

INTIMACY, INDIVIDUATION, AND MARRIAGE

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Abstract

Self-differentiation and intimacy are fundamental issues in family functioning. The way in which couples deal with these tasks will significantly influence personal satisfaction and mutual commitment to growth in their relationship. The relationship of intimacy and individuation in marriage is paradoxical. Mates cannot achieve one without developing the other. However, in order to achieve either they must focus on process in the relationship. Intimacy and self-differentiation are by-products of successful process. In working with families it is important to distinguish process and outcome. Likewise it is important to distinguish between adaptation and growth goals. Intimacy and individuation will follow if we can facilitate process in the marital relationship.

Résumé

La différenciation de soi et l'intimité sont des aspects fondamentaux de toute vie de famille. La démarche que le couple empruntera pour réaliser ces objectifs influencera énormément leur satisfaction personnelle et leur engagement réciproque à grandir par le truchement de leur relation. Le rapport entre l'intimité et l'individualisation dans le mariage s'avère paradoxal. Les conjoints ne peuvent obtenir l'un sans développer l'autre. Cependant, pour parvenir à l'autre, ils doivent porter leur attention au processus dans leur relation. L'intimité et la différenciation de soi sont les sous-produits d'un processus réussi. Lorsqu'on travaille avec des familles, il est important de distinguer entre le processus et l'issue. De même, on doit distinguer entre l'adaptation et les buts de la croissance. L'intimité et l'individualisation se réaliseront si nous pouvons faciliter le processus dans la relation conjugale.

They referred to themselves as a model couple. During their fourteen year marriage, they had never fought or spoken of the other in a derogatory manner. They loved their children dearly and respected one another as individuals. Their decision to separate was prompted by her recognition that she could no longer function as "a part of him".

Following the removal of their delinquent eldest son from the home, the husband had an affair with one of his parishioners. The wife turned to alcohol, drugs, and finally psychiatry. Each partner set up a coalition with another child in the family. Overt fighting and suicidal behaviour escalated to the eventual dissolution of their nineteen year marriage.

Hess and Handel (1967) identify as a fundamental task of the family, the achievement of separateness and connectedness between family members. To achieve both closeness and distance within the same social group is paradoxical. In the cases cited above, the marriage partners have reached an impasse in dealing with these issues in their relationships.

This paper will discuss the relationship of intimacy and individuation in the marital relationship. It will present some of the more common defensive approaches to these issues. It

will also identify the conditions necessary for a synergic relationship. Implications for dealing with these issues in interpersonal relationships will be suggested.

For many couples the achievement of self-differentiation and intimacy within the same relationship constitutes a dilemma. It is commonly considered an either/or situation: to win one is to lose the other. One simply cannot have both individual growth and a deep loving relationship. But to accept this position would be to reject the possibility of either. A close relationship, free from threat, requires the clear differentiation of one's self from the relationship. Likewise, the growth of an individual self depends upon the nurturance of an intimate relationship.

One might conclude then that, *ipso facto*, if one achieves intimacy, individuation will be assured; and that if he fails to achieve intimacy, individuation will be an impossibility. This is not necessarily true, for although they are inextricably linked, self-differentiation is not in itself sufficient to produce intimacy. Nor is intimacy sufficient cause for individuation.

The continual interchange between differentia-

tion and intimacy is a statement of survival or growth. It is not the degree of self-differentiation, nor is it the degree of intimacy which determines the quality of the relationship. It is the way in which the actors negotiate and renegotiate their relationship to accommodate each other that will determine the quality of the outcome. They can create a synergic relationship which is strengthened by their individuality or they can create an exploitive relationship which controls individuality. Intimacy and individuation are merely outcomes of process in the marital relationship. Each in itself is necessary but not sufficient for realization of the other.

