

Working with a Couple After Violence: Reflections on a Differentiation-Based Approach

Ian Gray

McGoldrick and Carter (2001) observe that interventions in a differentiation-based approach such as detriangling are often counterintuitive. In an attempt to understand the counterintuitive nature of a differentiation-based approach, I draw on Schnarch and others to reflect on the nature of paradox, integrity and differentiation. I discuss implications for work with a couple after violence, and I conclude that differentiation can be understood as a personal, social, or even master virtue. The paper moves backwards and forwards between a case example, and reflections on theory.

If you want to think with integrity, and are willing to bear the pain involved, you will inevitably encounter paradox ... If a concept is paradoxical, that in itself should suggest that it smacks of integrity and has the ring of truth. Conversely, if a concept is not in the least paradoxical, you may suspect that it has failed to integrate some aspect of the whole (Peck, 1997: 59).

Murray Bowen's concept of differentiation is widely known, if not widely understood, in the family therapy field. Bowen's 'differentiated self' is not simply an 'autonomous self', proudly independent, or even dismissive of, its relationships with intimates; instead, Bowen made it clear that the differentiated individual was able to maintain selfhood while simultaneously maintaining relationships with family, work colleagues and others, even in the face of powerful emotional forces that invite either enmeshment or 'cut-off'. Interestingly, in the philosophical literature, Calhoun's (1995) idea that integrity is best understood as a personal and social virtue, rather than a purely personal virtue, seems to parallel a growing

understanding in the family therapy field that differentiation is not just individuation, but that its relational resonances are profound. One of many therapists who draw on Bowen's theory, Schnarch (1991, 1996, 2002) is unique in articulating these resonances in his differentiation-based approach to intimacy and sexuality.

Tom's voice, low but clear. 'I just want to say ...' A pause, as he gathered strength. 'I know this is coming real late in the piece, but I want to say how sorry I am for the pain I caused you with my violence. And the fact that I tried to blame you makes me feel sick now.'

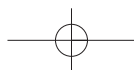
Amanda would turn to him, look intently at his face. 'What I want you to believe is that I am the one responsible for what I did. I know the hurt I caused you. I can assure you it will never happen again.'

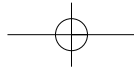
Amanda wouldn't say anything, just sit, take it in, feel the lightness in her shoulders as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her.

That scene played often in Amanda's mind. The words changed, but not her feelings of relief – relief from the emotional pain of the abuse she had suffered over five years. But the scene was yet to happen. Tom was unwilling or unable to offer the kind of apology or validation she was looking for.



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And to Amanda's disappointment, I was encouraging him not to.

I told Tom not to apologise if he didn't want to. And when Amanda questioned me about this, I explained that I didn't think it was in her interests if he apologised without meaning it, because she would sense that he wasn't genuine, but might feel obligated to accept his apology anyway, making her feel even more insecure.

Amanda wondered if I was suggesting she should just forget about what he had done. I told her that if an apology or acknowledgement from Tom was important to her, then she should continue seek that from him. But if he wasn't able or willing to give it, where would that leave her?

Then Tom asked what good it would achieve if Amanda was bringing up the past all the time. I told him I didn't feel it was in his interests that I try and stop Amanda from pressuring him for that acknowledgement. On one hand, he wanted her to trust him again, but on the other hand he wanted to avoid acknowledging the extent of his abuse. Since Amanda had said she wouldn't be able to trust him until he did acknowledge his abuse, he had a choice to make. And I suspected he needed the pressure she was putting him under to make that choice.

Schnarch (2002) believes physical and emotional abuse demonstrate that the more people depend on each other to regulate their anxiety and identity, the darker their relationships become. An 'industrial-strength' differentiation-based approach provokes a shift away from that kind of reliance on a partner.

Over time, a shift happened with Amanda and Tom. Amanda became increasingly sure of herself, while Tom started to struggle. Amanda changed jobs, Tom, a lawyer, lost long-standing clients. Amanda started going out with neglected friends, Tom became alternately depressed and desperate. On occasions, Tom would lash out verbally at Amanda, accusing her of sabotaging their relationship. Amanda was hurt by these accusations, but refused to be cowed by them.

