Relational Psychoanalytic Perspective on
Couples Psychotherapy

BY

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Much of what I am presenting today is taken from an article that will be published next year in an American journal *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*. The journal edition in which it will be published, was organized by the issue editor, Heather MacIntosh. Heather invited a number of authors of differing perspectives (relational, object relational, classical, self psychological, and intersubjective systems theory) to discuss how our theory influences our approach to psychoanalytic couples therapy. In my case, Heather requested that I write about how a relational psychoanalyst might conceptualize couple’s psychotherapy.

Accepting her request, I thought immediately that one of the best ways of all to illustrate relational psychoanalysis at large is through the lens of working with couples. Indeed, one of the first ideas I often introduce when presenting my model of couple’s treatment is that it immediately demonstrates transference in a manner that is often far more difficult to do in individual psychoanalytic psychotherapy – especially for patients who are largely unfamiliar and therefore more intimidated than intrigued with psychoanalysis.

As an example, I offer the difference between an individual patient’s reaction to my being five minutes late to our session, in which case to explore potential transference reaction, “What are your fantasies about why I am late today?” To the average patient yet familiar with psychoanalytic inquiry, this question may seem a bit “crazy and weird” to him, at least initially. However, if we change this illustration to couple’s therapy and his wife arrives five minutes late, we might see something entirely different. For sake of illustration, let’s imagine that unlike his “mystified” and awkward reaction to my asking him his “fantasy” about my lateness, in couple’s treatment he becomes instantly furious with his wife, in a relatively raw and unfettered manner.

What immediately begins to organize the field of this couple’s session, is what his wife’s “lateness” means to him. That meaning is very likely more congenial to his sensibility than one
posed by his therapist in individual psychotherapy. From his reaction in the couple’s session emerges an investigation of what his historical experience of others lateness has meant to him. Again, this is less about his “fantasy” of what his “strange” individual therapist is up to, than about his raw experience in the couple’s therapy session.

Playing with this illustration further, let’s imagine that we learn that when his was a boy, his mother was always late picking him up from school. Sitting alone, as the sun was setting, with little prediction of her arrival time, understandably filled him with dread, fear, and apprehension. Eventually, however, in a flagging attempt at coping, he assumed a kind of dissociated depression, though not it is finally surfacing in rage towards his wife.

This, I hope we can agree, offers unimpeachable evidence of his palpable transference reaction to his wife’s lateness. Meanwhile, since this is couples therapy, we can then get into what her chronic lateness is about. Perhaps in her narrative, we learn that it represents a kind of oppositional transference to her father for his having berated her constantly in her youth. In sum, we are immediately into the domain of the transferences of both partners along with how this is becoming systematically orchestrated in a vicious circle in their relationship, i.e. her lateness triggers his rage, and his rage further exacerbates her being oppositionally late.

Returning to the contemporary topic of Relationality, we know that a primary issue facing 21st Century Psychoanalysis is, that from birth to death, every aspect of human psychology is deeply and inextricably embedded in relationships. This includes what goes on in the actual interactional realm, for sure. But even more so, it involves what is going on in our imaginings, along with how we represent our sense of “self” in relationship to others, as they do to us.
In the case of the husband and wife, the issue of lateness only has poignancy because when it manifests in their relationship, it triggers a host of negative images and imaginings from their respective pasts. So, while all relationships operate in the facticity of the here-and-now, in couple’s treatment, it is much more about the “fantasies” that are getting stirred up arising from their interaction. This makes a treatment approach like the one I am presenting today, quintessentially one that pivots on psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Perhaps best conceived of as a “field theory” (Stern, 2015; Ringstrom, in press) relational psychoanalysis presents an array of concepts relevant to what happens when it is viewed through the lens of such ideas as: recognition theory, intersubjectivity, processes of dissociation, multiple self-states, enactments, as well as what happens as the therapist's observational perch shifts back and forth from observer-interpreter, to participant-observer, to observer-participant, to participant-participant. This short list of concepts becomes the medium through which all of the key ideas of psychoanalysis evolve from being a predominantly individual psychology, the so-called “one-person psychology” into a “field theory” now conceived in terms of a “multi-person psychology.”

