

The Dynamic Flow of the Couple

A UKAHPP workshop given 12th November 2005

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I begin with sitting, in silent meditation. I invite the participants to sense into their arms and legs, noticing how they find themselves. I invite them to sense into which self they are choosing to bring to this workshop. To consider the choice in creating a new autobiography, to bring a self forward which will be interesting and beneficial for them. I speak while they sit, eyes closed. I want to embed the action of choosing who to be in this moment. I often do this at the beginning of sessions, to settle the couple back into themselves, away from the other.

After some minutes I remind them to sense into their bodies, to notice the quality of sensations, to include the sensation of sound and sight. I suggest they slowly begin the experience of meeting each other in the room. I invite them to pair up with a stranger, find a private place to sit together, and exchange some novel introduction. Always keeping 90% attention on themselves and 10% on the other. This is heresy for therapists.

This is an immediate shift in the usual attitude implicit in much teaching. The therapist often adopts a compulsive attention only to the client, completely forgetting herself or her own needs. I want the couple therapist to attend to herself, withdraw from the seductive actions of the couple and allow herself the space to observe.

I use the word 'slowly' to support myself to allow these often rushed-over meetings. The beginning of all interaction sets up a system. To notice how I am part of co-creating a field, even in this full room of therapists, messages are being received and integrated.

Am I setting a frame in which everyone can create a space in which to express themselves?

I leave the newly formed couples to talk for several minutes. I invite them to share something 'special', which they would not usually share on a first meeting. This can be slipped into the conversation, or noted. Sharing begins a bond. Information supports the possibility of being known. I will not refer to this again during the day, but let it settle in the fabric of these newly forming couple systems. It will become part of the glue that supports them working together. The buzz in the room plateau's indicating a readiness for the next thing.

We watch a short film I made of four different couple systems.

In general a couple co-create a set of patterns, interactions, implicitly or explicitly designed, repeated and perpetuated, which form the system. In the large group we discussed the dynamics of the system as a concept. We begin to tease out the language we can use which addresses the system of the couple, rather than the couple as two individuals. This is a fundamental skill in addressing the system-as-client rather than the individuals. Systems generate a variety of different energies. We can *feel* and see the quality of energy as it animates the couple and comment on it. 'I notice how words

are spoken so quickly they create a kind of humming radar screen.' This offers the couple an image. Images and metaphors are non-judgemental pictures, which have wider references and borrow other systemic energies. It is a shared image, something to which I am suggesting they both contribute. This is a more soothing intervention than simply saying, 'You talk non-stop and don't listen to each other.'

I offer this transferring to addressing the system, as the frame in which to explore the work of the couple. After listening to a couple for several minutes, we can get a flavour of how the system flows and when it becomes derailed. I suggest that all couples need some feedback on their skills of communication at the beginning of sessions. A summarising speech from the therapist allows key patterns to be illuminated and gives the couple time to settle into hearing what they do well, and when they miss each other. The summary should use accessible positive language.

The workshop pairs then choose one of the couple from the film and prepare a summary speech to the couple. After some time of preparation the workshop couples practice delivering their summaries to volunteer couples in the room.

The couple who come to therapy are taught that they do have a system, however ragged it has become, and they are invited to be interested in its ontology and phenomenology. The therapist can only see what is in the room. To be phenomenological, is to respect what is palpable in the present. This helps the couple stay present and not collapse into story telling to claim a position. In other words, the couple are invited to comment on what choices, overt or covert, led them to be consistently participating in this particular kind of dynamic? What do they think their rules are? Who made them? How do they change them if they want to? When do they remember agreeing certain behaviours? Do they have a shared view of the system?

With these questions the couple are immediately expected to work together on their co-created powers in the relationship. This frame dissolves the victim/persecutor dynamic which many couples present when they first enter therapy. The fact that they both arrive speaks to a mutually shared interest. One or both may expect the therapist to take sides and 'prove' the other wrong. These are resentments from calcified emotional pain, which creates negativity and resistance. The therapist must find ways to support and frame these resistances positively and introduce ways to reintegrate them with new learning. As the couple acknowledge their contribution, new negotiation provides different experience and the beginning of a revised system.

The challenging therapist will penetrate entrenched positions by being willing to offer an equal energy to stimulate change. Framing involves setting conditions for the work. The therapist clearly states what she expects from the couple to provide the best climate for the work. Teaching couples to set new boundaries brings them relief as well as new hope for a different self to be seen and respected. The therapist may have to set 'absolutes', for example, being explicit about not accepting acting-out behaviours of violence or drug abuse which will prohibit productive

work. Firm contracting reveals the level of commitment each member is willing to give to secure a positive working environment.

Often therapists fear being offensive if they describe simply, or bluntly what they see. This is a common 'polite' therapists' style, preferring to find euphemism rather than say how it is. Euphemism does not help the couple see exactly what is going on. Hearing the spoken phenomenology of 'what is' acts as an awakening into the reality of a dynamic. It may be a form of *unheimlich*, wrenching from an inner dream-state into an alive consciousness. Each member of the couple may experience many of these moments as the systemically created scales fall from their eyes. This brings about a new vision of each other with a fresh *lack* of expectancy. This experience is often like seeing each other through a lens of detachment, as if viewing a stranger. This can be very disturbing for couples. The exposure, or collapse of their systemic empire is often experienced as a catastrophic collapse of the self. They ask, 'who am I without this pattern?' The loss of a habit, (even the most unwanted habits) can feel like the loss of a limb!

The therapist supports the couple through these layering shifts in vision by modelling clear positive communication. To continue to describe the system supports the therapist not getting tempted or tangled in the content. Content will lead to counter-transference. The therapist's voice must be more like a narrator of the story that is unfolding in the room. The therapist is appropriately depersonalised in order to stay out of the way. I sometimes experience a kind of spacial viewing, an intense attention, but at a far distance. I feel like a 'beady-eye' in the room, but am invisible to the couple. As they engage in their exchanges, swapping hurts or loves, willingness or refusals my prompts are to serve the flow between them.

When I see shifts in this energy I invite them to give regular feedback to acknowledge the new attitudes to each other. Often they attribute their new positions to seeing the other adopt a more open heart, a considering of an idea. They sometimes attribute my suggestions as their own! This is as it should be.

The workshop couples positively supported each other in practicing delivering a systemic perspective. Shifting to this way of speaking is difficult when we are not used to thinking systemically. They all tackled the task with fantastic energy and interest. I particularly valued their willingness to question this format with deeply entrenched or abusive relationships. In my experience, with these most difficult couples, this has been the only way to steadily and carefully support the couple staying in contact.

I asked the workshop couples to spend some time giving and receiving feedback about what they had learnt about their new 'couple' system, what they did well together and how they had enjoyed about working together. Being immediate locates us in our awareness about what we are actually doing. Finally the group gave feedback on the day, sharing what they had found useful in supporting new confidence.

A Part II of The Dynamic Flow of the Couple will run in May, and is open to all.

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