Difference: a source of support, tension or conflict?
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Having trained in the early eighties as a couples counsellor with what was then Marriage Guidance and, later, Relate, I was embedded in a more psychodynamic approach to couples work: investigating the significance of unconscious reproduction of past patterns of parenting in partnership relationships (Pincus, 1962).

Some ten years later, I integrated my Gestalt training into my couples work and I continue to appreciate how Gestalt has contributed to locating the work in wider contexts: emphasising shared responsibility for the co-created relationship, and working phenomenologically and creatively to raise awareness.

Watching these two films, each of which is about an hour long, is to witness and appreciate the range, depth and experience that Dr. Rita Resnick and Dr. Robert Resnick demonstrate as they work with two couples. Setting the background, both examples are located during two different week-long training workshops in Slovenia and Poland, and other participants are there responding as they observe the work. There are subtitles which support understanding. However, I also found that the clients’ occasional reaching for language supported my experience of the genuineness and courage of the two couples willing to share and risk in this context.

The Resnicks demonstrate a model of couples work illustrated by two therapists working with a couple. The advantages of this, when the therapists can support the rhythm of the work and intervene with both partners, are made evident. The graceful ease with which they do this is both a pleasure and a learning experience. The potential to be triangulated as a single therapist is all too familiar. Clients are often fearful of a therapist alliance against them and the mutual balance and support offered by the Resnicks to their clients was well demonstrated.

What these films provide is an opportunity to see a masterclass in Gestalt couples work. Although these videos may not be intended as direct training in relevant skills or theory, it is easy to see how the viewers can draw from these examples and integrate learning in their own couple work or, perhaps, reflect on their own relationships. The work is with two couples presenting with differing themes, difficulties and resources. We can generalise from these examples but, as must be the case, other common presenting issues and recurring themes are obviously beyond the focus of these sessions. Whilst some couples work can be intensely dramatic, with strongly expressed emotions and extreme conflicts, what we observe here is the slow, unfolding process as the work moves towards clarifying underlying processes and familiar interactions. In both cases, what is made apparent is the recursive loop of repeating patterns which affect a couple’s ability for connection. The inclusion of brief written material focussing on difference is cogent and relevant both to this couple and more widely.

We Already Had Great Things

During this week-long summer training workshop, two sessions in the week are edited to under an hour. There is a familiar presenting theme for this couple – a man and a woman – whose connection has waned over their twenty-year relationship. At the beginning of the session, context is asked for, from both participants, asking them to name their wants and needs from the session. In both examples, the importance of respect, and an awareness of boundaries when engaging in this work, is named. This couple’s pattern of contact and withdrawal, and the repeating patterns which interrupt their connection, is brought into awareness and possible change processes are considered.

As the Resnicks observe, ‘two become one, then there are none: from a fusion model to a connection model’. The movement between potential isolation and potential confluence in partner relationships is well known. To what extent does any couple experience intimacy as being both connected and separate? The Resnicks’ model of the Circle of Relating (1997), which I met some years ago, demonstrates this very clearly. I experienced them working with this couple towards a sustained dialogue in which each partner could more fully experience the other in both their sameness and their difference. As Devlin and O’Neil (2004) attest, each relationship has a rhythm of ‘moving closer, connecting, being intimate and attached, and then moving apart and being more separate, autonomous, differentiated and individuated’ (p. 114).

Shame is named in the session. One partner’s sharing of vulnerability – which moves his partner – also locates the shame where it belongs, as well as offering support and understanding of how the ‘then’ is present in the ‘now’ of their relationship. Whilst couples are invited to make connections with how their earlier histories present in the now, as the Resnicks state ‘primary experience is the currency (and only currency) of contact’. This is demonstrated in their effective interventions with both couples; we see
the moment-by-moment exploration of heightening awareness of both partners’ processes and witness their shared, interlocking dynamics.

Dealing with Difference

In this film, we meet a couple, two women, who have been together for three years and are faced with dealing with difference. I wonder how many of us watching might recognise the familiarity of trying to deal with difference by trying to persuade the other into changing and doing it our way!

The topic of discussion between this couple is about going to watch football matches. However, as is made very clear, this is not primarily about football: it’s about who gets to decide their time together and what happens when they don’t agree. As one therapist names, ‘you both want to be together. The battle is when you want to do it differently’. Who holds the decision-making power is an obvious course of exploration. Who asserts and who acquiesces, whilst retroflecting their own needs, is another dance familiar to many relationships. Again, we are reminded when working with couples that it is often less the issue itself but how the couple perceive and manage it that is of primary importance. How does this couple stand together to consider this issue? It is acknowledged that compromise, whilst offering benefits, also often involves loss. As one therapist rather eloquently names, ‘I can taste your reluctance to let go of your way’.

In the second of the two examples working with this couple, the session focuses on sexuality. This is a familiar theme which presents in couples work when the sexual relationship no longer meets the need of one or both partners. We see the importance of clarifying intentionality here, exploring at times how an intention may be received, with the therapist noting on occasion: ‘You missed each other there’. At one point, the question, ‘Is it a game for you?’ invites both partners’ needs and concerns to be considered. Clarifying the difference for each around touching and sexuality illuminates each partner’s understanding. The emerging playfulness, fun and energy are a pleasure to watch as they are encouraged to find expression between them. The need for compromise is made apparent. Whilst both partners need to be an advocate for their own wants and needs, the fundamental importance of shared responsibility and consideration is named very clearly: ‘Each of you has to be a representative for both of you, rather than each of you for each of you.’

