



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.129-137>

MCDSARE: 2018
International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the
Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

IMAGO THERAPY AND ORTHODOX THERAPY ON COUPLES
AND MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The present paper presents a theoretical scientific approach of therapy for couples, basically focused on two therapeutic orientations with subsequent similarities and differences; on the one hand, Imago therapy, which is mainly a therapy for couples experiencing emotional disconnection and orthodox therapy for couples, which is mainly included in a priest's task insuring the balance and equilibrium for couples experiencing a marriage crisis. The psychological premise of this theoretical paper is that surrender of illusions and fears in fellowship with others is at the core of life. The background principle of this approach is that Imago Therapy may be a natural adjunct of couples' spiritual beliefs and their commitment to helping each other achieve fulfilment in their marriage relationship. For more than a decade, The Imago Model in Action has been used regularly by therapists interested in this effective and now well-known model of working with couples. If we look at the core of this model in action, we see that the effect is merely the same both at the functional and psychological level. Both persons reconnect and reconstruct the emotional fundamentals of their marriage. Still, the significant differences appear at the level of principality. For the orthodox perspective, the very notion of marriage as a sacrament presupposes that a man is not only a being with physiological, psychological, and social functions, but that he is a citizen of God's Kingdom; whereas the Imago model focusses on healing the childhood wounds and reconnection which can keep marriage relationships fresh and dynamic.

Keywords: Psychotherapy; Religion; Education; Psychology; Social and Cultural Studies;

1. INTRODUCTION

For the past thirty years, in Romania, the institute of family and the concept of couple have been threatened by the transformation of the different understanding of the free union on man and woman. The orthodox perspectives perceives it as an indispensable condition for marriage whereas other society trends such as secularization and moral relativism prefer to ignore the sacral nature of marriage. As for the

therapeutic approaches, Imago therapy seemed to have been one of the unique forms of therapy that has similarities to the perspectives of orthodox view on marriage. Moreover, it has been proven a highly effective form of relationship and couples' therapy that has positively affected thousands of couples around the world. It is the only form of therapy which goes beyond reuniting the couples and seeks to bring back the sacred sense of universality and transcendence that the union between a man and a woman has had since its beginnings.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The orthodox therapy for couples encompasses the following key concept: orthodox marriage and orthodox family (it does not accept to offer support for other types of families, being restricted to orthodox family). The Imago therapy includes the following key concepts: Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT), imago dialogue (through conflict to connection), Imago model in action (healing the wounds on invisibility), short-therapy.

We shall shortly describe the key concepts involved in the each of the two therapeutic approaches.

2.1. Orthodox family/marriage

The institute of family is threatened today by such phenomena as secularization and moral relativism. The Orthodox Church asserts the sacral nature of marriage as her fundamental and indisputable doctrine. In the Orthodox Church, marriage is considered to be the oldest institution of divine law since it was instituted at the same time as the first human beings, Adam and Eve, were created (Gen. 2:23). Since its origin this union was not only the spiritual communion of the married couple – man and woman, but also assured the continuation of the human race. Blessed in Paradise, the marriage of man and woman became a holy mystery, which is mentioned in the New Testament in the story about Cana of Galilee, where Christ gave His first sign by turning water into wine thus revealing His glory (Jn. 2:11). The mystery of the indissoluble union of man and woman is the image of the unity of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32). The emphasis is on the Christ-centered nature of marriage. The sacred nature of the God-established union allows it to be regarded as 'a small church, an image of the Church. Therefore, all counselling regarding this union shall be performed also in the church except for cases of illness. Through God's blessing, the union of man and woman is elevated, for communion is above individual existence as it introduces the spouses to a life in the image of the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity. A necessary condition for marriage is the faith in Jesus Christ to be shared by a bridal pair, husband and wife. The foundation of unity in marriage is unity in Christ, so that the marital love blessed by the Holy Spirit may reflect the love of Christ and His Church as a mystery of the Kingdom of God and the eternal life of humanity in the love of God (Hierotheos Vlachos, 2001).

