Join us for an upcoming lecture by Rachel Cooke for Couple and Family Psychoterapy Section of **Polish Society for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy**

Lecture Title: On Love, Loss and Longing in Lesbian Couple Relationships

Speaker: Rachel Cooke, PhD

Date & Time: Monday, November 30, 2026, 20:00 – 21:30 CET

Location: Online via Zoom

Registration link: https://serwis.ptpp.pl/wydarzenia/enroll/230

Rachel Cooke, Psy.D. is a clinical psychologist working in private practice in Oakland, CA and via Zoom. She sees (mostly) couples and (some) individuals and provides consultation to couple therapists. She is a founding member, core faculty and current board chair of the Psychoanalytic Couple Psychotherapy Group (PCPG), which is the Bay Area's training program for psychoanalytic couple therapists. She presented two papers at COFAP in 2020 and her discussions of two visiting scholars' papers, given at PCPG's annual lecture, are published in the volumes edited by Shelley Nathans, entitled, "Couples on the Couch" and "More About Couples on the Couch" (Routledge, 2017 & 2022). Her chapter, "On Love, Loss and Longing in Lesbian Relationships," is in the 2026 Routledge Library of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis publication titled, "Love, its Meaning and Exploration in Couple Therapy," co-edited by Mary Morgan and Julie Friend.

On Love, Loss and Longing in Lesbian Couple Relationships

The most auspicious beginning of a couple relationship includes a mysterious and magical feeling of attraction that leads to what we collectively call, "falling in love." After the exciting, often mutually idealizing beginning, the potentially life-long "established" phase of a couple's life together ensues, and in order to establish a strong foundation, each individual has to manage the loss of that heady early stage and grapple with the reality of their differences. It can be challenging to navigate the transition from the "beginning," with its illusion of permanent gratification, to the "middle," with all its reality-laden disappointments. I will attempt to describe here what might be stimulated unconsciously at this juncture for lesbian couples, which I believe involves an unconscious return to the mother of early life, or "primary maternal object," and why this transition is suffused with particular complexities, especially for women who suffered loss or trauma early in life.

In my more than twenty years in clinical practice I have been struck by how many lesbian couples speak about their longing to be "seen," and how acute the pain of feeling "unseen" can be. This longing for attunement is felt very strongly to be an aspect of love. The better attuned their partner is, the more fully they feel "seen," and the more accurately seen, the more they feel loved. Conversely, the pain of being unseen is synonymous with feeling unloved. I will attempt to link this longing for attunement to an origin early in life: under conditions of novel, adult, intimate connection, lesbian women often seem to pursue an unconscious return to the primary maternal experience with an attuned mother. There is a high level of dependency and need for attunement, and the perceived shortfall in the partner's ability to meet these needs can feel very

painful.

The experience of being seen accurately, as one sees oneself, is an affirmation of the right to exist. For lesbian women, especially women over the age of fifty, or from less accepting sociocultural backgrounds, the wish to be seen may also be intensified by a history of invisibility. Many LGBTQ+ people grow up invisible to their parents, and even to themselves. This layer of not being seen leads not just to the later yearning for visibility but also to the expectation of not being seen. In this chapter, I explore the longing for maternal attunement and the unconscious pressure to restore something akin to the blissful connection that was lost. In what follows, I make use of several papers which reconceive the oedipal situation, in order to shed light on the difficulty some lesbian couples have moving from the beginning to the established phase of relationship. Instead of a couple which offers both stability and an ongoing sexual connection, I've found that lesbian couples who get stuck at this transition often diverge into one of two directions: either there continues to be a lively sexual connection, although in a context of relational instability, or else the opposite unfolds, in which there is a stable relationship that has lost its exciting aspect, leading to the well-known phenomenon of LBD (lesbian bed death). I conclude with brief, composite vignettes drawn from lesbian couples I have seen in my practice and a discussion of the movement between dyadic and triadic relating.