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**Homosexualities, Homoparentalities**

**Objecting to the object.  
Encountering the internal parental couple relationship  
for lesbian and gay couples<sup>1</sup>  
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**Summary**

Psychoanalysis and specifically psychoanalytic couple theory views our encounter with the internal parental couple relationship as a fundamental psychic event in the course of our development, but it is important to note that traditionally this has been a heteronormatively constructed concept. In this paper, the author describes how for some lesbian and gay couples, and particularly those who have grown up with a heterosexual parental couple, the representation and intrapsychic experience of an intimate heterosexual couple union internalized as a dynamic object, is objected to because it does not belong to their conscious desired experience and self-identity. Both partners desire to be in a couple relationship but not like the one they grew up with. Using a combination of psychoanalytic couple concepts, French psychoanalysis and contemporary theories of psychosexuality, the author proposes some psychoanalytic reformulations of same gender desire for couple relationships. The author highlights how some lesbian and gay couples may in fact “object” to the intrapsychic

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presence of the internal heterosexual parent couple as a dynamic object residing within their shared unconscious world. The author names this predicament ‘objecting to the object’ and illustrates the potentially damaging effect on the couple’s relationship using a composite case example. Finally, the author draws attention to the challenges of working with erotic feelings and how clinicians might help couples to explore aspects of their sexuality and gender identifications in treatment.

*Keywords:* couple relationships, lesbian and gay, sexuality and gender, internal parental couple, object relations.

**Résumé.** *S’opposer à l’objet. Rencontre avec la relation de couple parental interne pour les couples de lesbiennes et de gays*

La psychanalyse et spécifiquement la théorie psychanalytique du couple considèrent notre rencontre avec la relation du couple parental interne comme un événement psychique fondamental au cours de notre développement, mais il est important de noter que, traditionnellement, il s’agit d’un concept construit de manière hétéronormative. Dans cet article, l’auteur décrit comment, pour certains couples de lesbiennes et de gays, et en particulier ceux qui ont grandi avec un couple parental hétérosexuel, la représentation et l’expérience intrapsychique d’une union intime de couple hétérosexuel intériorisée en tant qu’objet dynamique sont contestées car elles n’appartiennent pas à leur expérience consciente désirée et à leur identité.

Les deux partenaires souhaitent vivre une relation de couple, mais pas comme celle avec laquelle ils ont grandi. En utilisant une combinaison de concepts de la psychanalyse de couple, de la psychanalyse française et des théories contemporaines de la psychosexualité, l’auteur propose quelques reformulations psychanalytiques du désir du même sexe pour les relations de couple. L’auteur souligne comment certains couples de lesbiennes et de gays peuvent, en fait, “s’opposer” à la présence intrapsychique du couple parental hétérosexuel interne en tant qu’objet dynamique dans leur monde inconscient partagé. L’auteur nomme cette problématique “opposition à l’objet” et en illustre l’effet potentiellement dommageable sur la relation du couple par un exemple de cas composite. Enfin, l’auteur attire l’attention sur les défis liés au travail avec les sentiments érotiques et sur la manière dont les cliniciens pourraient aider les couples à explorer les aspects de leur sexualité et de leur identification de genre dans le traitement.

*Mots-clés:* relations de couple, lesbienne et gay, sexualité et genre, couple parental interne, relations d’objets.

**Resumen.** *Objetar al objeto. Reencontrar la relación de pareja parental interna para parejas de lesbianas y homosexuales*

El psicoanálisis y, específicamente, la teoría psicoanalítica de la pareja considera nuestro encuentro con la relación parental interna como un evento psíquico fundamental en el curso de nuestro desarrollo, pero es importante tener en cuenta que tradicionalmente éste ha sido



un concepto construido en forma héteronormativa. En este artículo, el autor describe cómo para algunas parejas de lesbianas y homosexuales, y particularmente para aquéllas que han crecido con una pareja de padres heterosexuales, la representación y la experiencia intrapsíquica de una unión de pareja heterosexual íntima internalizada como un objeto dinámico, se objeta porque no pertenece a su experiencia consciente deseada y a su identidad. Ambos partenaires desean estar en una relación de pareja, pero no como aquélla con la que crecieron. Utilizando una combinación de conceptos de pareja psicoanalítica, psicoanálisis francés y teorías contemporáneas de la psicosexualidad, el autor propone algunas reformulaciones psicoanalíticas del deseo del mismo género para las relaciones de pareja. El autor destaca cómo algunas parejas de lesbianas y homosexuales pueden de hecho “objetar” la presencia intrapsíquica de la pareja de padres heterosexuales internos como objeto dinámico que reside en su mundo inconsciente compartido. El autor denomina esta situación “objetano al objeto” e ilustra el efecto potencialmente perjudicial en la relación de pareja utilizando un ejemplo de caso compuesto. Por último, el autor destaca los desafíos ligados al trabajar con los sentimientos eróticos y a cómo los médicos en el tratamiento pueden ayudar a las parejas a explorar aspectos de su sexualidad e identificaciones de género.

*Palabras clave:* relaciones de pareja, lesbianas y gays, sexualidad y género, pareja parental interna, relaciones de objeto.

