THREE ESSENTIAL THEMES OF
A RELATIONAL APPROACH
TO CONJOINT TREATMENT

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I. Actualization of self experience in the context of an intimate relationship.

“Actualization of self experience within an intimate relationship refers to how couples are drawn together out of a longing 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.” Much of what we regard as self-actualization must occur in relationship to others requiring their recognition of it, hence that which is hoped for can put one in peril through misrecognition. As such the hope to reconstitute one’s growth or to repair what was broken is uniquely counterbalanced with the dread that these hopes will be crushed leading to ‘reinjury’.”

Critical concepts to the actualization of self experience include an experience of agency and authorship in one’s life.

II. Mutual recognition of both partner’s subjective experiences.

Jessica Benjamin’s concept of mutual recognition represents an evolutionary step in psychoanalytic theorizing. To repair 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 servicing the needs of the other, to cultivation of each partner’s nascent curiosity about their own and their mate’s subjectivity. Without this, marital relations potentially devolve into patterns of dominance and submission, which Benjamin refers to as “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, Benjamin claims that we are intrinsically mired in the “paradox of recognition.” That is, there is perpetual dialectical tension between the assertion of self versus the recognition of other. The former entails the self-centered aspect of self-actualization juxtaposed with the need for recognition of this from the other; which, as we will see later, is complicated by the dialectics of self-interest and group affiliation.

III. The relationship having a “mind” of its own.

a. Ogden’s “psychoanalytic third” (a 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 is created between them)

b. Ogden’s “subjugating third” (a condition in which one person’s mind comes to subjugate another’s, or one allows themself to be subjugated)

c. Benjamin’s surrender (to “thirdness”) versus submission to dominance, i.e., “split complementarity.” (Surrender recognizes a third way of thinking about things without needing to either dominate or submit. It captures the inextricable quality of you-and-me versus you-or-me.)

d. Importance of complexity theory in understanding the ineffability and potential co-creativity.
SIX-STEP OUTLINE OF AN INTERSUBJECTIVE APPROACH TO CONJOINT TREATMENT

STEP ONE: How the therapist’s attunement to each spouse’s subjectivity instills hope, perspective and new possibility.

a) Elucidating the “pre-reflective organizing principles” of bi-dimensional transference
   1) reparative, developmental, self/object dimension (“forward edge”)
   2) repetitive, dreaded, resistive dimension (“trailing edge”)

b) Uncovering the vicious circle entanglements of both partners’ bi-dimensional transferences

c) Introducing the process of rupture and repair, through the mutual recognition of the “of course, of course” response

d) Repairing primary selfobject disruptions with secondary selfobject attunement to these disruptions

e) Distinctions in Fosshage’s “self-centered” vs. “other-centered” listening perspectives

f) Introducing the multiple self-centered, self-interests of self-actualization

g) Noting differences in transferences between the partners and those with the therapist (the former mostly in the repetitive dimension and the latter in the selfobject one)

STEP TWO: The therapist’s assertion that none of the three participants in the therapy has a more correct, i.e., “objective,” view of reality than any of the others, though each one needs to be seen as the arbiter of what is true (i.e., “fits”) within one’s experience of the moment. Underscoring the validity of each participant’s perspective (“perspectival realism”) from the view of the historical bio/psycho/social context of his or her development

a) Fostering attitudes of curiosity

b) Illumination of “context dependent issues”

c) Demonstrating the therapist’s “multidirectional partiality”

d) Addressing the therapist’s countertransference “conjunctions and disjunctions”

e) Mitigating the couple’s use of the “morality gambit” to fortify their perspective/position

f) Moving arguments from “evidentiary hearings” to playgrounds of meaning and new possibility

g) “Perspectival realism” sets the stage for the “dialectical” taken up in later chapters and can be used in the service of the “dialogical”

STEP THREE: The exploration of how each partner’s complaint arises from a multi-variant developmental history that contextualizes what each partner brings to their relationship.

a) Utilizing data gathering from both in vivo interaction and history-taking technique

b) Assessing each partner’s use of “mentalization”

c) Relevance of attachment styles

d) Multigenerational transmission processes

e) The importance of “implicit” as well as “explicit communication”

f) Affect tolerance and resilience

g) Assessing the influence of culture ("collectivism” vs. “individualism”) and gender in each partner’s personality organization

h) “Loyalty gambits”

i) Invocation of “trauma” to one-up the other
STEP FOUR: The awakening of the “slumbering giant” - when the “dread to repeat” repetitive transference state shifts into the “dread not to.” This step examines how partners reenact their conflictual pasts in the service of “trying to remain the same while changing.” It further investigates the phenomenon regarding certain dissociated self-states finally emerging only after other self-states become recognized during the course of the treatment. For these more dissociated states to emerge, they must be enacted.

a) Viewing enactments as means of reenacting both normal dissociated aspects of self as well as those sequestered from trauma
b) Illuminating deviation (“perversion”) of agency through its projection onto one’s partner
c) Illuminating “self-fulfilling prophecies” and tendencies to “seize defeat from the jaws of victory” to point out “comfort” in the familiar and dread of change
d) Vulnerability of therapist to also be pulled into enactments

STEP FIVE: Entails the enrichment of each partner’s capacity for self-actualization through enhanced introspection in the presence of the other. This Step also accentuates each partner’s sense of ownership of the multiplicity of their personality, along with learning to negotiate seemingly irreconcilable aspects of each one’s sense of self.

a) Recognizing and negotiating conflicts between multiple versions of self inherent in the complication of negotiating “self-interests” and “group-affiliation”
b) Transforming “dissociated self-states” into “distributed” ones
c) Distinguishing “subject” and “object” states in self and other
d) Modes of self-reflection: embeddedness, mentalization and mindfulness
e) Dialectics that inform multiple self-states
f) Recognizing and surrendering to irreconcilable paradoxes between versions of self

STEP SIX: The facilitation of each partner’s capacity to attune-to and support the other’s introspection and personal growth.

a) Facilitating an intersubjective relational mind set (a “psychoanalytic third”) that:
   1) Recognizes and facilitates the negotiation of conflicts between partners
   2) Recognizes and facilitates their surrender to certain irreconcilable differences
b) Therapist as transitional “third”
c) Role of “thirdness” in overcoming binaries
d) “One-in-the-third” (the mark of sameness in the context of connectedness) “it takes two to tango”
e) “Third-in-the-one” (the mark of difference in the context of connectedness)
f) Improvisational “thirdness”
g) “Thirdness” in collaboration and negotiation
h) Surrender
i) Transferring the therapeutic function of the Six-Step model to the couple along with facilitating their de-idealization of – and therefore letting go their need for - the therapist

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