

Imago's roots in Psychology – A layman's Guide

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Psychology “makes sense” with Imago

Harville Hendrix wanted his work to help a wide range of couples. So he made the decision to first publish the Imago system of couples therapy as a popular book, rather than a professional text. The strategy worked, and nearly 2,000,000 copies of “Getting The Love You Want” have been sold, transforming relationships the world over.

The downside of this strategy is that Imago is sometimes confused with “pop psychology”. Many are unaware that the work of Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt is founded in a profound understanding of psychology, combined with penetrating insights from their own extensive clinical work.

This article is an exploration of the psychological roots of Imago therapy, from the perspective of someone from outside the profession of psychotherapy. It's meant primarily for the non-professional reader, who has an interest in Imago, and how it relates to other psychological systems. There's also some useful information in here for therapists who might be considering using the Imago approach in their practice.

At the end of this article there is a list of some papers, by Harville Hendrix and others which explore the same subject for professional readers.

I explore this subject in three sections

1. The theoretical roots of Imago dialogue
2. How Imago incorporates theories of childhood pain
3. A brief review of some other theories which Imago incorporates

1. The theoretical roots of Imago dialogue

What's unique about Imago?

Let's start with defining Imago. It is a theory and therapy of couplehood, which is based on a synthesis and extension of relational insights of many established psychological theories and spiritual traditions. What makes Imago unique is that couples can benefit from all of this wisdom by practicing some structured dialogues.

How Freud's theories lie at the heart of Imago

One of Freud's significant contributions to the understanding of humanity was the concept of transference. He observed that people often don't interact with other people! Instead they interact with a mental construct which has some characteristics of their partner, but which includes a potent image of their own internal self constructed in childhood that they have projected onto their partner. Freud's theory is complex, but let me offer a simplified approximation. I may not be having a relationship with my wife. Instead I may be having a relationship with an imagined construct, which has some of my wife's characteristics, but also has a significant part of my own internal state projected onto her.

Freud saw the human psyche as driven to seek pleasure, but many of his followers saw the primary drive as seeking relationships in order to be whole and complete. Object Relations is an approach which sought to help people towards fulfillment through helping them become aware of transference in their interaction, so they could create more genuine relationships with other people. Much of the therapeutic work was done by working on the relationship between the client and the therapist. Object Relations is a highly respected field in psychotherapy, and it is one of the sources for Imago therapy.

Harville Hendrix often summarizes the entire teachings of Imago in one simple phrase – “Your partner is another person – get it!” But how do we “get it”?

The Imago approach is to create a safe framework for couples to get to know who their partner really is, and to enter into a deep and genuine relationship with them. Instead of working on the relationship between client and therapist, the focus in Imago is on the relationship between the two partners. Hendrix has described this as moving from an individual paradigm in therapy, to a relational paradigm.

Moving from an individual to a relational perspective

A paradigm is an overarching perspective which organizes thought and research. Many psychological approaches work in a paradigm in which each person is viewed as an independent and separate entity. They are taught communication tools to tell the other person about their needs, and negotiation tools to help resolve conflicts peacefully. But each partner is still seen in terms of their own projections. They haven't learned yet to see the other person, and are missing out on much of the joy, magic and potential of a deeper relationship.

Imago views the couple from the perspective of a relational paradigm, and by engaging them in a dialogue helps them focus on their relationship rather than on each other. In dialogue one person listens to their partner's perspective, whilst putting their own judgments and concerns on hold for a few moments. They might imagine that they are crossing a bridge into their partner's world, recognizing that it is very different from their own. In their partner's world they

find that everything their partner is saying makes sense, even though from their own original perspective it might have seemed that they were crazy. This is very different from one partner delivering a monologue, while the other partner is making judgments based on their own worldview and projections.

Martin Buber and “I-Thou”

In 1923, Martin Buber wrote “I-Thou”, a radical essay on the relational nature of existence. Inspired by Feuerbach and Kirkegaard, Buber made a distinction between two types of interpersonal relationships. The first he called an “I-It” relationship, in which people have relatively superficial connections with one another, and fail to break through their own projections. But Buber also talks of an “I-thou” encounter, where we have an authentic experience of our partner, understanding their “otherness.”

