A Relational Intersubjective Approach to Conjoint Treatment

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A Relational Intersubjective Approach to Conjoint Treatment

Philip A. Ringstrom, Ph.D., Psy.D.

This article updates an earlier version of a model of couples therapy published in 1994 in Volume Ten of Progress in Self Psychology. In this update, three broad themes premise the revised model including: (a) the actualization of self experience in an intimate relationship, (b) the capacity for mutual recognition, and (c) the “relationship having a mind of its own”. This revised model articulates elaborates the original Six Steps. These steps take up the importance of the therapist’s attunement to each partners’ bi-dimensional transference along with pointing out the couple’s “vicious circle” engagements that arise from each partner’s selfobject, developmental longings triggering one another’s states of repetitive transference. Their unique subjective experiences are further underscored in terms of the epistemological stance of “perspectival realism.” Their perspectives are then contextualized in terms of the impact of their developmental backgrounds. Where attunement is insufficient enactments result that elaborate dissociated self-states making them available for examination. The final steps of the model take up what is both negotiable and nonnegotiable within the partners themselves as well as within their relationship. Ultimately, termination is in evidence to the degree that the couple has internalized the functions of

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the overall model. It is noted that the Six Steps do not operate in a fixed linear manner rather they function non-linearly working as practice guidelines rather than stepwise rules for the practitioner to follow.

Keywords: enactments; intersubjectivity; mutual inductive identification; relational psychoanalysis

For over 30 years of treating couples, providing consultations to other clinicians, teaching seminars in graduate programs, and making presentations at international conferences, I have proposed that the goal of my intersubjective-relational approach to conjoint treatment is to enable two real selves to intimately connect under that same roof. I have further offered that in so doing, the partner’s will inevitably “stub one another’s toes,” and that central to my approach would be their developing a capacity to repair inevitable ruptures, and to do so in a manner that cultivates new ways of being together. The next natural question is, how does this happen, and how are we to think about it?

To begin with, this model of treatment embraces the inevitability of problems arising from both similarities and differences in life experiences and their meaning to each partner, as well as between them. These include experiences that are potentially part of the daily lives of any marital couple or other comparable long-term committed intimate relationship. Briefly¹, this model of treatment is organized in terms of three themes: (a) the actualization of self-experience in the context of an intimate relationship, (b) the capacity for mutual recognition of both partners’ subjective experiences, and (c) the idea of the relationship having a “mind” of its own.

While being deeply influenced by many writers, these three themes draw their principle organizational roots from the works of a number of differing, although often overlapping, theoreticians that elsewhere I have compared as the intersubjectivists and the relationalists (Ringstrom, 2010a, 2010b). Regarding this model’s earliest formulation of the first theme—the pursuit of self-actualization in the couple’s relationship—the works of the intersubjectivists (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987) was exceedingly important. Later, Tolpin’s (2000) theory of transference also became influential. These early formulations have subsequently been refined in terms of the impact of multiple self-state theory on transference arising from the works of enumerable relationalists (e.g., Aron, Bromberg,

¹This article is a condensation of some of the ideas in my book, A Relational Psychoanalytic Approach to Couples Therapy (Ringstrom, 2012).
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Davies, Mitchell, etc.). All the aforementioned authors’ contributions are illuminated in greater detail shortly.

A second major theme arises from the concept of mutual recognition (e.g., subject-to-subject relating), finding its principal roots in the works of Benjamin (1988, 1992, 1995, 2004). Mutual recognition is especially important in relation to the intermittent problems of dominance and submission or “split complementarity” that may arise in subject-to-object relating.2

Finally, the third theme, “having a ‘mind’ of its own,” originated from a somewhat creative reading of Ogden’s (1994) concepts of the “psychoanalytic third versus the subjugating third.” This third theme has been further refined by some of Benjamin’s (1992) observations about the element of “thirdness” in relationships.

Actualization of oneself within an intimate relationship refers to how couples are drawn together out of a longing to accomplish something incomplete from their upbringing. This manifests in the unconscious conviction that, “With this partner, I hope that I will be able to actualize that which heretofore I have been unable to. However, with this partner, I also anticipate dreading the revisiting of some quality of my past. Indeed, something that I wish I could overcome.” This means that the hope to reconstitute one’s growth or to repair what was traumatically broken is uniquely counterbalanced with the dread that these hopes will be crushed, leading to “retraumatization” (Mitchell, 1993).

Concepts critical to my examination of self-actualization include, among others, Stolorow et al.’s (1987) bi-dimensional model of transference, which includes a self/object/developmental dimension versus a repetitive/resistive dimension. Comparable to their work is that of Tolpin’s (2000) idea about the “forward versus trailing edge” of transference. Both sets of authors capture how, in contemporary psychoanalytic theories of transference (especially those influenced by Kohut’s self psychology revolution), the longing for developmental experiences that were missing or

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2It should also be noted that performing the functions ascribed to being another’s object is not necessarily bad. In fact, it can be a great source of pleasure as related to experiences of mastery, competency, and fulfillment. Such experiences might include nursing an infant, nurturing a child, and helping out friends, as well as playing a role in another’s drama, including the role of the seducer or the seduced. The key is that the subject-to-object position does not occlude the potential for mutual recognition (i.e., subject-to-subject position). We might even conjecture that, paradoxically, one can find a sense of being a subject in playing the role of being the other’s “object.”
insufficient during formative years is challenged by dreaded repetitions of experience of that thwarted development.

By selfobject experiences, of course, the authors are referring to different versions of attuned responsiveness to affect states throughout all phases of one’s life. Conversely, repetitive transference experiences pertain to fears and dreads of a repetition of selfobject failures. Tolpin (2000) captured how the selfobject dimension, or what she referred to as “the forward edge,” often represents the most barely noticeable tendrils of stunted growth. Her poetic depiction aptly described the fragility and vulnerability of the partners exposing their longings, and it is here that the “toes” of the marital partners are routinely “stubbed,” if not periodically “crushed.” Since my first article (Ringstrom, 1994), these points have been further elaborated in both couples and family therapy by authors influenced by the self psychological and intersubjective systems theory traditions (Shaddock, 1998, 2000; Leone, 2001; Livingston, 2007).

