

'Why Were You Drawn to Each Other?'— Some Implications of the Couple Bond for Couple Therapy

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Some themes in couple therapy are explored by introducing a case study of a couple in distress. The question, 'Why were you drawn to each other?' helps to unravel the relationship story, its dynamics and difficulties. Attachment theory as developed by John Bowlby is propounded as a useful model in understanding couple relationships. The importance of exploring family-of-origin attachments is reiterated, as well as helping each spouse to change in themselves rather than to blame their partner for their difficulties, with the ultimate aim being the enhancement of the relationship.

A COUPLE IN THERAPY¹

Sophie and Simon's Story

Sophie and Simon are in their late twenties and have been married for four years. They have a two year old son, Jonathan. Simon is a factory worker and Sophie works at home raising their son. Sophie receives an invalid pension. She has had a series of diagnoses, culminating in schizophrenia. Sophie was admitted as an inpatient in the mother and baby unit of a psychiatric hospital when her baby was eight months old. After a few weeks she was discharged and did not have any recurrent episodes. Once Sophie was out of hospital she and Simon started seeing me at The Bouverie Centre² to work on their marital relationship.

Simon's parents separated when he was two years old. Simon's mother moved states and raised the children on her own; she remarried when they were in their teens. Simon met his father again only when he was fifteen years old; at the same time he gained a stepfather. Simon's father is schizophrenic and partially blind. His condition remained undiagnosed for a few years; however, the family were aware that his behaviour was odd: for instance, he did not take his wife to hospital to deliver their second baby and she ended up giving birth in the backyard. He was violent, and Simon recalls, 'He used to bash his wife and take her wages'.

Simon feels quite detached from his family and is very angry about the hurts from the past. He feels that

he was deprived as a child and does not like to keep up much family contact. He also mentioned that he had uncles who were violent to their wives. Simon and Sophie believe that violent behaviour in men is 'in the *soi'*, a Greek expression meaning it could be inherited. Despite Simon's wishes to be independent of his family, he became very angry and distressed when his mother won Tattsлото and did not give him any money. He stated, 'Greek families should look after each other'. He refused to see his mother and when Sophie tried to encourage him to see her, he became uncharacteristically violent. The violent episode occurred six months before the session with the couple referred to below.

Sophie was born in Germany of Greek parents, who migrated to Australia when she was three years of age. Her parents were generous to their children materially but there was emotional impoverishment, physical abuse and domestic violence. Simon believes that Sophie's father spoils her: she would get twenty dollars for pocket money when other children got one dollar, thus she never learned the value of money and became a spendthrift. She was sexually abused when she was thirteen years old by an uncle and two of her girlfriends' fathers, ran away from home when she was sixteen years old and was raped when she was nineteen. She also developed an eating disorder in her teens. Sophie is now overweight and snacks non-stop. She is an extravagant, warm person who loves to be with people. Despite extraordinary suffering and pain she has generosity of spirit and good humour.

When Sophie met Simon, she moved in with him practically straight away. She was attracted to his friendship, and she found she could talk to him. He could take care of her and he brought stability to her life. Sophie was experimenting with drugs at the time and Simon helped her to come off them. He felt that she needed help, he liked listening to her and helping her with her

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¹Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the couple and their family.

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problems. He was attracted to her honesty and her compassion. Once Sophie's family found out she was in a defacto relationship they quickly started organising Sophie's and Simon's lives and made sure that they were living in wedded bliss.

One of the major problems that developed between Sophie and Simon was the interference of her family of origin in their married life. When she gave birth to their baby she needed her Mum's practical support. She believed that having a baby had brought her closer to her Mum: 'It will make my Mum happy for the few years she has left'. Simon experienced his mother-in-law's help as intrusive. According to Sophie, 'Simon found it hard when I had the baby and had my Mum over. I needed the extra help.' A psychiatrist who was seeing Sophie at the time of her post-partum psychosis described an 'over-enmeshment' with her mother.

Simon recalled that his maternal grandmother had visited his mother during the troubled time of her marriage to Simon's father and 'gave her the strength to leave'. Perhaps Simon felt threatened by his mother-in-law's presence in the house due to his memory of his own mother's empowerment by her mother. Maybe Simon felt that mother and daughter plotted against him, that he was the outsider in that relationship. Simon found it bewildering that Sophie had craved her independence as a young person and now had become reliant on her parents, 'These are the parents she wanted to run away from. Wanted her own life back then. Wanted the feeling of independence.'

