

WHEN COUPLE THERAPY IS NOT ENOUGH: THE COUPLE THERAPIST'S SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE WHEN CONSIDERING A RECOMMENDATION

by Michelle J. Frisch, 2009

This qualitative study explored how couple therapists experience, think about and decide whether or not to make a recommendation for one or both members of a couple to engage in individual therapy. The study examined situations when the couple therapist felt additional work was required, and looked at the risks and benefits of making such recommendations.

The questions that the study addressed were: Should referrals to individual therapy be made? If not, why not, and if so, why? Are there kinds of couple issues, or attachment styles, that suggest the benefit of both kinds of treatment? What considerations are most prominent in the therapist's decision-making process? What problems or advantages should the therapist anticipate when making a recommendation?

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine experienced psychodynamically-oriented therapists who specialize in couple therapy and who come from varying professional fields and theoretical orientations. Data from the interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

The primary finding of the study showed that, while there were various categories identified as times when recommendations were made, the principal impetus for making a recommendation occurs when the couple work is stuck, stalemated or has reached a plateau. The triadic nature of couple therapy was also seen to be an important factor in whether or not the couple work made satisfactory progress. The decision to refer one or both members of the couple to individual therapy is always focused on improving the progress of the couple work and endeavoring to place the couple within a psychic space where they can listen to, and talk to each other, and have a productive exchange.

Results indicated that couple psychotherapists in this study felt that individual therapy was oftentimes an important adjunct to the couple work. Findings included that therapists never made a recommendation without substantial thought and consideration.