

Lack of Self-Disclosure and Verbal Communication About Emotions as a Precipitant of Affairs

Shosh Carmel

Abstract

In this article, I explore the dynamic underlying a very common contemporary phenomenon—the creation of an additional intimate relationship, while remaining in another stable self-dyad. This phenomenon is discussed via the unconscious and conscious perspectives of those who initiated and actively engaged in the additional relationship. In the absence of a capacity for verbal communication about emotions, the additional relationship serves to enact powerful, infantile needs, that were not met or processed in infancy, and which therefore vigorously re-emerge in the adult intimate relationship that lacks the capacity to contain them.

Key words: affairs, object relations, emotional verbal communication, self-disclosure, emotional closeness, self-dyad, marital crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will draw attention to the dynamics that facilitate engagement in another couple relationship, while still committed to a long-term intimate partner. I will try to present a different angle on an ancient phenomenon, without excluding other approaches to what is sometimes called a “romantic episode”, “an affair”, or “marital infidelity”.

Phillips is of the opinion that, by means of flirtation,

from a pragmatic point of view, one could say that a space is being created in which aims or ends can be worked out; the assumed wish for the more or less obvious sexual combinations, or commitments, may be a way of pre-empting the elaboration of, making time for, less familiar possibilities. (Phillips, 1994, p. xix)

Such possibilities would seem to pose less of a threat of leading to intimacy. An additional relationship, one may assume, is a way to nourish longings, to stall in order to gain time. In this paper I shall discuss the needs and wishes which the additional relationship fulfils.

Theoretical background

First let us observe the background of creating a relationship with a long term intimate partner. The adult self-dyad is a close, exclusive relationship between two individuals, without blood ties, sometimes heterosexual and sometimes homosexual; sometimes it is set within the official framework of marriage, and sometimes outside of it. A “self-dyad” has been defined as,

a conjoint structure or shared unconscious space of two individuals who have come together to project, metabolize, and contain various features of the self, including unconscious fears, wishes, needs, longings, and drive states—all recruited from early development . . . this structure must also provide for both individuals support and affirmation, partly to repair and compensate for deficiencies experienced during early life. (Zeitner, 2012, p. xv)

Bertrand Russell, as early as in 1929, claimed that with the growth of civilization, traditional morals, and theology have less influence on people’s lives than they used to have (Russell, 1929). Paradoxically, nowadays, it seems that in some ways, the importance of the couple relationship is increasing. More than ever in the past, it has its own distinct existence, being less controlled by religious and social dictates. The routine of daily life is performed in an environment saturated by stimuli, subjecting the individual to frequent changes between people, sites, and objects, demanding an accelerated pace of adaptation. In this setting, the couple relationship serves as the central emotional refuelling station in the life of the adult.

Questions regarding the necessity and function of the couple relationship have been addressed by various schools of thought, such as religious attitudes towards marriage, divorce, and additional couple relationships, as well as by some psychoanalytic approaches.

In applying Bion’s approach to couple therapy, one may see the couple relationship as a potential emotional container for each of the partners (Ruszczynski, 1993). This approach touches on Fairbairn’s (1941) statement that “the libido is looking for an object”, as well as on Kohut’s (1971) idea, that the mental existence of man is always related to that of his fellow man, which serves him as a platform for growth (Solomon, 1998). Therefore he needs a “self-object” throughout his life. In other words, the individual who, by his very nature, is motivated by the need to communicate with other human beings, strives to realise this tendency in a couple relationship, albeit that it, in essence, is different from all the other relationships that he needs.

Nonetheless, establishing self-dyad with a chosen partner obliges the new partners to cope with many difficulties that are often unexpected. In modern times, the couple relationship is constantly changing through a

process of mutual designing. The partners often find themselves carried away in a *perpetuum mobile*, in which balance is not easily maintained, especially in times of distress.

Willi (1984) claims that, in modern times the long-term couple relationship is subject to greater pressure than in the past, and has to cope with more problems than ever before. Also Yovell (2004) states that nowadays, the intricacy of relations between the sexes has increased and deepened.

