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INTEGRATION OF DANIEL STERN'S DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY INTO A MODEL OF COUPLES THERAPY

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ABSTRACT: Therapists commonly use a combination of techniques derived from psychodynamic, cognitive and systemic approaches in their attempts to treat the resistant patterns brought into therapy by couples. In this paper we utilize Dan Stern's concept of RIGS (Representations of Interactions that have been Generalized) to generate an integrative model of conjoint therapy. The model presented here presents a framework within which these modalities can be effectively integrated.

Anyone who has treated a couple in therapy is well aware of the "stubbornness" of the symptomology which plays itself out in the field of the relationship. Couples seeking therapy are often enmeshed in repetitive, bewildering, painful patterns of interaction. In this light, the therapy is successful only if there are behavioral changes and corresponding changes in the affects and belief systems (cognitions) that guide those behaviors. This is no easy task. Effecting change in these patterns is complicated by the fact that we are simultaneously treating the couple system and the two individuals.

Understanding what keeps dysfunctional patterns of behavior intact and intervening in a couple's interactions requires that we attend to several different levels at once. These include: the specific dysfunctional transactions and the consciously held beliefs which support those behaviors; the unconscious developmental and historical (intrapsychic) elements that each individual brings into the marriage; the ways in which the intrapsychic features of the two individuals interlock to form an overall systemic homeostasis; and the external system itself—the community and culture of the couple.

Indeed, no one conceptual position is effective in treating couples on

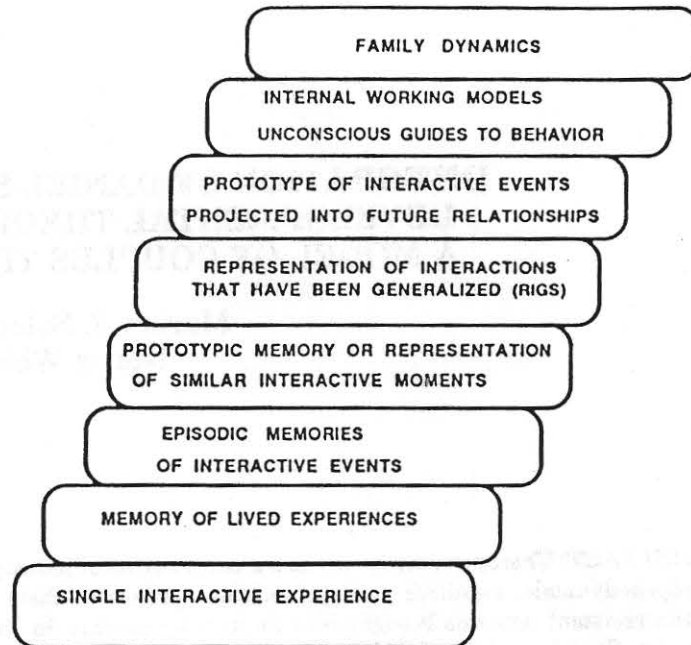


FIGURE 1

Developmental Hierarchy

all the levels noted above. However, it is the position of this paper that Stern's concept of the internal representational model can serve as a tool in bringing together these disparate treatment activities.

Internal Representational Models or RIGs, (Stern 1985) are organized according to a blueprint designed through a series of interactions with caretakers and other important figures throughout life. There is a developmental hierarchy (see Figure 1) that includes moments of lived experiences, memories (including distortions) of these experiences, and predictions of future interactions, that become the basis of a couple's dynamics.

Memories represent an individual's subjective version of lived experiences. A central premise of this paper is that every relationship throughout life carries the remnants of earlier relationships. From the beginning of life, each interactional experience becomes part of a relational pattern that is remembered and drawn upon throughout the developmental process. The developmental steps begin with the first single interactions between infant and caretaker. New information is taken in during subsequent interactions that confirms or discounts prior experience. Through a series of interactive experiences, a framework

develops in memory through which all data are filtered and processed and which conditions all subsequent behavior. The result is an individual's unique way of viewing and behaving in the world.

Patterns and events can never be recalled with complete accuracy since each new experience is always colored by earlier memories. These memories accumulate and eventually generalize into "representations of interactions." Stern (1985) calls these recalled interactional experiences RIGs. Each new interaction brings up memories of similar types of past experiences. A series of approximately similar interactions becomes generalized into a representative RIG, used to predict future events.

Stern reports that RIGs are flexible structures that average several actual instances and form a prototype to represent them all. As RIGs develop, the earliest experiences in the series fall into the unconscious, but nonetheless continue to support behavioral patterns and the conscious beliefs that rationalize those patterns. Thus, the concept of RIGs gives us a way of looking at behavior which situates it within a context of consciously- and unconsciously-held beliefs and memories.

