

The Couple as the Client

Glenys Jacques

During the brief three hours of this workshop twenty people, (one man only) engaged in experiential exercises and theoretical discussion to explore the atmosphere and energetics generated by being part of a coupled unit.

I paired up the participants (fortuitously into ten, and later into five groups of four) who engaged in a beginning exercise of projection. All relationships begin with projection. We bring our fantasies, consciously and mostly unconsciously, and overlay them on what we imagine the person in front of us to be. In the pair, one listens while the other, unknown to them, makes statements beginning 'I imagine you are..' These statements, while not based on any evidence raise unconscious projections about the hopes and judgements we make when meeting an other. The statements are made without conscious editing and in an attitude of feeling out what seems to be true, as you absorb the presence of the other. 'I imagine you have nice handwriting.' 'I imagine you have animals.' 'I imagine you are a pain to live with.' Of course, not many made such challenging statements as this last one, but the feelings we pick up generate and trigger difficult as well as benevolent beliefs. When we first get together with the Beloved, or indeed any other, these less attractive beliefs or intuitions are ignored. The couple begin a collusion in which a unique culture is developed between them.

After both parties declared their projections, they exchanged reactions, confirming and clarifying those which fitted and those which didn't. It is the case that we rarely project onto a blank screen, and there are energetic traces in the other, which can evoke often

uncannily accurate perceptions. These become the foundations on which we build what we then believe to be truths about the other. The most important and less attended to aspect of this dynamic, is the reclaiming of these projections as originating from the self. What we say about the other is often more relevant to the known and particularly *unknown* aspects of the speaker. This dynamic was discussed and participants could easily recognise their own personal material in the statements they chose. The unknown or hidden parts of oneself form part of what later brings discontent in relationships. These early positive projections form the equally less real, but attractive view, which the couple engage in agreeing to have about each other. This accounts for why few at the first meeting would make statements like 'I imagine you're a pain to live with.'

So, by the end of this exercise a degree of positive bonding had taken place and the couple were forming a relationship with warmth and good will. Usually known as the honeymoon period. Listening and observing are as censored or 'blind' here as they are at later more difficult stages of the relationship.

The group shared their observations of themselves during these projections and these highlighted important dynamics which were beginning to form even this early meeting. Some noticed an easy willingness to 'swallow'(introjection) the perceptions while others rejected

them. Some noticed a merging energetically, (confluence) while others kept their sense of self quite separate. These movements in the energetic field of the client/couple indicated how the unit would form and progress.

The willingness to swallow or reject another's view reflects the mode of the sense of self. If I swallow a view, without chewing it over, I shift my view of self to be outer determined. Chewing over is an important process of discrimination in deciding what is true and healthy for the self. Couples tacitly form agreements, to avoid conflict, or raise it, by usually unspoken contracts, which manage their energy flow. The result of these agreements can be a diminished sense of self, a cost paid out of fear of alternative consequences.

A: I'm upset you didn't call. You said you would. (attempt at truthful self need)

B: It's no big deal, you're just tired. You've been working hard.(deflection)

A: Yes, I guess you're right. (confluent, avoids conflict, diminished self)

Confluence is a merging of ones own self boundary into the other. A loss of separate identity and dependence results. I am now 'we'. Projections form the technical structure of deepening confluent relating. 'You must be hungry' is a projection of the speaker and lacks the curiosity of gathering information. There is a given assumption of knowing. I know you because you are me. Projections are a way of constructing the idea of the other which masks their real experience.

When the therapist supports awareness of these dynamics the couple system has more information to then make new choices. The therapist's task is to notice

and make available information missing from the system. Skilled interventions are formulated phenomenological observations without judgement. Both parties of the system contribute to the creation and breakdown of good contact.

Energy is a felt experience. The therapist uses her own presence and physical visceral awareness to monitor the rise and fall of energy in the couple system. Often energy falls when there is a block in communication, fear or withdrawal. Energy increases when information is offered, when there is openness to receive, or increased motivation for a new idea or dynamic. It is important for the therapist to be curious about her own felt energy and to find ways to describe this to the couple. One way of doing this is by using metaphor. I used an exercise I had done when training with Joseph Zinker.

I invited a volunteer couple to sit in the middle and begin a conversation. The viewers monitored their energy and were asked to form a metaphor matching the flow of energy in the couple. Descriptions included types of music, weather conditions, and flavours of food. These metaphors helped the couple grasp the atmosphere of energy between them, which they then chose to incorporate in subsequent relating.

For such a brief introduction to working with the couple system, I decided to focus on seven core skills for the therapist to practice. These were used in group of four, two therapists and the couple.

Presence

You are part of what you re observing and affected by the energy of the couple system. Use yourself as a barometer to describe what you feel

and observe. Zinker describes this as 'apperceptive mass' that is, the experiential ground of your own history.

Be in the Present

Stay with what is actually happening in front of you. Focussing on the present moment, is the opportunity for new skill building for the future.

Couple focus on each other

Invite the couple to face and speak to each other, not to you. This allows them to engage with what they experience in meeting. It also allows you to witness the flow of energy and observe their contact style.

What they do well

Heighten their awareness to what they do well and offer statements which confirm good contacting skills.

Forming a mutual figure

Invite the couple to choose what they both want to focus on. How they make this decision will give you information about how they work as a team.

Energy

Notice your own energy levels. If theirs goes up while yours is warm, draw attention to this. They may be going too fast, missing out stages of checking information or not hearing. Help slow them down. Statements like. 'I notice I suddenly feel lost and you seem to have shifted gear, I wonder what that is like for you?'

Encourage Curiosity

Frame interventions which invite the couple to stay curious about the process they are creating.

The group gave copious feedback to each other having chosen one or

several of these core skills. An important learning for them was to stay out of the couple's way and let them do the work. Generally therapists can fall into a deep professional introject, a belief which is to try to 'fix' the client. This often increases with couples in an attempt to create harmony. Often the couple need to learn how to argue or face conflict effectively and safely. The couple may need to say goodbye and end their relationship. These painful outcomes also offer deep emotional and spiritual learning. The therapist needs to challenge themselves about their own fears in entering these darker dynamics. The therapist must be willing to take risks and maintain the courage to sometimes name the things the couple are afraid to say. 'I notice you have little interest in each other and may be ending this relationship. I wonder if that has any truth for you?' This can bring enormous relief and a new honesty in the system. It can also be paradoxical and the couple suddenly find new energy for each other. Either way, the therapist must have the courage to speak the truth of their own observations.

And so the afternoon came to a close with a thousand more ideas and questions being formulated. However, some of the complex dynamics of a couple system had been experienced and participants felt an increased sense of confidence in new ways of working with their couples.

Glensy Jacques. Msc. is aUKCP Registered psychotherapist. She works with individuals, couples and groups. She is a supervisor, trainer and consultant for organisations. She runs a variety of workshops for counsellors in training.

Contact; 15 Kemey's St. London E9 5RQ. 0208 533 2948