In Bowen theory, such a shift can be explained in terms of 'traded pseudo-self' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988: 104) — in other words, one partner's level of functioning is artificially inflated at the expense of the other. While it had been evident for some years that Tom thrived and Amanda struggled, to do so Tom had effectively 'borrowed' functioning from Amanda. Now Amanda was functioning better, Tom's level of functioning had correspondingly diminished. In the family violence field, such shifts are usually described

in terms of power within the relationship — from a 'power over' towards a 'power with' relationship. The shift involves Tom losing power and Amanda gaining power, and sets the scene for a more equitable power-sharing arrangement. A differentiation-based approach helps to resolve the borrowed functioning that is a feature of all relationships. Horne and Hicks noted that Bowen theory:

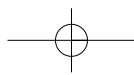
... is a manner of thinking that is sensitive to the process of oppression, in both in its therapeutic method and theoretical underpinnings ... In fact, it could be argued that Bowen's concept of borrowed functioning ... is oppression defined in a process-oriented, systemic manner (2002: 111).

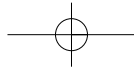
The debate as to whether family violence can be safely or effectively treated with couple or conjoint therapy has been polarised for many years now (Avis, 1992; Bograd, 1992; Hansen & Goldenberg, 1993). Some family therapists, sensitive to abuse, ethics and gender inequity, have used conjoint therapy with couples (Goldner, 1992, 1999; Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg & Walker, 1990; Jenkins, 1990; Jory & Anderson, 1999, 2000; Jory, Anderson & Greer, 1997). Recently, dimensions such as race, class, culture, sexual orientation and gender have received attention from clinicians and theoreticians (Bograd, 1999; Almeida & Durkin, 1999). More remains to be done, to determine, for instance, the type of cases where couples therapy is/is not appropriate, and the effectiveness of different combinations of treatment.

In the couples I see, the violence is as likely to have been psychological as physical, and moderate rather than severe. Often the men have voluntarily undertaken a men's behaviour change program; sometimes I see the couples concurrent with the men undertaking such a program. The women may have completed, or may currently have been participating in, a women's program. Invariably the abuse has greatly reduced if not ceased altogether, and the woman feels able to participate safely.

It seemed to me as I became acquainted with Bowen theory, that a differentiation-based approach was highly compatible with a family violence perspective. Furthermore, it was a nonpathologising approach — a preference of mine that had led me to narrative therapy, solution-focused therapy, and the invitational approach of Alan Jenkins. But I have found Bowenian practice difficult to come to grips with, and there have often seemed to be more questions than answers.

In practice, a differentiation-based approach is often counterintuitive to the way couples work is generally





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done — perhaps more so with couples work after violence. For example, therapists often believe the healing of the victim is contingent on the abuser taking responsibility for the abuse, and their therapy will attempt to facilitate this. In their Intimate Justice approach, Jory and Anderson (2000) have a specific intervention designed to transfer the anguish of abuse to the abuser in the form of accountability. In contrast, the approach taken in the above vignette does not place the responsibility for making progress with transcending abuse solely in the hands of the abuser.

The dangers and complexities of family violence work warrant an in-depth appraisal of any therapeutic approach under consideration. Specifically, I concentrated on trying to come to grips with what appeared to me a critical and unique aspect of a differentiation-based approach — its counterintuitive or paradoxical nature. It seems a kind of trick when you have explored ideas for some years in a meandering kind of way, to retrospectively impose a structure on that process. Along the way I had delved into the nature of paradox, integrity and differentiation, so while structure helps make the journey intelligible, it masks the reality that often only intuition or chance is the guide.