Each individual carries numerous representational models. What distinguishes each model is that it constellates around repeated incidents which have certain invariant and identifiable features. In Stern's words:

The experience of being with a self-regulating other gradually forms RIGs. And these memories are retrievable whenever one of the attributes of the RIG is present. . . . Attributes are thus recall cues to reactivate the lived experience. And whenever a RIG is activated, it packs some of the wallop of the originally lived experience in the form of an active memory. (Stern 1985, p. 110)

As the individual develops, a series of "working models" form and become entrenched in the intrapsychic world. Stern describes the working model as "an assembly of many interactions into a larger representation of a person's repertoire . . ." (p. 114). Once they are formed, RIGs function to determine: (1) what incoming information is selected for attention; (2) how that information is interpreted; and (3) the type of response that is likely to be selected.

The formation of a RIG is a significant accomplishment. It represents the taming of chaos and gives the individual a sense of understanding and security in an otherwise uncertain world.

FUNCTION OF RIGS IN ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

The way in which partners interpret behaviors and respond to one another is historically conditioned and, thus, the construct of internal representations is central to any understanding of the meaning of relational experience.

Individuals work hard to maintain and defend their RIG-organized expectations, interpretations and response patterns. The need the individual has to preserve the RIGs strongly conditions every relationship into which the individual enters. In fact, it often appears that two individuals will not form a relationship unless the partnership appears—at least initially—to preserve this internal structure for each of them.

There seems significant indication that people with complementary patterns often marry (Gurman 1978; Bowen 1978; Solomon 1985, 1989). After a period of time together, an unconscious fusion can form, with each fitting into the other's patterns of expectation. In this situation, the internal representations of each partner, although separate, become so interlinked that any aspect of one implies a reciprocal aspect in the other. Within this context, marital therapy serves to help the couple break the fusion which underlies the frozen complementarity. Breaking this fusion requires a profound understanding of its intrapsychic and relational aspects.

Interestingly enough, while internal representations possess the capability for shaping external events, that which is external has far less ability to affect what is internal. Once an internal representation is formed, new experiences are selectively attended to without conscious awareness in order to conform to the RIGs. The "royal road" to internal representations seems to be a one way street. Once formed, a RIG may be somewhat modified in later relationships, as in a corrective therapeutic experience. In general, however, there is a tendency for individuals to maintain a mode of relating that functions to create self-fulfilling prophecies. Intimate relationships spark memories of earlier bonds between infant and caretaker. Of all the potentially recallable lived experiences, the most poignant are those which fit the current working model of the relationship. This understanding goes a long way towards explaining the intractability of difficult relationship patterns.

It is exactly in this arena that marital therapy can have its greatest impact. Marital therapy is most effective if it takes into account the full complexity of the relationship between the internal and the external structures. Although the therapist initially sets for him/herself the task of altering the interactional pattern of the couple, it should be clear from the foregoing discussion that this task must be accomplished by the therapist working simultaneously with the RIGs of each partner.

THE DYNAMIC INTERACTION BETWEEN OVERT BEHAVIOR AND INTERNAL REPRESENTATION

When a couple comes into treatment, the therapist encounters a collection of overt behaviors enacted by each partner. The interactive

behaviors of husband and wife, indicated by B(h) and B(w), are in the domain of objectifiable events which can be identified, measured, videotaped. For example, a husband might complain that his wife always nags and argues, and his wife might complain that her husband never takes her seriously and withdraws whenever she tries to discuss issues. The therapist might actually observe these behaviors in session.

The basic model of husband-wife relationship (or of any intimate dyadic relationship) is depicted in Figure 2 below.

Each person has a RIG organizing his or her perception of self, e.g., as sibling, as child to parents, as competitor, as spouse, as parent to his or her own children, etc. Inherent in these RIGs are specific rules of behavior, expectations, belief systems and role definitions. Each one of these RIGs crystallizes out of a host of historical experiences and may be only tenuously related to the real context of objective events occurring in the relationship. Like icebergs, these RIGs are only partially visible in overt behaviors.

