constant pull from, and flight towards, a so-called sensible and rational way of relating (which never quite delivers what it promises), away from feeling tilted in the direction of emotional drought or tilting in the other direction, towards being flooded with too much and too intensely turbulent and potentially destructive emotion.

CHAPTER ONE

On being able to be a couple: the importance of a "creative couple" in psychic life[1]

Mary Morgan

> "The idea of a couple coming together to produce a child is central in our psychic life, whether we aspire to it, object to it, realise we are produced by it, deny it, relish it, or hate it"
>
> Britton, 1995, p. xi

Couples coming for therapy show us just how difficult it can be to develop and sustain an intimate, adult couple relationship. This begs the question, what is an intimate, adult couple relationship? Clearly some important earlier psychic developments occur that make it possible to become a couple. In my opinion, a crystallization of these psychic developments occurs, which becomes a part of the individual's psychic structure and helps to sustain him or her in a couple relationship. I shall refer to this as the internalization of a "creative couple" (Morgan & Ruszczynski, 1998). This development brings about a state of mind and way of relating, to oneself and to the other, that is a change from earlier kinds of psychic development. Because of the vagaries of life the psychic development may or may not be manifested in an actual couple relationship. Without this psychic development

couples in a relationship have difficulties, or the relationship is severely limited.

My intention in this chapter is twofold. First, it is to make explicit the process of psychic development as I understand it, and illustrate how two particular areas—the negotiation of the oedipal situation and adolescence—are crucial precursors to the development of a capacity to form part of a creative couple. I will also address the anxiety involved in psychic change.

My second intention is to describe key aspects of a creative couple state of mind and way of relating to another. In particular, I suggest that once an individual is part of an intimate adult couple relationship, if this development has taken place, then the creative couple as a psychic object can be turned to as a "third position" (Britton, 1989, p. 87), to help the individuals sustain their relationship when it is vulnerable. I hope also to show how creative this relationship can be, both internally and as part of a relationship with another; and how, through this relationship itself, further psychic development is possible.

Epistemophilia and the couple in psychic development

First, I will try to put the development of a creative couple as a psychic object within the context of psychic development as a whole. From the beginning of life the infant is struggling to make sense of experience and has an innate expectation of there being an object. Klein (1930a,b) stressed Freud's (1916–1917) assertion of an epistemophilic instinct, the urge to know or understand, as a component instinct of the libido. In her view, all instinctual urges involved objects, external or internal (Klein, 1952a). In her work with young children she could see inhibitions of epistemophilia and consequent learning difficulties, because the frustration that stimulated the urge to know could also give rise to sadistic impulses inhibiting it. Bion (1962b) saw the epistemophilic instinct in terms of the emotional links between objects, which he formulated as being either 'L' (loving), 'H' (hating), or 'K' (the wish to know the other). He described truth and understanding as food to the mind. Similarly, Britton conceives of the desire for knowledge as existing alongside love and hate: "Human beings have an urge

to love, to hate, to know, and a desire to be loved, a fear of being hated and a wish to be understood" (Britton, 1998a, p. 11).

These theories about the human being encompass the idea of an infant who is trying to make emotional links with an object, and to make sense of experience from the beginning of life. Although the newborn infant is not fully aware of the mother as a separate object, it does seem that the infant is born with an innate preconception of there being an object and, therefore, of coupling or linking. The idea of there being an object is very important because it means that there is, in the baby's mind, the idea of an "other" into which something can be evacuated, from which something can be taken in, or with which he can split off or link up. Following this, as Money-Kyrle (1971) has stated, it is also probable that the idea of a couple coming together sexually is derived from innate knowledge. At the beginning of life the infant seeks the mother's breast, the nipple and the mouth forming a vital link, both real and symbolic. There is a development of this imperative later in life in the drive to create a sexual couple, symbolized and sometimes actualized by the link between penis and vagina. From this beginning of linking up with an object (the mother) to linking up with another in an intimate adult relationship, much changes and has to be struggled with and negotiated. The important point about this model of development is that there is a process in human development where changes occur using what is already known, albeit often in an entirely new configuration. It also places psychic development within the context of a relationship.

Physiological changes in the individual and environmental responses stimulate psychic development, but such development may also be resisted. It may be possible to form an adult couple relationship without the development that occurs through relinquishing the primary object and negotiating the oedipal situation, but it will be fraught with difficulties. Intimacy, for example, instead of being based on knowledge of the reality of the separateness of the other, and the wish really to know the other, can be based on an expectation of omnisciently knowing the other and/or being known by the other; an experience closer to intrusion (Fisher, 1995; Morgan, 1995). Many couple relationships contain aspects of a regressive wish to be the infant with a mother who can provide everything: emotional, physical, and mental.