There are some beautiful spiritual concepts that Martin Buber unfolds in his work on the ‘I-thou’ encounter. While the “I” and the “Thou” are capitalized as if they are the focus, what he finds most full of meaning and possibility is the hyphen. The equivalent in Imago is to become conscious of the “sacred space” which is between partners and includes them. To live in full relationship with a person “thou”, rather than an “It” is a rich and purposeful life.

Bringing it all together – the Imago dialogue

Dialogue is a practical approach to achieving an authentic relational connection with our partner. The Imago dialogue has three key steps, mirroring, validating and empathizing, each of which emerged from some widely respected psychological principles.

Some of the core thinking behind the Imago dialogue process was influenced by the eminent psychologist Carl Rogers, who along with Abraham Maslow developed the Humanist approach to psychology. In humanistic psychology there is a great respect for the client’s own experience of their life, and their active involvement in re-solving their own psychological issues.

Rogers created an approach to applying these principles, which he called “Client-based Psychology”, later re-named “Person Based Psychology”.

In Person-Based Psychology the therapist listens intently to the client, and reflects back to the client what they have heard. The goal is to convey that they have heard and understood and accept the client’s worldview without judgment. The therapist is trained to have an unconditional positive regard for the client and to share their deepest concerns and feelings.

Roger’s approach aims to create what Buber would call an “I-thou” encounters between client and therapist. Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt’s radical step with

couples was to have one partner take the role of the client, sharing their world view, while their partner, rather than the therapist, reflected back their understanding and empathy. The “I-thou” encounter is now between the couple.

Processes like Active Listening which involve mirroring the sender’s words are well known. However Hendrix and Hunt realized that just mirroring back the sender’s words was not sufficient. Carl Rogers deepened the connection by having the therapist ask the client clarifying questions. Hendrix and Hunt modified this to coach the receiving partner to ask simple questions such as “Did I get you?” and “Is There More?” These deceptively simple phrases powerfully reinforce the sense of connection, and invite the sender to take a moment to become more aware of their own thoughts and feelings, and to feel safe to share them.

The dialogue became much more powerful when the receiver also made a statement to validate the sender’s perspective, in order to fully implement the Rogerian reflective approach. Validation requires one to look back through the eyes of the other, to see the world as it appears to him or her, and to understand the logic of the other person’s point of view. Furthermore it requires suspending judgment about the sensibility of the other’s world and the accuracy of his or her logic, and accepting that the other’s perception of the world is equally as valid as one’s own.

Robert Carkhuff was a student of Carl Roger’s who along with Charles Truax performed much of the experimental work to demonstrate the effectiveness of Roger’s Person-Based Psychology. His results were quite startling in that they showed that many clients got better, but many also got worse during therapy. A key determining factor was the degree of empathy the therapist showed to the client. Carkhuff even performed experiments using non-professionals in place of the therapist, and showed that they generally outperformed professionals in terms of the results they could achieve. He showed that one of the key variables in successful therapy is not the therapeutic intervention used. Instead it is the degree of empathy and the strength of the relationship between therapist and client. Empathic listening is a healing process.

Harville Hendrix had some early training in empathy based on Rogers, Carkhuff and Truax, as well as other students of empathy such as Heinz Kohut and Martin Hoffman. He used this experience as a basis for establishing the third step of the dialogue process. But now, rather than the therapist showing empathy to the client, it is their partner who shows them the empathy that helps them overcome their inner blockages and grow to wholeness.

Gottman’s research provides support for the dialogue process

John Gottman greatly deepened our understanding of couples interactions by performing extensive research into the characteristics of successful couples. He

set up an apartment in his laboratory where couples would interact whilst wired up to a huge array of sensors. By observing the same couples over many years he was able to chart the behaviors which led to a successful relationship and those which led to broken families.

Gottman observed that there are four traits which signal problems in a relationship. He called these traits “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”. Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling are riding the wind on their dark horses, seeking couples to tear apart.

As couples learn the Imago dialogue, they banish Gottman’s Four Horsemen from their relationship. Dialogue creates the safety for couples to open up to each other, rather than to stonewall. They respond by validating the other’s perspective, rather than to be defensive. The sender is coached to eliminate criticism and to speak about their feelings, to show respect for their partner. Although few couples continue to use the formal Imago dialogue in all their interactions, they adopt the principles of the dialogue into their conversations, ensuring that there is no room for the Four Horses in their home.