When probing such behaviors in the therapeutic situation, we learn that each behavior is supported by some kind of conscious belief or memory, indicated by C(h) and C(w). (It is important to note here that some beliefs are unique to each partner, and some beliefs are shared by both). In the example given above, the husband might hold a strong philosophical belief that arguing should always be avoided. His wife, on the other hand, might believe that an issue should never be left unre-

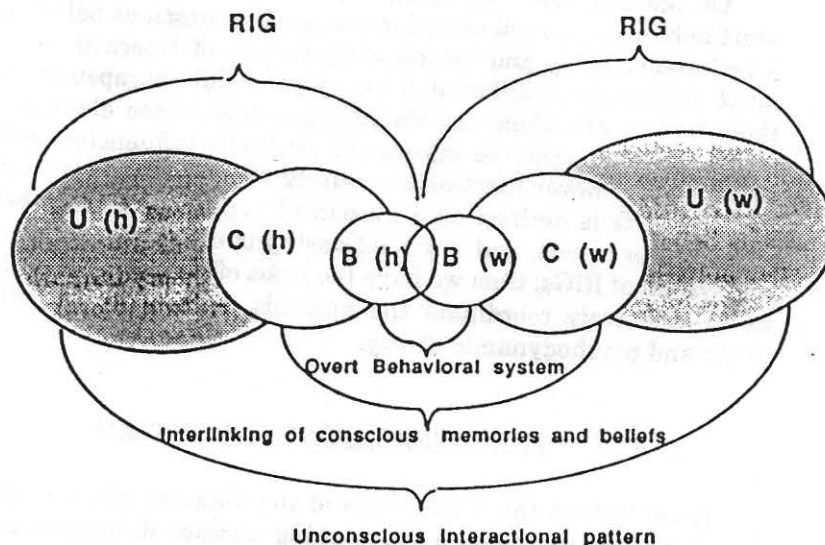


FIGURE 2

solved. Deeper probing reveals that all of these conscious beliefs are embedded in unconscious material, indicated by U(h) and U(w). For example, the husband who believes that it is wrong to argue and rationalizes this belief on religious and philosophical grounds, may at the same time be unconsciously terrified of invoking the wrath of a long-dead father.

In the above example, the wife whose husband habitually avoids discussion of significant aspects of their relationship may access memories of her father who did not take interest in her or memories of her siblings who ignored and teased her. Or, she might come to understand the situation as replicating her parents' relationship in which unresolved issues between them resulted in their divorce. Each of these interpretations carries with it implications about her power to have an impact on the situation and strongly conditions her sense of the options which are open to her.

People cling tenaciously to their representational models which allow them to produce "stories." These stories about reality constitute a sense of personal identity and to lose this sense is always frightening. Therefore, each member of the dyad will explain the situation to him or herself in a way that will cause the least damage to an internal sense of self: a vulnerable self must be preserved even at the cost of damage to the relationship.

The hidden payoff in an otherwise inexplicably painful relationship may be the way it guarantees each partner a stable and familiar sense of ego-integrity.

On another level, we begin to see that these apparently disparate overt behaviors, conscious rationales, and unconscious beliefs constitute a self-maintaining and interlocking system of interactions. Each element represents a different locus of potential therapeutic action. Although they are often considered separately, these elements actually represent interconnected aspects of a mutually influencing reciprocal interaction and never function as entirely distinct from one another.

If a RIG is defined as a system of actions, conscious beliefs, and unconscious beliefs, and if a relationship is understood as an interlocking system of RIGs, then we have the basis of a model theory that allows us to effectively coordinate the methods of cognitive-behavioral, systemic and psychodynamic theory.

THE INTERDEPENDENT SYSTEM

If we look at the three levels of the diagram above (Figure 2), we see that there must be an interlocking on each dimension in order for the relationship to sustain itself. That is, there are recurring cycles of objectively observable interactions, *and* there is a "fit" between the RIG

systems which ensures that the objective interaction will bring internal stability to each partner.

The representational model of either partner functions only within the framework of the expected and actual reaction of the other: to assume that either one's early learned model of interaction is the sole cause of a dysfunctional relationship pattern is specious. Marital interactions are dyadic. Each partner actively engages the other in recreating preconceived and expected interactional patterns. Thus, it is necessary to examine the reciprocal relationship between behavioral patterns and the shared emotional exchanges.

For the purposes of this paper, we are positing 3 discrete but interlocking systems: the husband's representational system; the wife's representational system; and the external system which constitutes the interaction between the two, i.e., their relationship. Each one of these systems attempts to maintain an internal consistency and resists change. Together, the three form an interlock which is very stable. Whenever either one of the partners or the relationship experiences stress, that stress is distributed among all three systems.

Marital symptoms appear to develop at the point at which any one of these systems comes into conflict with the others. In a relatively typical example, when a baby is born repercussions occur throughout the three systems. The relationship may have evolved to the point that it is prepared to integrate a new member; i.e., there are financial resources, there is room in the family home and the overt desire to bring a new member into the family. However, the birth may seriously stress the mother and father. It may bring up memories of abandonment and sibling rivalry in the father, and he may react by withdrawing as he reacted in childhood when he felt abandoned. This reaction may have some reciprocal impact on his wife, who may also be experiencing her own problematic reaction to the birth. In this example, each partner's reaction is conditioned by an early RIG which gives strong sense of self-definition.