The protection of the sacral nature of marriage has always been of crucial importance for the preservation of the family which reflects the communion of those tied by conjugal bonds both in the Church and in the whole society. Therefore, the communion accomplished in the sacrament of marriage is not simply a natural conventional relationship but a creative spiritual force realized in the sacred institution of the family. It is the only force that can ensure the protection and education of children both in the spiritual mission of the Church and in the life of society.

The orthodox doctrine views marriage as the heart of the family; and the family is realization of marriage. In today's world, a real threat to Orthodox Christians is constituted by the pressure to recognize new forms of cohabitation. The deepening crisis of marriage is a matter of profound concern for the Orthodox Church not only because of negative consequences for the whole society and a threat to internal family relationships, the principal victims of which are married couples and, in the first place, children because regrettably they usually begin to martyr innocently from their early childhood.

2.2. Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT)

Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT) was created by Dr. Harville Hendrix, author of the best-selling "Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples (1988)." The term Imago is Latin for "image," and refers to the "unconscious image of familiar love." More than two decades ago Dr. Harville Hendrix and Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt started providing resources for couples, therapists, or individuals seeking to find a way to be more effective in their life and relationships (<http://imagorelationships.org/>).

After Freud, the fields of couples' therapy and family therapy, under the influence of the emerging relational insights, began more and more to focus on interpersonal variables of healing and on more efficient models of therapeutic change. At the same time, cultural shifts in the mental health field led to the development of managed care, which limited therapeutic access for clients to less than 10 sessions in contrast to the requirement of most short-term dynamic and relational models, which recommended 20–40 sessions.

While the influence of psychodynamic and relational therapies continued to focus on unravelling the complexities of the past and the unconscious, much marital therapy focused on communication skills, conflict resolution, behavior modification, and problem solving (Wade Luquet, 2007).

The Imago therapy is a short-term therapy. Why did we choose a short-term couples therapy? Wade Luquet (*Short-term Couples Therapy- The Imago Model in Action*, 2007) has cleverly and efficiently devised a model of couple therapy consisting of six sessions (although he also briefly describes the same program in formats of 8, 10 and 12 sessions respectively), which offers couples an easily understandable and adaptable philosophy of relationships, along with the appropriate communication and problem-solving skills in a time-limited framework.

Nevertheless, this model is well balanced, sensible and clearly structured and wisely acknowledges that most of the couple work takes place outside the therapy room. In Romania, therapists undergo formation and supervision in this type of therapy only for the last 10 years. Couple therapy in itself has no longer been regarded as shameful also for the past 10 years. Our country does not have a tradition in couple therapy approaches as America does. Nevertheless, we chose Luquet's short-term couple therapy model with its clearly structured and concisely described time-limited amount of sessions as fitted perfectly for a properly designed comparative study to the orthodox approach. There are, of course, other types of couple therapy that may undergo this SWOT comparative analysis that we are about to perform in this article. But we limit our comparative perspective to only these two. We prefer this therapeutic approaches as they both describe a model of couple therapy that is practical, intelligent, accessible, logical, respectful, and immediately useful for both clinicians and researchers.

In contrast to the skill-based marital therapies, Imago included identifying the impact of childhood on marital choice and marital dynamics and the importance of acquiring relational skills. The central relational skill was the Imago Couples Dialogue, and the role of the therapist was radically altered from "expert" to "facilitator" of the dialogue process.

Imago Dialogue became a powerful therapeutic intervention to help couples restore connection in their relationship and thereby repairing the rupture of connection in childhood (*Short-term Couples Therapy- The Imago Model in Action*, 2007).

Therefore, The Imago therapy involves the "Imago Dialogue" process; the latter is meant to help partners move from blame and reactivity to understanding and empathy. Before opening and bearing this dialogue, there is an important psychological premise that the therapist has to consider: there is often a connection between the frustrations experienced in adult relationships and early childhood experiences. For example: If one frequently felt criticized as a child, he/she will likely be sensitive to any criticism from, and feel criticized often by their partner. Likewise, if one felt abandoned, smothered, neglected, etc., these feelings will come up in their marriage/committed relationships. Most people face only a few of these "core issues," but they typically arise again and again within partnerships. This can overshadow all that is good in the relationship, leaving people to wonder if they have chosen the right mate.

