

professional, personal and private - the challenge of working creatively with couples

Helena Løvendal Sørensen and Nick Duffell

In the beginning

We were not beginners at relationship. When we met we both had failed marriages behind us, but we thought that this time it would be different. However, after a brief honeymoon period, we seemed to be alternating between furious rows or civil frigidity. Despite our professional experience, we kept falling into bottomless conflict, showing each other sides of ourselves which we didn't like acknowledging. Our relationship, which promised love and friendship, now suffered from battle fatigue. It was very painful. We felt like failures and hypocrites.

Why didn't we give up then? Perhaps because it happened so fast that we still remembered the love between us. Perhaps because we thought we owed it to the children, who had already suffered from the break-up of their family. Perhaps because we were too exhausted to run off and try again. Probably it was a mixture. But eventually we looked at one another and asked the obvious question: 'What is going on?'

We knew from our work that the challenge of intimacy had many people beaten; many were resigned, or dared not hope for more than they already had. We looked around at our friends and colleagues and the picture was very

much the same. Hardly anyone seemed really to have it working. Divorce rates, single-parent statistics and the ubiquitous lonely-hearts columns, seemed to confirm the notion that we were not alone. It was then that we remembered the joke about the child digging in a manure heaped stable. His logic was: "With all that shit there must be a pony somewhere!" So we decided to search for the pony.

In other words we began to question whether our relationship trouble was something we were meant to run into. Could it be that rather than heading for failure we were revealing things about ourselves and about the nature of intimacy which could only be achieved through the medium of extreme discomfort? Following this lead we discovered some very specific things.

We noticed that what had initially attracted us to each other had now become the very things that exasperated us. Helena's optimistic and relaxed attitude to life, for example, once holding great lure for Nick, now appeared to him as unbearable naiveté and lack of responsibility. Nick's ability to discriminate, make decisions and act on them had been a bonus, but now Helena felt totally controlled by him.

And worse: it was as if each had the perverse power of bringing out the most unpleasant, uncooperative, and of course unconscious, side of the other. Nick found himself acting like the tyrant he had sworn he had left behind. We saw ourselves becoming possessed by family demons. Nick magically began to resemble Helena's controlling father, while he felt deprived of her maternal caring. We had begun to discover some of the ways that the Relationship was refining us, by facing us with what we weren't dealing with in our own lives.

It may come as no surprise that our sex life, which had been very vigorous when we first met, was now a place of eternal conflict. We saw that sex became a matrix where our relationship issues would invariably surface, whether we tried to control it by avoidance, or indulgence. We had certainly fallen out of love and into disappointment. Our thoughts ran like this: 'You are not who I thought you were... this is not how I wanted us to turn out.... if this is what we do to each other, we can't be right for one another...'

Abandoning the longing for the perfect

In Denmark, where Helena was born, they talk about the flowers and the bees. The flowers seducing the bees with their fragrance resembles the delightful experience of falling in love. But this is only the initial stage of the art of making and refining honey. Human beings are complex and multifaceted. Torn by seemingly conflicting needs and longings, we struggle to integrate the different aspects within ourselves. Had Nature

decided to wait for individuals to 'sort their stuff out' before releasing the fragrance of the sexual urges, the species wouldn't have survived. So she plays a very beautiful trick: falling in love. Then we fall out: it's the next stage, and it hurts.

If at this point nothing holds the two people together, such as children, marriage, or joint finance, the only sensible action seems to be to end the relationship to search for honey elsewhere - all too often to repeat the same story over again. If there are factors preventing a fast getaway, relationships often become stuck in patterns of resignation or resentment. Even if they lack love and joy, these patterns can prove amazingly durable. In order to do more than just survive this next stage, we had to learn to grieve the apparent loss of love, together. So much energy had gone into blaming each other for the pain we experienced: 'If you would only stop... or do more of... then everything would be as it used to be...,' and so on. We were desperately trying to change the other, or return to how it used to be. Meanwhile, the relationship had other plans. It seemed to be nudging us to change, like a mother bird tricking her young to jump off the edge when it's time to learn to fly. Rather than fleeing the other, we sensed that we had to abandon the images that we had of ourselves, each other, and of what we supposed love to be - including the fantasy that someone else had the ability to supply happiness and make one feel good about oneself.