Within this context, symptoms can be perceived as mutually beneficial for both partners, as they serve to protect each of them from having to challenge their set representational patterns. On the other hand, these symptoms simultaneously produce the need to change the very patterns they are trying to hold in place. This is exactly the point at which many couples seek therapy.

TOWARD DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF COUPLES THERAPY

Various approaches can be used in treating dysfunctional couples, including family systems therapy, cognitive-behavioral approaches or psychodynamic treatment. Each provides a possible path toward change.

Clinical experience, observation of many relationship problems and varied attempts at changing entrenched patterns seem to suggest the need for a more integrated, flexible approach to conjoint marital therapy which incorporates aspects of each theoretical framework.

Conceptualizing the relationship in terms of its representational landscape (RIG systems) allows us to coordinate our perceptions of actual patterns of interactions (the systemic dance), cognitions and beliefs (the underlying rationale with behaviors reinforcing beliefs and vice versa), and subjective memories (history). For each individual, changing behavior entails changing one's beliefs. Changing beliefs requires changing the ways in which one (consciously or unconsciously) remembers events and behaves according to these memories. And, changing the impact of these memories entails envisioning an entirely new view of the marital system. Seeing the way in which RIGs function within the couple system, we can articulate ways in which each therapeutic approach can work toward change within the same dyadic system, and how each can relate to and complement the other treatment modalities.

In a mutually-reinforcing and reciprocal manner, these disparate ways of perceiving experience fit together to provide keys for challenging resistant patterns. The couple described below came into therapy with Marion Solomon at the time that she and Nancy Weiss were doing the preliminary work for this paper. The authors decided this would be an appropriate case to test the applicability of their model, and they closely collaborated in the analysis of the interaction and method of treatment.

CASE EXAMPLE

a. Identifying Data

(This couple's presenting information is detailed in Dr. Solomon's case notes of the first session which are reproduced below.)

Joan and Aaron, both in their fifties, have been married 22 years. They have three grown children. Aaron is an executive in a large media-based agency. Joan was a child actress who has not worked since the marriage.

When the couple first came in to talk about their unhappy relationship, I was aware of Aaron's stiffness and discomfort, and Joan's almost childlike hopefulness. She had read about my work in a *Los Angeles Times* article on therapists who are pro-marriage. Joan seemed to have an idealizing transference to me from the moment that she walked in.

b. Presenting Features

Joan began the session saying that she had wanted to see a marital therapist for a long time and Aaron finally agreed because he "has something on me." She described therapy as their last hope for the marriage. Aaron, on the other

hand, downplayed the seriousness of the long-term problem and wanted to focus only on the presenting issue; Joan's "embezzlement" of their joint money.

Aaron accused Joan of stealing and hiding money out of her household allowance, which he labelled "embezzlement of community property." He insisted that she tell him how much money she had stolen and that she produce the bankbook. Joan resisted this, explaining that she might need the money if she were to leave the marriage. She then began to describe friends of hers who had ended up divorced and destitute after years of marriage. She said that the problem was not the money, but her husband's unloving attitude, his abuse of her, and her refusal to tolerate it.

Aaron interjected that Joan had a drinking problem and had problems with everyone in their family. "I've tried to ignore it but now she's gone too far. She is embezzling money and it has to stop. And I have a right to know how much and where the money is." Joan refused.

c. Initial thoughts upon observing the couples interaction

As I watched Joan's response, I thought, "She's enjoying some power over him." Rather than appearing guilty or upset, she seemed to look satisfied with herself. I wondered what exactly was the behavior that would go along with what Aaron called embezzlement. Rather than interrupt their versions of the issues, I waited to learn more about how they interacted together, what she meant by his unloving attitude and abuse, and what he meant by his statements about her drinking problem and embezzlement.

Joan was silent for a few minutes longer as Aaron continued to berate her for her dishonesty. He turned to me, wanting confirmation that I understood his long tolerance of a very difficult wife. He talked about how she spent most of her time in her bedroom in her pajamas. "When I get home from work in the evening, I want to go out to dinner or to the home of friends. She doesn't even want our children to visit or to bring their friends to our home."

As he spoke, Joan seemed increasingly agitated and suddenly cut him off in mid-sentence as he spoke of her poor relationship with their children. "You undercut me constantly with the children. You encourage them to ignore what I want," she said.

"I just want to have nice relationships with my children and my family," Aaron countered. "I'm nice to your mother and sister whenever we are with them. But you won't let my brother and his family in the house to watch sports events on TV. And our children don't feel that they are welcome at home."

