



POWER PSYCHOTHERAPY

A Novel Approach to Restore Broken Relationships: Theory and Practice

By Richard Skaff, PsyD

The history of couples and marital theory has gone through four phases beginning with the atheoretical approach from 1929 to 1932, to the psychoanalytic experimentation from 1931 to 1962, where therapists were seen as being able to tell truth from distortion, rather than creating a truth. One partner or the other must be wrong, and the therapist helped them to see this was the point of therapy; however, in phase three, from 1963 to 1985, family therapy overpowered couples' therapy, even though the majority of the famous family therapists mostly saw couples. For example, Satir coined naming the roles members played (the soother, the agitator, the distractor...), fostered self-esteem and actualization in couples, as well as in families, and saw the therapist more as a nurturing teacher who could help the couple continue what therapy started on their own. Murray Bowen began working on a multigenerational approach to family therapy and included couples work in his practice. He focused on differentiation from the family, and also from each other in the couple, triangulation within the family, but also as the couple sought others to become involved in their conflicts and projection processes. The

therapist was considered a coach who showed them how to calmly understand and accept each other's anxieties and fears in order to lower their anxieties. Subsequently, Don Jackson coined concepts like quid pro quo, homeostasis, and double bind for couples' therapy, and began looking at how systems processes happened between the two people. Meanwhile, Jay Haley focused on power and control as key to understanding why people do what they do in complex systems. He avoided focusing on insight, emotional catharsis, and conscious power plays. Instead, he saw the system as more important than the sum of the parts or people that make up the system.

Finally, phase four from 1986 to the present was marked by refining and integrating approaches to couples' therapy. New theories were introduced, such as Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy, Emotionally Focused Therapy, and Solution-Focused Therapy; all have received good empirical support. Couples therapy was used to treat depression, anxiety, and alcoholism, either working with the couple or working with the couple as a critical part of individual treatment in special clinics. In addition, feminism, multiculturalism, and post-modernism impacted the field as well, often showing we were not as comprehensive, broad-minded, and free of biases as we thought we were. Eclectic integration, brief therapy, and sex therapy treatment developed as subspecialties, and were incorporated into larger theories. (Niolon, 2011).

Ironically, on March 2, 2012, the New York Times published an article that questioned whether couples' therapy, with its multitude of approaches, actually works. According to Weil (2012), the fact couples' therapy stresses out therapists has long been an open secret. The field, however, seems to have decided now would be an appropriate time for its practitioners to address their feelings and vent. It started with the November/December issue of the trade magazine *The Psychotherapy Networker* and its cover story, "Who's Afraid of Couples Therapy?" The article also adds, "It's widely acknowledged couples therapy is the most challenging." According to Richard Simon, the magazine's editor, "The stakes are high. You're dealing with volatility" (Weil, 2010). The article addressed the minefields of couples' psychotherapy as well the history, approaches, and the possible reasons for the lack of success in this specialty. Terry Real, a licensed clinical social worker who was interviewed for the article, stated part of the problem is the kind of person who tends to become a therapist—someone who is empathetic, sensitive, calm, accepting—is generally not the kind of person who is a good couples' therapist. "The traditional, passive uh-huh, uh-huh is useless," Dr. Real says, "you have to like action. To manage marital combat, a therapist needs to get in there; mix it up with the client; be a ninja. This can be intimidating" (Weil, 2012). Peter Pearson and Ellyn

Bader, psychologists and founders of the Couples Institute in Palo Alto, California, which offers both therapy and training for therapists, describes the experience of counseling high-conflict couples in equally violent if metaphorical terms, as “like piloting a helicopter in a hurricane” (Weil, 2012).

Compounding the tender-empathy-caught-in-the-crossfire problem, couples therapy, as it is practiced today, with one therapist and two spouses together in a room, started in what might be seen as a convoluted way. Before the early 1960s, husbands and wives typically sought counsel singly, not together; counsel was provided by a clergy member, a medical doctor, or a social worker; and the mode of conversation was didactic (here’s what you need to do), not therapeutic (let’s figure out why you feel so bad) (Weil, 2012). Then through the late ’60s and ’70s, divorce rates started rising, and the field of marriage therapy exploded. Building off the family therapy model, in which families were treated as a whole or as a system, therapists started seeing most couples in pairs. This was a nice enough idea, maybe even a good one, but there was no research to support it. As a result, the practice, known as conjoint therapy, was blasted in psychology journals as “seriously lacking in empirically tested principles” and a “technique in search of a theory.” One theory the field latched onto was psychoanalysis: married couples had problems because of neurotic interactions and individual psychopathology. (Weil, 2012).

Another framework came from the human potential movement. Virginia Satir, known as “the mother of family therapy,” also was the first director of training at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, where Jack Kerouac and Joan Baez, among others, retreated to “find themselves.” Dr. Satir claimed the goal of marriage therapy was “not to maintain the relationship nor to separate the pair but to help each other to take charge of himself” (Weil, 2012).

