

## ***MARRIAGE VERSUS MERGER: What is a Couple? NOTES FOR COUPLES THERAPY***

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Many times when supervising psychotherapists, who were doing a lot of couples therapy, I would find myself saying to the therapist: "This is not a couple. Developmentally these two people are not at the level of being a couple. I can help you understand what is going on, but each of these people needs an individual therapist." Also, when working with couples myself, I have found distinct prognostic differences related to whether the two people who come to me, asking for couples therapy, are developmentally at the level of being a couple.

In one instance a married couple came to me when the wife was threatening divorce due to her husband having a drinking problem. During the course of the couples therapy, not only did the husband give up drinking alcohol, to save the relationship with his wife, and to save the family in which they had two children; but he demonstrated his many levels of awareness of who his wife was as a separate and distinct person from him. Further, his wife was able to develop a reciprocal understanding and empathy. This allowed this couple to develop the true mutuality of a married couple, leaving the couples therapy with a sincere commitment to being a team as they went forward together.

### ***Couple #1***

The man and woman in this couple each had some projected images onto the other that interfered with them being able to listen and hear the meaning in their partner's communication in the beginning. However, they were able to hear interpretations about their distortions of who the other one was, which could interfere with their communication. Many different areas of conflict came up in the course of our sixty minute sessions (15 minutes more than a psychotherapy session), but each of the members of the couple showed their capacities to discuss these conflicts, and to define their differences together. They also proved themselves able to express their feelings along with self reflection. They could be reminded to look at each other, even when they instinctively wanted to look away in anger. They shared their tears, regrets, longings, biases, memories and fears. They commented together on how they shared some deep values, ideals, and interests, but were also of quite different opinions on some things. They truly enlarged the scope of their curiosity about who the other person was, is, and was continuing to become. They began to understand more deeply why they had chosen each other, and why they were again choosing each other as they and their family evolved. They defined themselves as two separate but related beings, who could see how they contrasted with each other, conflicted with each other, and also joined together in shared purposes for their marriage and family.

Despite neurotic defenses that could divide them and create impasses, both the husband and wife in this couple cared enough to see each other beyond these defensive, self protective,

often unconscious maneuvers. They truly let awareness of their own obstacles enlarge their conscious embrace of mutuality in the relationship.

In essence, these two people could communicate as a couple that evidenced the major hallmarks of separation-individuation and self integration, which can be defined in Object Relations terms. They learned more about how each of their internal worlds, which they sometimes spoke about through sharing their dreams and fantasies, affected the way they saw each other and interacted with each other. This helped them each perceive the other more clearly. But much psychological development went into their capacities to view each other with more objectivity, combined with more compassion, patience, and optimism.

### ***Couple #2***

Now I will mention a contrasting couple, who failed to be at the level of a true couple, if we define these things developmentally. This couple had dated on and off for several years. They felt very much in love, but they would have arguments that constantly caused the man to break up with the woman. The man also came from abroad, and had a job that required he travel on an ongoing basis, plus having to revisit his home country to visit the children he had from a former marriage.

Unlike the process of the couples therapy sessions with the married couple, just described, the sessions with this second “couple” lacked any sustained process. Couple number 2 lacked the development of conversation, communication and relatedness that couple number one had. They would attempt to speak about what was bothering each of them about the relationship, with the man generally inviting his female girlfriend to speak first. However, very quickly the girlfriend would erupt in accusations towards her boyfriend and sometimes towards me. In fact she would very quickly explode when her boyfriend said he wanted to see if they could solve their problems so they might live together, but would maintain that he was not ready to consider marriage again, at least not at any time soon. At first the girlfriend could show some vulnerability, and could have the anguished pain of rage filled tears in her eyes, tears of rage more than grief, and thus not so easily processed or contained. At first her agony and anguish was palpable, and I found it easy to feel empathy and compassion for her, especially when her heart would speak through her throat, not just her rage, and she would manage to gasp out “I can’t stand it if you say “never,” (about marriage) before she ran out of the main room of my office. However, as her boyfriend maintained his position of wanting to work out their relationship, without needing to get married, or working out problems before discussing marriage, Marilyn began to impulsively throw out accusations or paranoid assumptions about me as well as about he boyfriend. She became increasingly antagonistic towards me so that I couldn’t help her hear what her boyfriend was actually saying. She would suddenly erupt in rage and terror with some totally tangential suspicion, tangential to the current attempted conversation, such as “You think I don’t really want him. I tell you he is the only one I want. You think it won’t work!” Marilyn was obviously projecting her own doubts and fears onto me, but they weren’t just projections. They were projective-identification enactments in which I began

