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The Geometry of Intimacy: Love Triangles and Couples Therapy

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Formally known as triangulation processes, love triangles feature prominently in relationships—sometimes providing stability, sometimes vibrancy. Alternatively, they can create instability, even destruction. Integrating the relevant psychoanalytic literature with clinical examples, the author explores the meaning of love triangles interpersonally as well as intrapsychically. Their nature, their role in intimacy, and how they impact psychoanalytically oriented couples therapy are discussed. Two categories of triangulation, *defensive* and *discordant,* are delineated and discussed using 4 clinical examples. The investigation responds to earlier concerns, such as from Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1955), and Chodorow (1992), who recommended psychoanalysts—with their unique access to patients' sexual behaviors, dreams, and fantasies—strive to understand romantic, mature love better. Further, the author offers a different angle on Kernberg's (1991) conception that, in mature love, 6 persons metaphorically interact: "the couple, their respective unconscious oedipal rivals, and their respective unconscious oedipal ideals" (Kernberg, 1991, p. 57). Kernberg's model rests on classic psychoanalytic theory; the author's is cross-theoretical and phenomenological. The article shows that triangulation, like endless other behavioral and psychological defense mechanisms, serves to lessen conscious and unconscious fears of intimacy. It also proposes that psychoanalysts confront defensive styles, clarify feelings, and interpret, teasing out layers of unconscious contract, and facilitating dialogue to enhance intimacy in couples.

Keywords: triangulation, intimacy, unconscious, defenses, nomenclature

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Having spent half my professional life providing psychoanalytic psychotherapy for couples and families, I hear about extramarital affairs or other forms of love triangles, weekly, if not daily. Love triangles feature prominently in relationships—sometimes providing stability, sometimes vibrancy. Alternatively, they can create instability, even destruction. Integrating the relevant psychoanalytic literature with clinical examples, I explore the meaning of interpersonal and intrapsychic love triangles. I focus specifically on describing their nature, their role in intimacy, and how they impact psychoanalytically oriented couple therapy. I delineate and discuss, in detail, two categories of interpersonal triangulation, *defensive* and *discordant.*

Assumptions, Definitions, and Delimitations

I investigate triangular phenomena as they present in dyadic, romantic relationships between two consenting adults—heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, queer, or other variation of monogamous, romantic love. Such a focus precludes my attending to many related themes. For example, I refrain from exploring concepts relevant to other intimacies, such as close friendships or family relationships. Another limit relates to monogamy itself. One of the women in a couple I discuss, for example, considers monogamous romantic relationships anachronistic. She views polyamory as a more organic human relational style. I similarly defer consideration of these topics so as to stay attuned to the primary theme of love triangles in monogamous relationships.

Romantic couples show wide variation in the degree to which they enjoy spending time with one another, in the frequency of their sexual activities, and in many other relational behaviors. Some couples may spend nearly every evening together. Others may spend much less time together, once per week or less, and often enjoy solo activities or involvement with work or avocational pursuits. I consider these differences a matter of personal style or preference, and will also not discuss these typical differences in relational patterns further.

Defining romantic love proves a daunting and controversial task, so I proceed with caution. Effective, stable intimacy requires these basic features: an environment in which the two individuals can actualize themselves, mutually recognize one another's subjectivity, and distinctly acknowledge the relationship itself. Mature, romantic love, then, itself inherently features a love triangle: the two parties and the relationship. In confirmation, Ringstrom (2012) suggested romantic couple strive to achieve: "(a) The *actualization of self-experience* in the context of an intimate relationship, (b) the capacity for *mutual recognition* of both partners' subjective experiences, and (c) the idea of the *relationship having a "mind" of its own*" (p. 86).

Further, maintaining vibrant, long-term intimacy requires the capacity for balancing binary, oppositional trends. Extending a philosophical concept introduced originally by the ancient Greeks and later by Hegel (1807/2009), and applied specifically to romantic love by Mitchell (1997, 2000, 2002), Ringstrom (1994, 2012, 2014), and other psychoanalysts, parties to sustained, mature romantic love contain the tension between stability, on the one hand,

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and instability, on the other. Within the family therapy literature, a parallel idea is the fundamental systemic distinction between morphostasis, meaning stability and homeostasis, and morphogenesis, referring to change and transformation (Steinglass, 1987). In other words, couples who sustain long-term, committed relationships maintain a dynamic equilibrium between reality and fantasy, novelty and convention, arousal and boredom, chaos and order, spontaneity and inhibition, adventure and routine, mystery and predictability, passion and control, danger and safety, and risk and security. As a result, mature, intersubjective intimacy requires nearly constant awareness of needs, desires, feelings, and a capacity for communicating and negotiating such dynamic states. Aron (1996) suggested that many couples regress to variations of sadomasochistic interpersonal contracts because of the difficulties in bringing such awareness, dialogue, and reciprocity to intimate relationships. Master-slave, rescuer-victim, leader-follower, and similar themes often prove less conflictual than intersubjective ones. Love triangles, as I will demonstrate, provide yet another path for conflict reduction. And, consistent with object relations theories, they exist, in parallel, interpersonally and intrapsychically.

As an example of relationship with balanced love triangles, a mature, married couple may enjoy talking, reading, watching TV, and making love. They may share a joint interest in rearing their small children, attending Amnesty International meetings and opera productions. The husband may additionally have a best male friend he visits once a week and a passion for stamp collecting. The wife may enjoy a close relationship with her twin sister and an interest in making jewelry. Ideally, they show enough independence in their individual lives, and dependence on one another, to sustain the kind of binary oppositional tension noted above. They experience the me-ness, you-ness, and us-ness typical of mature, romantic love.

When I refer to love triangles, I mean relations to the internal world or to external persons, activities, or things. Love triangles can involve relationships with the self, for example, a person engaged in extreme self-criticism or self-adulation. Triangulation may involve other persons, such as coworkers, friends, or relatives. It can take an impersonal form as in relationships to work, avocations, or recreational activities. Love triangles involving romantic or sexual contact, or those literally or figuratively removing one partner from the central relationship for long periods, are most likely to cause distress in one or both parties. The problem of extramarital affairs is self-evident. Subtle but perhaps equally problematic love triangles occur whenever a linear relationship overshadows the primary dyadic intimacy. Examples include a newly married partner who continues to socialize with college friends five nights a week, a long-term partner who begins working 80 hours per week after the children leave the home, or a husband who becomes so involved in backpacking that little time remains for the couple. I propose that problems of triangulation, generally, rather than with extramarital affairs, specifically, lie at the core of many difficulties plaguing couples.

