

# Deepening Couples Counseling Through Inner Critic Dialogue: A Case Study

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## Abstract

The psychological construct of the Inner Critic (IC) describes the internal, negative valuations made by individuals within relationships based upon previous faulty thinking (Earley, 2012; Green, 2008; Kugel, 2010). Marriage and family counselors working with couples may benefit from understanding the IC construct and utilizing the anthetic relationship therapy (ART) paradigm (Elliott & Elliott, 2000) to assist couples with neutralizing the deleterious effects of the IC's messages. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to (a) describe the development of the IC as an integral psychodynamic construct in psychological functioning and treatment; (b) highlight the mechanisms in which the IC manifests intrapersonally and sabotages individuals interpersonally; and (c) discuss the implications for utilizing ART to address the IC's destructive messages so couples can reengage in healthy and optimal interpersonal communication.

## Keywords

couples counseling, inner critic, psychodynamic

Gendlin (1998) was one of the first theoreticians to introduce the Inner Critic (IC) construct to the field of psychology as an internal "voice" that involves self-critical interior commentary. Moreover, IC imposes imperative "shoulds" and inflicts emotional punishment on the individual if the shoulds are disobeyed (Elliott & Elliott, 2000; Kugel, 2010). Shoulds are a form of self-imposed mandates that are formulated through a dynamic tapestry related to the individual's past functioning, child rearing, morality, and cognitive distortions surrounding psychologically painful or aberrant events. One example of a should that the IC could impose upon an individual who struggles with relationships is "You should be loved by everyone, or you're not of any value." This psychological or abstract concept that is often extreme (and significantly negative) in its valuation of situations and interpersonal dynamics can be found by different monikers across theoretical modalities. For example, IC has been compared to the Freudian construct, *superego*, which strives for perfection and, if identified with completely, leads an individual to lose the objectivity and balance of the *ego* (Stinckens, Lietaer, & Leijssen, 2013). The concept of the IC is also one of the foundational pieces of Albert Ellis' *rational emotive behavior therapy* (Ellis & Dryden, 2007), which stipulates the critical inner thoughts within individuals can lead to several "musts" of conforming to or adhering to unhealthy beliefs and attitudes otherwise referred to as "musterbations." The harsh self-criticism and subsequent musterbations inherent with the IC have the capacity to largely disrupt interpersonal relationships and logical thinking (Earley, 2012; Stinckens et al., 2013).

The purpose of this article is to (a) describe the development of the IC as an integral psychodynamic construct in psychological functioning and treatment; (b) highlight the mechanisms in which the IC manifests intrapersonally and sabotages individuals interpersonally; and (c) discuss the implications for utilizing ART to address the IC's destructive messages that may develop in individuals receiving joint couples counseling treatment.

## Development of the IC as a Psychological Construct

In considering the development of the IC across theoretical orientations, it is plausible that its emergence can be described using clusters of clinical importance (Stinckens et al., 2013). The IC is first derived from individuals' interactions related to their primary relationships with parents. These relationships are often saturated with criticism of the child's behavior, although neglect, inconsistency, or excessive permissiveness can also have the same deleterious effect of leading the child to evaluate himself as worthless, bad, unlovable, or inadequate.

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These valuations, if left unchallenged, further develop into maladaptive ways of perceiving and interpreting later experiences, or negative self-schemas. A self-schema of worthlessness—seeing oneself as fundamentally defective, unlovable, incompetent, guilty, shameful, or imperfect—serves as a platform from which the IC communicates (Kugel, 2010).

The efforts of the IC to dismantle a person's psychological health and reinforce faulty thinking have been described in different clusters in the literature. Earley and Weiss (2010), for example, describe seven ways the IC manifests: (a) the *perfectionist*, who demands an unreasonable level of perfection; (b) the *guilt-tripper*, who prevents the individual from repeating mistakes by disavowing forgiveness for past errors; (c) the *underminer*, who tries to prevent the individual from taking risks by directly attacking his self-worth; (d) the *molder*, who fears rejection or abandonment and attempts to avoid these by convincing the individual that he must fit into society's view of "good" or "worthy"; (e) the *taskmaster*, who fears mediocrity or laziness and whose desire for success often leads to procrastination and fear of failure; (f) the *inner controller*, who attempts to control the individual's inner desires and protect himself from indulgence; and (g) the *destroyer*, who shames the individual and aims to make him feel unworthy of the most basic respect.