In this light, the hunger for actualization can often feel like risky business, especially when it hinges in part on one’s partner’s response. Sometimes this creates such anxiety that partners engage in a kind of paradoxical unconscious self-fulfilling prophecy that ensures not getting the very thing one seeks, thereby eliminating the uncertainty of getting it. This point is elaborated much more in Step 4.

Complicating all of this further is that we are prone to feel like one, although, in fact, existing in many differing self-states (Stern, 1997; Bromberg, 1998, 2006; Davies, 1998, 2004, 2005). That is because the actualization of one self-state can easily be at the price of another self-state, and how this is reconciled can often involve attributing a disavowed self-state to one’s partner, even unconsciously inducing them to embody the attribution. For example, one frequently hears one partner arguing that the other is behaving “selfishly” because they will not go along with what the accuser wants. Often missing is that the accuser’s motives are no less selfish than those of the accused.

Despite whatever vulnerabilities there can be to self-sabotage, it is the endless pursuit of self-actualization that enlivens a marriage by “pushing” each partner to seek something more. Although being a hotbed for potential passionate discord, it may remain one of the best reasons for being married at all. As “Family Therapy Granddaddy,” Carl Whitaker (personal communication, 1983), often quipped to professional audiences, “It is important to get married so you have a safe place to hate.”
One essential element for accomplishing self-actualization in marriage is found in the mutual recognition partners have of one another's subjective experiences. Recognition is fundamental to personal growth because it captures the necessity of attunement to the need to be understood for who one experiences him or herself to be. It is further necessary to repair ruptures when selfobject attunement inevitably fails. Recognition of that disappointment is the glue that repairs the initial fracture, although such recognition is never constant. It can be fleeting, and inevitably must change throughout the couple's lives together as each partner develops throughout their life cycle.

In this light, Benjamin’s (1992) concept of mutual recognition represents an evolutionary step in psychoanalytic theorizing. In the beginning, analysts loyally adhered to Freud’s dictum, “where id is, ego shall be,” allowing that civilization would survive only to the extent that we can understand and regulate our animalistic nature. Somewhat later, psychoanalysts were swayed by the object relation theorists’ dictum of “where ego is, objects must be,” acknowledging the essential and unrelenting nature of human attachment in the development of one’s psychology.

To these dictums, Benjamin (1992) added one of hers (i.e., “where objects were, subjects must be”). Not only is this last dictum imperative in childhood development, but, by extension, it suggests that to truly thrive, marital dyads need to also develop the capacity to move back and forth between subject-to-object relating and subject-to-subject relating—that is, from each servicing the relational, sometimes actualization needs of the other, to also cultivating within each partner some nascent curiosity about their mate’s subjectivity (their unique way of experiencing the world and their unique perspective on it). The enhanced capacity to reflectively move in and out of subject-to-object and subject-to-subject relating is critical to my model of conjoint therapy. Without it, marital relationships are vulnerable to devolving into patterns of dominance and submission, even sadomasochism, which, as noted, Benjamin (1992) referred to as relationships governed by “split complementarity.”

One of the paradoxes of this model is that “who oneself experiences him or herself to be” can entail multiple versions of oneself, as well as, over time, mutative experiences of oneself, especially as a result of the therapy. Still, a sense of what feels real or true or authentic permeates the multiplicity of experiences that lends, eventually, to coming to terms with inner conflicts, as well as reckoning with internal aspects of oneself not so easily negotiated (see Step 5).
The third theme, the marital relationship having a “mind” of its own, pertains to the manner in which the unconscious minds of the two participants coalesce to allow for or to disallow for the actualization of each one’s sense of subjectivity. Like all versions of the mind, the “mind” of the relationship derives “its” quality of flexibility and adaptiveness depending on how “open” or “closed” it is. A relational system that is too open is vulnerable to becoming chaotic. If it is too closed, it is vulnerable to becoming petrified in its rigidity. Generally speaking, the optimal position of the “mind” of the relationship is when both participants in a dyad can be readily influenced by the other without this necessarily entailing “twinship” or merger. A corresponding circumstance in analytic treatment is defined by what Ogden (1994) referred to as “the psychoanalytic third.” Using the analogy of the relationship between the reader of his text and himself as its author, Ogden wrote:

You, the reader, must allow me to occupy you, your thoughts, your mind, since I have no voice with which to speak other than yours. If you are to read this book, you must allow yourself to think my thoughts while I allow myself to become your thoughts and in that moment neither of us will be able to lay claim to the thought as our own exclusive creation. . . . A third subject is created in the experience of reading that is not reducible to either writer or reader [p. 1].

By contrast, when the “mind” of the relationship is closed, it represents something akin to what Ogden (1994) called the “subjugating third”—a condition wherein one person’s subjectivity comes to dominate the other’s. This version of thirdness, as applied to my model of conjoint treatment, can be seen as potentially squelching mutual recognition and actualization of self, leading more to what Benjamin (1992) described as the dominance/submission of “split complementarity.” This occurrence underscores a collapse of Benjamin’s (1992) version of intersubjectivity

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4Ogden (1994) is somewhat more neutral on the position of the subjugating third when applied to psychoanalytic practice. Indeed, it is from the position of the analyst’s subjugation to the patient’s needs that she comes to identify with the unconscious organization, particularly through identifying with the patient’s projections. My use of the subjugating third highlights that there are times where this mode of subject-to-object relating is perfectly fine, and others where it can become deeply problematic when it falls into rigid patterns of dominance and submission.
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Conjoint Treatment (i.e., subject-to-subject relating), reverting to the primitively linear nature of subject-to-object relating. Benjamin’s (1992) treatment of this topic, derivative of Ghent’s (1990), is to distinguish between submission and surrender.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to go into depth about what Benjamin (1992) described as the role of surrender as opposed to submission or of being submissive, the distinction can be critical in reconstituting subject-to-subject relating. Suffice it to say, in submission, one submits to the will or agency of the other; in surrender, one relinquishes something within oneself, such as a pridelful position that feverishly defends against shame or humiliation. In this latter case, one comes to accept or bear up with greater resilience, typically undermining a negative affect state.

