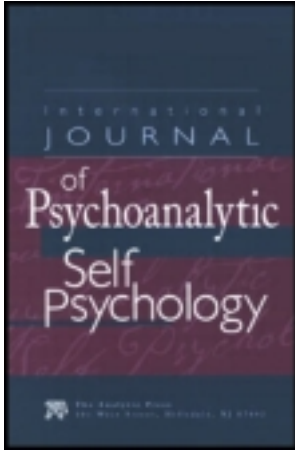


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# HELPING COUPLES HEAL FROM INFIDELITY: A SELF PSYCHOLOGICAL, INTERSUBJECTIVE APPROACH

CARLA LEONE, PH.D.

This article applies a contemporary self psychological approach to couple therapy, previously described (Leone, 2008), to the treatment of couples dealing with the aftermath of infidelity. From this perspective, infidelity is seen as a massive selfobject failure or relational trauma (at least in most cases in our culture) which typically stems from multiple intrapsychic and interpersonal factors. This article highlights the causes, functions, meanings, and impact of infidelity and emphasizes the importance of understanding the specific meanings of an affair for each individual partner and couple. It then describes a treatment approach designed to help couples process and integrate the experience of trauma and loss, address the issues that led to the unfaithful behavior, and gradually reestablish their relationship as a reliable source of selfobject experience for both partners. The use of directive,

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structuring, or educating interventions to achieve these goals is also discussed. Detailed clinical material is used to illustrate key concepts.

Keywords: couples therapy; infidelity; intersubjective; self psychology

“I feel like a tornado just blew through and destroyed everything,” says my newest patient tearfully, a few days after learning that her husband of 12 years had been unfaithful. “I think I’m going crazy—one minute I hate his guts and the next I want to hold onto him for dear life.” “I know it’s worse for her, but I feel like I’m going crazy too,” says her husband a minute later. “I hate myself for having done this, for hurting her, for being an idiot. I don’t want to make excuses, but there were reasons and no one cares about my side of the story—not her, not our friends, not even my own family. I’m just a big jerk to everyone now and probably always will be.”

This vignette illustrates the massive emotional and relational trauma infidelity can leave in its wake, at least for most couples in our culture. Its traumatic impact is felt especially by the hurt partner (as the partner who was not unfaithful is often called in the literature), but also by the partner who was unfaithful, who is usually also suffering in different ways. Metaphors such as tsunamis or explosions are often invoked by one or both to describe their experience, and posttraumatic symptoms such as feeling shocked, devastated and disoriented, experiencing obsessive or intrusive thoughts, and trouble eating, sleeping, or concentrating are common.

Working with couples after a discovery of infidelity can be a daunting task. Both partners are typically in crisis, affectively flooded and in a lot of pain, with intense or urgent yet very different needs from the therapist. Often one or both are not sure whether their relationship is even worth trying to salvage, as in the following case. These difficulties are greatly exacerbated when one or both partners have significant characterological issues or when the unfaithful partner is still involved in the extramarital relationship.

Despite its challenges, however, this work can be enormously rewarding. Helping people weather the storm, heal from pain, and rebuild their connection after a terrible rupture can be a powerful experience for all involved. And, although sadder, helping couples make a thoughtful, considered decision not to rebuild can be important and meaningful as well.

A clear theoretical framework for understanding infidelity and the healing process can “hold” the therapist as she seeks to hold her patients through this painful time.

### INFIDELITY: CAUSES, FUNCTIONS, MEANING, AND IMPACT

Like snowflakes—and people—no two affairs are just alike. Affairs differ in their causes, functions, meanings and impact—including their impact on the partner who had the affair, the partner who did not, and the relationship between them. Affairs can be sexual but not emotional, emotional but not sexual, or both emotional and sexual. They can be motivated by a wish for sex, love, closeness, nurturance, or emotional intimacy; by the thrill of the chase, the thrill of being chased, or the thrill of living dangerously. They can involve anything from anonymous physical pleasure to the glorious “high” of infatuation or romantic love—the intoxicating experience of adoring and being adored, of oneness or merger, of feeling deeply understood and known without words. Affairs can be an expression of anger or a need for revenge, and/or an effort to enact and perhaps attempt to heal something important and unresolved from the past. They can reflect an effort to call attention to important relationship dysfunction or longstanding unmet needs, and in some cases result in a happier, healthier long term relational fit for the unfaithful partner than the marriage was. Affairs can thus have both forward edge (growth-seeking) and trailing edge (repetitive) components (Tolpin, 2002)—or a both a selfobject and repetitive dimension (Stolorow, Brandshaft, and Atwood, 1987)—both of which need to be understood and responded to in the treatment.

The meaning and impact of infidelity depends largely on each partner’s particular needs for and expectations of fidelity. Both are influenced by each one’s relationship history and by cultural expectations or norms. For example, people who have been especially reliant on their partner (or an idealized image of that person) for self-regulation, enhancement of self-esteem, or healing of previous relationship traumas—and for whom fidelity is a crucial component of those functions—may experience infidelity as especially difficult or traumatic, maybe irreparable. In other words, infidelity is especially traumatic when it shatters what Stolorow (1999) termed an “absolutism of everyday life.” Those for whom monogamy is less

important or who come from cultures in which affairs are more common may experience an affair as less traumatic (Scheinkman, 2005).

In the example to follow, we will see that for the husband, fidelity meant his wife was “classy,” rather than “trampy” or “trashy” like his family. Fidelity and its association with class meant that he had married up and out of his chaotic childhood; it was part of an idealized image of his wife that shored up his shaky self-esteem through his connection to her. In contrast, for her, the extramarital relationship was an antidote to her long-standing depression. It meant that she was no longer willing to accept a life that felt empty, that she was still attractive, interesting and desirable, and that she had options if she chose to leave her marriage.