Process is the variable which operates to maintain the mutual growth of differentiation and closeness. Process means work. It involves negotiation, pain, and change. It is facilitated by trust, openness, and sensitivity. It is inhibited by suspicion, guarding, and self-centredness. Lest we presume that couples who follow the open marriage pattern or the dual career pattern have resolved these issues we must ask whether the pattern provides distance or promotes individuation. Likewise for couples who claim to be enraptured we must ask whether it is an expression of enmeshment or intimacy. The first possibility in each case would be an approach to survival; the second, a means to growth.

In the coming together of two people in a relationship, each brings his prized and unique self. This is both exciting and threatening for the participants. How the couple grapples with their differentness will significantly influence their growth as individuals and as a couple. If both mates spontaneously disclose themselves to the other, explore personal issues, and honestly negotiate solutions, they will achieve personal growth, solidarity, and a deeper relationship. If they do not share themselves openly with the other, their own growth and the growth of the relationship will be severely restricted.

A large part of each person's personality is generally undifferentiated, that is, it is not clearly and firmly claimed as an absolute way of being or believing for him or her. In the emotional union of marriage, it is the undifferentiated personalities which are shared. The portion of the personality which this represents for each partner is generally equal since individuals choose mates whose level of differentiation is comparable to their own (Anonymous, 1972). Within this part of the personality exist preferences and interests. In the fusion of two undifferentiated selves, the potential for conflict is readily apparent.

Within the shared self there will be disequilibrium as the twosome struggles to determine whose stance will represent their relationship. The threat of being engulfed or overpowered by one's mate can be very powerful. Each seeks recognition

of his individuality, yet cannot differentiate himself from the common self which he shares with his mate.

The operation basic to self-differentiation or separation from the common self is triangulation (Anonymous, 1972). This manoeuvre introduces a third person into the system, thereby diverting the tension to one's mate and the third person by defining the difference as theirs. No doubt many of the familiar mother-in-law jokes are related to triangling.

Triangulation is adaptive. It is employed in any close relationship to define one's own identity as separate from the group. Transactions which successfully reduce tension in the system continue to be used repeatedly. The dyadic system, having restored equilibrium by triangulation, becomes predictable and comfortable.

Intimacy requires a climate of openness, genuineness and nonpossessiveness. If one is threatened by the potential loss of his self to his partner, the barriers which he uses to defend his self will also severely limit intimacy. Intimacy can be physical, intellectual, or emotional (Dahms, 1974). Marriages based on physical intimacy or intellectual intimacy are quite satisfactory to many couples. Even if the experience is not completely gratifying for both partners, it may provide closeness and still create boundaries which limit emotional fusion.

Spontaneous sharing of one's self when differentiated from and reinforced by the other will promote a pattern of increasing intimacy. It is apparent that higher levels of intimacy will be more readily achieved by mates who have achieved a higher level of individuation. The fear of being obliterated will be reduced as will movement to obliterate the other, only when the individual is relatively comfortable with that which he knows about himself and is firmly committed to preserve. His energy can be spent in creative exploration; the sharing of experiences with his mate which provide opportunity for each to be positively reinforcing to the other. The outcome will be increased commitment and increasing intimacy.

The opposite alternative is also possible. Individuals with a low level of differentiation will be so guarded in their interpersonal exchanges that their level of intimate functioning will be correspondingly reduced. In situations where intimate glimpses are allowed, the mates will invest most of their energy in self-preservation. Consequently they will be negatively reinforcing with regard to intimate interaction and they will develop a pattern of interaction in which their commitment is to guarding against intimate intrusions. The relationship may be more vulnerable in crisis, though the commitment to the

relationship for the reward it provides, may be just as intense as for the previous example.

The relationship characterized by a high level of fusion and a low level of differentiation creates an enmeshed system (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries between mates are not clearly defined; each person is so involved with the other that privacy, autonomy, and goal directed activity are absent. This system overreacts to stress, yet does not resolve conflicts. Patterns of interaction are rigid. The relationship at the other extreme, characterized by a high level of differentiation and a low level of fusion, forms a disengaged system (Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries between mates are clear; autonomy, privacy and goal directed behaviour are valued above all else. Due to the extreme lack of involvement or fusion between members, stress experienced by one member has little or no effect on the other members. Patterns of interaction are *laissez-faire*. Most relationships would fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Frequently, disequilibrium in the system attempting to accommodate to self-differentiating moves by each spouse, is so potent that simple triangulation is not adequate to absorb the tension. Additional outlets are required. Most systems use a variety of defenses though one will tend to predominate.