The oedipal situation

From Freud onwards, psychoanalysis has fruitfully employed the myth of Oedipus to show the complex centrality of the primary triangular relationship between a mother, a father, and a child. That relationship is considered to be crucial in psychological development because the meanings and patterns the child experiences in that situation are likely to influence all subsequent relationships made in the journey through life.

What is it that is so significant about this early triangular relationship? The child is involved in a nurturing relationship with a mother and with a father, and in a relationship with the mother and father as a couple, including their sexual relationship and their capacity to produce new life. (This is no less true in the situation of an absent mother or father, or in the absence of the actual parental relationship.) By having a relationship with a mother and/or father, coming to observe and, if all goes well, to tolerate the special link between the parents, the child becomes aware of the experience of being included and excluded, and of there being different types of relationships. He also learns that there are generational boundaries (Britton, 1989). In other words, it has a structuring role in the personality. In coming to tolerate these vagaries of relating, the child has to contend with an affront to his or her narcissism and omnipotence. The child is not always at the centre of good relationships, and is needy of something that is creative and outside him or herself which, if his envy and narcissism can bear it, he can draw on. It is only by relinquishing the omnipotent phantasy of becoming part of a sexual couple with mother or father, and by recognizing and tolerating the special link between them, that the child will introject the parents-as-a-couple as a psychic object. The seed of the possibility of forming his or her own adult sexual couple relationship is sown.

As indicated earlier, working through the oedipal situation does not simply enhance the capacity to form a couple relationship but contributes in an essential way to a growing, intrinsic knowledge of what being part of a couple means. There are many aspects of this. Facing the oedipal situation requires the capacity to manage loss, as the idea that one could be the grown-up partner to either parent, and that one could prevent the parents being a couple together, has

to be relinquished. If not achieved, it will be impossible to fully invest in one's own intimate couple relationship. Couple psychotherapists frequently see couples in which one or both partners are still too enmeshed in a relationship with a parent, either as primary object, or as an oedipal object. In this situation there is a lack of emotional investment in the spouse, and the children can be drawn into a relationship with a parent as support or confidant, severely undermining the marriage and the children's own oedipal development. If the boundary around the parental couple's relationship is accepted, it becomes possible to see the difference between the parents as a couple and the child's relationship to the parent. Later in adulthood the situation is reconfigured, as the individual becomes part of an intimate couple and can bear to exclude the children from aspects of the relationship. It is easier, not simply because of having had that experience in relation to the parents as a couple but because the experience is internalized, effecting all kinds of other developments—physiological as well as psychic—occurring in the individual. As Money-Kyrle describes it:

> Where there has been a favourable development, and the concept of the first good object is well established, together with the capacity to remember it with love, there is far less difficulty in being able to recognise the parental relation as an example of the innate preconception of coitus as a supremely creative act—especially if this is reinforced by the memory of a good relationship between the nipple and the mouth . . . and after a renewed period of mourning for the child–parent marriage that can never be, to internalise and establish a good concept of parental intercourse as the basis of a subsequent marriage which may in fact take place. [Money-Kyrle, 1971, p. 105]

Adolescence

The unconscious introjection of the parents as a couple in an object relationship to the child aids later psychic development, such as that occurring in adolescence. For example, this triangular configuration helps the adolescent take ownership of his own body and mind, because he can be the one who chooses to exclude himself from the couple and develop his own identity (Laufer, 1975). The

typical adolescent then develops a sense of independence that is seen as the ideal. However, this is also a state of mind in which independence is diametrically opposed to the young infant's absolute dependence on the mother. If relationships are seen as one of these two kinds, utterly dependent or completely independent, then it is easy to see how such a state of mind would be extremely problematic, once in an adult couple relationship, should further development not occur. There is sometimes a tendency for the young adult to believe that his development is over and that he has succeeded in becoming "independent". Usually, this period of experiment with oneself and one's identity ends because of the impact of a new developmental imperative to form a couple. To some adults this can feel threatening, as if being part of a couple means the loss of this hard-won independence. It may therefore be avoided for some time, and sometimes forever. This adolescent idea of independence is an illusion because it denies a fact of life, namely that we all need help. Money-Kyrle (1971) conceptualizes this as the "recognition of the breast as a supremely good object", something that is innately known and discovered as part of experience, though something that can also be turned away from or denied. This is different from a regressive wish for dependence such as the infant had with mother. Both the idea of a relationship with the ideal object (mother) and the idealization of independence as in the adolescent state of mind are deeply problematic for the individual in a couple relationship.