The Imago dialogue therefore focusses not only on current practical problems of the couple but also on understanding each other's feelings and "childhood wounds" more empathically. Only then the partners may begin to heal themselves and their relationship, and move toward a more conscious relationship. With this process, a family formed of a man and a woman can transform conflicts into opportunities for healing and growth, and connect more deeply and lovingly with each other.

The ultimate outcome of a dialogical relationship is the creation of a conscious relationship within which both partners experience the restoration of the original condition of connection to all parts of oneself, to one's physical and social context, and to the cosmos—the experience of oneness which was lost in childhood.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to find similarities and differences between the two therapeutic approaches as well as to suggest ways in which both types of therapies may interrelate and contribute together at helping the couple reunite. Therefore, we shall present a descriptive approach of each and starting from SWOT type analysis for each to envision a further interrelation.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article is meant to identify lines where the two different approaches come together. Particularly, the priest may still be a counsellor and advisor for those who trust him as a person mainly but not necessarily as a messenger of God by appealing to Imago therapy. Paradoxically, in practice most orthodox priests in Romania apply techniques used in Imago therapy without even knowing it has a name. Imago therapy is new even for most Romanian psychotherapists and not known at all among orthodox priest in Romanian who do not seem to be open to apply psychotherapy techniques.

The next question is what brings forth orthodox therapy? From our point of view, it introduces another so-called “partner” in this relationship: that is Jesus Christ. The orthodox perspective on relationship explains the role of Jesus in the mirror of the orthodox conceptualization of the union. Therefore, what we are going to do next is to explain what are the similarities and differences between the two approaches.

1. If the psychological approach uses the two partners as the only resources for the case, the orthodox therapy brings forth a third partner, who is the most important part of the relationship.

2. The next key matter is that concerning the degree of religiosity of the partners and their faith. If they are true believers, that is they believe and accept there is this empowered third instance who can help them along with the solving of their conflicts then the therapy may develop smoothly according to the stages performed and established mostly by the priest. In they are not believers but appear to have asked for the priest advice, the letter may still help them by using techniques specific to Imago therapy (<https://ortodoxiatinerilor.ro/tinerii-biserica/psihologie-ortodoxa/17384-tehnici-de-psihoterapie-vazute-din-perspectiva-ortodoxa>).

In Romania, the general perception and position of Orthodox Church to psychotherapy is that of rejection. So the main question that arises here is why in many European and American countries the counselling provided by the priests is considered therapeutic and embraces many techniques from psychotherapy (of different orientations) and in Romania psychotherapy provided by specialists (psychotherapists, psychoanalysts and psychologist) is still considered something very different and even dangerous for the respective person involved in the process. More specifically, in Romania there are very few priests who are open to psychotherapy as a way of helping people and rather views it as a Devil’s infused work.

Very few initiatives have been taken to defense psychotherapy and view it as a way of helping man reconstruct his personality. One of them was initiated by the Association of Psychologists and Orthodox Psychotherapists together with the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology from Timisoara. They organized an international symposium with the following theme: “Therapeutic valences of orthodox spirituality and main directions in the development of contemporary psychology in 2013.”

Therefore, one core issue to debate is to find ways if there are any to validate both therapeutic approaches: Imago therapy is scientifically and empirically validated, their authors being well-known couple therapists who have witnessed the healing of hundreds of couples over the years whereas orthodox therapies in Romania are barely concepts and paradigms and recognized as such by very few priests. Most priests tend to avoid the term therapy when they talk about couples who ask for their help and prefer to see it as encompassed in the process of confession. Most of them see confession as a primary condition for further counselling. And this issue arises another research question: if offering couple counselling is pre-conditioned by the act of confession, wouldn’t it be better for the people who do not attend church as much as requested by orthodox dogma to be offered first counselling and then requested to come for confession? Doesn’t the act of confession request a great amount of trust of the individual first in the person of the priest? The authenticity of the act of confession isn’t it given first by the act of trust that the

believer puts in the hands of the priest? From this point of view, Imago therapy comes with a major advantage: it starts from a perceived reality that most of us have developed very good defense against accepting advice, especially if it looks like maybe we are in the wrong and are being told to do things right. Therefore, Imago couples' therapy takes a radically different approach. Imago therapy doesn't work to "fix" partners; it invites you to join within the therapeutic frame in working on the relationship as a whole. In Imago, nobody is right or wrong. The challenge is to learn how to talk together about things which really matter, in a way that feels safe, supportive, and positive (<http://imagorelationships.org/pub/about-imago-therapy/what-is-imago>).

