

China American Psychoanalytic Alliance

**A Roadmap for Couple Therapy:
Some Essential & Practical
Recommendations**



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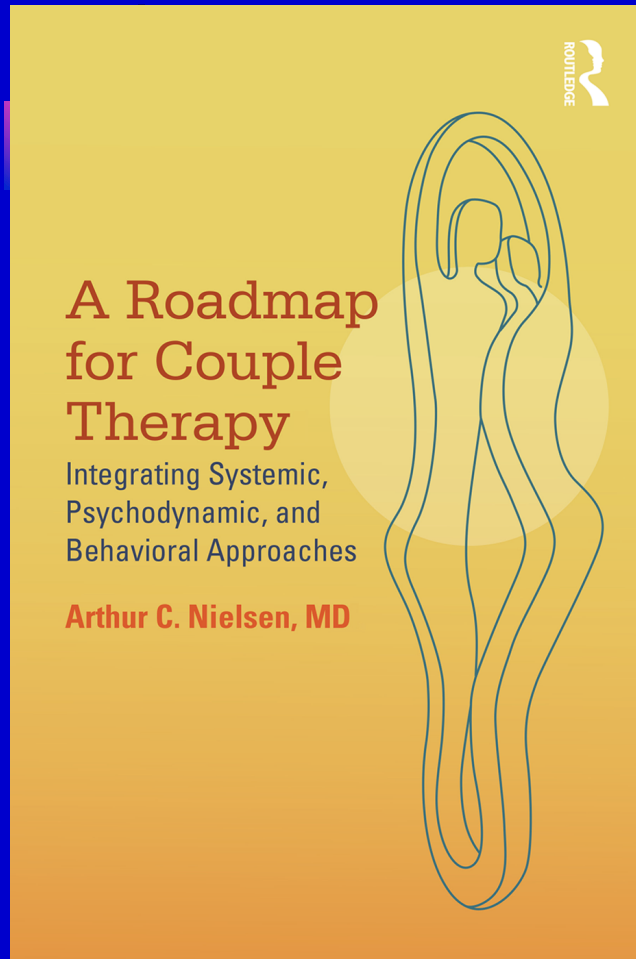
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Couple Therapy

- Difficult
- Important
- Uniquely powerful
- Rewarding

Practical & Essential Recommendations



- Selective from book.
- Beginners & experienced therapists
- Cross-culturally relevant (hopefully)



Plan for Today

- Importance of Couple Therapy
- Couple Therapy 1.0
- Upgrades
 - Psychoanalytic
 - Systemic
 - Educational
- Case example
- Sequencing Map
- Q & A



Some Statistics: USA

- 90% of Americans will marry.
- 40-50% of first marriages end in divorce, 20% in first five years.
- 20% of married people substantially unhappy.



Some Statistics: PRC

- Divorce rate rising for past 13 years.
- 3.8 million divorces in 2015.
- Higher rate than Europe, lower than US; 39% of marriages in Beijing, lower in rural areas.
- Extramarital affairs are a common cause



Some Stats (2)

- For patients presenting with “acute emotional distress,” intimate partner problems lead the list of causes.
- Marital distress is associated with broad classifications of anxiety, mood, and substance use disorders, and with all narrow classifications of specific disorders.



Some Stats (3)

- Marital success augments general well-being, physical health & economic success.
- Marital conflict, unhappiness, and divorce cause declines in all these areas, and similar problems in the next generation.



Happiness correlation

Correlations between a composite measure of happiness and general well-being *and*

- Income: $r = .21$
- Social support: $r = .35$
- Positivity in an intimate relationship: $r = .79$

