Chapter 10

Conjoint Therapy: An Intersubjective Approach

Jeffrey L. Trop

Several authors (e.g., Lachkar, 1985; Solomon, 1988) have discussed the utility of self-psychological concepts in the psychotherapy of couples. The intent of this chapter is to describe the application of the theory of intersubjectivity to the treatment of couples. It is the thesis of this chapter that disjunctive interactions within couples can be uniformly illuminated by understanding the principles unconsciously organizing the inner experiences of both parties. Before clinically illustrating this thesis, I first review the theoretical framework of intersubjectivity. I then discuss the conjoint therapy of a couple to illustrate the value of an intersubjective approach.

Atwood and Stolorow (1984) described the concepts of intersubjectivity as they have been applied to the psychoanalytic treatment of individual patients:

In its most general form, our thesis . . . is that psychoanalysis seeks to illuminate phenomena that emerge within a specific psychological field constituted by the intersection of two subjectivities—that of the patient and that of the analyst. . . . Psychoanalysis is pictured here as a science of the intersubjective, focused on the interplay between the differently organized subjective worlds of the observer and the observed. The observational stance is always one within, rather than outside, the intersubjective field . . . being observed, a fact that guarantees the centrality of

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introspection and empathy as the methods of observation. . . . Psychoanalysis is unique among the sciences in that the observer is also the observed [pp. 41-42].

And:

Clinical phenomena . . . cannot be understood apart from the intersubjective contexts in which they take form. Patient and analyst together form an indissoluble psychological system, and it is this system that constitutes the empirical domain of psychoanalytic inquiry [p. 64].

In a paper that I coauthored with Atwood and Stolorow (Atwood, Stolorow, and Trop, 1989), we further described the theory of intersubjectivity:

The intersubjectivity concept is in part a response to the unfortunate tendency of classical analysis to view clinical phenomena in terms of processes and mechanisms located solely within the patient. Such an isolating focus fails to do justice to each individual’s irreducible engagement with other human beings and blinds the clinician to the profound ways in which he is himself implicated in the phenomena he observes and seeks to treat. From an intersubjective perspective, phenomena that have been the traditional focus of psychoanalytic investigation are seen not as products of isolated intrapsychic mechanisms, but as forming at the interface between interacting subjectivities. In our previous work, we have shown that an intersubjective viewpoint can illuminate a wide array of clinical issues, including transference and countertransference, resistance, conflict formation, and borderline and psychotic states. . . .
Whether or not . . . intersubjective situations facilitate or obstruct the progress of therapy depends in large part on the extent of the therapist’s capacity to be aware of his own organizing principles. When such reflective self-awareness on the part of the therapist is reliably present, then the correspondence or disparity between the subjective worlds of patient and therapist can be used to promote empathic understanding and insight [pp. 555-556].

Central to the theory of intersubjectivity is the concept of an organizing principle. Atwood and Stolorow (1984) have proposed “that the need to maintain the organization of experience is a central motive in the patterning of human action” (p. 35). Thus, we each have unique organizing principles that automatically and unconsciously shape our experience. Say, for example, that a person is invited to an event where there are unfamiliar people, one of whom immediately turns his back when the person enters the room. Some people may organize such an experience to mean that they are undesirable and repugnant. Others
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turning away as a random occurrence and would not assimilate the
behavior as having a personal meaning regarding their entrance into the
room. Thus, each person will automatically organize experience accord-
ing to the unique psychological principles that unconsciously shape his
or her subjective world. Atwood and Stolorow (1984) further elaborated
their concept of organizing principles as follows:

The organizing principles of a person’s subjective world are themselves
unconscious. A person’s experiences are shaped by his psychological
structures without this shaping becoming the focus of awareness and
reflection. . . . In the absence of reflection, a person is unaware of his role
as a constitutive subject in elaborating his personal reality. The world in
which he lives and moves presents itself as though it were something inde-
pendently and objectively real. The patterning and thematizing of events
that uniquely characterize his personal reality are thus seen as if they
were properties of those events rather than products of his own subjective
interpretations and constructions [p. 36].