During the process of Imago therapy both partners learn to work on the relationship themselves, they have the most power and they become the experts on their own relationship by learning to find out what is really going on for each partner, and understanding how things in the present have a deep emotional connection to their past. In the orthodox approach the assumption is that one partner should do something to undo the wrong the other one has done. The emphasis laid on right and wrong may amplify the feeling of guilt. Repentance, the feeling of regret and the striving to obey rules of the church is the main target of orthodox family therapy whereas the Imago therapy is not judgmental at all. It seeks to heal wounds of both partners and help them reconnect at the emotional level.

Therefore, another research question envisions advantages and disadvantages of both types of therapy.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

We shall draw and fill in the template of SWOT analysis, after we have clearly defined the concepts each therapy deals with.

ORTHODOX THERAPY

INTERNAL FACTORS	
STRENGTHS (+)	WEAKNESSES (-)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the purpose of marriage is wisdom, love and the unity of partners and the fruit of this love are the children -orthodoxy in itself is regarded as a therapeutic education (Ioan Romanidis) -the priest has as model of therapeutic approach the Holy Fathers of the Church, therefore he has previous models of success regarding deification, the final purpose of orthodox therapy -the real therapy starts there where specific passions are eliminated. The sole therapy is found in the elimination of self-love, which is the root of all those passions; this may be considered a strength as the priest knows best where to start from. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the key element is the priest; he is the main person leading the couple to healing; he shall be endowed with qualities of a therapist therefore it is assumed that he has already successfully underwent a process of healing himself -the role of the priest cannot be performed by a woman; still the most therapeutic qualities belong to the anima part of us Jung); the priest asks the woman in the relation to be calm, obedient and patient and most of the times to help the man recover from his illness or weaknesses

EXTERNAL FACTORS

OPPORTUNITIES (+)

- it resembles medicine as it cures the person
- the meeting with a priest (endowed with the gift of healing) is a chance for each partner to reach the beatitude of the state given by deification
- in the healing process of the respective couple, each partner starts with the model of Christ; they are supposed to find within the Church and in their relation to the priest the connection with God they need to rebuild their relationship
- according to the orthodox dogma, the Holy parents, theology is in correlation to health and the fight for healing); it is mainly and before anything else, a scientific therapy (Hierotheos Vlachos, Orthodox Psychotherapy); however, this perspective is not embraced but psychiatrists and psychologists or research psychologists (not yet)

THREATS (-)

- if healing means reaching the state of deification, then it may be possible that the partners don't get access to this unless the priest has done it before; therefore, the healing process is not so much in the hands of the partners but in the priest's.
- heading someone to deification without having a previous experience is a bad thing; it may be regarded as a fall in itself; the priest has to be worthy of such a therapeutic task of deification
- the healing process is not a scientific approach but an art; it is a gift one transmits forward in different shapes and forms chosen by the priest; the main forms follow the holy tradition of the church along with the orthodox marriage rules; still the priest has to be a visionary person, as not all rules and methods apply to all couples and therefore it is not a moral healing but a theological one empowered by the Revelation of God
- external intervention is necessary in the process; an intervention that for us was realized, in the Person of Christ. Christ is the only truly "healthy" Person - not because He is also God (as the notions of "healthy" or "sick" do not apply to God) - but because of His human nature, which is unaffected by any inherited deterioration, and permanently joined (voluntarily and freely) thanks to the hypostatic - the personal - union with God, He has transcended deterioration and death. Consequently, no therapy (as a true and radical elimination of sickness) can be considered without Christ.