Lending a Hand

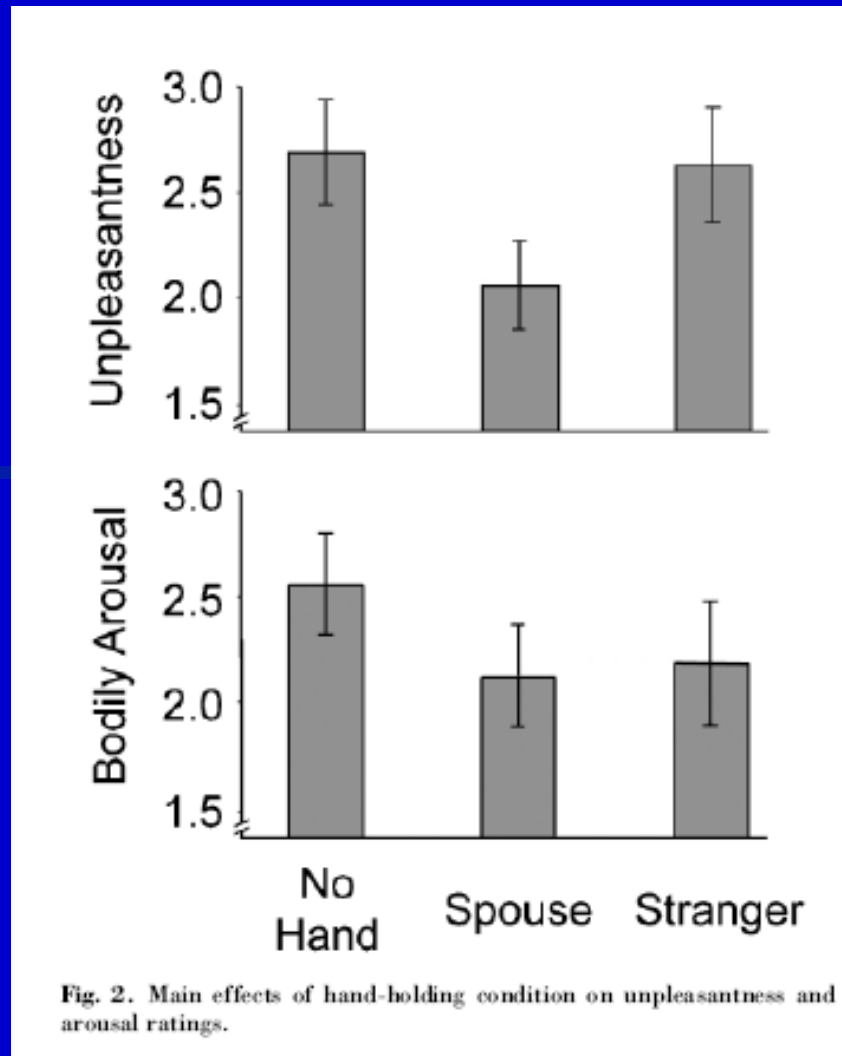


Fig. 2. Main effects of hand-holding condition on unpleasantness and arousal ratings.

Coan, James A.; Schaefer, Hillary S.; Davidson, Richard J.. (2006). Lending a hand: Social regulation of the neural response to threat. *Psychological Science*, 12, 1032-1039.



Some Stats (4)

- Couple therapy improves marital success and happiness in approximately two-thirds of unselected distressed couples with effectiveness rates that are “vastly superior to control groups not receiving treatment.”
- Room for improvement since less than 50% of couples entering therapy reach levels of marital satisfaction seen in non-clinical couples; and many couples who improve in therapy later relapse.

Final Key Statistic

Best Predictor of Success vs. Unhappiness



How Couples Manage Conflict

Development of My Model: Beginning, 1975



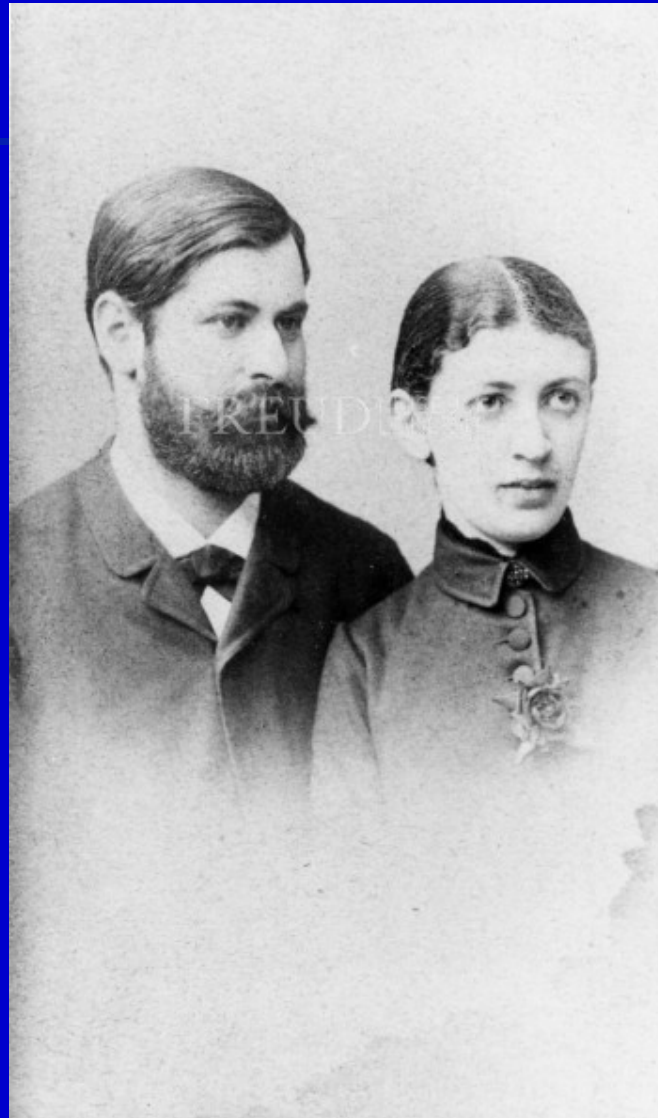
Yale & The
Connecticut
Mental Health
Center



