

Explicit Contracts, Implicit Worlds: A PO/CM-Guided Systemic Case Study of Double-Bind Dynamics in a Lebanese Couple

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Abstract

Background: Systemic therapy conceptualizes couple distress as circular patterns sustained by paradoxes and feedback loops. Despite frequent reference to Mony Elkaïm's Programme Officiel (PO) and Construction du Monde (CM), few case reports operationalize this split on interaction data in Arab contexts.

Objective: To produce a transcript-proximal PO/CM map for a Lebanese couple, identify reciprocal double binds, and derive culturally sensitive micro-interventions.

Methods: Explanatory single-case study nested within a larger mixed-methods project (surveyed 72 couples). Data comprised three conjoint and two individual sessions. Analysis extracted each partner's PO (explicit requests), inferred CM

(implicit beliefs from family-of-origin narratives and meaning patterns), modeled demand-withdraw circularity, and specified leverage points. Descriptive Dyadic Adjustment indicators were used for triangulation.

Findings: The partners' explicit contracts collided with implicit worlds: the husband's PO emphasized appreciation and provision while his CM centered on "never enough"; the wife's PO emphasized emotional priority while her CM anticipated abandonment. Two recurrent sequences emerged: (a) protest for presence → withdrawal/defensiveness → abandonment confirmation; (b) provision/absence to elicit appreciation → critique/protest → failure confirmation. Micro-interventions proved feasible in-

session: time-bound reassurance bids, pre-scheduled micro-presence rituals, therapist-mediated summaries that keep requests specific, and genogram-informed reframes. Early session markers suggested reduced escalation and greater clarity of requests.

Conclusions: A PO/CM-guided map can make reciprocal double binds visible and actionable in Lebanese practice, aligning systemic theory with culturally responsive dyadic routines. The contribution is analytic generalization (theory-building); broader testing across multiple cases is warranted.

Keywords: systemic couple therapy; Programme Officiel (PO); Construction du Monde (CM); reciprocal double bind; demand-withdraw; dyadic coping; Lebanon.

* Introduction

Systemic and family-therapy traditions conceptualize couple distress as a relational pattern stabilized by circular feedback loops, rather than as individual pathology. In such loops, each partner's reaction becomes the other's trigger, maintaining self-perpetuating sequences of pursue-withdraw, demand-defend, or escalate-escape (Watzlawick et al., 2011). Classic formulations such as the double bind show how paradoxical injunctions—

where any response violates an explicit or implicit rule—trap partners in recurrent impasses (Bateson et al., 1956). Structural, strategic, Milan, and constructivist schools elaborated how rules, boundaries, and meanings organize these patterns over time (Minuchin, 1974; Boscolo et al., 1987; Hoffman, 1981).

Within this lineage, Mony Elkaïm offered two clinically powerful lenses: the Programme Officiel (PO)—what partners explicitly request, promise, or require; and the Construction du Monde (CM)—the implicit belief system about self, other, and relationship, scaffolded by family-of-origin dynamics and cultural scripts (Elkaïm, 1997). The therapeutic “knot” often appears where PO collides with CM; for example, a partner may explicitly ask for closeness while implicitly construing closeness as risky or shaming, thereby inviting paradoxes and reciprocal double binds. Related notions such as collusion—unconscious cooperation to stabilize a shared theme (e.g., “closeness hurts”)—and interpersonal affect dynamics—the moment-to-moment co-regulation of emotion—clarify how beliefs and sequences reinforce

one another (Willi, 1982; Butler, 2015).

Culture further shapes what can be said (PO) and what must remain tacit (CM). In Arab and Lebanese contexts, extended-kin expectations, gendered role scripts, honor, and face-management norms crucially influence disclosure, boundary-setting, and repair (Dwairy, 2006; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000, 2005). Family-of-origin loyalties and transgenerational “ledgers” often keep partners loyal to inherited myths and debts even as they state new aims for the marriage (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; McGoldrick et al., 2008). Yet despite rich cultural literature and robust evidence from attachment-based, behavioral, and interaction-analytic couple therapies (Johnson, 2004; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Gottman, 1994), there remains a need for procedures that make the PO/CM split visible on transcripts, chart reciprocal double binds with sequence precision, and then derive micro-interventions suited to Lebanese cultural norms.