Where such a deleterious view of oneself is prominent, later adult experiences will be cognitively rationalized to fit such a self-schema. These information processing deficits may lead the individual to highlight and exaggerate information that confirms the faulty view while minimizing or ignoring that which contradicts it (Stinckens et al., 2013). Understandably, individuals have difficulty remaining mentally healthy with such a negative view of themselves. Therefore, to function, self-protective and/or externalizing behaviors are used to avoid feeling the pain of the IC's messages or overcompensate through negative behaviors toward others.

### **Anthetic Relationship Therapy (ART): Curving Effects of the IC**

The ways of coping to disorganized thoughts or faulty logic related to one's inner appraisals utilized by the IC often lead to interpersonal challenges, where the individual is consistently seeking approval and affection from others, or withdraws from others to avoid potential criticism or rejection (Stinckens et al., 2013). The corrosive effects of the IC can also be found in dysfunctional beliefs individuals carry regarding their intimate relationships, such as (a) the notion that arguments or disagreements in a relationship are always destructive and never productive, (b) acute partners can sense their partners' needs without any overt communication (i.e., mindreading), and (c) compatible partners have an unflawed, highly rewarding erotic relationship (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). When these maladaptive beliefs and coping styles cause interpersonal distress due to faulty thinking and unreasonable expectations, the IC has been successful in sabotaging relationships that might debunk these messages (Stinckens et al., 2013). Additionally, the experience

has provided the IC with more data to support the view that the individual is worthless and unlovable.

Marriage and family counselors may see the manifestations of the IC and understand its aberrant influence when they discover the unhealthy mechanisms partners communicate their unmet needs to one another. The IC, or internalized negative voice based upon faulty assumptions, is capable of inflicting feelings of defectiveness, guilt, shame, inferiority, and magnified fear; thus, attempts to avoid emotional punishment by the IC may manifest in interpersonally damaging ways, such as avoiding, distancing, disconnecting, fears about intimacy, vengefulness, defensiveness, resistance, and grandiosity.

The idea of quieting or silencing the IC or inner negative voice within individuals can be found, in some form, in virtually all modalities of psychotherapy. And as the IC can affect relationship satisfaction and effectiveness, its presence is frequently felt in couples counseling as well. Indeed, reasons that couples seek counseling often include interpersonal difficulties, particularly communication issues and lack of affection (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Kugel, 2010).

An internal climate in which thoughts, feelings, and behavior are driven by the IC's shoulds will often prevent interventions from being successful and, ultimately, will block couples from learning the skills needed for a successful and deeply satisfying romantic relationship. ART holds that once inner obstacles are cleared away and dysfunctional learnings are corrected, each partner will be able to psychologically mature and the relationship can be redefined in mutually satisfying ways. The notion that *inner freedom* is not only necessary for the learning and effective use of new interpersonal skills but will also lead to increased flexibility to choose which internal messages and viewpoints will be heard and acted upon is fundamental to ART. Inner freedom is a psychological cognitive construct that involves the individual's flexibility to choose whether or not the messages of the parts of oneself will be heard and acted upon. Furthermore, ART advocates for the IC to be replaced by an *Inner Guide* that functions by providing direction rather than commands backed by the threat of punishment. The Inner Guide interacts with interpersonally satisfying values, including emotional closeness, caring behavior, a commitment to working on problems, playfulness, individuation, healthy aggressiveness, pleasure, and responsible behavior (Earley, 2012).