Their description of intersubjectivity theory can easily be extended to
include the dyadic interactions that occur between partners. Thus, the
focus of a couple’s therapist should be the multiple intersubjective fields
that occur in conjoint therapy. The area of investigation of the therapist
is the interaction between the subjective worlds of the two partners,
as well as the meanings that occur at the interface of the interacting
subjectivities of the therapist and each member of the couple.

Atwood and Stolorow (1984) defined the concept of an intersubjective
disjunction as applied to individual therapy:

Disjunction . . . occurs when the therapist assimilates the material ex-
pressed by the patient into configurations that significantly alter its mean-
ings for the patient. Repetitive occurrences of intersubjective disjunction
. . . are inevitable accompaniments of the therapeutic process and reflect
the interaction of differently organized subjective worlds [p. 47].

As applied to interactions within the couple’s system, disjunction
between partners often reflects a pattern wherein each partner assimil-
ates the communications of the other into configurations that alter their
subjective meaning. Clarification of this process by the couple’s ther-
pist allows each person to understand the role that his or her own
unconscious organizing principles play in interpreting the meanings of
the partner’s communications.

In intersubjectivity theory the listening stance of the therapist is
characterized "as a method of investigating and illuminating the principles that unconsciously organize a patient’s experience" (Stolorow, 1993). The therapist attempts to maintain an unwavering focus on the affective experience of both partners. This includes a particular focus on the affective meanings symbolically encoded in enactments of mutual accusation, rage, and withdrawal.

Couples usually seek treatment when their own attempts to communicate and share experiences have repeatedly failed. At this juncture, behavioral enactments often have replaced articulation. Each partner is often assimilating the disjunction in a way that unconsciously affirms unique personal meanings that occurred in the context of repetitive childhood relationships.

The first task of the couple’s therapist is to establish an atmosphere of trust. The presence of a background selfobject transference tie with the therapist provides a trusting relationship for the investigation and illumination of the old repetitive organizing principles that affect each partner’s relationship with the other and with the therapist. The new selfobject experience with the therapist facilitates the development of new organizing principles and a capacity for self-reflection. Thus, the essence of cure within intersubjectivity theory lies in the acquisition of new principles of organizing experience (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992).

The capacity for self-reflection enables the patient to recognize the patterns inherent in the mobilization of old, constricting organizing principles and their relational foundation.

In the section that follows I discuss the treatment of a couple to illustrate the clinical application of the framework of intersubjectivity. In this case both partners were quickly able to assume a self-reflective stance, and this greatly facilitated the process. It is often the case that one or both partners will have strong resistances against the self-reflective process. In those cases the therapist will have to intensify efforts to develop a trusting bond. Interpretations can then be gradually offered that attempt to illuminate organizing activity without provoking resistance dimensions of the transference.

THE CASE OF MR. AND MRS. W

Mr. and Mrs. W, both previously married, came into treatment after they had been married three years. Their treatment occurred over a period of six months, and they were seen once a week. Mr. W was 50 years old and had been promoted six months previously to an executive position of great responsibility in a large public corporation. He had worked in the company all of his professional life and had risen through the hierarchy to this position. His father had also worked in this firm
ing and illuminating the principle of the experience" (Stolorow, 1993). The focus on the affective lines a particular focus on the enactments of mutual accusation, their own attempts to communicate failed. At this juncture, articulation. Each partner is way that unconsciously affirms ed in the context of repetitive it is to establish an atmosphere self-object transference tie with nship for the investigation and zing principles that affect each d with the therapist. The new facilitates the development of ty for self-reflection. Thus, the heory lies in the acquisition of (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). he patient to recognize the pat onstricting organizing principles e treatment of a couple to illus work of intersubjectivity. In this assume a self-reflective stance, often the case that one or both ist the self-reflective process. In sify efforts to develop a trust actually offered that attempt to oking resistance dimensions of ed, came into treatment after eir treatment occurred over a once a week. Mr. W was 50 nths previously to an executive je public corporation. He had oral life and had risen through r had also worked in this firm and had retired several years earlier. His father had actively promoted Mr. W's entrance into the company. Mrs. W was an Asian woman who was 38 years old. She had quit her secretarial post at the same corporation when the couple married. They had a one-year-old son, Jaime, who had been very much desired and was treasured by both of them. Mr. W had two other children, a girl of 16 and a boy of 14, who came to visit them on weekends.

