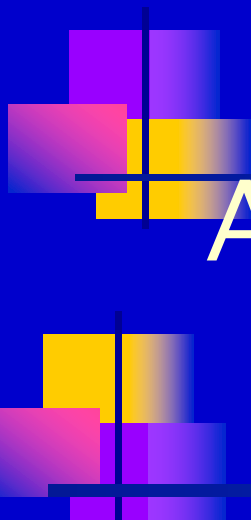


Illinois Psychological Association Workshop
4/28/17



A Roadmap for Couple Therapy: Overview & Psychodynamic Contributions

Arthur Nielsen, MD

Feinberg School of Medicine of Northwestern University

The Family Institute at Northwestern

The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis

www.arthurnielsenmd.com



Couple Therapy

- Is difficult!
- Is rewarding!
- Terminology

A Roadmap for Couple Therapy

Integrating Systemic,
Psychodynamic, and
Behavioral Approaches

Arthur C. Nielsen, MD





Other Couple Therapy Books

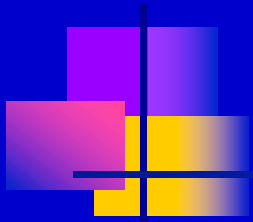
- One point of view
- Anthologies with one chapter on each approach
- Readers/practitioners must come up with their own synthesis.
- My book aims to fill that gap.
- Advantage of integration/multiple tools

Plan: Three Parts

- #1: Core Concepts
 - Origins of my ideas
 - Indications
 - Couple Therapy 1.0
 - Process Upgrade
- #2: Psychodynamics including Projective Identification
- #3: Beginning Therapy, Sequencing Interventions, and final Q & A

Plan misc.

- Not everything, mixing basic/advanced topics
 - Present audience?
- Four detailed cases
- Ask questions, including along the way.
- Mostly I'll talk; read some, including cases, that go faster & show more detail when read.
- Break: About 2:30



Part I: Core Concepts

Development of my ideas

Some orienting ideas & background



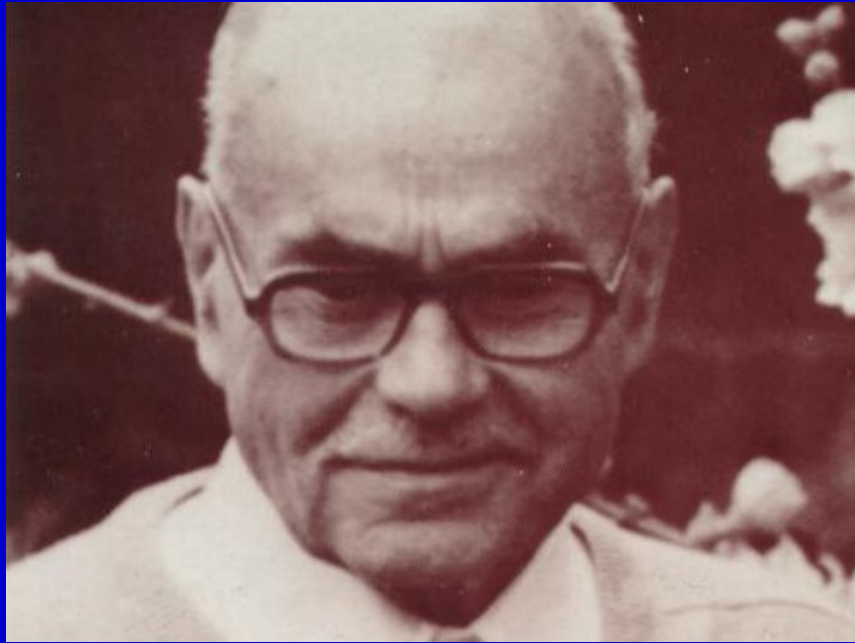
The Expected
Work with clients
Review of cases
Teaching
Literature Review

Psychoanalytic Training and Work



Sigmund & Martha Freud
Wedding 1886

- Hidden, somewhat unconscious issues
- Shame/Guilt
- Love, attachment, respect
- Idiographic meanings of events
- Transference—fears and wishes
- Defensiveness
- Personality structure
- Empathy and repair
- Here and now relational learning



Wilfred Bion

Experiences in Groups (1961)

Tavistock Group Relations Conferences

- Craziness/regression as emergent property
- Projective identification & anxiety containment
- “Work group” concept



Northwestern: Marriage 101

- Marriage education
- Literature review
- Rules for speaking/listening
- Steps for problem solving
- Encouraging positive experiences
- Acceptance

Nielsen, A. C., Pinsof, W., Rampage, C., Solomon, A., & Goldstein, S. (2004). Marriage 101: An integrated academic and experiential undergraduate marriage education course. *Family Relations*, 53, 485-494.