ART is a skills-based psychotherapy approach, where the primary goal is correcting the messages of the IC in order for new, adaptive, interpersonal skills to be learned (Elliott, 1999). In order to achieve this greater cognitive flexibility, ART utilizes *releasing statements*, incorporation of different personality types, and the teaching of new skills at various levels to increase satisfaction in couple relationships.

### **ART: Levels of Learning**

The psychotherapeutic process of ART involves three levels of possible learning for couples to consider: (a) *basic guidelines*, (b) *transformative skills*, and (c) *interpersonal skills*. The learning

of basic guidelines includes psychoeducation about feelings and acceptance and valuing of personal change. It is here that the concept of the IC would first be introduced and discussed by the marriage and family counselor with the individuals seeking treatment. Second, the couples and/or family counselor assists couples in identifying and understanding the functions of the IC, namely, its rigidity, judgment, and negative views. The ways in which the IC is interfering in interpersonal relationships are discussed. Finally, interpersonal skills, aimed at challenging and neutralizing the IC are taught to the couple. Typically, a marriage and family counselor using the ART approach begins with a diagnostic attempt to teach interpersonal skills. If one or both partners struggle to learn these skills, the counselor may explore whether the IC is blocking progress.

It is also possible that the counselor teaches the couple at a combination of levels. For example, Carl's wife, Sheila, asked him to undertake a personality change (interpersonal skill) from "withdrawn" to "open and forthcoming." He said he would do it in order to please her. With the support of the therapist, Sheila said, "No, you have to do it for yourself, because you want the pleasure of doing it. And you wouldn't feel resentment toward for me 'making you do it'." Carl was unable to accept this recommendation as he kept a "should" not to be selfish. Once the IC's message was brought to awareness in therapy by the counselor (and recognized by Carl)—a transformative skill—he was able to embrace personal change.

### Neutralizing the IC

The goal of neutralization of the IC in ART is designed to decrease the rigidity of thoughts, feelings, behavior, and attitudes that keep partners locked into their interpersonally rigid roles that create dysfunction and prevent satisfying relatedness. ART describes partners in terms of four polar types: (a) *tough*, (b) *tender*, (c) *self-sufficient*, and (d) *dependent* (Elliott & Elliott, 2000). Often, one pole will be hypercultivated, to the exclusion of the opposite pole, features of which will be submerged in the unconscious and often inaccessible to the individual. Tough individuals take pride in dominating and winning (Claes, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Vandereycken, 2012), solving problems, and being logical and rational. Their IC has imposed a negative view of their tender sides, as reflected in contempt for whining, discussing feelings, and being emotionally inclined or sensitive. Alternatively, tender individuals take pride in being sensitive, caring, and demonstrating concerned feeling for others. Although able to take a gentle approach with their partners, they struggle to accept their tough sides, failing to demonstrate assertiveness when needed.

Self-sufficient partners take pride in scaling down their needs, demonstrating fierce independence, and avoiding being taken advantage of or influenced by others. Their IC has contempt for "begging" behavior, as reflected in their judgmental feelings toward people who are dependent, needy, and loving. These individuals may see love as a dysfunction, as they understand terms in rational, logical ways and often detest or do not understand irrational or illogical thinking of feeling. Dependent

individuals, on the other hand, demonstrate flexibility and forgiveness, while also appearing modest and undemanding of their partner. As a result, these individuals seek love, approval, and physical proximity; however, they only rarely consciously feel judgmental or critical toward any other type. That is, they have completely forfeited their toughness and self-sufficiency.

The use of these polar types of categories may offer a useful paradigm for marriage and family counselors to understand interpersonal discord, particularly as they relate to dysfunctional dynamics within couples (Elliott & Elliott, 2000). For example, a tough man may elevate hardheartedness, discipline, practicality, and rationality while denying impulses to be playful, loving, easygoing, and tender. Any possible emergence of such impulses would be deemed impractical or perhaps weak by his IC. A marriage and family counselor utilizing ART may assist him in neutralizing his IC to allow more flexibility and freedom to think and experience tenderness. For another client who demonstrates dependency as a result of her IC's messages that she is incapable of success on her own, the counselor's goal with this individual would be increased psychological self-sufficiency. In this way, ART models flexibility by individualizing treatment goals to assist each partner with inner criticisms related to the polar type in which they are stuck or unconsciously fixated within.