How Susan Johnson and research into the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Therapy supports the dialogue process

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a research-based approach to couples therapy which focuses on the interactions between partners. Led by her research observations, Susan Johnson created a therapy system which has striking similarities to Imago.

In EFT each partner assists the other in helping overcome negative feelings and creating a positive and potent attitude to life. This is similar to the help couples offer each in the Imago dialogue. While an EFT therapist, like an Imago therapist, becomes a process consultant or coach, who focuses on helping the couple create a strong connection, their approach is therapist-centered rather than partner-centered.

The EFT research also strongly supports an approach, like Imago, in which validation of each partner’s perspective and working with empathy for each others emotions is critical.

Neuroscience and the Imago dialogue

Recent advances in Neuroscience also provide evidence for the effectiveness of the Imago dialogue.

Daniel Siegel is a leading Neuroscience researcher and author of several highly acclaimed books. He views the brain as a complex network of inter-connected neurons, and uses mathematical models to understand how the network

operates. Mental health is attained when the various parts of the brain are operating together, which he calls integration.

Siegel has created therapeutic approaches based on his research, which are aimed at increasing the degree of integration in the brain. This is achieved by engaging in activities which activate the pathways between the various parts of the brain, especially connecting them to the mid-prefrontal cortex, which plays a critical role in integration and self-regulation.

As these interconnecting pathways are activated, research shows that the brain adds more neural connections. The activity of the mind actually changes the structure of the brain in a lasting way. Strengthening these new neural pathways enables the brain to achieve a new level of integration, leading to more stable functioning.

This discovery demonstrates how couples who learn to work calmly through their issues in a dialogue not only develop an increased capacity to show their care for each other but also develop new neural pathways. Recent research has discovered there are “mirror neurons” in the brain, which appear to be the location for experiencing empathy for others. As couples practice empathy in the dialogue, this exercises the mirror neurons, and helps them to increase their capacity for empathy.

It is also possible that Imago dialogue helps create vertical and lateral integration in the brain. Lateral integration is achieved by engaging both the right and left hemispheres during the dialogue. The left hemisphere is primarily cognitive, and the right hemisphere is intuitive. Imago Dialogue achieves vertical integration by connecting the reflective capacity of the cortex with the emotional center of the brain known as the limbic system. In the Imago dialogue, mirroring integrates both hemispheres, validation integrates the upper brain with the mid-brain and empathy fully activates the limbic, feeling capacity of the brain. The integration by the practice of Imago moves it towards healthy processing. We are hoping to be able to demonstrate this experimentally soon.

2. How Imago incorporates theories of childhood pain

John Gottman’s experiments showed that even successful couples have long running disagreements. If a partner feels a frustration intensely over a long time, it is often connection to something deeply hurtful which happened to them in childhood. The Imago Behavior Change Request Dialogue provides a way to have an experience in the present day relationship with a romantic partner that helps to heal the hurtful experiences of childhood.

As he developed this part of the Imago approach, Harville Hendrix was influenced by the writings on love and marriage by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Eric Berne (Founder of Transactional Analysis), and Fritz Perls (Founder of Gestalt Therapy). Their views were based on the Freudian concept of transference, in which the emotions from childhood are unconsciously redirected onto another person.

Someone in childhood may have felt deeply upset about being abandoned by their caretakers. As an adult, they may experience this same acute pain of abandonment when being mildly neglected by their partner. They may experience this extreme frustration at a partner who is regularly late home from work, whereas their partner just doesn't see it as a big deal.

All these four great founders of modern psychology mentioned above developed clinical approaches in which the adult would gain insight, differentiate the spouse from the parents, and surrender the childhood expectations. Hendrix's clinical experience led him to doubt the effectiveness of this method.

In the Behavior Change Request process a dialogue process is used in which one partner guides the other to link the present day frustration to a painful experiences in childhood. Together the partners complete the first two steps in traditional psychological approaches in which they gain insight and differentiate their partner in the present, from the pain they experienced with their parents in the past.

But rather than the traditional third step of surrendering the childhood expectations, in Imago the expectations are actually met. Their partner is able to say "I understand the love you didn't receive from your parents, but I can meet that emotional need now. What is it that I could do?" In this way, rather than the partner being asked to recognize the futility of expressing childhood needs in adult life, these needs are brought into a relationship where they are met with a loving act. It is their partner's love that heals them.