At this point I felt somewhat bombarded by the myriad of problems each was throwing at the other and wondered whether to focus on their accusations of each others behaviors, their personal histories, or the way they experience themselves and each other. I was aware of feeling a stronger connection to Joan and reminded myself that I would have to be careful not to let my reaction to men who abuse their wives interfere with therapeutic neutrality. Yet, he did not seem like a man who would hit his wife. Was she talking about physical abuse?

I noticed the discomfort Joan seemed to be feeling as she prepared to defend herself against Aaron's verbal attack. Her expression seemed to alternate between sadness, anger, and impassivity. I wondered if she was holding back because she wanted to be sure that Aaron would agree to continue therapy, or if there was something that was too shameful to discuss.

At this point I interceded, partly to stop the mutual charges each of them blasted at the other, and partly to clarify the kinds of things that I expected to

focus on in our work together. I said that it was important for me to understand more about a number of things. I needed to get some information about their family and the relationship between each of them and between them and their children. I also wanted to know more about the families in which they grew up to help me understand what each of them learned to expect from a family and from themselves.

"But even before we go on to these things," I added, "I need to be sure that I understand how each of you experience this relationship; what is wrong in this relationship for each of you, and what has kept you together when there have been so many problems."

Turning to Aaron, I said, "If I understand you correctly, the event that precipitated your coming into therapy has to do with Joan taking and hiding joint money. Before that you were unhappy because Joan had a drinking problem and had cut herself off from relationships with friends and family."

"What about you, Joan? Obviously Aaron isn't the only one who has been unhappy in this marriage. What has gone wrong for you?"

Joan hesitated before she began and then seemed to talk around it. Then she said, "Everyone thinks Aaron is such a nice man. We go to parties at his work and his boss tells me how wonderful he is; how he couldn't do without him. The women tell me how lucky I am. Aaron is such a kind and gentle man—sure—but they don't know he is a wife beater. He used to beat me and I didn't want people to see the bruises. So I wouldn't go out."

"But I haven't touched you in 2 1/2 years," Aaron countered. Turning to me he said, "I stopped getting into those fights with Joan. I felt it was dangerous. I never meant to hit her. She drove me to it. All I wanted was to come home to a peaceful haven, but Joan never let up. She used to wake me up in the middle of the night and cross examine me. She couldn't sleep unless we weren't arguing. I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to talk. I wanted to go back to sleep. But she wouldn't let up. Then I began leaving the house. She hid my car keys. I didn't want to fight but she wouldn't let me alone. If she only had let me leave the house, I never would have hit her. I'm not a wife abuser."

"You just refuse to accept responsibility for what you did to me," Joan was indignant and adamant on this point. "No one is forced to beat their wife," she said. "And we cannot be married if you keep trying to blame me."

d. Initial Intervention

I was aware that I needed to understand how their defensive pattern reflected deeply held assumptions about their relationship. Rather than asking for a family history, I moved from specific behaviors that caused problems into questions about how behaviors fit into the ways that they have learned to interact. I asked the couple to express what they know about their relationship pattern.

By leaving the question open-ended and moving away from the immediate attacks and painful present feelings, I begin to get a perspective on the inter-relatedness of their separate and joint memories, beliefs and expectations. I watched who began speaking, how they considered each other's words, how they agreed and disagreed with each other, and what raised intense affect and how they defended against intolerable feelings.

Toward the end of a two hour consultation session, Joan began speaking quickly and used the remainder of the time to describe her view of their marriage. "When we met it was wonderful. He would do anything for me. He fought

his whole family to marry me. It was hard for me too. I felt a real pull not to leave my family. Not only that, but we were of different religions and he lived in California. So I had to leave my mother and sister behind. It was a real loss, believe me," she said.

Aaron did not respond or add to her memories of their meeting and marrying. Joan went on, "The first years were wonderful. But then when he got this job, we had to go out almost every night. The children were little and I hated to go out. But he loved it and I'm a great socializer. I'm really not, but I learned how to smile and be charming very early. I know how to say nice things to people so they will love me. I was in show business since I was a little girl. It didn't matter if I was sick or hurt or whatever. I would always go on. So Aaron and I went out, and I put on my smile; and I found that if I took a few drinks it was easier. Nothing bothered me when I drank. I told Aaron that I thought I had a drinking problem, but he denied it. I am more fun when I drink . . . I'm nice to his friends."