Couple Therapy 1.0

- Talk to Each Other (TTEO)
- Obvious advantages
 - Resembles lessons
- Emotional temperature
- Neutrality
- Mediation
- Not very successful

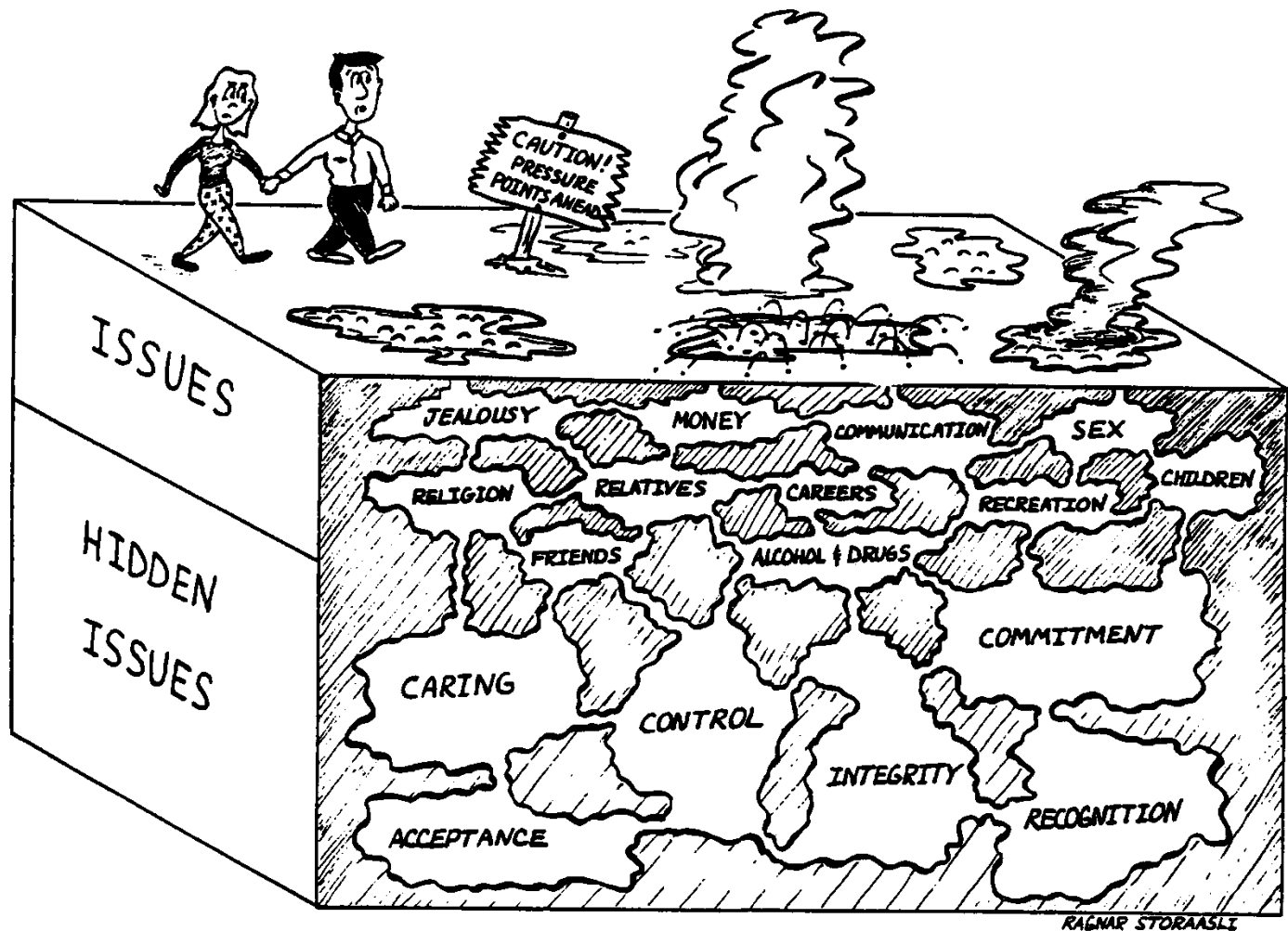
Psychoanalytic Upgrades



