

International Review of Psychoanalysis of Couple and Family.

ISSN 2105-1038

Nº 13-2013/1

The crisis of couple

**ROWS, CRISIS AND HOSTILITY IN A COUPLE. WHO DO WE
MAKE UP WITH?**

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Within couples, sources of conflict are countless and there is no lack of weapons, sharpened thanks to the other's weaknesses detected in the intimacy which bonds one to the other. Having defined the place of conflicts in the couple's psychic spaces, we shall look at the parameters characterizing them to understand the possible meanings of these duels, be they overt or covert. Depending on the groupal modalities of conjugal functioning, various types of solutions, including making up with each other, will emerge according to the specific listening offered during couple psychoanalytic therapy.

The battle ground

Contrary to individual psychoanalysis, where the subject embarks on a discovery of unknown intrapsychical conflicts which haunt his unconscious life and change the direction of his intersubjective links, in couple psychoanalysis, the obvious conflict is already there, in the foreground. The analyst's attention is caught by the interpersonal dialogues which happen naturally, revealing various levels of unconscious psychic functioning at work in the chain displayed there. Among these levels, it is the couple's shared unconscious which will

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need the analyst's care, without being the only object being cared for. The contents and *shared* unconscious process move within the link woven from the primal fantasies and unconscious alliances; they show themselves as being tied to the couple's respective ascendant lineage (the ancestors), to common or descendant respective lineage (the descendants), as well as to the links between collateral kinsmen (fraternal, first cousins, relative by marriage).

To consider the couple as a psychical entity which connects two people through an intersubjective link and contains their psyches in a common envelope has as a corollary the notion of a real participation from both members, meaning a complicity in reciprocity. And just as the origin of the conflict is not exclusively within the couple, its offspring will spread a varying amount of spitefulness in their own generation and between generations, depending on the wealth and adaptability of the contents moving in the links and in function of the quality of the psychic envelope which will contain, keep or let the conflict gush out of the conjugal sphere.

The conflict's parametres

The affects at work here are orchestrated by the couple's love/hate balance. Those two organising affects' tangling is inherent in any intersubjective link, particularly in its unconscious aspects. Depending on both the interfantasmatic activity in the couple and the existing link between affects and representation, we can talk passion, feelings or even simply emotions.

It is quite commonly accepted that love should be predominant so as to ensure a lasting link for the couple, and absolute happiness like a cloudless sky. However, other finely shaded aspects are involved and one of these seems crucial: surprise. Let's quote the thoughts of a character from Tolstoi (*Anna Karenina*): « Long ago, when he was still a boy, he had often laughed in his head about the small miseries of married life: rows, jealousies, petty concerns. Nothing like this would ever happen in his marriage, never his intimate life would be like the other's. And yet, this very meanness happened anyway and in spite of his wishes it was taking an undeniable importance. His surprise was considerable ... Never Levine would have imagined that the relationship between him and his wife could be anything else but full of sweetness, respect and tenderness; however, they had rows from the very beginning! »

The hateful witticisms which come up during a row are the cause of a feeling of disillusion, and even maybe betrayal. Nevertheless, we think that conflict brings the benefit of introducing the necessary disillusion of excessive ideals found in the honeymoon period and that dissensions contribute at the same time to the re-establishment of alterity which got somewhat lost in the fusion fed by fantasies of twin-like similarities which are a feature of groupal illusion. Disillusion would work towards the maturity of the couple in the same way it works so that the young child can reach individuation and acknowledge both his singularity and the alterity of any other. Paradoxically, it is disillusion which can potentially set the couple in a long term relationship: it contributes to the creation and feeding of conjugal identity, which is now able to cope with contrary events likely to split them up.

However, the love/hate tangle can reach a constant imbalance and crisis breaks out in a more and more predictable manner. The disappearance of the element of surprise indicates the couple is settling into a pathological pairing up, of which the most striking types are masochistic or pervert.

The various degrees of conjugal conflict

Every degree of intensity is possible up to crime of passion which is not part of our direct observation, but the fantasy of which cannot always be removed. The intensity of expression becomes particularly significant in two extreme situations which need to be highlighted: on one hand visible violence, with severe and obvious attacks, on the other hand, concealment, where the conflicts are covert, « subliminal », and even possibly unlikely to be detected by close relatives.

When violence invades the couple, aggressive behaviour is assembled by hatred projected onto the partner, overstepping and hiding the love investments. This hatred is in turn warded off and acted, threatening the other who is reduced to just his *radical alterity*. The other is not what we thought he should be and this sudden strangeness threatens both the alliance intersubjective link, likely to break, and the couple's psychic envelope which is then close to being torn apart. Words acquire a performative value which gives them the same strength as actions, gestures hurt and injure

physically and affectively. The result is major narcissistic damages, more or less tinged with the shame of letting oneself go or to let oneself be caught in such a whirlwind of violence. The effects can, of course, be irreversible.