This case study responds to that need. Using data from conjoint interviews with a Lebanese couple (pseudonyms), we (a) extract each partner’s PO from stated rules and requests; (b) infer each partner’s CM

from meaning-making patterns and family-of-origin narratives; (c) locate double-bind sequences that maintain circularity; and (d) propose leverage points—small, well-timed moves—to disconfirm rigid beliefs and restore flexibility (Elkaïm, 1997; Watzlawick et al., 2011).

*** Problem Statement and Research Gap**

Although systemic theory has long emphasized paradox, circularity, and context (Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 2011), much contemporary practice is organized around attachment (EFT), acceptance-based behaviorism (IBCT), or interactional metrics (Gottman) (Johnson, 2004; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Gottman, 1994). These approaches are valuable and empirically supported, but they typically do not organize session analysis around Elkaïm’s explicit/implicit split (PO vs. CM) nor do they routinely chart reciprocal double binds at a granularity that guides moment-to-moment intervention.

On the cultural side, Arab-world psychotherapy scholarship documents constraints and affordances of kinship, gender, and honor in shaping marital dynamics (Dwairy, 2006; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000, 2005). However,

there is a paucity of clinically annotated case studies that (1) operationalize PO/CM on actual interaction data from Arabic-speaking couples, (2) integrate collusion and affect-dynamics, and (3) translate the resulting map into micro-interventions that are culturally attuned (e.g., reframing reassurance without face-threat; redistributing tasks without status loss).

Accordingly, the present study addresses a clear gap: a transcript-based, culture-sensitive PO/CM mapping of a Lebanese couple that makes double binds visible and yields practical leverage points for interrupting circularity (Elkaïm, 1997; Willi, 1982; Butler, 2015).

*** Research Questions (Case-Study Focus)**

- 1- How does each partner's Programme Officiel (PO) appear as stated requests, conditions, and rules within sessions?
- 2- What elements of each partner's Construction du Monde (CM) can be inferred from narratives about family of origin, threat, loyalty, and worth?
- 3- Where do reciprocal double binds emerge in the action–reaction sequence, and how do they sustain the circular pattern?
- 4- What leverage points (timing, wording, task design) can plausibly

disrupt the loop in a culturally sensitive manner?

*** Significance**

Theoretical: The study integrates PO/CM with collusion and affect-dynamics, offering a unified lens for mapping and cutting circularity (Willi, 1982; Butler, 2015).

Clinical. It provides a stepwise template—PO/CM extraction → double-bind charting → micro-intervention design—transferable to analogous cases (Elkaïm, 1997). Cultural. It demonstrates culture-responsive adaptation of systemic techniques for Lebanese/Arab couples, consistent with regional practice guidance (Dwairy, 2006; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005).

*** Aims/Objectives**

- 1- Elicit and code each partner's PO from session material.
- 2- Infer and articulate each partner's CM from meaning-making patterns and family-of-origin narratives.
- 3- Identify and model recurrent double-bind sequences and the circular feedback keeping them alive.
- 4- Propose targeted micro-interventions and therapist stances to disconfirm rigid beliefs and restore flexibility (Elkaïm, 1997).

*** Key Terms (Operational Definitions)**

1- Programme Officiel (PO). The partner's explicit rules, requests, and stated conditions; operationalized as verbatim statements and observable requests within sessions (Elkaïm, 1997).

2- Construction du Monde (CM). The partner's implicit belief system about self, other, and relationship; operationalized via repeated interpretations and autobiographical themes tied to family-of-origin and culture (Elkaïm, 1997; McGoldrick et al., 2008).

3- Reciprocal Double Bind. A paradox in which any available response violates either the explicit demand (PO) or the implicit worldview (CM), thereby escalating or freezing the interaction (Bateson et al., 1956).

4- Circularity. Recurrent interaction loops where A's move prompts B's move which confirms A's construction, stabilizing the pattern (Watzlawick et al., 2011).

5- Collusion. Unconscious cooperation between partners to maintain a shared thematic belief, often protecting fragile identities while sustaining dysfunction (Willi, 1982).

*** Delimitations and Ethical Considerations**

1- Design. Explanatory single-case study aimed at analytic generalization (theory-building), not statistical generalization.