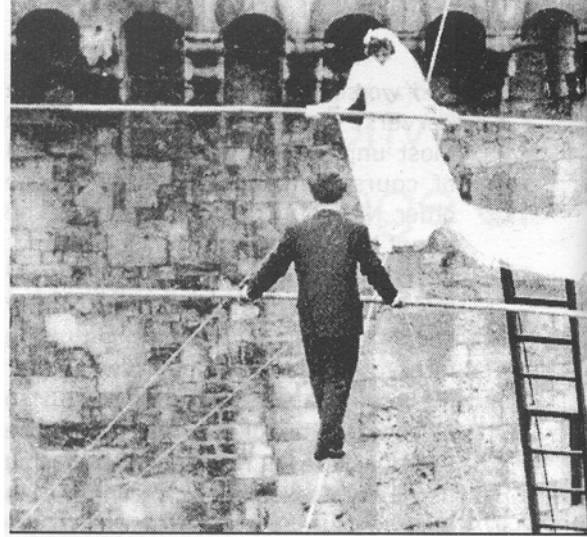
The pursuit of intimacy is scary and dangerous: the barriers each person puts up to stay safe, and maintains over a lifetime, have to be willingly lowered and opened to let the other in. Why should anyone take the risk?

At the same time our hearts and bodies were full of loss for what had once been and the yearning for reconnection. Despite our extensive therapeutic training, we, like everyone else, had no training in intimacy: it was like dancing in the dark.

Eventually, we realised that we weren't doing too badly. Pursuing a relationship consciously meant taking on a huge task. For this we would need courage and to let go of the notion that we were failures - no wonder so many of our parents' generation had settled for a quiet life! Malidoma Somé says that relationship is too much for one couple to bear, it needs a whole village to support them, because there is too much Spirit in relationship. The intimate relationship was going to reach the parts that even therapy failed to find. Holding this context made a terrific difference to our ability to tolerate what was happening, and to generate compassion towards each other.

The Next Step

We began to think about how best to support other couples to benefit from what we were learning. So we set about translating our experiences into psychological models through which we could offer men and women a means of learning and gaining support. Hence the 'A Man and A Woman' workshops were born. We called the first part *Dancing in the Dark*, to reflect the bewilderment of being a couple. We needed to find a way to unpick the very complex object-relation patterns which occur in a marriage, and to make the whole process understandable and of interest to couples. So we offered a simplified model of how our inner Parental Imagoes interact in the bewildering tangle of coupledness, which, building on the work of Winkleman and Stein, we called *The Bonding Patterns*. We thought of the



groups as temporary villages; we used storytelling and poetry to speak to people's unconscious, and examples from our own relationship to let participants know that they weren't alone in finding things difficult. The courses proved to be extremely powerful and effective events, and seemed to lack many of the transference elements which therapeutic groups normally evoke. We figured that this was because we were both present and genuine about our own relationship issues.

Next we founded *The Centre for Gender Psychology* to try to research a credible and relevant psychology of gender and to offer workshops for men, women and couples. We have since made various field trips to compare differences, particularly in pre-industrial communities. We have had to get more training for ourselves in the field of sexuality, because so many people present sexual problems which cannot be simply counselled away. For us it meant going to America and to Holland to get this training, particularly in working with the whole body. We started to get more information on the central and profoundly misunderstood role of sexuality in a couple's life.



At the same time our therapeutic work with couples started to improve. We were much better at managing conflict and being able to offer guidance through the maze of what was going for individuals. We now understood that what we had been learning was applicable to all couple relationships, and as the demand for our services increased we sensed an urgent need to train more people in this field. We felt that we had been privileged to find our way and that we wanted to make a contribution to the world outside, to see if we could do something to help stem the tide of divorce, single-parenting and unhappy homes producing unhappy children.

Love, Power, and Sex in the Real World

The late century consumerism has exacerbated the state of relationships, and psychology has not yet made much of an inroad. We hold a lofty vision, that stopping the war in the bedroom could make the greatest contribution to world peace, if the need to act-out conflicts and longings were processed at home.