Aaron looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. I wondered how he experienced and remembered it. But rather than interrupt, I let the story unfold. Joan continued, "Six years ago I knew something was wrong and I went to AA and stopped drinking. Aaron didn't encourage me to go. I was much easier to get along with when I drank. Whatever he wanted to do I said O.K. I've been attending meetings ever since then and I haven't touched a drop since. Aaron still wanted me to give parties with alcohol, and he didn't mind if the kids served drinks to friends when they came over. When I stopped drinking, I didn't like what was going on and I said so. But nobody listened to me. I wasn't good old mom any more. And Aaron didn't like me any more. When I tried to talk to him about important things, he wouldn't talk." "Later," he said. It was always later. And things kept getting worse. He couldn't say no to the kids, and we were spending money like water. And I tried to talk about money and business, and Aaron just ignored me, or avoided me. When I wouldn't go to social things he just went without me. I thought, maybe he had a girlfriend. There are a lot of pretty young things always trying to get attention in his business. When he came home, I wanted to talk about what was happening. But he didn't want to talk. When I insisted, he started hitting me. I was so ashamed."

She stopped talking and began to cry. "What happened then," I asked looking back and forth between Joan and Aaron and reminding myself that I must not align myself on the side of Joan as a victim, even as I felt a strong empathic response toward her. There is much more that I would need to know about these two people. It could not be that he was the cause of all of their problems, any more than she was.

"Aaron," I said, "you have been rather quiet. And I know that the expectations you had when you first got married have not been met either. It's more than the embezzlement of money, and it's more than your getting angry at Joan for her demands on you. Tell me how you see the situation." He was quiet for a moment and then responded to Joan's accusation of wife beating. "It went on for a couple of years, he said. I kept telling her to stop looking for an argument and stop pushing me into getting so angry. Then I decided that it had to stop. It was getting out of hand. From that day on I never hit her again, and when she tries to fight I just keep saying, 'I'm not going to talk anymore.' It's been two and a half years, but she still acts like I abuse her.

"I can never trust you. When you look angry, I get frightened. I can't stand it when you don't talk to me, and I can't make you talk," Joan said through her tears. "You get just like my father was when he got angry. There was no way to

talk him out of it or resolve anything. My father left us, and I got afraid you would too. All I wanted you to do was talk about things—not keep secrets and avoid me.

"When you wouldn't, I decided that I would have to leave. I began to save money out of the household expenses. I was careful and saved a lot." Joan was proud that she had managed to save several thousand dollars. It made her feel good to know she could manage money well, she explained. "Everyone treats me as if I am incompetent."

"So you were left with a terrible choice, Joan, either drink and do what Aaron wanted, or not drink and be aware of your intense pain and aloneness. Or leave the marriage. And Aaron, you say that you were just trying to have a peaceful, happy life, and that Joan was pushing you into terrible fights. You could either choose to accommodate Joan's need to finish a fight, or to accommodate your need to protect both of you from the anger. We can see already that there is much more going on than what you said when you started today. We will have to try to unravel what it is about if you want to make this relationship work for you."

e. Treatment plan

I suggested we begin with twelve sessions, and said that at the end of those twelve sessions we could discuss whether the therapy was helping and how to proceed. I looked to see if they had any reactions to this recommendation, and whether they would commit to twelve sessions. They both nodded, and Aaron said, "If it will make things better, I'm game."

I added, "There is also a lot of strength in both of you. First you, Joan, recognized that you had a problem with alcohol and went to AA without being pushed or even encouraged by anyone. You knew you were in trouble and knew you had to do something about it. That's a good sign. And Aaron, you recognized that your behavior was getting beyond your ability to control, and you were able to stop reacting physically. You are both able to use your thinking capacity to change your behavior. But the underlying problems were still there and we will have to look at what it's all about."

I then outlined a treatment in which we would look at the way each of them learned to be in relationships (Figure 1), how their memories and beliefs interlocked to create problems (Figure 2), and what messages each of them carry inside from childhood interactions about what they need, what they fear and how to protect themselves against being hurt.

After the initial session, the two authors consulted with one another to determine how to address and treat this couple's RIG system. The severity and intensity of their hostility, as manifested in their continual blaming behaviors and defensiveness, led us to focus specifically on their fighting patterns in the first six weeks of treatment. The next sessions were useful in presenting the RIGs underlying these patterns and in helping us to make use of our understanding of the RIGs to effect change in the marital system.

CASE DISCUSSION

Joan's behavioral style was to argue to the bitter end and to try unceasingly to make her point through brief exploration. It became apparent that this behavior was supported by her consciously-held beliefs that: "You can never stop until you resolve an issue completely."

Deeper exploration revealed that this belief grew historically out of the situation in which her parents never argued openly, but her father nevertheless became increasingly estranged from the family. Aaron's communicative withdrawal automatically aroused Joan's fear of abandonment. Her behavior, in this context, was a desperate attempt to maintain contact. Hence, Joan's conscious belief that all arguments must be resolved had been profoundly organized by her experience of her father's abandonment.