Burgess and Locke described, as early as in 1945, the modern shift in the meaning of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). They showed how, despite a rather strict division of gender roles characteristic of couples at that time, husbands and wives were expected to take the role of each other's friend and companion, far more than in the past. They called this new kind of marriage "the companionate marriage". A further change gradually occurred from the 1960s onwards, as gender roles became less strictly defined, and as marriage ceased to be the only way of establishing long-term couple relationships, self-dyads were also expected to serve as a platform for growth, personal development, and fulfilment for each of the partners. Cherlin (2004) argues that over the past few decades marriage has undergone a process of de-institutionalisation, a weakening of the social norms that define the partner's behaviour. He emphasises the increasing number and complexity of cohabiting unions, including the emergence of those with two partners of the same sex.

Reibstein and Richards (1992) argue that the central importance of marital fidelity has been influenced by the changing nature of marriage itself. In one survey respondents throughout the European Union were asked what they thought getting married means; the most popular answer was "committing yourself to being faithful to your partner" (Eurostat, 1995).

In other words, the pressure exerted on present-day couples is now greater than in the past. Previously, the basis of this kind of relationship had been economic needs, social status, and the recognition of children—that is, it was based on concrete, defined aspects, that were socially recognised. Today, on the other hand, the expectations from the long-term partner are focused on intimate aspects. Many men and women are economically independent and hold a social status that is not necessarily determined by their partner; while medical and social advances allow parenthood without a self-dyad. Therefore, the fulfilment of emotional needs became the most dominant task of the intimate partner.

Loewald (1951) explains that when a baby is born, a relationship between him/her and the mother becomes possible because they have become separate. Mitchell (2003) adds, that not only during the early stages of development is there unity between mother and baby (similar to Mahler's concept of the symbiotic stage), but also throughout life, there exists a kind of experience, whereby perceptions dissipate, for example,

between the “self” and the “other”, between the internal and external and, between fantasy and comprehension.

In other words, in the course of an intimate couple relationship, even those individuals who successfully function in various other social spheres may be surprised to experience an unexpected total emotional absorption. Thompson and others have therefore referred to these relations as the most direct heir of the primary relationships of childhood (Clulow, 2001).

Dicks (1967) explains that the expectations of fulfilment of intangible object relations needs, act mostly beyond the range of awareness of the couple. Many fantasies and complex anxieties, as well as pleasures stemming from infantile object relations, may be expected to be re-activated in the adult couple interaction. Stress in the adult relationship may be a result of internal conflicts that were externalised and projected onto the intimate partner (Ruszczynski, 1993). Unconsciously, or at least partly so, we expect our intimate partner to repair us and compensate for early deprivation. Kohut (1984) explains that couple interactions are synchronised as long as, in times of distress, each of the spouses is able to serve as a self-object to the other spouse. As we will see, it is only partially possible to take on this role.

Resnik (1995) claims that every individual holds a representation of two parents activating him from the inside. According to Loewald (1951), the yearning for the unity experienced in infancy continues throughout the life cycle of the individual, and facilitates intimate adult relationships. When it is re-lived through the bond with someone outside the family of origin, confusion and difficulty often arise; it is not easy to regulate the emotional closeness to this new person, the stranger. The contradiction between the values of individuality celebrated by modern culture, and the yearning for psychic merging with the significant other, further complicates self-dyad dynamics.

Choosing only one love-object, greatly increases the dependence on him, making love more risky and the efforts to assure this love become even more necessary (Mitchell, 2003). In other words, even if the spouses avoid open, frank, and intimate verbal communication, it so happens, that being together for a long time has an impact on their mental stratum. The time spent together and the joint conduct of life, increase the experience of merging with the other as a self-object. Longing for emotional merging stems from the unconscious phantasy of returning to the womb, where needs are totally fulfilled without the need for verbal communication. This yearning may be experienced by the other partner as a threat of total dependence. These dynamics, of merging phantasies and the need for emotional closeness on one side, that are experienced as a threat by the other side, may serve as a motivation for an affair for each one of them: For the first partner, it may fulfil the need for closeness; while for the other, it may serve as a way to escape it.