The couple came into treatment at Mrs. W's insistence and were referred by Mrs. W's family physician, who felt she had been depressed at her last visit. Mr. W was opposed to coming for help because he believed that people should be able to fix their own problems. He said, however, that he wanted to improve the marital relationship and would try to be helpful.

Mrs. W said that she felt their problems had begun soon after they married. She felt that the zest and excitement that had brought them together were diminishing in their marriage. She said that her husband had been spirited and fun-loving when they first met, that he was now withdrawn and increasingly angry at her, that he had previously been very generous in his financial dealings with her but had now become restrictive and penurious, and that previously he had enjoyed giving her gifts but no longer spontaneously bought her anything. She felt that the marriage was in grave jeopardy and that there was a real crisis between them.

Mr. W seemed shocked by what she was saying and was clearly taken aback by her sense of urgency. He said that he felt that his wife previously had been very supportive and understanding of his job demands but that she was increasingly critical of him and unrelenting in her demands that he spend more time with her. He said that his main experience of his wife was that she was always trying to control him and that while she had not previously been materialistic, she now regarded her as increasingly superficial. He added that he had given her the child she had always wanted and that that still didn't satisfy her. She glared angrily at him while he was saying this and said to him that he was implying that Jaime was only her son and not his child, too.

I continued over the next several sessions to explore the history of their relationship. Mr. W recounted that they had met about four and a half years earlier, when Mrs. W was a secretary at his firm. She was single at the time, and Mr. W had been married for many years. He had been very depressed in his marriage and unhappy for many years. His first wife was very cold and unaffectionate, and he was attracted to Mrs. W's obvious warmth and spontaneity. However, he had always valued loyalty and had never even considered leaving his wife. Mrs. W had been assigned as a secretary for a project he directed, and they had
spent many hours together. Mr. W was not comfortable telling me the details of their beginnings and seemed ashamed as he related them to me. I noted aloud that he seemed ashamed and apprehensive about how I might feel toward him. He seemed surprised by his own response when he acknowledged that he felt I might look down on him for leaving his first wife. He hastened to add that he had tried to talk to his first wife about his feelings of alienation and estrangement but she had repeatedly dismissed his concerns as a mid-life crisis and a phase that all men his age pass through. She told him that she was sure he would soon get over his feelings. She was devastated when he finally left the house. I could see Mr. W's pained facial expression and his concern about how I perceived what he was articulating. I clarified for him that he apparently did not feel that I would be able to view in a positive way his wish to feel alive and vital in a relationship. I also said that I understood that he had no wish to hurt his first wife’s feelings and that her pain was certainly her reaction to his leaving her and not to his intent. While this interaction with me was not central to the problems between Mr. and Mrs. W, it established much greater trust between Mr. W and me.

I then began to comment on the striking divergence between the couple's two assessments of the gravity of their situation and wondered if they had any ideas about this. Mrs. W immediately said that she was prepared to leave the marriage. I asked her what her feeling was about this, for she seemed hopeless and we had barely begun to try to understand what was happening between them. She said that she did feel hopeless and felt that the marriage would never get any better. Her husband, while listening to her, looked puzzled; I noted this and commented on it, and he confirmed that he had not seen their problems as so grave. I then asked Mrs. W if she felt that something had become extremely altered for her and if perhaps she felt that he didn’t care about her anymore. She began to cry and said that she indeed felt that way, that he didn’t really love her. I asked Mr. W if this was true, and he said, “Absolutely not,” insisting that he loved her very much.