Paradoxes can bemuse, disorient, delight, confound and challenge us. Not surprisingly then, the relationship between paradox and truth is an intriguing one. Schnarch notes that the opposite of a 'shallow' truth is generally false, but the opposite of a 'deep' truth is generally true as well (1991: 478). Peck (1997) observes that most people dislike thinking about paradox and attempt to flee from its inherent tension by running with just one side or another, with part of the whole truth. Peck suggests, by way of example, that the ethic of rugged individualism is an illusion that masks the actuality that we are interdependent; the truth is that we both are, and are not, individuals.

Schnarch (1991) suggests that in a relationship 'truths' are invariably half-truths. Couples fight over who has the 'truth', while collusively denying the deeper truth that they exist in two separate, but parallel, realities. Is it then an act of integrity — to draw from Peck's words above — to acknowledge a partner's truth while holding onto one's own? Certainly it is paradoxical when we consider how we invariably tend to act in relationships.

We create a dissonance when talking about truth and multiple realities in the same breath. For us as therapists, the tension between these two is probably not dissimilar to that which exists for someone acknowledging a partner's truth, while holding onto his/her own. If it takes integrity for couples to acknowledge

each other's truth and hold their own, it also probably takes integrity for a therapist to tolerate the tension between notions of truth and multiple realities.

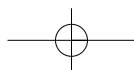
Schnarch (1991) believes that the mark of a complex relationship is the occurrence of paradox. The effective use of paradox can lead the way towards change, inviting an emergence of and tolerance for greater complexity. Behavioural suggestions can be more easily accepted and enacted. Greater flexibility and adaptability to the shifting situations that relationships face — and therefore true mutuality — could be possible. Schnarch posits the elegant idea that the paradox of normal developmental problems is that they present people with the opportunity to become capable of solving their own problems.

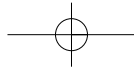
There are numerous examples of paradoxes within relationships. Schnarch (1991) suggests that such paradoxes can result from embedded cultural values and beliefs, interlocking unresolved individual dynamics, the use of language or characteristic interactional patterns, or from contradictions in male and female gender-role expectations.

Amanda liked to talk with Tom about her day, particularly when she was having problems at work. Tom found it hard to listen to Amanda's complaints without trying to tell her how she should fix them. The more she sensed he was demonstrating his prowess as problem-fixer than listening to her, the greater her annoyance. Having tried to establish his competence by fulfilling his gender role of problem-fixer only to have Amanda become annoyed, Tom was confused until he figured it was her gender role training that got in the way.

A therapist can attempt to remove paradoxes, or work with them. This is where a differentiation-based approach tends to be counterintuitive with respect to the way couples work often tends to be done. The differentiation-based approach makes no attempt to assist couples to negotiate and compromise away disturbing paradoxes. Instead, couples are confronted with the paradoxes their behaviour creates, and left to decide how they deal with them.

Men who have been violent or abusive often struggle to recognise the paradoxes their behaviour creates. They may demand that their partners be 'honest' with them, yet fail to see that these demands create fear, which undermines the likelihood of such 'honesty'. It is the same with demands for 'loyalty'. And while they wish to be loved by their partners, they constantly act in ways that make that impossible. When therapists draw attention to such paradoxes, the contradictions can be unsettling because they invite men to consider





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the *impact* of their behaviour on their partners. I have found relational paradoxes such as these can be deconstructed as two-choice dilemmas.

Schnarch (1991) introduced the concept of the 'two-choice dilemma' whereby people want two choices at one time, but all they get is one — unless they steal their partner's choices. Two-choice dilemmas exist in all relationships. Many people want their partner to express themselves freely but want to control when and where they do it. They want the other to do as they wish but want to control what the other does and when. They want to toy with their partner's sense of adequacy and yet they want the partner to be a competent person. While all relationships contain unresolved two-choice dilemmas, men who have been abusive commonly face a two-choice dilemma to do with trust. Often they want their partners to begin to trust them again *and* they don't want to listen to their partners speak of their experience of the abuse and its impact. They may convince themselves that discussing the abuse is going to remind their partners of it, make it less likely their partners will begin to trust them again. However, when men are unwilling or unable to discuss their abuse and its impact, they tend to be even less trusted by their partners.