The remainder of this article examines the themes of actualization of self, mutual recognition, and the relationship having a mind of its own as they manifest in a six-step approach to conjoint treatment, which is illustrated through the fictional case of “Ben” and “Elaine.” For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, this case is originally drawn from fiction, although it also derives its narrative from a creative amalgamation of many of the couples I have either worked with, or supervised the work of, over the past 30 years. As a consequence, the case is written in the form of an illustration of what this model of treatment could look like in such a case.

First, here is a brief note about the Six Step model. The six steps are not so much “steps” as constellations of ideas from intersubjective systems theory and relational psychoanalysis, which provide a background of considerations to help the conjoint therapist wade into the daunting morass of data that contributes to the average conjoint session. Furthermore, although the six steps appear as something of a logical progression, they should not be seen as being in a fixed linear or even hierarchical order. A better metaphor is that of the staircases found in the M. C. Escher print, Ascending and Descending, in which the top landing of the uppermost staircase, paradoxically, is the beginning landing of the lowest staircase. The steps of the model are never completed once and for all, but become a paradigm for restoring mutual recognition and reconstituting self-actualization in the relationship, especially in the wake of inevitable ruptures.

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5For example, every moment of treatment is potentially structured by six levels of transference that are constituted by each of the partners’ and the therapist’s bi-dimensional
Step 1: How the Therapist’s Attunement to Each Spouse’s Subjectivity Instills Hope, Perspective, and the Possibility for Renewed Growth

As Bion (1967) asserted, psychoanalytic treatment functions optimally when each session is seen as if it is the first session. From this standpoint, the potential exists for every session to return to Step 1, as much as anything to “model” the couple’s integration of the treatment, ultimately, for their own intimate use. What couples often present in sessions are everyday concerns, which, for them, may involve major conflicts. Ben, age 58, and Elaine, age 55, came to treatment seriously concerned about saving their marriage. It was a second marriage for each, and, as will be soon understood, a high-stakes venture.

Ben and Elaine were an attractive couple, both of whom presented congenially, exhibiting a high degree of motivation, desire, humor, and capacity for reflectiveness when not in the throes of battle. Although each felt seriously wounded by the other, and frightened that their relationship might not be salvageable, they both appeared highly motivated in seeking help.

They began their first session stating that recently they felt like they were fighting about everything, without being able to agree on anything. For the sake of focus, I asked them to give me an example of one particularly vexing fight. Of course, while I was asking them for manifest material, I was listening to how each one unconsciously organized the issue in terms of his or her bi-dimensional model of transference—that is, how each partner’s transference involves broad organizing themes hope and dread that are enabling or disenabling each one’s sense of self-actualization.

The example Ben and Elaine described involved her pressuring him to sell his family’s summer home that he had inherited some years before and which he had desperately fought to keep during his divorce. This vacation home was particularly meaningful to Ben because it represented the single place in his childhood where he felt most connected to himself, most connected to his family, as well as the only time he ever saw his parents appear to be truly relaxed and engaged.
Elaine, meanwhile, had very different thoughts about the vacation home. Downturns in the economy worried her; and, in her anxiety, she began “campaigning” on behalf of their radically rearranging their financial portfolio. In this light, she saw the summer lake property as an unnecessary luxury. Indeed, its sale appeared to her to be an excellent opportunity to produce quick cash because it had more than quadrupled in value since their marriage 5 years earlier. Furthermore, as the house was in Colorado, they rarely used it, although still having to pay for its upkeep. In the meantime, the capital proceeds from its sale would enable them to remodel the home they had recently purchased together, as well as help pay for a portion of Elaine’s oldest daughter’s wedding, both of which were things Ben was supportive of, although less concerned about how to manage those expenses.

Ben argued that if Elaine really understood him she would never conceive of asking him to sell the property. This represented the ruptured selfobject dimension of his transference in which he longed for Elaine’s attunement, mirroring, and affirmation. Worse, however, as is frequently the case, it triggered within him a powerful, repetitive dimension transference reaction—one reflective of a developmental history of feeling unseen, unheard, and misunderstood. The adaptive position he had assumed in relation to this was to pathologically accommodate (Brandchaft, 1994) his parents by assuming an “as if” good and loyal son position. In fact, his earliest attraction to Elaine was predicated on getting out of this invariant way of reacting. From the beginning of their romance, she exceeded everyone Ben had ever known in mirroring and affirming him in a manner uniquely confirmative of his experience. By contrast, Elaine’s idea of selling the summer home blindsided him. Indeed, one could say that it virtually traumatized him by her engaging in the “assault of the unimaginable” (Ringstrom, 1999, 2010a).

From Elaine’s perspective, Ben’s unusually poor judgment frightened her. She felt his archaic sentimental attachment to the summer home reflected poor judgment, as well as a rupture in his otherwise usual adoration, love, and respect for her ideas. Having grown up with two alcoholic parents, she was also keenly sensitive to what she referred to as “pipe dreams” (i.e., her parents’ alcohol-influenced delusions). Hence, the rupturing of her needed selfobject functions of both idealization and mirroring triggered a repetitive dimension of her transference in which she felt unprotected, unloved, and endangered.
Ruptures in marital relationships are usually nonlinear. Indeed, their beginnings are typically impossible to detect as they rapidly become “circularly causal”—devolving into “vicious circles.” These ideas, of course, are not new. In fact, they embody the fundamental epistemological stance (Nichols, 1987) of all family and couples systems theories. However, this model proposes a refined understanding of the elements of the couple’s marital conflict that especially capture the entanglements of their hopes and dreads. As such, Ben’s selfobject transference need for Elaine to affirm and support his position triggered her repetitive dimension transference of feeling unprotected and unloved. Meanwhile, her selfobject transference need triggered within Ben an experience of his perspective being annihilated, along with the requirement that he pathologically accommodate her.