Mrs. W at this point looked quizzically at her husband. I commented that it seemed hard for her to believe that he really did love her, adding that I understood that if she had come to believe he did not love her, then of course she would feel there was a crisis in her marriage. I pointed out to her that her husband apparently retained a conviction that they remained in love but that there was some other problem in their relationship. Mr. W agreed and said that he sorted out problems in his job and hoped they could sort this out together. I inquired if, in light of this comment, he had any theory about how it may have come about that his wife had acquired this perception of how he felt about her. He was not sure how this had come about and asked me if I had an idea about
not comfortable telling me the shamed as he related them to imed and apprehensive about surprised by his own response hit look down on him for leav he had tried to talk to his first 1d estrangement but she had d-life crisis and a phase that all n that she was sure he would stated when he finally left the n expression and his concern ulating. I clarified for him that able to view in a positive way nship. I also said that I under st wife's feelings and that her ving her and not to his intent. ntral to the problems between trust between Mr. W and me. iking divergence between the f their situation and wondered immediately said that she was er what her feeling was about I barely begun to try to under. She said that she did feel never get any better. Her hus zled; I noted this and comad not seen their problems as t that something had become s she felt that he didn't care said that she indeed felt that d Mr. W if this was true, and loved her very much. at her husband. I commented he really did love her, adding believe he did not love her, crisis in her marriage. I pointed stained a conviction that they 2 other problem in their rela sorted out problems in his job r. I inquired if, in light of this it may have come about that ow he felt about her. He was ked me if I had an idea about this. I replied that I was not sure but that we could figure it out together. At this juncture Mrs. W felt some relief and became warmer and more relaxed with him.

In the ensuing sessions I continued to explore what Mr. and Mrs. W experienced about each other and attempted specifically to identify central issues for each of them. Mrs. W complained incessantly about her husband's increasing attention to his work and his increasingly late hours. I clarified for her that she seemed to feel that Mr. W was more involved with his work than with her. She confirmed this and stated that when they first met they spent much more time being together and doing things together. She now felt shut out of his life. I interpreted that she seemed to feel that her husband did not care very much for her and that he had given her a baby to pacify her. I said that she longed for her loving husband to come back but feared he was gone forever. As I began to elucidate her experience in greater detail, Mrs. W confided that since their relationship had begun at work, she felt that Mr. W might be developing affection for someone else at work. She looked at him tearfully and said that if she was right about this, she wanted to know the truth so that she could leave the relationship gracefully. Mr. W was aghast at this accusation. Initially, he reacted angrily, stating emphatically that he would never do this, but he then became tearful that she could even consider him capable of this.

At this time I said that whatever else was going on between them, it appeared that Mrs. W had developed a certain conviction that her husband's increasing work demands meant that he did not care about her and was about to leave her. As this did not seem confirmed by Mr. W, either verbally or by his affective reaction, I wondered with Mrs. W if she had any notions about her own background that might shed light on her sense of feeling precarious about her importance to her husband. I hastened to add, however, that although I was now focusing on her and her background, I regarded her concerns about her husband's preoccupation with work and lack of attentiveness to her as entirely legitimate issues and that I would address myself to his experiences soon.

Mrs. W began to describe a long-standing inner experience of defi ciency and lack of confidence in her attractiveness. She was the only child of elderly parents. She described her mother as critical and under mining and as always needing to be the center of attention. This was particularly prominent in her mother's relationships with men. Mrs. W said that when she began to date in high school, her mother would monopolize conversations with her boyfriends and attempt to dominate her. She also revealed that her mother had a severe problem with drinking. Mrs. W's father was a businessman who was very interested in his work. However, she remembered a few interactions she had had with
her father during her adolescence when he talked to her with energy and enthusiasm. Such conversations often concerned a business negotiation or the stock market. Even though she did not understand the details, she had listened raptly, and she recalled his enjoyment at having been so animated in her presence. There were also a few times when they were home alone and he loosened up and actually enjoyed her sense of humor. As Mrs. W continued to describe the interactions within her family, it became clear that when both her parents were present, her father would focus exclusively on her mother and that any deviation from this would arouse her mother's anger. Mrs. W remembered feeling angry and then empty and devitalized when in the presence of both her parents.

As I listened it became apparent that Mrs. W had preserved a core sense of vitality but that her sense of herself as a valuable and attractive woman had been relentlessly undermined by her mother and father. Because her father required his wife's approval for his sense of well-being, he had no capacity to oppose her relentless demands for his attention.