2- Participants/Setting. One married Lebanese couple (pseudonyms), seen in a private outpatient setting over a bounded time window.

3- Data. Semi-structured conjoint interviews and in-session observation notes; standardized measures (e.g., marital satisfaction indices) used only for descriptive triangulation.

4- Ethics. Written informed consent; confidentiality and secure storage; right to withdraw; cultural sensitivity regarding extended-family themes, gender scripts, and face-management norms (Dwairy, 2006; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005).

interruption. (Elkaïm, 1997; Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 2011; Falconier et al., 2019)

*** Theoretical Framework and Previous Studies**

Systemic and communication-based traditions conceptualize couple distress as a property of patterned interaction rather than an individual deficit. Classic work on paradox and double binds explains how partners can become trapped in no-win sequences when any available response violates some explicit or

implicit rule (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). This insight aligns with the pragmatics of communication, which foregrounds circular causality: one partner's move becomes the other's trigger, stabilizing demand–withdraw or pursue–distance loops (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011).

Building on this lineage, Mony Elkaïm proposed a clinically useful distinction between the Programme Officiel (PO)—the explicit requests, promises, and rules partners state in the relationship—and the Construction du Monde (CM)—the implicit, historically shaped beliefs about self, other, and the bond (Elkaïm, 1997). In practice, circularity often crystallizes where PO collides with CM, for instance when a partner explicitly asks for closeness while implicitly construing closeness as risky. The related construct of collusion describes how partners unconsciously co-produce dynamics that confirm core beliefs (“closeness hurts,” “I am never enough”), maintaining stability at the expense of intimacy (Willi, 1984).

Affect-science refines the map. Interpersonal affect dynamics research demonstrates that partners' emotions co-regulate across time; escalation and shutdown are not merely individual traits but emergent

properties of dyadic coupling (Butler, 2015). Cognitive-belief models complement this by showing that relationship beliefs and expectations (e.g., “disagreement is destructive,” “partners should read each other's minds”) predict communication problems and lower satisfaction, furnishing the cognitive content of CM (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Longitudinal reviews further indicate that negative attributional cycles are reliable precursors of declines in marital quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Dyadic coping theory adds a process-level mechanism for change: couples jointly appraise stress and coordinate responses in ways that produce robust actor and partner effects on satisfaction and mental health (Bodenmann, 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Falconier, Kuhn, & Brnstrup, 2019; Ștefănuț, Vintilă, & Chireac, 2021; Landolt, Bodenmann, Randall, & Künzler-Heule, 2023). Framed through PO/CM, structured and predictable coping rituals can disconfirm threat-laden CMs while honoring each partner's PO, thereby cutting the loop.

Finally, culture is not peripheral to this system but constitutive of CM. In Arab and Lebanese contexts, extended-kin

expectations, gendered role scripts, honor, and face management shape what may be said (PO) and what remains tacit (CM). Culture-responsive guidance emphasizes careful attention to disclosure norms, religious meanings, and family hierarchies when conceptualizing and intervening with couples (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Dwairy, 2018). Recent work from the region likewise highlights the need for context-sensitive models of satisfaction, attributions, and help-seeking among Arab couples (Leonard, Tarabay, & Cayer, 2024), strengthening the rationale for a PO/CM-guided, culturally grounded case analysis.

Early interactional scholarship laid the groundwork for understanding couple dysfunction as a property of communication sequences rather than individual deficits. Bateson and colleagues introduced the double-bind construct to describe paradoxical injunctions that make any response a violation of some rule, thereby locking interlocutors into no-win loops (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956). Building on this insight, Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, and Jackson articulated the pragmatics of human communication, emphasizing

circular causality—how each partner’s move becomes the other’s trigger and, over time, stabilizes maladaptive patterns (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011). Within clinical practice, Elkaïm translated these principles into the operational distinction between the Programme Officiel (PO)—explicit requests and stated rules—and the Construction du Monde (CM)—implicit, historically shaped beliefs about self, other, and relationship. His cases of reciprocal double binds illustrate how overt demands collide with tacit meanings, generating cycles that resist change unless the loop itself is interrupted (Elkaïm, 1997).