## **Introduction**

Intimate adult couple relationships offer possibilities for growth and development as an integral and hoped for part of being a couple, but will for many involve difficulties and challenges at some point. After all, what so often brings people to therapy are the problems they experience within their relationships, or the difficulties attendant with not being in a relationship. Lesbian and gay couples present for therapy with difficulties that may look little different from those brought by heterosexual couples.

However, in my experience of psychoanalytic psychotherapy with individuals and couples, both gay and straight, there are specific factors particular to the psychic conflicts of some lesbian and gay couples that have a considerably different phenomenology and trajectory to those of heterosexual couples.

Psychoanalysis and specifically psychoanalytic couple theory views our encounter with the internal parental couple relationship as a fundamental psychic event in the course of our development (Ruszczynski, 1993) but it is important to note that traditionally this has been an heteronormatively constructed concept. For some lesbian and gay couples, and particularly those who have grown up with a heterosexual parental couple, the representation and intrapsychic experience of an



intimate heterosexual couple union internalized as a dynamic object, is objected to because it does not belong to their conscious desired experience and self identity. Both partners desire to be in a couple relationship but not like the one they grew up with. I am proposing that some lesbian and gay couples may in fact “object” to the intrapsychic presence of the internal heterosexual parent couple as a dynamic object residing within their shared unconscious world (Bannister *et al.*, 1955). The consequences of this can be rigidity and sense of rejection between the partners which I suggest is related to the psychic objection. I have named this predicament “objecting to the internal heterosexual parental couple object”, for brevity shortened to “objecting to the object”.

In this article, I begin with a description of how psychoanalysis has traditionally viewed same gender desire. Then I consider early object relationships, psychosexual development, the importance of identifications and innate bisexuality including a description of some contemporary psychoanalytic reformulations of same gender desire. Using a fictional composite case example I illustrate the clinical manifestation of “objecting to the object”, including some thoughts on why this may be a problem for lesbian and gay couples. I reflect on how being part of an intimate adult same gender couple relationship brings to life early object relationships and embodied experiences. Throughout, I draw on theoretical concepts which inform my ideas about the encounter with the parental couple relationship (Bannister *et al.*, 1955; Ruzsyczynski, 1993; Ruzsyczynski and Fisher, 1995; Grier, 2005; Ludlam and Nyberg, 2007; Morgan, 2001; 2005; 2009).

The ideas presented here are based on my experience with lesbian and gay couples and individuals in psychoanalytic psychotherapy who have grown up with heterosexual parents, though not necessarily parents who were always together as a couple. These ideas may also be relevant to heterosexual as well as homosexual couples, and to those who have grown up in other family formations who become troubled and seek psychoanalytic therapy.

### **Psychoanalysis and lesbian and gay couple relationships**

Historically, psychoanalysis has energetically focused its understanding of homosexuality as evidence of perversity and pathology, proceeding on the basis, largely unquestioned, that the only “healthy” outcome of the Oedipus situation is full heterosexuality. The application of the Oedipus complex within psychoanalysis to explore homosexuality was especially damaging, in part because of the conviction that there has to be a resolution in psychosexual development where the eventual outcome was heterosexuality and where the desire for the same gender parent was relinquished. Sexual desire was only considered healthy when directed towards someone of the opposite gender to oneself.



Homosexuality was then understood to indicate that psychosexual development had gone awry and was indicative of problems in resolving desire for the “forbidden” same gender object.

This construction of gender and sexuality has meant that a deeper exploration of the psychic conflicts faced by many lesbian and gay couples has been split off and shut down from the main body of psychoanalytic theory and practice, and with it the possibility of understanding more about lesbian and gay people’s struggle to find and maintain an intimate couple relationship. However, psychoanalytic theories of the couple relationship, previously based almost entirely on heterosexual partnerships have been changing. More recently, the development of psychoanalytic thinking and technique which could be of benefit to lesbian and gay couples whose relationships get in to difficulty has been gathering pace. For instance Lynch (2002) returns to Freud to understand the search for integration of love and sex for gay men, D’Ercole and Drescher (2004) in their landmark volume deal specifically with psychoanalytic approaches to same sex couples and families. This paper aims to explore the problems for lesbian and gay couples of encountering the internal parental couple relationship and the impact of this internal object in the couple’s shared unconscious world.

### **Early object relationships and psychosexual development**

The urge to pair is understood to be a powerful human drive begun in infancy, continued in development and for many, culminating in the formation of adult couple relationships (Ludlam and Nyberg, 2007; Grier, 2005). Psychoanalysis brings to the fore an understanding of this drive and the complexity of that which is deeply desired, emphasizing the connection between adulthood and infancy, between past and present. Subsequently, adult couple relationships are a place where these earliest object relationships and embodied experiences will be evoked and brought to life between partners. Early infantile experiences with parents may not be consciously recalled, but may be present in dreams, daydreams, and sexual phantasies including those of the primal scene.

Both partners bring to their couple relationship unconscious sexual phantasies in relation to their parents, and these will be prompted and awakened by the sexual intimacy and accompanying regression and vulnerability which comes from being part of a couple. Intimate adult sexual relationships recall not only these early aspects of genital sexuality and phantasy, but also experiences with parents during infancy and childhood - the priming of sexuality through the attention to and tending of bodily functions. As Freud (1912) put so clearly, sexual instincts and «components of erotic interest» (p. 180) are discernable and correspond to the child’s primary objects: «...sexual instincts find their first objects by attaching themselves to the valuations made by the ego-instincts, precisely in the way in



which the first sexual satisfactions are experienced in attachment to the bodily functions necessary for the preservation of life...» (pp. 180-181).