- “You’re both right!”
- Hidden Issues

Art & Patty: My role models & first patients

Art & Sheila

2/14/81



- “Being in love” helps
- Not shown: Divorces
- Motivates me to help
- Helps me be neutral
- Compatibility important
- Some problems can’t be divorced!



Nielsens 8/11/12



Art & Sheila 9/26/15



Indications for Referral from Individual Therapy

- Therapy stalled, centered on partner
- Unresolved disagreement with partner
- Affair or other serious betrayal
- Patient improving, considering divorce from unchanging spouse

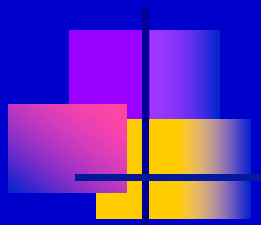


Couple Therapy 1.0

- Talk to Each Other (TTEO)
- Obvious advantages
- Emotional temperature
- Neutrality
- Offers: Hope, agreed time, mediation
- Limited effectiveness

Process Focus Upgrade

- 1st, most important upgrade
- All contemporary couple therapists
- Goal: Collaborating Couple, “Work Group”
- Stops blame game: Blames process
 - “Marital judge”
 - Experience near (Chemical reaction)
- Stops escalation due to mutual deafness
 - Only the neighbors!
- Hold your problem solving!
 - Otherwise herding cats!



Case Example:

THE INTIMIDATOR & THE NOVELIST

Key Interventions

- Focused on process after Couple 1.0 proved limited.
- Kept emotional room temp workable by moving in and out.
- Remained neutral: "You're both right."
- Did some "witnessed individual therapy"
- Fostered corrective experiences.
- Taught some speaking/listening rules.
- Worked on impediments to following them.
- Questions?



Part II: Psychodynamics

Hidden Issues, Fears, & Desires

Unpacking & treating negative cycles via
psychodynamic understanding (1)

- Importance of central human motives, fears, and defenses.
- Unconscious schemas of self & other in interaction.
- Trust, dependency, autonomy, shame, guilt, identity, honesty, and intimacy.

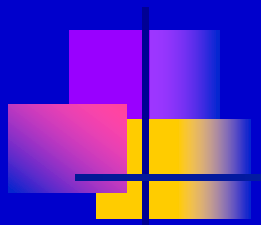
Unpacking & treating negative cycles via psychodynamic concepts (2)

- Sex and aggression, love and hate
- Formative influence of childhood as well as later life intimate relationships.
- Core concerns often defensively concealed
- Reveal themselves indirectly, in seemingly random thoughts or casual remarks (associations), in dreams, in symptomatic behavior, and in patterns of interaction with others (transferences).