The potential we have as individuals depends upon having the idea of being able to form a couple with another individual. Furthermore, though actually being part of a couple may be the desired state, not every individual chooses or achieves this due to any number of circumstances. More important is the belief in relationships as a source of creativity, and this may be concretely realized through becoming part of a couple from some other source; for example, through contact with colleagues, friends, and even good internal objects. The creativity of practising psychotherapists and psychoanalysts surely stems from an internal dialogue with such good objects.

Everyone struggles in coming to terms with the oedipal situation and, actually, the struggle seems to be an inevitable part of the experience. It is, moreover, not a once and for all development.

Negotiating the oedipal situation is not the same thing as resolving it, and difficulties in triangular situations (for example, becoming parents and incorporating a third into the couple), in being part of a couple, and in thinking, may continue in some form or emerge at times of stress. However, for some people there is a fundamental problem in this area of psychic development. Britton has described two areas of difficulty. The first is where the patient cannot allow a couple to come together in his or her mind, or in that of the analyst. The second is an "oedipal illusion", in which "the parental relationship is known but its full significance is evaded" (1989, p. 94).

The first situation Britton describes leads to serious difficulties in thinking, and is the diametrically opposite situation to the creative couple state of mind, in which it is possible to allow two thoughts to come together with a creative outcome. This process is reinforced by the experience of being in a relationship with another person with whom thinking can take place. The analytic situation that Britton describes is one in which any evidence that the analyst is having this experience inside his own mind, or between him and the patient, is felt as too threatening. He suggests that this is due to an earlier failure of maternal containment. The oedipal couple becomes equated with linking-up an idealized mother and her split-off hostility that threatens a precarious relationship to the primary object:

> The idea of a good maternal object can only be regained by splitting off her impermeability so that now a hostile force is felt to exist, which attacks his good link with his mother. Mother's goodness is now precarious and depends on him restricting his knowledge of her. . . . The hostile force that was thought to attack his original link with his mother is now equated with the oedipal father, and the link between the parents is felt to reconstitute her as the non-receptive deadly mother. The child's original link with the good maternal object is felt to be the source of life, and so, when it is threatened, life is felt to be threatened. [Britton, 1989, p. 90]

Britton shows how difficult an analysis with such a patient is, because the patient needs a relationship with the analyst in which there is no psychic intercourse.

One might think that individuals who require this kind of relating would find being in an intimate adult couple relationship

extremely difficult. Often this is the case, or it becomes the case. However, sometimes, for a while, such a couple feel they have found a way of relating that relieves them of the anxieties they would experience if there were more psychic intercourse. This relationship requires the kind of intercourse described by Britton with his patient: "We were to move along a single line and meet at a single point" (1989, p. 88). I described this kind of relationship in a previous paper on "projective gridlock", from which I quote the example of Tom and Rachel:

> Rachel reflected on how she and her husband Tom always did everything together: they studied together, shared the same interests and operated as one. He would chose clothes for her, and when they went to parties Tom would speak for both of them. It never occurred to her that she might have a different point of view. She often felt that when they talked to each other, he would lose awareness of her presence, and it seemed that she, for her own unconscious reasons, had gone along with this. For a long time she felt quite content in this situation, except that she had never enjoyed sex with Tom. Tom said that looking back, what had felt awful about having sex with Rachel was that he worked out what she thought, felt, and wanted to such an extent that it was like having sex with himself; paradoxically, he had not really known what was going on for her at all. [Morgan, 1995, p. 44]

In the second situation Britton describes, the oedipal illusion is felt to protect the individual from the psychic reality of their phantasies of the oedipal situation. This evasion has serious consequences for the individual's mental and emotional life. The patient Britton describes had difficulty in bringing things together in his mind, which affected the clarity of his thinking, and there was a pervasive sense of unreality and feeling of unfulfilment in his life, as well as a quality of non-consummation in all his relationships and projects in life.

Some couples come for therapy with the problem that they are unable to move forward, to make a commitment together (live together or marry with the possibility of having children), or to separate. This can be quite a desperate problem, particularly if the female partner is reaching the end of her fertile years and if one partner longs for children.

