

Running head: Pseudosecure Couples

PSEUDOSECURE COUPLES

Stan Tatkin, Psy.D.

Assistant Clinical Professor

Department of Family Medicine

University of California at Los Angeles

David Geffen School of Medicine

CURRENTLY IN PRESS – PLEASE DO NOT DISTRIBUTE!

Abstract

Numerous couples end up in therapy after many years of stable marriage. The catalyst that brings them is a crisis spawned by the revelation of a devastating secret or series of secrets. Like secure or earned secure pairings, these couples appear successful at interactive regulation. In striking contrast to secure couples however, these partners will present in therapy as having little real knowledge of one another, even after decades of marriage. At least one partner refuses to trust the other with his or her mind and maintains pockets of secrecy about the self that directly or indirectly impacts the safety and security system of the partnership.

Pseudosecurity is discussed here in terms of insecure pairings that find long-term psychobiological homeostasis through avoidance in ways that appear engaged and secure to the partners themselves. As a result, neither partner would admit to a pattern of avoidance either in themselves or the other. These are pseudosecure couples.

Pseudosecure Couples

Pseudosecure Couples As Different From Other Couples

Pseudosecure couples are often made up of insecure individuals, but not always. Partners can range anywhere from secure or earned-secure to the other end of the insecure spectrum (see **figure 1**). However, unresolved-disorganized individuals and those at the more extreme polar ends of the insecure spectrum are excluded from the pseudosecure coupling I describe here. This is because the pseudosecure couple is able to maintain many years of stable marriage without the massive dysregulation that disrupts couplings in severely insecure relationships. Unresolved-disorganized partners are unable to maintain a regulated false partnership due to the inherent dysregulation that comes with unresolved loss and trauma. Similarly, extreme polar ends of the insecure spectrum, though organized, involve massive dysregulation due to continual assaults on the partner's sense of safety and security. Whenever these partners move toward a committed relationship, they become psychobiologically dependent upon one another and this dependency activates intense reactions to proximity-seeking and contact-maintenance. Adaptations, or defenses against a threatened safety-security system, are continually being overwhelmed by an ever increasing perception of relationship permanence. Thus, these partners are unable to maintain a regulated false relationship and tend to have major problems early on.

There are exceptions to this, however, whereby stressors such as aging, death of a family member, physical illness, and other emotional-psychosocial stressors may lead to a developing pattern of dysregulation and a breakdown of the pseudosecure defense.

PSEUDOSECURE COUPLES:

- Show a preference for familiarity and intolerance of "strangeness."
- Do not welcome the complexities of strangeness in their partner and therefore are not able to maintain creative curiosity about the other and the self in the other.
- Tend to avoid novelty.
- At least one partner does not trust the other with his/her mind.
- Abide by a rigid set of internal self and object representations.
- Overly rely on triangulation and parallel play and avoid the use of joint attention.
- Have difficulty with either or both axes of time and proximity.
- Tend to avoid frequent and prolonged eye contact for interactive regulation.

Knowing and Being Known

One of the hallmarks of a pseudosecure individual is a refusal to trust their partner with his/her mind. This may be described as segments of experience, both past and present, which cannot be shared with the primary attachment figure. The narratives of these individuals contain various reasons for the secrecy:

“I need to have some modicum of privacy.”

“I don’t want him/her interfering with my business.”

“If he/she were to know, the marriage would be over.”

“I need something of my own, something that’s mine alone.”

Arguably, secure partners might expect to expand into one another’s minds, especially during periods of creativity or stress, simply because two brains are better than one. Still another purpose of a two-person psychological system is the intersubjective experience of knowing and

being known. Partners become “willing” containers for one another and provide a psychological space for each to organize and digest experience, particularly of the implicit kind. Unprocessed, implicit experience is by definition non-declarative and may therefore be unavailable for words. A partner may feel or think that which cannot be articulated, but would benefit from an intersubjective space within which to organize feeling or thought. They need another available and interested mind to help them hold the experience. Both partners would have to tolerate “not knowing” and “not understanding” long enough to create space for this sort of discovery. Secure partners may be more inclined to “use” one another in this fashion. This feature is entirely missing in pseudosecure partnerships.