The therapist’s objective in Step 1 is to point out to each of the partners their respective wishes, hopes, and longings, as well as how these can trigger one another’s fears, anxieties, and dreads. To quickly engage the couple in treatment, it is essential that the therapist is able to conceptualize these transference themes, especially in a manner that makes sense in the everyday language of each partner’s perspectives. For example, this entailed showing how the power of Ben’s negative reaction was fired by his experience of Elaine failing his affirmation need (failed “mirroring”) in a manner that felt so out of the norm that it felt virtually annihilating. Nevertheless, the analyst’s response to Ben demonstrated that Elaine’s reaction was the logical extension of her also feeling atypically unprotected (failed “idealization”—a misrecognition of her by Ben that, in its own way, felt annihilating to her. Pulling together these two explanatory elements leads to a third point, which involves showing how their failures of vital selfobject functions rapidly become circularly causal—as in, the more each presses for their selfobject need, the more each triggers whatever constitutes the core themes of their negative, repetitive transferences in each other. Notice there is no attempt by the therapist to take up which came first, the proverbial “chicken or egg”; or, more to the point, Ben’s failures versus Elaine’s. Indeed, it is wise to point out the futility of such arguments.

The analyst’s success in attuning to each partner specifically and then to the vicious circle dynamic in which their relationship is mired usually culminates in experiences of relief, renewal of hope, and an idealizing transference toward the therapist. Commonly, however, the partners continue to see one another more in the repetitive dimension of the transference, albeit with some hope that they might finally be understood—understood, that is, by the same therapist who also manages to not side with either one.
It is also important at this juncture not to create false hopes that all selfobject longings and needs can or necessarily should be met. Offsetting false hopes involves discussing the function of a kind of secondary selfobject attunement to when the primary one has to be disappointed. This was key to Kohut’s (1977) notion of “transmuting internalization”—that is, that the analyst does not necessarily provide the longed-for selfobject function (mirroring, idealization, etc.); however, he or she empathizes with the patient’s affective reaction of disappointment. In the case of couples, each partner empathically attunes (the secondary selfobject function) to their partner’s reaction to having their primary selfobject longing or wish disappointed. The reason this is critical is that to preserve each partner’s sense of personal authenticity, to be true to themselves, and therefore not be submissive, each one often has to say “no,” in some form or another, to the other’s wishes and longings.

Success in Step 1 also presents the couple with an in vivo model of “rupture and repair,” and illustrates to them how their therapy will likely continue to unfold. In short, in my experience, a successful therapeutic connection with the couple in Step 1 virtually always insures their return. This is because it breeds hope while also giving them a taste of their own salient transference organizations. In the best of circumstances, it also gets them both curious about the origins of their transference organization and the vulnerabilities they entail—all of which are investigated in greater depth in Step 3.

**Step 2: The Therapist’s Assertion That None of the Three Participants in the Therapy Has a More “Objective” View of Reality Than Any of the Others (Each One Needs to be Seen as the Arbiter of What Is True Within Her or His Experience of the Moment)**

One of the critical contributions of the intersubjective and relational perspectives to psychoanalysis is their invocation of the epistemological position of “perspectival realism”—that is, that none of us has a “God’s-eye view” of reality, and that each of us are inextricably interpreters of reality. That said, we obviously also interpret our subjective sense of reality based on rules embedded in our language, culture, temperament, and from our developmental surround. On top of this, we all have exquisite imaginations from which we make assumptions about the intentions of others,
the basis of which is also grounded in what Stern (2004) referred to as “the implicit relational” known. What is implicitly relationally known to each of us will be a unique synthesis of what we have learned in our development, which will overlap with other members of our culture, as well as being idiosyncratic to each of us.

Nevertheless, the ideas that give rise to Step 2 are meant to help the partners embrace what may be, in many cases, a rather radical epistemological shift in their thinking—that is, that their basic, everyday assumptions about reality involve them as much as constructors of “reality” as much as discoverers of “it.” This includes that what they heretofore have referred to as reality is strongly influenced by how the organization of the personality shapes “it.” Prior to such recognition, partners are vulnerable to engaging in concretizations of “reality” wherein that which each perceives as being “real” simply is “real” for them, and instead seeing their observations of reality as “slices” of the “great big altogether everything else.”

In many respects, the ideas of Step 2 are the lynchpin of this entire approach to treatment. Therefore, the degree to which either partner cannot accept this principle is the degree to which they will be highly challenged in terms of engaging in the subject-to-subject relating of mutual recognition. Unable to accept their own or the other’s points of view as subjective frames of reference, they devolve into the split complementarity of dominance and submission. In fact, they have little choice in their reactions because whatever their sense of reality is is threatened in an absolutistic manner, which then quickly jettisons each partner into wondering if the other one is “crazy,” they themselves are, or both.

Split complementarity also frequently devolves into shaming one another, further impairing their capacity to mentalize (Fonagy et al., 2002; Fonagy, 2003; Wallin, 2007)—that is, to know their own minds—as well as to accept one another’s differences. The degree of mentalization correlates with the degree of shame that each experiences. Thus, although the pursuit of mutual recognition is never about compelling either of them to agree with the other’s point of view, it does promote their grasping something meaningful about their differences. Often, this is best understood in the context of each one’s bio/psycho/social development (a point elaborated in Step 3).

It is important to note that “perspectival realism” does not involve “absolute relativism,” as in everyone’s perspective is equally correct. It accedes that where there are points of difference, one point of view may end up being better than another, and even that a third point of view
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may well be best of all. Indeed, in a well-functioning relationship, there is recognition that just such argumentation will ultimately be to both parties’ benefit. This includes cultivating a respect for one another’s normal states of “ruthlessness” in advocating one’s position. By this, I mean coming from a position of being without “ruth” (e.g., a predominant state of care and concern for the other). This can only happen, however, when each one’s perspective is not seen as competitively striving for dominance or submission\(^6\) but ultimately for the betterment of the relationship.