Having defined romantic intimacy, the balanced romantic triangle (me-ness, you-ness, and us-ness), and complex intrapsychic, interpersonal, and even impersonal love triangles, I even more carefully venture into a definition of what constitutes personal fulfillment. I journey here because what is meaningful to an individual person in a relationship may progress into one leg of a problematic triangle. In this regard, I derive ideas from Marx (1930/1988, 1845/1998) who, unlike Freud (1923/1991, 1930/1991, 1937/1991), emphasized human self-worth as resting on a capacity to work, to be creative or to otherwise conduct meaningful productive activity. He described these activities as "a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life*" (Marx, 1845/1998, p. 37). Freud (1923/1991, 1930/1991, 1937/1991), focusing more on humans as individuals than as socially and politically contextualized, generally considered a sound taming of the id and the superego by the ego as sufficient for an effective human life. However, Freud also famously described effective living as "the ability to love and to work [. . .]" (Kets de Vries and Freud, 1980, p. 395), to which followers later added the ability to play. I suggest these human activities, namely loving, working, and playing, constitute behaviors indicative of a thriving individual life. If pursued to an authentic, ego-transcending level, these activities may reflect self-actualization (Maslow, 1943/2013). Involvement in such gratifying, diversified activities, while also engaged in a mature romantic relationship, inevitably require a balancing of varieties of love triangles.

For example, individual involvement in friendships, athletics, political action and the like may be taken to an extreme. They may reveal excessive retreat into a person or an activity, a pattern Doroff (1976) termed "the narcissistic spectrum" (p. 144). In other words, these forms of withdrawal—which include turning inward psychologically—may demonstrate an unconscious overinvolvement in self, an outside person, or an activity at the expense of intimate involvement with others. Often these take form in compulsive behaviors such as shopping, eating, taking drugs, video gaming, and so forth In brief, narcissistic engagements of this nature, for example, alcohol, provide actual or illusory control over the inevitable vulnerability required for intimacy. They offer substitutes for love. I provide examples of the concept of the narcissistic spectrum in the case examples.

As I have in previous contributions (Karbelnig, 2014, 2016a, 2016b), I demonstrate a cross-theoretical, clinical nomenclature when presenting examples of love triangles in romantic relationships. I believe practicing psychoanalysts face a simple, binary choice in regards to theoretical commitment: Do they adhere to one psychoanalytic theory, considering it most true or accurate? Or do they listen to the phenomenological world of the patient, selecting theoretical models or metaphors based on *their patients* use of language? I make the latter choice, demonstrating my conviction in the clinical examples.

Even when their differences in personality and style are taken into account, psychoanalysts actually practice in more similar than dissimilar ways. Borbely (2013) drew a similar conclusion, writing, "most analysts of divergent persuasions would agree today that all schools attempt to and, in general, succeed in establishing a psychoanalytic process with their analysands" (p. 82). Regardless of their theoretical orientations, psychoanalysts *frame* their professional relationships, that is, maintain professional boundaries. They bring their *presence* to their patients, that is, display empathy, interest, curiosity, and so forth They utilize various forms of *engagement,* that is, clarifying feelings, confronting, or making interpretations, to uncover and alter patients' systems of *internalization.* Internalization processes exist on a continuum ranging from the conscious, for example, persons' conscious internal conversations, to dissociated mental content, for example,

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disavowed conflicts or deficits, to actual, concretized unconscious structures, for example, the superego or "dynamic structures" (Fairbairn, 1952, p. 377; Karbelnig, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Unique to couples therapy, psychoanalysts also directly disrupt and alter the parties interact with one another. I intend my modeling of this cross-theoretical, clinical approach to further dissolve psychoanalysis' unfortunate tribalism—an aspiration shared by Gedo (1983, 1997); Gill (1983); Greenberg and Mitchell (1983); Kernberg (2001); Klein (1976); Loewald (1980); Modell (2013); Rangell (1975, 2006); Sandler (1983); Schafer (1975); Wallerstein (1990, 2013), and others.

I appreciate Stolorow's (1997, 2011, 2013, 2015) contribution to psychoanalysis as regards post-Cartesianism philosophy. He proposes phenomenological contextualism as an alternative (Stolorow, 2015). Although this model likely presents an overall more accurate view of the mind–body–context, the fact remains that, experientially, persons *feel* and *think* as if they exist as separate persons. Further, persons have relationships with internal parts of themselves—even if these entities represent illusions. For the sake of presenting my thesis regarding love triangles, I defer to this subjective, phenomenological perception. I describe processes like projection, or concepts like the internal drama, as subjective phenomena rather than hard and fast truths, in deference to Stolorow's (2015) post-Cartesian ideas.

My study of the geometry of intimacy responds to earlier concerns, such as from Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1955), who lamented psychoanalytic theory's lack of adequate constructs for love relations. I answer Chodorow's (1992) request that psychoanalysts—with their unique access to patients' sexual behaviors, dreams, and fantasies—strive to understand romantic, mature love better. Further, I offer a different angle on Kernberg's (1991) conception that, in mature love, six persons metaphorically interact: "the couple, their respective unconscious oedipal rivals, and their respective unconscious oedipal ideals" (Kernberg, 1991, p. 57). Kernberg's model rests on classic psychoanalytic theory; mine is cross-theoretical and phenomenological.

I introduce the new terms for love triangles, namely defensive and discordant, with caution, privileging Foucault's (1969/2002) concern regarding the relative nature of any classification system. He considered categorizations little more than organized systems of discourse—a societal form of dialogue. Foucault (1969/2002) called systems of classification "the fabric of significations (which link up with one another and constitute, as it were, the continuous expanse of a discourse)" (p. 559). I believe the two categories of love triangles will contribute to the more than one-hundred-year-old discourse called psychoanalysis.

In the case examples, I present entirely fictionalized couples, based on an amalgamation of patients with whom I have worked over the years and my imagination. I demonstrate my agreement with Wallerstein (2013), who considered psychoanalytic theory as offering a "diversity of explanatory metaphors" (p. 36), rather than any singular model of mind or clinical practice. I primarily use terminology from Freudian, Kleinian, and Fairbairnian models of mind in describing the one-person psychodynamics. When describing the two-person and field phenomena of psychoanalytic interaction, I intersperse terms from self-psychology, intersubjectivity, or relational psychoanalysis as relevant.

I purposefully portray the gritty, murky world of the actual working consulting room. In that vein, I utilize experience-near, nonmechanistic phrases like love triangles, or common words overlapping with psychoanalytic terms, such as defense mechanisms or anxiety, rather than phrases like insecure attachments, organizing principles, affective regulation, or similarly sterile, antiseptic terms that reduce the complexity of the human experience. These unfortunate metaphors reduce the complex, even chaotic nature of human experience to mechanisms, to machines. I similarly avoid diagnostic terminology like borderline or narcissistic personality disorder. Instead, I use phrases like psychological immaturity, developmental delay, or primitive mental functioning.

The Terror of Intimacy

On the one hand, individuals in monogamous relationships fear judgment, rejection, condemnation, or other types of interpersonal hurt from their significant other. On the other hand, they wish to be seen, understood, loved. Moreover, even if persons find stable romantic love, no guarantee exists that their loved ones will continue to love them, remain healthy or even stay alive. In addition to the conscious fears of abandonment, loss, rejection and the like, persons typically have endured interpersonal childhood trauma causing enduring vulnerability in their romantic intimacies. Triangulation, and endless other behavioral and psychological defense mechanisms, serve to lessen conscious and unconscious fears of intimacy.