In order for insecurely attached individuals to produce and maintain positive, secure-like states of partnership, mates must construct and maintain fantasies of safety and security based on ideal roles of self and other.

These roles are ideal in that they produce sufficient positive feeling about coupling and help move partners toward more advanced stages of relationship. In these roles partners avoid painful ambivalence and inconsistencies based on their individual internal working models (Bowlby, 1969). This is similar to Winnicott's notion of false self (Winnicott, 1960) wherein one bases one's sense of self on a continuously engaged defensive system that is both novelty-and pain-avoiding (Stadler et al., 2006; Waters & Deane, 1985). In the pseudosecure couple, the co-constructed and mutually maintained false self must abide by a rigid set of rules that determine approach/avoidance behavior on an ongoing basis. In other words, both partners are able to maintain the integrity of their internal working models by settling in to an "idea" of one another that must remain static and thereby avoid discovery and surprise. This makes both the inner and

outer world "appear" more predictable and less threatening, yet it does so at the cost of vitality, freshness, wonderment, spontaneity, and complexity (Eagle, 2005).

Insecure individuals gravitate toward pseudosecurity by assuming they "know" their partners and themselves. The curiosity of the courtship phase is replaced by a more stable but fixed view of the other, as well as the "self in the eyes of" the other (Decety & Chaminade, 2003; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). To the minimal extent self and other are modified, it is to avoid dysregulation. This is a profound form of turning away. Partners cease or fail to notice the complexity of the other. In this system, novelty threatens their false sense of security and so is avoided.

"You're Not The Person I Married." There is an irony to this statement, both funny yet tragic, as the complaint reveals several misconceptions. The phrase assumes that partners can and should know one another late in the relationship as they knew one another early in the relationship; that partners do not change over time; that partners do not develop complexity both as individuals and as a couples system; and that partners are fully knowable.

Of course, "knowing" in the early stages of a relationship is purely transference. Romantic relationships are powered by positive transference, projection and projective identification, often including blissful fantasies of onemindedness and fusion (Aron et al., 2005; Koenig, 2005; Maner et al., 2005). Infatuated couples are, to a large degree, self-stimulating. As recent studies demonstrate, the brains of new lovers are awash in dopamine and norepinephrine as positive affects are amplified and sustained. In addition to increased levels of dopamine and norepinephrine, infatuated brains show decreased levels of serotonin, which accounts for the obsessiveness and worry that keeps new partners in mind while physically apart. This anxiety

("when is he going to call?") though painful, promotes longing, and provides the drive to reunite (Aron et al., 2005; H. E. Fisher, 2004; Helen E. Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, & Brown, 2002; Starbuck et al., 2001).

Pseudosecurity vs Novelty

Insecurely attached individuals tend to seek out partners who immediately feel familiar to them. This familiarity may also be termed, familial-arity, as the new person is experienced as "fitting in" with one's own clan culture. Strangers may become too familiar too quick with the sense of having "known" the other for a long time. Secure- autonomous individuals tend to be accepting and comfortable with *strangeness*² and tend to see it as novel and interesting. On the other hand, a pseudosecure individual will have a chronic need for early and somewhat final knowing.

It is important to clarify the term *novelty*, especially when attempting to evaluate its presence or absence in a long-term committed relationship. As mentioned earlier, courting partners are essentially engaged in mutual stimulation and relaxation via projective mechanisms, and so there is, by definition, little if any exposure to real novelty. As such, a certain degree of narcissism is involved and therefore partners are engaged in an autoregulatory system of stimulation and relaxation rather than true interactive regulation (Solomon, 1985, 1989). To put it another way, though courting partners are mutually engaged in amplifying positive affects, this mutuality is not the same as the more mature interactive regulation that is *expected* to occur later down the line as the relationship moves toward increasing mutual dependency. As a secure relationship progresses, partners *depend* upon one another for stimulation and relaxation. The relationship at the early stages resembles a one-person psychological system to a larger degree

than a two-person psychological system. We would expect a shift toward real interactive regulation as the relationship progresses and matures. This shift is predicated in part by each partner's acceptance of and comfort with strangeness rather than an ongoing captivation with familial-arity. This means that both partners are aware of each other as separate, autonomous and somewhat unpredictable individuals – an awareness that leads to an appreciation of complexity in the relationship.