Who, or what, is to be saved remains unresolved in some couples’ therapy practices. Is the client one of the spouses? Both of them? The relationship? From the first session, the tangle of needs and obligations can lead to problems. “For starters, there’s an ever-present risk of winning one spouse’s allegiance at the expense of the other spouse’s,” explains Dr. William J. Doherty, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, in his groundbreaking 2002 article on the topic of awkward couples counseling in the *Psychotherapy Networker*, titled “Bad Couples Therapy.” He states, “All your wonderful joining skills from individual therapy can backfire within seconds with a couple. A brilliant therapeutic observation can blow up in your face when one spouse thinks you’re a genius and the other thinks you’re clueless—or worse, allied with the enemy.”

Timing is also crucial, far more than in individual therapy, and this causes stress for therapists as well. “Let a couple interrupt each other for 15 seconds and pretty soon you have them screaming at each other and wondering why they need you to do what they could do at home,” Professor Doherty stated. He also added that with individuals, a therapist could stall. “You can always say, ‘Tell me more about that,’ and take a few minutes to figure out what to

do next,” he says. “In couples’ therapy, the emotional intensity of the couple’s dynamics doesn’t give you that luxury.” Then, there’s the possibility one of the partners has sought out counseling in order to commit what the professor described as “therapist-endorsed divorce.” This is rarely made known. Even couples who have given up on repairing a relationship may want to be able to tell themselves they have tried everything, especially if they have children. So they will start a course of couples’ counseling, claiming they want to change their relationship, when what they really want to do is to change their partner (Weil, 2012).

According to Weil (2012), some types of couples’ therapy is known to work better than others. One of the most promising methods is based on the attachment theory of parenting: good relationships are built on secure attachments, ones that are engaged and emotionally responsive. Another teaches couples to be more accepting of each other while at the same time working to change some of their assumptions and automatic behaviors. Both types of therapy are structured, and the results of both are well documented, in follow-ups. Still, the entire field of couples’ therapy suffers from a systemic problem. Couples often resist seeking help until they have been distressed for a long time. Brian D. Doss, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Miami, said the average couple is unhappy for six years before seeking couples counseling; at which point relationship problems are very difficult to fix. Thomas Bradbury, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, compares a troubled couple to a man with a broken leg. “Seek help straight away, and you’ll heal up just fine. Hobble around injured for months or years, and a full recovery becomes nearly impossible, as by that time,” Professor Bradbury said, “the therapist has to attend not only to the psychological equivalent of the broken bone, but also to the swelling and bruising, the sore hip and foot, and the infection that ensued” (Weil, 2012). “Most psy-

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chological theories about change are just that, theories,” Dr. William Pinsof a professor of clinical psychology and president of the Family Institute at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois stated. “They are not studies of how people actually change. A lot of people who primarily work with individuals feel overwhelmed by the number of variables they have to deal with when they work with couples,” Dr. Pinsof said. “You have to be very active in structuring the session, or the system can blow you away” (Weil, 2012). Still, none of this is going to resolve the real underlying problem. Says Dr. Pearson of the Couples Institute, “If you’re seeing couples, no matter what you do, you’re going to see a lot of anger and volatility. You’re going to see people fighting in your office, and that triggers a lot insecurity and doubt—all your issues from your own childhood, your own relationships. Who wants to sign up for another serving of that?” (Weil, 2012). Apparently, couples’ therapy was engulfed

for many years by family therapy and lost its identity, and then was retracted once again by an ineffective cornucopia of approaches. Systemic or not, the avenues for couples' therapy are numerous, and the results have been unsuccessful. There has been no clear or solid approach that resolves relational struggles by addressing the core human issue in relationships that tends to perpetuate these conflicts. Most of these therapeutic approaches attempt to resolve the superficial problems couples fight about instead of tackling the root causes. A lack of understanding of the dynamics that drive a couple into battle clearly has been missing. Fifty percent of American marriages still end up in divorce, despite the abundance of psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic strategies. What are we doing wrong? How can we enhance our couples' approach in order to improve outcomes?

Proposal: Shared-Power Makes Peace

Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary defines homeostasis as "a relatively stable state of equilibrium or a tendency toward such a state between different but interdependent elements or groups of elements of an organism, population, or group."

According to MedicalDictionary.com, the definition of homeostasis in biology is "the ability or tendency of an organism or a cell to maintain internal equilibrium by adjusting its physiological processes, or the processes used to maintain such bodily equilibrium."

Homeostasis is an essential biological phenomenon that keeps our bodies in equilibrium and keeps us healthy and alive. When

the hormonal or chemical balance in our bodies is diminished, increased, or tilted in favor of one chemical over the other due to illness or other influential factors, symptoms unfold leading us to seek treatment to restore our bodies' balance and to regain normal function and health. In politics, the term homeostasis can be applied to balance of power among nations. If this power is not well balanced conflict and wars occur.

Couples are dynamic organisms that require balance of power in order to subsist and prosper. When one partner dominates the other, discord develops, and the relationship withers and fails. Applying the principle of balance of power to couples' psychotherapy might be the only means to rejuvenate love, revitalize equality, and renew romance.