The treatment must identify and explore such particular meanings of fidelity and infidelity for each partner to fully make sense of the affair and its impact. For example, the most painful aspects of infidelity for the betrayed partner may not be the extramarital sexual contact itself (although that is usually very significant) or the breaking of a vow of sexual fidelity. Often the greater betrayal is having been lied to, especially if the unfaithful partner looked the other right in the eye while lying, thereby tainting the powerful and intimate experience of mutual gaze.<sup>1</sup> It may be having not been thought of or taken care of by someone long relied-upon for nurturance or protection, or having not been “number one” in the partner’s life. “I can’t stand being the consolation prize,” one man said repeatedly, unable to rid himself of the fear that his wife may only have recommitted to him because her extramarital partner was unavailable. Or the greatest pain may stem from the loss of the idealization (Kohut, 1984) of the partner, as in the case detailed later.

Finally, affairs differ in the extent to which they result primarily from the unfaithful partner’s individual issues or dynamics, which might have emerged in any marital relationship, and the extent to which they are related to something about this particular marital dyad. I often tell the partner who was unfaithful, “We need to understand how much the affair stemmed from something missing in your marriage—and how much from something missing inside of you.” I believe most affairs involve some of both, and are thus best treated in both individual and couple modalities. This article addresses the couple therapy component of the work.

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<sup>1</sup>Mutual gaze has been studied primarily between mothers and infants (e.g., Beebe and Lachmann, 1998), but has also been examined in couples (e.g., Gottman et al, 2002).

### TREATMENT APPROACH: OVERVIEW

The essential goal of couple therapy from this perspective is to help the partners to become better able to function as a reliable source of selfobject experience for each other. Doing so involves identifying and expressing one's own feelings and needs, understanding and responding to the other's needs, and repairing inevitable empathic ruptures when they occur. These abilities are influenced by each partner's self-esteem, ability to experience and regulate affect, and ability to mentalize (Fonagy et al., 2000) or reflect on one's own experience and the imagined (different) experience of the other. They are also affected by each partner's organizing principles or emotional convictions about themselves, others and relationships (Stolorow, Brandshaft, and Atwood, 1987; Orange, 1995), and their implicit or procedural relational patterns.<sup>2</sup> Couple therapy must illuminate and gradually transform these abilities, principles and patterns when they interfere with the selfobject dimension of the couple's relationship.

Toward this end, the self psychologically oriented couple therapist endeavors to immerse herself equally in the subjective affective experience or inner world of each partner and develop a selfobject bond or increasing sense of connectedness (Geist, 2008) with each. She fosters the accessing, heightening and sharing of vulnerable affect (Livingston, 2001; see also Johnson, 2004<sup>3</sup>)—or of emergent, previously unformulated experience (e.g., Preston, 2007)—through a process of curiosity, reflection, and discovery. She attends closely to each partner's narcissistic vulnerability and prioritizes the processing and repair of narcissistic injuries and empathic ruptures (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Beebe and Lachmann, 2002)—between the partners and between herself and each partner.

Finally, consistent with the work of others (Connors, 2001; Pizer and Pizer, 2006), I believe that directive techniques, such as coaching, structuring or educating, can be usefully incorporated into a psychoanalytic

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<sup>2</sup>My use of this term is consistent with the concept of implicit relational knowing as discussed by the Boston Process Change Group (e.g., Lyons-Ruth, 1999), as well as Herzog's (2012) "relational templates," Beebe and Lachmann's (2002) patterns of self and mutual regulation, and the work of Mitchell (1988) and others on relational configurations. For the purposes of this article, the distinctions between these concepts are not relevant.

<sup>3</sup>Johnson's emotionally focused therapy differs in many ways from the model described here, but overlaps significantly in its focus on empathy and the sharing of poignant and vulnerable affect. I have briefly discussed the similarities and differences between the two models elsewhere (Leone, 2010).

model (Leone, 2008). However, I advocate their use only when they are experienced by the partners as an attuned empathic response and when the resulting (facilitated or coached) interactions contribute to the development of positive new relational patterns and a deeper emotional connection. Such interventions can be seen as offering idealizing selfobject functions involving guidance and help from a wise or admired other. The therapist must remain aware of the relational configurations or dynamics involved when in the role of coach/director/teacher, and consider the multiple possible influences on the assumption of that role (it is co-constructed and emergent from the intersubjective field, may involve an enactment, can be narcissistically gratifying or a way of moving away from affect, and so on). However, as long as she monitors for such dynamics and attends closely to her patients' experience of directive interventions,<sup>4</sup> they can be a crucial part of a psychoanalytically informed treatment, as illustrated in the following case example.

#### TREATMENT APPROACH: REPAIRING THE RUPTURE

For couples dealing with the aftermath of infidelity, the overall goal of treatment is the same (improving the partners' abilities to function as a reliable source of selfobject experience for each other), but the primary focus of the empathic dialogue is on processing the experience of trauma, grief and loss; understanding and addressing the factors that led to the infidelity; and reestablishing (or establishing for the first time) a sense of trust and safety. In self psychological terms, this can be thought of as the ultimate rupture and repair sequence.

The first step of the treatment process often involves addressing the intense affective flooding and trauma symptoms noted earlier, especially if the revelation of the infidelity is very recent. In addition to listening closely and responding empathically to each partner's experience, the therapist may need to take a more directive role to contain and calm intense affect. Framing the situation as the traumatic loss of a needed and relied-upon attachment bond, and intense emotions or disrupted functioning as expectable posttraumatic symptoms, can help the partners make sense of otherwise overwhelming or alarming reactions. Finally, the therapist can

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<sup>4</sup>When discussing a previous failed couples treatment, I find couples are far more likely to complain that a previous therapist was caring and empathic but didn't really help than they are to complain that he or she was too active or directive.



explain how the healing process might work should the couple decide to attempt it. When people feel hopeless and cannot imagine how repair could ever happen, it can be reassuring to know the therapist has a rough road map of the journey. All of these can have a selfobject dimension.