Mutual awareness and appreciation of strangeness within the context of a secure relationship go hand-in-hand with interactive regulation and leads to individual and mutual development. Familial-arity, on the other hand, involves an unyielding and continual reliance on negative or positive transference material from early attachment relationships. This material gets projected onto each partner and onto the relationship itself. This becomes the false "knowing" that interferes with discovery and novelty and leads to pseudosecurity (Eagle, 2005).

Pseudosecurity leads to boredom and dissatisfaction with the partnership. In contrast, secure couples continually re-invent themselves out of an ongoing awareness and appreciation of mystery and change. These partners do not become chronically bored with one another. They continually update their knowledge base of one another and expand their identities through frequent interactive regulation.

Love vs Lust: falling in love is a close-up endeavor, lust is always at a distance

Mate selection, though based in a variety of social and economic factors, is fundamentally influenced by early attachment strategies. In addition to mate selection, early

attachment formation deeply affects other important aspects of close, dyadic interpersonal relationships. One such factor is management of intimacy and distance, which can be measured in terms of time and proximity (see **figure 2**). Time is the frequency and duration that one spends in contact with a primary attachment figure. Proximity is the actual physical distance that is allowed between partners. The axes of time and proximity is a good indicator of comfort with intimacy and distance within a dyad, yet more detail is required to understand what these two dimensions actually look like in close relationships.

Sustained contact in close proximity is an important concern referring back to the early attachment relationship. Physical proximity, in particular face-to-face, eye-to-eye contact has a dramatic effect on individuals. Consider the mother-infant relationship where holding the baby in the cradled position brings the mother's and baby's face within six to twelve inches of one another. The human brain is wired to respond very differently at this distance. The human brain has more visual neurons and pathways than any other sensory input. The human face has finer musculature than any other part of the body. The human eye, particularly the left eye, shows more expression and reveals more information about the autonomic nervous system than any other expressive organ. The music-like interplay at close distance is akin to playing the scales of arousal from high to low and back again. Being in the eyes of another can be exciting, mesmerizing, and compelling. This is why television news programs such as 60 Minutes favor extreme close-ups of individuals. Even those who might be considered uninteresting at a distance become very interesting close-up. In childhood as in adulthood, attentiveness to the face and eyes provides rapid social-emotional queuing, an intersubjective process that leads to interactive regulation of affect and arousal.

Interactive regulation most often involves face-to-face, skin-to-skin interaction whereby the partners are available to one another via one or more sensory co-regulators, primarily the eyes. It is no coincidence that secure couples make more frequent and sustained eye contact than do insecure couples. Insecure couples make less continuous eye and skin-to-skin contact and tend to rely more on auditory cues and visual cues, but at a distance far greater than twelve inches.

The distance in the visual field involved in attraction or attractiveness is an important component in drawing persons toward one another. If all goes well the early attraction phase, proximity-seeking moves into contact-maintenance, whereby partners spend extended periods in close face-to-face proximity, and perhaps even later, skin-to-skin.

In close face-to-face contact, both people experience intense amplified positive feeling. In the neurochemical sense, partners are experiencing dopaminergic surges and high levels of noradrenaline. This is the same kind of vitality seen in mother-infant play with the very same neurochemical activity. Much of the excitement has little to do with language but rather the nonverbal interplay involving the right hemisphere, deep limbic structures and higher cortical, predominantly right brain processes. Near senses such as vision, smell, sound, and touch play an important role in the interactive regulatory process. These are the very same senses that will later pose the greatest problems to pseudosecure couples as they become more psychobiologically dependent on one another (Tatkin, 2005).²

Interactive regulation is two brains engaged in psychobiological attunement (**see figure 3**). This is a process of error and error correcting as two psychobiological systems continually adjust to momentary loss and restoration of attuned interaction. Neuroscience visionaries such as Allan Schore, view this kind of interaction as right brain to right brain (Schore, 1997, 2001,

