

International Review of Psychoanalysis of Couple and Family

N° 2007/2 - The psychoanalytical process

INTIMACY, COLLUSION AND COMPLICITY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS WITH COUPLES

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Foreword

In order to introduce what we mean by intimacy, collusion and complicity, we believe it necessary to start from a wider theoretical premise as to which psychoanalytical model we think best suited to describe couple phenomena.

All the various psychoanalytical schools agree that for the secondary functioning of thought (i.e. the representational and self-reflective ability) a triangulation is necessary without which the ego cannot develop (psycho dynamically).

The primary scene process with which Eugenio Gaddini (1974) describes the progressive consolidation of the baby's mental ability to articulate three-dimensional thought based on its affective experience with the parental couple, recalls and integrates some relevant reflections made by Winnicott: *it is not possible to talk of a baby without its mother, and directly linked to this, there is no such thing as a mother without an implicit or explicit, acknowledged or denied link with masculinity-fatherhood.*

In order to understand what triangulation is in psychodynamic terms, it is useful to refer to two of Winnicott's concepts: that of transitional space and the use of the object.

As we know, the transitional space is the area of the me/not me and is the indispensable condition for the development of a child *provided with autonomy concerning its ability to take charge of its original self and make it communicate with what is other from that self.*

Without a transitional space, one cannot libidinally cathect the object, or in other words, one cannot use it with drives. The engagement of the libidinal drive, in fact, implies the management of conflicting and contradictory feelings such as love and hate.

A balanced couple relation moves along the parameters of triangulation as a synonym of capacity for authentic unconscious contact along with the acknowledgement of the limitations imposed by the other's reality.

Regression, along with transference is the primary access point in individual analysis allowing the process of therapeutic change. It is found in couples in what we might call its natural form.

Since couple relations induce regression and transference without an intermediate space that allows it to process hate, any internal conflict tends to be discharged on to the other, who is no longer seen as being different from oneself but is confused with an internal object or a part of the self.

In these circumstances, negative feelings are subjectively experienced as antagonist to the relationship and within the relationship legitimate emotions like love and tenderness cannot circulate.

Intimacy, collusion and complicity

In some cultures combined couples (where a young woman and a young man are pressed to assume predefined sexual/social roles) are considered more harmonious, than couples born out of passion (the latter are characterized by a strong illusion of immediate intimacy), because common habits and the sharing of everyday life are thought to facilitate the emergence of regressive needs along with the

assumption of adult tasks, thus helping to build a basis for agreement, nurturing a mutual sense of belonging and a link towards stability.

No matter how it was formed, a couple is engaged at a biological (sex), social (roles), affective and intrapsychic (internal representations) level. The feeling of intimacy, however, cannot be acquired for good, but each couple will try to maintain it by managing the conflicts that inevitably arise in life, or that derive from earlier individual conflicts, triggered off by specific moments in the life of a couple

Intimacy should not be mistaken for love and wellbeing. We can see great intimacy in couples that know how to share and give meaning to unpleasant feelings and moments of great suffering,

*"To an outside, uninvolved person, what appears to be an antagonistic communication can easily be a loving one" (Enid Balint 1968 p.35)
And: "Over and over again people come back to their failures in an attempt to remedy them...we could say that in marriage we unconsciously hope to find a solution to our intimate and primitive problems, particularly to those that we cannot communicate socially."
(p.41)*

This creates a kind of mutual "psychic containment" that fulfils a deep basic need related to the feeling of existing. Intimacy thus guarantees the fluidity and ductility of the link and favours the continuity of the relation also in difficult times.

The concept of collusion, instead, is used in general to describe psychopathological relational phenomena that are built on cross projective identifications. Each partner, by absorbing some features of the other partner's personality, imposes on that partner, rigid attributions emerging from parts of one's internal objects, or from rejected or idealized parts of one's self. Collusion in this sense, if used as a total or partial substitute for a proper intimacy, tends in time to fix rigid couple functioning modes in a tangle of parts of both partners, and inhibits the capacity for expression of other parts of the self, and of one's internal world.