The existence of such primitive fearfulness features prominently in essentially every psychoanalytic model. A complete review of the topic deserves separate, lengthy attention. Some theorists emphasize instinctual, biological origins; others environmental ones. But no psychoanalytic model lacks a model of interpersonal injury resulting in avoidance of the trauma recurring. Briefly reviewing this concept as it evolves over the history of psychoanalysis, Breuer and Freud (1893/1991) considered infantile, interpersonal trauma as acting "like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (p. 6). Klein (1946) viewed primary anxiety as caused by the trauma of birth, essentially the start of separation anxiety, and further anxiety as emerging from the frustration of bodily needs. She believes infants attribute such anxiety to others, namely caregivers. Bion (1959) offers a related, if less detailed, conceptualization. He suggests that, in place of Freud's metaphor of psychoanalysis as general archeological investigation, psychoanalysts expose "evidence not so much of a primitive civilization as of a primitive disaster" (Bion, 1959, p. 311), meaning an interpersonal failure or impingement of some type.

Moving into the British object relations theorists, Fairbairn (1952) theorized that infants and toddlers, when faced with a neglectful or abusive caregiver, unconsciously create an internal world consisting of the other, that is, rejecting mother, along with the part of self that was rejected, that is, unworthy self. This preserves the God-like nature of the real parental figures. Better to have an internal relationship with an internalized rejecting "other" than to exist all alone in the world, Fairbairn (1952) reasoned. Along the same lines, Winnicott's (1965) famous phrase, "It is a joy to be hidden but a disaster not to be found" (p. 186) captures the universality of the fear of intimacy. Although he intended the concept to describe children's desire to be understood by their parents, the phrase equally applies to the tension felt between parties to romance. Grotstein (1997), borrowing the phrase trade-

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marked by the Jewish Defense League, wrote of persons' striving to "never again" (p. 73) repeating the same type of interpersonal event so traumatic to them at one time.

Transitioning into the contemporary self-psychology, intersubjective, and relational models, Stolorow and Atwood (1992) privilege actual interpersonal trauma over instinctual or fantasy sources, considering the dynamic unconscious as *not* comprised of "repressed instinctual drive derivatives, but of affect states that have been defensively walled off because they failed to evoke attuned responsiveness from the early surround" (p. 31). Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987) note how, paradoxically, patients hope for a reparative experience with others but fear a repetition of childhood trauma. Using different terminology, Ringstrom (2012) described the same phenomenon as occurring when "the longing for developmental experiences that were missing or insufficient during formative years is challenged by dreaded repetitions of experience that thwarted development" (pp. 86–87).

Similarly, Mitchell (1991) considered emotional difficulties as resulting from interactions between "unfulfillable childhood desires and longings and the necessarily human imperfections of parental caregivers" (Mitchell, 1981, p. 396).

In sum, these psychoanalytic theories feature two-person, interactive developmental models, offering explanations of infantile trauma based based on primitive, internalized interpersonal interactions instead of the death instinct and similar biologically grounded ideas. Their varied concepts, such as the concept of the "relational unconscious" (Gerson, 1996, p. 632), suggest that fears of intimacy result from internalized *relational patterns* rather than intrapsychic instinctual tensions. Even more recently, Van Haute and Geyskens (2007) proposed "a primacy of infantile trauma" (p. xviii) similarly resulting from interactive processes, for example, infants' negative experiences with their caregivers. Infants' inevitable helplessness combined with their caregivers' unavoidable failures result in what they call "the traumatic structure of human subjectivity" (Van Haute & Geyskens, 2007, p. 3).

Loving couples obviously wish to avoid a recurrence of the types of conscious and unconscious trauma described by these and other theorists, whether conceptualized as the actions of a metaphorical internal foreign body, a rejecting caregiver, or a primitive disaster. They want to remain hidden, and to never again experience the primitive trauma they suffered. However, and paradoxically, couples romantically involved with one another must face the infantile trauma they have unconsciously avoided to achieve intimacy. Having provided an overview of the reasons for fearing intimacy, I review the psychoanalytic literature regarding romantic love.

Psychoanalysis and Mature Love

Except in the most conservative circles, Freud's (1923/1991, 1930/1991) early thoughts about mature love have been supplanted by more contemporary psychoanalytic concepts. Few contemporary psychoanalysts consider the phallus as the source of active sexual desire, or view men as more authoritative, active, and with better functioning superegos, than women. Blechner (2007) bleakly noted that early psychoanalytic explanations of love required male to female genital contact as criteria, eliminating homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender, or queer persons as capable of mature romance.

And yet Freud's opus regarding mature love need not be entirely discarded. He poetically described the state of being in love as occurring when "the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away" (Freud, 1930/1991, p. 66). He helpfully differentiated narcissistic-object love from mature love. (Freud, 1923/1991). As so often occurs when comparing and contrasting psychoanalytic ideas, one finds Freud's (1923/1991) distinction between narcissistic object love and mature love, albeit named differently, in the works of subsequent psychoanalytic scholars. Klein (1975), for example, differentiated schizoid functioning, in which persons fear their love will destroy others, from depressive-level functioning, in which persons fear their hatred will destroy them. She concludes that synthesizing loving and hating feelings toward loving partners—a process involving mourning, guilt, and reparation—constitutes mature love. For Fairbairn (1946), mature love requires development into mature dependence. These psychoanalytic pioneers suggest mature love occurs when two individuated persons perceive one another with relative clarity, care for one another, and enjoy giving *and* receiving love.

More contemporary psychoanalytic writers elaborated on these basic themes. Searles (1973/1994) considered the need to love, understood as the affirmation for the other, as elemental to mature love. Fromm (1976) differentiated infantile love—a concept synonymous with what occurs in what Fairbairn (1946) called "infantile dependence" (p. 34), Klein (1975) the "paranoid-schizoid position" (p. 2) or Freud (1923/1991) narcissistic object love—from mature love in which both parties love without primitive needs dominating their interactions. Bergman (1980) emphasized how mature love involves experiencing "a feeling of being understood in a special way by the beloved" (p. 75). Balint (1948, 1952); Bergmann (1980), and Kernberg (1974, 1977) defined mature love as mutual empathy, attachment, tenderness, trust, respect, and affection. Ogden (1986) and Gabbard (1996) considered mature, romantic love to consist of a complex cognitive, emotional state based on earlier object relations, idealization, and uninhibited expression of sexual feelings accompanied by an ability to negotiate ongoing mutual projective identifications. Wilkinson and Gabbard (1995) concluded, "Freud's assumption that *refinding* guides the course of love continues to be a basic premise" (p. 204), offering the phrase, "romantic space" (p. 210) to describe how the intrapsychic and the interpersonal become linked.

Davies (1994) considered mature love to involve play, a concept also heralded by Friend (2013). Bernstein (2001) privileges compassion as a requirement for mature love. Charles (2002) acknowledged monogamous romantic relationships face challenges but concluded, "as problematic as the ideal of symbiotic monogamy may be, we still attempt to accommodate it." (p. 131). Other contemporary psychoanalytic writings about love, such as by Benjamin (1988, 2004); Aron (1996), Mitchell (1998), Ringstrom (2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2014), and Hoffman (1996), privileged intersubjectivity and mutuality. Like many of their psychoanalytic contemporaries, these theorists consider mature love as involving mutual recognition where intimacy exists between equal partners who recognize one another as subjects, and as such, as separate. When synthesized, these varied psychoanalytic theories coalesce around the idea that mature love requires two persons with sound identity formation, good ego functioning, and a well-developed sense of agency who can identify their feelings, desires, needs, speak them, and negotiate with one another.

