

# *A psychobiological approach to couple therapy and issues of reciprocity: The influence of Janteloven on Norwegian couples*

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With a focus on the importance of cultural sensitivity within the therapy setting, INGA GENTILE explores how long-standing social attitudes exemplified by *Janteloven*, a set of social laws governing attitudes and norms toward individual success and accomplishment, might contribute to problematic themes presented in the context of modern-day Norwegian couples seeking therapy. Working within a Norwegian cultural frame, two couple case vignettes illustrate issues of reciprocity, and the potential influence of *Janteloven* on conscious and unconscious individual development, and on intersubjective experience, to further enhance therapeutic change. A psychobiological approach to couple therapy (PACT)—a combination of neuroscience, attachment theory, and arousal regulation—with a focus on moment-to-moment state shifts, allows for depth and sensitivity in understanding how conflicting cultural messages shaped attachment experiences, arousal regulation strategies, and personalities.

The Law of *Jante*, or *Janteloven* in Danish and Norwegian, is widely understood in Scandinavia to be a set of social laws governing attitudes and norms toward individual success and accomplishment. According to Bromgarda, Trafimowb, and Linn (2014), *Janteloven states that one should never try to be more, try to be different, or consider oneself as more valuable than others*' (p. 375). Although reportedly a centuries-old part of the collective Norwegian and Danish\Scandinavian psyche, and embedded in unwritten form in the culture for generations, the formal conceptualisation of *Janteloven* was as a set of 11 rules in a work of fiction by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (1936) entitled *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks*' (En Flyktning Krysser Sitt Spor, 1933).

Among the rules are *'You're not to think you are good at anything... You're not to think you are anything special... You're not to think you are as good as*

*we are... You're not to think anyone cares about you'* (Sandemose, 1936).

The intended purpose of the law is to maintain and encourage harmony, social stability, and uniformity. This is accomplished largely by valuing the collective above the individual.

In its best interpretation, the overarching spirit of the law encourages and imposes a sense of shared humility and dedication to equality among citizens. Indeed, the law may contribute to what is widely considered good about Scandinavian culture, including the region's generous social welfare policies and economic and social equality for all citizens. However, closer examination of the 11 rules reveals a degree of hostility toward individual development and value. Despite its guise as a social contract between the collective and the individual, *Janteloven* can be characterised by its marked lack of reciprocity. From

the perspective of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), its lack of value for individual development can be framed as the child (individual) having to regulate the self-esteem of an often narcissistic parent (in this case, the collective). This dynamic can lead to developmental vulnerabilities and has been linked with insecure attachment models (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Paradoxically, although the law purportedly holds the collective over the individual, it seems to contradict the principles of secure functioning (e.g., the values of attentiveness, sensitivity, attunement, and true mutuality) needed for successful adult romantic relationships (Tatkin, 2010). These values are considered to be optimal for psychological and neurological development and for social emotional functioning (Fishbane, 2007), and couple therapy may be warranted when their expression is lacking within a relationship.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the long-standing social attitudes exemplified by *Janteloven*, and other concerns about not wanting to be a burden to others, might contribute to problematic themes presented in the context of modern-day Norwegian couples seeking therapy. Although discouraging and devaluing of individual effort and success, it is worth considering the impact that persistent devaluing of one's self might have on the subsequent valuing of others, and on the formation and valuing of attachment relationships. In short, how does *Janteloven* influence attitudes and behaviours toward couple relationships, and how can this be addressed in therapy? The implications of using a psychobiological approach (Tatkin, 2012) to explore these issues is examined.

### A psychobiological approach

Attachment relationships, as conceived by Bowlby (1982), originate in infancy and are considered to be a lifelong phenomenon. The early bonds formed between a child and caregiver are thought to influence the development of internal working models of self and other, which in turn influence future relationships with other attachment figures, including partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Yumbul, Cavusoglu, & Geyimci, 2010). Secure attachment is considered the result of caregiver/child interactions wherein the caregiver is experienced as sufficiently sensitive, consistent, and responsive to both proximity-seeking behaviour and outwardly exploring behaviour. Insecure attachment patterns (i.e., avoidant, angry-resistant, ambivalent, and disorganised) are considered to arise as adaptations to inconsistencies in the care-giving environment.