Like other polar categories from the Jungian perspective (Green, 2009), such as individuals falling or vacillating along the Introversion–Extraversion spectrum found through assessment on the Myers–Briggs, partners may exhibit features of several polar types, although the features of one category (or complex) are typically most prominent. For example, one combination found among individuals who physically abuse their partners may be the *tough-dependent*. This would be like someone who is having conflicted internal messages of showing love by hurting someone else, a lesson most often learned earlier in life by abusive caretakers. Unlike other polar categories, however, the ART types enable connections to be made between personal differences and psychodynamic forces with the IC.

**Releasing statements.** ART ascribes to the notion that the IC, however manifested in the partner, must be addressed through therapeutic work before new interpersonal skills can be fully formulated and internalized. While some counselors may attempt to bypass the IC in couples counseling through debating or cognitive thought-stopping, ART seeks instead to use releasing statements (Elliott & Elliott, 2000). Releasing statements are based on the idea that, with shoulds, the IC is taking away the individual's rights. A releasing statement aims to empower the individual by regaining their rights and cognitively realigning with healthier thoughts poised closer to reality. For example, John's IC says, "You are selfish if you go out for a couple of hours with non-romantic friends after work instead of going home to Jane every once in a while." A releasing response would be, "You have the right to put yourself first sometimes as long as you aren't deliberately hurting someone

else.” While this statement does not mean that John has to decide to go out after work, it frees him from feelings of shame, defensiveness, and guilt and allows him to make his own decision.

### *Comparing ART to Two Similar Schools of Couple Counseling*

ART differs in substantive ways from other schools of couple therapy. Following are comparisons in values, theories, and methods of treatment. First, in narrative therapy (Freedman & Combs, 2008), the therapist’s goal is to ensure the couple externalizes their problem so that the problem (not each other) becomes the enemy. Similarly, in ART, the counselor helps the couple identify a source in each of them that can be labeled and disengaged from altogether. However, narrative therapy does not address the psychodynamic and cognitive construct of the IC, nor does it offer the value of inner freedom, but seeks written forms of transformation, through poetry and journaling, toward healing.

Internal family systems therapy (IFST; Green, 2008; Schwartz, 1995), like ART, sees the couple as suffering from intrapsychic elements that are influencing how the couple relates to each other. Unlike ART, IFST does not identify the IC as the primary source of intrapsychic distress. Nor does it offer the value of inner freedom, the theory that couple conflict is an attempt to defend against IC emotional punishments. It does, however, offer the couple a chance to engage in a form of psychodrama to abreact difficult emotional communications through the various intrapsychic “parts” with each other.

### **Case Study**

Rochelle and Paolo entered couples counseling after 4 years of marriage (all names and identifying information have been altered to protect confidentiality). Rochelle, a 34-year-old homemaker, felt emotionally drained by the couple’s frequent arguments. She also believed that these arguments had intensified and communication had worsened since the birth of their first child, Ricardo, 2 months earlier. Rochelle shared in the first couples counseling session that since Ricardo’s birth, she felt as though she was no longer in a partnership with her husband. She went on to validate this belief by stating that her requests to her husband to complete daily chores often evoked disproportionate arguments. Because she felt that she no longer had a partner that she could rely on, she was seriously considering leaving the marriage. However, she was not willing to give up yet, which is why she suggested couples counseling. Paolo, a 33-year-old computer software designer, who worked from home, agreed that the couple’s interpersonal conflict had intensified. He told the counselor that during arguments he felt trapped and unable to disengage, even though he believed that distance was what he needed in such situations. Alternatively, Rochelle believed that Paolo was ignoring her needs and abandoning her when he attempted to separate from her. She was angry with Paolo for retreating to his home office when an argument occurred; she did not feel able to do the same with a small infant.