IMAGO THERAPY

INTERNAL FACTORS	
STRENGTHS (+)	WEAKNESSES (-)
<p>-The basic thesis of Imago Relationship Therapy is that each person is a creation and function of relationship and in turn is a creator of the relationship in which he or she functions.</p> <p>-the goal of therapy is to help couples co-create a conscious marriage. The role of the Imago Therapist, in contrast to that of both traditional long-term and short-term therapists who function as experts and the source of healing, is to facilitate a therapeutic process that empowers the partners in the relationship to heal each other and grow toward wholeness</p>	<p>Happy and stable couples are able to feel into each other's experience and have a visceral understanding of the other's feelings, whether of anger, frustration, confusion, or joy. Still, many partners aren't able to access empathy; even if they have cognitive empathy they may lack affective/emotional one. Counselors working with couples who lack attachment and empathy skills will need to create a sense of safety from which empathy can be born, helping the listening partner listen fearlessly to a partner's feelings, and then validating the partner's experience rather than trying to marginalize or replace it with his or her own version.</p> <p>-Although love is a powerful impetus for husbands and wives to help and support each other, to make each other happy, and to create a family, it does not in itself create the substance of the relationship—the personal qualities and skills that are crucial to sustain it and make it grow. Special personal qualities are crucial for a happy relationship: commitment, sensitivity, generosity, consideration, compromise, and follow through with joint decisions.</p> <p>-people form union by marrying for a lot of reasons and love is not always the first or the most important reason.</p>

EXTERNAL FACTORS	
OPPORTUNITIES (+)	THREATS (-)
<p>-the goal of therapy is to help couples co-create a conscious marriage. The role of the Imago Therapist, in contrast to that of both traditional long-term and short-term therapists who function as experts and the source of healing, is to facilitate a therapeutic process that empowers the partners in the relationship to heal each other and grow toward wholeness. To help them become therapists for each other, he functions as a coach rather than as expert or source of healing.</p> <p>-If the work is with an individual not in relationship, the focus is the same—his or her functioning in relationship. Since the dialogical process can be learned quickly, the need for the therapist becomes healing may take years, but the</p>	<p>When couples come for couples counseling, many will have an eroded base of respect and trust for each other; that they usually come as a last resort and they have built up enormous resentments by the time they get into therapy (an enormous amount of resentment can build up in that time)</p> <p>-Escalation is a communication style that fans the flames of the conflict and brings about intense emotion. Invalidation occurs when a partner negates, counters, or ignores the experience expressed by a partner. Couples who don't manage to learn structured communication techniques, such as the Couples Dialogue of Imago won't be able to prevent these corrosive</p>

internalization of the process can be achieved in a few weeks.

- a family formed of a man and a woman can transform conflicts into opportunities for healing and growth, and connect more deeply and lovingly with each other.

behaviours from occurring in their conflictual interactions.

6. FINDINGS

Although orthodox psychotherapy includes apparently all cases of people, it refers to all people, one cannot get access to it unless he or she agrees to the orthodox tradition and have faith. So even if one is born orthodox by tradition, he cannot get help from an orthodox priest unless he deeply agrees and is committed to understanding and living the family relationship according to the orthodox rules, dogma and believes. According to Orthodox Tradition, after Adam's Fall, Man became ill, death entered into the person's being and caused many anthropological, social, even ecological problems. In the tragedy of his fall man maintained the image of God within him but lost completely the likeness of Him, since his communion with God was disrupted. However, the Incarnation of Christ and the work of the Church both aim at enabling the person to attain the likeness of God, that is, to re-establish communion with God. By adhering to Orthodox therapeutic treatment as conceived by the Holy Fathers of the Church, Man can cope successfully with his thoughts and thus solve his problems completely and comprehensively. As for the marriage dysfunctionality or problems, the final purpose in marriage should be not merely emotional reconnection like in Imago therapy, bur healing and salvation. As for the stages of healing, they are known and encompassed in the orthodox dogma or theology which is understood here as a therapeutic approach. The priest is the representative of Theology which is regarded in the orthodox therapy paradigm as the person endowed with the gift of guiding the couple achieve this state of healing. He is supposed to have experienced it before and be a model just like the Model of Christ.