Converging lines of evidence from systemic and psychodynamic traditions further clarify why these cycles persist. Willi’s concept of collusion depicts an unconscious dyadic “contract” that protects vulnerable identities while paradoxically sustaining the problem; couples co-produce confirmation of their feared themes (e.g., “closeness hurts,” “I am never enough”), which maps closely onto CM content (Willi, 1984). From a cognitive-relational angle, Eidelson and Epstein’s work on dysfunctional relationship beliefs shows that expectations such as mindreading or the destructiveness of

disagreement are linked to poorer adjustment, furnishing empirical content for the beliefs that populate CM (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). Longitudinal synthesis by Karney and Bradbury demonstrated that negative attributions and affective spirals forecast declines in marital quality, reinforcing the need to target meaning-making processes that feed circularity rather than only the surface content of conflict (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Process-level interaction research provides robust quantitative corroboration. Meta-analytic findings demonstrate that the demand/withdraw pattern—one partner pressing for change or closeness while the other distances or shuts down—is reliably associated with lower relationship satisfaction and maladaptive individual outcomes (Schrodt, Witt, & Shimkowski, 2014). This pattern dovetails with affect-science showing that partners' emotions co-regulate across time; escalation and shutdown are emergent properties of dyadic coupling, not merely individual traits (Butler, 2015). In PO/CM terms, demand/withdraw often reflects a collision between an explicit PO for proximity and a CM that construes proximity as risky, or between an explicit PO for appreciation and a

CM organized around anticipated failure—configurations that invite reciprocal double binds.

A complementary strand of literature identifies corrective mechanisms at the dyadic level. Research on dyadic coping indicates that couples' coordinated appraisals and coping responses yield reliable actor and partner effects on satisfaction and mental health (Bodenmann, 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Contemporary systematic reviews and meta-analyses converge on the conclusion that structured, predictable coping rituals strengthen relationship functioning, especially under stress (Falconier, Kuhn, & Brnstrup, 2019; Ștefănuț, Vintilă, & Chireac, 2021; Landolt, Bodenmann, Randall, & Künzler-Heule, 2023). Framed through PO/CM, dyadic coping routines can be designed to honor explicit requests (PO) while disconfirming threat-laden implicit beliefs (CM), thereby cutting the loop at its generative hinge.

Finally, culturally responsive scholarship underscores that CM is shaped by social context. In Arab and Lebanese settings, extended-kin obligations, gendered role scripts, and honor/face considerations structure what can be said explicitly (PO) and what remains tacit (CM).

Clinical guidance for Arab clients recommends sensitivity to disclosure norms, religious meanings, and family hierarchies in both assessment and intervention (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Dwairy, 2018). Empirical work from Lebanon documents correlates of couple satisfaction and advances culturally valid measures, providing tools for local practice (El Frenn, Sfeir, Fawaz, Hallit, & Obeid, 2022; Abboud et al., 2023). Recent regional studies further highlight culture-embedded attributions as drivers of satisfaction, reinforcing the need to situate PO/CM mapping within local meaning systems (Leonard, Tarabay, & Cayer, 2024). Together, these findings justify a case-based, culture-attuned application of PO/CM that makes reciprocal double binds visible on transcripts and derives micro-interventions aligned with local norms.

*** Methodology**

*** Design and Rationale**

This study adopts an explanatory single-case design situated within a broader mixed-methods project on marital expectations and satisfaction among Lebanese couples. The single case is used for analytic generalization—illuminating how explicit expectations (Programme Officiel;

PO) and implicit constructions (Construction du Monde; CM) interact to produce paradoxes and circularity in a culturally specific context (Elkaïm, 1997; Watzlawick et al., 2011).

*** Sampling and Participants**

From a survey cohort of 72 Lebanese married couples (N = 144; ages 26–74; M = 43.2, SD = 10.7) recruited largely from Beirut and Mount Lebanon with diverse religious backgrounds, the focal case was selected for maximum information richness (clear PO/CM tension, salient reciprocal double binds) and for triangulation with standardized indices of marital adjustment.

*** Measures and Materials**

1- Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was used for descriptive triangulation of couple functioning (Spanier, 1976). The larger project referenced contemporary applications of DAS in marital assessment; we acknowledge variant scoring/short forms in the literature.

2- PO/CM analytic grid (derived from Elkaïm, 1997) to code explicit demands/requests (PO) and inferred belief structures (CM) from session transcripts and conjoint narratives.

