

Building trust

Projective identification is one of the most important processes for therapists to be aware of, but the use of it is different in couples work, writes **Clare Ireland**

The presenting problem of a client coming for individual therapy almost always has, at its root, a relationship issue of some kind. With a couple in the room, the therapist can observe the couple's interaction, while facilitating fairness and balance. In individual therapy, therefore, there's no witness present to give the other side of the story, and the therapist has to be particularly alert to reading between the lines. When a couple arrives in the consulting room, the presenting problem will have something to do with the couple feeling in some way estranged. They feel alone, separated out and isolated. The original intimacy, trust and support seem to have disappeared. What has gone wrong? Where did the feelings of abandonment, rejection and separation originate in their couple story? Where did the painful feelings ignited between them originate? Which of the feelings that are surfacing resonate with past feelings, therefore becoming disproportionate in strength between the couple?

The progress and usefulness of the therapy will be determined by how successfully the therapist is able to listen to, and hear, each individual's verbal and nonverbal communications, in an empathic and balanced way. Each person must feel understood, heard and equal in the interpretations of the therapist. The therapist has to be constantly alert to the unspoken words hidden behind what is said in the room. More than clever words and skilful interpretations, an atmosphere of trust must be felt between all three people.

What follows is a brief description of a fictional couple caught up in projective identification. Simon, feeling anxious about his job during a cull in his company, says quite

calmly to his partner, Fiona: 'I wonder what I should do if I lost my job?' By saying this – however calm his tone seems – he has tapped into a fear carried by Fiona, which may have its root in her childhood. She might, however, feel unsafe sharing her own anxiety, and become defensive and attacking. This would disable her ability to contain Simon's anxieties while sharing her own. In doing so, neither of them would feel contained or held. If, however, Fiona was able to reassure Simon by sharing her own feelings of fear, they might then begin to create a safe space to find a solution, which would have been previously unavailable to them because of their unspoken feelings of fear.

When using the words 'contained' and 'held', I'm referring to the concept of a baby in distress being held by a calm mother, who's able to contain both her own anxious feelings and those of the crying baby. Inside and outside of therapy, couples can function relatively effectively, even with problems of containment, as long as both partners are able to provide holding. In therapy, this requires the therapist's ability to contain the feelings of both partners, while the couple develops a creative third way.

The following conditions are also essential when working with couples:

- *A safe setting* – each partner needs to feel that the therapist will not allow either to be hurt by the interactions in a session. Until the setting feels safe, the projecting individual will not let go of the denial of his or her internal experience, which maintains defensiveness.
- *Equality* – if either partner thinks the therapist is taking sides with the other partner, or treating the other partner unfairly, then the equality is threatened and feelings of unfairness are internalised.
- *Balanced empathy* – if the therapist is to help the denied feelings of the projecting partner to surface, she or he will need to feel that the other in the room are not denying their own identification with the projected feelings. Thus, it is important that therapists do not treat the surfaced feelings of the projector as something that they would never feel themselves. Rather, they must relate to the disturbing thoughts and feelings with understanding.

- *Listen to the communication* – for greater intimacy to occur, a couple will need to communicate feelings of vulnerability in an open, non-blaming, non-conflictual fashion. A couple therapist must try to use the communication process to help unblock the resistance. In the early stages of the work, when the therapist is trying to make sense of the couple interaction, he or she may experience projective identification sequences, creating feelings of helplessness and being stuck. They may even experience some of the feelings of anger and misunderstanding that occur between the couple. The countertransference experience of confusion and helplessness needs to be understood by the therapist when making their interpretations. When the therapist perceives a projective identification, they can then try to interrupt the recurring pattern of conflict and misunderstanding. He or she tries to help both members of the couple to identify with, and be able to contain, the feelings. This opens up the possibility of creativity between the couple. They begin to feel the return of trust, intimacy, strength and progress. This better feeling can be something for the couple to internalise and use naturally, when previously they might have descended into conflict. ●

About the author



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