Relationships are supposedly private business, yet millions are invested in advertising to sell the vision of a perfect sexual body complete with the perfect relationship. The past two years have brought home the connection between the private lives of men and woman and the public lives of prominent persons. The undoing of Diana Princess of Hearts, and the Clinton scandal cannot be ignored. The irony of the President being in deep trouble and the inventors of Viagra receiving the Nobel Prize at the same time is staggering. The world desperately needs to embrace a new understanding of sexuality and

relationship, and psychology should take a leading role here. Andrew Samuels' article *The Erotic Leader* in *Self & Society*, May 99, is therefore extremely welcome.

With all the media intrusion we want our leaders to become human, just like we wanted to know about the bodies of our parents when we were children. But we need to remember that there is also a private Clinton household, with Clinton as father and husband. How can he manage such different roles and projections so long as society maintains an unnatural split between the private parts (including the genital energy) and the public parts of those who are our gladiators in the political arena, charged to lead us towards increasingly more civilised ways? We have to re-engage with how we split love and power. Love still belongs to the home, the private sector, the women's domain, with no political value in the 'real' world. Power is still publicly recognised and rewarded with money, position and access to military potency. Men pay a high price for gaining and maintaining this sense of power. Politics are still a gender issue; and this split is well known fare.

What is less known, however, and ironically within the psychological community, is how our concepts of love are fused and undifferentiated. One major learning we have brought home from our forages into more training seems to us now to be incontrovertibly true. Simplified, this is that we are at core sexual beings, and that our whole lives are a constant development of our sexuality within quite specific stages. For example, the small child is by nature curious about genitals and sexuality in himself and others; the adolescent wants to experiment with himself and others; the young adult wants to

reproduce; at middle age we are busy with refining sex and relationship; when we are old we want to pass on what we know.

Samuels is absolutely right when he talks of our need for what he calls erotic playback. Unfortunately, he falls neatly into the old Freudian mistake, when he suggests the relevance of incest fantasy. Incest fantasy is an adult association coming from being dominated by the unfulfilled Inner Child. The child does not long for sexual relations with its parents, but for a sexual relationship. This means that he or she needs to have his growing sexual nature mirrored back and supported in relation to his whole body. This includes the genitals, which we have made taboo, but sexual intercourse belongs to a later stage. Similarly, Clinton's actions were clearly adolescent: it was even heavy petting he engaged in. Therefore he was right when he said that he 'did not have sexual relations with that woman'. The real question for us is whether we want a powerful world leader who is sexually stuck in adolescence.

By analogy, we can see the current world situation developmentally as in ne. The depletion of natural resources, the pollution of the earth, the loss of respect from the young to parents and authority figures, the breaking down of old values, the family, joint parenting, stable breadwinner roles, is a symptom of adolescent mess. Despite our amazing skill and growth (just like puberty), the human race has not developed a matching potential for human interactions. It is natural for adolescents to be more engaged with the excitement and curiosity at their own potential and opportunities, than to be interested in relationships.

However, the need for relationship is deeply embedded in our genes, and for that we have to grow up. Our difficulties in navigating through this mixture of vulnerability and dependency appear to be at the root of most pathologies.

Revising the Oedipal World

We now see that Freud was absolutely right when he decided to focus almost exclusively on the Oedipal Position. The problem is that he had only just begun to discover what it was. We all have to deal with what we call our own Oedipal Triangle, and that generally requires much of a lifetime. This is how we understand this Triangle.

We are born into the world, as relational sexual beings, into the field of our parents' relationship. This means that:

- 1.** We owe our existence to the sexual, and thereby relational, activity of our parents. This is self-evident but can be overlooked. If we are really honest, the thought of our parents making love freely and lustily to create us is an image of supreme joy.
- 2.** We are impelled to finish the relational business that our parents had together and could not cope with. Unchecked and unconscious, this leads to co-dependency and other neurosis, the unconscious resentment about which gets funnelled into current relationships.
- 3.** We are destined to internalise the same gender parent (typically) as a model for Identity and the opposite gender (typically) for a model for Relationship. This applies to our everyday, psychological, gender and sexual

identities. Our parents have been influenced by their parents and their wider cultural heritage. We both replicate and counter-react towards our models.