Reflections on their approach

Throughout these sessions, couples were encouraged to consider the language that they both use when speaking and responding to each other, and at times to speak directly to each other. Both partners were supported to say something simple and in a directly owned way. For example, I enjoyed the direct intervention when the therapist turned to the client and said ‘Look at her eyes not mine...What do you see?’ Partners were supported by language that was both owned and direct, and more likely to facilitate dialogue between them: ‘It’s different when you say the obvious and tell her what you want, not what she should do.’ Another intervention that I particularly liked was “I don’t know” could be the end of the conversation or the beginning of an exploration.

Both couples were supported to understand their meaning-making in their processes through clarification by the therapists. The Resnicks showed the importance of both clarifying the process and naming it. The importance of clarification was evident when the therapist asked ‘Are you saying no, or hearing no?’ As I watched, I noticed the times when I felt the pull towards one partner or the other, and reminded myself of the importance of balanced neutrality. Throughout the work, there were many examples where you could see each therapist confirm or acknowledge both partners with words, smiles and gestures. However, both therapists also challenged the client’s deflections, held the figure, and reminded the client of the question asked, demonstrating the importance of respectful dialogue. In support of a dialogic relationship, both partners were encouraged to pay attention to the importance of embodied process as well as to spoken language: to check in with their own process when their partner was speaking, so as to pay attention to both.

There were some enjoyable examples of Gestalt’s creative approach. The importance of grading and self-support, of both couple and therapists, was well demonstrated. Shared laughter, which was often present, was another support. As an invitation, ‘You don’t have to believe it, it’s an experiment’ supported the couple to practise new behaviours and to explore deeper awareness. We saw how identifying and deepening awareness of an experience could increase vitality. There was also a consideration of how this learning could be transferred to their lives outside the session.

Throughout their work, we see the Resnicks focus on content only to the extent that it illuminates process. The naming of process and the statement of the obvious is transparent and, evidently, effective. For example, when one partner had not wanted to come to therapy and had felt somewhat blackmailed into it, the therapist commented, ‘You came, so obviously you want something’. The Resnicks showed the importance of working phenomenologically, checking their understanding and inviting exploration rather than interpretation. They asked for specifics as in, ‘What’s
the “it” he takes for granted? We therefore can observe the times when tight therapeutic sequencing, to which Polster (2021) refers, supports the work. Furthermore, we can observe the places where softening supports a deepening of the work.

Malcolm Parlett (1991) refers to the meeting of a therapist and client as two dancers coming to the dance: a metaphor that has remained vivid for me and a useful lens through which to consider therapeutic work. In these examples of couples work, we can see how each partner contributes to the dance of the relationship, bringing both earlier dance steps and the nature of a co-created familiar dance in their current relationship.

As Gestalt therapists, we do not work as change agents: we can watch the Resnicks raising awareness of how these couples interact, helping the couples find possible ways of understanding for themselves and for each other, and offering them invitations to explore other potential ways of relating. As they state, ‘Without trying to change them, we use the interruptions to their contact as the currency of contact’.

Gilbert and Shmukler (1996) name the importance of goodwill for the relationship as being directly relevant to the potential outcome of therapy. In the second video, we meet one partner’s initial reluctance, but mostly all four clients appear to demonstrate both that significant goodwill, and an ability to draw on the support available to them to remain open to dialogue and to engage with the process. Other couples, as we know, present with deeply entrenched patterns and conflicts, holding firmly to their own position and perception of truth.

In both videos, although we know the location of the training, the nationality of the clients remains unknown. Whilst the focus of the work is on the interlocking dynamics between the couple in open-ended or ongoing work, the difference of culture and context for these couples would be interesting to consider. How might a couple of the same or different genders be differently supported according to their culture and where they now live? As we know, when we enter the field we change it. I wondered, what might have been the meaning of working with two internationally renowned American therapists and trainers for the couples? Or the meaning of being observed?

As the Resnicks write, in most cultures, difference has a difficult reputation. How couples deal with difference – rather than what the differences are – is at the root of almost all couple issues, which certainly finds resonance with my experience as a couples practitioner. This is clearly a fundamental aspect of partner relations. Also, in a changing and more mobile world, more couples bring a greater diversity of backgrounds to their relationship (Singh et al., 2020).

In their writing on dealing with difference, they name that collaboration ‘can only happen when there is parity/equal entitlement to needs and preferences’. This creates safety, recognising that a resolution that works for both parties may not always be found. Their balance of interest, warmth and engagement with these couples demonstrates the ongoing significance of this and the fundamental importance of balancing on the seesaw of a couple’s sometimes polarised or more confluent relationship.

I consider that when we work with a couple there are very real opportunities for creative change; for the individuals and families directly concerned, but also for the communities in which they are embedded. There are many approaches to couples work and in these videos two highly experienced practitioners demonstrate their way of working. Both personally and professionally, I resonate when the Resnicks (1997) teach that relationships are both hard work and that they are, hopefully, worth the effort. Reflecting on these videos I am left appreciative of the willingness of all involved to work towards better support and understanding of these significant relationships.

References


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