The rest of the Behavior Change request process establishes in more detail how the partner can change their behavior to meet that need. This was developed from the work of Richard Stuart who published a Social Learning approach to Couples Therapy in the 1980s.

Neuroscience and healing past pain

New discoveries about the brain provide a new basis for understanding the power of the behavior change request process. Childhood pain is seen as a traumatic event which leaves an imprint in our brain stem. This part of the brain works in relatively black and white terms, and is associated with the flight or fight response. In the case of an experience of being abandoned as a child, the memory of abandonment is stored in the brain stem. A later adult experience of neglect can evoke this memory in the brain stem, and trigger intense anxiety.

The Behavior Change Request process begins with the sender talking about a frustration experienced in the present day. This cognitive process takes place in the cortex at the top of the brain. But when the receiving partner asks the sender to talk about their feelings, this engages the limbic system, lower down in the brain where emotions are processed. Finally the sender goes back into childhood to find a memory which they associate with these feelings, which is stored in the lower brain stem. The brain is now processing in an integrated way, connecting the painful memories in the brain stem, through the emotional limbic system, and up into the cortex where cognitive processing takes place.

Neuroscientists have demonstrated how integration of the sub-systems of the brain lead to healthier functioning. We hope to complete experiments soon to demonstrate this integration as a result of the Imago dialogue.

Gottman and the Behavior Change Request

John Gottman, the pre-eminent marriage researcher, teamed up with his wife Julie Gottman, a clinical psychologist, to create a set of clinical interventions based on his extensive research. One of their core processes is also designed to convert feelings of frustration into specific requests for change. This provides couples with a tool to manage arguments. John Gottman determined that the success with which couples manage arguments is a key determining factor in the success of the relationship.

The Gottman research-based approach has many similarities to the Imago Behavior Change Request. Couples are coached to discuss the frustration together, in a safe and respectful way to reach a deeper understanding of each partner's concerns and feelings around it. Based on this the couple agree to making small, easily achievable changes to reach a compromise.

3. A brief review of some other theories which Imago incorporates

How Imago changes as new theories emerge

The story of the container exercise is a great illustration of Imago's ability to make changes to its recommended practices, based on new understandings of theory. Since the core principle of Imago is to work in a relational paradigm, it feels natural to make adjustments to practice as current theories change.

The Container Exercise was developed to help couples deal with anger, and for a while was regarded as the "Flagship" of the set of structured Imago dialogues. The exercise was built on Jung's theory of projection and holding, adapted into a structure based on Gestalt therapy. In the Container Dialogue this was

translated into the relational paradigm, where one partner was coached to express their rage in a safe and controlled way, while their partner supported them.

However developments in Neuroscience showed that the brain builds new neural pathways to reinforce and strengthen our behaviors. Rather than letting out the anger by expressing it, the concern is that rather than getting better at being angry through the container exercise your anger increases. Nowadays the Container Exercise is rarely used, primarily for those who have not expressed anger before, and may need to build some form of release.

Gestalt Therapy- and a story of how Imago Therapists contribute to the evolution of Imago

Hendrix's own therapist for a long period was John Whittaker, who used Gestalt methods. In Gestalt there is a lot of emphasis on the healing power of completing "unfinished business" through experiencing it in the here and now. For example, Hendrix was trained to heal his childhood experiences by imaginatively recreating his parents, who provided what he did not receive in actuality.

Bruce Wood and Maya Kollman, who trained with Hendrix, translated this process into the relational model. They created a role-play dialogue, in which where rather than one partner imagining their parent, the other partner actually plays the role of their parent in a dialogue. The sender shares their childhood memories, while the partner in role play listens sympathetically, and offers empathy.

This is one early example of many times when Imago Therapists trained by Harville Hendrix have also contributed to the evolution of Imago theory and practice. Maya Kollman, Pat Love, Bruce Crapuchettes, Sunny Shulkin and Joyce Buckner formed the original group of Master Trainers who worked particularly closely with Harville and Helen.

The "Imago" in the history of psychology

The role of the Imago in selecting our partner is a useful model to help us make sense of our romantic history. It helps us understand why it is that a power struggle usually emerges between even the most ardent lovers.

The Imago theory of partner selection has its roots in Freud's work. Freud gave the name "repetition compulsion" to the tendency for people to reconstruct the past by choosing a partner who resembles their parents. Fritz Perls expanded the idea in Gestalt Therapy – calling it "Unfinished Business". Perls saw that feelings and memories of our parents are unconscious, and avoided, but they

come out in our behavior anyway. For Freud this repetition of the experience is an attempt at resolution.