to feel caught up in the same broad reaching blanket accusations that she would level at her boyfriend in different ways. I felt the intensity of her paranoia, and also experienced the frustration of knowing that she was nowhere near the truth of what I was feeling or thinking, and I thus felt firsthand how misunderstood, and how demonized, her boyfriend was feeling.

I also began to feel the psychic pull towards a sado-masochistic fight that mirrored that which she would attempt to provoke with her boyfriend, which would generally result in her boyfriend withdrawing from the arena of the session, pulling back into the position of an observer, and beating a hasty retreat from any vulnerability. His psychic retreat extended to refusing to read or say a list of his own complaints about the nature of his girlfriend's treatment of him.

And as he withdrew Marilyn would become even more frantic. Not wanting to totally drive him away with rage laced accusations, she would turn towards me instead, enacting her own scapegoated position in her early family drama, as she tried to goad me in a position of having to defend myself. It was all I could do to try to stay out of the drama Marilyn was reenacting, by refusing to fight her oppositional stance, and refusing to defend myself. However, my role as an objective observer in the battle between each member of this couple would be undermined. I was undermined in my attempts to communicate to Marilyn, who was being paralyzed by her resistance to any psychic penetration by either me or her boyfriend. I tried to interpret what was going on, but the essence of it, in Marilyn, was nonverbal, and Marilyn walled off against any psychic penetration from me, or from any understanding of what I was saying. Her defensive walling off operated from a primal nonverbal level in dissociated (and traumatized) parts of her mind. Then her boyfriend would become the objective observer who would intervene between me and Marilyn, as I "resisted transformation" (Edward Levinson) into a participant in the projective-identification drama. He would say to Marilyn: "You won't listen to her. She is trying to help you. She is trying to help you understand. She is trying to speak to you."

Instead of the sessions moving in the progressive direction of the couples' therapy with couple number 1, the session with couple number 2 became polarized. All meaning was blocked, distorted, and obviated, to the point that the boyfriend refused to continue coming to the sessions. His girlfriend, who I am calling Marilyn, was crushed and traumatically disappointed, but she could never control what she was doing, or be able to think, reflect, or respond to me or her boyfriend with any awareness of where we were coming from during the heat of the sessions, where her sadomasochistic enactments pressured me. It also came out that her boyfriend had a history of growing up with a battling married couple, his parents. His father was an outward abuser, and all his mother could do was withdraw. The last thing this man, who I will call Peter, wanted, was to

participate in outward aggression. He wanted to run for the hills, and his girlfriend felt increasingly **abandoned**, which provoked more of her paranoia and attempted enactments.

***Theory of Marriage versus Merger: the Developmental Criteria for Being a True Couple***

When we think of the more primitive “couple” coming to couples therapy, which is really not a true couple in terms of the developmental Object Relations criteria of separation-individuation and self integration, we might think of the “couple” that enters our offices with one member overshadowing the other in terms of speech, opinions, and self expression, so that the other is silent and hidden, but possibly symbiotic with the more articulate other. When the more hidden and silent member, who might merely echo the other, is asked to speak by the Couples’ therapist the more silent partner may defer to the other. Sometimes this can reflect an obvious lack of development on the part of the silent one, which may be associated with “Co-dependence” and “Closet Narcissism,” the latter implying that one part of the undeveloped couple merges in with the false grandiose self of the other member of the Couple, and gets an identity through the false grandiose image of the idealized partner.

However, the underdeveloped couple comes in various shapes and sizes. Many are seen as a couple from the outside. Yet the two people involved are not yet a couple, in psychological developmental terms. They may actually be two people operating at a level of psychic developmental arrest, where early disruptions in maternal bonding have forestalled, and continue to forestall, the evolution of an authentic, individuated, and self activating identity.