In romantic relations, the basis of authentic dialogue requires recognition of the fact that the other is different and separate and the discovery of the reality of basic solitude (Winnicott, 1958).

Mitchell (2003) refers to the fact that passion and commitment reflect very different values; therefore the alliance between love and marriage has always been shaky. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to emphasise that a further contradiction exists between individuality on the one hand, and emotional closeness and devotion to the stranger on the other. In mother–baby relations, we accept as natural that mothers, during the first weeks after birth, hold the illusion of absolute merging with the baby (Winnicott, 1956). How should boundaries function in the couple/self-dyad, the nature of which tempts us to return to the primary phantasy, but in reality is created between two people without blood ties, at a stage at which each of them is expected to be self-sufficient? Lacking definite answers from an outside authority, the individual has only his own intuition to rely on, and thus easily becomes confused. According to Mitchell (2003), romantic passion demands a surrender to deep emotions, which need assurances. In previous times, assurances were given in various ways—there was a religious and/or social prohibition on divorce, as well as a much higher functional dependence on the spouse. Nowadays, such assurances are not taken for granted; they must be established by working together on intimacy. In this context, one may assume that, sometimes, an affair replaces the ability of the spouses to accept the inherent uncertainty of their relationship and of life in general.

Establishing a self-dyad gives rise to the challenging question—how will an individual draw the chosen person closer to her/his world? How will this relationship be able to serve as an emotional container for each partner? The condition for succeeding in these tasks is that each partner is aware of the fact that the self-dyad can serve as a safe haven through emotional intimacy, but not through total infantile merging. Each partner must realise that a spouse can offer only a partial fulfilment of the back-to-the-womb phantasy. Moreover, the spouse expects partial fulfilment of their own back-to-the-womb fantasy.

Since both partners are no longer embryos, they need to use verbal communication in order to convey their wishes and needs, especially emotional ones. But what seems logically obvious, in reality, is rarely implemented. Verbal communication serves as a mediator between the changing, hidden, inner, emotional world, and outside reality, which is also changing and requires adaptation. Winnicott (1963) identified this affinity, pointing out that relating to objects is closely connected to the ability to communicate and to communication. Relating to objects is a complex phenomenon, which relies on maturing processes that require an adequate environment to support them. The more a spouse surrenders to a tendency

to avoid emotional, authentic, open, and frank verbal communication, the greater is the risk of the couple getting caught in a pattern of muteness. The partners are locked in a womb-like pattern of non-verbal communication, and are often very frustrated to discover that it does not meet their expectations of this relationship. Their frustration may result in looking for an alternative self-object to serve as an emotional container. This is a significant crossroad that often triggers a crisis.

The timing of this crisis may be determined by many factors. First, there are normative crises due to natural changes in the cycle of life, such as the birth of children, raising adolescents, and the emptying of the nest, etc. Aside from these, there are crises resulting from unexpected changes, such as disease, unemployment, war, and relocation (common among hi-tech employees), etc. All these stresses demand emotional verbal expression. When such expression does not occur, coordination and cooperation between the spouses are often lacking. Moreover, this state does not allow each of the partners to use the other's presence as a facilitator of mentalisation (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). In other words, the non-verbal partner not only avoids conferring his/her internal world onto the other, but also often fails to listen to his/her own inner sphere through this neglect. Using Winnicott's (1960) terms, by means of verbal emotional communication, the individual expresses his "true self"; expressing the true self is a necessary condition for establishing a good-enough couple relationship. A person, who rarely communicates in this manner with his/her partner, misses an opportunity for emotional growth. Thus, a vicious circle is being created, since this stunting of growth further enhances the avoidance of verbal emotional expression and projects onto the partner the phantasy of serving as a perfect womb-like container. This kind of vicious circle endangers the durability of the couple.

In this context, Winnicott (1958) pointed out the paradox, that the individual needs communication with the other person as well as needing an experience of solitude and separateness. Being with the same partner for a long time highlights this dilemma: how to be separate without feeling isolated. Experience shows us that in the self-dyad, those who are interested in preserving and nurturing an existing relationship, must preserve and nurture emotional verbal expression on a daily basis. To this end, sufficiently open, frank, and direct communication is needed, allowing for the processing of constantly changing personal and interpersonal dynamics. According to Waring (1988), self-disclosure is the single most enhancing factor for marital intimacy.