Schnarch (1991) points out a paradox that occurs for some women who perceive partners as untrustworthy. If they or their partner attempt to prove this perception untrue, an increase in trust of their partner can occur at the expense of increased personal feelings of insecurity and doubt regarding their own perceptions.

The paradoxes around trust invite men to integrate their partner's experience into their own understanding; often only when he is able to talk about his abuse, and listen to her speak of the impact it has had on her, can she be able to begin to trust him again — if this is going to happen at all. Facing his two-choice dilemmas around trust means facing, not avoiding, his feelings of shame and remorse. Just as importantly — since as we have noted it is often not in his partner's interests to be encouraged or expected to trust him — he faces the challenge of realising that it may have become more important to her to regain trust in herself and her judgement, rather than in him and his judgement.

Tom had decided to stop being upset with Amanda going out with her friends and working long hours. He did not like the way he was treating her. Although he was afraid Amanda would move on and lose interest in him, he let her do as she wished without his usual sniping. To his surprise, over time their relationship improved. Amanda continued going out without him,

but spent more time with him, both finding they were enjoying it.

Men will often report that the effect of some changes they make — to stop trying to control their partner, or not to pressure her in the various ways they had in the past — is that they make progress in their relationship. They are experiencing what Shaw (1988) has called the paradox of intention.

Shaw's book is the study of a simple idea: that of reaching the goal by giving up the attempt to reach it. Everyday experiences of the paradox of intention are common — such as remembering forgotten names only when the effort to do so has ceased. But how do we understand men's common experience of an improvement in their relationship when they stop reacting to their partner or trying to control her? How do we understand the case of men separated from their partners who find they get along better?

Shaw sees this process as a maturation of the self which, 'does not arise through doing, as an accomplishment, but by a cessation of the wrong kind of doing, through letting go' (1988: 159–60). He notes that this kind of 'letting go' in relationship is a

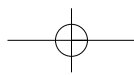
process of learning non-attachment to persons and things, but non-attachment is not detachment or withdrawal; the relevant image is touching, without clinging (1988: 159).

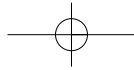
He says that when this happens our actions are no longer a way of dealing with or denying our precariousness: 'The wheel spins more truly when the center is still' (1988: 200).

This paradox of intention can strike people as illogical. The paradox of intention shows that if we give up our goals, our intentions, we are able to make a wider range of responses; it is then easier for us to override the automatic, habitual responses that are normally driven by our anxiety about achieving our intentions.

When their relationships improve, men can be faced with the two-choice dilemmas of wanting to keep cherished beliefs and wanting their relationships to continue to progress. They may need to confront their cherished beliefs about gender, power and relationships. It may not be possible for them to cling to outmoded gender roles, and *also* continue to make progress in their relationship.

Lerner (2001) discusses what she calls the paradox of authenticity. She notes that it is a cultural ideal to 'be yourself', but when we feel we are being ourselves, we are often simply falling into habitual patterns of interaction and reaction around sensitive issues. Until we are able to break from these habitual patterns, we





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are not likely to be heard by those we wish to *really* hear us. The paradox of authenticity is that speaking in a more authentic voice often involves being strategic and considered, rather than indulging our powerful urges to be our true, wonderful, spontaneous, uncensored selves. We just have to be willing to practise what does not come naturally in order to be authentic to our yearning to make our relationships work.

We have seen that paradoxes are inevitable in relationships. They challenge us to look beyond the usual, and act beyond the logical. If (as Peck notes in the passage we quoted at the beginning of this paper) when we think with integrity we inevitably encounter paradox, paradox itself is an invitation to integrity.

Calhoun (1995) described three pictures of integrity that have gained philosophical currency: the 'integrated self', 'identity', and 'clean-hands' pictures of integrity. The integrated self-view refers to the integration of parts of oneself such as desires, evaluations and commitments, into a whole; that is, one does not attempt to disown the less pleasant aspects of the self. The identity view refers to fidelity to projects and principles that one claims to be constitutive of one's core identity. The clean-hands view refers to maintaining the purity of one's agency, especially in dirty-hands situations; that is, sticking to avowed principles, whatever the cost to us or others.