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Love Triangles and Psychoanalysis

Kernberg (1974, 1977, 1988a, 1988b, 1991, 1995, 2011) has arguably written the most extensively about love triangles from a psychoanalytic perspective. He differentiated between "direct triangulation," (Kernberg, 1991, p. 56) referring to an unconscious fantasy of an excluded third, idealized party, and "reverse triangulation" (p. 56), consisting of a compensating, revengeful fantasy involving a third party. He considered these as universal fantasies, describing a couple as consisting of "potentially, in fantasy, always six persons in bed together: the couple, their respective unconscious oedipal rivals, and their respective unconscious oedipal ideals" (Kernberg, 1991, p. 57).

The idea of love triangles, also termed triangulation, features significantly in the family therapy literature. For example, Minuchin (1974); Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974); Satir (1967); Scharff and Scharf (1991) and Bowen (1978) directly referenced triangular processes in couple and families. They consider triangulation, as well as exploitation and ostracism, as ways of managing frustration, anxiety, and other painful emotional states in couples and families. Bowen (1978) believed nuclear family members' efforts to differentiate, that is, separate and individuate, may be disrupted by fusion (as in symbiosis) or by triangulation (which restricts differentiation). He considered triangulation the smallest unit of stable relationship in a family.

Varieties of Love Triangles

As I noted above, love triangles take infinite forms and varieties, from the balanced to the imbalanced, from the benign to the malignant. They range from the colloquial "golf widow" or the engineer so obsessed with a calculation problem as to ignore her partner, to the overt sexual and romantic love affair which destroys an intimate relationship. They also involve the internal world itself. The self, or ego, always exists in relationship with itself or with other parts of the internal world or internal drama—a phenomenon observed by novelists, poets, and playwrights well before Freud (1893/1991, 1923/1991) formalized the observation. Readers are well aware of the various theories of the internal world, ranging from Freud's original topographic model through Klein's (1935, 1946) world of unconscious phantasies and Fairbairn's (1952) dynamic structures to such contemporary concepts as the "relational unconscious" (Gerson, 1996, p. 632). Persons' involvement in their internal worlds, particularly when excessive, comprise two points, that is, ego and internal object, of a love triangle, diminishing the intensity of the primary intimate relationship in much the same manner as external persons or activities.

Clinical experience with impasses in couples work reveals a dyad rather different from Kernberg's duet or sextet, the latter of which involves distinctly Freudian metaphors, that is, superego and idealization. I identify but two categories, the *defensive* and the *discordant.* The former features excessive love triangles in the service of avoiding intimacy-enhancing dialogue; the latter reveals deep impairments in the ability to sustain intimacy as a result of trauma and/or developmental delay. Of course these types of love triangles unfold in parallel to persons' internal dramas.

Defensive Love Triangles

Defensive love triangles refer to excessive involvement with triangles in the service of defending against dialogue between intimate partners. In these relationships, one or both parties fear discussion of their differences or of the various ways they feel hurt will prove fruitless or, worse, retraumatizing. Jeffrey and Ann offer a recent example. Jeffrey was married previously. He and his first wife had five sons, ranging in age from 13 to 21. It is interesting to note that they are all 6 feet, 4 in., tall. Jeffrey's first wife, suffering from schizoaffective disorder for years, killed herself in 1995. Significantly, two of those children had discovered their mother hanging, dead, in the garage. The entire household had been traumatized by the loss. Jeffrey remained a widow until 2005, when he began dating Ann, a woman who had been a distant friend of his first wife and who worked part-time as a registered nurse. A successful orthopedic surgeon, Jeffrey, in the years before he met Ann, became immersed in his work, essentially avoiding mourning the loss of his first wife. He harbored intense feelings of sadness, guilt, and rage at her. He hired a nanny, a housekeeper, and a cook to assist in the rearing of the three children. He began drinking alcohol to excess. Jeffrey also began overworking after he began dating Ann, avoiding tensions emerging between the two of them. His abuse of alcohol persisted.

Ann divorced during 2000, and had two sons of her own who were of short stature. When Jeffrey and Ann first presented for psychoanalytic couple therapy, they sought help for frequent arguing, sexual problems, a feeling on Jeffrey's part that Ann frequently criticized him, and Ann's sense that Jeffrey treated her as a housekeeper. Ann complained of "living in a house of giants," referring to Jeffrey's sons. She worried about his drinking. Jeffrey's pattern of retreat to his well-worn behavior of excessive devotion to work and productivity, and concern about his alcohol abuse, emerged most obviously during the first few sessions. Also, Ann feared hurting Jeffrey, wanted to support his physician's lifestyle, and felt guilty that she relied upon Jeffrey's income. She therefore avoided confronting Jeffrey. Instead, she devoted her energies to creating a blended home, preparing meals, and planning dinner parties for Jeffrey's colleagues. In brief, then, the excessive triangulation took the form of Jeffrey's becoming too involved in his work and alcohol abuse and Ann's retreating into 1950s style homemaking activities. Significant arguing and emotional distance developed between the two of them.

Jeffrey recalled feeling criticized by both of his parents, particularly his mother, during his childhood. Assisted by his superior intelligence, he excelled academically to compensate for his resultant emotional insecurity as well as his athletic inadequacies. His propensity to immerse himself in work began early in his life, and continued as a narcissistic defense into his adulthood. It featured prominently in his first marriage, limited his emotional availability to his sons. He did not begin abusing alcohol until after his first wife's death. Ann's style of retreating resulted as much from cultural as from early childhood sources. Reared in the deep south, she was socialized to put others' needs before hers, to behave in a subservient way to men, and to avoid direct expression of emotion as a matter of courtesy. Her infantile trauma consisted primarily of a neglectful father, often away working during family mealtimes and even bedtimes. Ann's father was kind to her—in a manner consistent with Jeffrey's thoughtfulness—but he spent little time

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actually involved in her life. She remembers her mother, like Jeffrey's, as narcissistic and critical of her.

In terms of their internal dramas, both parties were well integrated, manifesting little primitive mental functioning. The primary theme of Jeffrey's internal world was of a frightened, rejected child coping through a narcissistic retreat into academic and occupational excellence. The more recent alcohol abuse served the intrapsychic, maternal function of comforting him while also enabling his avoiding feeling his recent loss as well as the longer-term longing significant since his early childhood. Ann's internal world closely paralleled its external manifestations. Like Jeffrey, she compensated for the rejection she felt by her mother by overly identifying with a "Southern-good-girl" theme—courteous, self-effacing, sacrificial. It left her, internally, with a chronically devalued sense of self that her coping style only worsened.

