' positions, or miss opportunities to intervene in emancipatory and dialogical ways. For example, in work with couples negotiating gender roles, schooling choices, or care responsibilities, practitioners may face situations in which partners' perspectives clash with what professionals consider appropriate or necessary, leaving them hesitating between enforcing institutional norms, "respecting culture", or even withdrawing from intervention altogether—each option carrying significant ethical and relational consequences.

It is within this theoretical and practice context that the **Motivational Dynamics Model (MDM)** is introduced. The MDM is designed to support therapists in navigating this layered and contextually rich reality. The model brings together (1) an attitudinal foundation grounded in relational connection and reflexive positionality, and (2) a dynamics based map of four Motivational Layers—personal, socio cultural, normative, and core values/red lines—visualized as overlapping circles.

In superdiverse European contexts, where multilingualism, migration histories, layered identities, and welfare-state governance shape everyday therapeutical practice, professionals need frameworks that help them engage complexity without reducing it to culture or purely individual concerns. The Motivational Dynamics Model offers such a practice-grounded yet theoretically informed approach. By clarifying how different motivational domains shape tensions and possibilities in helping relationships, and by linking each domain to appropriate relational and professional responses, the model supports social workers, family support professionals, therapists, and other practitioners in engaging ethically sensitive, relationally complex, and normatively layered situations. It aims to help practitioners avoid the familiar pitfalls of culturalisation, color-blind universalism, and premature moral judgment, while staying closely attuned to the lived realities of the individuals and families they meet.

2. A Relational–Dialogical Professional Stance as Foundation

Across multiple strands of theory, there is increasing recognition that diversity-responsive practice is inseparable from questions of **power, social inequality, and institutional context**. Anti-oppressive and anti-racist perspectives emphasize that couple therapy encounters are shaped by asymmetrical power relations, organizational mandates, and structural constraints that influence both clients' options and practitioners' interventions (Dominelli, 2002, 2017; Boccagni, 2015). In superdiverse contexts, the risk of culturalizing social problems is particularly pronounced when structural factors such as legal precarity or welfare exclusion remain in the background or are overlooked (Julkunen et al., 2023).

Recent scholarship also highlights the **emotional and affective dimensions** of diversity-related practice. Engaging with racism, inequality, and moral conflict often generates discomfort, ambivalence, and ethical tension among practitioners, shaping how professional commitments are sustained or compromised over time (Grishow-Schade, 2024). These insights underscore the need for frameworks that attend not only to relational ethics, but also to the conditions under which practitioners remain able to act reflexively and responsibly.

Within this landscape, **dialogical and relational approaches** deepen the ethical orientation introduced by cultural humility by focusing on how meaning is co-constructed in practice encounters. Dialogical theory emphasizes tolerating uncertainty, suspending expert authority, and engaging with multiple perspectives; resisting the urge to settle too quickly on single interpretations (Arnkil & Seikkula, 2015). Similarly, relational scholarship in psychotherapeutic conceptualizes cooperation, trust, and understanding as emerging through interaction rather than as outcomes of technical intervention (Julkunen et al., 2023).

Cultural humility can thus be understood as both an ethical stance and a relational practice orientation, closely aligned with dialogical principles. It calls on practitioners to remain open to being affected by the encounter, to recognize the limits of professional knowledge, and to engage clients as partners rather than objects of intervention (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998; Gottlieb, 2013). Greene-Moton and Minkler (2020) further argue that humility must be situated within organizational and structural contexts to avoid becoming an individualized moral ideal detached from broader institutional responsibility.

The Motivational Dynamics Model is grounded in this convergence of **anti-oppressive**, **relational**, and **dialogical** traditions. Rather than offering a prescriptive method, the model begins with a **professional stance** that creates the conditions for meaningful engagement with complexity. This stance is articulated through three interdependent elements: **human connection**, **reflexive positionality**, and **context-tailored professional intervention**.

2.1 Human connection

The first core element is **human connection**. Humility-based approaches emphasise relational presence, curiosity, and recognition of clients as full meaning-makers (*Gottlieb, Nybell & Laurila, 2017*). In practice, connection cannot be reduced to communication techniques; it emerges through sustained relational engagement in which professionals are genuinely available as persons (Baart, 2001; Hoffman, 2009). Research on working with diverse families shows that the absence of such connection often reinforces mistrust, particularly in contexts where families fear being misunderstood or judged (Lecoyer & Oizaz, 2022).

In cross-cultural practice, relational grounding also serves as a safeguard against premature interpretation and culturalisation. Without sufficient attention to relational connection, practitioners risk reducing complex situations to simplified cultural explanations, thereby overlooking the layered realities of clients' lives (Lee et al., 2018). Human connection thus creates the relational conditions in which dialogue, trust, and shared exploration can emerge, enabling practitioners to engage with the Motivational Layers in a meaningful way.