In listening to both Rochelle and Paolo discuss the issues that had brought them to couples counseling, the counselor, utilizing ART, recognized the polar types that were likely informing their IC’s messages. Paolo, for example, worked hard at his job and was described by Rochelle as “impossible” when it came to compromising work for family time. The counselor hypothesized that Paolo was demonstrating extreme toughness and that his IC was inflicting emotional punishment on him if he considered being playful or tender with his wife or child. Rochelle, on the other hand, was struggling with dependency, where the counselor hypothesized her IC’s messages about leaving the marriage were also wrought with thoughts such as, “You could never make it on your own.” The counselor decided to address these possibilities with Rochelle and Paolo to better understand the dynamic that was occurring between them. Both easily recognized ways in which their polarities were causing difficulties in their marriage. Paolo agreed that he sought distance as a way to avoid feeling vulnerable with Rochelle, particularly when they were both angry. Rochelle said that she felt that she was nothing if she could not even make her marriage work; therefore, she pursued Paolo and tried to force the attention or tenderness she craved.

It was clear to the counselor that the polarization of toughness and dependency were fueling both partners’ IC messages. The counselor introduced the concept of the IC and its functions in the interpersonal dynamic and explained that the IC’s emotional punishments were rendering Rochelle and Paolo desperate for relief. Specifically, Rochelle was pursuing emotional support and comfort while Paolo sought distance and rigidity. Furthermore, the emotional punishments were resulting in defensiveness that was being displaced onto one another rather than the IC. The counselor then assisted both Paolo and Rochelle in identifying the IC its messages by asking them to record and discuss the inner thoughts and messages heard during times (or before and/or after) of conflict. For example, Paolo’s IC expected perfection and gave him messages such as, “You shouldn’t upset Rochelle. You should please her. You’re doing it all wrong. You can’t do anything right. You’re a failure as a husband.” Then, “Of course, if you do everything she asks of you, you’ll never get any work done. Then, you won’t make any money, and your family will starve and be out on the street.” Similarly, Rochelle’s IC expected perfection but also acted as a destroyer, telling her, “You can’t get away like Paolo—that makes you a bad mother,” and “You don’t have a partner anymore . . . but you could never make it on your own anyway.”

In discussing these cognitive distortions and self-sabotaging messages, Rochelle acknowledged that she needed to be perfect. She went on to say that as a child, her parents were often missing from her daily life, as they were preoccupied with work and social obligations. She made an internal commitment to be an exemplary mother; however, she was able to recognize that her expectations of perfection were likely to end in feelings of disappointment and failure. Paolo was visibly moved by his wife’s words and agreed that he, too, wanted to be an exemplary husband and father. He went on to say that one of the reasons he often disengaged from arguments was because he



feared feeling like a failure if he fought with his wife. He reported that he had never seen his parents argue; therefore, he conceptualized arguments as inherently negative. Rochelle seemed surprised by this and attempted to free him from his IC's statements by providing reasons why arguments can, in certain situations, be psychologically healthy for a couple. Similarly, Paolo attempted to free Rochelle from her IC's statements by listing all of the ways she was a caring mother to their son. Both seemed surprised at the other's concern, and the counselor encouraged them to verbalize their support directly to one another in an effort to shift the emotional climate from conflictual to caring. Additionally, the counselor also educated the couple on the importance of receiving and providing emotional support from partners when freeing themselves from IC messages.

The ability for both Paolo and Rochelle to recognize the role their IC was playing in their lives, while also voicing understanding and concern for one another, demonstrated to the counselor that both were ready to begin releasing themselves from their IC. Rochelle and Paolo learned to use releasing statements to free themselves from the shoulds of the IC and regain control of logical thoughts and feelings. Paolo was first encouraged to challenge his IC's messages with the statement, "I have the right to . . ." He struggled to make statements such as, "I have the right to upset Rochelle," in front of his wife. The counselor normalized this feeling but also reminded Paolo that the releasing statement was simply to remind him of his choice over whether or not to make a decision that might trigger Rochelle's upset mood. This process was also helpful for Rochelle, who observed Paolo's attempts to release himself from the IC while also feeling hurt by his statements. At this point, the counselor reminded Rochelle of the outcome should Paolo's IC remain in control; Paolo would feel defensive, argumentative, and avoidant in an effort to escape the IC's emotional punishment. Again, the counselor encouraged Rochelle to verbalize her support directly to Paolo.