I utilized a variety of clinical psychoanalytic means of engagement—empathy, confrontation, clarification of feelings, and interpretation—to assist both parties in learning about, and ultimately *reexperiencing,* feelings associated with their infantile trauma. Responding to the type of language they used, I utilized a combination of Freudian and Fairbairnian metaphors in working with them. For example, I invoked the concept of the Oedipal complex in helping them understand their relationships with their fathers. Jeffrey's reliance on overwork included a component of competing with his father, trying to achieve a greater level of success than him. Over time, we accessed his deep underlying feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, leading ultimately to a working through of his feelings toward his father as well as mourning his first wife. Because it emerged as a significant corner of a love triangle in and of itself, I confronted Jeffrey repeatedly regarding the alcohol use, always following those interventions with empathic explanations of how the substance soothed him and helped him avoid mourning. Ann enthusiastically joined in these confrontations. Between my interventions and her reactions, Jeffrey relinquished the alcohol abuse within the first year of the couples therapy.

Ann, fighting off a chronic sense of abandonment and rejection, realized she had overidentified with her passive father. As occurred with Jeffrey, she ultimately experienced the rejection, loss, sadness, and similar emotions related to the earlier trauma of her mother's criticism and her father's absence. She learned how her coping strategy actually left her with less self-valuation. As a result, she began asserting herself overtly with Jeffrey as evident, for example, in her expressions of feeling "abandoned" and "replaced by" his use of alcohol every evening. These external, behavioral changes mimicked alterations in her internal drama. She openly worked through feelings she developed in reaction to Jeffrey's withdrawal behaviors.

Both parties took well to Fairbairn's (1952) idea regarding how childhood interpersonal conflicts become internalized and rendered unconscious to maintain the sanctity of their actual parents. They learned how they may well have feared their anger could have killed one or both parents, inhibiting them from acknowledging such feelings later in life. Their understanding of their fears of encountering, in their relationship itself, precisely the painful experiences they had thus far successfully defended against increased. Together, we extracted some of Anne's memories of her feeling rejected by her mother and being abandoned by her father and then interpreting how these internal dramatic themes (or dynamic structures, to use Fairbairn's [1952]) term, distorted her perception of Jeffrey.

Always striving for balance, however imperfectly, I confronted Jeffrey in similar ways, teasing out how sensitivity to criticism predating his meeting Ann, had already been repeated in his relationship with his first wife, and had resulted in cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal patterns invading his perception of Ann. He learned about the nature of his internal drama—the split between his feeling small and inadequate and the part of him that strived to excess to compensate and, later, used alcohol to avoid negative emotions. Surprisingly, Jeffrey wept on several occasions as he recalled the pain of his prior wife's suicide, particularly his guilt at his children finding her body.

Jeffrey and Ann, capable of mature dependence, nondefensively considered these previously unconscious, repetitive themes as well as many conscious but unspoken ones. As a result of their increased insight and their tolerance of previously avoided mental pain in the presence of one another, their capacity for intimacy gradually increased over time. Their interpersonal behaviors within actual sessions, as well as outside of them, demonstrated their capacity to face primitive disasters and to face what they never again wanted to face. Ultimately, they both became able to voice their positive and negative feelings about one another more openly, displaying an improved capacity to distinguish between persecutory projections and true persecutors (J. Grotstein, personal communication, May 17, 2000).

Joseph and Elizabeth also demonstrate how love triangles serve a defensive function— simultaneously in the internal and external worlds. They sought help when Elizabeth, briefly using Joseph's phone to confirm dinner plans with one of their sons, read a highly romantic, intimate text string between Joseph and a female colleague. Elizabeth reacted with intense hurt, rage, and jealousy. She asked Joseph to move out of the family home. The couple began consulting me during this crisis period.

The dynamics I observed differed significantly from Jeffrey and Ann's in that, although Joseph had the more malignant romantic triangle as well as many other benign ones, Elizabeth had too few. Having suffered from child abuse at the hands of his highly narcissistic, anxious mother, Joseph defended against his infantile trauma in a manner similar to Jeffrey's—but to an even greater extent. Actively working as a criminal defense attorney, he also serves on the board of his local, state, and national bar associations, started a nonprofit legal service, and maintains close friendships with several colleagues from law school. He is an extremely gregarious, outgoing person.

Elizabeth, in contrast, works part-time as a CPA for a small accounting firm and socializes little with colleagues. She suffered less significant childhood trauma, consisting mostly of neglect from her narcissistic father who relied on her as a source of emotional support. Elizabeth learned to undervalue her own needs and wishes. One of three female siblings, she relied upon her sisters during her childhood and adolescent years for social support. They served as her primary social contacts from her middle-school and high-school years. She met Joseph when she was 18. She thereafter relied mostly on him for her needs for intimacy. She unconsciously allowed him to shield her from further personal development. She devoted herself primarily to the marriage during their early years together, and then to their two sons.

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When the sons moved away, Elizabeth retreated into working, watching TV in the afternoons, cooking dinner for her and Joseph, and then retiring early. She became deadened by the routine. She was unable to mourn the loss of her sons to normal developmental progression. She had not developed any friendships nor had she discovered any enlivening avocations or recreations. Elizabeth felt deeply ashamed of this trend, revealing an internal love triangle consisting of Elizabeth's self-criticism, Elizabeth, and Joseph. Early in the course of our sessions, Joseph spoke of feeling "left out of Elizabeth's relationship with her internal critic."

Joseph and Elizabeth emotionally traveled in divergent directions. Despite the intense pain they both suffered the first few months after Elizabeth learned of the emotional infidelity, the crisis opened up long-dormant themes preventing the marriage from thriving. I helped both parties became aware of these chronic, if ineffective, coping styles through intensive sessions that began twice a week and reduced to once a week after six months. With them, I utilized metaphors from self-psychology and relational psychoanalysis because, again, their own language comported well with ideas from these schools. Rather than confront his feelings of boredom with the relationship, Joseph had gradually increased his involvement in love triangles (his work, his other professional activities, his colleagues) over the years. More recently, he had engaged in the flirtation with a female colleague. I used the concept of self-states (Bromberg, 1998) to describe Joseph's way of splitting off his attention to that particular woman. It is interesting to note that this way of describing dissociative processes helped Ann to understand his behavior in a less judgmental way.

Using the framing, presence and engagement methods similar to the prior couple (and common to all clinical psychoanalytic models), I brought these previously unconscious defensive love triangles into their conscious minds. Joseph took responsibility for acting out his dissatisfaction and his anger through the various benign love triangles and, more significantly, through the potentially malignant one with his female colleague. Because she lingered in feelings of victimhood related to Joseph's betrayal, I took more time to extract relevant themes from Elizabeth. Ultimately, however, I confronted her with her propensity to avoid conflict through watching TV and going to bed early. I interpreted the parallels between her relationship with Joseph and with her father, specifically how she had learned to pay little heed to her own needs and desires. She learned how the repetitive relational pattern, comporting with the idea of a relational unconscious, evolved in her relationship with Joseph.

As they grew more capable of understanding themselves and encountering one another, we further elaborated upon the unconscious themes discovered. Alterations occurred. Joseph accessed the "terror" feelings associated with his internal self-image, "driving" him toward achievement and other forms of attention that served to calm his intense anxiety. With Elizabeth, we uncovered more of a deeply sad, neglected self-image habitually reacting to the "internal critic" in an endless and ultimately self-defeating cycle. As these themes came into the consciousness of both parties, I encouraged mutual empathy for these primitive self-images and the needs associated with them.