One such couple presented their problem as an inability to decide to get married, sometimes expressed by James and at other times by Ellie. They felt they probably would marry at some point, but they didn't know when that would be or how they would be able to make the decision. Sometimes they felt comfortable in this position, and sometimes they felt in an acute state of anxiety. James was in his late forties and, although he had had previous long-term relationships and, in fact, had been engaged twice, he had never married. Ellie was in her early forties, and this was her first committed relationship. Neither of them had more than a rudimentary sense of a creative couple in mind, and they were frightened of repeating the dynamic of their respective parents' relationships, which were sado-masochistic in nature. In fact, their stalemated situation had a sado-masochistic aspect to it, of which they were unaware. There was a dynamic in the sessions that felt like treading water as, even when there was a sense of some intercourse taking place between them, or between them and me, it didn't seem to lead to any outcome. In one session they reported feeling that they had had a good discussion over the weekend with friends they had been away with, and they felt that this was progress. They had talked about the future, where they would live when they were married, in particular Ellie's hope that they could move closer to her sister, how many children they would have, including the fact they both secretly hoped to have a boy. The content of their discussion felt very new, and the therapist initially also heard this as progress. However, as they shared more of the details, the therapist became aware of how defensive this thinking was. It began to take on the quality of a flight away from the painful reality of not actually knowing whether they could be together or not in the future. It was as if they had by-passed that difficult problem and taken up residence in a fantasy world of being married, of being parents, and of being able to resolve things without conflict.

Many couples coming for help present similar difficulties rooted in problems with facing or working through the oedipal situation. The difficulties may be narcissistic in nature, as I have described in the "projective gridlock" (Morgan, 1995). In this situation, like Tom and Rachel, two different and separate people cannot come together, feeling that there is only room for one in the relationship. Alternatively, as with the "oedipal illusion" in James and Ellie's

case, there is room for two, but they can produce nothing much between them, resulting in the feeling of non-consummation that Britton describes.

Anxieties aroused by development towards creative couple relating

The movement towards feeling oneself to be part of a couple in which two minds come together to create something can challenge both partners' narcissism and omnipotence, which are rarely, if ever, relinquished without regret, shame, sadness, and opposition. However, the internalization of the creative couple as a psychic object also provides the container within which the regression often associated with the first phase of the capacity to experience something new can be contained.

As with every new stage of psychic development, there are anxieties about giving up what previously felt known and secure in order to step into something new and not yet known. As discussed earlier, many individuals on the verge of making a committed relationship feel full of loss about giving up their independence and autonomy. There is tremendous anxiety about giving up what was previously regarded as being the achievement of a "mature" position. This may be because, following the earliest developments as part of a mother–baby couple, all subsequent developments have been largely about becoming more separate and independent, and the achievement of this relative independence is often felt to constitute maturity. Becoming part of a couple again often stirs up anxieties about losing this independence, raising fears of having to fit in, and feelings that it will not be possible to be fully oneself in a relationship. Some couples come for help in a battle, each wanting to hold on to their omnipotent individuality, and seeing a relationship as a situation where their partner should fit into their view of how things should be. At its most extreme, such couples have no idea that a relationship could be anything else.

Building on Klein's work, Bion (1970) has conceptualized how changing one's way of thinking and relating involves dismantling previous views and theories, which can have the quality of a psychic catastrophe—a going to pieces (Grier, Chapter 10, herein). In Klein's (1946) terms, this is a move into the paranoid–schizoid position. The subsequent reforming of a new set of views and theories

is a synthesizing move into what Klein described as the depressive position (Klein, 1935, 1940). Creative effort can therefore be viewed as a process, on a small scale, of movements to and from the paranoid–schizoid and depressive positions. The tolerance of a degree of disintegration, without resorting to omnipotent, primitive defence mechanisms, or turning back to a previously held position, is essential for creative thinking and living. At each point of development, fluctuations between the paranoid–schizoid and depressive positions will occur.

Britton (1998) develops these ideas, describing the process of moving from the depressive position to what he calls a post-depressive position. This entails moving from a situation of integrated understanding into a new situation of uncertainty and incoherence, a new paranoid–schizoid position, before moving on to a new and, as yet, unimaginable resolution incorporating the new facts; a new depressive position. Ruszczynski (1995) has referred to this, in terms of the couple relationship, as allowing inevitable and necessary regressions, at times towards more narcissistic relating, even in a couple relationship that has the capacity for more mature relating.

Both these writers are describing the fact that regressive states of mind and behaviour are not to be considered simply as psychopathological states, nor as only the products of disruptions caused by life transitions and environmental impingement or traumas, but that such states are unavoidable, even necessary, as a result of the inevitability of psychic disruption occurring at points of new learning and growth. Once the new learning is established, an internal reintegration takes place and there can then be a move forward to a new depressive position.

Paul and Anna, married with a young baby, had fallen into a pattern familiar to many couples seeking help, in which they were leading quite separate and independent lives. The husband was very involved in his work, a new business he was developing, and the wife was very involved with their baby, who had been conceived after several years of infertility treatment. It was his affair with a close friend of hers, shortly after the birth of their child, which exposed something between them and led them to apply for therapy. They were both sceptical about therapy. Anna had once had counselling in connection with the infertility problems but hadn't found this helpful. Paul thought therapy would be about

putting him on the right track and imposing a bland alternative to his more exciting, though (he also felt) destructive, existence.