One of the chief impediments to the therapist facilitating this, however, is his or her own countertransference conjunction with one of the partners and disjunction with the other (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). In the case of conjunction, the therapist’s own bi-dimensional transference organization is too identified with one partner while in a state of disjunction with the other. For example, a therapist also challenged by the woes of tough economic times could readily over-identify with Elaine’s perspective on the efficacy of selling the summer home while becoming compromised in understanding or appreciating Ben’s position. Yet, another therapist who had felt coerced into relinquishing some cherished family heirloom might more readily identify with Ben’s position over Elaine’s. Although these examples are overly simplistic, they illustrate, in principle, what frequently occurs in conjoint therapeutic misalliances.

Therapists must come to expect that these kinds of alliances and misalliances can, if not even will, occur. Absent this recognition, there is a particular calamity that occurs in couple’s treatment: It can devolve into the therapist and one of the partners becoming a co-therapy team treating the remaining partner (e.g., the “identified patient”). Unchecked, this can lead to the estranged partner either pathologically accommodating the “co-therapy team” or engaging in fight (narcissistic rage) or flight (abrupt termination). Considerations in Step 2 underscore that the problem is not that the therapist has such inevitable “prejudices” (Gadamer, 1991)—they are inevitable in most long-term treatments—but what he or she does about them, lest they destroy the treatment. Whenever the therapist notes that she or he feels trapped in a conjunction/disjunction impasse, she or

\(^6\) Dominance and submission cannot be seen outside of their complementary form. They are mutually and phenomenologically dependent. The dominant party is enslaved in his or her need to be submissive, as much as the submissive requires the role of the dominant. Meanwhile, the submissive often paradoxically achieves a kind of “moral superiority” in terms of claims about her or his “victimization.”
he must pause to reflect on her or his participation in it, as well as perhaps seeking consultation if her or his own reflection is insufficient.

I advocate that the optimal position for the conjoint therapist to take is one of “multidirectional partiality” proposed by Boszormenyi-Nagy (1987), as exemplified in the position of “perspectival realism” discussed in this step. From this position, the therapist can make deeply and affectively saturated comments of recognition regarding both partners’ subjective experiences, which often manifest in what I have come to refer to as “of course, of course” responses. This was illustrated earlier in speaking to both Ben’s and Elaine’s understandable reactions to experiencing their key selfobject needs and expectations being endangering, hence triggering their repetitive transference reactions that devolved into their vicious circles.

“Of course, of course” responses involve statements that summarize each partner’s perspective. The therapist instantiates his or her “of course” response by indicating that each partner’s reaction to the other can make perfect sense in some developmental context of their experience (an experiential background explored more in Step 3). On the system’s level, the “of course, of course” response “slides” back and forth as the therapist appears to recognize each partner’s perspective while subtly, but deftly, recruiting the other partner to grasp what the therapist is saying about each partner. In this manner, the therapist helps each other’s experience begin to make sense in a manner heretofore inaccessible to either of them. Metaphorically, this works much like a “sound mixer” in a recording studio, wherein each “of course” response slides back and forth in a rhythmic manner until there is a balance of perspectives in the room demonstrative of an episode of mutual recognition.

**Step 3: The Exploration of How Each Partner’s Complaint Arises in the Context of a Developmental History of Thwarted Longings That Emanate From Malattunements or Traumas in Past Self–Selfobject or Other Object Relational Configurations**

Although every form of treatment operates in the here and now (i.e., the present moment), each version of the present must always be

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7I am grateful to Lynne Jacobs for the “of course, of course” response, which is an extension of how her analyst, the late Dede Socarides Stolorow, would bracket her deeply empathically attuned, penetrating interpretations.
contextualized by how it makes sense in terms of the past, as well as by how the past colors imagination about the future. This also entails what Stern (2004) referred to as “present moment remembering.” Therefore, finding out each partner’s narrative about their past becomes the crucible out of which meaning-making occurs in the present. Gathering this information can be done both in vivo, listening for naturally unfolding historical themes, or deliberately taken in sessions specifying one partner telling the therapist about their past while the other “quietly” listens. This is outlined in greater detail in my 1994 article in *Progress in Self Psychology*, so I do not go into detail here. The decision of in vivo versus deliberate history-taking often gets determined by how much affective containment a couple needs before they can settle into such states of self-reflection.

Although it is often not difficult to discern the ruptures in the developmental dimension of each partner’s transference, as well as how this triggers reciprocal repetitive transference reactions, discovering why they are organized as they are typically requires a deeper investigation in their developmental past. Fortunately, hooked by the attuned understanding both experienced in Step 1, Ben and Elaine were eager to supply their backgrounds.

They reported that shortly after Ben graduated from college and Elaine was still attending college, they were “set up” by their parents who were mutual friends. Their initial contact was very rocky because Ben was in a highly compromising relationship that threatened his ability to be with Elaine. This compromise involved an “ugly dark secret” about a relationship Ben was currently in and which he could not easily break off. He was, in short, poised for a double bind—to be “punished” for falling in love with Elaine and to be “punished” for not, if he must forfeit her.

At the time they met, Ben was a very lost young graduate, clueless about what to do when he “grew up.” Although his parents were pillars of their community, they appeared to live lives of quiet desperation; however, this fact seemed lost on them. Ben’s perspective about them was consonant with many youths of Ben’s late 1960s counter-culture generation about their parent’s generation. In this context, Ben was sorely in search not only of an identity, but for a partner who would, perhaps for the first time, both really understand and accept him in terms of whatever his emerging identity would become.8

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8Emblematic of Ben’s and Elaine’s generational position are the Jefferson Airplane lyrics from their song, “Someone to Love”:
Elaine’s family was as equally successful as Ben’s, although her parents were both serious alcoholics. The regal lifestyle in which she had been raised was a frightening sham, leaving her feeling largely unprotected. Consequently, she longed for a truly idealizable partner, one suffused with the values of her 1960s generation, who would both protect and unequivocally adore her.