It was from this relational vantage point then, that I developed my model of couple’s therapy found in my book *A Relational Psychoanalytic Approach to Couples Psychotherapy*. (2014) The book was the evolution of my thinking and practice for over four decades. That sojourn began with my dissatisfaction with psychoanalysis when I was being trained in graduate school in the early 1970’s which catapulted me into the ideas of family systems theory. For over a decade and a half, I tried to figure out which of the family systems theories best fit for me as there was considerable disagreement among them. For instance, during that period, family systems theory spread across a long continuum of; on one side, those theories so wedded to
“systems” that the very construct of “self” was anathema. On the other side, were theories that remained entrenched in the concept of self. These latter theories were wed to the importance of struggling with what it means to be one’s self in a system. One that embodies influences that are forever shaping, challenging, and in pathological circumstances, even threatening the existence of one’s sense of self.

In my mind, the more strident systems thinkers went too far in arrogating sense of self as something quaint if not somewhat “delusional”. Especially when compared to the inexorable machinations of the contextual system. Their emphasis undermined for me what it means to be an individual in a system. That is, for one to feel impassioned, to create and pursue one’s dreams while also learning to face the vicissitudes of one’s own existentiality and ontology. Ultimately, to also face the inherent confusions of facing one’s mortality.

In short, I could not abandon the sense of what being one’s self entailed, no matter how confounding that became in the face of the power of a system’s perspective. For me, a system without a concept of self was simply unacceptable. Still, whatever one’s experience of self means, it also can never be fully realized unless it finds its place in a system, especially in relationship to the one in which it developed. Hence, self without a sense of how it’s embedded in a system was also simply unacceptable.

This led to my contemplation of three critical themes relevant to relational psychoanalysis in general, but especially to the model of couple’s psychotherapy as I was conceiving. These themes take up first, self-actualization in a long term committed relationship, followed by the second theme of the necessity of mutual recognition versus mutual negation (for self-actualization to be able to occur). Finally, came a third theme
regarding something quite ineffable that occurs in long term relationships, which I refer to as the relationship having a mind of its own.

The organization of these three themes enabled me to finally create a viable relational psychoanalytic approach to couple’s psychotherapy. One that truly suited my relational sensibility. What follows is a thumbnail sketch of what each of these themes represents, after which, will come key concepts that emerge from them in the form of a Six Step, systematic, relational psychoanalytic approach to couple’s psychotherapy.

The first theme, the “actualization of self-experience in an intimate relationship”, traces its roots to the commencement of the Industrial Revolution over 200 years ago. Due to the explosion in technology and manufacturing the United States and in Europe, major migrations of populations began moving from the agrarian life of the countryside into a metropolitan life where employment in manufacturing and all adjacent industries (for example finance and banking) were in an explosive ascendancy. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the proportion of agrarian life to that of metropolitan was 90% in the countryside and 10% in the city. But by the turn of the 20th century, those proportions in many places literally reversed. This created a titanic turn in the culture of the family.

With the massive disruption of the agrarian community based multigenerational family life, marriage shifted from a social arrangement between families, to more of a personal choice. This meant that “mate selection”, which heretofore was almost entirely socially arranged between families, became a matter of choice between partners. With this latter shift, mate selection suddenly became powerfully influenced by desire. The Romantic Age in art and literature had also begun, and of course, as soon as mate selection became a matter of desire, the world of the unconscious mind became a huge factor in making that choice. Let us not forget that
the Latin word for desire is libido! It should be no surprise that psychoanalysis would come into being precisely at the turn of the 19th into the 20th Century.

The “actualization of self-experience within an intimate relationship” refers to how partners are drawn together out of a longing (desire) to accomplish something incomplete in their development. This manifests in the unconscious conviction that: “With this partner, I hope that I will be able to actualize that which heretofore I have not been able to. However, with this partner, I also anticipate dread revisiting some aspect of my past. Indeed, something that I wish I could overcome.” Of course, the ideas that are central to this first theme arise from Stephen Mitchell’s (1993) work on “hope and dread” along with many others in the relational canon.