Sigmund & Martha Freud
Wedding 1886

Psychoanalytic Upgrades

#1: Hidden (often unconscious) issues

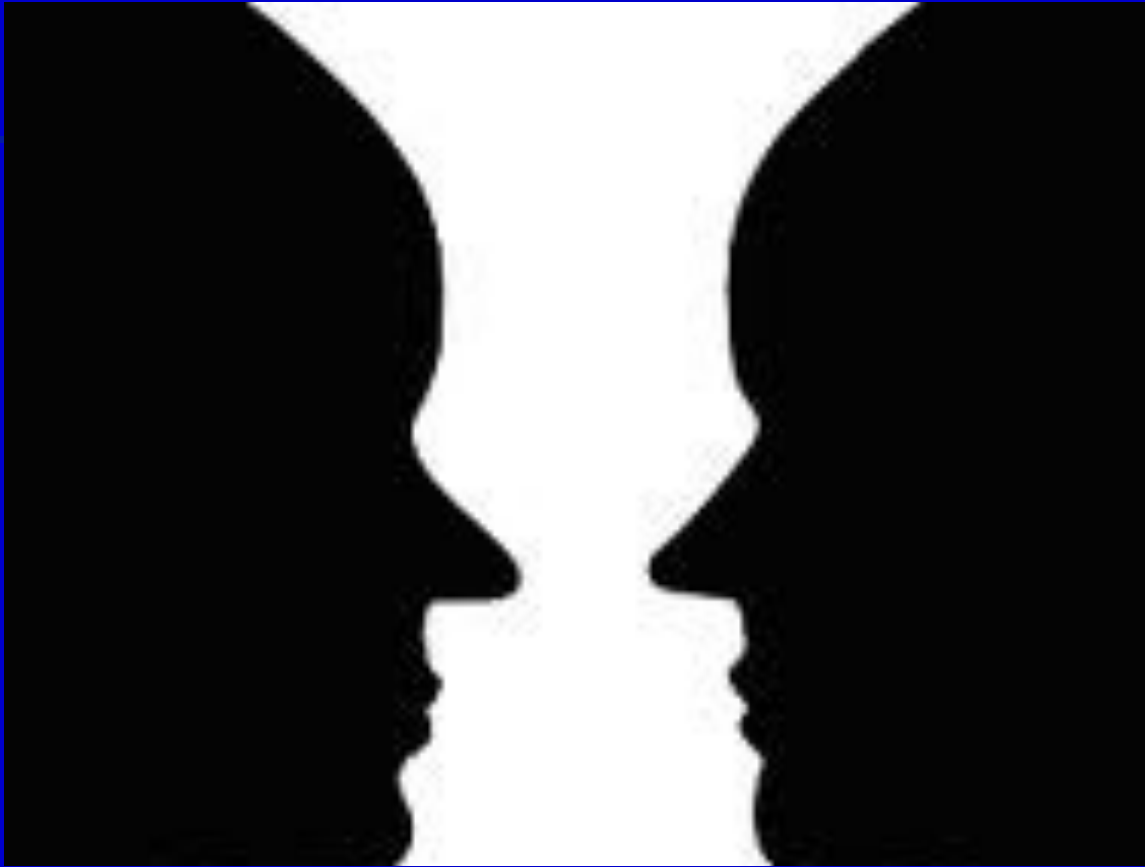


Psychoanalytic Upgrades

#2: Divergent meanings of events



The Rubin Vase



What do you see?