2002, 2005). The intersubjective process activates several key limbic and non-limbic structures involved in “high-resolution” socioaffective operations. Activation of these structures tend to occur more in the right hemisphere (Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, Cooper, & Damasio, 2000; Bourne & Todd, 2004; Gainotti, 2001; Henry, 1997; Kimura, Yoshino, Takahashi, & Nomura, 2004; Manas K. Mandal & Ambady, 2004; Pelphrey, Singerman, Allison, & McCarthy, 2003; Tucker, Hartry-Speiser, McDougal, Luu, & deGrandpre, 1999; Watanabe, Miki, & Kakigi, 2002). More importantly, however, skillful interactive regulation involves rapid, “thoughtless,” *accurate* reading and responding to emotional cues. This capacity involves an integration of vertical, hierarchical ascending and descending neural pathways that span subcortical and higher cortical regions. This vertical hierarchy is again right-lateralized during positively and negatively charged interactions (Adolphs, 2001, 2002; Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, Cooper, & Damasio, 2000; Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1996; Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio, 2000; M. K. Mandal, 2004; Mitchell, Elliott, Barry, Cruttenden, & Woodruff, 2003).

What Guards Against Pseudosecurity?

- Two-person psychological orientation.
- A preference for interactive regulation.
- Resolved trauma and loss.
- Attraction to complexity.
- Good neuro-development for social-emotional functioning.
- Sobriety.
- Secure-Autonomous or Earned-Secure attachment.

Helping Pseudosecure Couples

Pseudosecure couples generally come in to therapy because of a crisis involving a secret or set of secrets kept by at least one partner. The secret is usually financial or sexual in nature. The crisis sets up a pattern of dysregulation that is effectively treated in frequent and lengthy sessions. The long and frequent sessions help reduce the psychobiological stress that arises from the inability of pseudosecure partners to repair the injury.

Frequent and lengthy sessions also allow the therapist to work through the many state changes experienced by partners throughout the session. State changes cannot be managed in one-hour sessions. The therapist can use the longer sessions to work in depth with the avoidant partner's destabilization. This can accelerate the therapeutic process in ways that might never occur in individual therapy. Whether or not they decide to stay together, the crisis that brings the pseudosecure couple into therapy can provide enormous benefits to each partner. The therapist working with pseudosecure couples should make very clear – that their investment in therapy at this time, though very painful, will move both partners forward in their development in a way never before experienced. And for those couples that choose to stay together it is also, quite truthfully, an opportunity to at last become married.

References

- Adolphs, R. (2001). The Neurobiology of Social Cognition. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, *11*, 231-239.
- Adolphs, R. (2002). Neural Systems for Recognizing Emotion. *Curr Opin Neurobiol*, *12*(2), 169-177.
- Adolphs, R., Damasio, H., Tranel, D., Cooper, G., & Damasio, A. R. (2000). A Role for Somatosensory Cortices in the Visual Recognition of Emotion as Revealed by Three-Dimensional Lesion Mapping. *J. Neurosci.*, *20*(7), 2683-2690.
- Adolphs, R., Damasio, H., Tranel, D., & Damasio, A. R. (1996). Cortical Systems for the Recognition of Emotion in Facial Expressions. *J. Neurosci.*, *16*(23), 7678-7687.
- Aron, A., Fisher, H., Mashek, D. J., Strong, G., Li, H., & Brown, L. L. (2005). Reward, Motivation, and Emotion Systems Associated with Early-Stage Intense Romantic Love. *Journal of Neurophysiology*, *94*(1), 327-337.
- Bechara, A., Damasio, H., & Damasio, A. R. (2000). Emotion, Decision Making and the Orbitofrontal Cortex. *Cereb. Cortex*, *10*(3), 295-307.
- Bourne, V. J., & Todd, B. K. (2004). When Left Means Right: An Explanation of the Left Cradling Bias in Terms of Right Hemisphere Specializations: Developmental Science.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss*. New York,: Basic Books.
- Decety, J., & Chaminade, T. (2003). When the Self Represents the Other: A New Cognitive Neuroscience View on Psychological Identification. *Consciousness and Cognition*, *In Press, Corrected Proof*.
- Eagle, M. (2005). *Attachment and Sexuality: The Paradoxes of Familiarity and Novelty*. Paper presented at the The New York Attachment Consortium, Garden City, New York.