2.2 Reflexive positionality

The second core element is **reflexive positionality**. Cultural humility and critical psychotherapeutical perspectives stress the need for ongoing reflection on one's own social location, power, and interpretive frameworks, and on how these shape professional encounters

(Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin, 2015; Dominelli, 2002, 2017). Such reflexivity includes recognizing the ways in which professionals are embedded in broader systems of inequality and how their knowledge, practices, and institutional roles may reproduce or challenge these dynamics.

As highlighted in both theoretical and practice-based work, there is no neutral position from which professionals observe or intervene. Professional knowledge itself carries normative assumptions about what is considered "good" , "appropriate" behaviour, or "in the best interest" of the client (Rober, 2012; Kanne, 2014). Reflexive positionality therefore requires practitioners to critically engage with their own assumptions and to remain attentive to how their interpretations are shaped by both personal and institutional frameworks.

This awareness enables professionals to approach complex situations without defaulting to cultural explanations or normative imposition, and to remain open to alternative perspectives embedded in clients' lived realities (Danso, 2018; Boccagni, 2015).

2.3 Context-tailored professional interventions

The third core element is the commitment to **context-tailored professional interventions**. Rather than applying fixed techniques, practitioners adapt interventions to each specific person or family, their social networks, and the broader context and timing of the situation. This aligns with process-oriented perspectives showing that effective practice depends on how practitioners respond to the **underlying relational and motivational processes** at stake (*Frey et al., 2020*). Interventions become part of a co-constructed process, responsive to what emerges in the relationship rather than predetermined by cultural assumptions or standard protocols.

These three core elements provide the relational–dialogical stance needed to engage meaningfully with the complexity of clients' experiences. With this foundation in place, we can now turn to the heart of the Motivational Dynamics Model: the Motivational Layers, which offer a concise and structured way of understanding the key domains that structure people's meaning-making and the motivational forces at play.

3. The Motivational Layers of the Motivational Dynamics Model

Grounding the Motivational Dynamics Model in the Work of Amr Abdalla

The Motivational Dynamics Model builds explicitly on the work of **Dr. Amr Abdalla**, Professor Emeritus at the United Nations–mandated University for Peace, whose decades of teaching and practice in conflict analysis and resolution resulted in several foundational frameworks, among which the framework known as the *Wheels of Conflict*. Developed for Islamic and intercultural contexts, Abdalla's framework distinguishes between different domains through which conflicts unfold, including personal needs, cultural expectations, religious norms, and non-negotiable moral boundaries.

While originally designed for mediation and conflict intervention in Muslim 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.

This insight remains highly pertinent in contemporary superdiverse societies. Couple therapists regularly encounter situations in which personal concerns, family or community expectations, legal or institutional norms, and deeply held values intersect and potentially conflict. Abdalla's model offers a rare conceptual structure capable of holding this complexity without collapsing it into either individual psychology or cultural determinism.

It is important to name this lineage explicitly. Abdalla's model 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.

This epistemological positioning is not incidental. It provides a **wider analytical lens** for understanding situations in which people's actions and motivations are shaped simultaneously by personal concerns, collective expectations, normative frameworks, and deeply held values. As such, Abdalla's work offers particularly fertile ground for rethinking professional intervention in contemporary superdiverse societies.

The Motivational Dynamics Model retains this core structure while adapting it to a broader field of application. Three shifts are central to this adaptation. First, the focus moves beyond explicit conflict to include **everyday psychosocial and relational situations** in which values and norms may be latent rather than openly contested. Second, the emphasis shifts from analysing *conflict elements* to exploring **underlying motivational domains** that shape how people perceive, justify, and act within a given situation. Third, the framework is rendered applicable across diverse cultural, religious, and secular contexts by reframing the original domains in more universal terms.

This adaptation is not intended to detach the model from its origins, but to translate Abdalla's core insight into a form that supports context-responsive social work practice in superdiverse settings.

From Wheels of Conflict to Circles of Motives

In Abdalla's original framework, the wheels help practitioners analyse which *type* of elements structure a conflict and why certain intervention strategies succeed or fail depending on the domain involved. Building on this logic, the Motivational Dynamics Model reconceptualizes these domains as overlapping **circles of motives**, that represent key areas in which meaning-making and motivational forces take shape, emphasizing what *drives* people.

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.

This reframing enables social professionals to move beyond binary moral debates or cultural explanations and to adopt interventions that are proportionate and context-adequate. It also foregrounds the importance of professional reflexivity: practitioners themselves are not neutral actors but bring their own motivations, norms, and red lines into the interaction. Distinguishing

between personal convictions and professional responsibility becomes crucial, particularly when fundamental rights or safeguarding obligations are at stake.

By translating Abdalla's wheels into a motivational framework, the model becomes applicable not only to mediation but to the full range of couple therapy.

The four Motivational Layers are described below.

3.1 Personal Layer

The **personal layer** concerns clients' individual experiences: their needs, emotions, desires, fears, and immediate concerns. Cultural humility frameworks emphasize the importance of approaching these meanings with openness and without premature interpretation (*Tervalon & Murray-García; Gottlieb, 2013*). This layer is often the first entry point into understanding what feels meaningful, painful, or urgent for a person at a given moment.

