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Aspects of time and space in analytic work with couples

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Summary

In this paper I explore psychic change in the couple in relation to elements of time and space. One dimension of this is the regularity and continuity of the therapeutic container provided by the analyst over time. Another is the analyst's presence providing a couple state of mind which increases psychic space. If the couple are able to respond to this, the couple analytic space becomes for the couple a different kind of space from the one they normally inhabit, in which they feel safer to bring more of themselves, their associations, dreams, irrational thoughts, not only their complaints about the other. The creation of a couple analytic space supports the couple in dealing with difference and otherness which often stimulates hatred but can also find expression in creating something new and developmental, previously unknown to the couple. Negative capability and a resistance to finding quick solutions has to be borne by the couple, and the analyst, in this process. The emergence of something new in the couple needs to be noticed and supported by the analyst.

Keywords: Time, continuity, the setting, psychic space, triangular space.

Résumé. *Quelques aspects du temps et de l'espace dans le travail analytique avec les couples*

Dans cet article, j'explore le changement psychique dans le couple en relation avec des éléments spatiaux et temporels. Une dimension en est la régularité et la continuité du contenant thérapeutique que fournit l'analyste sur la durée. Une autre dimension est la présence de l'analyste offrant un état d'esprit de couple qui accroît l'espace psychique. Si le

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couple est capable de réagir à ceci, l'espace analytique de couple devient un espace différent de celui que le couple habite d'ordinaire, dans lequel les partenaires se sentent suffisamment en sécurité pour dévoiler davantage d'eux-mêmes, leurs associations, leurs rêves, leurs pensées irrationnelles, et non pas seulement leurs plaintes à propos de l'autre. La création d'un espace analytique de couple soutient le couple dans ses efforts pour gérer la différence et l'altérité, efforts qui stimulent souvent la haine mais peuvent aussi trouver une forme d'expression à travers la création de quelque chose de nouveau et de développemental que le couple ne connaissait pas auparavant. Le couple ainsi que l'analyste doivent pouvoir supporter les zones d'ombre et résister à la quête de solutions rapides, au cours de ce processus. L'analyste se doit de remarquer et de soutenir l'émergence de quelque chose de nouveau dans le couple.

Mots-clés: le temps, la continuité, le cadre, l'espace psychique, l'espace triangulaire.

Resumen. *Algunos aspectos del tiempo y espacio en el trabajo analítico con parejas*

En este trabajo exploro el cambio psíquico en la pareja en relación con los elementos del tiempo y el espacio. Una dimensión de esto es la regularidad y la continuidad del contenedor terapéutico proporcionado por el analista a lo largo del tiempo. Otra es la presencia del analista que proporciona un estado mental de pareja que aumenta el espacio psíquico. Si la pareja es capaz de responder a esto, el espacio analítico de pareja se convierte para la pareja en un tipo de espacio diferente del que normalmente habitan, en el que se sienten más seguros para aportar más de sí mismos, sus asociaciones, sueños, pensamientos irracionales, no sólo sus quejas sobre el otro. La creación de un espacio analítico de pareja apoya a la pareja en el tratamiento de la diferencia y la alteridad, lo que a menudo estimula el odio, pero también puede encontrar su expresión en la creación de algo nuevo y de desarrollo, previamente desconocido para la pareja. La capacidad negativa y la resistencia a encontrar soluciones rápidas tiene que ser soportada por la pareja, y el analista, en este proceso. El surgimiento de algo nuevo en la pareja debe ser notado y apoyado por el analista. Palabras clave.

Palabras clave: tiempo, continuidad, el dispositivo, espacio psíquico, espacio triangular.

Couples often come to us with fixed ways of relating seen in powerful projective systems or with unconscious beliefs that constrain the relationship. In such a relationship there is an absence of psychic space in which both partners can fully exist and relate creatively to each other. As I have conceived of it, a creative couple capacity is the new psychic development that potentially takes place in the intimate adult relationship. It builds on the coupling or being two that evolves as a part of psychic development, leading up to and becoming part of this kind of couple. This psychic development can be briefly summarized to include the following:

From earliest infancy, we learn about and experience dependence on an object, intimacy, love and hate, curiosity and how interacting with the mind of another is the fulcrum for our own development. With early Oedipal development, we learn about and have to come to terms with the link between the parents, including their sexual relationship, from which we are excluded. But this also provides us with triangular space and the awareness that the mother (or maternal figure) who contained us was



a mother internally linked to another – classically the father. It helps us understand about linked separateness and provides us with an arena in which later we can experiment with being part of a couple and being separate within a couple.

