Assessment of Couples

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The field of couple assessment, like so many other areas of clinical assessment, is in the midst of substantial theoretical and practical self-analysis and revision. Different theoretical orientations in this field have co-existed mostly in isolation from one another, and advocates of each orientation have maintained their own more-or-less standard approach to assessment. These standard approaches generally have involved following a rather detailed recipe of procedures. Thus, each theoretical approach to couple assessment has been quite specific in terms of goals and methods, albeit of a different flavor.

In recent years, however, not only new combinations of assessments and new tools, but entirely new approaches to assessment have been developed. Practitioners, researchers, and practitioner-researchers have become interested in a more multi-level approach. Although this may present some difficulty for the novice (standard assessment protocols are fewer, options greater), the prospects for advancement in the field are many: A conceptual and methodological shift may lead to even greater convergence of couple assessment methods.

The purpose of this chapter is not to present yet another, specialized four-star recipe for couple assessment, or some hybrid assessment technique. Nor do we simply provide a compendium of psychometric
assessment tools: other sources provide such resources with far greater completeness than this space allows (e.g., Touliatos, Perlmutter, & Straus, 1990). Rather, our purpose is to present a number of the commonalities of the various assessment approaches currently utilized, and to put particular, but not exclusive, emphasis on clinically-relevant assessment procedures. We augment this discussion with some suggestions for increasing convergence in the field among researchers and practitioners alike.

Our title, "Assessment of Couples," reflects the fact that married, heterosexual couples are by no means the only couples who seek professional help nor are they the only ones who serve as the subjects of couples' research. The assessment approach we describe is quite applicable to other types of couples, such as gay, unmarried, and/or remarried couples. Every couple has its own particular history and problems, which need to be examined, as we shall describe. However, the commonalities among various types of couples far exceeds their differences in terms of assessment needs.

We begin by examining the context for assessment (clinical, research, or both), then explore the various levels of assessment (individual, couple's presenting problems, micro-interactional, patterns of interaction, etc.). Throughout the chapter we present assessment techniques (both tried-and-true and the more novel) that may be useful in many settings and for different applications. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of newer methodological techniques that may help to increase further the compatibility of assessment strategies not only among advocates of particular theories, but also between what researchers and clinicians do.

Three Purposes of Assessment

Couple assessment methods, as in other areas of assessment, cannot be divorced from the purpose of the assessment. Clearly the most common reason for conducting a couple assessment is to inform clinical interventions when a couple presents for therapy. Although therapists of different orientations approach this assessment somewhat idiosyncratically, most agree that a) assessment is critical, and b) needs to be quite thorough, and therefore may take several individual or conjoint sessions and may be augmented by self-report questionnaires or other procedures that address individual or couple functioning.

Of course, couples may be part of a research assessment in a study investigating basic relational processes and issues. Often, research as-