

EDITED BY **SHELLEY NATHANS** AND **MILTON SCHAEFER**

COUPLES ON THE COUCH

PSYCHOANALYTIC COUPLE THERAPY
AND THE TAVISTOCK MODEL



Couples on the Couch

Couples on the Couch provides a clear guide to applying the Tavistock model of couple psychotherapy in clinical psychoanalytic practice, offering a compelling sampling of ideas about couple relationships and couple psychotherapy from a broadly relational psychoanalytic perspective. The book provides an in-depth perspective to understanding intimate relationships and the complexities of working in this domain. The chapters and their accompanying discussion also offer a fertile resource of material for readers who have not previously had exposure to the theory and technique of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, as well as offering an expanded and more rigorous approach to those who are already familiar with the Tavistock model. The chapters cover key topics, including: unconscious beliefs, forms of couple relating, sex and aging, and draw upon the work of Klein, Winnicott and Bion, as well as attachment and object relations theory.

The majority of the contributors are affiliated with the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relations (TCCR) in London or The Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy Group (PCPG) in Berkeley, California, and make fundamental use of the theoretical model that has been developed at TCCR since the 1940s. *Couples on the Couch* provides an introduction to the TCCR approach to couple psychotherapy and exposure to the depth and breadth of this framework. Each of the chapters contains in-depth theoretical and clinical case material, presented in tandem with formal discussion, demonstrating how theory may be applied in a variety of clinical encounters and, by doing so, deepening the theoretical understanding of the difficulties that beset couples and the challenges posed to those who work with them. The book provides an in-depth perspective to understanding intimate relationships and the complexities of working in this domain.

Couples on the Couch will be of great interest to couple psychotherapists and counselors, marriage and family therapists, psychoanalysts, as well as graduate and post-graduate students in psychology, marriage and family therapy, or those in psychoanalytic training programs.

Shelley Nathans, Ph.D. is on the faculty at California Pacific Medical Center, Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy Group, and the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California. She has authored papers on infidelity and projective identification in couples, and is the director and producer of the film *Robert Wallerstein: 65 Years at the Center of Psychoanalysis*. She is in private practice in San Francisco and Oakland.

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¹ Greenberg, J. & Mitchell, S. (1983). *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Edited by Shelley Nathans
and Milton Schaefer

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For our loving husbands, Sam Gerson and Scott Plakun.

“We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love.”

Sigmund Freud

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Preface

Shelley Nathans and Milton Schaefer

The chapters in this book and their accompanying discussions offer a compelling sampling of ideas about couple relationships and couple psychotherapy from a psychoanalytic point of view. The authors of these chapters, with one exception, are affiliated with the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relations (TCCR)¹ in London and rely heavily on the theoretical model that has been developed there since the 1940s. This book provides an introduction to the TCCR approach to couple psychotherapy and exposure to the depth and breadth of this framework. Each of the chapters in this book contains in-depth theoretical and clinical case material and is presented in tandem with a formal discussion. This selection of chapters and the accompanying discussions provide an opportunity for those who are unfamiliar with these concepts to become acquainted with this approach. Additionally, those who wish to deepen their understanding of the Tavistock model will find a trove of material to enhance their knowledge.

All of these chapters and discussions were originally presented at the Annual Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy lecture series in the San Francisco Bay Area between 2008 and 2014, sponsored by the Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy Group (PCPG) and the Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychology (NCSPP). This annual conference brings renowned scholars from the TCCR in London to San Francisco. Each year, a visiting scholar from the TCCR is invited to write and present an original chapter that is formally discussed by a local psychoanalytic couple psychotherapist. This lecture series has become a highly respected fixture in the educational offerings for couple psychotherapists and psychoanalysts in Northern California and beyond, and has become a nexus of thought and training for working with couples from a psychoanalytic perspective. This has also led to the development of an

intensive, multiyear post-graduate training program in psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy, offered in Berkeley, California by the PCPG.

The majority of chapters in this collection were authored by clinicians affiliated with PCPG and TCCR and were previously published in our local psychoanalytic journal *fort da*. The chapter by Virginia Goldner appeared in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* (2014) and Francis Grier's chapter was previously published in an edited book (2013).

We have arranged the chapters and their companion discussions to provide coherence, rather than in the chronological order in which they were presented. The book begins with an introduction by Shelley Nathans that describes psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy, outlines the history, theoretical basis and development of the Tavistock psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy model, and discusses some of these key concepts and their relevance to working psychoanalytically with couples. The subsequent chapters demonstrate how theory may be applied in a variety of clinical encounters and deepen the theoretical understanding of the difficulties that beset couples and the challenges posed to those who work with them.