We should however note that the concept of collusion is currently used to describe all those phenomena of link-structuring that are not necessarily pathological. Collusion is therefore also a dual defensive organization that can be likened to other individual defences, such as phobic or compulsive personality, and as such plays an important

protective function against the fear of loss and separation, and also the deep fear of the unwanted aspects of one's internal world.

In this sense we can say that collusion in couples is necessary for coping with the complexity of adult life, but can become an obstacle to the development of individual potential, as it absorbs huge amounts of energy directed at maintaining the status quo.

To talk of development potential in adults can seem unusual in the psychoanalytical field, usually oriented to studying intrapsychic dynamics defined in the early phases of life, owing to the belief that once maturity is reached, things are set, and only limited corrections can be made.

On the contrary, to think that significant moments in a person's life, such as marriage, the birth of a child or the death of a parent, can trigger off significant crises that entail re-individuating (as in adolescence), opens up new perspectives on individual growth processes with consequences on the psychoanalytical psychotherapy of couples and families.

We can say, then, that adolescence does not only represent a stage in the growth process, but can be seen also as a state of mind that maintains some aspects of childhood throughout life. (Erikson, 1969).

We may consider intimacy as a deep need for self-continuity fed by trust in the partner, and collusion as that aspect of the link that roughly corresponds to the Ego.

As for the need to keep creative energy alive, the ability to reinvent oneself at any age by fully using one's internal resources, we believe that the feeling of complicity best defines this sense of sharing in a couple.

Complicity represents, in fact, a more dynamic feeling that goes hand in hand with the couple's projects, as it maintains a positive tension between support and competition both in intrapsychic and external terms. Certainly complicity is based on the confirmation of the roles assumed in a couple and can be likened to "the two of us versus the world".

The term complicity derives directly from clinical situations: couples often use it in sessions to describe the harmony that was there but is

now lost, or something that they envy in others and wonder why they cannot achieve it. That feeling of being “the two of us versus the world” makes one feel the other is there even when not physically present.

The concept of cross projective identification can be clinically useful to describe serious psychopathological conditions, but, in our opinion, it is better to refer to other models to describe the neurotic “normality” of couple relations.

Terms such as dyadic boundary (Dicks, Giannakoulas) or couple skin Ego (Anzieu) are clinically useful metaphors to evoke the peculiar ductility or rigidity of psychic containment, but also the variable permeability of inside (intrapsychic) and outside (acting out).

Puget and Berenstein (1989) defining the term link write:

*“Establecemos una diferencia entre una relación objectal como formación intrasubjetiva, intraterritorial respecto del aparato psíquico, y una relación entre el yo y otro yo con características de extraterritorialidad a la cual llamamos vínculo o relación intersubjetiva”.*¹
(p.31)

We wish to facilitate a qualifying and specific aspect of therapeutic work with couples: the creation or consolidation of the extraterritorial area.

We have chosen the metaphor of territory, alluding to the use of space. If space is shared (intraterritoriality), each partner inevitably loads it with personal meanings that can generate conflict and produce disconfirmations.

The extraterritorial space is the space of relations that does not overlap with the personal, or at least not fully. It is a dynamic space where encounters and confrontations take place and from which often harmony emerges.

In this game between two partners, a bridge is built between the libidinal cathexis of the object and the response to the need for stability and continuity of the self.

In order to understand the dynamics of marital relations, two basic concepts of Winnicott’s : transitional space and use of the object must be grasped.

We also believe that to understand adult affective dynamics, reference to the development model of the original dyad is not enough. We suggest integrating in our practice, psychoanalytical knowledge deriving from the discoveries on the adolescent mind.

The reference to the mother-baby dyad used to describe the transitional space, has the defect of considering an asymmetric dyad, where roles are clearly different, even if they have a common goal. This is different from the experience of new subjectivation made by adolescents who use the coming from, and going to, their family and peer group, as moving from action to thought, and from intrasubjectivity to intersubjectivity.