Nonetheless, progress was slow. It took months for Elizabeth to forgive Joseph and to develop compassion for the unconscious motivation driving his behavior. Joseph struggled to relinquish his stimulating love triangles, fearing a return to Elizabeth's "deadness" that indirectly reminded him of his mother's rejection of him. As these barriers fell away, Joseph and Elizabeth began spending more "alone time" with one another. They rediscovered a love for theater and for dancing. By the time they terminated treatment, they were taking ballroom dancing classes together. Also, they purchased subscriptions to two theater groups and one opera company, providing ample external triangular activities that drew them closer and enlivened their marriage. Further, Elizabeth successfully overcame her considerable feelings of interpersonal shame by deepening two friendships she made through PTA involvement. She also became actively involved in dressmaking—a hobby she had enjoyed as an adolescent. Meanwhile, and on another level, changes in unconscious structure were evident in both of them. Joseph became better able to manage his anxiety; the harshness of Elizabeth's internal critic lessened.

Discordant Love Triangles

Some couple who seek professional help end up realizing their love triangle involvement signifies an inability to sustain mature love due to trauma or developmental delay. These couples often elicit strong negative countertransference reactions in psychoanalysts who, while striving arduously to build bridges between them, ultimately realize they are insurmountable. Psychoanalysts, often feeling frustrated, angry, incompetent, or hopeless, can identify discordant love triangles and proceed accordingly. These often-lethal alliances take many forms, and the two case examples I present cover only two of many possible variations. They represent two common configurations: Couples who are too psychologically immature to engage in a mature form of romance, as manifest in their tendency to lack sufficient individuality to see the other party as a whole person, and those who are too psychologically injured to allow anyone to grow close to them.

Sarah and Chambray

These two romantic partners sought consultation for a most unusual, circular problem, causing the course of psychoanalytic psychotherapy to last but a few months. Sarah, a lesbian involved in polyamorous relationships, sought help with one of her primary partners, Chambray. She wanted specifically to discuss a controversy surrounding consent. Sarah educated me about how consent, as a philosophical and political concept, featured prominently in the polyamory community. They both advised me of their preference for literal sadomasochistic, sexual engagements of a nonviolent nature, that is, they used safe words. However, their entire relationship featured dominance by Sarah over Chambray. By their own admission, the relationship operated, at best, more like a 19th century marriage and, at worse, like a master-slave relationship. One hitch had developed, however, and that concerned Sarah's obsessional guilt over whether Chambray was truly consenting to the sadomasochistic contract.

Sarah initiated our work together, calling to make the first appointment. Chambray willfully complied, but the sessions consistently revealed domination by Sarah. I sifted through the history as it naturally emerged over time. Sarah had been reared in an extremely religious, Jewish tradition, essentially ultraorthodox in nature but also centered around a cult-like Rabbi leader. She was told she had prophetic capacities. She remembers feeling under

"mind control" until her preadolescence, at which point she gradually individuated. At age 15, she ran away from Israel, where she was born, never to return. She only occasionally spoke by telephone to her seven siblings and her parents. She rarely saw them. She identified herself as homosexual from her earliest memories, a sexual orientation alien to her religious community.

Chambray came from a less abusive and controlling family environment, but both her parents drank alcohol excessively. She remembers feeling emotionally responsible for them. She recalls how "they controlled the oxygen in the room." She learned to repress and suppress her needs. Chambray abused alcohol herself from age 16 to 26, at which point she became actively involved in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and stopped drinking. Just before she became sober, she had engaged in prostitution for approximately a year to make up shortfalls in her income.

These historical themes, as well as the types of language they both used and behaviors they demonstrated, led me to utilize metaphors from primarily Kleinian metapsychology, a few existential concepts, and some relational psychoanalytic ideas. Both parties suffered from highly traumatic early childhood experiences, but their ways of adapting diametrically opposed one another: Sarah learned to retreat narcissistically and remain in control of intimate relations; Chambray learned to read the needs of any "other" in her life and to comply with them. Both styles had become ossified. They were evident in their other relationships as well as in their behaviors in academic and occupational settings. They both displayed the rigid, black-and-white thinking characteristic of Klein's (1935) paranoid-schizoid position.

As the work with them unfolded, ideas from Fromm (1941/1994) also came to mind, and I presented these to them over the course of our meetings. He hypothesized that, in place of Freudian dual drive theory, persons flee the fear, aloneness, and other existential realities of individuation. Of sadomasochistic relationships, Fromm (1941/1994) wrote

> The sadistic person needs his object just as much as the masochist needs his. Only instead of seeking security by being swallowed, he gains it by swallowing somebody else. In both cases, the integrity of the individual self is lost. In one case I dissolve myself in an outside power; I lose myself. In the other case I enlarge myself by making another being part of myself and thereby I gain the strength I lack as an independent self. (p. 157)

A key moment of the short-term couples therapy occurred while the three of us explored the problem of consent. The absurdity of the discussion quickly became evident. I pointed out Chambray's having resorted to prostitution at one point, revealing a propensity to submit to objectification, and how this style fit well with Sarah's having been literally coached into a mode of narcissistic control. Sarah wanted assurance of Chambray's freely consenting to the relationship, but of course her insisting on free choice, while Chambray struggled with autonomy and agency, rang hollow. The double-bind nature of the relational problem rapidly came to light. The love triangle consisted of the two women and the concept of consent, demonstrating how points in love triangles can include an ideology.

In terms of their internal dramas, both women demonstrated fairly primitive types of mental functioning. They displayed the flurries of idealization and devaluation characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position. Unlike the "internal critic" noted above in regards to Elizabeth, both Sarah and Chambray demonstrated much greater space between the parties to their internal world. But one example, Sarah's insistence on obtaining Chambray's consent revealed a more marked dissociative process than evident in the other two couples discussed thus far. It made little sense. It emerged from a split-off, distant self-state contradicting the more dominant one desirous of control. Paralleling the short-term nature of the couples therapy, little change occurred in either woman's internal drama.

The meetings came to a fairly abrupt end when Sarah accused me of having a Judeo-Christian bias toward their polyamorous lifestyle. I felt surprised, frustrated. I reacted by, I believe, nondefensively exploring the possibility of such a prejudice, particularly given my three decades of marriage and my membership in the dominant white culture. Sarah perceived my response as disingenuous; Chambray thought it sincere. I watched as the two of them argued, with Sarah insisting her viewpoint was the most accurate. Toward the end of the session, I interpreted how the argument itself exemplified their sadomasochistic interpersonal contract. I pointed out the rigidity of their relational pattern. I advised Sarah of the likely impossible, contradictory nature of her quest. I suggested she consider seeking a course of psychoanalytic psychotherapy for herself. She asked me for a few referrals, which I gave her. She then abruptly ended the couples therapy. A few weeks later, Chambray called me, asked for a referral for psychoanalysis for herself, and advised me the relationship with Sarah had dissolved.

Frank and Claire

Frank and Claire made an appointment for couple counseling due to frequent arguments, indecisiveness about having children, infrequent sexual contact, and a growing emotional distance between them. They also wanted to explore their desires to have children given Claire's age approaching 40. They met in high school. After attending different universities, majoring in political science, they returned to their home town, started dating again, and married. They both pursued careers in politics, running first for the city council where they both gained seats. They later ran for State representative. Both of them successfully gained office. They earned some fame for becoming the first husband-wife team to hold the same political office.