Despite Ben’s initial efforts to rebuff Elaine, the two rapidly fell in love; a love that would have flourished but for the introduction of Ben’s ugly secret—that is, that he had been seduced into an affair with Elaine’s mother prior to meeting Elaine. Predictably, discovery of this secret instantly severed their tie. Desperate for Elaine, Ben interrupted her wedding to Carl, and whisked her away by city bus to parts unknown. Although momentarily giddy in their abandonment and rebellion, Ben and Elaine quickly realized that they had made a terrible mistake. Within 1 week, Elaine left Ben and returned to Carl, begging his forgiveness. They were married 3 months later, and within 3 years had given birth to two daughters. Carl appeared to be the Rock of Gibraltar that Elaine believed she needed to wed; but, as Emerson noted, “consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds” (BrainyQuote, 2011). Quickly, she began to privately ruminate about the quiet death she was suffering at the price of her security. As soon as she became aware that her daughters would be “leaving” her in adolescence and eventually going to college, she enrolled in law school.

Meanwhile, Ben fled his and Elaine’s debacle and joined the Peace Corps in Zimbabwe, where he met Ruth. The twinship of Ben’s and Ruth’s shared social values initially made him think that he had finally met his life mate. Accordingly, they were married by a tribal chief, and discovered quickly thereafter that Ruth was pregnant with their son Ben, Jr.

Questioning whether the politically tumultuous Zimbabwe was a healthy place to raise their baby boy, they returned to the United States, and both enrolled in Harvard Law School. Thereafter, however, their relationship devolved into seemingly ceaseless arguments that belabored feminist rights and a host of one-up, one-down “morality plays” that eroded

When the truth is found to be lies
and all the joy within you dies
don’t you want somebody to love
don’t you need somebody to love
wouldn’t you love somebody to love
you better find somebody to love.
their intimacy. Because of their concern for their respective children’s well-being, both Ben and Elaine each stayed in their lackluster marriages until their children had successfully entered college. In the meantime, each privately pondered the whereabouts of the other.

Seven years prior to entering treatment, Ben and Elaine accidentally reconnected in Las Vegas at a conference of trial lawyers. They instantly realized that they were still madly in love. They carried on an affair from separate cities until it was impossible to endure any longer. Each got divorced, and they finally married one another. Although the passion in their relationship remained high even as they entered treatment, the unresolved elements of their numerous disquieting beginnings was once again surfacing, threatening their continued well-being.

STEP 4: “AWAKENING THE SLUMBERING GIANT”—EACH PARTNER IS VULNERABLE TO REENACTING THEIR CONFLICTUAL PASTS IN THE SERVICE OF MAINTAINING THEIR SENSE OF SELF-ORGANIZATION (“TRYING TO REMAIN THE SAME WHILE CHANGING”)

Earlier versions of my Six Step model of conjoint treatment (Ringstrom, 1994, 1998) have understandably been critiqued as privileging the selfobject dimension of the transference, suggesting that if each partner could learn to provide the requisite selfobject functions the other requires, the relationship would abound in greater harmony. This position was also embraced by Shaddock (1998, 2000), Leone (2001), and Livingston (2007).

Although this initial formulation (Ringstrom, 1994) seemed to serve the model well, I began to notice how often partners frequently became significant participants in actively insuring that they would not get the kind of attuned responsiveness that they ostensibly seemed to both need and desire. As Philip Bromberg (1998) wrote, patients sometimes appear to be “trying to remain the same while changing.” Why is this, we must ask?

In one respect, this involves a conservation of self model, not unlike that discussed in object relations theory. In this model, we are “destined” to reenact past relational styles, sometimes in the hope that they will change, but equally as often for the security of the familiarity of a known mode of relating. This line of thinking is supported by a host of adages such as “better the devil you know,” as well as “be careful what you wish for.”
In contrast to what Step 1 might be thought of as the “dread to repeat” negative repetitive transference experiences, Step 4 takes up the “dread not to repeat” theme. Thus, the essence of Step 4 involves pointing out how the partners engage one another in “self-fulfilling prophecies,” often referred to as enactments; or, as I prefer, episodes of “mutual inductive identification” (Ringstrom, 2007, 2008b). These are states wherein that which cannot find expression in the explicit verbal realm of discourse must become implicitly enacted (Ringstrom, 2008a; Shimmerick, 2008) by each partner, inducing the other to take on some part of one another’s “scripts.” Such “enactments” (Aron, 2003; Bass, 2003; Black, 2003) generally emerge out of a profound sense of threat wherein archaic self-states are adaptively activated to protect other self-states.

Ben’s and Elaine’s “scripts” manifested in their respective repetitive transference states. In this manner, each organized their arguments about the fate of the summer home as if the other was a pernicious version of their parents. Seeing Ben’s desire to keep the summer home as living out an irresponsible, nostalgic “pipedream,” Elaine viciously attacked his rationale. Because shame of the kind that Ben experienced temporarily impairs one’s ability to mentalize (Fonagy et al., 2002; Fonagy, 2003; Wallin, 2007), Ben faltered in his attempts to garner a credible defense of his position. His unusually inchoate response, however, unfortunately closely resembled the kind of irrational counter-arguments Elaine suffered throughout childhood from her alcoholic parents.

Meanwhile, Elaine’s powerfully “reasonable” arguments awakened in Ben the dread of being logically out-gunned by his ever rational parents. Tormented that he could not effectively fight back and beset by what he felt as a requirement to pathologically accommodate Elaine lest he lose her, he lied. Instead, he claimed that he had called a real estate agent in Colorado and put the house on the market, when he had not. His hope, he later confessed, was that after a number of months of the house not selling, he could persuade Elaine that they should just keep it.

Ben’s overt deception can also be seen as having its roots in the more daily and routine self-deceptions and adaptive skepticisms that embody familial relations (Slavin, 2007). Caught in a lie, and given the special circumstances of what secrets meant to Ben and Elaine given the origins of their relationship, Elaine threatened him with divorce, resulting in their seeking treatment.

Of the many considerations under Step 4, an especially critical one is for each partner to learn to “own” their own dysfunctional style of
reenacting the past, especially so that they can find alternative ways of staying true to themselves in the face of having to initially disappoint one another.