In adolescence, we struggle with powerful feelings of dependence and independence, identifying with important objects (including aspects of our parents), but also needing to be separate from them and have a mind of our own. We take ownership of our own separate and sexual body which no longer has anything to do with the parents (Laufer, 1981). And then, for most of us, at some point, we choose to make an adult sexual relationship of our own and become a couple, though as Waddell points out, «developing such a capacity may, for some, take many more years and possibly several different attempts» (Waddell, 1998, p. 176).

In the psychic development that can occur having become an intimate adult couple, the Oedipal triangle is reconfigured so that the third point on the triangle is the couple's relationship, a symbolic third, to which the couple can turn to find a place in their minds. Over time, the couple experiences their relationship as an *entity*, as a *resource*, something they have created and continue to create together, the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.

Each partner's capacity to move between their subjective experience, taking in the view of the other, and bringing together the two, creates more psychic space in which new thoughts and thinking can occur. When there is something difficult to manage, identifying with their internal creative couple helps the two come together with the belief that something new can be produced between two – thus the word “creative”. Once established there is a secure belief that relating to and thinking together with another is potentially a creative process. However, being a creative couple is challenging both because of what we have to manage in relation to the other, as well as inside ourselves. In this paper I am going to discuss two of the areas that I see many couples struggle with that gets in the way of these creative couple developments.

The first is a difficulty in engaging with the other as separate and different. In order for the relationship to function creatively, two people separate and different have to be allowed to exist and then through their intercourse create a third, something new, different from each of them individually. For those working with the intimate couple relationship the difference and otherness of the other has always been of interest, for example, the work on narcissistic relating (Ruszczyński, 1995, Pickering, 2006, Colman 2005/2014,) including the idea of the couples «projective gridlock» (Morgan, 1995), as a mechanism for dealing with anxiety about separateness and difference by creating the illusion of being one, and Janine Puget's who states that, «to work with the complexity of links as it happens with family and couple psychoanalysis has to do with the difficulty to accept the unavoidable otherness and alienness of each one» (Puget, 2019, p. 25). This is an issue of space. Being able to allow space for the otherness of the other rather than close down space by reducing two into one and in that process no ‘thirds’ can come into being.

The second difficulty which I observe often in couples is the absence of the capacity for negative capability. Seeking certainty, the right answer, and so on is not creative, but being able to be creative requires not knowing and allowing something new to



come into being. This is an issue of time. Both of these, the capacity to bear separateness and difference and the capacity for negative capability are essential components of creative couple relating. Both of these can require an immense amount of psychic work for the couple. That psychic work is in part enabled by the particular nature of time and space afforded by the couple analytic process.

Difference and otherness

The fundamental difference, otherness and unknowable-ness of another is a fact that is not easy to accept. Sometimes the intimate couple relationship stimulates a longing for early fusion and attunement, especially if that early experience was unsatisfactory. And of course a couple relationship can provide that attunement, through a genuine loving curiosity and wanting to know the other and perhaps at times in a good sexual relationship, but it is not a permanent or perfect state.

For some couples the others separateness and difference is experienced as a threat to themselves and they deal with that anxiety by extending the boundary of themselves to encompass the partner. We could call this a narcissistic form of relating, or we might see this in a fixed projective system in which each partner is required to carry aspects of the other in a fixed way.

The couple analyst through providing a couple analytic space, opens up triangular space (Britton, 1989; Ruszczyński, 1998; Morgan, 2001, 2005; Balfour, 2016) in which the couple can experience the therapist as a third relating to each of them and their relationship. When in the position of observer, they can see the partner and therapist interacting which can provide a window from which to observe and think about themselves interacting with their partner, or they see their partner from a more outside/third position place. Often couples are fighting about difference as if there is an unconscious belief that they should think the same or be “on the same page”. This is a closing down of psychic space in the relationship. The analyst helps to open up space by engaging with their difference as a fact, even if a difficult one for them, and as something potentially creative. But this takes time and psychic work.

The key to adult coupling could be described as a change from the wish to be attended to by the other to a curiosity about the other which can become a source of great pleasure. For those individuals struggling to manage difference, the analyst’s clear absorption in the exploration of the individuals and of the couple itself provides a model for this form of adult intercourse. The opportunity provided for each member of the couple to observe this process between analyst and the other provides a lived experience of a process that can be introjected and played with. What will become clear over time is that the analyst’s continuing interest during the period of not knowing has a profoundly restorative and creative effect. In this way the passing of time represents a deepening of understanding instead of a dread of not knowing.