3.2 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*). Work with families in diverse settings shows that meaning emerges through these relationships, and practitioners must explore them carefully (*Gottlieb, Nybell & Laurila, 2017*).

3.3 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*).
Intervention-theory literature further notes that providing contextualized information about norms can support clearer, more collaborative decision-making (*Frey et al., 2020*).

3.4 Core Values / 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*).
This layer also includes legally or ethically required "red lines" in professional practice, such as safety and rights. Realist perspectives on intervention emphasize that these boundaries help determine which actions are possible within a given context. [sciencegate.app]

3.5 Working with Layers as Dynamic Processes

In practice, these layers rarely appear in isolation. A tension around a young person's choices, for example, may involve personal fears, family expectations, religious or legal norms, and strongly felt values. The value of the Motivational Layers is that they help practitioners **slow down**, separate out these domains, and engage with each one without collapsing everything into "culture" or into individual pathology. This is consistent with relational–dialogical approaches

that aim to make space for multiple meanings rather than reducing complexity (*Gottlieb, 2013; Gottlieb et al., 2017*).

By viewing the layers as **dynamic processes**—not fixed categories—the MDM helps practitioners identify which aspects of the situation are most active in the moment and which forms of relational support or **(context-)tailored interventions** may be helpful. The next section links each layer to corresponding modes of practice.

4. Working With the Motivational Layers in Practice

The Motivational Layers offer a way for practitioners to pause, sort through complexity, and identify which domains are most active in the moment. To translate this into practice, the Motivational Dynamics Model connects each layer with a corresponding **mode of relational and professional engagement**. These modes are not techniques to be applied automatically; rather, they help practitioners consider **which kind of response** is most aligned with the client's needs, context, and timing. This approach reflects process-oriented perspectives that emphasize attending to the underlying relational and motivational processes at play (*Frey et al., 2020*).

Below, each layer is paired with a mode of practice. In reality, couple therapists often weave between modes as more than one layer becomes relevant.

4.1 When the Personal Layer Is Active: Listening, Exploring, Clarifying

Concerns located in the personal layer call for **attentive listening** and **curious, non-judgmental exploration**. Cultural humility literature stresses the importance of approaching personal meanings without premature assumptions (*Tervalon & Murray-García; Gottlieb, 2013*).
Here, practitioners focus on **what the situation feels like** for both partners, 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.

4.2 When the Socio-Cultural Layer Is Active: Exploring Relationships and Contexts

If the tension appears rooted in family roles, communal expectations, or social pressures, practitioners shift toward **relational and contextual exploration**. Rather than treating "culture" as a fixed attribute, cross-cultural analyses show it is essential to explore the lived dynamics of relationships, obligations, and support networks (*Lee et al., 2018*).
This may include asking about family involvement, mapping relational expectations, or exploring sources of belonging and strain. Research in family-oriented social work highlights that new meanings often emerge when practitioners respectfully explore how clients' decisions affect — and are affected by — others around them (*Gottlieb, Nybell & Laurila, 2017*).

4.3 When the Normative Layer Is Active: Clarifying and Contextualising Norms

When clients struggle with conflicting expectations about what is "allowed," "appropriate," or "required," the practitioner's role shifts to **clarifying norms**, **contextualizing rules**, and supporting **informed decision-making**. Norms may be legal, religious, moral, or institutional. Discourse-analytic work shows that such normative assumptions often operate implicitly and shape cross-cultural interactions in powerful ways (*Lee et al., 2018*).
Intervention-theory literature supports the importance of providing accurate, contextualized information when normative confusion becomes a barrier to collaboration or safety (*Frey et al., 2020*).
Here, practitioners remain dialogical: they offer information **only as needed**, and in ways that honour clients' autonomy and meaning-making.

4.4 When the Core Values / Red Lines Layer Is Active: Recognizing Boundaries and Safeguarding Rights

When deeply held values or non-negotiable boundaries are at stake, couple-therapists must approach the conversation with **careful recognition** of what these commitments mean for the partners. Cultural humility literature stresses respecting such convictions without imposing one's own moral framework (*Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin, 2015*; *Gottlieb, 2013*).
At the same time, social 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.

4.5 Integrating Modes: From Layers to Context-Tailored Interventions

In practice, multiple layers often overlap. A partners refusing to support financially family in the home-land, for example, may involve personal distress, family expectations, religious norms, and strongly held values around responsibility or honour. The MDM helps practitioners **slow down** this complexity and move toward **(context-)tailored interventions** that respond to what is most active and meaningful in the moment.

This layer-to-mode linking is not prescriptive; it is a **relational guide** that allows practitioners to stay grounded in human connection and reflexive positionality while choosing next steps that fit the situation. It supports practice that is culturally responsive without culturalising, open without vague neutrality, and ethically anchored without moralising.

So drifting away from a conflict driven model in couple therapy towards context-tailored interventions can be helpful in a super-diverse demographic context like Brussels.

Work in progress !

Kim Lecoyer

Geert Schelkens

Birsen Taspinar