The Couple, the Therapist and the Team

Initially the couple were both keen about therapy but Simon's enthusiasm waned as the therapy progressed, whereas Sophie's involvement with me and the therapeutic process grew. After a break of nearly a year they are now sitting in the therapy room with me, and with a team behind the screen. Sophie and Simon have dressed for the occasion, and he has taken time off work to be present. This is the second time an appointment has been made, as the first one was cancelled by Simon. 'No wonder he didn't want to stay in therapy—it took away from his role as Sophie's therapist,' the team leader comments in the discussion before the couple arrived. I realise why I had felt so much animosity coming from Simon towards me!

Simon: I don't know what to do any more. She has a habit of leaving food lying around and leaving doors opened. She doesn't organise herself and she always loses her keys. I cracked up last week. I told her off. This is leading to a marriage break-up.

Sophie: It's more your problem.

Simon: Our biggest issue is communication break-down; not listening or doing what the other wants. I can't live in a messy house.

Sophie: [To Simon] It's not! [To Therapist] I'm always on the go. Simon has a different style. I don't want his help. I'll run the house my way.

Simon: [To Sophie] You like talking with your friends and you clean the house for your friends. [To Therapist] I can't control her any more; she's a very confident person now. She does her own thing; we live separately though we share a bed. There is no love-making any more.

I explore the meaning of this for him by discussing female and male roles. For instance, Simon says he was called a 'poofter' by his peers at school for helping at home. He is in fact a very sensitive and enormously compassionate man, and does a lot of the practical tasks around the house which would normally be the female's lot. I look at what Simon's expectations of a wife are. Thus my focus is on the presenting problem, which is not very helpful for this couple as it keeps them in their stuck position. It would have been more helpful to look at what an untidy house *represents* for him.

In their reflection, the team ponder the original reasons for Sophie and Simon being attracted to one another, and how what once drew them together has now become problematic. Early in the relationship Sophie allowed Simon to look after her: now she wants to be his equal. This has created sadness for him, as he feels lonely and unsure of her love for him. Out of his unsureness, he has been trying to control her, but she has grown to be a strong woman and is fighting for her survival and her personhood. They have entered a vicious cycle where he complains, and she rebels by refusing to do the tasks he would like her to do. They both fail to appreciate the good in the other. Their relationship at first helped them to overcome the pain of loneliness but now this is no longer enough to keep the marriage alive.

The team's reflection is a powerful emotional experience for the couple and opens up the wounds in their life, their questioning of their love, and the issue of whether they should stay in the marriage. What can we learn from relevant theory that might help us in working with a troubled couple like Simon and Sophie?

PARTNERS IN LIFE: CONCEPTUALISING THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

'What Drew You to Each Other?'

In the words of Satir, '... if humans never find their sameness, they will never meet; if they never meet their differences, they cannot be real or develop a truly human and zestful relationship with one another' (Satir, 1972: 138). Simon and Sophie both came from the same ethnic and socioeconomic background, both sets of parents were migrants, they both had had difficult childhoods and both had been emotionally deprived. There had been violence in both their families of origin.

Sophie and Simon were also attracted to the differences each saw in the other, yet perceived differences can lead to problems. In one therapy session Simon admitted that Sophie was 'a complicated character'. He also made the comment to her, 'You will never

understand a male and a male will never understand a woman'. In a marriage, males and females have to deal with enormous differences in their construction of relationships. Chodorow attributes these gender differences to the fact that women are usually responsible for early child care. Therefore, 'In any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connectedness to other people more than masculine personality does' (1974: 43–44).

Tom Paterson says, 'If you want a man to feel you understand him, speak to him about his loneliness' (1996: 15). Simon is indeed an isolated man, and exemplifies Gottman's statement:

Unfortunately, marriage is still about the only outlet for emotional expression in the lives of most men. Whereas wives usually have a fairly wide support network outside the marriage of friends and relatives, husbands, in essence, only disclose to their wives—and nobody else. It is not surprising, then, that unhappily married men are deeply lonely (1994: 47).

Compared to Simon, Sophie has a network of friends, yet she feels deeply lonely too. Many people backed off when they found out she had a mental illness. Her constant eating is a way of filling up the emptiness she feels inside and she craves intimacy as well, complaining that Simon is not very romantic or sexually intimate. She speaks of having another baby, partly as a craving to fill the emptiness inside her, partly because of her need to nurture herself. The loneliness that both Sophie and Simon feel is not solely explained by gender.