Boys and girls use their mothers and fathers – their primary objects - differently in the process of identification and parents play a central role in structuring children's gender and influencing psychosexual development. Laplanche and Pontalis (1973) define identification as: «the psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property, or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified». From the time a child is born and anatomically assigned a sex, parents respond to the child's gender and encourage development in ways they find appropriate to the child's sex. This priming of the child's gender and sexuality will be informed by parents' phantasies about the child and their gender, and also by the parents' own gender and sexual identity. In the course of development the child seeks out aspects of both parents that feel congruent to the self, including features they admire and want to model themselves on. They may also construct a sense of self which aims to feel in certain ways, unlike their primary objects. Children's primary identifications with their parents both male and female provide the basis for their innate bisexuality which Freud noticed and described (Freud, 1905a). Stoller (1972) highlighted how important this observation was throughout Freud's writing (Freud, 1905a, p. 220): «Since I became acquainted with bisexuality I regarded it as the decisive factor, and without taking bisexuality into account, I think it would scarcely be possible to arrive at an understanding of the sexual manifestations that are actually to be observed in men and women».

Fast (1984; 1990) emphasises the centrality of a child's need to identify with both parents and use identifications across both genders to formulate important parts of their self-representations, imaginatively elaborating their fantasies about erotic relations between the sexes. Freud (1905a) considered that an inherent constitutional mix of female and male traits not only influenced the degree of a person's femininity or masculinity but also influenced object choice. Freud commented that in terms of constitutional bisexuality: «all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious» (1905a, p. 145, footnote 1915). The unconscious homosexual object choice in development that Freud referred to is particularly pertinent for the lesbian and gay couples I am considering here, as is the unconscious heterosexual object choice as exemplified by the internal parental couple which is objected to.

### **Childhood sexuality and parental responses**

A further important aspect of psychosexual development is the parental response to a child's early expressions of sexuality, which may significantly influence the



trajectory of psychosexual development for lesbian and gay people. Target (2007) and (Fonagy, 2008) both describe how aspects of early psychosexual development and particularly sexual excitement are necessarily poorly mirrored by parental figures. The infant in a state of sexual tension «is generally not offered a congruent metabolized representation of his or her psychosexual feelings, even when other feelings are sensitively responded to» (Target, 2007, p. 522). Both authors highlight how whilst it is possible for parents to contingently mirror a range of feelings such as sadness or anger for instance, there would appear to be no conscious way to mirror sexual arousal. Because there is no contingent representation of the infant's experience, there can be no real containment of these sexual feelings and experiences. This means that «sexual arousal can never truly be experienced as owned» (Target, 2007, p. 523) and therefore, there will always be a need to have one's sexuality elaborated by another. «Because sexual excitement is by its nature incongruent with the self, excitement has to be experienced in the other and only therefore with the other» (Target, 2007, p. 524). Furthermore, where a parent's response to their child's state is unmarked or inaccurate, the child is unable to find themselves in the mind of the other and is forced instead to internalize the representation of the object's state of mind as if it were their own.

Parents' experience of not mirroring sexual arousal may be necessary and protective in many ways, but for lesbian and gay people, this unmarked, unelaborated response may have an adverse effect on aspects of psychosexual development. For fathers and mothers with a child of either gender it would seem important that they possess a healthy integration of their innate bisexuality that can be comfortably acknowledged within themselves, something which indeed may occur out of conscious awareness. If things proceed fairly well, the child's sexuality, desire and expressions of gender identity can then be responded to by parents without discomfort, rejection or alarm. However, where the parental response to a child's expression of same gender desire and emerging sexuality in childhood is unwelcoming, then the trajectory and eventual fate of identifications with both parents, as well as the capacity to experience and inhabit one's innate bisexuality will be significantly affected. In terms of innate bisexuality, I am describing an intrapsychic process whereby it is possible to identify with and feel desire for both genders as distinct from the bisexual object choice where there is a desire to enact one's sexuality with both genders.

I am suggesting that where a child's emergent sexual orientation is different to their parents, the parents' responses to sexual arousal in a child of the same gender as themselves may be to react with an even greater degree of alarm, disapproval, or disgust which in turn the child then internalizes. This may come to exacerbate the difficulties for the child or young person in coming to accept their same gender desires and sexual phantasies, and then cause immense internal conflict. It is not difficult to surmise that where the parental response to a young person's emerging sexuality and desire for someone of the same gender is ignored, invalidated,



disputed, or overridden, the result may be that the path of psychosexual development is profoundly impacted upon. Crucially, in development as a child interacts with their parents, they may encounter two specific aspects of experience: firstly their desire for the parent of the same gender and secondly, the reaction of the other parent to this expression of desire. In my experience of psychoanalytic therapy with both individuals and couples, I have often listened to descriptions of experiences from lesbian and gay patients where as children they were either told directly - or it was indicated to them less directly by both parents, that it was more acceptable to express desire towards the parent of the opposite rather than the same gender. This was frequently accompanied by a commentary on whether their behaviour was either not sufficiently masculine or feminine enough for their gender, or too much so in the parents' view. Frequently gender identity and gender roles are conflated with sexual object choice. It is most often taken as a given that opposite gender attraction is what makes a couple relationship, or where couples are the same gender, a binary gender divide between masculinity and femininity is constructed. As a patient of mine once said "*people always say that when you're gay or lesbian in a couple, one is the man and the other the woman*". The idea that same gender desire is acceptable not only to others but also within one's own mind, and need not reflect a heterosexual union, may be especially difficult to consider particularly if in the first instance it is one's parents who are clearly disapproving.