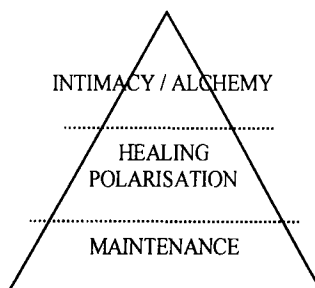
4. We tend unconsciously to take on specifically what our same gender parents could not do, for three reasons: to help them out; to get a role of worth in the family; and to get some of the erotic attention from the opposite gender parent, which we must have in order to become a sexual person. This does not mean that we want intercourse, it means we want erotic energy and support in our developmental functioning. Psychologically, however, the deficits in awareness in the family and its stable dysfunction mean that sons end up realising that they have been under a spell where they behaved like their mothers' husbands, and daughters have been, as it were, their fathers' lovers.

5. Just as we have internalised parents by whom we normally feel persecuted, we also know precisely what our parents could not do to support us, and what their actual qualities were. We therefore have the potential to reprogramme our Object Relations. All this takes some unpacking, and much inner work. In effect, we have a set of good parents within us. We neither need to project them out onto the world, nor continue in our disappointment, if we can get a sense of them behind us, and that they in turn might be supported by their parents, and so on. In this way it is possible to rebuild one's psyche with a whole twin set of ancestral lines behind and in support. In effect we are beginning to see that this is at the core of the wisdom of the pre-industrial indigenous world that we have almost ethnically cleansed from our planet.

Training couple-workers.

For training purposes we developed a simple model of relationship which, in essence, proposes that there are three stages. The first phase we call Management. This is what most counsellors try to restore when it breaks down and couples present themselves for therapy.

Next comes Polarisation. This phase cannot be avoided if you want to reach to its twin pole Healing or Harmonising, in order to access the final stage, which we sometimes call Alchemy, Transformation, Harmony, Intimacy, or Potency, depending on context. You cannot get to Intimacy by means of



communication techniques, however generally helpful they are, or by skipping the conflict zone of Polarisation. It has to be entered into and lived through. This is very scary to do without a guide who knows the way, and most relationships founder at this point when they hit it.

Mostly our parents' generation, particularly after the war, was content to stay at the maintenance level. The values here are survival, stability, security, and belonging. This becomes

more and more the task of the relationship when an extended village/tribal community is no longer holding this bottom line. The downside is that there is little dynamism and there is a tendency to stagnate. Nature does not favour stagnation. Most of us have inherited an Oedipal Triangle based on maintenance values and the reactive dynamics which change and danger throw up. This makes the next level additionally frightening. Gender issues also cut in, as the man's inherited preponderance for a quiet life at home with a busy life outside, puts him on defence alert when the woman's emotional nature starts to brew up trouble to get things to change, because they have been stuck. The journey through polarisation and harmonisation is not for the faint-hearted. It is a journey that turns out to be more like a spiritual quest, except that the awakening is through entering ordinary life rather than removing oneself from it. The carrot is

not a promise of perfection, but rather an invitation to enter an ongoing adventure beyond dualism: Intimate Potency means to both experience our deepest human nature, as well as something which may look extremely ordinary.

It is not easy for a couple to negotiate these levels; the active assistance of a therapist who is not afraid of conflict, understands the stages, and recognises the different levels of contexts, is enormously helpful. A counsellor who colludes with the couple to attempt the return to the safe previous management stage will be made impotent by their Relationship, an entity which we call The Third Being. And yet each new synthesis needs to be managed and function at the everyday level. We believe that the cultivation of these skills is urgently required and that working in this way is effective and inspiring.

Further Reading

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Helena Løvendal Sørensen and Nick Duffell are husband and wife psychotherapists.

Their latest venture is a diploma course training for couple-therapists run in partnership with ReVision, called Contextual Couple Counselling. Call 0181 575 8881 for details.

Helena and Nick will shortly be publishing a book on their work. Their public workshops include Dancing in the Dark, Men Sex Power and Spirit and Women Sex Power and Spirit They can be contacted at: info@genderpsychology.com.