The repair process between therapist and patient is relevant to that between partners, despite the obvious differences. Therapists seeking to repair an empathic rupture in the treatment relationship endeavor to listen as nondefensively as possible, focusing first on understanding the patient's experience (Kohut, 1971; Wolf, 1984) in detail before explaining, interpreting or sharing their own experience. Once people feel deeply understood, they often become more open to examining the factors that led to the rupture—usually first in terms of the other person's contribution, and later, their own.

Similarly, many hurt partners reeling from a discovery of infidelity need a long period of focus on their experience of devastation, betrayal, outrage, and so forth, before they can tolerate much focus on the unfaithful partner's experience or on the factors that led to the affair. The therapist can help the hurt partner express strong feelings without attacking or shaming the unfaithful partner (admittedly not easy, but not impossible), while helping the unfaithful partner listen, empathize, and respond with understanding, sorrow, deep remorse (if present) and words of comfort. The hurt partner may want the unfaithful partner to experience as much pain as he or she has, in order to feel fully understood and less alone. The therapist can frame this wish as understandable, while also empathizing with the unfaithful partner's experience and making it clear that attacking or shaming will not facilitate reconnection or the process of discovering whether the relationship can become what they each need.

If the partner who had the affair cannot provide helpful responses to the hurt partner, at least initially, the therapist can do so herself. She can also legitimize the hurt partner's need for such responses, help both partners understand why the unfaithful partner is having trouble providing them, and gradually help both partners become more able to provide such responses for each other.

Once both partners are ready and interested, the therapist helps them explore the usually multiple interacting factors that led to the affair. This means helping them construct a theory of their relationship and of the affair, identifying the issues or difficulties each partner came into the relationship with and the many ways they have influenced each other over the

years. It also includes clarifying what hurts most about the affair, what it means to each, what exactly has been lost, and what the current loss or betrayal reactivates from the past for one or both.

Finally, the healing process involves identifying what each partner now needs from the other in order to feel safe, close and connected. For example, the hurt partner may need repeated apologies, courting or/and various kinds of evidence that the affair is not continuing or that unfaithfulness will not recur. He or she may need evidence that the unfaithful partner really understands the depth of the pain and damage caused by the affair and is not just saying the words. The partner who was unfaithful typically also needs to feel (at least eventually) deeply understood and viewed with some compassion, as not just someone who was unfaithful but as someone with strengths and weaknesses and legitimate emotional needs despite what he or she has done.

This part of the treatment sometimes involves helping partners negotiate agreements that accommodate their conflicting needs, such as a hurt partner's need to discuss the affair constantly and the other's legitimate need for a break from the topic at times. These kinds of negotiations (e.g., Can the hurt partner check the other's cell phone or e-mail records? How often? Can the unfaithful partner have any contact with the extramarital partner?) can be framed as an opportunity to learn to dialogue and negotiate with each other effectively.

One last point: with all couples, it is important to monitor both partners vigilantly for signs of narcissistic injury. However, this is especially important in the aftermath of infidelity because the partners have already experienced so much injury, shame or betrayal at the hands of a trusted other. The following case example illustrates many of these concepts.

### CASE EXAMPLE: JACK AND BARB<sup>5</sup>

#### INITIAL SESSION

Jack, a 53-year-old successful attorney and father of three was devastated, heartsick, and outraged when he finally caught his wife in the lie that led her to admit what he had been suspecting for months: she was having an affair with a male colleague. Jack came to the initial session at the urging of his wife, family, and pastor, but with little hope.

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<sup>5</sup>To protect confidentiality, the case described is an amalgam of two couples with similar presenting problems and similar dynamics.

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

*Jack (angrily):* I don't know why we're even here, to be honest with you. No offense or anything, Doctor, but come on, seriously, what are you going to tell me? (*bitterly, to Barb*) What the hell is anyone going to tell me, for God's sake? (*Barb looks sad and defeated. She looks down and says nothing.*)

*Carla (trying to match Jack's tone and demeanor):* You don't know why the hell we're even sitting here, when, let's face it, nothing Barb or I or anyone can say can make this not have happened—or ever make it OK that it did. Is that it?

*Jack (looks up, startled, meeting my eyes for the first time. I see misery, devastation and hopelessness in his eyes.):* Yeah, that's about it in a nutshell, I guess. I'm sure you mean well and all, but I just don't see what good any of this can do.

*Carla (trying to match his hopeless tone):* No, of course you don't. Of course at this point you can't imagine how anything could help. And it's true (*shaking my head, sadly*), no amount of couples therapy can make this not have

I'm a little taken aback, but my heart goes out to Jack immediately. I associate to my paternal uncles who have no experience with therapy and might say something similar in the same situation.

My impression is that Barb is remorseful but believes any response is futile.

I am trying to capture Jack's experience as closely as I can. I think of this as trying for "exactly" or a "bull's eye"—or at least close enough to those. I associate briefly to my first real heartbreak and again my heart goes out to this man. I note my tendency to identify more with the hurt partner than the unfaithful partner.

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

happened or get you back everything you've lost. We might be able to get you back more than you think right now, I don't know, but this relationship will never be just the same as it was, and that's an incredible loss for you. All we can do now is help you both grieve what you've lost and figure out what the relationship can be—and whether that is something you want.