Developments in neuroscience have helped to elucidate the critical role of the quality of an infant's early attachment experiences, via moment-to-moment psychobiological interactions with a caregiver, on the development of the parts of the brain involved in emotional function and affect regulation. Secure attachment experiences are associated with optimal right-brain development and organisation. These experiences

affect neural networks between the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) and limbic system, where emotional function and capacities for affect regulation, including self-regulation, are managed and coordinated (Price, Carmichael,

PACT focuses on early attachment experiences and their impact on the formation and development of brain structures and the ANS. Specifically, PACT is based on an understanding of the areas of the brain and nervous

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& Drevets, 1996). The OFC also influences the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which is responsible for maintaining emotional equilibrium. That is to say, the brain, being experience dependent, is shaped by repeated early interactions that not only imprint internal working models but also lay the neural pathways that will determine the functioning of regulatory capacities needed later in life. It is here we see the direct and intractable relationship between attachment organisation and the robustness/fragility of arousal and affect regulation. A psychobiological approach to couple therapy (PACT®) is a model that works from this intersectional point and draws upon research in infant attachment and developmental neuroscience to understand, beyond content, what is occurring on a developmental and psychobiological level with chronically distressed couples.

system responsible for ongoing social emotional functioning and arousal regulation (Tatkin, 2009). In practice, the PACT therapist applies this understanding to work with the ability of both partners to tolerate and regulate different affective and arousal states. This is done with the understanding that: a) regulation of these states can be linked predictably to individual attachment organisation; and, b) can be managed well or poorly within the context of the shared attachment system of a couple. The overarching intention of PACT is not to change individual attachment orientations but to address issues related to safety, security, and threat and to guide partners toward a more secure-functioning relationship, which includes enhancing the couple's ability to co-regulate across different arousal states. This is done by addressing and ultimately reshaping the attachment system so that partners are able to



Illustration: © SavinaHopkins, 2014.

relate to one another in a more secure-functioning manner.

The PACT therapist understands that repeated encounters with early primary caregivers generated internal working models stored as procedural or implicit memories, and that these experiences drive much of human behaviour. Procedural memories are accessed and used without the need for conscious control or attention. Through accessing these procedural memories and related arousal states, both individually and dyadically, the PACT therapist seeks in 'real time' to *'reshape the arousal dynamics of a couple system so that it more closely resembles a secure attachment partnership with high positives and low negatives'* (Solomon & Tatkin, 2010, p. 119). This process emphasises nonverbal behavioural cues over traditional verbal content: *'Viewing attachment relationship problems and struggles as a matter of skills and deficits can greatly aid the couple therapist in formulating treatment plans and interventions that address what couples actually do and not what they say'* (p. 119).

The PACT therapist is interested in assessing and understanding individual attachment organisation (i.e., secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-angry/resistant, disorganised); couple system organisation (insecure vs. secure); and related individual and co-regulatory strategies (i.e., autoregulation, external regulation, self-regulation, and interactive regulation). Because the emotional processing underlying interpersonal exchanges takes place in the implicit right hemisphere of the brain, and is thereby largely outside of awareness, the PACT therapist employs a number of 'bottom-up' strategies aimed at accessing this right-brain, unconscious material. (For a more detailed discussion of attachment organisation and arousal regulation theory along with related assessment and intervention tools, see Solomon & Tatkin, 2010.)

### The role of culture

As a child of two cultures, with a Norwegian-born mother and an American-born father, my background contributed to my interest in culture as one of the many forces shaping human personality, behaviour, and interaction. I spent the last several years living

and working in a Norwegian setting, which increased my curiosity with regard to the influences that shape the Norwegian experience. The observations I made during my work as a couple therapist led me to focus on the influence of the cultural norm of *Janteloven* on relationship formation and functioning.

The brain both shapes, and is shaped by, culture (Ames & Fiske, 2010), and as such influences the development of individual cognitive, affective, and motivational processes (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001). Researchers in cross-cultural studies, including the relatively new field of cultural neuroscience, have begun to 'tease out' and explain variations in a wide range of psychological phenomena across different cultures. For example, pertinent to this paper, patterns of secure and insecure functioning have been shown to differ across cultures and within cultures, even within Western societies (Keller, 2013; Quinn & Mageo, 2013). For example, sensitivity is one component in the development of secure attachment (Tatkin, 2010); however, what is defined as sensitive can vary from culture to culture. Given demonstrated variation in terms of development of the hallmarks of a secure attachment system, it is important to understand how specific cultural norms can either foster or deter this process.

Of particular interest here, given the lack of reciprocity and subsequent potential for insensitivity in messaging, is the influence of *Janteloven* on the development of internal working models and the establishment of attachment patterns and related regulatory strategies in Norwegian couples. If on a cultural level *Janteloven* has the potential to be dismissive, diminishing and derogatory towards individual attachment needs, and as a consequence, dismissive of the value of dyadic attachment relationships, this may have implications for adult relationship functioning. *Janteloven* is problematic for couple functioning if it reinforces non-mutual, misattuned, insensitive, and inattentive insecure strategies. The non-mutual spirit of the law can impair experiences that would lead to the ability of a couple to balance their dependency needs with

seeking support for those needs and the meeting of those needs in others.