In "Couples on the couch" (Chapter 2), Stanley Ruszczynski presents a detailed description of the application of psychoanalytic theory to working with couples. The author discusses the core theoretical and technical concepts that underlie and distinguish psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy. He argues that the psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy model relies on a stance that focuses on the conscious and the unconscious, as well as the intra-psychic and interpersonal nature of the couple relationship, all of which is created through the transference-countertransference interaction between the partners. In addition, the concepts of the shared unconscious, unconscious partner choice, projective identification and triangular space are discussed with regard to understanding couples. He then describes the qualities of narcissistic relating and contrasts this with the more mature form of relating associated with depressive position capacities.

In Chapter 3, Rachel Cooke places Stanley Ruszczynski's chapter in the broader context of his other writings, showing how they all share a focus on the negotiation of difference in couple relationships. She proposes ways that the couple therapist can facilitate healthier, less narcissistic forms of relating. Dr. Cooke explores the developmental roots and impediments to the sense of separateness and how it impacts the development of empathy in couple relationships. She concludes her

discussion with thoughts about the diagnostic and mutative aspects of the therapist's positive, empathetic response to the couple.

In her chapter "Unconscious beliefs about being a couple" (Chapter 4), Mary Morgan elaborates the ways that a couple's unconscious beliefs about the other and the relationship are central to the therapist's understanding of couple difficulties. She describes how individuals often mistake their beliefs about the relationship and their partner as facts, and she links this to the problem of the partner's lack of curiosity about their spouse. These unconscious beliefs are often strongly defended against by keeping out any new information, resulting in the types of relationships characterized by spirals of frustration and stagnation that often present in our consulting rooms. Using case examples, she explores two prevalent unconscious beliefs: that the relationship is dangerous, and that a relationship requires the perfect attunement of the partners. Morgan makes the point that the affective tone in the room and the therapist's attention to her own countertransference reactions play a central part in both the diagnosis and the effective treatment of a couple's unconscious beliefs.

In Chapter 5, Milton Schaefer's discussion of Mary Morgan's chapter connects her view of unconscious beliefs about a couple to her seminal ideas about "the creative couple" and "projective gridlock", highlighting both the positive and the pathological forms of couple relating. He posits that unconscious beliefs are not just pathognomonic but serve as essential models for being a couple. He contrasts religion with cults as respective positive and negative models illustrative of how beliefs function in the individual, in couples and in society. The author uses Morgan's case examples to contrast the Tavistock and American Relational views of enactment and the role they play in couple psychotherapy, while emphasizing the therapist's ability to maintain and model curiosity.

Using the couple dynamics at the center of Shakespeare's play and an elegant theoretical argument that mines both Freud and Bion, James Fisher in Chapter 6, "The Macbeths in the Consulting Room," addresses the problem of working with deep disturbance in couples through the lens of the "proleptic imagination." This is a concept borrowed from the field of rhetoric that refers to the representation of the future as if it has already occurred or existed – a state of mind that obliterates the distinction between the imagined and the real. As applied to couples, this can create a problematic form of relating that relies on certainty as opposed to

curiosity and can escalate destructive dynamics rather than facilitate communication. Fisher argues that this conceptualization has technical implications in working psychoanalytically with couples. He stresses the importance of the therapist's capacity to listen to the partners' projections as communications and advocates shifting away from the use of interpretations directed toward each of the partners in attempts to get them to reclaim their split-off projections.

In her response to James Fisher's chapter, Shelley Nathans ([Chapter 7](#)) describes in vibrant detail the ways that his concept of "the proleptic imagination" – where a couple takes their fantasies about the future as concrete reality – manifest in the day-to-day experience of working with couples. She illustrates how this concept can help the therapist track the often dizzying oscillations that one encounters in the work. The author sheds light on how Dr. Fisher adopts a more Bionian point of view, whereby projections are seen as more communicative than evacuative of unwanted parts of the self, and how this results in Fisher's view that interpretations addressing the couple's use of projective identification are not particularly helpful. Taking issue with this, Dr. Nathans points out the ubiquitous nature of such projections and argues for a more inclusive and flexible interpretive therapeutic stance.

In [Chapter 8](#), "Psychotic and depressive processes in couple functioning," Francis Grier describes a couple operating in the near psychotic, paranoid-schizoid level. He discusses how this gets played out in the arenas of idealization and the passage of time. He argues that these types of couples often defensively cling to the idea that they should function as a single, almost undifferentiated unit and can experience an overwhelming sense of blame and betrayal when this unrealistic ideal is not met. The author shows how idealization can function both as a hideout to protect the partner's sense of dependency and vulnerability, but also to contain destructive aspects of the self that are resistant to change and development. There is an unreal sense of time and a denial of the need to change in the face of the couple's changing circumstances – for example, with the arrival of children. He also takes up the perplexing problem of what happens when one party in the couple is more able to develop than the other and the varying ways this gets played out in the transference. In two extended case examples, he illustrates how couples triumphantly force a continual re-enactment of a fantasized past in present time. Grier then describes the ways in which couple psychotherapy can facilitate a

movement to a more mature, differentiated state of mind where there is less need for projection and blame, a greater boundary between each individual, between the couple and others, and an enhanced realistic sense of a combined purpose that is shared.