Another key idea in this first theme, is that much of what we regard as self-actualization must occur in relationship to others. By this I mean our most optimally fulfilling experiences of self-actualization usually require our partner’s recognition of them. Thus, critical concepts to the actualization of self-experience include an experience of agency and authorship in one’s life, both which necessitate recognition (Benjamin, 1988) to feel fully realized. In consequence, that which is hoped for can put one in peril through misrecognition. This makes the hope to reconstitute one’s growth or to repair what was broken as uniquely counterbalanced with the dread that one’s hopes will be crushed leading to ‘reinjury’, if not possibly retraumatization.

The second theme of mutual recognition versus mutual negation, is deeply indebted to Jessica Benjamin’s concept of intersubjectivity in which, mutual recognition represents an evolutionary step in psychoanalytic theorizing. Key to the process of repairing ruptures, marital dyads need to also develop the intersubjective capacity to move beyond subject-to-object relating to subject-to-subject relating. That is, from one human being (the “object”) servicing or perhaps frustrating the needs of the other (the “subject”) whether in fact or fantasy. Relational
intersubjectivity involves the cultivation of each partner’s nascent curiosity about their own and their mate’s subjectivity, hence subject-to-subject relating.

Without this, marital relations potentially devolve into patterns of “dominance and submission”, which Benjamin refers to as “split complementarity.” Mutual-recognition, however, does not aspire to the “twinship” myth of perpetual “mutual attunement.” Indeed, mutual recognition makes no sense seen independently of its dialectical position with “mutual negation.” In this manner, we are intrinsically mired in the fundamental “paradox of recognition.” Embodied in it is, the perpetual dialectical tension between the assertion of self versus the recognition of other. The former entails the self-centered aspect of self-actualization (sometimes being “ruthless”, i.e. without focusing one’s care and concern upon the other over one’s self needs and desires) juxtaposed with the other’s need for one’s recognition (involving being ruthless). Being “ruthless” or “ruthful” readily becomes complicated in the dialectics of self-interest versus affiliation.

This then leads to the third theme which is, the relationship having a mind of its own. With the sweeping impact of general systems theory in the 1970s, psychoanalysis underwent a massive paradigm shift. There was no longer any place for the linearity of “cause and effect” thinking. The fundamental premise of systems theory is that “everything influences everything”. Hence cause-and-effect ideas such as “drives”, no longer held sway in psychoanalysis which gradually shifted from seeing “drives” as so fundamentally causal, to seeing them more akin to motivational systems that arise or are inhibited in relational contexts. (Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage, 1992 and 1996) This cemented our understanding that all human relationships are circularly causal, meaning inextricably mutually influential and mutually regulated.
By the 1990s, general systems theory was becoming updated with nonlinear dynamic systems theory, more commonly known as complexity theory. It is key ideas from complexity theory that establish some foundation to the third theme of the relationship having a mind of its own, a foundation upon which many psychoanalytic ideas are built. Briefly, here are a few ideas from complexity theory. For example, “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” (the so-called “butterfly effect”iii) wherein is it impossible to determine what the initial condition was that set the system under examination in motion. Extrapolating this principle to my topic, notwithstanding partners tendency to do so, it is pretty much fruitless to assign blame in a relationship because whatever happened initially, that may have given rise to the attribution of blame, is fundamentally indeterminate. This becomes important in helping couples undo their binary tendency to create a system of blamer and blamed, which will be taken up in greater detail, shortly.

Complex systems also can, in highly unpredictable ways, completely change at “points of criticality”, or so-called “tipping points”. That is, the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back.” In these and other ways complex systems prove to be dynamic, fluid, and highly unpredictable. They are also reactive to “perturbations” which involve the occurrence of things that are powerfully disruptive to the normative operations of any system.

