

“Couples Therapy”:

The Ultimate Guide to Understanding Love during COVID-19

As a Psychology/ Cinema and Media Studies double major I tend to steer toward deep psychoanalysis of characters and cinematography, but this approach rarely helps me insert myself into the film or TV show. I am able to appreciate the payoff in fictional work as it relates to the characters, especially in psychological thrillers, but rarely does a movie cause immediate self-reflection and complete investment in story. That is why I was floored by my natural engagement with the form and participants in “Couples Therapy,” and the show’s ability to generate self-discovery throughout the viewing process. I wanted to observe the couples’ conversations like a fly on the wall, seeing if they could dig deep enough and be vulnerable with their partners. In this paper, I will mainly focus on why this show reached its audience during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This show was released during a crucial time of increased media consumption and curiosity about private lives born from a force into isolation. I believe that the show’s success stems from its voyeuristic nature, raw exploration of therapy, and its cultural relevance.

The pandemic created an isolating environment which generated three crucial cultural developments in society: a rise in the TV streaming audience, an increase in representation in TV, and investment in personal mental health. According to Katie Jones’ study about media consumption during the lockdown, all generations reported an increase, primarily to stay updated about the pandemic although the next use was for entertainment (Jones). “Couples Therapy” airs just before the COVID-19 lockdown, situating itself as a perfect binge watch show during the next unpredictable months of isolation but also due to its particularly interesting content and form. It mainly reached an audience of writers who analyze psychoanalysis’ presence in the

media, but also anyone interested in a “show [that] manages to blend the risk and rubbernecking thrill of reality TV with the emotional riches of narrative cinema, while aspiring to the moral authority of responsible documentary” (McAndrew 54; Haas). The show reached a journalistic and media studies audience who has followed up with Dr. Guralnik in a series of interviews and podcasts featured in *The New Yorker* and *The Cinemaholic*.

The show speaks to a wide audience, mainly due to its extremely diverse cast of couples who challenge preconceived notions about heterosexual relationships. Michael McAndrew in *Language and Psychoanalysis* states that Sam and Lauren (a non-binary partner and transwoman respectively) are

[p]erhaps the most compelling (and realistic) couple of season one... who struggle with both “traditional issues” of couples in couples therapy (division of household labor, financial struggles) but also with the demand and desire to conceive a child, pitting them against the medical and psychotherapeutic discourse which has traditionally not been kind or gentle to anyone, much less already marginalized people (McAndrew 54).

The show’s unapologetically raw storytelling of devastating pasts and contemporary struggles to do with race, class, and gender, creates a space for curious learners and seekers of real, lean-in TV to challenge their perspective on the world. This show was meant to act as a political force in the rapidly shifting societal values around representation throughout the pandemic.

The lockdown also created a shift in housing conditions, creating situations where families and couples had to either spend all or none of their time physically together. Along with medical concerns and political movements during the COVID-19 pandemic, these factors created widespread uncertainty and helped explain the “25% increase in anxiety and depression globally” (Kola et al. 1851). An international increase in mental health disorders necessitated a

societal shift in therapy practices and general mental health awareness. Thus this overlap in a cultural shift in media consumption and attitude towards mental health fostered a successful environment for “Couples Therapy,” a show about rediscovering connection and pushing back against isolation through therapy.

“Couples Therapy” was persistent on creating a set free from evidence of a production crew, solidifying the shows’ authenticity and placing the audience in a purely voyeuristic position. The aesthetic cleanliness of this show, and feeling of being an observer, was a deliberate choice of the producers, indicating an intent to stylize the show to appeal to a voyeuristic audience and allow the participants to remove themselves from the presence of the production process. Several critics note the shows’ authenticity such as Kathryn VanArendonk’s article in *The Vulture* and Andy Denhart’s Reality TV show review. VanArendonk states how “[t]he series works because its filmmakers have created an immaculately careful space to shoot it in, a box that almost lets them escape the Schrodinger’s cat question of whether observation always changes an experiment’s outcome,” establishing how the shows expertly hidden cameras behind a one way glass mirror and background of Dr. Guralnik’s office causes the couples, although being casted and aware of being filmed, to truly forget about the aspect of being on a reality TV show (VanArendonk). This way the viewer is exposed to the truly raw and vulnerable versions of the couples, aided even in post production which Denhart states, “takes care of its subjects as human beings; it doesn’t treat them as footage to manipulate, nor has reality been hacked to pieces by bad network notes” (Denhart). By causing the participants to forget about being filmed, the audience becomes the only conscious member of the show itself. The audience, maybe unaware of their pleasure in embodying the hidden cameras and “spying” on the couples conversations about extremely personal traumatic experiences, finds comfort and connection in

observing a genuine interpersonal connection. I posit that this show was successful due to the production's ability to capture pure human interactions and self-discovery through therapy during the pandemic which caused society to experience a lack in physical connection and strained emotional relationships.

Even though physical connections were at times forced during quarantine, the increase in dependence of technology created an equal divide in communication and emotional connection. Sherry Turkle examines how mobile telephones have disconnected our society, even prior to the pandemic. She states in her book, "Reclaiming Conversation," that, "online communication makes us feel more in charge of our time and self-presentation. If we text rather than talk, we can have each other in amounts we can control. And texting and email and posting let us present the self we want to be. We can edit and retouch" (Turkle 21). During the pandemic where communication was most accessible through texting, leading to the distancing of relationships, seeing couples struggle but come out on the other side having made some connections within themselves and with their partners was comforting. Watching couples have to overcome the global struggles of isolation, medical, and financial stressors in raw forms and using technology as a tool for seeking mental health help situates the show's importance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The generated curiosity in both the psychological aspect and filming of the show brings viewers (and old cast!) to Reddit, where the fanbase can personally chat with Dr. Orna and continue the show's work of creating a dialogue about the importance of communication in the ever developing technological world. With an inconsistent release schedule and the show's location on Showtime makes it somewhat hard to invest in, resulting in the niche Reddit fanbase, only started by Dr. Orna nine months ago. This tight community generates further conversation

about the need for connection and allows for the audience to further participate with the show's format which invites the viewer to be an active, voyeuristic observer.

This paper could not even begin to explore the ways in which the context of the pandemic led to destigmatization of mental health and shifts in cultural attitudes toward Western medical practices, such as therapy and medications, along with the bittersweet implications of transitioning into a hybrid workforce. What's relevant now, though, in a time where AI is reducing society's reliance on face-to-face interactions, and students can take classes fully online, and people do not feel the need to see their friends because they just texted last week, technology can produce shows such as "Couples Therapy" which display the possibility of true connection in a modern media format. This realistic documentation of life during a global pandemic, revealed the innermost secrets of individuals, forming a voyeuristic audience aching to use their laptop, phone, TV, tablet, or whatever screen as a window seeing their faint reflection as they view how their lives are mirrored in Dr. Orna Guralnik's sessions.

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