Difference ideally brings excitement, interest, and vitality to a relationship. Sophie is outgoing, warm and vivacious, and keeps an untidy house; Simon is neat and tidy at home and quiet and withdrawn socially. She loves to play and have fun, she spends money lavishly compared to Simon who is hard working, holds onto his money, and hopes to pay off their mortgage as soon as possible. These differences would obviously lead to conflict in their relationship, though initially they would have formed part of the attraction to each other, Simon being attracted to Sophie's extrovert personality and she being drawn to his common sense and practical nature. The qualities they found intriguing in the other person are qualities they need to develop within themselves. Whitaker (1976 in Russell and Drees, 1989) calls this problem 'the issue of self-discovery by denial of the other'. It is based on the belief that if one spouse can only disassociate from the other, perhaps he or she can find happiness or discover who he or she is, because the root of the unhappiness is seen to be the other person.

Attempts to change the other person usually lead to failure, as pointed out by the behavioural therapists (Jacobson, 1992; Gottman, 1994) who have found that 'acceptance of partner' is a major catalyst for change in couple therapy. Thus, one of the goals of therapy with couples is to get the spouses to a stage where they recognise the wish to change in certain ways within themselves rather than struggling to change the other. The pathway for this process may be through questioning about mate selection. The question, 'What drew you

to each other in the first place?', highlights each partner's strengths and the notion of what they 'bring to the relationship' fosters the idea of acceptance. When the partner who has been attempting to change the other begins to take responsibility for his or her own happiness, this may allow the second partner to focus on his or her own self with openness now that there is less need for defensiveness.

The challenge for Simon would be to be able to accept love and help from other people without his woundedness getting in the way. He was originally attracted by Sophie's compassion and earthiness, the way she cared for her friends. He needs to allow himself to be cared for, as they are by her, instead of being rigidly stuck in the role of caregiver to one person. The challenge for Sophie would be to find ways to show love and affection to Simon which were acceptable to him, and to develop a sense of *herself* as exciting and precious rather than relying on Simon to engender it in her.

Loyalty to Family of Origin

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) highlighted the 'invisible loyalties' and the intergenerational sense of justice which are intrinsic to relationships with our families of origin. Our family's past colours our life in the present. Moreover our relationship to our parents is an integral part of our psyche. In a similar vein, the notion that we re-enact issues from our family of origin with our marital partner has influenced most forms of psychotherapy with couples (Dicks, 1967; Framo, 1976; Bowen, 1978; Napier, 1987).

Sophie and Simon, with their son Jonathan, have repeated some of the patterns in their families of origin, such as the violence, the sense of emotional impoverishment, and the marital conflict. Simon was two years of age (Jonathan's present age) when his mother left his father (which was also when he himself lost contact with his father) so he may be reliving in his marriage some of his rage and hurt and sense of abandonment from that time. Simon was then out of touch with his father until the age of fifteen. He grew up with stories about his father's violence, his father's strange behaviour and his mother's emancipation. By the time he again had contact with his father, his father had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and was visually impaired, weaving baskets for a living. These experiences would have moulded Simon's ideas about manhood and his ideas of himself as a man. In marrying a woman who was diagnosed with schizophrenia, Simon has recreated one aspect of his mother's marriage to his father.

He wanted to cut ties with the family of origin, whereas she nurtured those relationships and relied on them, particularly on her mother's help. In becoming a mother, Sophie has identified with her own mother, and become reliant on her help in raising her son. Her loyalty to her family of origin has now become stronger than her loyalty to her family of procreation. Sophie also

helped Simon to maintain a relationship with his own father and mother by telephoning them and making sure that they saw their grandchild.

The idea that marital partners mutually select each other to make an 'exquisite' match, and form a relationship which provides a safe space to work out unresolved issues from the family of origin, reverberates throughout the psychotherapeutic literature (Dicks, 1967; Bowen, 1978; Napier, 1987, 1988). Whitaker (1982, in Russell and Drees, 1989) states that the

marital partners have chosen each other with great wisdom, with the wisdom of social propriety, with the wisdom of their bodies, as well as the unconscious awareness of how they compliment each other's person (93).