3- Double-bind chart adapted from Bateson's paradox mapping to identify reciprocal injunctions and

“no-win” response sets (Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 2011).

*** Procedure**

The couple (pseudonyms Jad and Magalie) completed five clinical contacts: three conjoint sessions and one individual session with each partner. Session aims followed a stepwise arc: (1) history and couple myth; (2) explicit expectations, complaints, conflict episodes; (3) mapping circularity and linking PO/CM to perceived satisfaction. Individual sessions focused on family-of-origin narratives and CM formation, including collusion dynamics in the Willi tradition.

*** Analytic Strategy**

- 1- Extract PO: verbatim explicit requests/conditions.
- 2- Infer CM: recurrent interpretations and core beliefs grounded in autobiographical themes (family-of-origin, loyalty, threat, worth).
- 3- Locate reciprocal double binds: sequences where any available response violates either the partner's PO or their own CM (Bateson et al., 1956; Elkaïm, 1997).
- 4- Model circularity: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$ loops where each move confirms the other's construction (Watzlawick et al., 2011).
- 5- Derive leverage points: micro-interventions to interrupt the loop

(timing/wording tasks, reframes, disconfirmation moves).

*** Trustworthiness**

Triangulation occurred via (a) conjoint and individual accounts, (b) observed interaction sequences, and (c) DAS indices. Reflexive notes documented therapist assumptions and culture-bound meanings (Dwairy, 2006).

*** Case Context & Procedure**

Demographics and background: Jad (45) and Magalie (40) have been married 12 years, have two children, and both hold university degrees. Jad works full-time; Magalie is self-employed but reduces practice hours to be present with the children. Initial data indicated relatively low marital satisfaction, with descriptive DAS values suggesting lower satisfaction for Magalie than for Jad.

*** Session arc.**

- 1- Conjoint 1: Couple history, partner choice, emergent couple myth.
- 2- Conjoint 2: Explicit expectations (then/now), grievances, conflict scripts; preliminary PO/CM mapping.
- 3- Individuals: Family-of-origin narratives; collusion patterns (Willi) and CM formation linkages.
- 4- Conjoint 3: Integrative mapping—circularity between PO and CM and

perceived marital satisfaction; identification of leverage points.

*** Salient observed pattern.**

Jad invests heavily in work “to provide,” seeking appreciation; he experiences hurt/anger when he perceives he is never “enough.” Magalie values his sacrifice yet experiences neglect/rejection when bids for presence/affection are unmet, reading non-response/absence as abandonment. Escalating protest from Magalie evokes Jad’s shutdown/defensiveness; Jad’s withdrawal confirms Magalie’s abandonment schema, and her escalation confirms Jad’s “never enough” schema—locking the dyad in a mutually amplifying loop.

*** PO/CM Mapping**

Partner	Programme Officiel (PO)—explicit requests	Construction du Monde (CM)—implicit beliefs
Jad	“I want to be appreciated.” Demonstrations of care via provision and effort should be recognized.	“I am never enough.” Worth and love are conditional on performance; closeness risks criticism/exposure.
Magalie	“I want to be loved and emotionally prioritized.” Requests for time, attention, responsiveness.	“I will eventually be abandoned.” Distance or delay = proof of rejection; vigilance prevents loss.

*** Derivation**

- 1- Jad’s CM reflects a performance-contingent sense of worth shaped by a demanding paternal standard and limited emotional validation—fueling perfectionism and sensitivity to perceived criticism.
- 2- Magalie’s CM reflects early experiences of relational

unpredictability and limited tenderness—fueling hypervigilance to signs of distance and a chronic fear of abandonment.

*** Reciprocal Double-Bind Sequences & Circularity**

*** Sequence A (Magalie-led protest).**

- 1- Magalie requests more presence/assurance (PO_M).
- 2- Jad, feeling accused/insufficient, withdraws to work or defends effort (confirms CM_J: “not enough”).
- 3- Withdrawal confirms CM_M (“I’m being abandoned”), prompting protest/critique.
- 4- Protest confirms CM_J (“I fail despite sacrifice”), increasing shutdown—loop closes.