It can be argued that every move from a paranoid schizoid state to a depressive position requires the activity of curiosity (or K, to use Bion’s schema), because it is only K that can move the psyche from the pleasure principle to the reality principle (Stokoe, 2020). In the same way, the stimulation of curiosity in the couple about each



other is the necessary stimulus for any move into a creative couple stage of development.

Negative capability

Keats use of term «negative capability» has been taken up by psychoanalysts because it describes an essential element of the psychoanalytic process. He set out what he believed was necessary to become what he called a «Man of Achievement» or one who is «capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason» (Keats, December 1817, p. 477-478). Perhaps one of the most important aspects of a 'creative couple state of mind' is about tolerating not knowing, allowing previously held views to break down and be reconfigured in an intercourse with another. It rests on a belief that out of this disintegration, further integration will occur and lead to new, previously unknown, creative development and solutions. This capacity in the analyst has been described by Bion in *Attention and Interpretation*.

«In every session the psycho-analyst should be able...particularly with regard to memory and desire, to be aware of the aspects of the material that, however familiar they may seem to be, relate to what is unknown both to him and to the analysand. Any attempt to cling to what he knows must be resisted for the sake of achieving a state of mind analogous to the paranoid-schizoid position. For this state I have coined the term "patience" to distinguish it from "paranoid-schizoid position", which should be left to describe the pathological state for which Melanie Klein used it. I mean the term to retain its association with suffering and tolerance of frustration. "Patience" should be retained without "irritable reaching after fact and reason" until a pattern "evolves". This state is the analogue to what Melanie Klein has called the depressive position. For this state, I use the term "security".... I consider the experience of oscillation between "patience" and "security" to be an indication that valuable work is being achieved» (Bion, 1970, p. 123).

When we are presented with something different, something "other" which sometimes we cannot immediately comprehend or assimilate, before ejecting it completely because it doesn't sit easily with us, can we allow it to reside for a while inside us, in our mind, to experience it, think about it, without knowing at that point what we can do with it. This dismantling of previous views and theories can have the quality of a psychic catastrophe, a going to pieces (Grier, 2005). The state of not knowing or understanding is necessary as a result of the inevitability of psychic disruption arising at points of having to take in something new. Creative effort can therefore be viewed as a process, on a small scale, of movements to and from the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. The tolerance of a degree of disintegration, having "patience" which involves suffering and the toleration of the frustration of not knowing is important, as Bion describes. And there will always be the internal pressure to resort to omnipotent primitive defense mechanisms, or to turn back to a previously held position.



Once something new has been taken and processed, an internal reintegration can take place and there can then be a move forward to a new depressive position. However, this process does not occur without anxiety, sometimes enormous anxiety as a familiar position has to be relinquished before knowing how something new, but as yet unknown, will come together.

Conclusion

There are aspects of time and space that seem so fundamental to an analytic process and so part of our internal setting, that we hardly notice them. The regularity, continuity and boundedness of the sessions provided by the analyst over time. The couple analytic space which opens up the relationship rather than closes it down that for the couple is intrinsic to the work. The space between the sessions in which the analyst and the couple process the session consciously and unconsciously is also important. Birksted Breen (2003) describes this as “reverberation time” a term she uses to describe «the time it takes for disturbing elements to be assimilated, digested and transformed». She says: «The time element is fundamental here. It is the analyst's own capacity to wait, to tolerate remaining in discomfort, which can be introjected by the patient enabling him/her eventually to remain with his/her own state of mind» (p. 1506).

Staying with difficult thoughts, feelings, aspects of the self, rather than projecting them as Birksted Breen describes, takes time and psychic work both in the analyst and the patient. As Zinner has described a couple relationship can be used in quite the opposite way, the relationship becoming «a repository or dumping ground for externalized elements of intrapsychic conflict or expelled unacceptable inner objects. ... the quality of the marital relationship is sacrificed to the need to minimize inner tension within the individual partner»(Zinner, 1988, p. 2).

It is the fact that these things interest the analyst that enables her to remain patient and observant. If she were not intrinsically interested, then staying in this state of observing not knowing would be mechanistic and liable to produce what Britton & Steiner have described as an overvalued idea instead of a selected fact – a version of certainty rather than waiting to see what emerges. Thus time and space are completely central to the analytic mind and something we hope can be offered to the struggling couple who in their need for sameness and certainty close down on this aspect of their relationship.

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