As Ladame (2004) writes:

“Adolescence is necessary to conclude the construction of identity, of the subject, of the Ego. This process started a long time earlier – its core is the basis of being and guarantees its continuity – but will remain an open site if the psychic changes following puberty cannot integrate. The task of identity construction requires a triple appropriation: of one’s own body as a man or a woman, of one’s thoughts and of one’s drives. It is not a phase in itself but an indispensable requirement for starting a relationship with others in adult terms, on the social and sexual level.”

In order to integrate the sexual body and to take on itself the disruption of the earlier coordinates that defined its identity, the adolescent mind needs a potential space without which it cannot have access to a new subjectivation.

Developing the capacity to use one’s mind, the peer group, the family and sexual experiences in turn, is an indispensable task for adolescents.

If in infancy a person has been unable to achieve internal capacity to use the object, i.e. to love it and hate it without destroying it, or if there is no possibility for triangulation because potential space is lacking, then the site cannot be completed as Ladame says. *But if the site is open, a new opportunity for transforming the contact with external reality into “experiencing” in Bionian terms can be found in couple relations.*

The extraterritorial psychic space, kept inside the safety boundaries by mutual trust, has a lot in common with the features of the adolescent mental state.

Case history

After this premise we could say that couples' expectations from psychoanalytical therapy corresponds to what more developed couples have been able to obtain from complicity: i.e. a space for sharing, for deep communication, for role playing, for conflicts and for life.

We will now illustrate the therapeutic process of a couple who wished to recover the sense of complicity that declined considerably after they decided to get married and live together.

When Chiara and Marco met they were both emerging from broken relationships. With great suffering Chiara had left her 10-year long boyfriend, an ex-school mate, with whom passionate love had become deep affection.

Marco had had various experiences, always frustrating, he said, because he was more interested in having girlfriends than real love. His last affair, with Goia however, had been a true love story, but later on their fighting became so bitter he decided to break up.

Initially Marco and Chiara shared their painful failures. They were both sensitive and intelligent but came from completely different backgrounds. Marco's family was traditional: the father was the master and commander, the mother always obliging. Never a fight, all were subject to the chief, who could also be supportive and helpful when needed. But Marco, the only boy and much younger than his two sisters, was very close to his mother and had seen her cry often, so he resented his father greatly.

Chiara, instead, came from a family where independence was greatly valued. There was no great role difference between her parents who both experienced satisfaction working out of the home and shared domestic chores. Even though she did not admit it, it was evident she had often felt abandoned by her busy family. She had always been very close to her big brother, who married early, and subsequently had less time for her.

Marco and Chiara were fearful of making another mistake and during the first years maintained a relatively uncommitted relationship.

Things went smoothly and sexual intercourse was not affected by the passing of time. They felt relaxed and were ready to start thinking about living together.

But as soon as the step was taken, the dark clouds that had troubled their preceding stories reappeared. Aware of the risk they decided on entering into couple analysis.

About a year after starting analysis, Chiara began the session by recounting how she felt a renewed tenderness and attraction for Marco and said: "I feel like a teen all over again". Marco smiled on hearing this and, slightly embarrassed, said two nights ago they had sex as if they had only just fallen in love, and it was particularly nice because they were laughing and sharing little things which they hadn't done for a very long time.

They were both surprised by this unexpected event.

Chiara described an evening at the movies with good friends and the discussion that followed. Unlike the previous times, she and Marco were able to express their opinions without conflict despite their diverging ideas. Chiara agreed with a friend she always admired, whilst Marco had taken his usual role of opinion leader with the rest of the group of the same mind. The evening ended on a harmonious note.. On the way home they continued to talk about the film in a humorous and relaxed way and they commented on the many details of the evening. They said it was probably this pleasant climate that led Marco to suggest sex to Chiara who appreciated that a pleasant evening could end with sexual pleasure.