*** Sequence B (Jad-led provision).**

- 1- Jad increases provision to show love (PO_J).
- 2- Increased absence undermines Magalie’s need for immediacy/affection, triggering abandonment alarms (CM_M).
- 3- Alarm → criticism; criticism reads as devaluation, confirming Jad’s “never enough” (CM_J).
- 4- Jad either escalates defensiveness or retreats—loop closes.

*** Paradoxical bind (both sides).**

- 1- Magalie: “Be closer to prove you love me,” yet closeness is continually tested under an abandonment lens

that cannot be satisfied by sporadic evidence.

2- Jad: “Appreciate me to prove I matter,” yet appreciation cues are filtered through a “never enough” lens that discounts existing tokens. These are reciprocal double binds: any move risks violating an explicit request (PO) or re-activating an implicit threat (CM) (Bateson et al., 1956; Elkaïm, 1997; Willi, 1982).

Circularity statement. Magalie’s fear of abandonment activates Jad’s fear of failure; Jad’s fear of failure re-activates Magalie’s fear of abandonment—sustaining a self-confirming loop (Watzlawick et al., 2011).

As illustrated in Figure 1, Magalie’s protest–Jad’s withdrawal loop sustains abandonment and failure confirmations; cut points are marked.

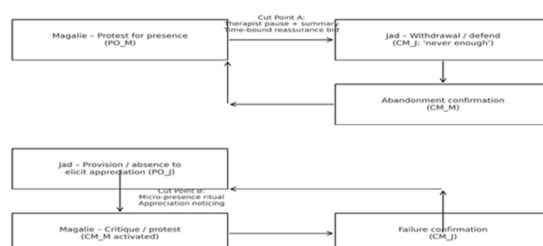


Figure 1: Circularity Diagram and Reciprocal Double Binds

* Therapeutic Leverage Points (Micro-Interventions)

1- Disconfirming tasks tied to PO without triggering CM.

A- For Jad: pre-scheduled micro-presence rituals (brief, predictable

check-ins) that are not contingent on performance milestones; therapist frames these as relational competence, not as remediation of failure (Elkaïm, 1997).

B- For Magalie: time-limited, positively framed bids (e.g., “10-minute connection at 7:30 pm”) with explicit appreciation noticing—separating reassurance requests from global criticism.

2- Reframing “provision as love” into both/and.

A- Translate Jad’s provision into attachment-relevant signals (e.g., “Providing and showing up briefly now protects our bond”), maintaining face while shifting the meaning of presence (Johnson, 2004).

3- Interrupt protest–withdraw cycles in vivo.

A- Mark the moment of escalation; insert pause + summary to prevent semantic drift into CM confirmation (“What you’re asking now, Magalie, is... Jad, what you’re hearing is...”). Use soft startups and repair attempts (Gottman, 1994).

4- Genogram-informed meaning work.

A- Link present moves to family-of-origin themes (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; McGoldrick et al., 2008) to de-personalize triggers (“This isn’t Jad abandoning; it’s your

nervous system tracking old loss cues”).

5- Reciprocal non-reinforcement contract.

A- A brief, co-written pact: “When X happens, we will not do Y (the CM-confirming move); instead, we will do Z (a small, trackable alternative).” This is consistent with Elkaïm’s emphasis on not reinforcing the partner’s belief and on cycle interruption.

*** Ethical Note**

All details are anonymized; informed consent was obtained. Cultural sensitivity guided disclosure boundaries, language, and the handling of extended-family topics (Dwairy, 2006)

*** Findings and Discussion**

*** Quantitative overview and case positioning**

Within the broader mixed-methods project, 72 Lebanese married couples (N = 144) were surveyed, spanning ages 26–74 with diverse religious backgrounds, high educational attainment, and primarily Beirut/Mount Lebanon residency. This single-case analysis is nested in that dataset to enable analytic—not statistical—generalization.

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was used descriptively alongside clinical material to triangulate perceived marital

functioning across communication, intimacy, compatibility, and conflict resolution domains (Olson et al., 2008).

For the focal couple, Jad and Magalie (pseudonyms), descriptive scoring indicated comparatively lower marital satisfaction, with Magalie scoring below Jad (Y_DAS \approx 82.79 vs. 92.22; couple mean \approx 90.65), situating the pair toward the lower end of the functioning continuum in this sample.