Dicks (1967) asks what it is that enables the growing human being to acquire the resources for emotional maturity and responsible role fulfilment as a spouse and a parent, and after an examination of Klein's and Fairbairn's writing, answers,

... an infancy spent ... with a good and understanding mother ... creates the basis for a relatively easy passage through later phases ... When dependence and receiving, especially, can be lived out in the generous warmth and wealth of sensuous pleasure of the 'nursing communion', the first, and perhaps essential step towards a good marriage will have been taken (36-37).

Napier (1987, 1988) states that marriage is a form of psychotherapy, in which both partners hope to be reparented by their partner. We marry to add something to our lives, we want to feel nurtured, safe and profoundly valued, but the intimacy of marriage, of living so closely with another person, can shake us to the core of our being. This confrontation and upheaval can lead to growth and change for both partners,

...in addition to linking up with someone who inadvertently plays some of the familiar roles that we associate with our parents and our siblings, our partner also has the capacity to help us vary and change those dramas. This person, from a different family world, also represents newness and change ... (Napier, 1988).

Above all, it is attachment theory which has fully explored the ramifications of this principle.

Attachment Theory and Couple Relationships

What is special about the attachment between partners in life? What is the nature of the loyalty which develops between husband and wife?

John Bowlby (1969, 1973) spent a lifetime researching and theorising about the development of the infant-mother bond. Attachment theory is a distillation of ethology, psychoanalysis, and object relations theory. Towards the end of his life, Bowlby wrote a biography of Darwin, and Bowlby conceptualised mother-infant bonding in the framework of evolutionary adaptation: attachments ensure survival in a dangerous world (Johnson, 1986). He discarded drive theory,

conceptualising instead an instinctive pattern of behaviour that disposes the infant to form an affectional bond, or attachment, to its caregiver and to protest and despair at separation from, or loss of, that figure. These ideas were based on the 'imprinting' which occurs when a goose or duck is born: it attaches itself to the first moving object it sees (Sable, 1992). Bowlby sensed that humans too must have such bonding behaviours and intergenerational cues which predispose them to relational experiences.

Most importantly, the nature and success of the early bonding process with parental figures also has an impact on the kind of attachments the individual will make in later life, in that interpersonal experiences beginning with the mother-child bond (or significant caretaker-child bond) are internalised and provide a map for a person's future relationships. In this vein, Stern (1990) postulates that a baby forms a mental model of his mother based on all their interactions:

This model will ultimately consist of many different pieces of interaction ... We also assume that the mental model he builds of his mother will act as the prototype for what he will expect to happen with other loved persons whom he encounters in life (1990: 43).

It has been found that there is a significant relationship between the quality of an infant's attachment to the parent and the adult's reconstruction of his or her attachment history, as well as the child's later representation of self and others (Main, 1991).

In an evolutionary perspective, Ainsworth (1991) suggests that marriage customs have been developed to foster enduring sexual pair bonds, backing up biological predispositions to ensure that the young are cared for. In a long-term sexual relationship, whether in a marriage or not, attachment develops into give-and-take where at one time or other each partner looks to the other as stronger, wiser, and/or more competent, and the other reciprocates by providing care, comfort, and reassurance, and thus security.

Attachment in childhood is distinguished from other relational bonds by a number of specific features. The child attempts to remain within the protective range of the attachment figure, who provides the child with a 'secure base', so that s/he is free to explore and to play. The threat of separation from the attachment figure brings about protest and attempts to stop the separation from taking place. When children are threatened, they turn to their parents as a source of security. Once attachment to a particular figure has formed, only that figure is established as the primary object of attachment, and she cannot be replaced. Other figures may provide companionship but they do not substitute for the attachment, no matter how loving they may be. Most significantly, *attachment feelings persist despite the permanent loss of the attachment figure*. Pining, despair and grief follow the loss of an attachment figure. Finally, attachment seems to persist *even when the attachment figure is neglecting or abusive*, though feelings of anger

and misuse may then be mixed up with attachment feelings.

Certain relationships between adults, typically between husband and wife, seem to have some of these very qualities. Studies of adult bereavement and marital separation have indicated that adults go through intense grief as they mourn the loss of their partner either through separation or death (Bowlby and Parkes, 1970; Parkes, 1972; Weiss, 1975 in Weiss, 1991). Stern contemplates the importance of the sustaining presence of the primary caregiver and the feelings of panic and fragmentation that a one year old baby experiences upon becoming separated from his mother and observes that adults also suffer from separation anxiety.

Almost anyone would panic at finding himself swimming in the ocean, out of sight of land, the boat drifting away ... Even in ordinary life, the threat of separation from our most important partner—whether husband, wife, or parent—has similar, if less dramatic effects (1990: 99).