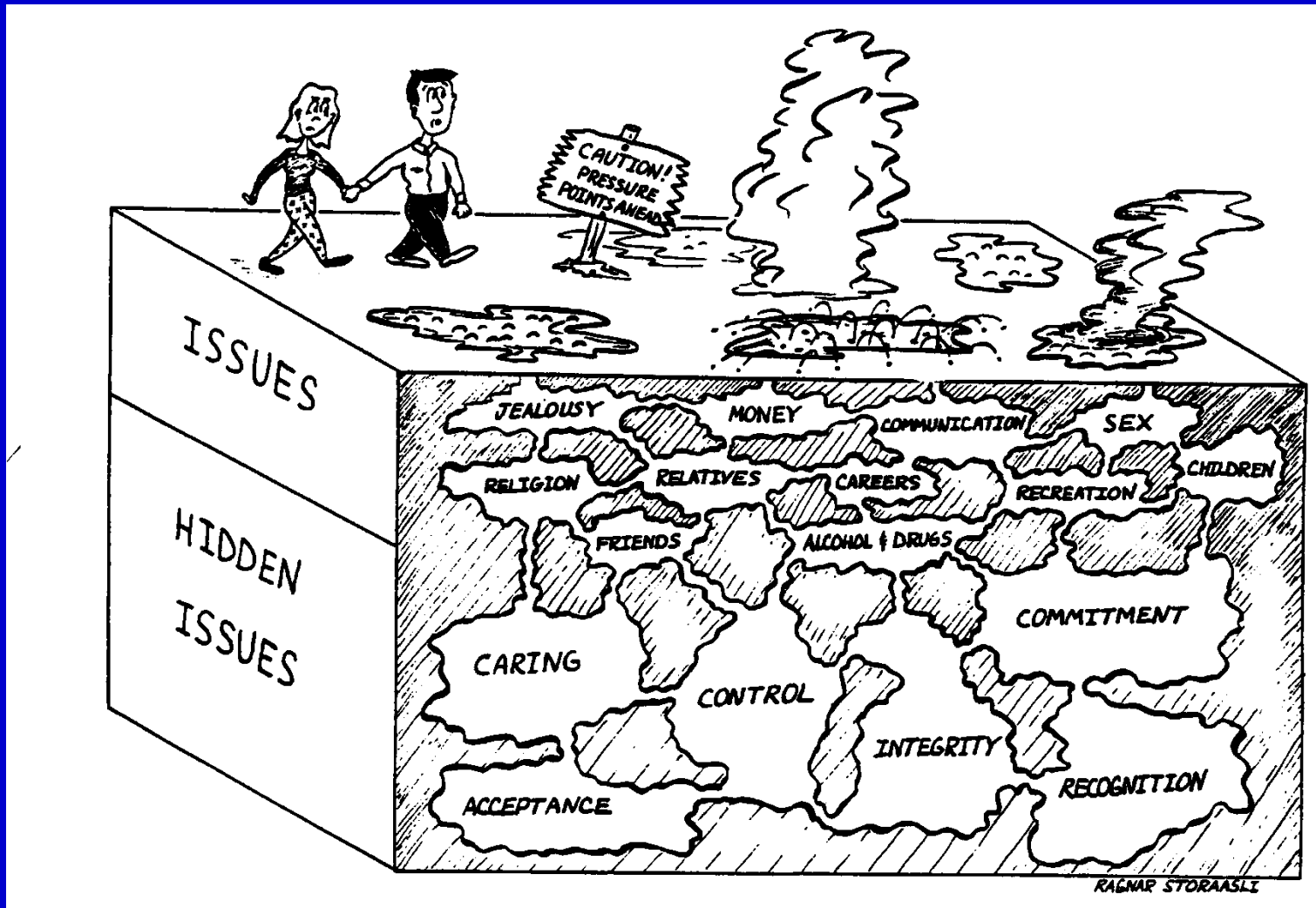
Unpacking & treating negative cycles via psychodynamic concepts (3)

- Countertransference: + and –
- Cure: Insight and new ways of relating
- Therapist role: Facilitate safety and encourage risk-taking for both self-discovery and new relational learning.



Dick and Tina: Ghosts of Christmases Past

Events, Issues, Hidden Issues





Dick & Tina: Hidden Issues

- Event: Pregnancy.
- Issue(s): How to parent and what sort of family to be.
- Hidden issue, Dick: Avoiding reminders of traumatic childhood scenes.
- Hidden issues, Tina: Avoiding reminders of traumatic childhood scenes, and distress when someone “rains on her parade.”

Hidden Issues Implications

- Explains fights over trivial matters
- Most fights (per Gottman)!
- “Hidden issues come online.”
- “Never bring up the past”—sometimes bad advice.
- Moral: talk more about basic issues:
 - love & respect;
 - shame & guilt;
 - control & attachment, etc.
- Exception: sometimes too hot.



Concealed Positive Desires

- Vulnerable when voice them directly
- Some are mirror images of fears
- “Dancing together”
- To be known.
- Empathy when partner fails to meet needs
- Unencumbered time alone
- Revenge



Three Therapeutic Suggestions

- Ask some good questions
- Make a better case
- Heal the interpersonal bond

Ask some good questions

- “What nerve just got touched?”
- “Can you help us understand the intensity of your feelings?”
- “If your tears could talk, what would they say?”
- “Can you talk from your fear?”
- “What were you hoping for when . . . ?”
- “How did it make you feel when John just said . . . ?”
- “Did you know that was how Sarah feels?”
- “Have you felt strongly like this before?”
- “Did something like this happen when you were growing up?”