It was evident from Mrs. W's description of herself that her self-esteem as a desirable woman had always felt precarious. She had initially been drawn to Mr. W because of the enthusiasm and energy he directed toward her. Mr. W's attention and admiration had served to counteract her underlying feelings of deficiency as a woman. One of Mrs. W's organizing principles was that she was inherently unappealing as a woman; Mr. W's initial responsiveness had evoked a hope of transforming this deficit. This central perception of herself had, however, operated outside of her awareness. Her inner experience was one of increasing panic and subsequent rage at her husband when she experienced him as neglecting her. She desperately yearned for his continuing mirroring responsiveness to her even as her interactions with him became insistently demanding and controlling as she became increasingly hopeless about herself. She focused, in particular, on a need for material possessions as concrete proof of his interest in her. He reacted to these demands for material goods by becoming even more withdrawn and stubborn, further reinforcing her view that he did not care for her. She was thus prepared to leave the relationship, feeling a deep and abiding sense of defectiveness, which was covered over by her rage.

I directed my comments describing my understanding of Mrs. W's unconscious organizing activity to both of them, but I focused more on explaining to Mr. W what had happened. I told him that his wife had felt that he was spending less time with her and had interpreted this automatically as an indication of his increasing disinterest and disaffection with her. This experience recapitulated for her the central and most painful themes of her childhood, causing her to feel increasingly worthless
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\understanding of Mrs. W’s f them, but I focused more on d. I told him that his wife h her and had interpreted this easing disinterest and disaffec- ed for her the central and most er to feel increasingly worthless as a woman. I told him that what he experienced as controlling and demanding was for her a disguised expression of a primary longing for responsiveness in regard to her femininity. He listened intently and indicated that he understood that she felt seriously undermined by him. I asked him if he had ever thought about their situation in this way and if he had any ideas how he might have exacerbated these feelings in her.

Mr. W replied that it had always been hard for him to take seriously his wife’s feelings of insecurity because he in fact found her so very attractive. His response was to joke with her about these feelings, and he acknowledged that he had not understood how desperate she felt because he knew that he loved her. I asked him if it was difficult for him to express his loving feelings directly to her, and he quickly acknowledged that expressing feelings was not the easiest thing for him to do. I asked him more about his family background in this regard. It emerged that his father had been a businessman like himself and that his parents’ marriage was very similar to his own first marriage. He sensed the joylessness of their marriage and remembered talking to his father about it on one occasion. His father had stressed that values like loyalty and tenacity were important in life and that marriage was work. His father had said firmly that if a person made a choice then it was his responsibility to make it work. His father was a very stern and harsh man who was always convinced that his way was the right way. Mr. W had admired his father for his power and strength and had always aspired to be strong just like him.

I wondered with Mr. W if leaving his first marriage had been difficult because he had deviated from the concepts that had shaped his life previously and had clearly diverged from his father’s moral stance. It was difficult for him to talk about this, but he said he still felt tormented about having caused his former wife and children so much pain by pur- suing his own aims. He confided that recently he had begun to ruminate that indeed he might have made a mistake by marrying his second wife, since she was becoming more and more angry with him.

Over several sessions I began to explore in greater detail Mr. W’s work history. His supervisor, the chief officer of the company, had begun piling more and more work on him as time passed. His hours at work had thus gradually become more extended. I asked Mr. W how he felt about this and whether this was acceptable to him. He actually seemed shocked by my question and somewhat puzzled. I pointed this out to him and told him that he seemed confused. He said that this was a hard question for him to answer, since he did not really think about his feelings very much. He did, however, know that he did not feel his work hours were something he truly had a choice about. I pressed him on this point and asked why he did not have a choice. At first he could
not answer but then spontaneously said that he did know what he was feeling: he missed spending time with his wife but felt stuck in his job. He felt that there was truly nothing he could do about this situation.