The basic thesis of Imago Relationship Therapy is that each person is a creation and function of relationship and in turn is a creator of the relationship in which he or she functions. Each person begins life essentially connected to all aspects of himself and to his physical, social, and cosmic context. He is whole and experiences a oneness with everything. The human problem results from a rupture of this essential connection, a rupture caused by unconscious parenting which does not support the maintenance of original connection. This results in separation from self-parts and alienation from others which create the problematic character of the social context in which we live—flawed mental health, interpersonal tension, and social ills. The fundamental human yearning is to restore this original connection.

In the process leading to marriage, it seems that we choose to make a pair especially with a person who unconsciously recreates a relationship with a person similar to our original caretaker. Still at the unconscious level, each of the partners anticipates the healing of their emotional wounds and the recovery of their wholeness. The attempt at reconnection inevitably fails, however, because the similarity of the selected partner to the original parents results in the recreation of the original, wounding childhood situation, resulting in the power struggle. The goal of therapy is to help couples co-create a conscious marriage. The role of the Imago Therapist, in contrast to that of both traditional long-term and short-term therapists who function as experts and the source of healing, is to facilitate a therapeutic process that empowers the partners in the relationship to heal each other and grow toward wholeness. To help them become therapists for each other, he functions as a coach rather than as expert or source of healing. Essentially, the therapist helps partners in a committed partnership make contact with each other and eventually achieve empathic connection through a process called dialogue. The conscious and consistent use of the three phases of dialogue—mirroring, validation, and empathy—ultimately restores connection between partners, and this connection leads to healing of emotional wounds, resumption of developmental growth, and spiritual evolution.

As a conclusion, we may state that the two types of therapies are not similar from many points of view: firstly, at the level of content or dogma, secondly from the perspective of the person who leads the

therapeutic process (the orthodox therapy is performed by a priest, within the Church-in Romania he does not need to go through other therapeutic formation or experience other form of counselling except for his own process of healing.); thirdly, they differ a lot in the final purpose. They may interfere at the technical level, as all levels of the psyche are involved, but they are very different in the common goal: whereas in orthodox therapy the final goal of marriage is to attain the mutual salvation, after the healing performed by the priest who is supposed to have undergone these stages himself.

However, the two do not share similarities at the process of learning either. Once each of the partners knows the aspects of the personality he or she has to work on, the need for the therapist as a healing assistant is very necessary in orthodox therapy, each of the partners has to present progresses by doing something within the relationship and the church, whereas in Imago therapy, once the internalization of the process has been achieved in a few weeks, both partners can exercise it on a regular basis and check progress with the therapist only if they feel the need to.

7. CONCLUSION

From our point of view, what is needed is a new theoretical orientation at the level of a paradigm shift from the individual as the locus of being and individual pathology as the human problem to an ontology of relationality as constitutive of being and its rupture as the source of the human condition. Such a shift has been in the making for decades with the appearance of conjoint therapy for couples, family systems theory, and group therapies of all sorts. These innovations registered our awareness of the restriction of the individual paradigm and the need for a more inclusive vision of the human situation, but they are halfway points on the journey to a new paradigm because they tend to use the dynamics of the individual as the model for the dyad, family, and group. In addition, some of these therapies focused on the individual in context (conjoint therapy and group psychotherapy) while others lost the individual in the context (family systems therapies and group therapy).

The needed new theoretical orientation must understand relationality or inherent connectedness as the structure of being and preserve the individual as points of connection. Such a theory will see the reciprocal effect of context on individual psychodynamics and intrapsychic functioning, and the influence of the latter on the former. In other words, all things, including persons, are in relationship, and they are what they are because of their relationship to each other, and their relationship to each other is a function of who they are individually. Relationship is seen as the essence of being at the personal and cosmic level. Imago Relationship Therapy is an example of such a paradigm. The challenge and inspiration which led to its development were to create a couples' therapy that was effective in helping partners understand and maintain their relationship.

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