*Jack seems to consider this and we sit a minute in silence. I meet Barb's eyes and after a minute ask what she's thinking.*

*Barb:* Well, I'm the one who wanted to come, but I don't know whether this can do any good either. I can't undo the past, what's done is done. I tell him I'm sorry, I've told him a hundred times I never meant to hurt him, but it does no good. I know what I did was wrong but there were reasons . . . but he'll never let it go now, he'll never let me off the hook. . . . I don't want to be divorced, I do love Jack but I haven't been happy for years, that's what led to this, and now this will be forever hanging over my head.

I am trying to capture and reflect Jack's affective experience and offer some direction or education—and maybe hope—in response to his intense hopelessness and sense of futility.

I try to let Barb's futility, hopelessness and fear of never being out of the dog house wash over me. I flash on times I have felt guilty and have wondered if I would ever really be understood and forgiven. I am also aware of feeling

## TRANSCRIPT:

*Jack (bristling immediately, raising his voice in outrage):* You lied through your teeth, you betrayed the vows we made before God and everyone after 30 years and I'm supposed to just get over it? And you say you love me? You've got a great way of showing it.

*Carla (interrupting):* Ok, hang on, Jack—I see the contradiction: she says she loves you, yet she cheats on you? That's definitely one of the things we would have to understand. And of course it's ridiculous to think you or anyone could get over this kind of betrayal quickly. I know that and I think Barb knows it.

*(I glance at Barb for confirmation. She nods her agreement, and Jack seems more settled, so I continue, addressing her now.)* It sounds like it's not so much that you think he should be over it by now, Barb, but that you feel so helpless. You don't know what to do, you can't change the past and what you've tried so far doesn't seem to do any good. *(Barb nods, meeting my eyes—I feel I have the “exactly” I'm*

## COMMENTARY:

that Jack would be a difficult guy to be married to.

Jack understandably doesn't hear Barb's fear that he will never really reconnect to her and feels criticized, invalidated and hurt by the implication that he is unforgiving or excessively critical. When hurt he goes quickly to outrage and righteous indignation (to restore a sense of vitality) and becomes physiologically flooded. This pattern, developed early in life, later becomes the focus of much of the treatment.

I am trying to limit Jack's angry attack and help soothe and contain him by validating his experience. I also want to support his understandable question, “how could you have done this if you loved me?” because it reflects more vulnerable feelings and needs.

I try to capture Barb's experience as accurately as I can, both so she will

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

*looking for.*) I have some ideas for you both,—but first I want to say that I understand, Barb, that even though you are very sorry, you don't want to just be verbally berated for the rest of your life, you would eventually need to have your emotional needs met too.

*Barb:* Exactly, but I just don't know if that's possible.

*Carla:* Right, of course you don't. There's no way to know yet if this relationship can really become what you each need it to be.

*Jack (more settled):* Well, I wish it was possible, for the kids' sakes at least, but I just don't see how. How is anyone supposed to get over something like this? (*He goes on to explain that he'd always assumed any man who took his wife back after she'd been unfaithful must have "no pride."*) Hell, I don't want to beat the crap out of her the rest of our lives either, I know that's not the solution, but what

feel understood and to help Jack better understand her.

I often note in passing that I have ideas or thoughts and wait to see whether the patient asks about them. This is a way to assess whether introducing my ideas will be experienced by the patient as an attuned response to a felt need rather than experience-distant or misattuned.

My use of the phrase "verbally berated" is interesting here since it was my wording, not Barb's, and an implied criticism of Jack. I think it was an unconscious message to Jack to limit his attacks and think about Barb's experience and needs, but risked injuring him. In retrospect I wish I had focused more on Barb's fear that Jack would never really reconnect to her or prioritize her needs.

Again I am taking the lead or functioning as the expert by firmly repeating that they can't know yet and by introducing the idea that the relationship should ideally meet both partners' emotional needs.

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

am I supposed to do here? And she has only herself to blame anyway.

*Carla:* She's the one who was unfaithful, not you, but you're right, it does no good to, as you say, "beat the crap out of her." Of course neither of you know what to do here, you've never been through anything like this. I can tell you what other couples have found helpful, but before that, I'm curious as to what the two of you learned in your families growing up about dealing with intense pain, sadness and loss like this.

*(Both look startled by the question and exchange glances. Jack hesitates, looking down)*

*Jack:* My family was nuts, ok? They didn't teach me much of anything. That's why Barb was such a breath of fresh air when I met her. She wasn't like them, she comes from better.

*(Both summarize their family backgrounds and it becomes clear that Barb came from a more*

Note the shift in Jack's affect here, from hopeless and outraged to confused and questioning. I believe this occurred because he felt understood by my empathic summaries and calmed by my adopting an instructional, limit-setting or expert role. It also appears that he heard my message about "berating" and was calmed rather than injured by it.

I am trying to acknowledge but downplay Jack's last blaming statement and support his recognition that attacking isn't helpful. I then continue leading or guiding them toward more reflection and vulnerability, given my sense of their need for help doing so.

I often try to introduce something about the impact of childhood experiences on the couple's relationship somewhere in the first session—not through traditional history-taking, but by finding some link or segue related to the current topic. As long as the partners don't

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

*affluent, stable but emotionally disconnected family. Her father was volatile and sounded like Jack in many ways. Jack conveys that he is proud of being a self-made man who distanced himself from a chaotic, alcoholic family and married into a more stable, “classier” family.)*

*Jack (bitterly):* She knows what I’ve been though, she’s met them, she knows how they are . . . (*voice cracking*) and she goes and does this. (*Barb begins to tear up too.*)

*Carla (softly):* Oh, I see, (*making eye contact with both, then settling on Jack*), so she knows how they were, where you’ve come from . . . and it was so important to you that she was so different from them. And now it feels like . . . maybe she’s not so different? Like maybe she’s forgotten where you’ve come from?”