The most common mechanism used to restore equilibrium is for one mate to surrender or make null his undifferentiated self. The emotional fusion is thereby represented completely by only one spouse's self. Conflict is bypassed, the system returns to a state of equilibrium, and commitment is increased. Many traditional marriages utilize this mechanism: the husband becomes successful in the business world, the wife invests herself in promoting his success. It is not surprising that many mates who take the low power position in the system manifest physical illness, depression, or drug dependency. The dysfunction of the low power mate is functional for the system: tension is drained off and equilibrium is maintained. This is the pattern of the first case cited earlier.

Marital conflict is another mechanism which absorbs large amounts of *undifferentiation* and so maintains closeness in the relationship. Cuber and Harroff (1973) refer to relationships which function around this dynamic as conflict-habituated.

Conflict may not always be expressed overtly, in fact, it may be avoided at all costs. The mates in a pseudo-mutuality pattern (Wynne, Rycoff, Day & Hirsch, 1967) are consumed by concern for fitting together to the extent that neither can tolerate the possibility of differing from the other. The perceived cost of expressing one's own identity is the destruction of the relationship, which would be intolerable. This relationship functions as though it were all encompassing,

including all elements which are considered complementary and excluding those which are considered non-complementary. The boundaries are not clear, in fact they are continuously shifting. Wynne et al. (1967) call this the "rubber fence" phenomenon.

Projection to a significant less powerful person, frequently a child, is also used to restore equilibrium. By scapegoating a child, tension is directed toward the child, thereby restoring balance in the marital relationship. An eldest child is usually selected if tensions from early marriage have not been resolved. However, a child may be selected on the basis of characteristics which most closely represent the conflict area for the couple. In order to maintain the child in the system the parents implicitly reward him so that he cannot escape the role without inducing overwhelming stress for himself. This is the pattern of the second case cited earlier.

Yet another mechanism is the formation of a stable coalition with a third party; a child, a parent, a lover. The only way the mate can act and maintain balance is to accept the coalition.

While many of the above mechanisms serve to restore balance, they avoid conflict resolution. They are primarily defensive and manipulative, restricting both individuation and intimacy. Only when there is conflict resolution can a truly intimate relationship develop. And only under these circumstances can individual growth progress within the relationship. This is likely to occur if process is emphasized.

A synergic relationship is based in process. It thrives on open exploration, honest negotiation and compromise. It views differentness as an opportunity for fun and personal growth. It delights in closeness and separateness for each person. Change is the norm: change within the individual and change in the relationship. But change is not easy — the inherent disequilibrium is not always pleasant. Mutual exploration and negotiation is crucial to conflict resolution and the development of a synergic relationship. In order to help families in distress we must determine whether their pattern of relating provides distance or separateness, exploitation or closeness, survival or growth, conflict avoidance or conflict resolution.

The successful negotiation of self-differentiation and intimacy issues between couples has broad implications. The more differentiation they can maintain in their mutuality, the more flexible they can be in dealing with crises. Death or illness of a family member should not destroy the system or individuals in it since the strength of each would have been clearly identified and well developed. Children raised in an environment of love to be autonomous beings will also be better prepared to cope with other people

and to adjust to change. Mutual self-differentiation in an intimate relationship is a goal worthy of promotion by personnel in the mental health field.

Individuation and intimacy in marriage are related by process in the relationship. Intimacy need not be arrived at by exploiting one's partner. Nor does individuation need to be limited to the growth of one partner only. Continued negotiation is necessary to create and maintain a system characterized by increasing intimacy and individuation. In this context, each aspect will enhance the other.

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