Drawing on ideas regarding the unconscious choice of a partner, in [Chapter 9](#) Julie Friend extends Grier's thinking about the role and fate of idealization in the couple. She shows how a couple's asymmetric development can lead one party to feel that there is "breach of contract" between the couple, with accompanying feelings of hurt and abandonment. Friend cautions against using pathologizing terminology that may foreclose the therapist's empathic stance and she suggests clinical interventions that can facilitate the couple having a more realistic conception of time. The author's close reading of the clinical material also highlights how Grier's interpretive focus on the transference can promote change in one of the partners, but at the same time, may lead to enactments of the couple's underlying problematic dynamic.

In "Romantic bonds, binds, and ruptures: couples on the brink" ([Chapter 10](#)), Virginia Goldner discusses the complexities of working with couples on the brink of disillusion and argues that adult romantic partners are bonded with the same monumentality, and for the same hard-wired reasons, as are mothers and babies. Consequently, romantic loss, injury and deadlock can be understood as instances of what trauma theorists now call "relational trauma" or "small t trauma". By interweaving dynamic systems, attachment and neuropsychological theories, she explains the primitive mental processes and relentless enactments common to couple psychotherapy treatments. Goldner views couples as enacting an unconscious symmetry whereby they are looking for a "relational home" and seeking to gain mastery over the unresolved traumas of the other's non-recognition.

In her commentary on Virginia Goldner's chapter, Rachael Peltz ([Chapter 11](#)) reminds the reader that a couple's desire to be fully known is matched by its impossibility and that it is this search for recognition and the ensuing disappointment that fuels the repetitive recriminations one sees in couples in trouble. Drawing connections between Bion's ideas about the dynamic unconscious and field and systems theory, the author lays out the ways in which couples look to each other, and to the therapist, to process and contain unacceptable parts of themselves. In the maelstrom of projected part-objects it is the therapist's reverie – as

part of the field – that can serve as a guidepost to making interventions that both hold and uncover what is most poignant and unspoken.

Christopher Clulow's chapter, "How was it for you? Attachment, sexuality and mirroring in couple relationships" (Chapter 12), tackles the frequent presenting problem of couples with difficulties in sexual desire. He draws on Winnicott's ideas about mirroring, as well as attachment theory, to understand and treat these frequently intractable problems. Clulow proposes that sexual feelings are only discovered through one's relationships with others, that desire has to do with absence and longing, and that sexuality must be negotiated in a field of disappointment and loss. The author uses finely detailed examples from Frederic Fonteyne's 1999 film, *Une Liaison Pornographique*, as an illustration of the ways couples navigate sex and attachment in their attempts to delineate the realities of their relationships. Clulow highlights and distinguishes the ways that difficulties with attachment in infancy and childhood can lead to a later deadening of desire. This can include neglectful or overly intrusive mirroring of the infant's first displays of sensuality, leading to an insecure base of attachment and subsequent sexual problems in adulthood. In such cases, attachment and sexuality become intertwined so that sexual arousal sparks anxiety, disappointment and fears of rejection. Clulow argues that insecure and anxious attachments are related to a person's use of psychic equivalence producing a confusion between internal psychic states and external realities. Finally, he shows how the attachment concepts of contingency and marking can be used as effective therapeutic tools to establish a sense of safety in the session and help the couple move beyond their shared defensive stance.

In Chapter 13, Leora Benioff responds and expands on the chapter by Christopher Clulow and notes that even individuals with no history or indication of attachment issues can exhibit symptoms of low sexual desire. She draws upon LaPlanche, Stein, Benjamin and Mitchell to explore how the fundamental unknowability of the other, coupled with the unruliness, excess and mystery of sexuality, can lead to a defensive stifling of sexual desire. She argues for conceptualizing difficulties in desire not only through the lens of attachment theory, but also through the acknowledgment of the extremely private and self-contained nature of sexual experience.

We close this collection with an eye on endings. The final chapter and penultimate chapter of the book is "Growing old together in mind and

body,” by Andrew Balfour. The author relies on neo-Kleinian ideas, including the capacity for mourning, to poignantly explore the themes arising in clinical work with some elderly couples. He asks, “How can we be aware of transience in a way that enhances our capacity to live, rather than filling us with despair or distancing us from immersing ourselves in life while we have it?” Balfour employs a developmental model in which the anxieties and defenses of the individual’s early life are seen as effecting subsequent developmental challenges and determinate of the capacity for coping with the experience of growing older. He emphasizes how aging entails a return to the body and the reemergence of the anxieties associated with early somatic experience. Balfour describes the couple’s experience of illness, especially dementia, and reminds us that the threat or actuality of cognitive fragmentation and physical decline may foster a claustrophobic experience of being trapped within a damaged object. The case examples in this chapter vividly describe these clinical phenomena and illustrate the application of a psychoanalytic model to understanding the elderly couple.