In developing the third theme, the relationship having a mind of its own, several important psychoanalytic ideas occurred to me that readily connect to complexity theory. First among these, is Thomas Ogden’s (1994) concept of the psychoanalytic third - his model of intersubjectivity - wherein the thoughts of each partner inextricably influence one another in a process of intimate co-creation such that neither can really lay exclusive claim to what was created between them. “Thirdness”, relates to how two subjects’ minds play-off-of-and-with
And if we think of a “novel, i.e. a book” as a metaphor for a marriage, the quality of “thirdness” in any marriage is measured by how well that “it” is “co-authored”. Divorce statistics exceeding 50% of marriages in the United States, indicate how many of these “novels” are so “poorly written” they have to be abandoned (ergo leading to divorce).

When talking about “thirdness” in psychotherapy, Ogden states, the therapist most often represent becomes the “subjugating third,” wherein she “subjugates” her mind to that of the patient’s. Ogden notes this is the outgrowth of the asymmetrical nature of their roles. The therapist is the “helper” and the patient is the “helped”. This means, the bulk of attention is directed to assisting the patient.

The position of the subjugating third in long-term intimate relationships, e.g. marriage, can be quite a bit trickier. Rather than subjugating one’s subjectivity by choice, one can feel like one must submit to the other’s domination. Elsewhere, I have called this a kind of “negative thirdness” (Ringstrom, 2001) something tantamount to Benjamin’s idea of “split complementarity.” This of course was alluded to above in the second theme of mutual recognition versus mutual negation. The quality of “thirdness” in any relationship depends on how effectively the two subjects are at collaborating and negotiating from the positions of their unique, optimally symmetrical perspectives.

All of this notwithstanding, there are also circumstances in which the achievement of “thirdness” sometimes requires the capacity for surrender. That is, because sometimes in the length of a long-term intimate relationship, there are certain issues that simply are not up for negotiation. Obviously, the circumstances can become mired in the “split complementarity of dominance and submission, of the experience of “the doer and the done to” (Benjamin, 2004, 2018) in which paradoxically both partners experience themselves as the “submissive”, the
“done to”, the “victim”. It is precisely in these circumstances that the capacity to surrender can become critical. But this gets really tricky, since as Ghent (1990) argued, submission and surrender, can look very much alike. And yet, they are quite different with the former entailing something of a masochistic position whereas the latter is informed more by a process of “letting go” of something.

An easy way to distinguish between submission and surrender is found in the distinction between the prepositions “to” and “of”. In submission, we feel like we have submitted “to” another, whereas in surrender we feel like we have surrendered something “of” ourselves in which we have felt caught in its grip, but now feel liberated.

For example, a husband is entrenched in a very powerful opposing stance with his wife about how they are raising their teenage son. She experiences him as being domineering and herself as having to be submissive. However, after considerable reflection, he discovers that his stance is less about something what he really believes, than some feeling that emerges in identification with how his father raised him. This insight, enables him to achieve a position of his own, which, as it turns out, is much closer to his wife’s than the one he was taking when he was so identified with his father. His surrender led to a shift from their “binary” position of “your way or mine” to one of “thirdness” involving “our way.”

Hopefully, it is evident how these three themes are intimately linked to one another. We enter relationships hoping our self-actualization will be recognized and supported, while dreading it won’t. As such, the quality of our relationship hinges on how well we deal with the “paradox of recognition”. That is, the paradox the couple will go through, during recurrent episodes of “mutual negation” while in search of the repair of their ruptures in the form of “mutual recognition.” In this latter manner, the “thirdness” of the relationship having a mind of
its own can be achieved in manners more wholesome and helpful to the partners than a life mired in the “split complementarity” of perpetual “dominance and submission” and perhaps eventual dissolution of their relationship.

These three themes inform the entire organization of my relational psychoanalytic approach to couple’s psychotherapy. It is an approach outlined in Six Steps, though these are not “steps” in the traditional sense of a linear, hierarchical progression. Instead they are to be thought of as nonlinear, much like the Escher print in Appendix A, wherein one notices two disparate lines of Monks both ascending or descending four stair cases, though paradoxically, they always end up at the lowest (e.g. “first”) landing. The image of nonlinearity involves Escher’s artistic genius, a feat captured by the optical illusion.