*Jack (voice rising again):* That’s right, this whole crazy affair thing is just the kind of thing they would do. (*He elaborates a bit and ends by turning to Barb.*) I just can’t believe you, of all people, could do this to me. (*She looks down but doesn’t respond.*) You know (*to me*), I would have staked my life—my life, you

experience this as taking them away from what they want to talk about, it can shift them from attack/defend reactivity toward more reflection and vulnerability, thereby facilitating new relational experience.

I am trying to heighten and extend a vulnerable moment (Livingston, 2001) and help Jack formulate and articulate the history and fears that underlie his outrage. I am also trying to highlight the particular meaning of Barb’s unfaithfulness for Jack, to help them understand the intensity of his reactions to it



## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

understand—that she would never do this. Apparently I shouldn't gamble, I can't trust my own gut sense of things anymore. To me she was always a quality woman, someone with class. Turns out she's like a common tramp . . .

*Carla:* OK, hang on, let's talk about this . . . (*I shoot Barb a quick look and try to convey with my expression and body language, "I'm sorry, that must have hurt, I'm coming to you," before turning to Jack.*) I understand that this is the very last thing you would ever have expected from the Barb you thought you knew so well, who came from such a good family . . . It just makes you sick, you're still in shock . . . (*He meets my gaze, nodding, so I continue.*) And I see part of why—this whole situation reminds you of your family, and there's so much old pain there that you don't want to be reminded of, thank-you. (*Jack rolls his eyes, nodding.*) It also makes you feel like you don't even know your own wife, who you've loved and depended on for 30 years. That's a long time! No wonder this is so upsetting, it's like the rug being pulled out from

Clearly I am trying to protect Barb from name-calling and shaming by interrupting here. I also use "eye dialogue" and other nonverbal signals in an effort to at least partially respond to the both partners at once, as I have described previously (Leone, 2008).

Again, I am trying to capture Jack's

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

under you, as if the sun suddenly rose in the west or something . . .

*(He agrees and elaborates on his disorientation, confusion, difficulty sleeping and eating, and so on. I say of course those reactions are alarming but they make perfect sense considering he feels he's lost the one thing he'd thought he could count on in life and in light of his beliefs about the "type" of woman who would be unfaithful to her husband.)*

Carla: It sounds like you've always believed that only cheap, "trashy" women have affairs, and the Barb you've always known isn't like that. But you know *(firmly, in a slightly limit-setting tone)*, people have affairs for about a million different complicated reasons, most of them having absolutely nothing to do with being cheap, easy or trampy. *(Jack looks up here, looking at least slightly curious about the other possibilities, so I continue.)* I don't know yet, of course, but the affair could have partly had to do with things you, Barb, really needed and weren't getting enough of from Jack or your marriage, and/or with issues of yours that predated your meeting

experience as closely as possible, take the lead by introducing the idea that it is important to understand what the affair reactivates historically, before returning to an empathic summary of Jack's experience.

Again I see myself as functioning as a source of guidance and structure here: protecting Barb, soothing and containing Jack, and working toward the eventual goal of facilitating selfobject experience between them—a goal which certainly would not be achievable while Jack maintained a view of his wife as a tramp.

## TRANSCRIPT:

## COMMENTARY:

each other. (*Both seem to be listening closely.*) If you decide to do this therapy, that's the kind of thing we would have to figure out together: all the reasons this happened, how to make sure it never happens again, and what this affair really means and doesn't mean. (*to Jack*) Like, does it really mean that everything you thought you knew about Barb all these years was wrong—or were there just some important things you didn't know, maybe because you've been so busy trying to succeed professionally? And does this really mean she's trampy or just like your family? And even (*to Jack, warmly but in slightly teasing tone*)—does staying together at least until we figure all that out really mean you have no pride? (*Jack meets my gaze and half smiles, acknowledging my reference to his previous statement.*)

*After a little more discussion, they agreed to return a few days later, and we were off.*

I continue leading (in a longer speech than usual for me), outlining my vision of the treatment and offering tentative interpretations or empathic conjectures from the position of expert or authority. Again, I see these as serving selfobject functions and promoting new ways of understanding and relating that will potentially lead to increased selfobject experience between the partners.

This was my first foray into the use of humor with Jack, something that turned out to be central to our relationship and the treatment.

## DISCUSSION OF INITIAL SESSION

This session illustrates several aspects of work with couples dealing with infidelity, as well as a number of aspects of a contemporary self psychological approach. First, it shows the intense level of pain, anger and affective flooding that is often present in the hurt partner, especially shortly after the infidelity is discovered, and the importance of illuminating the particular meaning of infidelity for each individual partner. It also demonstrates the therapist's efforts to empathically grasp and resonate with the inner experience of each partner and to function as a potential source of selfobject experience for each through attuned responses to their needs—including needs for guidance and structure. Finally, although the partners were not encouraged to speak directly to each other because an empathic dialogue between them was not yet possible, the dialogue between the therapist and each partner laid the ground work for eventual empathic dialogue between the partners.

## FIRST MONTHS OF TREATMENT

Once convinced to give the therapy a try, Jack could tolerate it only as long as Barb was abjectly sorry and contrite. The minute she began to talk about any other feelings, such as how unhappy she had been in the marriage or what had led to the affair, Jack became enraged and insisted that she was rewriting history to justify what she had done.<sup>6</sup> He accused her of complaining about him to deflect attention from her own wrongdoing and of not taking responsibility for her actions. When there was a disagreement to be negotiated, Jack could remain in a constructive dialogue only if Barb deferred to his wishes, such as allowing him to view her cell phone records. If she disagreed or refused, he became enraged and affectively flooded again.