The "You're both right!" Intervention



Art & Patty: My role models & first patients



Psychoanalytic Upgrades

- #3: Fears: shame, guilt, abandonment
- #4: Desires: love, attachment, respect
- #5: Transferences—fears and wishes
 - Transference allergies/“Default settings”
 - Core Negative Images
- #6: Defensiveness/indirectness



Psychoanalytic Upgrades

#7: Empathy and repair



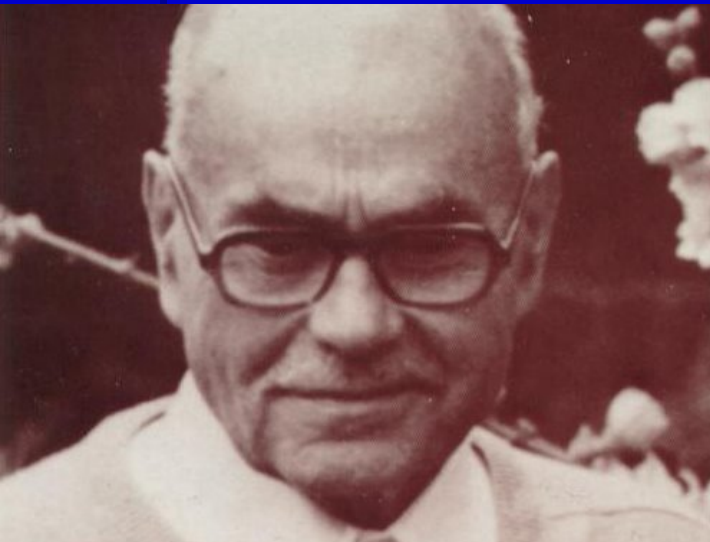
Psychoanalytic Upgrades

#8: Countertransference

- Interfering
- Helpful or “usable”
- Side with “least likeable partner”

Systems Upgrades:

From Tavistock Group Relations Conferences



Wilfred Bion

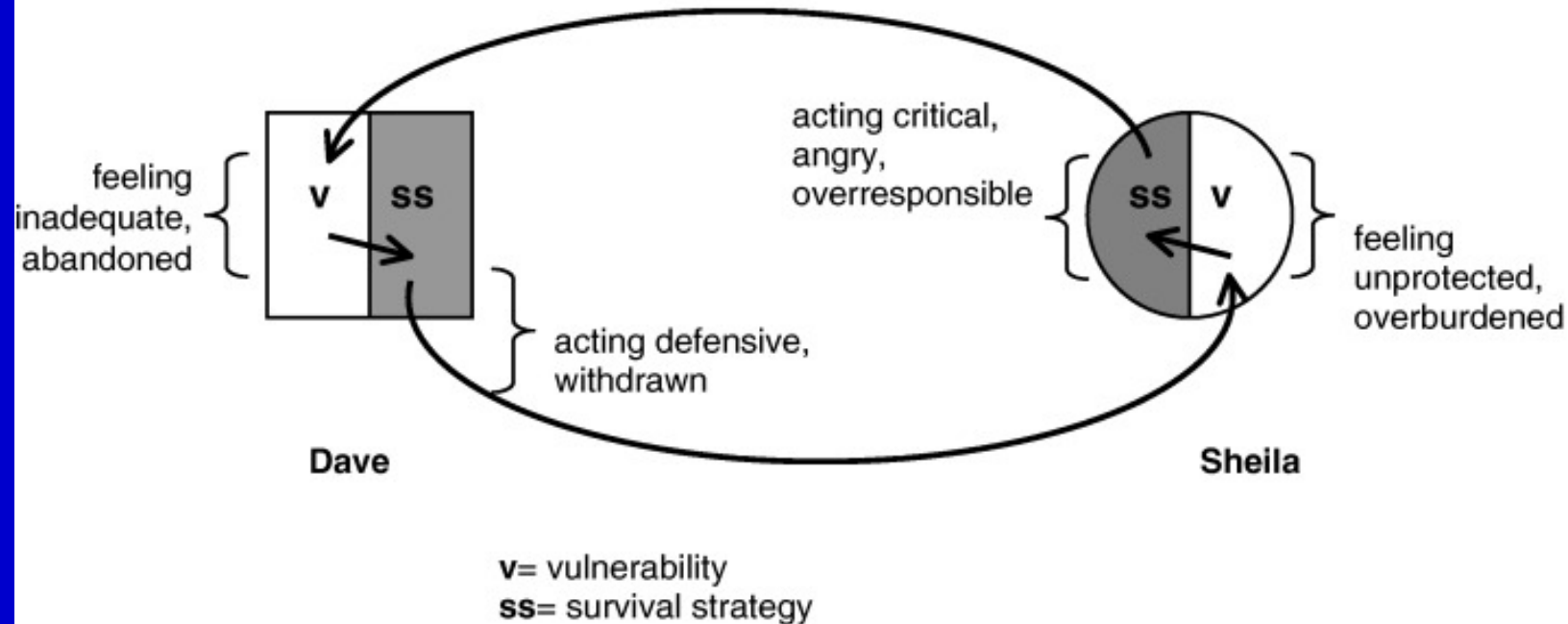
Experiences in Groups
(1961)