Of course, the Couples therapist may be sent the referral of couples that are not developed to the psychological level of being a couple. That therapist may take quite some time to realize that the two people who enter her/his office together are not at a psychological level in which Couples Therapy can be effective.

Once she/he realizes this, what is the Couples therapist to do? I would advise considering referring each of the two people involved to two different experienced Object Relations educated psychotherapists, each of whom can treat the individual for developmental growth in individual psychotherapy. Sometimes one or two people in the “couple” are already in therapy. Sometimes the “couple” has been referred by one partner’s therapist. Sometimes, the second partner needs to be introduced to the idea of individual therapy by the Couples therapist. The partner who is not in therapy may or may not choose to go to an individual therapy, of course. Yet, the attempt to guide the person in that direction can be an educated one. Sometimes both partners have therapists, and just need to continue the individual work until they can resume couples therapy for their aspirations as a couple.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> couple vignette I describe in this essay, you see a state of merger, rather than the marriage of two separate, individuated and fully developed individuals. But the merger is not as obvious in the beginning as it would be with the couple that comes in with one partner silent or as servicing the partner as a narcissistic echo (often due to the merged image of Closet Narcissism, but sometimes due to intimidation enacted at home). In couple number 2 here, Marilyn and Peter can be seen to have an imbalanced relationship, where the emotional and verbal communication of a couple cannot go forward. But Peter was not just silent and hidden,

or just intimidated. He was very articulate in stating quite loudly, and in fully verbal speech—not just nonverbally, that he was intimidated. He said to Marilyn: “I am scared of you!” “You scare me when you are so aggressive and have a look of hate on your face. I can’t be open with you when you do that. I can’t be vulnerable.” Marilyn could not hear and respond to this in the moment spontaneous expression of fear, which could be seen on her boyfriend’s face.

If Marilyn was not imprisoned and encased in a closed system within her own mind (for very good reasons of course, given her history), where she lived in the monotone obsession about whether Peter would marry her, she could have given Peter breathing space, and a safe space in which to candidly, but also vulnerably to express himself. As their Couples therapist I felt sad for Marilyn, but also extremely frustrated!! I couldn’t help having the countertransference experience of some identification with Peter in his frustration with Marilyn. That didn’t mean that I couldn’t empathize with Marilyn in her fear of never finding a man she loved who she could marry. But the developmental arrest impasse I experienced in Marilyn informed me of why she was not only sabotaging the Couples therapy, but also gave me insight into why doing individual therapy with her would be quite difficult. Her closed system of defensive thought was a pretty intensely walled off system. Even if she could have the affects of grief and loss and moments, her predominant affect was paranoid rage! She couldn’t stop perseverating on all the ways that Peter was unavailable to her, and as she chased, criticized, and shamed him she intensified all of Peter’s defensive distancing maneuvers, where he just wanted to take off, and did! Although Peter had fallen in love with her, and there was mutual sexual attraction, he was not dependent on her in practical way. He could leave her if he wished, but with much intense pain. This man did experience loss, not just anger or rage. If Marilyn would pursue an ongoing course of therapy to deal with her narcissistic and paranoid defenses, she might have a chance to salvage things with Peter, but such treatment takes time, and Peter may not wait. The trauma and tragedy of both their childhoods might just repeat themselves, and leave them both much more alone than they wished to be, although they both had serious problems with intimacy on a sustained basis, and especially with intimacy and commitment. Although not obviously psychologically merged when they came in the door, Peter could only break the merger (“I’m addicted to her, but I must leave her!”) by literally leaving the relationships. Nothing partial between them was working for him. Marilyn just berated him with her shaming analysis of him, and would continue to do so, unless he proposed marriage. The merger here might only be ended by one partner walking out permanently. Short leavings had not worked.

So merger can come in many sizes and shapes. When they first walk into the Couples Therapist’s office (or now enter the virtual room, with Corona Virus) the two psychologically enmeshed and merged individuals may actually look like a Couple. Sometimes it takes several sessions, sometimes many, to tell for sure. The developmental understanding of the Couples therapist can be critical in accessing the situation as the two people involved cannot engage emotionally, and communicate through words and affects, the meaning of who they each are, and of who they want to be as a couple.

Patience is the password for the Couples Therapist.