My concept of the “six steps” is presented in linear fashion mostly for organizational purposes while less for practicable ones. Elements of any of the Six Steps may at various times during the treatment, not necessarily in the same order.

More to the point, however, the Six Steps do suggest an arch of the treatment which I will elaborate momentarily. The steps of the arch progress until the couple achieves some mastery of the problem that typically brought them into therapy. My experience however, is that once this problem has been satisfactorily addressed, new issues emerge that require cycling through the Six Steps again. This is why patients and therapists alike sometimes lament, “After all this work, it feels like we are back at ‘Step One!” Of course, in a sense that is true, though not something to fret. I encourage them that after they have worked through their focal complaint, it makes room for them to analyze other issues. However, once they have so mastered the model through its repetition of disparate (albeit connected) issue, they will be ready to terminate. I will speak more
about this towards the end of this presentation, but first back to what I mean by an arch of treatment.

The arch of treatment, begins symmetrically (involving the first three steps) and ends asymmetrically (involving the last three). This idea comes from James Grotstein (1997) in which he posited that all psychotherapy should begin symmetrically, though end, asymmetrically. By symmetrically, Jim meant that our patients need to experience our developing a powerful identification with the chief concern(s) that brought them to therapy. This involves in engaging in a deeply empathic manner conveying the therapist’s understanding of what the partner’s complaints mean to each of them, in language that they can readily understand. Grotstein argued that only under these circumstances can patients feel safely bonded enough to the therapist to truly divulge what they would need to. This includes an openness to the arise of unconscious material as well as to become vulnerable to the vicissitudes of change they may have to face.

Grotstein also argued however, that therapy must end asymmetrically, and by that he meant it must go beyond simply corroborating our understanding of the patient’s point of view, the primary function of symmetry. Grotstein averred that crucial asymmetry involves asserting, e.g. “marking” (Fonagy, et. al., 2002) the potentiality and necessity of different points of view in relation to the partners’ complaints. Although Grotstein was not writing about couple’s therapy per se, his assertions are equally meaningful to the therapeutic endeavor of working with any long-term intimately engaged couple. Following this arch, I posit, once again for emphasis, that the first three steps of my approach are largely embodied in the symmetrical aspect of treatment, while, the second three steps embody more the movement towards the asymmetrical. This takes us to my delineation of each of the Six Steps.
Pursuant to the *symmetrical* objective of forming a powerful identification with each partner’s experience regarding what brought them to treatment, **Step One** focuses on the therapist’s *attunement* to each partner’s subjectivity in a manner that seeks to instill *hope, perspective, and a possibility of renewed growth*. Step One is based primarily on principles from theory and practice derived from Self Psychology and Intersubjective Systems Theory. These theories emphasize that psychoanalytic psychotherapy be guided by the therapist’s engagement in an *empathic/introspective method*. This involves the therapist’s focussing her exquisite attunement on capturing - in everyday terms – that which Stolorow, et al., refer to as the *reparative, developmental, selfobject dimension* of each one’s transference versus the *repetitive, dreaded, resistive dimension* of each.

In a comparable manner, Tolpin (2002) referred to these bipolar dimensions as belonging on a continuum of what she called the “total transference experience”. Tolpin described this continuum as embodying a “forward edge” and a “trailing edge” of the composite transference experience. The “forward edge” is analogous to Stolorow’s “reparative, developmental, *selfobject*” transference while the “trailing edge” approximates his “repetitive, resistive dimension.” Transference in both treatment paradigms is understood as involving the fundamental organization of every individual’s sense of self in relation to their sense of the other, as well as what they imagine the other feels about them. These ideas of transference are not as simple as they may seem. That’s because the system of transferences also includes that of the therapist, commonly referred to as the two dimensions of the therapist’s countertransference.