In Leslye Russell’s response to Andrew Balfour ([Chapter 15](#)), the author applies Ogden’s concept of the “autistic-contiguous position” to understand how the world of the elderly can seem to shrink, forcing the psyche back to the sensorium where concrete experience and the routine patterns of daily life attain primacy. Drawing upon Meltzer’s concept of the aesthetic conflict, she highlights the psychological parallel between the infant’s experience of dependency on the mother and the elderly person’s dependency on the caregiver. Russell, following Winnicott, usefully reminds us that dependency and caretaking are complex and can include hateful, destructive aspects that the aging couple must negotiate. She posits that these challenges can be a liability and limitation for the couple, but that they may also provide the possibility of renewed connection and intimacy if the couple can accept the ensuing losses associated with aging. With her sensitivity to the psychic demands imposed on the elderly couple, she provides an inspirational framework for all of us as we face the final stages of life.

We are confident that *Couples on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy and the Tavistock Model* provides an in-depth approach to understanding intimate relationships and the complexities of working in this domain. It offers a fertile trove of material for readers who have not previously had exposure to the theory and technique of psychoanalytic

couple psychotherapy, as well as offering an expanded and rigorous approach to those who are already familiar with the Tavistock model of working with couples.

Note

- 1 In 2016, the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships changed its name to Tavistock Relationships (TR). For the sake of consistency, we continue to refer to it as TCCR.

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Introduction

Core concepts of the Tavistock couple psychotherapy model

Shelley Nathans

This chapter provides the reader with an introduction to the key psychoanalytic concepts that are fundamental to psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy and highlight those that are the cornerstones of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) model. This approach is rooted in psychoanalytic theory and technique and facilitates in-depth work with couples that is dynamic, capacious and creative.

There is an unquestionable demand for couple psychotherapy services in the United States and although there is a surfeit of techniques and couple treatment modalities, few formal training opportunities in psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy exist in the United States.¹ Some American psychoanalytic institutes offer elective courses in couple psychotherapy, but therapeutic work with couples has not been developed within the psychoanalytic training paradigm. As a result, many psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists have not had the benefit of a rigorous training in couple psychotherapy and are left without access to a coherent psychoanalytic model to support their clinical work with couples.

A brief history of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships

In contrast, clinicians in England have had access to high-quality education in psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy for many years because couple psychotherapy has been regarded as a distinct discipline with its own specific training, literature and identity (Clulow, 2009). The development of this professional identity has fundamental psychoanalytic roots that can be traced to its origin and association with the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. From their inception,

these institutions incorporated psychoanalytic thinking to better understand and address the pressing social issues of the public, including the mental health of children, families and couples.

The awareness of the detrimental psychological impact of World War II on couples and families led to the establishment of the Family Discussion Bureau in 1948 (now called the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships²). This constituted the first formalized attempt to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the understanding and treatment of marital difficulties. Born out of a desire to address the needs of couples and families in distress, most particularly following the traumas of the war, the founders turned to psychoanalysis to deepen their understanding of the emotional pressures inherent in relationships (Ruszczynski, 1993). Using the ideas of Freud and Jung, and in consultation with psychoanalysts at the Tavistock Institute, such as Michael Balint, they developed an application of psychoanalysis to treating couples. The family welfare workers on staff were trained to attend to the unconscious dynamics in couple relationships and to the impact of transferences and countertransferences on treatment outcomes (Dicks, 1967).

In addition to the work of Freud and Jung, the model was influenced by the research and clinical endeavors of others working at the Tavistock, such as John Bowlby (1969, 1973), whose infant observation studies emphasized the issues of separation and loss. This research had a significant impact on the model for treating war victims and on the understanding of the importance of attachment between children and their parents, as well as between adults in intimate relationships.

Due to the high demand for services following the war, a group psychotherapy model was developed. This led to the application of psychoanalytic ideas to the understanding of groups – a specialty for which the Tavistock has earned an international reputation. Isabel Menzies Lyth, a founder of the Family Discussion Bureau, formulated a highly influential theory of the unconscious forces that shape organizational life (Menzies, 1949). Wilfred Bion (1961) began his work on the unconscious phenomena that shape the behavior of groups at the Tavistock and his understanding of group dynamics and mental functioning is clearly evident in the Tavistock model of couple relationships.

The early model was also influenced by a number of other important psychoanalysts who were affiliated with the Tavistock, including Enid and Michael Balint, Elizabeth Bott Spillius and Henry Dicks. Dicks'