Some years later, Frank decided to run for State Senate—a political position requiring greater time and effort. After discussing the plan extensively, Claire decided to let her State representative term expire and to devote her energies to helping Frank in his pursuit of a higher office. They had great ambitions—a governorship and possibly even a presidential run. They concluded their goals would be best served with Claire in the support role. By the time they began consulting me, Frank was actively involved in his campaign for State Senator. When I first met them in person, I noticed how distantly they sat from one another in my waiting room. They similarly choose to sit in the farthest possible corners of my consulting room.

Within the first few sessions, both parties shared details of their personal histories. They were only children. Frank had been adopted by an older couple who were age 50 when the adoption occurred. His father worked excessive hours; his mother "doted" on him. He felt distant and alienated from them both. He made few

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friends. He devoted himself to athletics during his elementary and middle-school years. Once in high school, he became almost obsessively involved in student government.

Claire enjoyed a closer relationship with her parents yet they lived an insular life as a family. The parents had few, if any, friends. They both worked. Their evenings were devoted to caring for Claire or watching TV. Unlike Frank, Claire developed some close friendships during her schooling. However, she too developed an intense interest in political endeavors in high school. Once she met Frank, she became highly devoted to him, seeming to repeat the pattern characteristic of her parents' relationship. She let her other friendships lapse.

One of my initial engagements consisted of gentle confrontations of the distance evident in their seating preferences and also in their way of speaking only through me. (I ask couples to sit in a triangular fashion, partially facing one another and partially facing me, to facilitate as much direct conversation between the two parties as possible.) They could not see the distance I observed. When the discussion later turned to the topic of their having children, they both expressed concern that childcare needs would interfere with their political aspirations.

I utilized a combination of Freudian, Kleinian, and self-psychological metaphors to enhance their self-understanding and to increase their capacity to dialogue with one another. They responded well to the idea that they both had developed strong ego-identifications as politicians. They took to the concept of the superego well, embracing their conjointly felt desire to "make a difference to others." They quickly realized, and then acknowledged, that their mutual and longstanding interest in politics outweighed their desire for children. I noticed that my simple presence as a referee of sorts, or my serving as a mediator between them and their respective superegos, rapidly facilitated the solution to the child bearing controversy. Once this matter resolved, they resisted my efforts to explore their sexual relationship. The issue fell away as Frank's campaign required more of both of their time.

Frank and Claire began working toward terminating the treatment as soon as Frank gained the State Senate position, declaring they would soon relocate to the capital city. I felt highly frustrated, even angry, despite the reality basis to the move. They seemed as distant as they had ever been, locked together in a mutual love triangle focused on political power. I encouraged dialogue about differing needs—particularly given the transition from mutual self-interest to a focus on Frank's self-interest—but they resisted my efforts to facilitate their discussing this change, or any differences between them. I interpreted this pattern frequently in the final few months, and also confronted other ways they avoided greater emotional intimacy and intersubjectivity. I interpreted the rigidity of their respective ego-superego relations which featured little room for more needs for intimacy, recreation, leisure, and so forth They seemed almost puzzled by the idea of interpersonal dialogue. They struggled to understand the concept of intersubjectivity. Their capacities to provide self-object functions for one another, which Kohut (1981) described as a "replacement for lacking narcissistic cathexis of the self" (p. 100), were markedly limited. Given their high levels of intelligence, I considered this lacuna remarkable, likely representing their avoiding an unconscious catastrophe or any revisitation of the traumatic basis of their subjectivities (Van Haute & Geyskens, 2007). Little change occurred in their internal dramas, likely because of the ossification of intrapsychic configurations just noted, the resistance to dialogue, and the relatively short term of the couples therapy. Similar to Sarah and Chambray, they primarily manifested paranoid-schizoid mental functioning.

Shortly before termination, Frank and Claire joined in an alliance against me, accusing me of placing excessive demands on them for closeness. I absorbed their anger at me. I gradually realized they had achieved what they sought: a resolution of the childbearing question and a pseudoacknowledgment of their level of intimacy as acceptable. I was in no position to confirm or deny the latter, because of course they define their level of intimacy as they wish. Nonetheless, they demonstrate the concept of discordant love triangles in that the three features of mature, sustainable intimacy, as described by Stern (1997); Balint (1948, 1952, 1979), Bergmann (1980); Kernberg (1974, 1977); Benjamin (1988, 2004); Ogden (1986) and Gabbard (1996); Ringstrom (2014), were lacking. They seemed incapable of allowing each other to seek self-actualization while also mutually recognizing one another. The third element, namely an ability to acknowledge the relationship as "having a mind of its own" (Ringstrom, 2014, p. 3), was also absent. Their relationship focused on the pursuit of political power, a formidable love triangle, rather than on the relationship itself.

The concept of discordant triangles helped me to contain some of the negative affect I experienced in the countertransference. The three of us achieved Frank and Claire's stated goals of reducing conflict and facilitating decision making regarding having children. I misread, either through my own projection or my sensing an unconscious desire on one or more of their parts, a wish for greater intimacy. I struggled with them for it, only to garner an alliance against my ultimately unsuccessful efforts. Had they not been so locked into their individual and conjoint relationship with political power, I might have referred one or both of them for individual psychoanalytic work. They left, annoyed, before I could make such referrals.

Conclusion

The concept of love triangles reveals a certain geometry to mature romantic relationships. Although a mathematical metaphor risks adding another mechanistic symbol to the long list of dehumanizing ones already littering psychoanalysis, metaphors lie at the heart of language. And psychoanalysts need concepts—preferably cross-theoretical, phenomenological ones—to facilitate their discussions as they work with individuals or couple, teach students and colleagues, or otherwise share their professional activities. I propose the categories of defensive and discordant love triangles because they comport with clinical phenomenology. They do not reduce human beings to machines or organizing systems; instead, they call our attention to common interpersonal processes which, as I soon explain, actually present in more of a scalar than binary pattern. These categories reflect parallel intrapsychic phenomena. They comport with the foundational concept of the dynamic unconscious, as well as its consonant philosophy of structuralism (Saussure, 1916/1983, Sarup, 1993).

The two categories organize ideas about love triangles described by Kernberg (1974, 1977, 1988a, 1988b, 1991, 1995, 2011). At one point, Kernberg (1991) claimed that, in mature love, six persons unconsciously interact with one another—the couple, their

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respective rivals, and their respective oedipal ideals. At another point, he refers to only two types of triangulations: "direct triangulation," which involves a third, excluded, idealized other party, and "reverse triangulation" (Kernberg, 1991, p. 56), referring to a fantasized third party utilized for revenge. compensating. The concept of defensive and discordant triangles simplifies Kernberg's 1991) duet and sextet, organizing love triangles in two terms which, in turn, reflect varied degrees of maturity and trauma.