- Fisher, H. E. (2004). *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*: Henry Holt & Company.
- Fisher, H. E., Aron, A., Mashek, D., Li, H., & Brown, L. L. (2002). Defining the Brain Systems of Lust, Romantic Attraction, and Attachment. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *31*(5), 413-419.
- Gainotti, G. (2001). Disorders of Emotional Behavior. *Journal of Neurology*, *248*(9), 743-749.
- Henry, J. P. (1997). Psychological and Physiological Responses to Stress: The Right Hemisphere and the Hypothalamo-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis, an Inquiry into Problems of Human Bonding. *Acta Physiol Scand Suppl*, *640*, 10-25.
- Kimura, Y., Yoshino, A., Takahashi, Y., & Nomura, S. (2004). Interhemispheric Difference in Emotional Response without Awareness. *Physiology & Behavior*, *In Press*, *Corrected Proof*.
- Koenig, B. L. (2005). *Misperception of Romantic and Sexual Interests*. The College of William and Mary.
- Laplanche, J. (1999). *Essays on Otherness*: New York, Routledge.
- Mandal, M. K. (2004). Laterality of Facial Expressions of Emotion: Universal and Culture-Specific Influences. *Behavioural Neurology*, *15*(1), 23-34.
- Mandal, M. K., & Ambady, N. (2004). Laterality of Facial Expressions of Emotion: Universal and Culture-Specific Influences. *Behavioural Neurology*, *15*(1-2), 23-34.
- Maner, J. K., Kenrick, D. T., Becker, D. V., Robertson, T. E., Hofer, B., Neuberg, S. L., et al. (2005). Functional Projection: How Fundamental Social Motives Can Bias Interpersonal Perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*(1), 63-78.

- Mitchell, R., Elliott, R., Barry, M., Cruttenden, A., & Woodruff, P. (2003). The Neural Response to Emotional Prosody, as Revealed by Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging. *Neuropsychologia*, *41*(10), 1410–1421.
- Pelphrey, K. A., Singerman, J. D., Allison, T., & McCarthy, G. (2003). Brain Activation Evoked by Perception of Gaze Shifts: The Influence of Context. *Neuropsychologia*, *41*(2), 156-170.
- Schore, A. N. (1997). Early Organization of the Nonlinear Right Brain and Development of a Predisposition to Psychiatric Disorders. *Development and Psychopathology*, *9*, 595-631.
- Schore, A. N. (2001). Effects of a Secure Attachment Relationship on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health. *Infant Ment Health J*, *22*, 7 - 66.
- Schore, A. N. (2002). Dysregulation of the Right Brain: A Fundamental Mechanism of Traumatic Attachment and the Psychopathogenesis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Aust N Z J Psychiatry*, *36*(1), 9-30.
- Schore, A. N. (2005). Attachment Trauma and the Developing Right Brain: Origins of Pathological Dissociation -- Chapter 9. In A. N. Schore (Ed.), *Attachment Trauma and the Developing Right Brain* (pp. 36). New York: WW Norton.
- Solomon, M. F. (1985). Treatment of Narcissistic and Borderline Disorders in Marital Therapy: Suggestions toward an Enhanced Therapeutic Approach. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *13*(2), 141-156.
- Solomon, M. F. (1989). *Narcissism and Intimacy : Love and Marriage in an Age of Confusion* (1st ed.). New York: Norton.
- Stadler, C., Sterzer, P., Schmeck, K., Krebs, A., Kleinschmidt, A., & Poustka, F. (2006). Reduced Anterior Cingulate Activation in Aggressive Children and Adolescents During

Affective Stimulation: Association with Temperament Traits. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, In Press, Corrected Proof.*

Starbuck, S., Roberts, S., Jenkins, P., Broomfield, B., Corrance, M., Fairchild, D., et al. (2001).

In the Heat of the Moment

Biochemistry of Feelings [videorecording]. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences.

Tatkin, S. (2005, January/February). Marital Therapy and the Psychobiology of Turning toward and Turning Away - Part 2. *The Therapist, 16*, 64-86.

