

2013, "Those Pesky Filters!"
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

**My Marriage/Your Marriage:
Paradigm Mismatches of Marriage
or
"Those Pesky Filters!"**

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A paradigm is a way of looking at things. People typically do not know that they look at things in their own unique ways. Unless something happens to get your attention, you may never question why you see things the way you do. Most people use their own experiences as criteria to judge other people and the events occurring in their own lives and the lives of others. Your "shoulds" come from your paradigms.

Two people who come into a marriage bring their own unique experiences to that marriage. They each have their own unique ways of perceiving their own experiences and assigning meaning to it. I call these unique ways of seeing the world as "filters". Every person's perceptual "filters" will be unique based on your own experiences. No two people will have had exactly the same life experiences. Even if they did, they would still have unique filters, colored by their own personality characteristics, attitudes, and many other factors that go into assigning meaning to the events of our lives.

Your filters color the intake of information in your life. They are made up of your own experiences, beliefs, attitudes, mood states, emotions, and relationship events. Your own unique filters can have profound effects on the relationship events in your life. When you assume that there is no other possible way to view the world, a situation, or a relationship, this sets the stage for many communication and relationship problems.

Expectations regarding marriage, partner behavior, conflict management, and the expression of love, will by nature vary between two people. Partners often assume that they know the "correct" ways that that these things should be and that any diversion away from those expectations is just plain "wrong." Much of the time, neither partner knows that the other one has a different paradigm and sees things differently. They often assume that when the other partner does not conform to his/her expectations that the partner has done something wrong, is deliberately thwarting their desires, or is in some way simply misbehaving. People generally expect others to share the same meanings that they have for things and find it "weird" or "wrong" that others believe or think something different than they do about things they take for granted.

Many couples believe that they know without a shadow of a doubt, the nature of their partner's intentions and motivations, and that there is no other possible way to interpret or give meaning to an event besides the ways they already think about it. In reality, there are very few (if any) universally agreed upon meanings to any given situation or event.

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"Filters", are in most respects "learned". They can be challenged and unlearned. They can be replaced with healthy alternative explanations for relationship events. Philosophers and scholars have long noted the observation that whatever you think, is your reality. While gender could account for some of the difference in perception of the marriage, it cannot account for the unique world view that each person brings to the relationship. Because of each individual's different concept of reality, there would be two different marriages in each marriage (his/hers; mine/yours). Your own experience of your marriage may not match your partner's. There is more than one way to look at, give meaning to, and assign value to those relationship experiences.

It is hard to understand another person's perspective when you don't believe that it is possible to have a different perspective. To have a healthy relationship of give and take, it is crucial to not only recognize that your way of viewing the world is uniquely your own, and to come to understand how your partner sees the world.

Without our own egocentric world view remaining unchallenged we believe that we know without a doubt what the partner feels, thinks, and "means". Our world view assigns motive, good/bad judgement of partner behavior, and intention. If we can begin to challenge what we "know" we can come to understand the partner's filters, how s/he assigns meaning to relationship events, and begin to give the partner the occasional benefit of the doubt, instead of automatically assuming that relationship difficulties occur because the partner is intentionally behaving badly, does not care about us, is wrong, or is lying.

Often by the time couples come into counseling they have each been identifying the other spouse as "the problem". Attempts to problem solve make matters worse, since there is only one way to look at things. Partners get caught up in a coercive pattern of trying to make the other person "see" things his/her way. Each gets more and more invested in his/her own paradigm and become convinced that the only way to solve the problem is for the partner to come around to his/her perception and solution. The other partner who is firm in maintaining his/her different perception of the problem and in advocating for his/her own solution is viewed as a liar, crazy, or just plain obstinate.

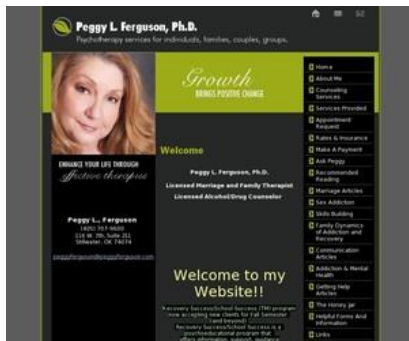
With the classic "attribution error" each spouse usually justifies his/her own position while vilifying their partner's position. Each partner makes allowances for his/her own inappropriate responses while holding the partner to a different standard. The more they argue and try to problem-solve, the more hopelessly entangled they become in their fixed positions. Each subsequent attempt to break the dead-lock, cements them into place even more firmly. As each partner keeps trying to win the other partner over to his/her perception and solution, they each become more and more frustrated.

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Some couples will give up on problem solving over time and not keep trying to negotiate for change within the relationship. Sometimes one spouse, completely dissatisfied with the response of the partner to repeated requests for change, will stop requesting change, withdraw, and eventually leave the marriage. The other partner, who is relieved to be free of the "nagging" or "criticism" feels happier, more content, and thinks that things have finally worked out on their own. This spouse has a great marriage. S/he is happy. S/he is unaware of the depths of the other spouse's frustration and despair. S/he is shocked when the other spouse leaves the relationship. S/he will say, "I can't believe you left. We were happy". "We" weren't happy. One spouse was happy. The other was not. If one spouse is unhappy or dissatisfied in the marriage, the marriage has a problem.

Marriage problems can be solved when each partner can begin to understand their partner's world view. With a little help and some practice, many of those "filters" can be identified and "neutralized", thereby making it easier to have healthy communication and positive interactions. When you can put yourself in your partner's shoes, you can have the confidence to take the risk to communicate on a deeper level, be more genuine, and take more risks with problem solving on real relationship issues. Much of the time filters operate beyond your awareness, but becoming aware of them enables you to challenge any distortions in your thinking that set you up for emotional pain, misunderstanding, and over/under-reactions.



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Tags: Communication filters, couple conflict, marriage conflict, couple problem solving, attributions, how to resolve conflict in marriage, cognitive distortions in marriage, marriage problems, causes of conflict, conflict resolution in marriage, conflict marriage.

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