This adult attachment figure offers a sense of security and place, a sense of being needed, and an opportunity for nurturance. Yet adults often replace their partners upon separation or death. How does this affect the notion of 'irreplaceability'? The author heard of a case of a man whose wife of 35 years died after a long illness. His current partner, Anna, has the same name as his deceased wife, but he differentiates between them by referring to the former as 'My Anna'. Even though this man's first wife has been replaced by another attachment figure, he is loyal to the memory of his primary choice, and the endearment he uses graphically conveys that she was a part of him, and 'belonged to' him. Similarly, Simon repeatedly referred to Sophie in sessions as 'my wife' rather than using her name, as if in an effort to secure his tie to her in the face of the fear that she valued her friends more than him.

Where attachment develops between couples, there is a need to maintain closeness, distress upon inexplicable separation, joy upon reunion, and immense grief at loss. Even individuals who have been unhappy in their marriages, and misused by their partners, may continue to feel emotionally bonded to them (Weiss, 1991). However, as in the case of ambivalent and negative childhood attachments, adult partners may vacillate between loyalty, and hatred, resentment and distress. Both Sophie and Simon manifest the adult equivalent of ambivalent or anxious attachment. Attachment theory would predict that their childhood relationships to their primary caregivers were marked by a deep sense of insecurity, which, given the family of origin histories on both sides, seems not unlikely. The disappointment they now feel in each other, after their initial sense of mutual support and caring, may well represent a re-enactment of those early feelings, of which both would now be totally unconscious.

Simon's greatest comfort and source of affection is their baby son, 'I like being with my son', he stated. Perhaps Simon is in the process of 'transferring' his attachment from Sophie to Jonathan, just as Sophie

hopes that her son may supply the love that she craves, and which Simon seemingly cannot supply. Paterson's view is that the loneliness and isolation men feel stems from being outsiders in the realms of child-bearing and feeding of babies, and that men would benefit from attachment experiences in which they could feel nurtured as well as nurturing. In this case, however, Simon was close to his son and took extremely good care of him. Even though he woke up very early in the morning to go to work in the factory he usually woke up to the baby at night because the medication Sophie was on prevented her from doing so.

Yet the need for contact and security from another adult is a natural part of being human, and the emotional experience of close relationships is essential for mental health. Both Simon and Sophie crave to be loved and appreciated. Attachment theory helps us to see that couple therapy needs to address each partner's sense of security, or, on the other hand, sense of deprivation and isolation in the relationship. Simon feels tremendously insecure in his relationship with Sophie: he feels that she is inaccessible and emotionally unresponsive to him, he feels that he is the 'giver' and she is the 'taker'. The untidy house has become a symbol for Simon of the neglect he feels inside himself, which may have stemmed from the deprivation he experienced in his childhood. In complaining about the untidy house, he is expressing his deep yearning for love, as Sophie expresses hers in her longing for romance and sexual intimacy.

CONCLUSION

The story of a couple's meeting and attraction, the mate choice they have made, and the concomitant struggle to 'co-evolve and co-individuate', to use Stierlin's (1987) terms, carries a rich range of meanings in couple therapy. Most couples come to therapy in deep pain and disillusionment about each other and their marriage. Marriage exposes people's vulnerabilities and brings forth the deepest issues in their lives, and recreates their earliest affective relationships; to explore what drew people together in the first place is to discover what their bond means to the couple. Couple therapy can then paradoxically catalyse change within each partner so that they can acquire some of the qualities which attracted them to their spouses in the first place. When the individual focuses on the self as the target for change, the relationship itself is enriched.

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The eleventh annual Family Award for Children's Literature

(for books published in 1997)

The Family Therapy Associations of Australia have this year awarded the \$1,000 annual Family Award for Children's Literature to *Lockie Leonard Legend* by Tim Winton, published by Pan Macmillan Australia. Lockie is a thirteen year old surfer whose mother starts behaving very strangely, and ends up in hospital suffering a clinical depression. The narrative is presented in a light-hearted and engaging way, without compromising emotional depth or realism.

The \$1,000 **Young Readers/Picture Book Award** was not awarded this year.

Highly commended: *Guitar Highway Rose*, by Brigid Lowry, published by Allen & Unwin. Adolescence and independence are thoroughly explored from both the teenagers' and the parents' perspectives.

A short list of books for use in therapy was also compiled from this year's entries.

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