As if matters were not complicated enough, *relational psychoanalysis* also sees our personality as a *composite of multiple self-states*. As Philip Bromberg (1998) put it, “we feel like
one, while being many.” This becomes a far more essential idea in the asymmetrical side of the arch, though frequently I allude to the idea of multiple self-states very early in treatment.

Nevertheless, it is in the therapist’s capacity to identify the respective “forward edges and trailing edges” of each partner’s complaint, that the theme of their respective “hope and dread” is revealed. In this manner, the therapist not only develops a powerful identification with each of their experiences of “hope and dread”, but even more importantly, also powerfully demonstrates what is happening that is activating their states of transference. To do so, she points out how the “forward” edge (the hopeful longings) of each partner’s transference triggers one another’s “trailing” edges (the dreaded experience), rapidly linking their experience of “hope” with one of “dread”, in a circularly reinforcing fashion.

**Steps Two and Three**, augment what is undertaken in **Step One**.

**Step Two** is profoundly ensconced in the epistemological idea of “perspectival realism” wherein we must accede to the idea that there is actually something we are all relating to that we call “reality”. That it is something that we agree truly exists, notwithstanding the fact that our subjective experiences of “it” can differ mightily. Simultaneously however, we must recognize that whatever that “it” is that we are referring to as “reality”, is “something” that no one can apprehend in totality. At best, each of us can only have our unique perspectival “slice of it.” Hence, differences in our perspectives are both abundant and yet completely expectable.

This then, is the essential rub of human nature and relationality. To varying degrees, we agree or disagree about our respective perspectives - that which we collectively call “reality.” The commonality of disagreements in couple’s treatment underscore why I speak of it as often involving a “war of epistemologies.” In the most extreme cases, where differences in the points of view about what is “true” and “real” are of great importance, partners can end up feeling that
their very sanity is being called into question. Each partner can find them self in a conflict Jody Davies (2003) described when each one feels that, “To feel sane I must forgo love and to feel loved, I must forgo my sanity.”

The issue of perspectivalism is not only isolated to the perspectives of the partners, but includes the degree to which the therapist’s perspective culminates in her countertransference, “conjunctions and disjunctions” with her patients’ perspectives. Conjunctive countertransference, entails the therapist’s subjective point of view being so correspondent with that of one of the partners that it obstructs her being able to recognize, much less, assert meaningful difference. To invoke an English idiom, she becomes unable to “see the forest for the trees.” Meanwhile, disjunctive countertransference involves there being such a degree of difference between the therapist and one of the partner’s perspectives, that they are unable to find any common ground.

In couple’s psychotherapy, it is normal for conjunctive and disjunctive countertransference to arise. What is critical, however, is for the therapist to openly embrace it when it occurs. Not doing so can lead to the partner in the disjunctive position to threaten to terminate the therapy or to submit to becoming pathologically accommodating thereafter engaging in a kind of pseudo-treatment that leads the therapy into impasse. However, when the therapist openly acknowledges her biases, she begins to demonstrate how such controversy can be taken up in very constructive ways, that are not yet a part of the partners’ repertoire.

The essence of Step Two then, is the cultivation of an atmosphere more committed to curiosity, particularly with respect to the illumination of, collaboration of, and negotiation of, the couple’s differing perspectives. A key part of the symmetrical arch of the treatment approach, is
the obviation of the partners tendency to devolve into the “split complementarity” of “dominance versus submission” alluded to in the Second Theme of the approach.

Background material accumulated in Step Three augment the conscious attunement oriented aspect of the symmetrical process, as it is enhanced by a host of ideas from psychoanalysis and other social sciences which help us better understand key elements of each partner’s upbringing as it pertains to an enriched understanding of each partner’s subjective perspective. Gathering data Step Three of each partners development may occur through in vivo interaction in the “here and now” of the treatment, or, deliberate history taking sessions as described in my book.

Key ideas about each partner’s background include their capacity for “mentalization”, their exhibition of various degrees of “secure and insecure” attachment patterns, their use of “implicit versus explicit” memory systems, as well as the influence of both culture and gender. An example of the influences of culture, might entail the degree to which partners are from “collectivist” versus “individualist” cultures. All of these ideas are taken up in detail in Step Three of my book.

