3 Context of embitterment

3.1 Relationships and embitterment

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3.1.1 Introduction

Across all countries and cultures, most people are involved in intimate couple relationships at some point in their lives, whether it be marriage or cohabitation (Buss 1995). Intimate couple relationships continue to be viewed as the best forum for meeting individual needs for affection, companionship, loyalty, and emotional and sexual intimacy. As common as intimate relationships and marriage are, in industrialized western countries approximately 40–50% of marriages end in divorce. Many other couples, about 10 to 25% live in stable but unhappy relationships for various reasons, e.g., the financial implications of divorce, personal and cultural expectations about divorce, or because no alternative partner is available (Hahlweg et al. 2010).

Conflict within relationships is inevitable. At one time or another, partners might inadvertently make a hurtful comment, forget to pick up the dry-cleaning, or borrow their partner’s car and leave the gas tank empty. Most couples resolve those conflicts on an ongoing basis, leaving little emotional residue to negatively impact their lives. However, examples of more devastating relational conflicts include psychological and physical aggression, blaming the partner for nearly everything, degrading the partner, telling major lies, making drastic unilateral financial decisions, and other similar humiliations and betrayals (Gordon et al. 2009). These conflicts can leave lasting emotional scars on marital/couple functioning, particularly with regards to psychological closeness, if partners are unable to forgive each other and effectively resolve their conflicts.

From a clinical perspective, dissatisfied or divorcing couples experience the deterioration of the relationship as “unjust” and respond with negative emotions. Due to a sense of unfairness from their partners, they likely experience anger, rage, or hate towards the partner; due to their own experience of loss, they experience sadness and grieving towards themselves. Interestingly, the concept of “embitterment” has not been addressed in the couple therapy literature, despite the fact that in treatment many partners express feelings as being victimized, helpless, and bitter about what has occurred. In fact, the only reference we could find in the couple literature was a non-empirical article by