Jung used the term “Imago” in his works to mean the “inner representation of the opposite sex”. Hendrix broadened the Jungian concept, and for him the image or “Imago” is formed out of the internalization of all childhood caretakers, and its projection onto our partner is part of the process of falling in love.

In a written exercise called “The Imago workup” each partner in a couple recalls the positive and negative aspects of their childhood caretakers, and uses these to help them understand the role these played when they choose their partner. The exercise also includes creating some insight into the childhood roots of frustrations which are explored in the Behavior Change Request dialogue, which as described above has its roots in Freud, Jung, Perls and Berne.

Attachment Theory and Imago

In the 1950’s John Bowlby developed “Attachment Theory”, a well researched field which shows that the relationship between children and their parents is critical to healthy mental development of the child. He was strongly influenced by James Robertson’s studies of young children who had to visit hospital, and where despite the medical care, they rapidly declined when separated from parental love.

If children received appropriately warm and supportive parenting, they grew up to be securely attached. But others experienced abandonment, or intrusive parenting, which affected their ability to develop stable relationships. Cindy Hazen and Phillip Shaver extended Bowlby’s work on Attachment to adult romantic relationships, showing how as a result of the childhood experience, adults might develop a tendency to become anxious in situations where they were either abandoned or intruded upon.

In Imago teaching this forms the basis of the teaching of Maximizer and Minimizer responses. Teaching psychological principles in Imago is important, because it enables couples to deepen their understanding and awareness of themselves, so that they can be more present for the other partner during the dialogue and other interactions. There is also a strong sense of empowering the couple by helping them understand the key psychological principles that the therapist is using. This creates more equality between the therapist and client, and helps strengthen the sense that they are working together to co-create a better relationship. This is in contrast to some traditional styles in which the therapist is the expert who holds all the knowledge, and directs the therapy.

One of Hendrix’s key contribution is to take a huge and complex field of psychological theory, and present it to couples in such a way that it “Makes sense”. Using his models of development, couples are able to gain insights

which guide them in their exploration of their self. Once they know the source, many feel empowered to let go of judgment and negativity, and to become more available to care for others.

Social Development Theory and Stages of Development in Imago

As well as presenting attachment theory in a simple and understandable way, Hendrix has also developed a detailed description of the stages of human development by synthesizing the social development theories of Margaret Mahler, Daniel Stern, Henry Stack Sullivan and Erik Erikson. Once again the system “makes sense”, and empowers couples to learn to let go of traits acquired in childhood, and adapt better to adult relationships.

Growth Gifts and Stretching linked to Neuroscience

As couples learn more about themselves through Hendrix’s synthesis of attachment and social development theory, they begin to recognize that they find some things difficult to do as adults, because of how their childhood history shaped them. And they learn that these adult traits are often quite limiting, and hold them back from living their life to its full potential.

Earlier we talked how in the behavior change request, one partner agreed to some small changes in their actions, to help provide the caring that their partner did not receive in childhood. Through learning about their own development, the partner making this gift of caring, is now able to see that it will stretch them into territory which they have learned in childhood to find painful. Now as an adult, they are moved by love for their partner to make small but difficult changes. Neuroscience shows us how these changes in behavior build new neural pathways, and that through this process of stretching to meet their partners need, the mind restructures the brain towards a more balanced and joyful state.

The future

Some research already exists to demonstrate Imago’s effectiveness, and much more is planned for the next few years. Meanwhile we are excited at the flexibility of the Imago approach, which will be able to absorb and respond to the accelerating rate of development in neuroscience and other fields of psychology.

Harville Hendrix has empowered those who he trained to continue to develop new Imago processes, and strengthen existing ones as we learn more. New applications for Imago theory are also been developed by those trained in Imago, bringing its insights into conflict resolution, business, and other fields.

Articles for the Professional reader exploring the origins of Imago in psychological theory

These articles are available on the Imago website:

Imago Relationship Therapy – Perspectives in Theory

Edited by Harville Hendrix, Helen LaKelly Hunt, Mo Therese Hannah, Wade Luquet. Josey Bass 2005.

Chapter 1: The Evolution of Imago Relationship Therapy – Harville Hendrix

Imago Theory and Theoretical Foundations

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