- #1: “Craziness” as emergent property
- #2: Projective identification & anxiety containment
- #3: “Work group” concept

Systems Upgrades

#4: Vicious Cycles and Maladaptive Dances

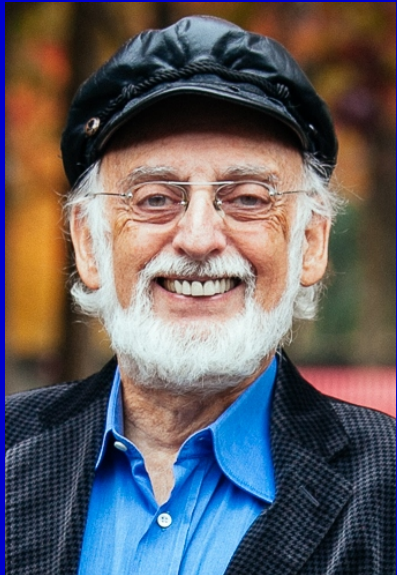
The Vulnerability Cycle



Scheinkman, M., & Fishbane, M. (2004). The vulnerability cycle: Working with impasses in couple therapy. *Family Process*, 43, 279–299.

Systems Upgrades

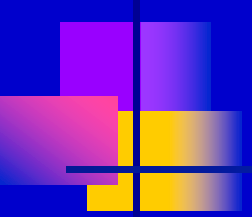
Process: John Gottman's findings



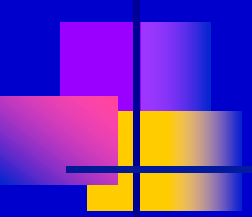
- Newlywed study & The Love Lab
- “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”:
 - Criticism
 - Defensiveness
 - Contempt
 - Stonewalling

Systems Upgrades

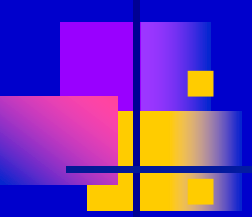
More on Couple Cycles

- 
- Hard startups
 - Defensive responses: fight or flight
 - Contempt
 - Stonewalling
 - Invalidation
 - Cross-complaining
 - Escalation, polarization and vicious circles
 - Deeper psychological sensitivities, fears engaged
 - Fears of each seem confirmed
 - “Negative interpretation”
 - Relationship itself becomes topic

Adverse consequences

- 
- Alienation, dissatisfaction, resentment, hopelessness
 - Initial complaint not resolved and instead things feel worse.
 - Doubts about the relationship
 - Loss of positive forms of intimacy
 - Talking, joking, touching, hugging, sex, etc.
 - Negative expectancies increased
 - Even good things interpreted negatively (“He was nice today, but just wait...”)
 - Conflict avoidance
 - Nagging

Result: Process Focus Upgrade

- 
- Most important upgrade to Couple Therapy 1.0
 - All contemporary couple therapists
 - Goal: Collaborating Couple, “Work Group”
 - Stops blame game, blames the process
 - Stops “marital judge”
 - Experience near (Chemical reaction)
 - Stops escalation due to mutual deafness
 - Only the neighbors!
 - Hold your problem solving!
 - Not herding cats!

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades



Howard Markman



Scott Stanley

Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. (2001). *Fighting for your marriage* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Northwestern: Marriage 101



Bill Pinsof



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.

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

#1: A moment of choice!

- Remind yourself you have power to make this better or worse.
- Choose to “fight fair.”
- Remind yourself that safety and a healthy process are crucial.
- **Resolve to follow the 3Cs: To be calm, curious, & caring.**

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

#2: *Be curious about your partner*

- Don't be put off by painful insults (they indicate the intensity of hurt) or by seemingly trivial issues (they must be tips of some iceberg)
 - Jeni's insult at age 4.
 - "People only yell for things when their normal requests for something important haven't worked."
- Wonder about what you are missing
 - A "hidden issue"
 - A transference allergy or a Core Negative Image
 - If nothing occurs to you, ask your partner.