In the past they had recounted similar situations, characterized by the repetition of unpleasant feelings when Chiara felt crushed by Marco's ability to express his thoughts independent of other people's opinions, this made her feel angry and inhibited, and fall into envious silence. There was no question of having sex on those nights and they ended up in exhausting discussions on Marco's inability to understand her, and Chiara's sorrow at being crushed by rational arguments that did not help her to change her oppressive internal state.

In the year preceding this session, therapeutic work had mostly explored the presence of an admired, but often crushing father phantasy (shared by both) that forced Marco to assume a rational and socially successful male model and left Chiara with the weight of the experience of infantile abandonment. Chiara had a similar phantasy in her beloved brother who became a source of impossible rivalry and competition for her partner, ending up in a seduction game that left her always unable to win her right to be loved and admired.

In particular, for Marco to suggest meeting on a sexual level was a request to his partner for confirmation that he was still alive sexually, and not cancelled by rationality, while Chiara, who considered sexuality her winning tool with males, was often inhibited by a deep guilt regarding the legitimacy of this triumph over the object.

At this point we can say that if the therapist's implicit theory is that Marco's sexual motivation is not too masculine and Chiara's motivation too narcissistic, she/he could risk unconsciously interfering with the subjective meanings that the male/female meeting favours in this couple. This is better clarified by the following dreams:

Later in the same session they relate the dreams they had had that night. Chiara dreamt she had gone up to the split level floor (that Marco had built when he moved into the flat, that she initially did not want). In the dream she is happy to see how much extra space they now have, but when she wants to come down she realizes with terror that the stairs are without steps. Luckily there's another staircase which she uses to come down.

Marco, in turn, dreamt that his dog jumps into a rough sea. At the beginning he orders the dog to jump, but then, when the dog does not surface, he is afraid it has drowned, but a friend tells him the dog will swim ashore.

Both dreams can be put on a par by the issue of integration of the excited body represented by the climbing up and down in Chiara's dream and by the jump into the water and returning to the shore in Marco's dream. They could however also be related to the desire to try a new approach to self challenge which for Chiara means the capacity to access high aspects (typical of her family) concerning her ability to express herself and see her intellectual prowess acknowledged. For Marco it is a question of experiencing his bodily

power, overcoming the fear of the sea/mother that swallows him in her uncontrollable emotional waves.

The shared object now seems less oppressive. In both partners we see a more dynamic use of the third element, represented by the peer group, by Chiara's admired, but not inhibiting friend, and the therapist in his function of father and friend for Marco. And both have started to make a more dynamic use of their minds, bodies and feelings.

We would also like to point out that the use of a theory that considers adolescent aspects as still being present in adults, allowed the therapist to see the importance of the reality of experiencing contexts for the couple, in parallel with the work of elaboration induced by analysis, transferring the technical modes of adolescent psychoanalysis to analysis of the couple.

Conclusion

By illustrating this case history we propose the following hypothesis: a couple can reach an affective and libidinally dynamic stability when it can build a bridge between the unconscious need for intimacy, in the service of the self, and collusion, seen as a socially necessary dual defensive organization. We defined this bridge with the term complicity, following the suggestion of some couples in treatment that stimulated us to use the subjectivation experience in adolescence, as an area of the adult mind that plays an important role in the dual dynamic process. In our opinion, the possibility that in time a couple can mutually acknowledge itself as a libidinal object for satisfactory sexuality can be ascribed to adolescent complicity.

We believe that a good therapeutic process is influenced by the fact that the couple therapist is aware of her/his implicit theories concerning the meaning of a stable couple.

The process of transformation that a couple can accomplish with the help of therapeutic work is due to two factors:

1. the couple can reactivate each partner's adolescent area on which to base their complicity

2. the therapist, aware of her/his implicit theories on the idea of the internalized couple, is able to respect the partners' subjective experience without useless impingements.

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¹ "We suggest a difference between an object relation as intrasubjective intraterritorial formation in the psychic apparatus and a relation between an Ego and another Ego with extraterritorial characteristics, which we call link or intersubjective relation"