Power

Power is an important concept in human history. Power has been the only consistent universal value that has defined man over and over again throughout all empires and civilizations. Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary defines power as "the possession of control, authority, or influence over others." In other words, power only can be characterized as the desire to totally dominate others, where one person or group can inflict pain, suffering, and humiliation on others in order to totally control and exert mastery over them. Lust for power is addictive because it provides humans with a false sense of control over their lives that takes them away from their insignificance and misery. People abuse their power because they simply can. This is the ultimate statement of power.

Ironically, love and sex can be classified as components of power. During courtship, a person attempts to cajole, seduce, conquer, penetrate, lure, flatter, and attract a partner in order to bring them under their spell; however, we tend to romanticize love to hide our deep-seated desire to obtain power, keep it, and exercise it over others in order to feel secure and almighty. It is only a man or woman's longing for power that gives them the illusion of becoming greater than he or she truly is. People who gain some power tend to become obsessed and possessed by it and yearn for more of this unquenchable and magical elixir. Money and brutality always have been the tools to achieve dominance over others. A wealthy individual wants to acquire more wealth and self-proclaimed titles and will use brutality and destruction to expand his or her power. The more money and control they have, the bigger they feel, and the larger the illusion of omnipotence becomes. It is no wonder a man of influence, like Henry Kissinger, has called power "the ultimate aphrodisiac." Sadly, regardless how much money and power an individual can accumulate, the end result is the same. He or she ultimately will die like everyone else. Only with death does the illusion of power evaporate. Therefore, we must deal with it and tame it without allowing it to destroy us and annihilate the people around us.



Theory of Power in Couples' Psychotherapy

How can one love a partner who dominates and humiliates him or her? Romantic love definitely is not the answer to a successful relationship; therefore, the author proposes the key ingredient for relational success is a balance of power among the involved couples.

Relationships are based on equality; however, when there is a hierarchy, this is actually a dictatorship and a one-sided relationship. As a result, resentment, anger, depression, affairs, conflict, and divorce arise.

Based on this author's long time experience as a psychotherapist, I've found most conflicts among couples are a direct result of an imbalance of power. When one member is more dominant than the other, this consequently makes him or her feel insignificant or unloved; coexistence disappears and struggle emerges. When a person feels powerless they become depressed, angry, and act out; suddenly love is transformed into vindictiveness and indignation. Humans have an innate need for security that might be a result of their vulnerability in living in a hostile and indifferent world, or a consequence of feeling insignificant, considering the magnitude and the complexity of the universe, which in turn leads them to a sense of deficiency in having control over their lives that is culminated by their fear of dying. However, the illusion of power presents them with a pseudo-sense of dominion and control that will aid them in overcoming and transforming these fears.

Power psychotherapy is a strategically active approach designed to help the struggling couple restore the balance of power between them. In addition, psychotherapists must remember empowerment is conducive to feeling secure, loved, and respected.

Conclusion

Power psychotherapy is extremely effective if these 10 principles are applied accurately and consistently. It can be confidently stated couples' therapy will be made more exciting and successful if power psychotherapy is applied. Let's remember; people who feel empowered are happy people!

It is my sincere hope that while reading this excerpt from my coming book *Power Psychotherapy*, you become as excited as I am about this novel, dynamic, and "power focused approach" that will help restore broken hearts and marriages.

This article is an excerpt from Richard Skaff's upcoming book titled: *Power Psychotherapy: A Novel Approach to Restore Broken Relationships: Theory and Practice*. Copyright, Library of Congress, 2012. He is also working on obtaining grants that will empirically help him validate the success of this new approach to psychotherapy. The website of powerspsychotherapy.com recently was launched.

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10 PRINCIPLES OF POWER PSYCHOTHERAPY

1. **Acknowledge** the existence of power dynamics among couples.
2. **Reduce** the stigma in regards to the concept of power in relationships.
3. **Establish** that love and sex are components of power and encourage couples to acknowledge and embrace their individual power.
4. **Assist** the couple in recognizing their relational issues are a result of a power struggle.
5. **Act** as a guide to help the couple realize their need to dominate one another in order feel secure but not superior.
6. **Elucidate** the connection in relationships between power and security rather than power and superiority.
7. **Clarify** that a free and dignified individual cannot sacrifice his dignity, happiness, and relationship to obtain an ephemeral feeling of security.
8. **Guide** the couple to acknowledge the hierarchy and the imbalance of power in their relationship and articulate the ensuing consequences for their current relational dynamic, which could result in separation, vengeance, or violence as a means to survive.
9. **Facilitate** the transformation of the power struggle between couples into a strategic negotiation tool in order to keep the peace and to remind them that accord and respect are conducive to increased trust and intimacy.
10. **Emphasize** and promote the concept of shared power, fairness, and equality in interactions; facilitate a Socratic-like forum where the couple can engender their own creative strategies to achieve reconciliation and balanced power by using compromise, behavioral planning, and empowerment.

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