Thus, the unconscious principle that organized Mr. W's experience pertained primarily to his work supervisor. His organizing principle was that he was required to do whatever was required to comply with the wishes of his supervisor, to perform his job and, if necessary, sacrifice his feelings for his wife. His organizing principle of dutiful loyalty was an expression of his idealizing relationship with his father. I offered an interpretation of this, directing it to both of them but primarily to Mrs. W. I said that I thought that Mr. W was raised to be loyal and hardworking, and, in particular, to go along with whatever his superiors wanted. I also said that as part of this configuration, Mr. W had been influenced by his father to devalue the importance of feelings of joy and excitement. I said that an organizing principle that shaped Mr. W's sense of self was that self-differentiation from his father's values was prohibited. Thus, when Mr. W fell in love with his wife, he had begun for the first time to make contact with important aspects of himself that had been prohibited within the context of his relationship with his father. It had been difficult for Mr. W to sustain confidence in the importance of these new aspects of himself when work demands began to escalate; instead, he began automatically to comply with the demands of his supervisor. Mr. W nodded enthusiastically and said my comments were absolutely correct.

This interpretation was of great importance to both of them but was very relieving for Mrs. W in particular. She said that it was essential for her to hear that her husband's increasing preoccupation with work was a product of a conflict he had about his own ideals for himself. She began to understand that he truly wanted to be with her but that his superior's requests for more work were a source of wrenching conflict for him. She was able to decenter from her initial response and became more attuned to her husband's underlying struggle.

Mr. W continued to work on the issues related to his differentiation from his father. He requested individual therapy and was referred to another therapist. He ruefully confided to me that he knew he was not the most likely candidate for therapy when I first saw him. Gradually, he was able to free himself of the need to comply with the demands of his supervisor and was able to assert his own needs at work. This involved an intense inner struggle, because he knew that limiting his work time would impede his advancement in the company. He also worked at feeling more comfortable articulating loving and affectionate feelings toward his wife.

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festation of his own conflicts. She also gained a much greater awareness of her tendency automatically to organize any inattentiveness on his part as an indication of her unacceptability as a woman. She became able to understand that her feelings of unattractiveness did not correspond to her husband's experience of her. Her feelings were, instead, a remnant of her father's repetitive rejection of her needs for responsiveness. Mr. W also was able to see clearly that his wife's attempts to control him were expressions of panic about not being found lovable and he tried to be more directly affirming and affectionate. They mutually decided to end the therapy because they both felt they had revived the spirit of their earlier time together.

DISCUSSION

I have described the case history of a couple who were treated over a six-month period. It is my belief that the intersubjective model of psychotherapy, which utilizes the concept of interacting subjectivities, is uniquely suited to the treatment of couples. It is the thesis of this chapter that the task of the conjoint therapist can be defined as an attempt to illuminate the organizing principles of both spouses as these become manifest at the interface between their interacting worlds of experience.

Both spouses in this treatment became aware of the unique, uncon- scious, and invariant principles that organized their own experience and that of their partner. Both developed significant understanding of the interacting organizing principles that codetermined their marital problems. Mrs. W's organizing principle was that no man would find her endurably appealing. When she met her future husband, his warmth and enthusiasm helped her temporarily to overcome her organizing principle and feel more vitality as a woman. Mr. W's subsequent withdrawal into work activities was automatically assimilated by her as an indication of her failure to be attractive. In her efforts to repair her narcissistic injury, she became critical and controlling.

For Mr. W, his primary organizing principle was a product of his diffi- culty in differentiating from his father's ideals. He automatically complied with demands of authority figures at work and ignored his own needs to feel alive in relation to his wife. His father's ideals had involved being dutiful and hard working and valuing loyalty and compliance. Hence, for Mr. W, experiences of joy and excitement were seen either as unimportant or as a potential threat to task performance. Mrs. W's vitality and humor had awakened in him a capacity for an intense attachment that had been previously buried. Thus, Mrs. W had initially helped her husband transcend his archaic organizing principles and begin to resume his emotional development. However, in the face of
increasing work demands by superiors, his newfound and precariously established capacity for affective vitality began to be eroded.

Through the therapeutic work both partners became increasingly aware of their unique contribution to the impasse in their marriage. I saw my treatment goal as the elucidation of the organizing principles governing their interacting subjectivities. This was achieved when the spouses each became reflectively aware of both the organizing principles of their own subjective world and the organizing principles of the subjective world of their partner. That is, they each acquired an awareness that the patterning and thematizing of experiences that characterize their personal reality were products of their psychological organization, not the result of objective, factual assessments.

REFERENCES