I have encountered two common and interrelated problems in my work with ethnic Norwegian couples: (a) I have observed a significant limiting of affectionate expression and signalling, despite the expressed need and desire of partners for affection. For example, a partner may be comfortable receiving verbal praise and affection, tolerate receiving physical affection, yet present as uncomfortable or reluctant to reciprocate either form. Furthermore, that individual may have chosen a partner who loves both giving and receiving affection. (b) I have observed partners disowning their own dependency needs, including the need for admiration from their partner, while not acknowledging the anger or resentment they feel that those needs are going unmet.

At first glance, these issues may not be unique to ethnic Norwegian couples. However, using the frame of *Janteloven* can help us to better understand how the behaviour of a couple can be influenced by social rules that limit the display of emotion in a variety of social settings, and emphasise the importance of being humble and not setting oneself apart or drawing attention to oneself. Especially pertinent are actions that range from personal achievements to expressions of exuberance or affection. The two cases that follow illustrate these issues.

### True independence is not born of neglect

Henrik and Anna have been married for ten years. Anna's primary complaints are that Henrik does not pay enough attention to her, and withholds the expression of both physical and verbal affection toward her. Although physical intimacy was not a problem early in their relationship, it has increasingly become an issue of contention between them. Henrik reports a loss of libido, which he connects with a general ongoing sense of 'blueness'. Henrik needs a lot of time to himself, and spends a lot of time away from Anna and their daughter, in his home office watching movies. Henrik's primary complaints are that Anna complains too much and pushes him too often to talk about

things, especially feelings. He feels he cannot do anything to please her. Conversely, Anna prefers not to spend time alone and expresses that she can never have enough contact with Henrik or be too close to him.

In attachment terms, both Anna and Henrik experience the components of their relationship that are non-mutual and insensitive as alienating. Their differing needs related to proximity-seeking and contact maintenance can be connected to their individual attachment patterns. Although appearing to be opposites, their respective relationship styles position them to be able to tend to one another in ways that perhaps each needs but never received or did not receive enough.

Looking through a culture lens, we see the potential influence of *Janteloven* in the couple's attitudes about the function of their relationship and their attitudes toward acknowledging and addressing their own and each other's dependency needs. This is particularly evident in their need to feel comforted or cherished. From a PACT perspective, helping Henrik and Anna understand that management of distress and relief are paramount to their combined and individual well-being is crucial. Using an attachment

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lens, we can begin to explore the individual, familial, and cultural influences on both Henrik's and Anna's sense of self and of self in relationships.

During the attachment interview used by PACT therapists in the first session with a couple, it is paramount to listen for issues related to safety, security, loss, separations, reunions, injury, and repair. Exploring Henrik's early attachment experiences revealed that his father died when Henrik was nine years old, and that he has very few memories of his father. He knew his father was ill and was frequently in the hospital. When his father died, Henrik was sent out to the barn to be alone. When asked about this in greater

detail, he revealed that he sat alone and forgotten for several hours as his family tended to other things. Being left alone to deal with and attempt to organise his emotions isolated him even more from the rest of the family. It also may have reinforced an already existing belief based on experience that in times of distress no one is there.

This early experience was never discussed in Henrik's family, and until the time of therapy, he had said very little about it to Anna. This revelation

highlighted in a new way the influence of early unresolved loss on Henrik's sense of safety and security in an uncertain world. It also shed light on his overuse of autoregulation in the form of an intense need for alone time within their marriage. With this new information, Anna could begin to take Henrik's withdrawal less personally. As such, she felt more able to show sensitivity toward his vulnerabilities, and paradoxically began to get her own needs for closeness met in a different way. At the same time, this helped to create space to explore Anna's sensitivity to abandonment without triggering Henrik's defense. Henrik began to experience a shift in

his defence in the form of reluctance toward cherishing Anna, something she at a very fundamental level desperately needed and had seldom experienced. He explored the defence against cherishing Anna as a means of avoiding once again confronting the loss of something he cherished, as he had experienced when he lost his father. Henrik could begin to open up to the experience of feeling cherished by and special to Anna. Both he and Anna thus experienced themselves and one another in a new way.

This opening to the experience of cherishing a partner took on greater depth of meaning within the context of the influence of *Janteloven*. Using the principles of PACT, along with an awareness of the cultural impact of *Janteloven*, I was able to help this couple uncover and begin to repair longstanding underlying issues related to safety and security. In turn, this opened up opportunities for Anna and Henrik to both give and receive affection in ways that satisfied their individual needs for both closeness/proximity and distance. I observed new behaviours such as holding hands, sitting near each other, and greater awareness of and mutual joy in moments of nonverbal communication. They were no longer as adverse to what they had perceived as undesirable dependency. They were learning instead that the independence with which they had been living was not a positive form of independence, but had been based on neglect.