It is with the advent of the second half of the arch, when the treatment switches from symmetry to asymmetry, that we see the introduction of the “relational turn” in Steps Four through Six. While the depth of empathic attunement enables the therapist’s powerful identification with each partner, to some degree, the treatment may become constrained by the couples conscious “stories” about what they believe their problems involve.

Before delving into the “relational turn” it should be noted that considerable work can be accomplished in the symmetry of Steps One through Three, and that sometimes couples find this work sufficient. They are satisfied in their having developed a more profound sense of their
own subjectivity as well as that of their partner’s. And, as a result, they find that they have become better equipped to collaborate and negotiate their relationship on this basis. This becomes sufficient for them to terminate.

While the symmetrical half of the treatment arch is necessary, for most couples it is insufficient. That is because, the symmetrical phase leaves on the “editing room floor” dissociated intrapsychic material. From the relational psychoanalytic vantage point, this involves the unconscious material of dissociated multiple self-states that typically become revealed in the form of enactments. Frequently these enactments, can only come into play after the symmetrical portion of the treatment has made the work safe enough and connected enough for more disturbing unconscious material to be dealt with. Further complicating this process, involves the therapist being caught up in the enactments sometimes through dissociations of her own.

From the relational perspective, however, enactments are not seen as “missteps”, as much as presenting the treatment with opportune moments. In the latter case, they unveil “unthought known’s” (Bollas, 1989), and “unformulated experiences” (Stern, 1997). Dissociated self-states can emerge in the experience of “not-me states”. These may involve experiencing something that does not feel like it is “of me” but clearly, some part of me, senses that “it” is. It is through the illumination of these states, that their place in the totality of each partner’s personality begins to make sense. As Bromberg intones, this moves the therapeutic process from each partners’ dissociation to the realization of their respective intra-subjective conflicts.

All of this is what makes Step Four appear like the “awakening of the ‘slumbering giants’” within the treatment process. Compared to the symmetrical side of the arch being about the patients “dread of repeating negative transference”, the asymmetrical “relational turn” involves the “dread of not repeating it.” The latter necessity relates to the following axiom:
“That, partners cannot authentically negotiate between one another (intersubjectively), that which they have not negotiated within themselves (intrasubjectively).”

This brings us to **Step Five** which takes up the recognition and negotiation of conflicts between each partner’s *multiple self-states* which have not been reckoned with. We might refer to this as the intrapsychic, or “intrasubjective” illumination of the treatment model. This step entails the enrichment of each partner’s capacity for *self-actualization* through enhanced introspection into their conflicts. And, what is especially compelling, is that they do so in the actual presence of the other. This work involves transforming “dissociated self-states” into “distributed ones” (Pizer, 1998) or what I have referred to as the work of illuminating *multiple self-states* evolves into something of a “‘working’ committee of the mind”. An analogous space in which the conflicts between *self-states* are finally recognized, making space for their *collaborating and negotiating* positions representative of something resembling a composite “voice” of the *multiple self-states*.

It is through each partner’s increased sense of ownership of the multiplicity of their personality, as well as in facing certain conflicted aspects of their sense of self, that they become fortified to pursue more authentic engagements with one another. Furthermore, that through this, they are vastly better equipped to *collaborate and negotiate* including reckoning with aspects of themselves that cannot be negotiated and therefore may require assuming a place of “surrender” as elaborated in the third theme, *the relationship having a mind of its own*.

As progress is made in the work of the conflictual aspects of each partner’s *intra-subjective* mind, we begin to see each one’s capacity to attune to and support one another’s introspection and personal growth. This movement in **Step Five**, is the precursor to **Step Six**, the setting of the stage for greater *intersubjective* collaboration and negotiation of their conflicts.
Finally, in the case of certain irreconcilable differences, it enhances their capacity to reconcile and to facilitate a sense of personal surrender, without slipping into the complementarity of submission to feeling dominated.