Trevarthen, C., & Aitken, K. J. (2001). Infant Intersubjectivity: Research, Theory, and Clinical Applications. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 42*(1), 3-48.

Tucker, D. M., Hartry-Speiser, A., McDougal, L., Luu, P., & deGrandpre, D. (1999). Mood and Spatial Memory: Emotion and Right Hemisphere Contribution to Spatial Cognition. *Biological Psychology, 50*(2), 103-125.

Watanabe, S., Miki, K., & Kakigi, R. (2002). Gaze Direction Affects Face Perception in Humans. *Neuroscience Letters, 325*(3), 163-166.

Waters, E., & Deane, K. E. (1985). Defining and Assessing Individual Differences in Attachment Relationships: Q-Methodology and the Organization of Behavior in Infancy and Early Childhood. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 50*(1), 41-65.

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self. *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 140-152.

Footnotes

¹ This is different from Jean Laplanche's term, *étrangèreté* (Laplanche, 1999).

² Psychoanalyst Morris Eagle has written on the connection between attachment and sexuality noting that there may be incompatibilities between security attachment and libido (Eagle, 2005). However I believe he is describing the pseudosecure couple rather than the securely attached couple when postulating the early death of mutual sexual attraction during marriage.

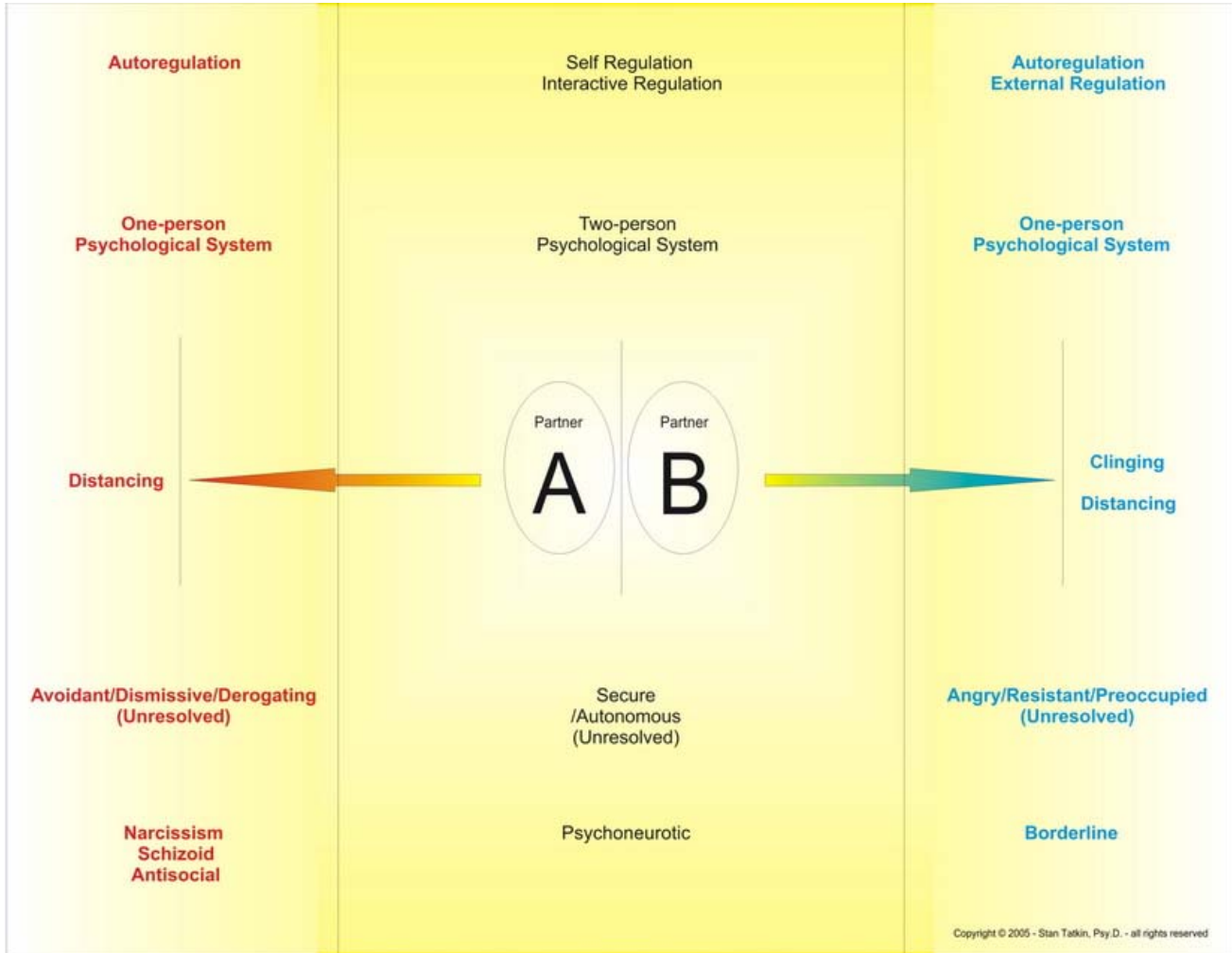