The second specific aspect which can poison a couple's life is represented by the infiltration of *underhand attacks*, of little obvious intensity, fairly vague and to be frank, ambiguous enough to have their aggressiveness denied. In this case, we get very close to perversion and its pernicious effects; the other is disqualified as soon as he tries to answer back and the first attack becomes thus twice as effective because its ambiguity offers the possibility of retraction which makes it twice as offensive.

Temporality

The couple lives and is seen only as a story happening between the inaugural, when the unconscious intersubjective link begins to be woven, and the expectation of keeping the promises glimpsed in the shared ideals. Depending on how the three major parameters, the affects, intensity and temporality are tangled, we can observe a wide range going from temporary disagreement to an extemporaneous explosion, from fundamental dissension, to a state of chronic quarrelling, where can be found peaks which feed the flames of the fighting. The famous « domestic fights » emerge on a wave of chronic dissension, or give the beat to a basic harmony which is rather satisfactory. The fights happening in a couple's life are either *acute* or *chronic*, and of variable *length* and *periodicity*. In the end, it is the temporal course of conjugal conflicts which, beyond their formal aspects, seals the couple's fate: when seeing the amount of suffering regularly endured, arrives the *moment* of realisation that no mending is possible or desired.

What does conflict mean for the couple?

What triggers the episodes is often difficult to recall, the objective possibly being simply to reach the crisis' acme so as to get some sort of orgasmic pleasure from the paradoxical mix of mastering and the irrepressible. On another metaphorical level, D. Anzieu (1986) saw in the natural tendency to have domestic fights the work of a « couple's paradoxical logical organiser » described thus: « we get on to not listen to each other ». This kind of shared anti-couple myth is compatible with the observation of excuses to have a fight which rest

on exciting a prevalent fibre in the link uniting the partners, each « fibre » helping to define the couple's identity, for the benefit of mutual investments and sharing psychic contents. This couple's identity is superimposed to individual identity, while it gains autonomy in the alliance link in the family.

Among the link's elementary fibres are material solidarity, comfort coming from habit and the security it gives, the importance how the couple is seen socially, but also and above all the mutual, intellectual, moral and affective support the spouses show to each other in an atmosphere of trust. Finally the complicity between genders is probably at the heart of the couple's link, a rope as strong as its opposite, rivalry, both being reversible, simultaneous and complementary.

In the end, calling into question anything that contributes to creating the couple brings on a narcissistic conflict between the subject and its belonging to the couple.

We fully understand that the couple's metapsychological status when in conflict cannot be unique: we are walking on a busy clinical ground where multiple pathologies meet, but also situations where neither of the partners taken individually could be seen as mentally ill or the incarnation of evil, in spite of the devastation brought on each other in an acted mutuality, and suffered in a pathological mode.

Contemporary couples' conflict and how this is externalized in therapy

In conjunction with considerations towards different types of couples, many factors in social evolution cause an ongoing increase in separations, whether the couple is officially married or not. Going to a solicitor is already a form of « externalisation » of the conflict, taking it outside the conjugal sphere; it is not meant to be therapeutic although it can bring effects of that kind and is available only for officially married couples wanting to split up. Another way of externalising the conflict is to bring it to be treated by a couple psychoanalyst. What attitude can be adopted in a therapeutic perspective to meet the couple's expectancies?

The multiplicity and rhythm of the psychic movements involved, sometimes violent ones, demand an intense concentration from the analyst. Words and thoughts clash, damaging both the psychic envelope and the link. The couple shows a noticeable loss in psychic

fluidity. In these conditions, to carry on thinking about sharing and movement of psychic elements demands a wide spectrum care, without wandering off each person's unconscious intrapsychic conflicts: it is the whole of the psychic contents given as data which needs to be gathered to recognise its transferential impact, be it from both partners or just one.

In the initial transference, the analyst is called upon to act as a referee or to punish, attracted to form alliance or get involved in the movements of attack, retreat or defence. Faced with these attempts to make the analyst's attention stray from the couple's groupal identity and to annex it individually, it is important to keep in mind the function of spokesperson given to one member of the couple. Analysing the counter-transference will help to perceive more clearly the nature of the affects, fantasies and representations produced and use them for the couple's psychic work as a group. Indeed, with conjugal conflict, all these elements can provide prize material to rebuild the couple's intersubjectivity in its unconscious components and intrapsychic anchorage, whether they appear to belong to just one or be shared. Because the couple's link does not stop with the subject, it plunges right into the heart of each subjectivity, including in a couple analyst framework where hermeneutic interpretations towards the couple seen as a group are predominant. This framework, with its hospitable and sheltering functions, will contribute to groupal regression, both topical and formal where the couple's common basis will reappear. This is where lie what's left of the first groupal illusions, from there that the common primal fantasies emerge, beyond the couple's singular psychic productions first shared then separated. When hearing the ultra-differentiated psychic productions coming to the foreground of the warring couple, it is crucial that the analyst keep in mind the archaic foundations of a couple's psychic groupality. Their residual expression will automatically be shown through actions, facial expressions, sighs, looks and motions spotted by the analyst and which are clues to a potentially useful starting point for the couple; the analyst will rely on them to help create an atmosphere favourable to daydreams, interfantasmatisation, or even a new mythopoeia.