Barb had been remorseful and apologetic for many weeks while Jack was devastated and grief-stricken, but now saw his angry, demanding behavior as an example of exactly what had caused her to be unhappy in the marriage all along. She accused Jack of being controlling and self-focused, said he had never been able to put his own needs aside

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<sup>6</sup>Which she may have been, at least in part. Hurt partners often complain that the unfaithful partner's recollection of the marriage before the affair is more negative than that person actually felt at the time. A hindsight bias may occur for either partner: Hurt partners may recall more positive aspects of the marriage prior to the affair while downplaying the negative aspects.

to respond to hers, and implied that her extramarital partner had been different.

I felt, as I so often do, like a double agent. I could see that Jack was in no way ready for the part of the work that Barb was. Given the meaning this affair had for him, what it repeated and reactivated, and his pre-existing difficulties regulating self-esteem and affect, he needed a much longer period of empathic immersion before he could move toward the kind of recognition and exploration of Barb's experience that she needed. Yet I also felt that Barb had been quite responsive and attentive to him for a number of weeks and could not reasonably be expected to maintain an attitude of constant sobbing contrition indefinitely. I saw how her natural need to express feelings in addition to guilt and remorse was triggering Jack's fear that she was not truly sorry—or not sorry enough relative to his anguish—while Jack's need for more time before really hearing Barb was triggering her fear that he was too self-focused to ever meet her emotional needs.

Feeling deeply for both partners and seeing how their perspectives and needs are at once so legitimate yet so exquisitely conflicting can be very difficult and emotionally draining for the couple therapist. This struggle is one of the biggest challenges of couples work, yet it can be used to help partners see the simultaneous legitimacy of both their own and their partner's experience.

During this period, I just tried to speak to both partners' experience and needs, saying things like: "Of course you object when Barb starts talking about those things, Jack. For some very good reasons, you're not ready to hear them yet. You're still reeling and it's all you can do to just breathe and get through the day." He nodded, meeting my eyes. "I think of you like a burn victim," I told him. "When Barb is crying, apologizing or agreeing with you, that's the salve that takes the edge off the pain, medicates it and makes it tolerable. When she disagrees or wants to talk about herself, it's like someone stealing that salve away and ripping off the bandages . . ." "No, it's like the person who burned you originally pouring acid on the burn," he corrected. I winced in agreement and nodded, and we sat a minute, breathing together.

"And here you are, Barb," I went on eventually, "not intending to rob Jack of the one thing that helps him, just trying to get some of what you really need." I said that of course she needed to know that Jack would eventually be able to discuss those important topics with her and put her needs first sometimes. Monitoring Jack carefully for signs of narcissistic injury, I said that if he had not put Barb's needs first as much as she had

needed, of course that would have to change for them to have a happy marriage, affair or no affair. I said I thought Jack did have the ability to respond to Barb's needs, at least some of the time, and that when he did not, there were probably important reasons why that we would need to understand together.

### FIRST YEAR OF TREATMENT

Over time, as we repeatedly empathically noted Jack's (understandable) difficulty hearing Barb's perspective, Jack began to acknowledge that his difficulty putting his own needs on hold temporarily, in order to focus on Barb's needs and experience, was a long-standing problem that predated her affair. However, he continued to escalate immediately if he felt there was even the slightest implication that this excused her behavior in any way, so I learned to include disclaimers such as, "this doesn't excuse what she did, but. . ." Jack gradually acknowledged that his volatility and difficulty listening closely to others had been a problem in other relationships, including with his children and colleagues. Although he insisted that we were not there to discuss his childhood, he did not argue when I noted that it was hardly surprising that he was not good at focusing on the experience of others, considering that no one had focused much on his experience growing up. Shortly thereafter, he agreed to a course of individual therapy with a therapist I suggested. (Barb had been in individual therapy all along.)

Although I had felt from the start that Jack could benefit from individual therapy, I believe that recommending it prior to this point (when he began to feel the need for it himself) would have been misattuned and could have led to a narcissistic injury and derailed the treatment. By this point he was past the acute trauma reaction and had been strengthened somewhat through his connection with me. His reasonably positive experience of the couples work, and perhaps difficulty sharing me with Barb at times, also made the idea of a therapist of his own more appealing.

Despite reminding us that what led to the affair did not excuse it, Jack became increasingly able to listen as Barb and I pieced together what had happened. I consulted frequently with her individual therapist as we identified her long-standing dysthymia and low self-esteem and their origins in childhood and adolescence; how she had devoted herself to motherhood, caring for elderly parents and charity work but had not felt well cared for by anyone; and her long-standing feelings of emotional disconnection from

many people, especially Jack. She described her surprise and delight when she unexpectedly found a job she loved and was good at, saying “it was like coming out of a coma”—feeling fully herself for the first time in many years, maybe ever.

It also became clear that Jack had always wanted Barb to work in his office, something she had no interest in doing. He had grudgingly accepted this, but once she began working for someone else, he had become increasingly resentful of her investment in someone else’s business—especially when he really needed help with his. Unable to directly express his feelings of hurt and abandonment, he had become increasingly critical and resentful, which led to constant fighting and a decline in their sexual relationship.

The reader can imagine the rest of the story: The more Jack complained about Barb’s job, the more supportive a male colleague appeared in contrast. This man and Barb developed a close friendship, then a vitalizing flirtation and eventually a brief sexual relationship. She reported that she had been so hurt by Jack’s criticism, selfishness and inability to be happy for her after all her years of supporting his career that she “didn’t truly feel married anymore” and assumed they would eventually divorce. Telling herself that the marriage was essentially over anyway allowed her to justify breaking a promise of sexual exclusivity.

