

Object Relations Couple Therapy Overview

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Couples Therapy

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Joe and Edith (fictional names) met two years ago and married shortly after; they do not have children. Although they are both distinctly different, they seem to have a strong romantic connection with each other. Both Joe and Edith come from different backgrounds, Joe was neglected as a child and Edith was overprotected and felt emotionally suffocated by her parents. The relationship between Joe and Edith is familiar on a subconscious level, Edith allows Joe to have his independence and Joe gives Edith plenty of affection, love and demonstrates a strong bond. There are times when they fight and each partner gives their respective reason. Joe feels there are times when Edith is distant and unavailable when he needs her the most, while Edith feels that Joe is smothering her and he is “needy.” This couple would be served best in *object relations therapy* mostly due to their complementary neuroses that will be explained within this work.

Object relations couple therapy derived from both a psychoanalytic object relations model of the mind of the individual and group analytic theory. This type of couple therapy is rooted in psychodynamic theory; which emphasizes that there is an interaction between drives, unconscious motivation, and how they manifest in behavior. Various works for this theory have derived from Willcott, Klein, Guntrip, Balint, Fairbairn. There are two major common features in Object Relations Couples Therapy, those are behavioral and systems theory approaches.

According to Jill and David Scharff, object relations couple therapy relates to the couple as a small group of two and as two individuals, and moves easily between their shared external and internal reality. Conflict specific to the marriage commitment must be translated in terms of the spouses’ unconscious desires and aspirations. An example would be Joe and Edith, both of their unconscious needs are primarily unmet due to their early experiences with their nurturing parent.

Object relations theory declares that the motivating factor in growth and development of the human infant is the need to be in a relationship with a nurturing person, not the liberation of energy from some instinct. This theory declares that having a nurturing parent is key to our existence.

“As the infant relates to the nurturing parent, attachment develops and psychic structure is built. The experience, even with a good mother who responds well to her infant’s needs, is always somewhat disappointing in that needs cannot be met before they cause discomfort, unlike the experience in the womb. When the infants’ frustration is intolerable, the infant perceives the mother as rejecting. To cope with the pain, the infant takes in (“introjects”) the experience of the mother as a rejecting object and rejects that image inside the self by “splitting” it off from the image of the ideal mother and pushing it out of consciousness (“repressing” it). This is called the “rejected object.” It is further split into its “need exciting” and “need rejecting” aspects, associated with feelings of longing and rage, respectively. The part of the self that related to this aspect of the mother is also split off from the original whole self and is repressed along with the relevant, unbearable feelings (Scharff & Scharff).”

Now the personality comprises of three parts: (1) a “central self,” attached with feelings of satisfaction and security to an “ideal internal object”; (2) a “craving self,” longingly but unsatisfyingly attached to an “exciting internal object”; and (3) a “rejecting self,” angrily attached to a “rejecting internal object.”

Healthy/Dysfunctional Relationships

Some object relational and self-psychological analysts feel that partners in a marriage like Joe and Edith’s marriage tend to select mates based on their complementary neuroses. In other words, they choose partners that balance their deficits; opposites attracting. Couples usually

connect at both a conscious and subconscious level and whether they stay together is ultimately determined at their subconscious level.

In a healthy marriage, this unconscious union allows for de-repression of the repressed parts of one's object relations, so one can re-find lost parts of the self in relation to the spouse. In an unhealthy marriage, the fit cements previous repression, because undoing of the defenses would also undo the spouse's similar defensive frame that the marriage is supposed to consolidate rather than threaten.

An example is Edith rejecting a part of herself that is denied or overvalued and sees Joe as if he were complete with these qualities, whether in fact he is or not. Joe inevitably has been chosen because of his psychological valencies and physical and sexual characteristics that resonate with parts of Edith's self and object, Joe also has his own personality and body that are different from those of Edith's and her external objects on whom her internal objects are based.

Process of Therapy

Couple therapy for object relational theory usually has a duration of 45 minutes to 1½ hours, and may occur weekly or twice a week for many year.

Other than having a beginning, a middle, and an end, the object relations couple therapy session has no structure imposed upon it, because the therapist does not direct how the couple will use the session. Instead, we follow the couple's lead and comment on how their use of the session reflects their way of dealing with other times, tasks, authorities, and intimate situations.

Goals are not closely defined, because this theory finds this to be restricting. This theory does not tailor their approach to the removal of a symptom, because they value the symptom as an important that leads the therapist through the layers of defense and anxiety from which it stems. Goals tend to change over time as the partners are freed to experience the potential of

their relationship. So therapy is preferred as an open-ended format of a couple's desires for treatment.

Role of Therapist

The role of the therapist in object relations couple therapy is to be neutral, active, directive, and challenging. The therapist must be able to tolerate anxiety and countertransference. At times the therapist will become the object that is "used and abused" to process many anxieties and emotions like a child using a toy to express himself or herself. An object relations therapist typically follows, rather than leads, they are supportive and confrontational, using their own presence and feelings, yet they are somewhat distant in that they do not allow mood to dominate the session. The therapist will share information that is not personal, like fantasies to relate better with the couple. It is important to note that the client-therapist relationship with the couple will progress over time.

Important assessments and interventions that therapists use in object relations are setting the frame, creating psychological space, listening to the unconscious, following the affect, transference and countertransference, interpretation of defense, and confronting basic anxiety.

Setting the frame may be established at the beginning or may emerge according to need as the consultation proceeds. The frame includes the number and length of sessions, the setting of the fee, the therapist's management of the beginning and end of sessions, and the establishment of the way of working. Typically about five sessions are needed before the therapist is ready with a formulation and recommendation. This allows for one or two couple sessions, one or more individual sessions for each spouse, and a couple session in which formulations and recommendations about treatment are given. The partners typically try to bend

the frame so that unconscious wishes can be gratified, though their actions are interrupted by the therapist, who stays firm.

Final Thoughts

Joe and Edith's pasts would be addressed in therapy mostly by using the therapist as the "object" in which they can transfer their unresolved issues from their nurturing parent. This theory relies heavily on transference and countertransference to occur in therapy. The therapist is highly involved in this therapy unlike other respective theories (Solution-Focused Therapy). The object relations therapist is highly skilled in working with the subconscious processes. Once Joe and Edith are able to directly address their anxieties and stressors, we can begin to terminate therapy as a couple. If individuals wish to see a therapist going forward as individuals they may.