

# Application of the Personal Priorities to Couple Counseling—A Case Study

*Ken Long*

The theory of personal priorities originated with Nira Kefir, an Israeli psychologist. William Pew developed it further, and Jacqueline Brown expanded it greatly and also demonstrated its application to counseling.

Briefly summarized, the Personal Priorities suggests that each person has a priority, a feeling which he strives to achieve in order to feel that he really belongs and is okay. Four priorities are given—

1. Superiority
2. Comfort
3. Control
4. Pleasing

A person having one as a priority feeling will use one or more of the remaining three categories as behavior to achieve the feeling. For example, a person who feels that they belong only when they feel superior to those around them may gain this feeling through controlling others, reflecting on how comfortably he is able to live in comparison to those around him, or by helping (pleasing) others in difficult circumstances.

When access to the priority feeling is blocked, a crisis is preceived. At this point, none of the customary behaviors in a person's repertory give him access to the priority feeling.

Thus, there are two factors operating—the priority, and the access behaviors. Since the priority is a life goal, it is not easily given up. The problem is mainly one of access, one alternative is to work on new behaviors to gain access. A person who feels superior by assuring his own comfort might extend the range of his behaviors to include those which please others, as in helping "the less fortunate." A second way of meeting the crisis could be to contest the imperative nature of the priority. For example, "I must be superior," might be replaced by "I prefer to be superior." Either of these methods alleviates the crisis nature of blocked access.

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## The Case Study

Carol, the wife, initially contacted the counselor. She came to complain about her husband's drinking and "womanizing." The original contract was to help Carol deal with her own feelings about the situation. It was also agreed that should Bob, her husband, choose to attend, he would be welcome and that at such time, new goals for the counseling of the couple would be discussed.

At the second session both Bob and Carol were present. Some limited goals, centering around improvement of the relationship, were set. In order to assist the couple in looking at the relationship some initial testing was done. This included an alcoholism scale for Bob and Jacqueline Brown's Personal Priorities interview for each of them.

Results of the alcoholism scale were positive. The pattern of priorities and maintenance behaviors which emerged defined the relationship in ways which allowed the couple to view their interactions more clearly than by use of traditional methods.

Bob's priority feeling was comfort. His main techniques for achieving this were superiority and, to a lesser extent, control. This may be diagrammed as follows—

### Bob

Priority Feeling \_\_\_\_\_ Comfort  
Through Maintenance Behaviors \_\_\_\_\_ Superiority, Control  
To Avoid \_\_\_\_\_ Pressure, Stress

The image which comes to mind is that of a feudal baron retiring to his castle for a well-earned rest after a hard day of dragon-smiting. Indeed, Bob felt that he had earned his comfort and looked on his home as a refuge from the pressures and anxieties of fighting to earn a living.

Carol's priority was control. She maintained her control by pleasing others. A diagram of her priorities would be—

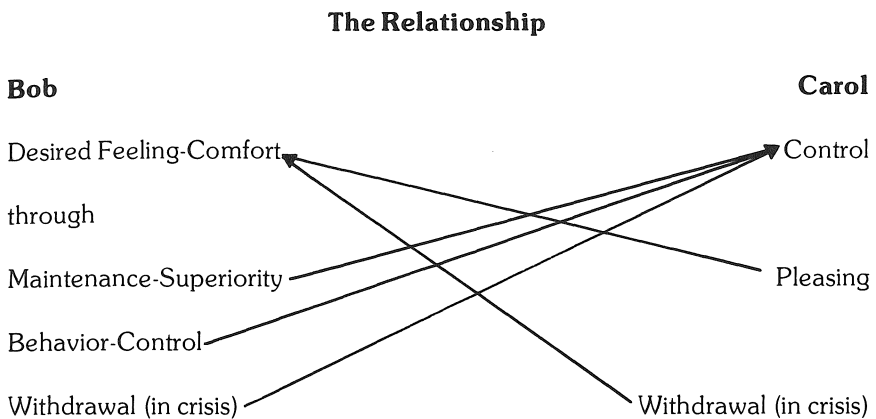
### Carol

Priority Feeling \_\_\_\_\_ Control  
Through Maintenance Behaviors \_\_\_\_\_ Pleasing  
To Avoid \_\_\_\_\_ Embarrassment

She pampered her husband and waited on his every whim. In return for this, she frequently got her own way and was able to manipulate Bob very effectively.

When access to the priorities became blocked for either of them the solution was withdrawal, Bob withdrew into an alcoholic haze where he may not have felt entirely comfortable, but, at least, he was able to avoid pressure for the moment. Carol withdrew by refusing to talk, leaving the room, and once by going to Reno. These techniques allowed her to avoid the embarrassment she would have felt by staying in an out-of-control relationship.

The third entity here, the relationship, may be best viewed in terms of the relationship between each person's priorities and the other's maintenance behavior.



The relationship here is represented by the impacting of each party's maintenance behavior on the other's priority. Bob's priority of comfort, is met by Carol's pleasing behavior, and the withdrawal or threat of withdrawal of all that comfort gives Carol a good deal of control. Bob's superiority behaviors represent no threat to Carol's control and, in fact, facilitate it by facilitating her pleasing behaviors. His attempts at control, however, result in a fierce power struggle. The focus of the struggle shifts from time to time with changing circumstances and the demands of the current situation, but given his behavior and her priority, such a struggle is always a possibility. It usually begins when some third party or situation makes Bob uncomfortable. He attempts to eliminate it by controlling it, thereby threatening Carol's priority and the battle is joined.

Bob's behavior of withdrawal is a real and direct threat to Carol's control and could well bring her embarrassment. This is a crisis. It was the precipitating incident for Carol seeking help. When neither charm nor tears, anger nor withdrawal to Reno would change Bob's uncontrollable behavior, Carol decided to try counseling.

Based on the information derived from the Personal Priorities interviews, a treatment plan was devised. Steps taken were as follows—

1. Education of the couple in the Personal Priorities and their application to their own relationship.

2. A discussion of the limits they had each placed on themselves and the relationship by reacting rather than acting.

These first two steps really amounted to “spitting in their collective soup.”

3. Decisions by Bob and Carol about desired changes.

a. Bob decided he wanted to identify alternative behaviors which would give him access to his priority of comfort in more acceptable (to him) ways.

b. Carol decided that she wanted to—

1. identify alternative behaviors for attaining control and
2. change her priority from “I must be in control,” to “I prefer to be in control.”

It should be noted here that each person is deciding on changes in their own personal priorities and maintenance behaviors. The basis for the decisions are their individual concerns for their relationships. Their power to decide how to behave and what to believe is a basic tenant of Adlerian psychology. The social interest inherent in their decisions is obvious. Up until this point, they had been acting in what seemed to each the only possible way. When they took the decision to change upon themselves, they recognized the existence of other alternatives and acknowledged their own responsibilities for their choices. At this point we enter the re-education phase.

4. Confrontation and psychodrama were used to work on modifying Carol's priority.

5. Homework, listing alternatives and role play were used to explore alternative maintenance behaviors.

6. Homework in practicing new behaviors.

7. The couple was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-anon to provide continuing post-counseling support.

On the basis of this case, it would seem that the Personal Priorities interview may serve as an effective diagnostic instrument for examining couple relationships. It also served here as an effective motivator for change based on social interest.

## References

Brown, J. *Practical application of the personal priorities*. Maryland: B & F Associates, Inc., 1976.

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