During their initial argument about the sale of the summer home, neither Ben nor Elaine could remain true to themselves and also respond to each other as each would have naturally wished. This clash inevitably provoked what Benjamin (1992) referred to as the collapse of intersubjective relating—that is, the quality of split complementarity wherein the position of dominance “rules” the mode of “mentalization.” Mentalization refers to the means by which each partner reflects on the meaning of his or her experience while recognizing that their partner also does the same, although often in both different and similar ways.

There are many ways in which this might happen. Referencing just one, I find that when partners are unable to communicate their own needs, as well as recognizing those of the other, I sometimes adopt something of an “alter ego” role, speaking for each. In so doing, I share some recognition of each of their selfobject longings, as well as their reactions to their failures. Of course, whenever I do this, I check out with each of them how accurately my statement captures their sensibility.

For example, behaving as Ben’s alter ego, I might say, “Look Elaine, I think that I can finally understand why you want me to sell the summer home, particularly in light of your fears about our economic priorities. I want to work this out too, but I need in some way for you to understand the magnitude of grief that is awakened in me at the mere thought of selling the summer home... no matter how ridiculous it seems. Because selling it extracts a price from me that is bigger than even what I am clear about myself.”

Similarly, I might say on Elaine’s behalf, “Ben, I am beginning to understand, that I really have never truly appreciated what this place means to you. Probably because I have been so worried about money. Frankly, I am eager to press forward with our dreams and not to so much cling to the securities of our past, either financial or emotional ones. I want us to create something new. But I also know that I can be very pushy. I’m starting to get that I did all of this in a manner that was doomed to blow

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9Although Benjamin (1992) did not specify the role of “mentalization” in her idea about the “dominant’s” position, she informed me (personal communication, 2001) that this connection made total sense here when I presented it at a conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2001 (Ringstrom, 2001b).
up.” Of course, long before couples can articulate this kind of exchange, they can still immeasurably profit from having this modeled for them. This demonstration of potential communication compels them to take up what interferes with such mutual recognition and, furthermore, what might be at stake for them in sabotaging their intimacy.

It can also be helpful for the therapist to address the role that divergent multiple self-states can entail. For example, although much of Elaine’s and Ben’s relationship involved a kind of reflexive supportiveness of one another, there remained certain split-off and disavowed, more “ruthless” aspects of their characters. Elaine, for example, could quite ruthlessly be thoughtless about the meaning of Ben’s summer home, whereas Ben could be equally ruthless in dismissing Elaine’s interests. “Normalizing” such reactions goes far in sucking the power out of the “morality” gambits in which their relationship could founder in righteous argumentation. This can foment in a deeper appreciation of Sullivan’s (1953) admonishing “that we are all more simply human than otherwise.”

**Step 5: The Development of Each Partners’ Capacity to be Introspective in the Presence of the Other**

Step 5 helps accentuate each one’s sense of ownership of his or her part in the relationship’s conflicts, as well as better negotiating conflicts between his or her own multiple self-states. This augments each one’s capacity to recognize and surrender to what is “non-negotiable” within oneself.

As partners take more responsibility for sabotaging getting what they want (Step 4), they gradually also can become more reflective. This is an exciting step in the treatment, evidencing lessened defensiveness, along with each partner’s increased curiosity about their own contribution to their problems. Such movement, however, is not without considerable risk. It can make the partners more vulnerable to one another, which can also lead to greater volatility. Step 5, therefore, takes up how their volatility may lead to their attempts to avoid examining their respective roles through, instead, engaging in unconscious collusion. Such collusions manifest in what Benjamin (2004) referred to as a “negative third,” what Ogden (1994) referred to as the “subjugating third,” and what I have referred to as the “noxious third” (Ringstrom, 2001b). Step 5 illustrates how the relationship having a “mind” of its own manifests in an interpersonal form of resistance. Frequently, this resistance takes form in the obfuscation of
meaning-making (B. Pizer, 2003; Ringstrom, 2003). I have found that, at such times, it is important to stop talking to each partner directly and to instead “speak” more to their relationship as if to a “mindful entity” itself.

Doing this involves my staring at the space between them and saying something like, “This relationship seems to be telling us that it is simply not a safe enough place to be vulnerable with one’s feelings. That one does so at one’s own potential peril. Your ‘relationship’ is protecting each of you by obscuring any kind of conversation that risks genuine connection, especially in the context of what you fear will happen if that connection fails.” Communicating with the “relationship” instead of directly with either of the partners may seem a little “crazy.” However, over the past decades of experience with this form of intervention, I have never had one couple challenge me about it. Instead, they consistently calm down, at least for the moment, and cease attacking one another. In trying to understand this reaction, I have concluded that talking to the relationship instead of to either partner individually mitigates either feeling singled out and shamed and blamed.

On top of this, however, speaking to the relationship having a mind of its own awakens a third point of view in which the therapist embodies the position of the “third.” Hopefully, over time, this is a vantage point with which the couple comes to identify—one that eventually becomes a part of their communication repertoire long after treatment has ended. This vantage point, of course, embodies the intersubjective position of mutual recognition wherein the subjectivities of both partners can be reflected on, and it is this capacity that is particularly essential for them to be able to invoke during the very moments in which their views appear most incompatible. Meanwhile, commenting on the absence of safety in the couple is also a way of meta-commenting on what must occur for the treatment to work. In essence, the therapist communicates, “Look, safety is not going to happen on its own. You are both going to have to make it happen and, if you don’t, you are also in some way personally choosing to sabotage this relationship.”