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

#3: *Be curious about your yourself!*

- Ask which of your hot buttons have been activated or whether your CNI is in the room.
- Ask what else is going on in your life that might explain the intensity of your feelings.

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

#4: *Be caring and helpful*

- View your partner as someone needing help.
- Ask: "How can I help you?"
- Ask: "What do you need from me right now?"
- Ask: "What is making it hard for you to see my point of view or to agree with me?"

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

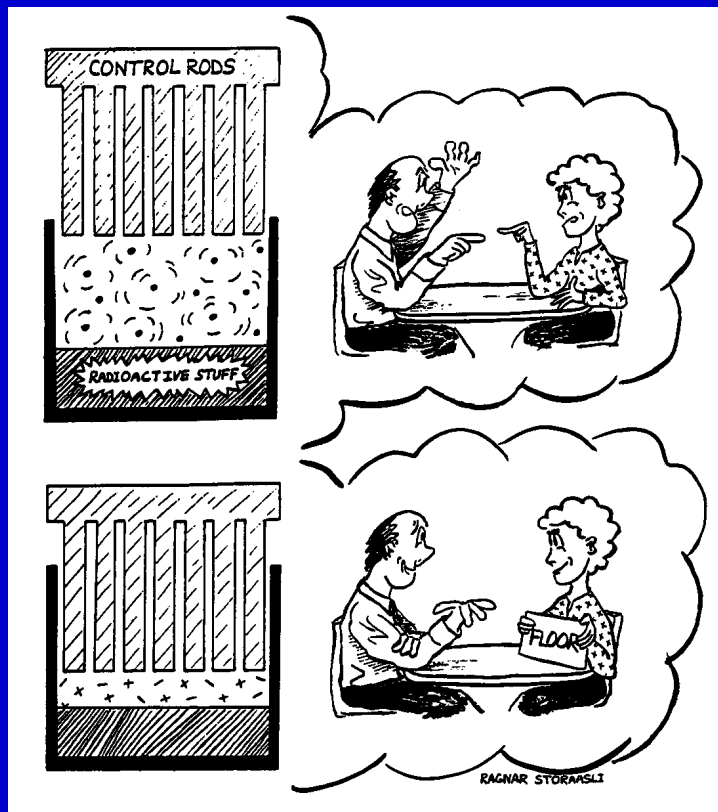
#5: *Be caring by working harder at empathy*

- Unilaterally take the role of empathic listener.
 - Cease attempting to make your points
 - Take up role of news reporter.
 - Works for me!
- Try to recall situations you've experienced that are similar to those your partner is describing.
- Remind yourself that in any heated argument there is always truth on both sides.

Behavioral/Educational Upgrades

Most important things to teach couples

#6: *Teach the Speaker/Listener Technique*



Speaker-Listener Technique increases safety, reduces emotional temperature, allows communication.



Speaker-Listener Rules

Rules for both

- The speaker has “the floor” and the other takes the role of “listener.”
- Share the floor.
- Can use concrete prop for “the floor”, e.g., a pillow or book.
- No problem solving



Speaker-Listener Rules

Rules for the listener

- Paraphrase what you hear
- Focus on what the speaker is saying.
- Don't rebut.



Speaker-Listener Rules

Rules for the speaker

- Speak for yourself. Don't be a mind reader.
- Don't go on and on.
- Stop and let the listener paraphrase.

#7: Teach Problem Solving and Work on Specific Problems



Nielsens 8/11/12

Rules for Problem Solving Conversations



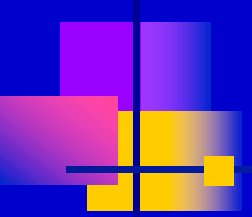
- Hold your problem solving
- Limit to one problem or part of a problem
- Define the problem
- Brainstorm
- Compare/discuss options
- Be aware of costs if no agreement
- Agree to a trial of your plan & write down details
- Evaluate outcome at later time
- Modify the plan based on results