In the early sessions, Paul was brutally honest to Anna, saying that he wasn't in love with her any more and that he was unsure if he wanted to stay in the relationship, though he felt devoted to their baby. Anna was extremely hurt and angry with Paul. However, at this stage she was much closer than he was to a belief in the possibility of their establishing a more creative couple relationship. She dealt with his rejection by becoming emotionally and sexually withdrawn. They both sought refuge from their painful situation, he in his work, and she in a rather idealized relationship with their baby.

In the course of the therapy it became apparent that there had been rejection upon rejection from the beginning of the relationship. One partner would risk showing vulnerability and great need of the other, and the second partner, relieved of these feelings via projection of them into the first partner, would turn away with renewed feelings of self-sufficiency and independence. One of the things that contributed to the shift in this couple's way of relating was their feeling of dependence on the therapist, which took them both by surprise. On one occasion the therapist had to cancel a session at short notice. In the following session the couple denied that this event mattered at all, nor did it matter if they had to miss a session for any reason. The therapist felt, though, that they had been quite disturbed by the event. It was only several sessions later, when the issue came up in relation to something else, that the couple could let themselves, and the therapist, know how angry they had been. Once their need for another could be grasped, initially in relation to the therapist, they began to risk being more open with each other. Both began to share very deep anxieties about their inadequacies in a number of areas, particularly in relation to sex.

As the couple began to feel safer with the therapist and with each other, they discovered something that neither had been able to envisage earlier. Simply put, they began to feel that they had a "relationship"; a third that they were invested in nurturing, but that also contained them. They were, of course, still sometimes in conflict, particularly when they felt let down by each other. However, this conflict began to be contained within their relationship, and was less at risk of being acted out outside the relationship in an affair, or inside the relationship in emotional withdrawal. They

also discovered that conflict, if containable, could lead to solutions. Paul came to understand that only when he did not have the "relationship" was he capable of destructive acting out, as he had done in becoming involved in the affair. At the same time he rued the loss of his earlier freedoms, which were accompanied by a phantasy of not being in a relationship. Through mourning this loss he became able to discover something else—a deep love for his wife. Towards the end of therapy, the couple had been to see a play in which one of the central themes was about the exploitation of indigenous peoples. Suddenly, in the middle of the play Paul had a revelation. He realized he had treated the woman he'd had the affair with as a "lesser human being", summoning her when he felt depressed or inadequate and, at the same time, debasing his wife and himself. When he'd been with his mistress he was in a state of mind in which he no longer felt contained by the relationship with Anna.

As the end of the therapy approached, Paul said to his wife, "Look, if we're going to stay together as a couple, there may be difficult things we'll have to face together. Maybe we won't be able to have more children, we'll both get older—there may be illnesses, and there will be losses." This couple could only contemplate facing these facts of life because of the strength derived from discovering a creative couple relationship, which provided a container, in the sense that they could imagine facing difficult things.

As is often the case, this couple had come for therapy at the point of psychic disintegration, in the sense described by Bion and Britton. Their previous way of being was no longer functioning adequately as a container. They had to let it go, without yet knowing what a future different psychic state could be.

Aspects of creative and non-creative relating

I will now describe some aspects of creative and non-creative relating that manifest in the couple relationship. My purpose is to illustrate the movement between more, and less, creative relating in any one couple, and to show how some couples find themselves situated much more in one position or the other. This may prove useful diagnostically, and it also relates to the aim of couple psychoanalytic

psychotherapy, which could be conceptualized as helping the couple towards more creative couple relating. Perhaps I should first reiterate that the "creative couple" is primarily a psychic development, one in which it is possible to allow different thoughts and feelings to come together in one's mind, and for something to develop out of them. This capacity obviously has a major impact on an actual couple relationship. If one can allow this kind of mating within oneself, it becomes more likely that one can allow it to occur between oneself and one's partner. I wish to clarify that, when writing about the creative couple state of mind, I refer to a level of psychic functioning of which individuals become capable, even though they may not always achieve it. Fisher's (1999) conceptualization includes an oscillation between what he calls the psychic state of marriage and something more narcissistic. What marks this out from a more overall narcissistic relating is that this creative couple state of mind has been discovered, and can be recovered.