### **Same gender desire: reformulating theory**

In an attempt to reformulate psychoanalytic ideas about the homoerotic desire for the same gender parent, several contemporary writers have contributed to a more in-depth understanding of the trajectory of this desire in the psychosexual development of lesbians and gay men, including the eventual manifestation in adult couple relationships. In relation to gay men, Roughton (2002), Goldsmith (1995; 2001), Frommer (1994; 2000), Corbett (1993) and Isay (1987; 1989; 1991) all put forward new constructions of the Oedipus complex, importantly not dominated by hetero-normative bias, but rather attempting an understanding of sexuality with more fluidity. They recalibrate traditional disparagement and pathologising of same sex desire, most specifically by revising Freudian ideas about boys' attraction to their fathers. They make the case convincingly that this may occupy an equally important and crucially benign role in male development. Furthermore they emphasize that it is not indicative of disturbance as previously had been widely proffered. Goldsmith (1995; 2001) and Isay (1987; 1989; 1991) particularly elucidate aspects of desire in childhood and consider the way in which this may impact on later development for men in their adult relationships.

Describing female experience, Elise (2000) elucidates how women use their bodies unconsciously as a protection against fully experiencing female desire. Elise





describes how a mother's heterosexuality, which does not incorporate a healthy integration of her own psychic bisexuality, and is not comfortably acknowledged and expressed in relating to her daughter, can inadvertently cause her to reject the little girl's sexual desire. This desire for her mother then is «typically erased, negated, made invisible, nonexistent» (p. 219). In a later article Elise (2002) describes how in development the heterosexual gaze a boy has for his mother and the girl's desire for her father can be validated and seen, but the mother tends to be blind to the girls sexual impulses and desires for her, something noted by several other authors (Butler, 1990; 1995; Kernberg, 1991; O'Connor and Ryan, 1993). The meaning of this rejection in childhood can influence the fate of identifications formed with both parents as well as the capacity to inhabit one's innate bisexuality flexibly.

The points made by Elise (2002) in relation to women, Goldsmith (1995; 2001) and Isay (1987; 1989; 1991) in relation to men, are especially helpful in understanding the consequences of rejection of homoerotic interest in a parent of the same gender and I think is particularly relevant here in terms of elucidating how these experiences of rejection can be brought to life in an adult couple relationship between partners. When parents insist that the child's emerging sexual desires should be directed elsewhere, or that the expression of their gender identity should be manifested in a stereotypically accepted way, it may be harder for the child to identify with the parent who has been rejecting, or with the other parent who has allowed or encouraged the rejection to occur. Where identifications *are* made, they may then have to be disavowed or split off because they carry with them difficult or aggressive feelings relating to important attachment relationships. The need to identify closely with one parent or the other in order to be like them and as a way to gain parental approval may be particularly acute if homoerotic desires are disapproved of by either parent. These aspects of identification might have to be held on to tightly for fear they may be attacked or undermined. Identifications with parents of both genders can then become rigid, uni-dimensional or distorted and it may become more difficult to allow greater integration of male and female identifications. Such integration is necessary in order to acknowledge one's innate bisexuality, the identification with and desire for both genders, to inhabit this, allow it to be known and understood in oneself. In this way there is the possibility for a range of identifications that can be flexibly available in the mind. In the midst of the ensuing confusion about desire, whom one desires, whom one should and should not desire, what can be expressed or kept secret, it can be difficult to make a sexual object choice, enact one's desires with freedom and flexibility of mind and subsequently, to maintain an adult sexual relationship.

Such early psychosexual developmental experiences as described here may for some individuals shape the unconscious beliefs about being a couple which each partner brings to the relationship. Morgan (2009) describes how unconscious beliefs form a central part of the unconscious life of the couple. Although they are



“beliefs”, they reside in the unconscious like facts, unless they become conscious and can be thought about (*ibid.*, p. 3). These unconscious facts then become certainties that can drive many aspects of our conscious life. For some lesbian and gay couples whose parents were hostile or rejecting of same gender desire, their early psychosexual experiences are not modified by development and become fixed in the unconscious as a belief about all subsequent relationships, residing as an interdiction prohibiting same gender desire.