Despite Jack’s insistence that understanding how the affair had happened would not help, over time something did shift for him as he heard Barb’s story in detail. He had known something of her struggles with depression and self-esteem, but now realized he had had no idea of the depth of her unhappiness and emptiness. He had also known that he and Barb had been fighting a lot since she started her job, but had been so righteously consumed with his own hurt and anger that he had greatly underestimated the impact of this on Barb. “I guess I did rain on her parade,” he admitted eventually, and began to grasp how painful that had been for her, especially when I reminded him how he had felt as a child when his parents did not share his pride or delight at something. Jack never stopped needing us to reiterate that none of this excused Barb breaking a vow of fidelity, but gradually he came to understand her affair differently: as a relationship that had shored up her very shaky self-esteem and vitalized her inner deadness and as her way of protesting the deterioration of their relationship and asserting her right to happiness. This understanding took the edge off Jack’s pain and eventually allowed him to reconnect.

Barb came to see the affair quite differently as well, moving from viewing it as wrong but primarily the result of Jack's emotional unavailability, to a much greater awareness of the depths of her own depression and sense of inadequacy. She also came to see the ways the affair relationship repeated her typical relational patterns of putting the other's needs ahead of her own and not speaking openly about her own needs and feelings.

#### REMAINDER OF THE TREATMENT

Over about a three-year period, Jack and Barb gradually rebuilt their marriage, although I often wondered if they would. The initial focus was on Jack's intense grief, anger, and sense of betrayal, followed by a long period of negotiating around various conflicting needs such as whether Barb could continue to work in the same company, whether Jack could monitor her cell phone and e-mail records, and so forth. (Eventually she left the company, and they compromised on the records, but it took months.) There was a long period of examining why Barb had had the affair and why she had felt "in a coma" to begin with; and finally a greater focus on their current relationship. The latter part of the treatment, which included considerable work on helping them learn to talk more in a more reflective, vulnerable way, felt more like regular couple therapy than an "infidelity" treatment and involved much less of the expert role I had assumed earlier on.

It is noteworthy that there were numerous times over the course of this treatment when one or the other partner became quite upset with me. As described earlier, Jack initially experienced my efforts to understand what led to the affair as equivalent to excusing Barb's behavior. Until he felt more connected to me, he often became enraged when I was empathic with Barb. Similarly, Barb sometimes accused me of "coddling" Jack or having unrealistically high hopes for him when she was convinced he would never change. Early on she also rather dramatically accused me of not understanding her need to keep her job ("You just don't get it, Carla! Nobody gets it!") I felt the problem was not that I did not "get" what the job meant to her, but that I also got what it meant to Jack that she refused to leave it, and spontaneously said as much a bit sharply, startling all of us. In such incidents, I insisted that we put our original topic on hold temporarily and focus instead on the rupture with me. I believe my efforts to understand and repair these ruptures, and willingness to apologize on occasion, helped the couple learn to use a similar process with each other.



## COMPLICATIONS TO THE HEALING PROCESS

As noted earlier, two major factors can complicate the healing process just described: (1) when one or both partners are trauma survivors or have significant characterological issues and (2) when partners come for treatment even though one partner is still in love or involved with a third person. Given space constraints, I discuss each only briefly here.

### CHARACTEROLOGICAL ISSUES IN ONE OR BOTH PARTNERS

The repair process is obviously considerably more complex when one or both partners have significant deficits in their capacities to regulate self-esteem; experience, integrate, and regulate affect; and self-reflect and imagine the experience of the other. Jack and Barb had deficits in many of these areas, which is part of the reason their treatment took three years. For partners with even more severe deficits, infidelity is only one of their many problems and generally must be dealt with as part of an ongoing process of helping each develop greater self-esteem, increased affect tolerance and self-soothing skills, a greater awareness of their own and others' experience, and new implicit relational patterns, including an improved ability to dialogue effectively with each other. As with Jack and Barb, for such couples, couple therapy is much more likely to be successful if both partners are in excellent concurrent individual therapies—ideally with frequent collaboration between the therapists.

### WHEN ONE PARTNER IS IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE

In my experience, the prognosis for the original marital relationship is far worse in these cases, but in rare cases the “spell” of the extramarital relationship eventually fades and the original couple succeeds in rebuilding their connection. Often this occurs when the extramarital partner is not available, so the unfaithful partner wants to disengage from that person. In this situation, in addition to everything discussed earlier, the repair process also involves helping the unfaithful partner grieve the loss of the extramarital relationship and become available to love again. This obviously takes time and is generally better addressed primarily in individual therapy, but in many cases the hurt spouse is able to tolerate some (carefully worded) discussion of the unfaithful partner's experience of loss.

In most cases, however, even if the marriage would likely have been repairable if not for the extramarital relationship, the unfaithful partner is unable to give up that relationship and recommit to the marriage. I see this as due to a version of the “split transference” described by Graller (1981) and others, in which the extramarital relationship is experienced very positively—primarily or exclusively through the lens of the selfobject dimension of experience—while the spouse is experienced more negatively, through the lens of the repetitive dimension of experience. The original relationship thus can never compete with the affair relationship: the marriage will always lose. But, as I tell couples, this is comparing apples and oranges. The more important questions concern the best long term relational fit and relative capacity of partners to meet each other’s needs over the long run—questions that cannot be answered during the “high” of new love or when one partner is not fully available or present. Although some therapists understandably refuse to treat couples unless extramarital relationships have been ended first, I believe it can be helpful to highlight these issues and at least help the partners understand how the repair process might work if both partners chose to reinvest in the marital relationship.