The counselor also assisted Paolo with combating bullying from the negative and hurtful messages from the IC. For example, Paolo released himself from the statement and replaced it with, "You are a failure as a husband," by saying, "I have the right to be what you call 'a failure as a husband'." Nuancing such a statement allowed Paolo to recognize that the IC was affecting his beliefs about success and failure, which were not necessarily accurate.

As Paolo continued this practice with each of the IC's messages, he became noticeably more relaxed and reported to the counselor feeling a sense of relief. Similarly, Rochelle reported relief after she made releasing statements to free herself from her IC. Messages such as, "You shouldn't get away like Paolo," were released (or replaced) with, "I have the right to get away." Additional concerns such as, "But I have to care for the baby, who is nursing," were countered with, "Okay, Inner Critic, I have the right to get away. We'll figure out how to make it work." In addition to freeing herself from shoulds of her IC, this work allowed Rochelle and Paolo to move toward interpersonal comingling without the heaviness of discord and anxiety. Because problem solving was a necessary component of Rochelle's releasing

statement, both agreed to work together in the session to identify ways for Rochelle to get away, if she chose. Rochelle and Paolo also agreed to continue discussing ideas at home, signifying their commitment to improving communication.

Finally, the counselor addressed the negative prediction both Paolo and Rochelle's IC's were making, such as Paolo's IC's prediction that if he did not do what Rochelle asked no work would get done. This prediction was associated with magnified fear that his family would starve, as well as toughness (i.e., "Feelings are a waste of time; you need to focus on what is important"). Similarly, Rochelle's IC was predicting that she needed to leave because the relationship was hopeless and that she would fail if she left. In an effort to release themselves from these negative predictions, the counselor encouraged them to say to their IC, "You are just an Inner Critic. You can't see the future, so I refuse to believe you." Both reported feeling a sense of relief when they realized that these statements were responsible for keeping them in a state of interpersonal conflict.

In the sessions that followed, both Rochelle and Paolo reported that they were regularly practicing their releasing statements at home. Such freedom from the IC's messages allowed Rochelle to stop pursuing Paolo for support, while Paolo no longer felt the need to distance himself whenever a problem arose. Because Paolo could tolerate closeness and increase tenderness, Rochelle was able to seek out ways to increase her independence. She joined a book club, and eventually, began considering a small, part-time job at night. Feeling more connected and supported by each other, Rochelle and Paolo became ready to address solutions to child care issues, finances, and anger, which informed the ongoing work in subsequent counseling sessions.

## Conclusion

From the utilization of ART by the marriage and family counselor mentioned in the previous case study, Rochelle and Paolo were able to neutralize the harmful effects of internal cognitions based upon their systematic faulty thinking. After achieving the inner freedom to make decisions based upon reality and not faulty or dysfunctional logic, the couple was able to engage in more satisfying and meaningful communication with each other. Through the process of psychotherapeutically challenging the couple's cognitive distortions by neutralizing the negative messages inherent within the psychological construct of the IC, the marriage and family counselor paved the way to increased positive and more realistic communication of needs between the partners (Earley & Weiss, 2010).

The IC construct, a destructive, internalized messaging system that often sabotages individuals in their romantic relationships, can be accessed and countered through the use of externalizing the interior faulty thinking and replacing it with more accurate cognitions. These new cognitions are based upon the current reality of the individuals within a relationship and not from an accumulation of negative valuations over a lifetime. ART (Elliott, 1994, 1995) is one beneficial modality that assists marriage and family counselors in the difficult, but often

rewarding, process of helping couples through discordant relational patterns by assessing and changing self-defeating and illogical thinking.

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