### **Objecting to the object**

I want to describe how the presence of the internal heterosexual parental couple relationship can lead to particular difficulties for some lesbian and gay couples. The internal parental couple relationship-as-object is not just the mere addition of mother plus father. In development, the parental couple relationship is externally perceived and emotionally experienced by the child both consciously and unconsciously, and experienced in the caretaker’s physical handling of the infant or child. It is a complex blend of the parents’ relationship with each other, as well as both parents’ gendered identities and sexuality expressed towards each other, and towards the child in their interactions with her/him. The presence of the internal parental couple as a dynamic object is thought to shape both an individual’s relationships with couples generally, and specifically, the formation and maintenance of couple relationships in adulthood, including the shared unconscious world of the couple (Grier, 2005; Ruzsyczynski and Fisher, 1995). Each partner’s relationship to the internal parental couple relationship as a dynamic object will influence the hopes, anxieties, expectations and beliefs about choice of partner as well as the way the relationship develops and grows. By dynamic object I mean the complex system formed by the interaction between two human beings and the interplay between their two subjective worlds. Put simply, it is the continual flow of reciprocal mutual influence, both interpersonal and intrapsychic, between partners and which contributes to creating the couple’s shared unconscious world. Something of a shared unconscious image of the internal couple relationship as object will bring partners together and structure their attachment to each other. Kernberg (1995, pp. 48-63) states that the longing to become a couple is a wish to fulfill deep unconscious needs for a loving identification with the parental couple. For many, such a loving identification with the internal parental couple will play an important part in sustaining their adult couple relationship. However for the lesbian and gay couples I am considering here, this presents a problem because some of the ideas, phantasies and experiences about being a couple, internalized in development feel incongruent. The heterosexual imprint is dissonant from the desires and phantasies in being part of a same gender couple. I am proposing that the internalized heterosexual parental couple relationship is experienced as an



incongruent and unwanted object in the couple's shared unconscious world and is fundamentally contrary to what they desire.

In trying to further understand this phenomenon I return to the ideas of Fonagy and colleagues (Fonagy, Leigh *et al.*, 1995; Fonagy and Target, 2000; Fonagy *et al.*, 2003). They describe the centrality of mirroring, where parental responses resonate and reflect the internal state the infant displays. The parent simultaneously distorts the infant's state through the use of exaggeration, "*motherese*", irony, thereby conveying to the infant that they understand but crucially, are not overwhelmed by or necessarily experiencing the same affective state. There is concurrently both contact with and distance from the infant's internal state. Where feelings are left unacknowledged, or are poorly mirrored and are therefore non-contingent reflections of internal self states, this can lead to internal representations which are incongruent to the self. This creates an alien experience within the self, brought about because «ideas or feelings are experienced as part of the self which do not seem to belong to the self» (Fonagy *et al.*, 2003, p. 439). In turn, this creates an instability within the self. I am proposing that the internalized heterosexual couple relationship as a dynamic object, incongruent for some lesbian and gay couples, is felt to be alien. This feeling of something alien within the self then meets a hostile external environment privileging heterosexual relationships which can, for some lesbian and gay couples, lead to further difficulties (for a more detailed discussion see Hertzmann, 2011).

In my experience lesbian and gay couples objecting to this incongruent and alien object can present with difficulties in several ways. Frequently there is a quality of rigidity in the relationship and this can be in relation to various issues such as, questioning what kind of a relationship the couple are in together or want to form despite often having been together for many years, difficulty negotiating flexibly what roles are taken up in the relationship and the meaning of these roles for both partners, or a constant low level mutual rejection creating a feeling of uncertainty about whether the relationship will survive or not. One might say that many couples both gay and straight struggle with these kinds of problems. I am suggesting that the rigidity and sense of rejection for some lesbian and gay couples may well be related to a psychic objection to the internal heterosexual parental couple. Where there is adverse parental response to same gender desire, a same gender coupling can not be securely introjected and neither can one's innate bisexuality then be flexibly anchored. Consequently, rigidity is employed in the service of keeping things stable, giving a semblance of security between partners and for some couples, they may simultaneously try to emphasize their *lesbian* or *gay* coupledness as legitimate.

In the following clinical example, I focus on a couple who, in struggling with this psychic objection went to considerable lengths to ensure they did not feel or know about the presence of the internalized heterosexual parental couple in their shared unconscious world. This example highlights each partner's identifications with



parents of both genders, where rigidity and splitting were employed in order to disavow themselves of the knowledge of the range of identifications and accompanying feelings. It also illustrates the difficulties they experienced in relation to the range of identifications and desires for both genders and the problems they faced in coming to know and understand these aspect of themselves, both individually and as a couple.

### **Clinical example**

Morris and Jim had been together for about 10 years when they sought help for their relationship difficulties. The presenting problem was a recent waning of their sexual relationship. They described how Jim had always been the “passive” partner, Morris the “active” partner and that they had previously been satisfied with these roles which felt to each of them an established part of their identity as gay men. More recently, Jim had expressed a wish to be the active penetrating partner in their sexual relationship, something which Morris was not prepared to consider as he wanted to maintain his current role. Morris could not understand why Jim now wanted to do something differently and Jim became increasingly dissatisfied and angry that Morris would not allow him to take up an active position, accusing him of being overly rigid. Morris said he found the idea of becoming passive “unbearable” and Jim responded by insisting that if something did not change, he would seek sex outside of the relationship. Jim appeared to be pressurizing Morris and also seemed to be under some internal pressure within himself to make these changes to their roles immediately. Consequently they had reached an impasse, resentments had built up between them and they were thinking of splitting up.

In the early stages of the therapy, it seemed to the therapist that Morris and Jim had very rigid ideas about their respective roles, both in the relationship generally and sexually. However, it was unclear why at this point they were having issues with the roles they took up in the relationship which formerly had worked well. The therapist continued for some time to experience the couple as both inflexible and impenetrable and was struck by how this reflected closely the couple’s presenting complaint about each other. In terms of their histories, although Morris had to some extent spoken about his parents and experiences growing up, Jim had generally been more closed. The therapist noted their reluctance to describe their histories more openly, especially anything about their own parents’ couple relationship.

