Couple Therapy: A Contemporary Psychoanalytic Sensibility

The primary goal of couple therapy is a deepening of the bonds of intimacy between partners. The typical aim is to repair, revitalize, and strengthen ongoing relationships, although it may instead be to help a relationship end so both partners maintain a sense of personal integrity and hope, in moving toward separate futures. How is all of this done, in clinical practice, and what does contemporary psychoanalytic theory have to offer in the way understanding intimate connections, why they might falter, and what the therapist’s role is in a healing process?

These questions and others will be considered in the light of contemporary self psychology, intersubjective systems theory (phenomenological contextualism), and relational analysis, with particular attention to empathy, dialogue, and mutual recognition. Working with couples will be seen to follow organically from analytic theories in which self experience is considered to be radically embedded in constitutive relational ties. Case vignettes and readings will be used to explore a variety of practical and theoretical topics involving intimacy, sexuality, and vital, enduring relationships.

After taking this course, students will be able to:

1. Undertake an empathic inquiry to assess individual partner perspectives and the couple's fundamental relational dynamics.
2. Explore partners' developmental issues and current interactions that shape difficulties in the relationship.
3. Promote partners' empathic regard for each other's perspectives, and encourage mutual recognition.
4. Recognize areas in which the therapist's own emotional convictions limit or shape understanding of the couple's issues.
5. Promote the establishment of a safe environment and a dialogue, in which partners can be more honest, more vulnerable, more trusting.
6. Relate clinical intervention to theoretical rationale.

Readings (in suggested order):


This paper will be a central focus of the course and will be a take-off point for discussion of theory and clinical sensibility. The following short pieces will help solidify some of the main concepts:


In addition to these brief summaries of the theoretical and clinical issues covered in this course, here are some resources for deeper study:


… Keep your eyes open for a forthcoming book on couple therapy by Carla Leone!


A profound, plainly-stated treatment of intersubjectivity and the risk inherent in intimate relationships, between patient and analyst, or between intimate partners.


The gold standard for presentation of an approach to couple therapy outside the sphere of relational psychoanalysis.


Excellent summary of the work of the Boston Change Process Study Group, discussing the micro-interactions, moment moments, and intention unfolding processes that characterize and shape every relationship. Illuminates the ways in which intimate relationships can go off track in moments, providing a key to understanding and repair.


While not specifically about couple therapy, “Expanding Recognition” is the title of a segment of this journal issue devoted to a superb dialogue concerning the relational analytic concept of *mutual recognition*. Includes a paper by Donna Orange, with responses by Jessica Benjamin, Phil Ringstrom, and Mal Slavin, and a concluding response by Donna Orange.

**Other ideas:**

Have a look at the website for the Couple and Family Therapy and Psychoanalysis section of the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association, known more simply as “Section VIII”: [http://sectionviii.org/](http://sectionviii.org/). For those eligible to join APA Div. 39 (you don’t have to be eligible to be an APA member), there is a lively forum which has a (mostly) monthly clinical question for discussion.

If you are a member of IAPSP, the International Association for Psychoanalytic Self Psychology, there is a forum organized by Carla Leone, David Shaddock, and Steven Stern, for ongoing discussions of couple therapy issues. IAPSP is in general an exciting and interesting group: [http://www.psychologyoftheself.com/](http://www.psychologyoftheself.com/).

For an interesting popular media take on couple therapy, have a look at the HBO series “In Treatment” [http://www.hbo.com/in-treatment/index.html](http://www.hbo.com/in-treatment/index.html). Look for sessions with the clients “Jake and Amy.”