*** Case context and emergent interactional theme**

Jad (45) and Magalie (40) have been married for 12 years and are parenting two children. He works full-time; she maintains a flexible self-employed practice with reduced hours for caregiving. Across five clinical contacts (three conjoint; one individual session with each partner), the dominant interactional theme emerged as a pursue–withdraw cycle organized around mismatched meanings of provision, presence, and appreciation.

Observationally, Jad’s investment in work to “provide” coexisted with irritation and hurt when he read Magalie’s bids as criticism or perpetual dissatisfaction; Magalie, while acknowledging his sacrifices, experienced the same investment as neglect or rejection

when bids for attention went unmet—escalating protest on her side and defensive retreat on his.

*** PO/CM mapping and reciprocal constraints**

The case coherently instantiates the study’s guiding hypothesis: explicit expectations (PO) often mask or collide with deeper implicit constructions (CM), sustaining repetitive loops.

In session work, Jad’s PO centered on appreciation for effort (“see my provision as love”), while his CM carried a performance-contingent self-worth theme (“I am never enough”). Magalie’s PO centered on emotional prioritization and responsive presence, while her CM was organized around abandonment expectancy (“I will be left”).

These configurations are historically intelligible: Jad’s family context emphasized achievement with limited emotional validation, scaffolding the “never enough” belief; Magalie’s childhood involved emotional distance and unpredictability, scaffolding chronic vigilance to loss.

From a systemic perspective, the couple’s sequences crystallize into reciprocal double binds (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956): when Magalie

protests for presence to disconfirm abandonment, Jad experiences accusation that confirms “not enough,” withdraws, and thereby re-confirms her abandonment schema. Conversely, when Jad doubles down on provision to elicit appreciation, his increased absence heightens her abandonment alarm, which erupts as criticism that re-confirms his failure schema. The same move that satisfies one partner’s PO violates the other partner’s CM, yielding a no-win structure that maintains circularity (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & Jackson, 2011). The case notes explicitly frame the work around double bind logic and circular feedback, consistent with Elkaïm’s model.

The Table 2 presents the PO/CM map with exemplar utterances and leverage points.

Table (2): PO/CM Map for the Focal Couple

Partner	Programme Officiel (PO)	Construction du Monde (CM)	Exemplar utterance (paraphrased)	Leverage point (micro-intervention)
Jad	Wants appreciation; reads provision and effort as primary love signals; requests reduced criticism.	Core belief: "I am never enough." Worth is performance-contingent; closeness risks exposure to failure.	"I'm working hard so we're okay—why does it still feel like it's not enough?"	Pre-scheduled micro-presence ritual; therapist reframe: presence = competence, not remediation of failure.
Magalie	Wants emotional priority, responsiveness, brief but reliable presence and affection.	Core belief: "I will be abandoned." Distance or delay is read as rejection; vigilance is protective.	"When you don't reply or come late, my mind goes to 'I don't matter.'"	Time-bound reassurance bids (e.g., 10-minute check-in); appreciation noticing separated from global criticism.

*** Integrating family-of-origin and belief content**

The partners' implicit worlds (CM) derive salience from family-of-origin narratives: Jad's perfectionistic striving and sensitivity to perceived devaluation mirror early paternal standards and intermittent maternal validation; Magalie's hypervigilance to distance mirrors inconsistent caregiving and affective scarcity.

This pattern accords with classic accounts of collusion—unconscious dyadic cooperation to stabilize a shared theme (Willi, 1984)—and with cognitive-belief findings linking dysfunctional relationship beliefs (e.g., mindreading expectations, catastrophizing disagreement) to

poorer adjustment (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). In affect-science terms, interpersonal affect dynamics make the protest–withdraw loop emotionally sticky: one partner's arousal up-regulates the other's defensiveness, entraining both in time (Butler, 2015).

*** Clinical meaning and leverage**

Operationalizing PO/CM on transcript-proximal material, as this case does, identifies where to cut the loop: (a) micro-presence rituals for Jad that reframe "showing up" as relational competence (not remediation of failure), protecting face while disconfirming "never enough"; (b) time-limited, positively valenced bids for Magalie that separate reassurance from global criticism; (c) in-session interruption of demand–withdraw with therapist-mediated summaries that keep requests specific and observable; (d) genogram-informed reframes that relocate threat from the partner to the inherited meaning system. These moves align with Elkaïm's emphasis on not reinforcing the partner's core belief and on cycle interruption, while converging with evidence for dyadic coping routines as culture-sensitive, high-leverage mechanisms (Bodenmann, 2005; Falconier, Kuhn, & Brnstrup, 2019).