In short, the analyst uses a listening which is mainly hospitable and containing, making sure he keeps a good fluidity in his own thoughts, doing his best according to his abilities for individual and groupal care

to fulfil the conditions needed for a true analytical work for the couple.

Potential outcome of conflicts

The nature of unconscious alliances, the strength of affects or the eventual predominance of love neither guarantee the couple's serenity nor that it will last as a psychic entity, even if there is no separation to socially confirm the couple's dissolution.

In the midst of conflict, conscious and unconscious destructive designs are at work, but the couple does not let itself be easily conquered and the outcomes are varied. Through its conflicts, their repetition and the multiplication of their themes, the couple can find thrills to remobilise its ability to connect, reinforce the alliance link and reassure itself. This evolution happens only if are resolved the conflicts coming from the couple's mythology and ideals: thoughts are turned towards the future. This positive fate may however lack stability and fail because of the compulsion to repeat at work in the link.

Solving and reconciliation are not synonymous: solving is the work of a mostly unconscious process coming from the psychic work done in the transference-counter-transference dynamic, while reconciliation demands a decision made and a project supported by an effective commitment. It rests on solving, without which it would be just words.

To be strong, reconciliation should happen simultaneously at the various level involved in the couple's conflict, starting with oneself. Representations of oneself overtaken by destructivity can arouse disgust, hatred or shame. This needs to be thought over and put aside to rebuild the couple's link. Notice that reconciliation with oneself can oppose the couple's reconciliation: the partners commit to a shared acknowledgment of the rarefaction of the psychic contents moving in the link or of their harmful effects. Myths, fantasies and representations coloured by affects are less and less invested in, or are negatively invested in. Libido moves away and the untying forces benefit from this: the link is dying. In the best case scenario, an agreement is reached on the advantages of confirming this simultaneous extinction of the conflict and the couple. The couple's psychic envelop is deserted and only practically inert traces of the link will remain.

The second line of the reconciliation will be done with the couple itself as object of shared investments, beyond returned rationality regarding the other we may have hated, and by whom we were wounded and suffered. This renewal of the alliance link can commit each to a reassessment of the narcissistic contract which binds them to filiations and to his ancestors: the unconscious alliances are not inalterable. This positive hypothesis is then supported by a common rereading of the *conjugal romance*, formed by a conglomerate of myths, ideals and fantasies.

Such an outcome can be considered as positive for situations where the couple is maintained solely through a mutual hold on each other and where hatred is constantly at work moving sometimes under the guise of obvious indifference. The economy of this type of link is costly and generates suffering and its simultaneous denial: denial always runs after suffering to cancel it or divert it away by projecting it outside the couple's groupal envelop. It is necessary that skilfully measured out narcissistic compensations emanates from this pathological type of couple's link for it to carry on.

But the pervert couple, running out of internal or external alibis can also end up badly maimed when the aim is the psychic extermination of the other: the fight stops then for lack of adversary, even if it means moving onto another battleground.

Conclusion

Throughout this sweeping presentation around the notion of conjugal conflict, our intention was not to present either a typology of conflicts copying closely a typology of couples nor an inventory of the possible ways to be reconciled. We would like to highlight that conflicts, as painful as they may be to live with, are not at all the dregs of conjugal relationships to be eliminated at all cost. They play a major role in the building of the couple as a mature and long lasting entity, but they may also transform themselves into warning signs in case of violence and repetition, reaching their ultimate conclusion only through the link breaking up.