Aaron presented himself as logical, rational, mild mannered, and very unemotional. He seemed determined to avoid anything that might result in a confrontation or might escalate a fight between them. He would withdraw at the first sign of discussion or whenever a mild amount of emotion was present. Neither Joan nor Aaron were aware of the protective nature of his cut-offs.

In an attempt to uncover the historical precedence for Aaron's current behavior, Aaron recalled early memories of his household being shaken by "royal battles" between his parents. Aaron attributed these fights to his mother's emotionality and her incessant nagging of his father whom she dominated along with all four children. Aaron recalled his father spending the weekends in his study with his religious books and his wine. Aaron remembered his father telling him that these were the only times he could avoid his wife. Aaron's two sisters were rebellious and his brother got involved with drugs. Describing himself as essentially alone, Aaron defended himself against his parents outbursts and his siblings' behavior in a number of ways. "I was the good one," Aaron said. "I never bothered my parents the way my brothers and sisters did. Their rebelliousness just gave my parents more to fight about. I tried to obey them, but when the fights came, I was just too frightened to stay in the house."

"I think the first time I disobeyed was when I decided to marry Joan. My mother said, 'I expected that from your sister, but not from you.' Until the day she died, I don't think my mother ever accepted my marriage to Joan."

As was Aaron's pattern, he did not confront his mother. Rather, with Joan's encouragement, he simply detached from her. He said that it left a deep sadness that he never reconciled with his mother before she died. In exploring this further, it became apparent that there was a relationship between the death of Aaron's mother and his physical abuse of Joan.

When I asked how long it was since she died, he replied that it was six years ago. I asked when the physical abuse began and as we explored it, the two events coincided. I suggested that Aaron was living with two conflicting messages: "Don't be like father, be a man by asserting control over a wife," and alternately, "Escape the pain of conflict at any cost; be good even if it feels bad."

Underlying Aaron's beliefs about conflict was his fear that his childhood experience would be recapitulated with Joan. Joan's bid to escalate arguments elicited in Aaron a desire to leave the house, either physically or through emotional withdrawal as his father did. His affect, behaviors, and cognitions mirrored those he experienced as a child facing his parents' continual blow-outs.

Furthermore, Aaron held an unconscious belief that his father was weak and inadequate. He viewed his wife's behavior as the reason preventing him from expressing his manliness. At the time of his mother's death, Aaron blamed his inability to reconcile with his mother on Joan. Aaron made an unconscious decision that, unlike his father, he would resist any further attempts his wife made to control him. To his dismay, when he felt pushed against a wall Aaron found himself defending this decision through violence. It was at this same time that Joan went to AA and stopped drinking. She became less social and less willing to numb her feelings to please others.

As these issues emerged in the conjoint therapy sessions, Joan related her fear of abandonment to her early experience with her father. She loved her father, but knew from her mother that he was unfaithful, that he left them when she was four years old, and stopped supporting them soon after. Her mother, an ex-dancer, became a stage mother and helped Joan to develop as actress and performer. From that time onward she learned how to charm everyone, and was always "on." "No one knew that I was really shy," she said. She and her sister held the major emotional and financial responsibility for the family after her father left. Her mother was emotionally fused with her daughter and has remained to this day financially dependent on her.

All family members continue to blame Joan's father for the insecure and chaotic state of their lives. As Joan talked about her mother, she remembered that her mother went into her bedroom and drank every evening. But in spite of Joan's experience with AA, she had never identified her mother as an alcoholic.

She idealized her mother, (as she idealized the therapist) and accepted her mother's belief that all of their troubles were caused by the father's drinking and chasing women, and finally, by his abandonment of the family.

Joan's experience of her mother and of herself waiting at home for her father to return generalized into a working model (RIG) predisposing her toward certain expectations in relationships. Of course, Aaron's expectations were very different.

The following figure represents the RIG system of this couple, with specific reference to the patterns underlying their styles of fighting (see Figure 3).

The vertical dimensions of this figure present the RIGS system for

	HUSBAND'S REPRESENTATIONAL MODEL	WIFE'S REPRESENTATIONAL MODEL
OVERT BEHAVIORS (Behavioral)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rational • Cut-off affects • Withdraws from highly charged exchanges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional • Volatile manner • Pursues any discussion intensely
CONSCIOUS BELIEFS (Cognitive)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid conflict at cost • Always stay in control • Emotions can get you out of control (Emotional=irrational)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate at any cost • Don't stop until the issue is completely resolved (Emotional=Being in contact)
UNCONSCIOUS BELIEFS (Psycho-dynamic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escape the pain of parental conflict • Safety and security is based on protecting oneself from emotional contact • Don't be weak like father • Women are overemotional and demanding and cannot be trusted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escape the pain of parental disengagement and abandonment • Safety and security is based on being in continual emotional contact • Letting go results in abandonment • Men are like father and can't be trusted

FIGURE 3

each of the partners, and, as discussed previously, these three levels are interdependent. From a therapeutic perspective, we can see that each of the horizontal levels provides a potential focus for intervention. For example, we can intervene to help our clients to behave differently or to help them to modify their conscious beliefs, or to help them to access and reformulate their unconsciously-held beliefs and expectations. These levels describe our primary therapeutic modalities with couples: behavioral, cognitive and psychodynamic.