J. WRIGHT

## Contempt for neediness

Sandra is 32 and Paul is 40. They have two small children, aged three and five years. They have been together for 13 years. Paul's mother had a chronic mental illness and was frequently hospitalized. His earliest memories are of being with his two great-aunts and being in charge of his younger sisters. He has no memories of being sick or injured, despite the fact that all children get sick or injured at some point in time. Sandra's parents had volatile tempers, and her earliest memories are of being afraid. She was positioned early on to have to choose between two parents who competed for her affection, and who she feels did not ever really want her.

Both Sandra and Paul come from families in which performance was valued. What could be called contempt for neediness comes through in their individual current narratives and in their attachment-related memories (procedural as well as declarative) from childhood. In terms of the influence of *Janteloven*, this couple did not negate their individual needs as a means toward a greater communal good. Rather, a sense of false independence led them to sabotage the closeness they wanted in their relationship. Each had a familial history in which it was not acceptable to express need or to take action to get a need met. This can be further understood in the context of *Janteloven*, wherein their long-standing ability to maintain a relationship in which one or both suppressed individual needs and diminished the other's needs is regarded as cultural norm. How deserving they feel of getting their needs met and how valued they may feel for who they are take on a new complexity when understood in the context of *Janteloven*.

Sandra and Paul met while participating in semi-professional athletic competitions, and both delight in sharing stories about individual athletic successes. It is important for them both to be admired and any show of weakness is unattractive — both publicly and privately. They ascribe to a 'fight or die trying' attitude. Their relationship is laced with competitiveness, which is often not of the friendly sort. Instead of amplifying mutual positives by knowing how to

make one another feel good, they try to make themselves feel good at the expense of one another. They each function as a one-person psychological system, a hallmark of insecure functioning, and their interactions are characterised by a dearth of friendliness, good will, warmth, and flexibility. They report a remarkable lack of playfulness and joy in their relationship, and both express sadness in relation to this.

## *Misattunement between them left the one in need feeling rejected and reinforced the contempt for neediness that is volleyed back-and-forth between them.*

Using the principles of PACT, I steered them toward exploration of their unmet emotional needs and the psychobiologically driven reactions underlying their outward behaviours toward one another. We did this through re-enactments of problematic interactions and through revealing early attachment experiences. For example, it was revealed that Sandra gets angry when Paul leaves and feels anxious until he returns. When he returns, she is already irritated with him before he walks into the room. Re-enactments of problematic situations, and showing the couple how to understand their behaviour within an attachment frame, shed new light on old dynamics and positioned Sandra and Paul to experiment with secure-functioning behaviours.

Another area in which the couple frequently encountered difficulty was in not knowing when the other was in distress or how to attend to it. For example, when Sandra turned to Paul because she wanted him to help her get through something she found anxiety producing, he inadvertently exacerbated her distress rather than soothed her. This served to reinforce her internal working model of others as being unavailable, or if available, as being unable to provide adequate and appropriate support. In short, it reinforced the contempt for neediness she already felt as a result of her family upbringing and the potential influence

of cultural norms linked to *Janteloven*.

Sandra was in a similar position when Paul was in distress. Misattunement between them left the one in need feeling rejected and reinforced the contempt for neediness that is volleyed back-and-forth between them. Working with Sandra and Paul in real time, I was able to help move them toward secure functioning, without being limited by their notion of neediness as an undesirable trait.

At the same time, this could be interpreted as counteracting the subtle but pervasive influence of as they became aware of the false sense of independence that had prevented them from achieving the closeness they wanted in their relationship.

## Conclusion

In recent decades, the importance of cultural sensitivity within the therapy setting has received growing recognition. In the cases discussed here, working within a Norwegian cultural frame, familiarity with *Janteloven* and its potential influence on conscious as well as unconscious individual development and on intersubjective experience serves to further enhance therapeutic change. As demonstrated in these two case examples, not only were personal beliefs and behaviours explored, but also the cultural beliefs of *Janteloven* embedded in the couple's experience. Using a psychobiologically informed approach, with a focus on moment-to-moment state shifts, allowed for depth and sensitivity in understanding how conflicting cultural messages shaped attachment experiences, arousal regulation strategies, and personalities. This approach allowed a PACT therapist to untangle the undesirable messages in a manner that was both culturally sensitive and psychologically insightful so that the couple could make choices that led them toward a more secure and satisfying partnership.

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