### CONCLUSION

The first line of my previous article on couple therapy consists of four words: “Couple therapy is hard” (Leone, 2008). They are still just as true for me today, and never more so than when dealing with the traumatic self-object ruptures and losses that usually occur in the aftermath of infidelity in our culture. However, a clear conceptualization of the causes, functions, meaning and impact of an affair and a general roadmap of the healing process can make the task a little easier.

Contemporary self psychology offers a framework well-suited to this task. Understanding unfaithful behavior as an effort to access desperately needed selfobject responses or communicate something important can help the therapist maintain an empathic connection with both partners. Framing intense emotions and disrupted functioning as expectable reactions to the traumatic loss of a needed and relied-upon selfobject relationship can help make couples sense of their experience. Finally, viewing the healing process as a rupture and repair sequence, the therapist can help partners process the experience of trauma and loss; understand and address the factors that led to the infidelity and the specific meanings it has for them; and determine whether their relationship can become a reliable source of selfobject responsiveness for both partners.

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### TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Este artículo aplica el enfoque de la psicología del self a la terapia de pareja, descrito anteriormente (Leone, 2008), y al tratamiento de parejas que están afrontando las secuelas de la infidelidad. Desde esta perspectiva la infidelidad es vista como una falla masiva en la función de selfobject o un trauma relacional (al menos en la mayoría de casos de nuestra cultura) que surge a partir de múltiples factores intrapsíquicos e interpersonales. Este artículo enfatiza las causas, funciones, sentidos y consecuencias de la infidelidad, así como la importancia de entender los sentidos específicos de una infidelidad tanto para cada uno de los miembros como para la pareja. Después se describe un abordaje terapéutico diseñado para ayudar el proceso de las parejas e integrar la experiencia de trauma y pérdida, abordar los temas que condujeron a la conducta infiel, y gradualmente restablecer la relación de pareja como una fuente confiable de experiencias de selfobject para ambos participantes. También se discute el uso de intervenciones directivas, estructurantes y pedagógicas para conseguir estos objetivos. Se utiliza material clínico detallado para ilustrar los conceptos clave.

Une approche contemporaine dérivée de la psychologie du soi, déjà décrite (Leone, 2008), est appliquée à la thérapie de couple en particulier, de couples aux prises avec les contrecoups de l'infidélité. Dans cette perspective, l'infidélité est vue comme une rupture objet-soi massive ou un traumatisme relationnel (la plupart du temps dans notre culture) relié à des facteurs intrapsychiques et interpersonnels multiples. L'article apporte un éclairage sur les causes, les fonctions, le sens et les retombées de l'infidélité, insistant sur l'importance de comprendre les significations pour chacun des partenaires ainsi que pour

le couple de la liaison extramaritale. Une méthode thérapeutique est proposée pour intégrer l'expérience du traumatisme et de la perte, pour identifier les enjeux qui ont mené au comportement infidèle et, graduellement, pour restaurer la relation maritale comme source fiable d'expérience objet-soi pour chacun. Des interventions éducatives, structurantes ou directives pour atteindre ces buts font l'objet d'une discussion. Les concepts-clés sont illustrés par un matériel clinique détaillé.

Questo lavoro impiega l'approccio contemporaneo di psicologia del sé alla terapia di coppia, precedentemente illustrata (Leone, 2008) per il trattamento di coniugi che debbano affrontare le conseguenze di una infedeltà. Da questo punto di vista, l'infedeltà è concepita come un fallimento d'oggettosé globale o un trauma relazionale (quanto meno nella maggior parte dei casi nella nostra cultura) che deriva in maniera paradigmatica da una molteplicità di fattori intrapsichici e interpersonali. Questo lavoro mette in luce le cause, le funzioni, i significati e l'impatto dell'infedeltà e sottolinea l'importanza della comprensione dei significati specifici di una relazione extra-coniugale per ciascun partner e per la coppia. Descrive poi un approccio al trattamento volto ad aiutare le coppie ad elaborare e integrare l'esperienza del trauma e della perdita, ad analizzare gli elementi che avevano portato al comportamento infedele e a ristabilire gradualmente la relazione coniugale come una sorgente affidabile di esperienza d'oggettosé per entrambi i coniugi. Viene inoltre discusso l'impiego di interventi direttivi, strutturanti o educativi volti a raggiungere questi obiettivi. Per illustrare i concetti chiave si fa riferimento a materiale clinico dettagliato.

Dieser Artikel wendet eine zeitgenössische selbstpsychologische Herangehensweise der Paartherapie, die an anderer Stelle beschrieben ist (Leone, 2008), auf die Behandlung von Paaren an, die sich mit den Folgen von Untreue plagen. Aus dieser Perspektive wird die Untreue als ein massives Selbstobjektversagen und (jedenfalls in den meisten Fällen innerhalb unserer Kultur als) Beziehungstrauma betrachtet, das typischerweise einer Vielzahl intrapsychischer und interpersonaler Faktoren entstammt. Dieser Artikel stellt die Gründe, die Funktionen, Bedeutungen und Auswirkungen von Untreue heraus und betont, wie wichtig es ist, die spezifischen Bedeutungen zu verstehen, die eine Affäre für jeden der beiden Partner und das Paar hatte. Danach beschreibt er einen Behandlungsansatz, der darauf ausgerichtet ist, Paaren zu helfen, die Erfahrung des Traumas und des Verlustes zu verarbeiten und zu integrieren, sich den Themen zu stellen, die zu dem untreuen Verhalten geführt haben und die eheliche Beziehung schrittweise als für beide Partner verlässliche Quelle von Selbstobjekterfahrungen wieder herzustellen. Die Nutzung direkter, strukturierende und edukativer Interventionen, um dies zu erreichen, wird auch diskutiert. Ausführliche Fallbeispiele dienen der Illustrierung der zentralen Konzepte.