In **Step Six**, the concept of the therapist as representative of “thirdness” - the crucial “third” point of view throughout the treatment - becomes fully crystalized. In Step Six, we see that it has been in the role of the therapist’s “thirdness” that she has been especially effective in facilitating the resolution of a variety of binaries that heretofore would have fixated the couple in the “dominance and submission” of complementarity. That is, their history of arguments that have devolved into *either/or’s* and not *both/and’s*.

The latter tend to degenerate into irreconcilable “black and white” arguments over matters such as child rearing, sex, finances, *engagement with their respective families of origin*, sado-masochism and so forth. The concept of “thirdness” creates a perspective wherein both partner’s realize that they are feeling like the “victim” of the other, which imposes upon them a kind of paradox. The only way that they can *both* feel like “victims” is through also recognizing that they *both* are being experienced by each other as “persecutors”. Thirdness emerges when both recognize what it is about them that is being experienced as “persecutory”. That is, what makes the other feel “victimized”. Through this recognition, they begin to see that they are the “same.” That their positions vis-à-vis one another embody both “persecutor” and “victim” which gels in some level of mutual recognition. This enables them to move beyond fixed patterns of treating each other like “objects” to treating each other as “subjects”. Ones that feel recognized irrespective of what still may linger of their perspectival differences. Or as Jessica Benjamin puts it, they move “beyond the ‘doer’ and the ‘done-to’”. (Benjamin, 2004, 2018)
The conclusion of Step Six also serves as a way of thinking about termination, which involves the successful transferring of the therapeutic function of the Six Step model to the couple. This occurs when the couple has sufficiently internalized the steps enough to utilize them on their own. They no longer need to idealize, much less need, to cling to the therapist as the “third”. They are now capable of maintaining “thirdness” on their own.

In all of this, Step Six presages the idea of termination. By the time the couple has gone through the Six Step process a few times they begin to experience an ownership of it, at which point, the therapist and therapy are no longer needed. In the therapist’s place is an experiential “structural entity” for them to refer to when they find themselves once again going down the ugly road of being entrapped in the binary world of “black and white”, “right and wrong”, “good and evil”.

REFERENCES


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i What relational psychoanalysis offers is a kind of meta-theory, a veritable “big tent” in which each contemporary theory of psychoanalysis, for example contemporary versions of Freudian, Kleinian, Object Relational, Self-Psychological, Interpersonal as well as Lacanian and Jungian and more, take up the implications of what it means for all the above metapsychology’s to have become "multi-person" psychological theories of practice – albeit in their own unique ways.


iii Gleick (1987) noted in his book *Chaos: Making A New Science* that meteorologists, who were among the first to make use of chaos theory, otherwise known as complexity theory, posited that theoretically the origins of a hurricane in the Caribbean may well have been started from the flap of a butterfly’s wing in Venezuela.

iv On this point, Goldner (2014) writes: "Indeed, if you've been living and sleeping with your partner for two years (it should be no surprise that we only attached to those we touch), you are now bonded, wound around each other, nervous system to nervous system, and your psychic state is now joint property. You may not be happy, it may not be good, but despite ourselves, it is our human nature, to paraphrase Crosby, stills and Nash, to 'love the one where with.'"

v This perspective, is sometimes referred to as “social constructivism”, or “perspectival constructionism” (though all three differ a bit). Nevertheless, all of them share an epistemological point of view that embodies something of a paradox.
This “thirdness” takes several different forms, notably as Benjamin (2004) wrote, the “one-in-the-third” pertaining to “rhythmicity”, as in “it takes two to tango.” Here, the tango represents a powerful metaphor for how the couple finally learns how to “dance” together in so far as each one’s role is tightly predicated upon following each other’s leads and responses in a manner that creates the aesthetic of their new dance. This contrasts to what Benjamin described as the “third-in-the-one” which entails the processes that mark the partners’ subjective differences, in the context of their burgeoning connectedness.
167. *Ascending and Descending*, 1960
Lithograph, 350 x 265 (13 5/8 x 10 1/4")
Signed and dated: II/60 M.C.