Initially, the therapist tried to pick up on Morris’ strong feeling about how being passive would be “unbearable.” The therapist did not get very far with exploring this feeling but sensed it might be important for them both. The meaning of Jim’s need for change and why it had occurred at this point in their relationship was also very difficult to elaborate. The therapy began to feel restricted and stuck. The therapist was perplexed by how problematic it was to explore the material they



brought to the sessions. The couple went to great lengths to ensure the therapist “completely got” what they were saying. A significant amount of time could be spent pursuing precisely the correct word or phrase. They often corrected the therapist if there was anything less than an exact reflection of what they had said. In addition, they noted to the second the exact start and end of each session and commented when the therapist was not in lock step with them. They frequently refuted interventions and interpretations that seemed reasonably congruent with their thoughts and the material they communicated. The therapist’s countertransference was of feeling straightjacketed, exhausted by their continual need for entirely congruent, precise responses. It felt to the therapist as if almost every intervention was rejected.

A few months in to the therapy, something unexpected occurred which punctured the therapeutic paralysis. In the middle of a session, Jim’s phone rang, he grimaced, muttered something inaudible and switched off the phone. There was a long pause before Jim said he was sorry for the interruption, it was his mother calling but that it was not important. The therapist, having noted his facial expression and the subsequent long pause, commented that Jim had not said very much about his current relationship with his mother although he had briefly described that his parents divorced when he was 11. Jim said “Oh, didn’t I explain? It’s not really very important. But when I was 11 and just about to go to secondary school, I found out my mother had been having an affair with my class teacher. She left the family to live with him and that’s how my parents got divorced”. Jim went on to describe how his father had brought them up on his own and managed quite effectively. Jim found this change in the family difficult and for years he was very angry with his mother, refusing to speak to her. However, in the past few months there had been the beginnings of a tentative rapprochement between him and his mother, initiated by her. Jim remarked that for years he had not thought about her and was only now becoming aware of the extent of his anger towards her. The therapist put to the couple the link between the intrusion of the phone call in the session and the “intrusion” of Jim’s mother in to his life at this point, bringing Jim’s mother unexpectedly in to the therapy and in to their relationship. This time, rather than the couple rejecting the therapist’s intervention, Jim and Morris were more thoughtful and considered what the therapist had said for several minutes. Eventually Jim said that he was relieved to talk about what had happened in his childhood and although pleased at the possibility of things changing with his mother, the tentative rapprochement had also brought to the surface many complex and contradictory feelings about her.

This event in the therapy made it possible for the therapist to begin to interpret more of their material in terms of its unconscious content. Although there was a deepening in the work, it was notable to the therapist that the couple still rejected interventions that did not entirely mirror their feelings. They particularly disliked more saturated interpretations including those focusing on the analytic situation,



although they communicated their dissatisfaction less immediately than before. The therapist remained curious about the way in which this couple required such therapeutic “accuracy” and was not sure of its meaning, but continued to note its presence, deciding that it was necessary for the time being to adjust technique accordingly so that the couple felt safe enough to explore the contents of their minds.

Despite this progress, the couple continued to argue about their respective sexual roles. The therapist felt it was important to try to return to each partner’s feelings about these roles, Morris’ feeling of it being unbearable to be passive and Jim’s sense of urgency for change. When the therapist tried to explore this internal pressure Jim’s association to it was that he had felt something similar with his father. It occurred to him that he had always had a need to be close to his father but that this had become much more marked after his mother left. As Jim began to talk about his childhood, what emerged was that not only did he admire the way his father had remained “internally strong” after finding out about his mother’s affair, but he also remembered a holiday to the seaside where he had found his father’s muscular body attractive. As he described this scene he was shocked by his own observation and memory of his father as an “Oedipal” object of desire. The therapist commented that these thoughts and feelings felt as though they were taboo, and that previously unavailable to him, had now been brought to conscious awareness. Jim could now permit thoughts and feelings to emerge more flexibly from his mind and correspondingly, rather than rejecting the therapist’s thoughts, allow them in.

Jim’s exploration of these feelings seemed to help Morris think about the unbearable feeling with which he was struggling. Morris said that being masculine was very important to him and that he associated being passive with a woman’s sexual position. Morris’ father had been very judgmental about Morris’ emerging sexuality in childhood. He constantly criticized his mannerisms, telling him they should be “*MANnerisms*” not “*WOMANerisms*”. Morris’ mother had joined in with these criticisms and pointed out the ways in which he was “effeminate”. Morris’ father took him to many different sporting activities in the hope that this would “toughen him up”. Morris enjoyed these times with his father though he remained, as he put it, “woeful at sport”. His mother objected to the amount of time Morris’ father spent with him and in hindsight, Morris thought she probably felt very excluded. For the first time in the therapy, he became very upset as he recounted how hard he had tried to be more masculine in order to gain his parents’ approval. Morris remembered thinking that if he was more like his father, then he might love him more and be less critical. He also had a memory from about the age of about 9, where he thought that because his mother loved his father, being more manly like his father would be a way to gain his mother’s love and approval. In the therapy, Morris came to understand that he too had homoerotic desires towards his father, which his mother may have discerned at some level. He was left with a sense that to do anything which for him was sexually associated with being feminine, to take



up the passive position, was unbearable as it brought to mind painful and humiliating feelings from the past.