*** Cultural fit**

The couple's Lebanese context matters for both conceptualization and intervention. Extended-kin obligations, gendered scripts, and face/honor concerns shape what is sayable (PO) and what remains tacit (CM), influencing escalation thresholds and repair attempts. Culture-responsive guidance for Arab couples underscores careful handling of disclosure norms and status threats, which is consistent with the pacing and framing adopted here (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Dwairy, 2018). The case thus contributes a culture-attuned illustration of PO/CM mapping that renders reciprocal binds visible and actionable.

*** Practical Implications**

This case demonstrates how a transcript-proximal PO/CM map can guide micro-interventions that interrupt circularity without threatening face or identity. For practitioners working with Lebanese and broader Arab couples, three practices appear especially useful: (a) designing micro-presence rituals that honor a partner's Programme Officiel (e.g., predictable check-ins) while disconfirming threat-laden Construction du Monde beliefs; (b) reframing provision and effort as attachment-relevant signals to protect

dignity while meeting proximity needs; and (c) pausing the demand-withdraw cascade with therapist-mediated summaries that keep requests specific, observable, and time-bounded. Framed this way, dyadic coping routines become culturally sensitive leverage points that satisfy explicit contracts while loosening implicit fears (Bodenmann, 2005; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009).

*** Limitations**

As an explanatory single-case study, the aim is analytic generalization rather than statistical inference (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). The couple's histories, socioeconomic position, and kinship structures may limit transferability to other Lebanese subcultures. Data relied on conjoint and individual interviews plus in-session observation; standardized scales were used only for descriptive triangulation, which constrains causal claims. Finally, the therapist-researcher's positioning and cultural familiarity, while advantageous for rapport, risk shaping interpretation; we mitigate this through reflexivity and an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

*** Reflexivity Statement**

The analyst is a culture-insider practitioner familiar with Lebanese

family scripts and face/honor dynamics. This positionality facilitated access, idiomatic translation of meanings, and sensitive pacing. At the same time, it risked “over-familiarity” and confirmation of expected narratives. To counter this, we documented preconceptions in reflexive memos, sought discrepant evidence during coding, and iteratively checked that interventions target the loop rather than align with either partner’s storyline (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007; O’Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014).

*** Future Directions**

Future work could (a) replicate the PO/CM mapping across multiple Lebanese cases to examine recurring double-bind motifs and culture-specific leverage points; (b) integrate brief behavioral experiments (e.g., 2-week micro-presence protocols) with pre–post dyadic-coping and satisfaction measures; (c) compare outcomes of PO/CM-guided work with attachment-focused or IBCT protocols in culturally matched samples; and (d) extend analysis to triadic sessions with influential kin, given the salience of extended-family systems in local marital functioning (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005; Dwairy, 2018). Mixed-methods designs can preserve interactional

granularity while strengthening inference.

*** Rigor and Reporting (Suggested Notes)**

We recommend aligning the write-up with qualitative reporting standards: provide a brief case selection rationale, a transparent coding procedure for identifying PO and CM (operational criteria + examples), and a simple double-bind identification rule (what counts as a no-win structure). Document steps enhancing trustworthiness—triangulation, negative-case analysis, and a minimal audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tong et al., 2007; O’Brien et al., 2014). Position claims explicitly as theory-building (analytic generalization) rather than prevalence-estimating (Yin, 2018).

*** Conclusion**

By mapping explicit contracts (PO) against implicit worlds (CM) at transcript level, this case makes reciprocal double binds visible and actionable in a Lebanese cultural context. The analysis clarifies why well-intended moves (greater provision; stronger bids for closeness) can inadvertently fuel circularity, and how small, predictable dyadic routines can satisfy explicit requests while disconfirming rigid beliefs. Framed as analytic generalization, these

insights suggest a practical pathway for culturally responsive, systems-informed couple work that privileges cutting the loop over winning the argument.

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