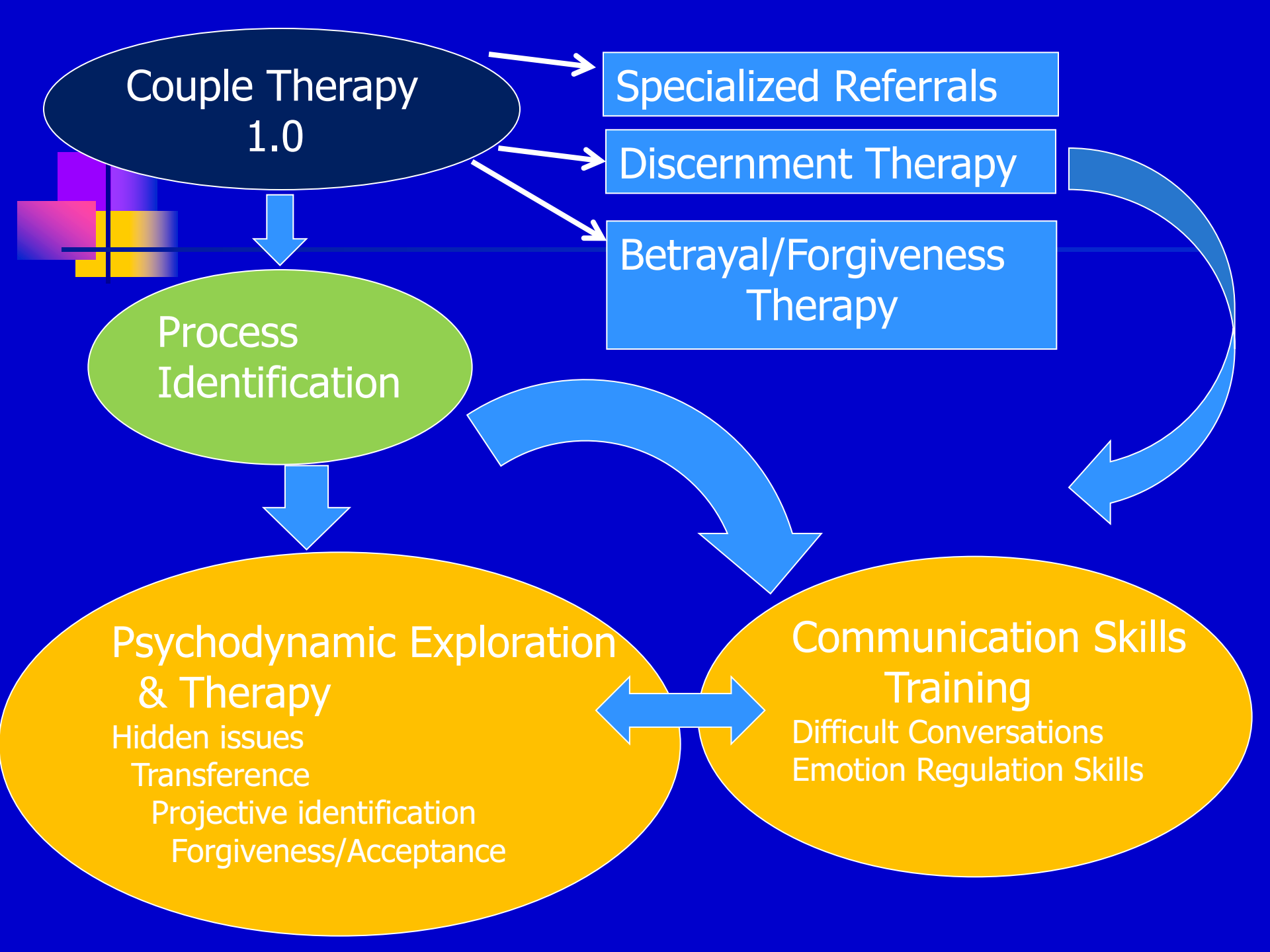


Case Example:

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.



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.
- When process allows, discuss specific problems
- Concurrently, encourage positive experiences.
- When possible, work towards sexual connection.



References

- Nielsen, A. C. (2016). *A roadmap for couple therapy: Integrating systemic, psychodynamic, and behavioral approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Nielsen, A. C. (2017, in press). Psychodynamic couple therapy: A practical synthesis. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/wol1/doi/10.1111/jmft.12236/abstract>
- Nielsen, A. C. (2017). From Couple Therapy 1.0 to a comprehensive model: A roadmap for sequencing and integrating systemic, psychodynamic, and behavioral approaches. *Family Process*, *56*, 540-557.
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A Roadmap for Couple Therapy

Integrating Systemic,
Psychodynamic, and
Behavioral Approaches

Arthur C. Nielsen, MD



Time Remaining: Q & A

To obtain the book, go to
www.arthurnielsenmd.com
Will take you to Amazon page

To obtain the PowerPoint
slides, go to
www.arthurnielsenmd.com