The relationship as the third position

The development of the depressive position goes hand in hand with the oedipal situation, as Britton (1998) has so clearly pointed out. With the awareness of mother as a separate object, with relationships that can exclude the child, comes development of triangular space and three-dimensional thinking. As well as being an observer of a couple from which he is excluded, the child can start to develop an idea of himself in a relationship excluding a third, and being observed by a third. Eventually this third becomes internalized as an aspect of himself, the capacity to observe himself in his own relationship. This development, what linguistics calls the "meta" position, is crucial for the individual in an adult, couple relationship.

In the creative couple state of mind, the concept of the relationship provides a third position for the two individuals in the relationship. The capacity for a third position is central to the creative couple, and the oedipal triangle now becomes a template for understanding oneself as part of a couple. The oedipal situation provided the opportunity to develop one's capacity to observe one's internal intercourse, and now the concept of oneself as a couple provides the vantage point from which to observe oneself in a couple relationship. When a breakdown occurs in one's relating to the other, one can take up the position of the relationship as a third, and observe oneself within the relationship (Figures 1 and 2).

In this position the different, or sometimes opposing, perspective of the other is not felt to obliterate one's own view, but can be taken in to one's psyche, and allowed to reside there and mate with one's own thought. In this way, the individual's psychic development is enhanced through an actual creative couple relationship with another person. This creativity becomes possible because a state of mind has been achieved in which two minds, as well as two bodies, can come together and create a third.

Simon and Karen, a young and very affluent couple with an eleven-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old son, approached therapy in utter despair. Simon thought his wife was so angry and irrational as to be on the point of madness. Karen was despairing of the fact that, in her eyes, her husband fell acutely short of her idea of what a husband should be. She had previously been married and it appeared that there had been little sexual contact in the relationship, which had lasted only a short time before her husband had left her. Although angry with her ex-husband, Karen held a conviction that, had it continued, this would have been the

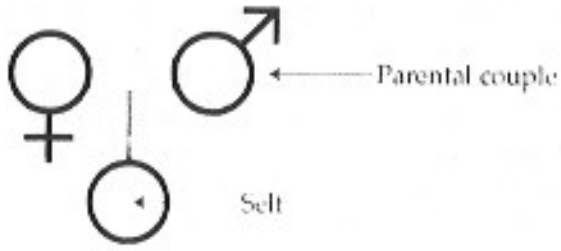
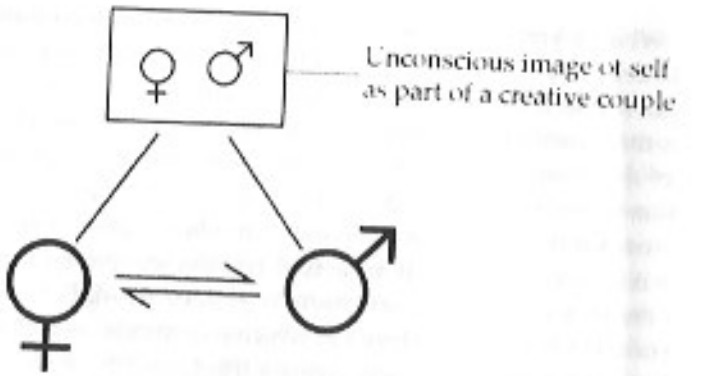


Figure 1 The oedipal triangle, at the end of a healthy development; the individual feels him/her self to be in a positive relationship to the parental couple and can experiment with occupying all the different roles either including, or excluding the other(s).



Each individual perceives him/her essentially to be part of a couple therefore, in the relationship, each feels 'contained' by a shared unconscious concept - the creative couple.

Figure 2

ideal relationship. At the beginning of therapy, her disappointment with what she and Simon had in comparison to her previous, idealized relationship fuelled her anger. It was only much later in the therapy that the non-attainment of the ideal began to be mourned, and Karen could become in touch with some of what she did have with Simon.

There was a long phase in the therapy in which the couple had no contact with the idea of a creative couple relationship, and therefore did not have the kind of relationship that they could turn to as a third position. Consequently they rapidly became very dependent on the therapist as a third party who could keep the relationship in mind. The therapy was marked by a conflict in which Karen would berate Simon for falling so far short of the mark, and Simon would attempt to be reasonable and to pacify her. Karen related to her husband as someone who should relieve her of pain, anxieties, and depression. In order to do this he had to understand exactly how she felt, and why she felt like it. Simon was a man who had difficulty in knowing about his own feelings, and frequently failed adequately to understand those of his wife. This dynamic between them, which was experienced time and time again in their relationship, left Karen feeling she had no husband, no other to turn to, and left Simon feeling impotent and a failure. There was pressure on this relationship to be a more of an infant–mother coupling, set up as one of the partners to be contained by the other, rather than an adult sexual relationship in which the two individuals can come together and think.