As we have seen, the couple relationship serves as a wall onto which powerful infantile fantasies are being projected. It therefore becomes a potential space for enactment of repressed primary emotional structures and states. When communications are not sufficiently effective, are not

characterised by openness, and are not conducted in a non-threatening atmosphere, more disruptions of balance can be expected to occur, caused by the spouses' repressed inner objects. When such a disruption of balance occurs, several scenarios may follow.

One possibility is that one or both partners acknowledge that a problem has occurred, and that they will have to solve it by themselves or through professional help. Another possibility is separation and/or divorce. These possibilities can be realised, provided that there is minimal open and controlled emotional communication at least by one partner. If this is not the case, in other words, if communication is deficient between the spouses and therefore usually introspection is also poor, other behaviours may be expected to appear as enactments. One kind of enactment may be starting an affair. This phenomenon stems from the essence of the couple's dynamics; it is not affected either by gender, by the status of marriage, or by the length of the relationship.

CLINICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

The following are some of many clinical examples. My perspective is based on many years of work with middle class individuals and couples all of whom were in employment, earning a decent living, and otherwise well functioning.

Case 1. Ron: relieving guilt, creating transitional space

As we will see in the following case, the guilt and blame involved in an affair may often block the patient's introspection. Strict moral rules dictate clear-cut solutions, that cannot always be followed, resulting in guilt and shame. These kinds of expectations reduce the transitional space, since they leave no place for playing with the options available, or even for any delay necessary for contemplation.

When Ron first called me, he sounded very anxious and made an urgent appointment. The next day, on entering the room, he appeared older than his forty-one years; he looked despondent, worried, and embarrassed. He sat down clumsily in the armchair facing me, and immediately began to speak.

I don't know what to do . . . I'm married, I have two children and for the last three years I have been having an affair with a young unmarried woman who loves me. I have a feeling that my wife is about to find out and I am afraid that everything will fall apart . . .

Later it turned out, that it was a platonic relationship, without any sexual involvement. Yet his voice trembled, and his speech was very confused.

Every now and then he choked and uncontrolled outbursts of crying interrupted his words. I tried to make eye-contact, but most of the time his eyes were downcast. When he finally succeeded in glancing fleetingly at me, I realised that Ron was devoured, not only by fear, but also by intense feelings of guilt, and was anxiously awaiting punishment.

Looking at him, I was surprised to find myself saying he should not feel guilty. I did not feel that he should be blamed for having been carried away by the emotion he described, even though, at that time, I did not have any explanation for my reaction.

Ron was surprised by my reaction. Later on, it turned out that the moment he sat down facing me, he was concerned mainly about the way I would react to the disclosure of his secret. When saying, "I don't know what to do", he did not expect any practical advice about his wife. The deep motive for revealing his secret had been pangs of conscience and of guilt. For a long time he had thought of asking for professional help. It had not been easy for him. Until now, he had never considered himself to be in need of psychological help. His family held the belief that a person relies only on himself, and asking for psychological assistance was perceived to be a weakness and a source of embarrassment. Furthermore, he had been educated in conservative family values, especially with regard to marital fidelity. He was ashamed of his doings and felt very guilty about his inability to discontinue the relationship which threatened to destroy his family. This was the complex background to his session with me; rather than seeking advice, as he had declared in the beginning, he was actually waiting to receive the punishment for his misdeeds.