Make a better case

- Dan Wile and “doubling”
- Less conflicted, more articulate advocate

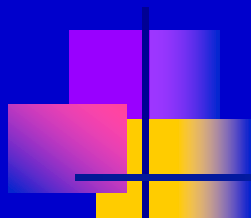
Heal the interpersonal bond

- EFT: Goldberg, Johnson, Goldman
- Steps toward softening and connection
- Partner A reveals a core experience.
- Partner B perceives A's underlying experience and now perceives A in a new way.
- This changes B's response to A.
- A perceives B's new response and this supports new organization in A.



Impediments to “softening”

- Vindictively triumphant
- Letting the other off the hook
- Caretaker fear
- “Catching the feeling”
- Too much Mr. Fix It.
- Overwhelmed themselves



Sally and George: Working with underlying issues

Projective Identification





Varieties

- To externalize an internal debate
- To externalize a self-evaluation
 - Adversarial couples: Hot potato
- To unconsciously enact a scenario
- All interfere with intimacy, problem solving, and well-being.



Component Steps

- Transference
(projection)
- Induction
- Identification
 - Recipient
 - Inducer



Therapeutic Tasks

- Taste it ourselves.
- Help *both* partners contain the projected feelings so as to cease their polarized enactments.

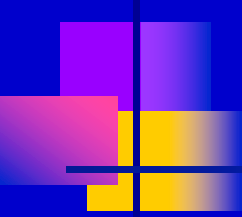
Induction Types: Unintended

- Motivation debate
- “Pseudo Projective identification”
- “Ironic processes”
 - Too afraid of being criticized
 - Pouring milk analogy
 - Nagging
 - Abandonment fears



Induction Types: Motivated

- Psychological gain present
- Via Inaction: “Innocently doing nothing.”
 - Lack of responsiveness/support
 - Lack of worry: “Conservation of anxiety.”



Projective identification as the royal road to success with couples

Rachel & Matt:

Projective identification to manage shame



Other Examples of PI

- Dating/marrying your problem
- Dating/marrying your cure:
Fatal Attractions
- Marital polarities



Marital Polarities

- Hysterical (feeling/free spirited) vs. Obsessional (thinking/planning)
- Overadequate vs. underadequate
- Angry/entitled vs. stoical/long-suffering
- Sane (victimized/enabling) vs. “crazy” (identified patient)

Fatal Attraction Example



Attraction

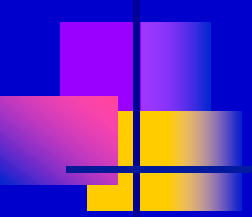
Wife: He seemed very smart, very capable.

Husband: She respected me. I felt accepted and appreciated.

Disillusionment

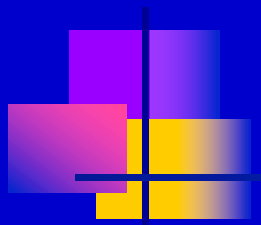
Wife: He makes me feel stupid and incompetent.

Husband: She feels bad about herself and blames me.



Healing Polarizations

- Help each see merits of other side
- Help each accept disowned parts
- Explore past which explains origins
- Explore current motivations
- Note benefits



QUESTIONS?



Part III:

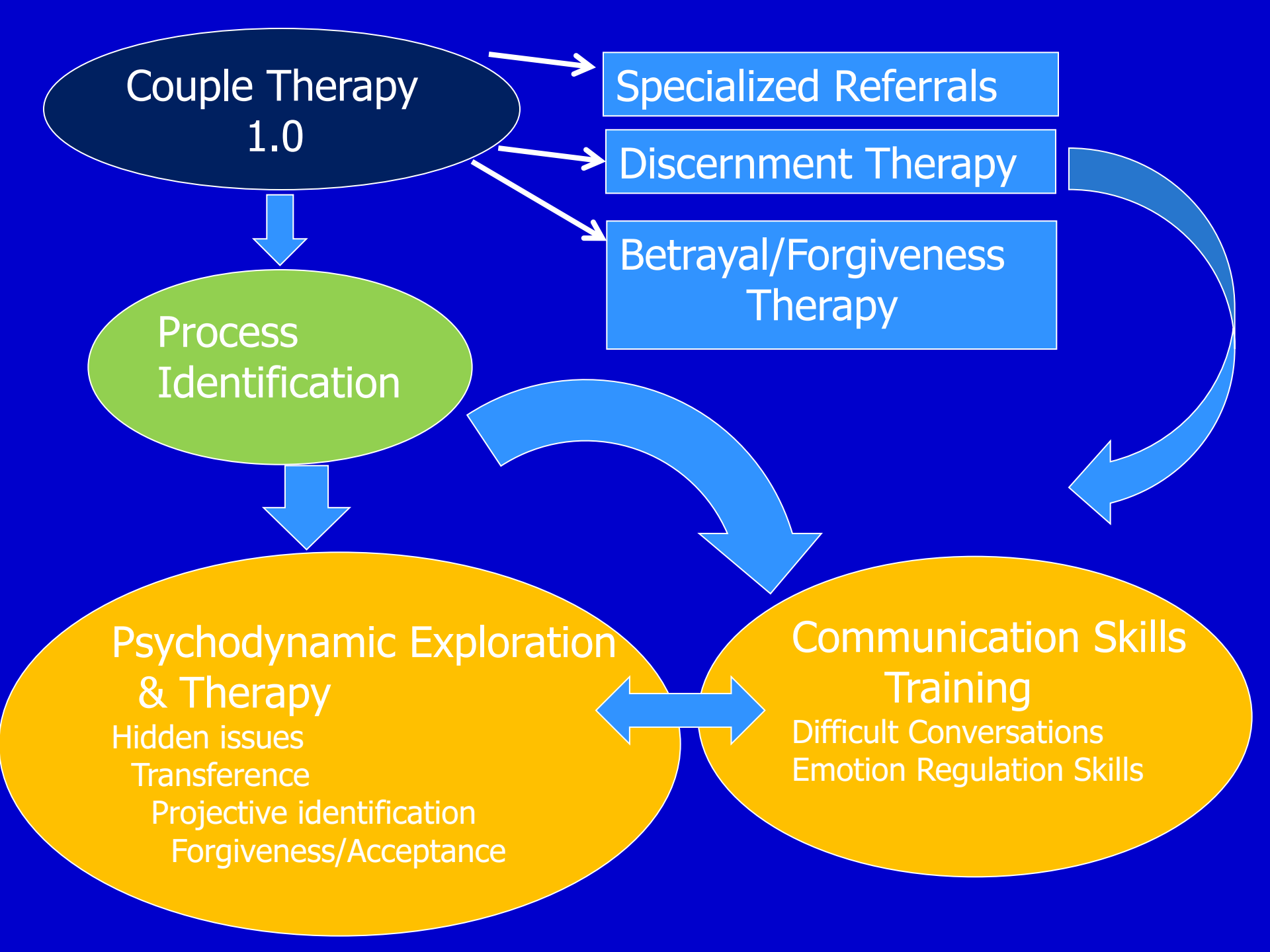
Beginning Therapy & Sequencing Interventions

Goals for 1st Session

- Develop alliance with both partners, while maintaining neutrality.
- Understand their reasons for coming, including why now.
- Observe them “doing their problem” in their negative interaction cycle.
- Place the current problem in historical or developmental context.
- Provide some therapeutic help.
- Instill hope.
- Obtain feedback, including about our working together.
- Summarize to the couple my view of their main problems.

Format for Diagnostic Phase

- Two conjoint sessions
- In second, assess reaction to first and to questionnaire
- Two individual sessions
- Goals for individual sessions
 - Alliance
 - Countertransference when meeting alone
 - “What you couldn’t say with partner present”
 - Problems/benefits of this
 - Past history: Mistake if get none (“heat of battle problem”)
- Final conjoint
- All are “therapy” to some extent



Common to all “skills”: RESTRAINT

- Not “doing what feels right.”
- Chinese finger traps
- Fork in the road
- 3Cs: Calm, curious, and caring



Psychodynamic
Exploration &
Therapy

Communication
Skills Training



Specific Problem
Discussions

Problem Solving
Negotiation
Training

Encourage Positive
Experiences

Encourage
Better/Restored Sex



Take Home Points

- Couple Therapy 1.0: Let them try by themselves.
- Focus next on the process.
- (For most) Next to psychodynamics.
- (For most) Interweave skills training.
- Balance nondirection with direction.
- When process allows, discuss specific problems
- Concurrently, encourage positive experiences.



Additional References

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Time remaining: Q & A