The systems perspective comes in when we observe the interlock between the two separate RIG systems presented by the couple. As is the case with many couples, although their personal narratives and internal subjective experiences are very different, they have formed com-

plementary RIG systems which intensify the unconscious fusion of the couple. The severity of this couple's conflict leads us to assume that their fusion was reinforced along several different RIG systems.

It has been frequently noted that intervention on one level may bring about change on all three levels. On the other hand, the force of the interlock between the three levels may prevent intervention on a single level from producing effective and lasting results. Consequently, the therapist capable of perceiving the interconnections between all levels of analysis has the best possible chance of moving the couple system out of a painfully stuck place.

In elaborating the above case discussion systemically, we observe that Joan and Aaron were locked into a symmetrically escalating cycle which underscored a profound enmeshment. The more she pursued, the more he withdrew. The more she pursued, the more she was compelled to continue pursuing—or to completely leave the relationship. In the same fashion, the more he withdrew, the more he was compelled to maintain this posture although he had no wish to end the relationship. Each partner's response positively reinforced the other's behavior.

On the cognitive level, both Joan and Aaron were carrying a valid truth about the relationship that needed to be heard and acknowledged. Indeed, neither felt understood, affirmed or cared for. However, no amount of discussion could work here insofar as they had formed a system in which each one held one-half of a single truth. On an unconscious level, this type of frozen state had produced a situation in which Joan was, in fact, (re)creating her father and Aaron was (re)creating his mother.

In treatment, both partners closely analyzed their conscious beliefs, challenging the absolute nature of those beliefs, and standing up for the particles of truth held in them. They were then able to develop behavioral contracts with one another to establish more mutually satisfying ways of handling conflict.

For example, both realized that timing seemed to be a critical element in their escalating conflicts: Joan pushed for immediate relief and Aaron waited for the tension to magically disappear. Joan eventually was able to understand that tensions cannot always be resolved immediately. Aaron was willing to consider having "discussion," as long as he felt permission to postpone them when he felt unable to handle the intensity of the emotions. Together, they developed an intricate "time-out" system which both satisfied Joan's need to continue and Aaron's need to withdraw. Their first behavioral change provided genuine hope that the marriage could, in fact, change. Simultaneously, the anxiety they experienced in trying to carry out their new behaviors provided the impetus to consider their deeply held unconscious beliefs.

COURSE OF TREATMENT

During the first twelve sessions, Joan and Aaron developed new ways of resolving conflicts and of bringing affect into the relationship. Aaron quickly acknowledged the emotional desolation of his childhood and realized that Joan's ability to connect affectively could help him undo the loneliness he had carried since childhood. As he began to give expression to his emotional states, Joan's superficial volatility diminished. Having significantly decreased their level of conflict and having begun to hear each other's stories detailing their vulnerabilities, Joan and Aaron were encouraged to continue the longer term work of addressing other RIG systems underlying their dysfunction.

These RIG systems included those pertaining to sexuality, competence, money, security, individuation/autonomy and so on. It was only by uncovering and reworking each of those RIG systems that the couple could experience genuine relief and create a relationship free from the constraints of the past. Their RIG'S interlock at the point at which neither was provided any real model of intimate behavior. Locked in their power struggle, both are protecting themselves and one another from having to confront the real struggle of achieving intimacy, and each is protecting the other from having to abandon a hard-won self structure. In the case of Joan and Aaron, letting go of the past is a prelude to learning to resolve conflicts, and learning to understand each other's experience when they attempt to resolve conflict is a prelude to intimacy.

CONCLUSION

The concept of RIGs developed by Daniel Stern can clearly help us articulate a framework within which the integration of the various therapeutic modalities can be most appropriately carried out. Working with couples presents unique difficulties because the patterns they present are complicated and resistant to change. Therapists have utilized various treatment approaches—cognitive-behavioral, systemic and psychodynamic—in order to deal with these difficulties. It appears that clinical practice is most effective when these approaches are theoretically and pragmatically interwoven.

To effect such an interweaving, this paper uses the concept of internal representation (RIGs) out of Stern's research on the development of generalized representational models. Understanding the RIGs of each partner helps the therapist and ultimately the mates to become more emphatically attuned to the internal reality of each of them.

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