At the end of the conversation, I pondered my response. It was supposed to dispel Ron's anxiety and to reduce the intensity of his guilt, which seemed to paralyse him. At the same time, this response was meant to moderate the judgement that he felt. Many years of work with couples has made me only too well acquainted with the tendency of spouses to turn to an expert to decide "who is the good guy and who is the bad guy". Ron was tormented by regret and guilt about the injury he felt he had inflicted on his wife. Yet, in spite of this, he felt strongly attached to the parallel relationship he had created, and therefore very much trapped. The threat he felt apparently originated, not only from fear of his wife's response when she found the secret out, but also from a feeling of inner weakness and frustration. This stemmed from the fact that, despite his mental torments, he had neither succeeded in freeing himself from the "forbidden" relationship, nor was he willing to give up the woman of his youth, the mother of his children. Ron's mental state was like a crossroads without road signs; it was hard for him to choose, or to make decisions and he therefore felt paralysed and helpless. From his heavy tone of voice it seemed, for some minutes, that he was about to collapse. Indeed, he directly addressed

the fear for his mental stability. Consequently, dissolving the guilt would lessen the emotional burden engulfing Ron, an emotional burden that made him incapable of reflecting on his situation in a more balanced manner.

Later on, I tried to convey, as much as I could, that I was there at his side to assist him, so that he could understand himself better and find the best way for himself. I told him that during the course of our next sessions, he would have feelings, that he would have to contain, to understand, and to accept, without being immediately required to act upon them; and that my room would serve as a sheltered space for a clearer and wider introspection of his mental world, for imposing renewed order and balance.

In therapy, we went back to his early object relations, as well as to his present relationships. He did not report any marital problems, while at the same time repeatedly expressing his strong emotional attachment to the two women in his life, his wife and his girlfriend. I wondered what accounted for his having two intimate relationships simultaneously, with a high emotional arousal towards both on an almost equal level?

My non-judgmental response towards Ron, relieved the feeling of threat, thus creating what Winnicott would call a holding environment (Winnicott, 1956). It is also possible that the therapeutic alliance provided a temporary, additional, platonic relationship, that was more parentally biased, and not romantic. His wife became less anxious and encouraged Ron to be in therapy, affirming her love for him before every session. This kind of atmosphere encouraged Ron to explore further his motives for creating a significant relationship outside his marriage.

He could now reflect more freely on the family he grew up in. This family stressed family values as a part of a wide and strict education that emphasised being fully committed to the expectations of others. He was not accustomed to act for his own benefit, nor did he regard such a line of thought as being appropriate. Being the second son of his parents, he was accustomed to being "forever second". There was always someone superior and more favoured than he was, and all that was left for him was to obey—but in this he excelled. In his parents' home it was always he who was ready to help, even without being asked. When he got married, without receiving any financial assistance like his brother, he did not complain and he certainly did not make any demands. When his children were born, about two years after his marriage, and his wife became immersed in raising them, he never complained. He engaged himself with their upbringing, and ignored the lack of attention to himself. Ron understood that these circumstances created a predisposition for the additional couple relationship.

It should be noted that during the entire process, which lasted for about three years, Ron was consistent in expressing his love for his wife and children. The therapeutic bond with me provided him with non-judgmental,

empathic listening, that he needed in order to overcome the old conflict with the values of his family of origin. At the same time, he mastered self-listening, and learned how to communicate openly with his children and especially with his wife, and to ask her to respond to his changing needs. As a result of this, he stuck to his family and accepted that choice.

Case 2. Simon and Ruth: the case of the unavailable spouse

As the following case shows, an affair often stems from a prolonged period of time in which one of the spouses is emotionally unavailable to the partner, in comparison with a prior situation. This may happen for many reasons, such as, career demands or choices, physical illness, depression, family demands (e.g., a sick or aging parent), or, as in this example, maternal preoccupation. Lack of “good enough” awareness by the emotionally unavailable spouse about the impact of the changed conditions on the couple’s relationship, may create strong feelings of blame in one and a great deal of guilt in the other.

When I met Simon and Ruth, I did not verbally express my non-blaming attitude towards affairs, so that they would not interpret my words as leaning towards one or the other side. From the therapeutic point of view of the multidimensional approach, at least initially, it does not matter who initiates; the task of the therapist is to understand and disarm the escalation pattern (Scheinkman & Werneck, 2010). This may be an extremely difficult requirement, as during the treatment of couples, countertransference reactions by the analyst are often intense (Zeitner, 2003).