The therapist's countertransference at this point was of feeling less rejected by the couple. There was a feeling both of greater flexibility, being under less pressure to get things exactly right and the couple allowed interpretations to land and take effect. For instance the therapist was able to put to the couple that perhaps their active-passive roles might be connected to their early experiences with both parents in different ways and what then emerged, was a greater understanding and exploration of their identifications with them. Jim said that it had occurred to him recently that being the passive sexual partner brought his own parents' relationship "right in to our bed". Specifically he equated, and was very uncomfortable with being passive as it brought to mind his mother's experience of sex with his father, which was now abhorrent to him. The therapist suggested that perhaps in order to counter these disturbing thoughts and feelings, the solution for Jim was to enact something different, to be the active partner, thereby ensuring he was now in his father's position. This also accorded with the desire he had felt for his father in childhood which had until now been disavowed. The therapist added that this might also explain the urgent feeling gripping Jim at this time.

Morris came to understand more about the meaning for him of being active. His way of feeling properly masculine had several aims - to gain his mother's approval and most particularly to find a way to be both close to his father and resemble him. To be a passive partner was in his mind closely linked to being feminine and to the constant criticism by both his parents. The thought of taking up what he saw as a sexually passive position brought live Morris' anger towards his mother, something previously he had managed to keep at bay. Morris had a very strong belief that being penetrated was akin to being in a heterosexual relationship and being feminine. To be active made Morris feel more like his father, a potent male which was for him, a feature central of his identity as a gay man.

Jim and Morris described how they had both believed that by being a gay couple they did not have to think about anything female, and that to do so was akin to a betrayal of their hard won sexual identity. Both of them had previously equated a change in their active-passive roles as recalling a heterosexual couple, something they objected to in different ways. Gradually, the rigidity about their roles as a couple loosened and a greater flexibility was allowed between them. With this came a new idea - that they could remain active and passive as before but that they could freely move in their minds between active and passive sexual phantasies and aims. They also discovered that they did not necessarily have to change the manner in which they enjoyed their sexual relationship because they felt there was a more mutual and flexible psychic penetration of each other. There was now room to explore where their desires and phantasies lead them together. This less oppressive relationship to aspects of masculinity and the disavowal of anything to do with what they thought of as femininity meant that they could enact their sexual phantasies



safely and not feel they were a threat to the relationship. What was striking was that their relationship to their internal heterosexual parental couple relationship both as a couple and individually, felt less persecutory. They no longer used a heterosexual template to reference the way in which they enjoyed their sexual life together and define their couple relationship. This in turn loosened the unconscious tie to their parents' expression of gender identity and sexual orientation integral to their internal parental couple relationship object. Not only was the unconscious tie to the internal heterosexual parental couple now more flexible, so too was the bond between gender identity and sexual orientation, which had previously been binary and somewhat unidimensional.

## **Discussion**

Jim and Morris seemed to want to create something qualitatively and distinctly different from the parental couples they had grown up with and internalized in development. To try to counter the incongruent internal object residing in their shared unconscious worlds, aspects of their sexual relationship which recalled the parental couple had to be kept out of mind and their respective roles inflexibly held on to. The experience of the incongruent internal object was also present in the transference to the therapist, where there seemed to be a very distinct need for the therapist's interventions to be highly congruent with the material Jim and Morris brought to the sessions. Their psychic objection to the object and to the authority of the object, the influence it exerted, was brought to life in their frequent rebuttals of the therapist's interventions.

It is a feature of couple relationships that aspects of both partners can be split off and projected in to the other and where the couple's projective system (Ruszczynski, 1993) is operating benignly, it can make those conflicted parts of the personality more tolerable and understood within oneself. Relationships can work well for many years in this way, as was the case for Jim and Morris. However, the couple's projective system can also produce the need to control or attack this less agreeable, conflicted part of oneself which, now located in the other, can be seen more clearly. With some projections and split off aspects of the self, there inevitably comes a time when these can no longer lie dormant. In terms of identifications with aspects of a parent, where these have been split off and projected in to one's partner, they can then be brought to life in the couple relationship in troublesome and alarming ways. Eventually projections have to be reclaimed because the maintenance of a split makes an unsustainable demand on the psychic economy of the self as well as on the couple. Not to reclaim these parts of the self could even threaten the survival of the relationship. In order for the potential developmental capacities of a couple relationship to presage growth, these previously dormant issues can then emerge between partners and be reworked. In development, the fate





of identifications and innate bisexuality can be profoundly impacted upon particularly, as previously described, where there has been parental rejection of homoerotic desires. This may lead to rather rigid, one-dimensional identifications and a rejection of aspects of masculinity and femininity. Some lesbian and gay couples may manage such a predicament by splitting off identifications and therefore their desire, projecting it in to their partner and in this way disavowing themselves of the knowledge of both the desire for and rejection by their parents. These identifications and experiences may then inform the unconscious beliefs (Morgan, 2009) about same gender desire and relationships which each partner bring to the relationship.