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ABSTRACT

« Domestic fights »: This generic term encompasses a vast spectrum of situations. There are parameters which help to identify and understand metapsychologically the conflicts infiltrating the couple or alliance's unconscious intersubjective link. We will mention three variants: temporality (type of trigger, length, repetition), intensity of incidents (minimal, ambiguous, frank, violent), as well as quality of affects at play (passion, emotions and the feelings orchestrated by the couple love/hate). Depending on their intricacy's alchemy, we can notice a range going from temporary disagreement to extemporaneous blaze which tears apart the usual harmony, from long term discord to a state of crisis or chronic aggressiveness. If

these situations are as old as couples are, the current way of life and its new standards facilitate the frequency and number of partners; for all that, *fluidity is quite out of place* and the pain caused by these reorganizations lead people to seek couple psychoanalysis. If the break up doesn't occur, reconciliation enables the couple to survive. But this situation lacks stability, failing through the compulsion to repeat at work in the link. It is actually in the link that the levers for reconciliation can be seized, using the transference-counter-transference games occupying the therapeutic environment. There will be a multiple axis of psychical work to ensure viable reconciliation with:

- the other,
- oneself,
- the respective ancestors and their function in the unconscious alliances
- the couple itself as an object of shared investment,
- the conglomerate of myths, ideals and fantasies which make up the conjugal romance.

Key words

Conflict in the couple - couple's unconscious intersubjective link - conjugal romance - temporality - couple psychoanalysis.

RESUMEN

"Conflicto conyugal": este término genérico recubre un vasto espectro de situaciones. Ciertos parámetros confluyen en la identificación y la comprensión metapsicológica del conflicto, que se infiltra en el vínculo de alianza intersubjetivo inconsciente de la Pareja. Citaremos tres variables: la temporalidad (modo de desencadenamiento, duración, repetición), la intensidad de las manifestaciones (minimalista, ambigua, franca, violenta), así como la calidad de los afectos en juego (pasiones, emociones y sentimientos orquestados por la dupla amor/odio). Según la alquimia de su intrincación, se observará una gama que va del desacuerdo pasajero a la conflagración extemporánea de una escena que desgarrar la armonía cotidiana, desde el malentendido de largo curso hasta el estado de crisis o de beligerancia crónicos. Si estas situaciones son antiguas como la pareja, la vida contemporánea y sus nuevas normas facilitan la frecuencia y la rapidez de los cambios de compañeros; con todo, la fluidez no se establece y el dolor de estos reordenamientos invita a recurrir al psicoanálisis de pareja. Si la ruptura no está

consumada, la reconciliación permite a la pareja escapar de ella, pero esta situación carece de estabilidad, y es puesta en jaque por la compulsión de repetición que actúa en el vínculo. Es efectivamente aquí, en el vínculo, que habrá que aprehender los resurgimientos de la reconciliación, a través de los juegos transferenciales contra-transferenciales de la sesión terapéutica. Para una reconciliación viable, los ejes del trabajo psíquico serán múltiples con:

- el otro
- consigo mismo
- los antepasados respectivos y sus funciones en las alianzas inconscientes
- la pareja en sí misma como objeto de investidura compartida,
- el conglomerado de mitos, ideales y fantasmas que constituyen la novela conyugal.

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Palabras clave

Conflicto conyugal - vínculo intersubjetivo inconciente de la pareja - novela conyugal - temporalidad - psicoanálisis de pareja.

RÉSUMÉ

« Conflit conjugal »: ce terme générique recouvre un vaste spectre de situations. Certains paramètres concourent à l'identification et à la compréhension métapsychologique du conflit qui s'infiltré dans le lien intersubjectif inconscient de couple, d'alliance. Nous citerons trois variables : la temporalité (mode de déclenchement, durée, répétition), l'intensité des manifestations (minimale, ambiguë, franche, violente), ainsi que la qualité des affects en jeu (passions, émotions et sentiments orchestrés par le couple amour/haine). Selon l'alchimie de leur intrication, on observera une gamme allant du désaccord passager à la conflagration extemporanée d'une scène qui déchire l'harmonie quotidienne, de la mésentente au long cours à l'état de crise ou de belligérance chronique. Si ces situations sont vieilles comme le couple, la vie contemporaine et ses nouvelles normes facilitent la fréquence et la rapidité des changements de partenaires ; pour autant, la fluidité n'est pas de mise et la douleur de ces remaniements invite à recourir à la psychanalyse de couple. Si la rupture n'est pas consommée, la réconciliation permet au couple d'en réchapper, mais cette issue manque de stabilité, tenue en échec par la compulsión de répétition à l'œuvre dans le lien. C'est bien là,

dans le lien, que seront à saisir les ressorts de la réconciliation, par le biais des jeux transféro-contre-transférentiels de la scène thérapeutique. Les axes du travail psychique seront multiples pour une réconciliation viable avec :

- l'autre,
- soi-même,
- les ancêtres respectifs et leurs fonctions dans les alliances inconscientes,
- le couple lui-même comme objet d'investissement partagé,
- le conglomerat de mythes, d'idéaux et de fantasmes qui constituent le roman conjugal.

Mots clés

Conflit conjugal - lien intersubjectif inconscient de couple - roman conjugal - temporalité - psychanalyse de couple.