With Ruth and Simon, I felt a great empathy for the wife sitting in front of me, who told a sad story of dangerous births. In Ruth’s first pregnancy, eight years before, there were complications over a period of several months and the birth itself was also difficult, with the baby sustaining injuries. For years, the child had to undergo continuing, complex medical treatments and needed special care and attention at home. At the same time, the couple had to cope with heavy workloads, with Simon completing his academic studies, and with livelihood difficulties. Despite all this, and mainly for the benefit of their firstborn, they decided to have another child. When Ruth became pregnant, their firstborn being less than two years old, Simon began to feel emotional distress, that increased as the birth approached. In light of the circumstances of their life, Simon did not tell Ruth of his distress, as she herself was overburdened and stressed. During the three months preceding the second birth, Simon found himself conversing more and more with a woman colleague, who was about to get married in the same month in which the birth of his second child was expected. Simon used to go out to lunch with her, and during the joint meal they shared the tensions accompanying the significant events about

to happen in their respective lives. Simon, who did not see any fault in his actions, did not hide them from his wife. Ruth, however, became very angry and jealous and wondered why he did not talk to her, but preferred turning to a "stranger". Ruth felt very much offended and betrayed. During the couple therapy, they understood that long before Simon had turned to his colleague, a certain alienation resulting from their circumstances had penetrated their relationship, keeping them apart and impairing the closeness between them.

Simon and Ruth show how Winnicott's famous paradox manifests itself in the life of a couple: the ability to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of another. Without a sufficient measure of such experience, the ability to be alone cannot develop properly. In the self-dyad it is not self-evident that the ability to be alone will be maintained over a long time and under any circumstances. Under those such as pertained this case, where the woman was caught up for years in primary maternal preoccupation (Winnicott, 1956), the man might well feel kept out and rejected. Therefore, the need to be alone in the presence of the other could be filled by an alternative, not necessarily romantic, figure, one that served as a protection against a tormenting feeling of loneliness and anxiety. If only Simon could have verbalised, for himself and to his wife, the distance and rejection he felt from her, he might not have needed a third person to serve as an emotional container.

Case 3. Rina: fulfilling unspoken wishes

For Rina too, the extramarital relationship she had maintained for several years was not the result of passion, but of a lack of verbal emotional expression. Through the affair, she restored balance to her otherwise unbalanced emotional life. Like many others, she did so unconsciously, through an almost uncontrollable enactment, instead of through conscious choice.

Rina grew up in a family where physical needs were always properly met. Yet, whenever she needed advice or a shoulder to lean on, she never turned to her parents. The parents were described as hard-working people, steeped in a migration crisis resulting from their immigration to Israel, and troubled by problems of earning a living. At that time, she did not regard them as people she could turn to for advice; instead, she adopted for herself an extreme pattern of self-reliance.

Many years after she married, Rina had accepted the advances of a much older senior colleague. This colleague was influential in the company that had hired her as a new, ambitious employee. He was married and had children of his own, and stated from the start that he had no intention of getting a divorce. Although this relationship continued for several years, Rina never

became deeply attached to him, nor did she enjoy the fleeting sexual relations that became rare over the years. As far as she was concerned, it had not been the central part of this relationship. When asked, Rina described her husband to me as a “frightened little child”. She portrayed their relationship as asymmetric, as she was acting as a parental figure for him.

During therapy, Rina realised that, without being aware of it, she had responded to the wooing of an authoritative, fatherly person, who created for her an atmosphere of security because of the age gap between them and the attitude of sheltering he displayed toward her. He thus answered a wish which was left unfulfilled by the asymmetric relationship with her husband. It is interesting to note, that Rina and her colleague had no heart-to-heart conversations, and talked mainly about work-related issues. As in her childhood, Rina found here a protective parental figure, who did not fulfil her emotional needs.

As opposed to Ron and Simon, Rina’s enactment did not involve finding an alternative emotional container. Rather, she created a relationship that constituted an inverse image to that of her marriage, where she was the dependent partner, even though not emotionally so. Her affair expressed non-verbally her need for support and dependency.