Jim and Morris had somewhat binary gender identifications. They considered physical receptivity as passive, female in construct, and an enactment of feminine identification. Being the penetrating active partner was in their minds male in construct and a central way to express masculinity. They struggled together with the previously unconscious contract to keep active and passive sexual positions distinct both mentally and physically. Corbett reminds us (1993, p. 347) of the possibility that masculinity should be able to incorporate aspects of desire, passivity and activity in sexual relationships between men. Lynch highlights that far from being castrating, receptivity can in fact be highly active and demanding. He also emphasizes the need for psychoanalysis and society more widely, to broaden attitudes particularly to anal sexuality, to adopt a more flexible and, one might say “versatile” position to exploring the myriad of meanings it holds, not just for gay men.

For Jim and Morris their sexual roles had important meaning and were part of their couple fit. For Jim, by being the passive partner he was in phantasy, able to be close to his father by taking up his mother’s role in the primal scene. He could then in his mind undo or rework the rejection by his father of the erotic desires he felt towards him in childhood. However it was striking that any identification with his mother’s sexual experience or indeed any desire Jim may have felt towards her in development, was not something he was consciously aware of. In addition his identification with his father’s desire to be the penetrating active partner to his mother had been split off from conscious awareness and projected in to Morris in whom there was a valency. By being the active penetrating partner with another man Jim would be able to recalibrate the recent disturbance to his identifications brought about by the reemergence of his mother. For Morris the idea of being the passive penetrated partner brought him close to his mother’s experience in the primal scene, something which had been split off from conscious awareness and projected in to Jim in whom there was a desire to be penetrated. Morris found Jim’s request for him to be passive very disturbing not only because of his split off identification with his mother, but also because he associated it with being feminine. Being masculine was a way to maintain his original tie to his father. Anything other



than being entirely masculine was objectionable to Morris who rigidly needed to hang on to his active role.

Both men had felt homoerotic desire for their fathers and identified with them in different ways. The rejection by their fathers and mothers to the expression of same gender desire had a significant impact on the eventual fate of Morris and Jim's identifications with both genders. It became more difficult then to identify with aspects of both genders, and also with a loving parental couple where aspects of masculine and feminine can be freely expressed. Rigidly holding on to their respective roles and identifications meant that they could not flexibly live out a range of phantasies and desires which evoked other identifications, and to inhabit aspects of both masculine and feminine positions in their relationship. The rapprochement between Jim and his mother had destabilized this couple's shared unconscious world by bringing to life their identifications with parents of both genders including those feminine identifications which had been split off. Neither wished to recall the internal parental couple object and objected to its very presence in their shared internal world. They could not allow themselves in phantasy to think about, identify, play with in their minds, the sexual experience of both genders and to fully own their innate bisexuality. Furthermore, to change their active - passive roles meant challenging some of the identifications they had formed in childhood and fortifying others. These carefully lain structures in both their minds had previously been essential to the development of their sexual identity and their unconscious beliefs about same gender relationships.

The therapist's countertransference feelings of rejection and dismissal were palpable. The couple gave the therapist a powerful experience of rigidity and they demonstrated a significant need to keep particular thoughts out of mind. In the transference the therapist, amongst other things, stood for their feminine identifications that they had had to keep split off and they related to the therapist in the same manner as they related to female identifications. It was striking how their rejection of the therapist's interventions gradually lessened around the same time as Jim's mother came in to the therapy. The rapprochement between Jim and his mother was mirrored in the therapy in the couple's rapprochement to the therapist and also to their female identifications. It became possible to allow interpretations to reach them and to take in the experience of the therapy and the therapist. They could now know consciously about their homoerotic desires towards their fathers in childhood. Split off aspects of themselves could then be brought to conscious awareness and re-integrated. Their innate bisexuality could be inhabited with greater flexibility and identifications with both genders used to more securely anchor a same gender union.



## Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the psychic objection felt by some lesbian and gay couples to the presence of the heterosexual nature of the internal parental couple relationship, including the masculine and feminine gender binary. The objection by one or both parents to their child's expression of homoerotic desire in development is an integral part of the psychic objection to the internal parental couple. I have described how identifications, innate bisexuality and homoerotic desires in early development can be brought to life in the intimacy of an adult couple, and can present rigidly and inflexibly in both sexuality and gender identifications. Although this example illustrates a gay male couple relationship, in my experience many similar issues arise for lesbian couples. The presentation of their difficulties may be somewhat differently portrayed, but common to both is an inflexibility in relation to innate bisexuality. In psychoanalytic therapy with lesbian and gay couples, it is important to explore their relationship to their innate bisexuality, the availability of a range of identifications, and the meaning of their identifications with both genders. If these aspects can be considered it may be especially helpful in understanding a couple's interactions, particularly in relation to gender roles and unconscious beliefs they bring to the relationship and which drive the way the partners relate to each other. Both lesbian and gay couples and heterosexual couples can have difficulties with identifications and desire for both parents, but for same gender couples there may be an added hostility and objection to the heterosexuality of their internal parental couple perhaps due to implicit masculine and feminine binary constructs of gender identity and object choice. *I would suggest that there is an even greater need to explore and anchor securely a range of identifications in same gender relationships because of this.* The therapist's flexible stance in relation to gender and sexuality communicates that these matters can be safely explored without either value judgment or being seen through a heteronormative lens. This can provide the couple with a therapeutic experience where the pain of early rejection and split off aspects of the self can be worked on, identifications with both genders available and eventually, innate bisexuality integrated and more flexibly inhabited. This may require clinicians to acknowledge and revisit the relationship to their own innate bisexuality, cross gender identifications and the potential to desire someone of the same gender.

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