The ideas that organize Step 5 build on the multiple self-states theory instantiated in Step 1 (Stern, 1997; Bromberg, 1998, 2006; Davies, 1998, 2004, 2005). As Bromberg (1998) noted, our analytic patients begin to grasp a deepening “capacity to feel like oneself while being many.” Progression to Step 5 solidifies how multiple self-states refer to the very normal processes of dissociation that human beings are heir to, as well as
those arising from trauma. Dissociation can shield us from the incompatibility of many of our self-states, as well as incompatibilities with those of others. Thus, the phenomena in Step 5 is an extension of the overall process of normalizing what Bromberg (1998) called “standing in the spaces” (i.e., finding a means of “standing” between disparate self-states such that none have to be denied). It is from this point of complex recognition that the multiple self-states that each partner embodies can be better negotiated (S. Pizer, 1998).

Finally, Step 5 is a prelude to 6 because axiomatic to this model is that it is highly difficult to negotiate the normal conflicts arising in the interpersonal realm of a relationship when one is unable to recognize, much less negotiate, conflicts arising from within oneself. In this manner, I frequently say to patients that it is virtually impossible to “negotiate between that which has not yet been negotiated within.”

**Step 6: Each Partner’s Capacity to Attune to and Support Not Only Their Own, But Their Partner’s, Introspection and Personal Growth**

This arises from each partner’s ability to reconcile or surrender to that which is non-negotiable, not only within themselves, but between them. This latter position helps them become better equipped to “bear witness” to the slings and arrows of daily misfortune that will inevitably occupy one or the other’s lives throughout the course of their marriage.

Evidence of the capacity to perform some of the elements designated in Step 6, even if only briefly, becomes a very positive prognostic indicator. In fact, couples who are able work their way back to this step signify their capacity for termination. This capacity further signifies that, despite their intermittent ruptures, the couple has internalized the therapeutic functions of this model. It is also marked by their de-idealization of the therapist, further signifying that the therapeutic function of the model now belongs to them. Of course, this accomplishment may well exceed the goals of many forms of conjoint therapy, and even exceed the wishes of some couples. Psychoanalysis and all its derivative modes of treatment naturally set the bar higher than others. Typically, the profile of couples who work well on Steps 5 and 6 are those exhibiting a nascent search for personal truth. Ben and Elaine, for example, were highly psychologically minded, both having been in individual therapy and even having experienced some couples counseling in their previous marriages.
This raises a common question regarding this model of treatment: Is it necessary for the partners to either be in individual psychotherapy or to have been? My answer is “no.” Individual psychotherapy can be useful; however, sometimes it can be complicating to the point of being destructive to the conjoint treatment. This is especially the case when one of the partner’s individual therapist does not appreciate the intersubjective, relational perspective that this model is based on; or, that the individual therapist concretizes one partner’s grievance against the other by making “wild interpretations” about his or her patient’s spouse in absence of ever having had contact with them.

Meanwhile, I have learned over the past 30 years of experience as a psychoanalyst that many patients are able to quickly adapt to a psychoanalytic mode of treatment in couples therapy that is otherwise impossible for them to achieve in analytically oriented, individual psychotherapy. This is because many patients remain clueless about the construct of transference, especially in relation to their analytically oriented psychotherapist. This makes it exceedingly difficult for them to develop a “transference neurosis” in relation to their analyst from which they can come to grasp central organizing themes regarding their personality. Efforts to encourage such a working alliance can founder in a process that feels very alienating to the patient, if not downright crazy. This is because the analyst inquires about a host of plausible feelings and reactions that the patient might be having toward him or her that the patient simply is not conscious of. Meanwhile, such patients—who might require years to become analytically engaged in developmental and repetitive transference dimensions with their therapist—quickly come face to face with both these dimensions as they instantaneously arise in relation to their spouse. This makes it much easier for the analytically oriented therapist to point out in very convincing and compelling ways.

In addition to these points, I have worked with some couples for whom reaching Steps 5 and 6 remain beyond their reach or, more important, perhaps beyond their interest. Still, this model of treatment has enabled them to internalize a greater capacity to convert “lethal” battles into simple skirmishes while also learning how to become less defensive and to be able to renegotiate more palatable solutions regarding their differences. This has included a greater capacity to take responsibility for their own psychic “realities” as opposed to projecting blame on one another. This capacity is ultimately welcomed by most everyone, even when the deeper soul-searching of Steps 5 and 6 is not their cup of tea. Although
perhaps not achieving the psychoanalytic ideal of “working through,” these patients leave couples therapy with quite a bit to “work with.” This enables them to keep their skirmishes from devolving into their “barroom brawls” of yesteryear.

Meanwhile, couples like Ben and Elaine, who remain nascently curious about themselves and one another, are better equipped to ultimately face what must be seen as non-negotiable. Ben simply could not authentically sell his family summer home—a point that Elaine came to understand. In so doing, however, her surrender deepened Ben’s appreciation of her, in general; and, in particular, made him more responsive to her concerns. As he was quite clever with money, he was able to secure a second line of credit on their existing home while working out a repayment plan that would involve a kind of minimal monthly tapping into their retirement funds without penalty because Ben was eligible to begin to use his retirement funds the following year when he turned age 59.

Being able to tolerate the non-negotiable becomes an aspect of surrendering a position without feeling like one has submitted to the will of the other. It is what replaces the shame and humiliation of submission with the sense of personal efficacy for surrendering an otherwise prideful position. Meanwhile, at any moment I detect submission, I call it into question, pointing out that it will very likely, at some point, “bite the couple in their proverbial ‘relational ass’.” Meanwhile, successful episodes of surrender also facilitate a capacity within the couple to bear witness to the vicissitudes of their existence as life progresses toward death and losses of all kinds (e.g., health, capacity, and relationships).

The radically important function of bearing witness in Step 6 is that when each one can speak of his or her bad affect state in relation to one another and to instead listen to one another without either judging or trying to change the other’s point of view, an uncanny quality emerges—that is, that often the bad affect state turns out to not “sound” as bad as it originally “felt,” and therein ensues enhanced perspective and relief.

In the end, however, to be true to themselves, partners will inevitably continue to step on one another’s toes, and therein the entire cycle of steps is reactivated over and over again. This Six Step model poses a system of ideas about how to not only manage the complexities of a long-term, committed relationship, but to help it turn the crisis of its breakdowns into the opportunities for more structural commitment.
Conjoint Treatment

References


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