Case 4. Dolly and Asher: a virtual affair

Sometimes, the difficulty of emotional verbal expression does not manifest itself through a real affair, but through a virtual one. Today, this is especially common through the internet, but exists also in other forms, as we will now see.

At the time they came to me for treatment, Dolly and Asher had been married for about thirteen years and they had two sons, aged twelve and ten. They told me that they had met in their teens when Asher was about to enlist in the army and Dolly was a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl. Dolly had been then in the beginning of a relationship with Mikey, a youth of her age, living in the same neighbourhood. For Dolly, this first relationship was premature and hesitant and ended after about two months. After leaving Mikey, seventeen-year-old Asher arrived on the scene. Dolly told him about Mikey, and Asher even ran into him several times on the street by chance. In other words, both Dolly and Asher’s acquaintance with Mikey had been very superficial. Asher began courting Dolly and she responded. Asher devotedly clung to Dolly and after a while, they became sexual partners.

On Asher’s discharge from the Army, they got married and their children were born. Over the years, tensions between them developed into recurrent quarrels which focused on Mikey, even though the relationship with him had been severed several months before they became a couple. They had not heard from him for many years and he had not been seen in their

neighbourhood. During therapy, it became apparent that an obsessive memory of this shadowy figure, in fact, served as a “protective screen” against an open discussion of the particular difficulties they encountered in establishing an intimate emotional closeness between them. A couple collusion (Willi, 1984) can be identified here, which is aimed at preserving the ambiguity in their relationship by using the object that, in itself, represents ambiguity for each of them. As communication between them improved, the shadowy figure vanished by itself and a beneficent emotional dialogue became possible.

Case 5. Benjamin and Dan: sex substituting dialogue

In the following example, we see how occasional sex outside the existing couple relationship can also serve as an enactment that replaces authentic emotional verbal expression between the spouses.

Benjamin, about thirty-eight years old, came for therapy at the height of a crisis. It turned out that he was facing the disintegration of his five-year long relationship with another man, Dan. His partner had found out that during the last two months he had had several casual sexual encounters, whose names he did not even remember, as, according to him, they did not arouse any passion or interest in him. During therapy, it had become clear that Benjamin had been in mourning for his father who had died some months before. The danger that he might also lose the relationship with Dan had seriously shaken him. When talking to him, it turned out that despite keeping a joint household, spending time together, and passionate sexual relations between them, Benjamin found it difficult to carry on a verbal dialogue with his spouse, and especially to open up emotionally to him. He flinched from confrontations and also from demonstrating his affection. Because of his deep mourning, his need for emotional sharing with his spouse became stronger. In spite of this, he continued to remain silent in Dan’s presence. The restraint of intimacy with Dan left Benjamin in a state of loneliness and emotional distress, from which he found relief in the anonymous arms that embraced him momentarily, without posing any threat of a genuine emotional closeness. Benjamin came to couple therapy with his partner. Together they overcame the obstacles to verbal communication between them; Dan became once more a self-object for Benjamin and vice versa.

DISCUSSION

In the above clinical examples, the sex component was either of minor importance or absent altogether from the alternative relationship. This fact, discovered through listening to many patients, contradicted the common

expectation about romantic affairs. In the light of this, what remained was to understand the circumstances of this phenomenon in an altogether different way. As we have seen, what was most prominent in these patients' long-term relationships was the difficulty in communicating emotions verbally, usually in a time of crisis. Simon and Ron each found another partner with whom they could freely express themselves, while their wives were emotionally unavailable; but the other examples showed that the ability to express emotions verbally, that never existed inside the long-term relationship, did not miraculously spring forth when turning to a new partner outside this relationship.