There was probably a narcissistic structure in Karen that provided her with an illusion that actually she could manage by herself, a situation common in individuals seeking help as part of a couple. This was, of course, by definition, an anti-relationship, psychically quite active, which could manifest itself quite destructively between the couple. The relationship was founded on an attack on relating. Against the background of often being emotionally let down by her husband, Karen would also, on occasion, actively destroy those times when Simon was capable of offering her something that she wanted or needed. Becoming aware of Simon's capacity to meet some of her requirements terrified her, because she experienced knowing about her dependence as an attack on her illusory self-sufficiency. At worst she felt this to be tantamount to an annihilation of her self.

Karen described, in a desperate way, how Simon was simply "not there". In the consulting room this was, at first, rather difficult to see. Simon presented himself as a reasonable man, on the face of it always trying to do things and to make things better for Karen. However, in a more fundamental sense, Karen was right; her husband was not there for her. Simon didn't let her know how he felt about anything, and sometimes was quite secretive about what he actually did contribute to the relationship. This increased her difficulties in a number of ways. She didn't have someone else's feelings to come up against, to take into account and to act as a limiting factor to her own feelings; she didn't have the opportunity to be the one able to think about him when he was distressed, as she was always seen to be the irrational one; but, even more importantly, she felt that she was not in a relationship with another person.

Simon could understand some of this and its impact on his wife. The problem for him was that he did not feel in touch with his own feelings and anxieties, which were connected to his early experience of relating to an object similarly cut off from feelings. Moreover, he was so frightened of his feelings, which were powerful and

violent—primitive because they had never been processed—that he was invested in leaving Karen with all the feelings in the relationship, and in unconsciously and sadistically allowing them to escalate. Therefore, although on the face of it Karen was the irrational one, the therapist was aware of how invested Simon was in getting Karen to express feelings that he was too frightened to contemplate in himself.

After quite some time in therapy moments slowly began to occur in which the couple began to discover their relationship as a resource. For example, later in the therapy, their son developed a condition that required a lot of medical intervention and would possibly require one of them to take a period of time off work, or even to leave their job. In a rare moment, instead of taking up their opposing positions on the subject, they were both able to own and share with each other their anxieties. They also began to get themselves into a third position, and to see how they had been dealing with their anxieties by attacking each other. They could then move towards something more supportive. It was an important experience for them to discover that this could lead to a creative solution as their collaborative thinking emerged—an outcome that neither had considered a possibility at the beginning.

The degree of conscious and unconscious relating

The way a couple deals with their emotions is an indication of whether or not they are relating as a creative couple. The couple relationship is a very emotional one, regardless of whether, or how, emotion is expressed. This is due to the intimacy of this relationship, which either breaks down, or threatens to break down, boundaries, including defences. Primitive emotions, such as dependency, envy, love, and hate, are evoked. In addition, earlier internal object relationships become re-enacted as the drive to work through unresolved inner conflicts takes hold.

It is not true that in the creative couple there is no fighting between the individuals. There will inevitably be differences, disagreements, frustrations, anger, and hatred. However, in the creative couple relationship there is a sense that the relationship can survive attacks that each individual makes on the other, and hope that, out of disagreement, understanding may eventually come. In this way the relationship is subjectively experienced as a resource, something the individuals in the relationship can turn to in their minds, with the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. This is tremendously helpful to a couple that is having a difficult time together because somewhere there is a belief that the relationship can withstand it. Of course, not all arguments have the potential to be creative, and sometimes it is quite the opposite. In the creative couple relationship, however, the individuals find it possible, enough of the time, to process their own emotional experiences and to think about them, sometimes with the help of their partner. This capacity for reflection, for being able to think about one's own feelings as well as a partner's, is, as described earlier, an important part of psychic development.

In what one might describe as a destructive argument there is the tendency to rid oneself of what feels emotionally unmanageable, and to project it into the partner. Intimate relationships are a fertile arena for projections. Partners are obvious objects into which to project, both because of their proximity and because the boundaries between intimate couples are more permeable. Many couples seek help in a state of mind where they feel unable to think about their own and their partner's unmanageable feelings, nor can they think about what is happening between them. They feel the impact of their own emotions, but are overwhelmed by them and, in this primitive state of mind, are unable to think about them. On top of this they often feel, like young infants, that the reason they are feeling so overwhelmed is because they are being attacked from outside by the partner. As described earlier, the idea holds sway that the partner is responsible for both one's happiness and one's unhappiness.