Figure 1 -- Secure/Insecure Spectrum. This graph is intended to map out secure versus insecure partners with several overlays included. From this we can look at attachment from a physically proximal/distal, intersubjective, and object relations perspectives. The yellow colored radiation from the center is intended to illustrate where the pseudosecure couple might fit within the secure/insecure spectrum.

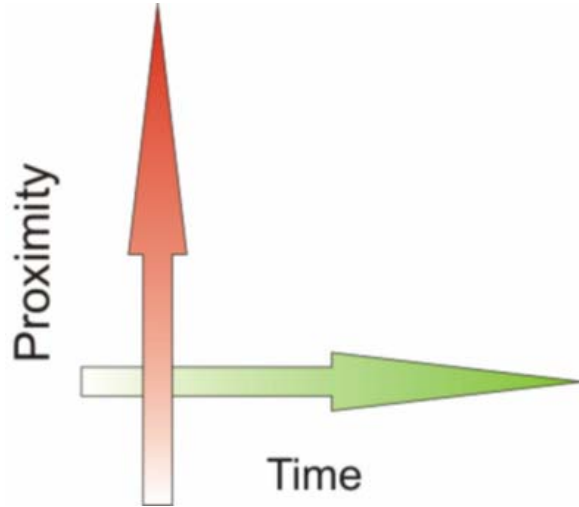


Figure 2 -- Axes of time and proximity. Secures and insecure alike may be understood in terms of tolerating time with and physical proximity to their primary attachment figure.

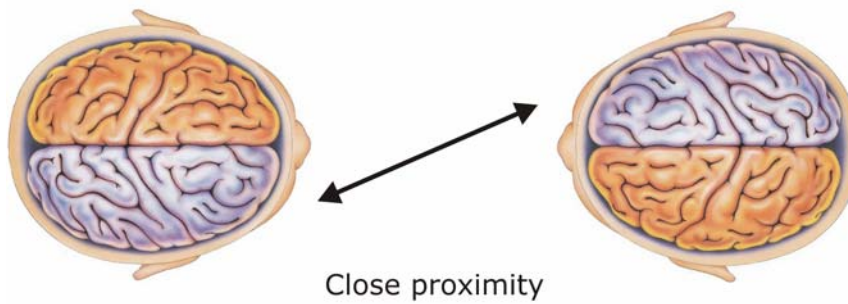


Figure 3 - Right brain to right brain interaction encompassing the near senses involved at close physical proximity. Partners are face-to-face, eye-to-eye, and are co-regulating via pupil dialation, eye movement, and orbicular muscles surround the eye. Through vocalization, partners co-regulate via mutually modulated prosodic speaking tones and utterances (the language portion of speech is primarily left-hemisphere). Through skin-to-skin contact, partners co-regulate via non-verbal cues of approach and withdrawal (involving other senses) as well as skin temperature, pressure of touch, and other tactile sensations. Both olfaction (smell) and gustation (taste) are strong co-regulators that, with high frequency, become an issue with avoidant partners. Neurologically, there is well-documented evidence linking highly attuned, positively valenced, close physical interaction with activation of right laterized medial structures, traversing sub-cortical and higher cortical regions (reviewed in-depth in later chapters).