Exploring the complex relations between adult love and passion, and the childhood relationship with the parents, is defined by Mitchell (2003) as one of the fundamental challenges in psychotherapy. In the above cases, in every family for their own particular reasons, patients' parents were perceived as distant and emotionally inaccessible. In adulthood, they reconstructed the inadequate communication patterns of their childhood. They all needed containment and listening, and to an extent that did not fit the framework of an adult couple relationship. Also, they were less aware of the need to search themselves and their early object relations to find how they should change in order to help themselves and those surrounding them in the present. Therefore, when various needs arose in them, they remained unaware, or only partially conscious, of the situation. Their obliviousness of needs and wishes, and the difficulty of putting them into words, created "time bombs" that "exploded" through enactments. One possible enactment was having an affair. Dicks (1967) claims that intimacy is created through the fulfilment of symbolic object relations needs, acting mostly outside the spouses' consciousness. The individual's inner world is "populated" by earlier relationships and experiences. Consequently, particularly in the intimate meetings with the self-object in the self-dyad, he/she might expect to meet the same images and the same situations, this time fulfilling the previously unsatisfied needs. However, so far as repressed emotional needs are concerned, most of them being unclear and yet powerful, it is very difficult to find a means of satisfying them, inside or outside a self-dyad.

This article, does not aim to cover all the aspects of failure in couple relations, but identifies the lack of verbal emotional communication, as a main source of breaches in preserving the exclusivity of the couple relationship/self-dyad. I suggest that an individual's recognition of his/her own "communicative style"; in its degree of sincerity, frankness, and avoidance of emotional demonstrativeness, before entering a specific couple relationship, (and irrespective of the partner's contribution) could moderate the partner's expectations. Were this to happen, at this point, each partner takes responsibility for him/herself, changing what needs changing in him/herself, in order to create a new communicative pattern suitable to

adult self-dyad. Achieving mutual, intimate, and open emotional communication is the first objective required to improve the couple relationship.

In the case of Ron, he committed himself to a personal process, lasting for about three years, at the end of which, his relationship with his wife strengthened, and they became closer than ever. They started having frequent, deep, and meaningful discussions, and began going to joint activities, either as a couple or together with their children, extended family, or friends. The same process happened also to Rina, who chose to maintain and develop the framework of her marriage. Like her, Dolly and Asher, and Benjamin and Dan continued their joint lives. Simon and Ruth, however, chose to divorce, and learned during therapy how to maintain the joint parental framework in a manner which would suit the needs of their children and reduce emotional damages resulting from their separation.

The fact that none of these patients chose to start afresh with the new person in their lives is no coincidence. Although this does happen sometimes, of course, more often than not, the third party is of less importance than it might seem. Many times, as in Dolly and Asher's case, the focus on this third person does not enable a deeper insight into the primary relationship.

In the light of this, the role of the therapist in many cases is to move away from the intense feelings of guilt and blame, and away from the focus on the third party, in order to allow for a thorough examination of the relationship. As has been suggested here, this may often result in the discovery that the relationship lacks sufficient emotional verbal communication. Through therapy, this type of communication can be gradually acquired. The therapist thus serves as a benevolent third party, who does not threaten the existence of the self-dyad.

In my opinion, another goal of therapy is to curb the often unconscious and exaggerated expectations that are projected onto the self-dyad. This is a necessary step in the recovery of the adult relationship system. The infantile idealised expectations for womb-like containment and perfect non-verbal communication should be replaced by emotional communication skills. Taking responsibility for daily, direct, verbal disclosure enables the maintenance and growth of a satisfying adult self-dyad. Developing skills for emotional intimate communication between couples can serve, as Mitchell's "guarantees", to maintain the relationship for a long time, and to regulate closeness: it deepens intimacy on one hand, and on the other, limits the infantile dependency on the other person (Mitchell, 2003).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This article is intended as an invitation to broaden the perspective from which to consider and explore additional couple relationships, that are created while committed to an existing self-dyad.

The approach chosen in this paper is based on a combination of principles from family systems therapy, object relations theory, and a multidimensional approach that deals with interaction between personal and situational characteristics. This draws attention to the complex transactions whereby individuals select, interpret, and change situations (Scheinkman & Werneck, 2010; Zeitner, 2012). When dealing with conflicts stemming from a patient's involvement in an additional relationship, strong emotions often arise, in both patients and therapist. Rage, guilt, blame, and accusation blur the ability to see the affair as an enactment. Enactment is sometimes almost inevitable for someone who did not get the chance as a child to learn a different language, the skill of communicating verbally about emotions.

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