However, in Peck's view, integrity is possessed of a purpose beyond protection of the boundaries of self, identity and reputation. A hallmark of his concept of integrity is the presence of uncertainty. Calhoun holds a similar view. She believes that integrity involves simultaneously standing behind our convictions and yet taking others' doubts about them seriously. Therefore ambivalence and compromise do not mean lack of integrity; indeed, if we aren't pulled as far as uncertainty or compromise, integrity demands at least that we exercise due care in how we dissent.

Calhoun believes that integrity happens in the context of community, through our relations with others. She believes that missing from the common view of integrity as a personal virtue is a vision of integrity as a social virtue. While a personal virtue consists in having the proper relation to oneself, a social virtue consists in having a proper relation to others.

Differentiation, it seems to me, has suffered a similar fate. It, too, has been viewed as purely a personal virtue. McGoldrick and Carter (2001) believe that Bowen's concept of differentiation is widely misunderstood in the family therapy field. Often the term is misapplied as if it meant autonomy, separateness, or

disconnectedness — ironically, they suggest, since Bowen's was the only early family therapy theory that gave equal weight to autonomy and emotional connectedness as characteristics necessary for the development of adult maturity. A primary goal of Bowen therapy was grounding oneself emotionally and learning to connect emotionally by developing a personal relationship with members of one's family.

Tom used the word 'integrity' from time to time. For Tom, it meant trying to regain the sense that he was acting in concert with some of his deepest values. Amanda didn't use the word, but she talked about 'getting real' and being 'authentic'. For her, this meant trying to regain the voice she felt she had lost in the relationship. For them, whichever of these words they used, the process they were referring to seems to me to be differentiation, the maturation of the self. They were striving to become better people with better relationships.

Schnarch is more optimistic than Bowen was about the potential for people to become more differentiated. He describes the role of two-choice dilemmas and compassion in this process:

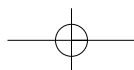
Compassion requires making room in your relationship for your partner. This involves not stealing your partner's choices by perpetually asking for more time before you buckle down and work things out. Repeatedly, you will have to choose between stifling your partner's growth and happiness, or growing up yourself (2002: 278–279).

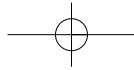
Transcending abuse involves a restoration, or restorying, of integrity. Lerner (2001) believes women come from a more solid place if they speak to preserve their own integrity and are not silenced by fear, rather than speaking because they need an apology or expect to have their reality validated.

Fishbane notes that more recent Bowen theory, especially reformulated by women therapists, uses the language of connection and interdependence. This shift is reflected in a greater focus on intimacy. Downey considers a current definition of intimacy as:

... maintaining an I–Thou relationship, where the other is valued and not objectified. It also consists of the responsibility to 'grow ourselves up', to take care of ourselves so that we can maintain attachment and self-direction, validating ourselves rather than relying on others to validate us (2001: 135).

Downey believes the liberating nature of such an intimacy allows us to see ourselves as relational beings, able to be separate *with* others, rather than separate *from* others. Schnarch (1996) says that the paradox of





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differentiation is that it is about being closer and more distinct, rather than more distant. Since it is in relationships that we grow, I believe differentiation can be described as a personal and social virtue, or even as Calhoun would finally characterise integrity, a master virtue that encompasses many others. To return to Peck, if paradox is an invitation to integrity, the paradox of differentiation is that it is an invitation to equality, mutuality and intimacy.

Amanda stopped trying to seek Tom's acknowledgement of his abuse. One session, she spoke up and told him about the pain it had caused her. She told him that she didn't feel she could trust him. If he did anything like it again, they were finished. Tom just sat there and listened.

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Endnote

- 1 Schnarch suggests that while the term itself is linguistically incorrect, it is therapeutically useful.

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