As the literature review and case examples confirm, mature couples engage in multiple interactive triangles, all dynamically balanced with one another. Triangles include intrapsychic ones involving relationships with self and other. Layered alongside, individuals' involvements with other persons, occupational or recreational activities, or even ideologies comprise other triangles. Couples enjoying mature love tend to display an involvement in triangular relationships showing the same integration as their internal dramas. Effective, mature romances may be conceptualized in terms of degree of a balanced triangulation that attends sufficiently to the intimacy between the two primary parties. On one end of a continuum, for example, two partners may enjoy a fairly loose bond while being intensely involved with persons or activities outside of the relationship; at the other end, some couple spend most of their time with one another while still maintaining involvement with stabilizing, intimacy-enhancing outside persons or interests. These triangular configurations typically result in little relational pain or emotional distance. The couples feature flexibility. If one party becomes develops influenza, for example, the other will assume caregiving duties while the sick person naturally regresses. The intrapsychic and interpersonal flow effectively into the temporary change in status, and then moves back as the ill party regains their health. None of the cases I presented would have displayed such mutability, particularly before the couples therapy.

Jeffrey and Ann, for example, presented in a fairly fragile state with distance and rigidity in their way of relating interpersonally. After their courtship, Jeffrey resumed a historical pattern of excessive work. He also abused alcohol that had, in and of itself, become a distinct love triangle of its own. Ann had overly identified with pleasing him, identifying with the "Southern good girl," to use her words. Underlying these external behaviors, Jeffrey had long compensated for his low self-valuation through excessive work. The alcohol use was new, however, and seems to been his awkward way of coping with the *second* round of marital difficulties (the first occurring in his first marriage) and with the incomplete mourning of the loss of his first wife. Ann compensated for her negative self-valuation through the excessive sacrifice which only lessened her self-worth more. As their interpersonal relations altered, in conjunction with the intrapsychic changes, their relationship became more intimate and resilient.

Joseph's psychodynamics mirrored Jeffrey's in many ways. However, his sense of self had been more significantly traumatized. He reported experiencing states of "terror" alleviated by a devotion to work and related professional activities. Elizabeth was not as sacrificial as Ann, but her way of withdrawing, combined with an avoidance of her facing the maturation of her sons, left her deadened. They were also a frequently arguing, emotionally distant couple when they started couples therapy, but also showed transformation interpersonally and intrapsychically after the sessions ended.

In stark contrast, the other two couples displayed much more primitive forms of mental functioning evident externally as well as in their unconscious dynamics. Sarah and Chambray sought resolution of an impossible, paradoxical request for consent. They displayed developmental delays characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position. The couples therapy showed little progress, and the relationship dissolved shortly after they terminated in anger. Sarah initiated the termination, feeling frustrated that the consent issue could not be resolved and accusing me of a Judeo-Christian bias. It is interesting to note that Frank and Claire—similarly developmentally delayed—terminated while united in irritation about me and, more significantly, in their shared political aims—clearly the dominating love triangle. They maintained distance interpersonally—much as they both did intrapsychically through primitive dissociative processes or widely divergent self-states. Ironically, unlike Sarah and Chambray, they considered the couples therapy a success, at least in terms of resolving their decision to refrain having children. As I described in detail above, I struggled with more significant negative countertransference with those last two couples. In some ways, they could be conceived of as failures; alternatively, perhaps I just brought them as far as they could travel which, in the first case, led to the actual dissolution of the relationship.

Another way to differentiate defensive from discordant triangles is to consider the strength of the linear relationship between the two loving partners. Persons involved in defensive love triangles rarely stray far from their "bond of love," as Benjamin (1988) would put it; those in discordant love triangles show, by definition, severe difficulty maintaining any primary tie. They often break it. Jeffrey and Ann, or Joseph and Elizabeth, for example, engaged in defensive triangles and yet a clear level of engaged intimacy existed in both couples. Jeffrey retreated to work, Elizabeth into herself, Joseph to a romantically tinged relationship with a colleague, and Ann to homemaking. And yet sufficiently intense intimacy existed for their relationships to survive their defensive retreats into these other relationships or involvements. Responding to standard clinical psychoanalytic engagements, they fairly easily resumed emotionally painful dialogue that had been avoided by them and achieved parallel changes in unconscious dynamics.

Sarah and Chambray, and Frank and Claire demonstrate discordant love triangles. With them, more significant disarray in their unconscious, dramatic themes were evident. Chambray, for example, displayed a masochistic submission which Kernberg (2011) recommended be differentiated from mature dependency. As she became aware of the trend, she grew more distant and ultimately dissolved the relationship. As I came to know Frank and Claire more intimately, the limits in their capacities to be open, vulnerable, and close to one another became evident. They worked side-by-side on politics; they even briefly bonded in their anger at me in the psychoanalytic session in which they jointly concluded to not have children. I saw no evidence of mature love toward one another, that is, the triad of me-ness, you-ness, and us-ness.

Coincidentally, psychoanalytic psychotherapists serve yet another triangular function, using methods of engagement to disrupt problematic triangles, that is, interpreting their meaning and purpose, and empowering the two parties to converse—if possible. Psychoanalysts act like revolutionaries: disrupting defensive styles, clarifying feelings, confronting, interpreting, teasing out layers of unconscious contract, increasing the capacity of the

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parties to dialogue and to tolerate greater vulnerability with one another. Enhanced by improvisation (Ringstrom, 2010b) and consistent with their own personal style and "signature" (Ingram, 1994), psychoanalysts strive to enhance the intimacy enjoyed by couple—if mature intimacy is possible.

If encountering a defensive type of love triangle phenomenon, psychoanalysts' work proceeds in a nonlinear, dynamic fashion. But work does proceed. Change occurs. Conflicts and deficits are addressed within the loving relationship, or the triadic one if the psychoanalyst is taken into the equation. The two parties to intimacy lessen their narcissistic ties to persons or activities. They increase their intersubjective ties with one another. Fairly typical types of transference and countertransference phenomena emerge. In contrast, discordant love triangles typically evoke frustration, anger, hurt feelings, and so forth as psychoanalysts encounter more severe impediments in these patients' capacities for intimacy.

The defensive-discordant polarity may be more accurately conceptualized by considering them as existing on a continuum. Persons on the defensive end typically display fewer conflicts, deficits or traumata than those on the discordant end, a continuum similar to the many other continua offered by psychoanalytic theorists, that is, Freud's (1923/1991) psychosexual stages, Klein's (1935) paranoid-schizoid to depressive positions, and Fairbairn's (1952) infantile versus mature dependence. In other words, more mature and/or less traumatized patients tend to develop defensive triangles to avoid intimacy and less mature and/or more traumatized patients tend to develop discordant triangles to destroy it.

I intended this exploration to assist clinicians in understanding couples, in enhancing their work with couples, and in identifying differences in their countertransference experiences in working with them. The concepts of defensive and discordant couples offer a rough, structural map for psychoanalysts working with couples. However, we psychoanalysts will forever remain humbled, even mystified, by the complexities of human subjectivity, and more so when infinitely complex human subjectivities are multiplied by factors of two or three.

Murdoch (1997) wrote, "confronted with some vast prospect, the starry sky, or the Alps, the imagination and the senses cannot properly take in what lies before them, that is they cannot satisfy the reason, which demands a total complete ordered picture" (p. 263).

Even bolstered by the concepts of defensive and discordant love triangles, we psychoanalysts who work with couples, or individuals for that matter, are destined to work with anything but complete and ordered pictures.

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