Psychic separateness

In a creative couple relationship it is possible to be psychically separate within the context of an intimate relationship. This is different from the early relationship between mother and baby. There, mother and baby are not psychically separate, and this is quite appropriate—in fact, this symbiotic relationship is a crucial part of psychic development, with the infant needing to be dependent on a mother to meet his needs. But, even for an infant, psychic

separateness soon becomes essential to his being and the development of his personality, as Winnicott pointed out:

> It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing. [Winnicott, 1958, p. 418]

One of the dilemmas many individuals encounter when they become part of an intimate, adult relationship, is how to be psychically separate and, at the same time, intimate. If the developments referred to earlier have not taken place, then the individual may have the merged mother–baby model unconsciously in mind as a mode of relating. Although I refer to this as a difficulty, it is of course quite common for couples to seek and aspire to a merged state of mind, feeling this to be the essence of being in love. However, true and sustaining love comes only with the disillusionment of this idea of merger as the ideal. The relinquishment of the ideal object goes hand in hand with the development of the wish really to know the other, not by magically becoming "one", but from the outside, with all the limitations and frustrations that this involves. The feeling of merger in the being-in-love state is so powerful because one feels just like the baby with mother, i.e. fused with an ideal maternal object. If the ideal of merger can be relinquished, then the attractions of difference can be discovered. Once the couple has given up the idea of merger as the ideal that they have to strive for, it becomes more possible from time to time to move into that state spontaneously, for example during sex, and to enjoy the intense feeling that it arouses; and it is also more possible to move out of it again, without too much regret.

If, however, the ideal of merger is not relinquished, and yet becomes harder to sustain, difficulties will arise in the relationship. Sometimes the couple are quite aware of this problem, and one or both describe the feeling of not having a separate existence within the relationship. Most commonly, one partner feels that the other's behaviour is responsible for his or her happiness. Conflict arises around not being able to see the other as separate, as one partner

tries omnipotently to control the other, to make them into the kind of object they want or need them to be, or to impose their own version of reality on the other as if theirs is the only true version. The one, more or less tyrannically, requires of the other certain forms of behaviour so that life may be bearable.

Conclusion: a sense of containment

In this chapter I have tried to show how I understand psychic development as it relates to the couple; where it founders, and where, sometimes with the help of psychotherapy, the awareness of creative intercourse can be discovered or recovered.

In living through the oedipal situation the infant has the beginnings of an idea of a couple who together, as a function of their relationship, "contain" the baby (Bion, 1959, 1962a). What the child does with this experience and information goes through some transformations on the way to his or her developing the idea of a creative couple relationship. As an adult, this is encompassed in the idea of a couple relationship, which can contain not only actual children, but also, when needed, each partner in the relationship. It is also the beginning of the idea that this couple relationship can be creative, symbolized by the possibility of actual children, and realized through new thoughts, ideas, and other possibilities.

In the creative couple state of mind, the couple feels they have something to which they both relate, something they can turn to that can contain each of them as individuals. It is something they have in mind, and they can imagine the relationship as something that has them in mind. With couples in treatment it is observable both when this third element is absent and when it starts to develop. The latter can be a profoundly moving experience, as in the case of Paul and Anna.

Once this capacity to create a relationship is secure, it can then help contain the regression that inevitably arises at life transitions, at points of crisis or of new learning, or just in trying to manage the ups and downs of everyday life, all of which are likely temporarily to undermine more mature relating. It allows room for ambivalence and the toleration of the inevitability of conflict and tension. This is the kind of relationship in which creative solutions are sometimes

possible—solutions that neither of the individuals would have imagined or found on their own. One can notice this development in couples in treatment, as in Simon's and Karen's case, when previously stuck situations become loosened up, as perhaps some things can be relinquished, and possibilities for different ways forward start to emerge.

Note

1. My thanks to Philip Stokoe, with whom I formulated the idea of a creative couple in psychic life in 1998. This formed the basis of a paper which Stanley Ruszczynski and I gave at The Tavistock Marital Studies 50th Anniversary Conference later that year.

CHAPTER TWO

Reflective space in the intimate couple relationship: the "marital triangle"*

Stanley Ruszczynski

> "The vital process that drives men and women to each other, to love each other, then create life, and thus achieve continuation of the human race Freud called the oedipus complex"
>
> Rey, 1994, p. 4

Britton's (1989) paper "The missing link: parental sexuality in the oedipus complex" has, in a short space of time, come to influence much psychoanalytic thinking and practice with individual patients. Britton delineates the significance of the infant's relationship not only to each of the parental couple individually, as mother and as father, but crucially to the parental couple *as a couple*, for individual psychic development. He develops Bion's (1962b) two-body, container–contained concept to that of a

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