PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN COMMON COUPLE DANCES

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This paper integrates the object relations concept of projective identification and the systemic concept of marital dances to develop a more powerful model for working with more difficult and distressed couples. This integrated model explains how some couples use the defenses of splitting and projective identification to externalize and transpose internal conflicts into interpersonal conflicts in five common marital dances. The author suggests how object relations techniques can be used to interrupt the projective identifications, help clients to reown their disowned and projected affects and resolve the conflict on the intrapsychic level so that the marital dance is no longer necessary to resolve the intrapsychic issues.

COUPLES’ RESISTANCE TO SYSTEMIC THERAPY

The field of systemic marital therapy has generated powerful and effective strategies for helping couples to track and modify their marital dances, but there are some couples who cannot take advantage of these strategies to alter their interactions without first resolving the internal issues that require the defensive dance. Willi (1984, p. 181) suggests that “Couples in collusion” resist changing their nonproductive behaviors because “Changing roles is equivalent to breaking up the mutual defensive arrangement, with the subsequent surfacing of repressed fears.” Theorists have suggested that the most common fears underlying the maintenance of these dances are activation of negative self representations (Siegel, 1992), for example, “I want too much”; exposure of self as inadequate, empty or fragmentation prone (Lansky, 1982), for example “I’m abandonable”; and intimacy anxieties that get triggered by an actual or anticipated increase in interpersonal intimacy (Feldman, 1979), for example, “I’ll be taken advantage of.”

This paper extends Feldman’s (1979) view that marital conflict may serve to prevent the emergence of intimacy anxiety and proposes that the purpose of some common marital dances, including conflict, is to serve as a collusive defense for certain couples against the anxiety that is created by the stimulation of internal representations and emotions during intimacy. Furthermore, I propose that there are characteristic anxieties that underlay each of the specific dances. Thus, I will propose clinical hypotheses about which individual issues underlay each dance and therefore need to be resolved so that the collusive defense is no longer necessary, and the partners are free to change their positions in the dance. It is hoped that an understanding of the anxieties that fuel the negative interactions will give therapists a fresh perspective on frustrating couples that do not seem able to change their dance.

Couple Dances as Collusive Defenses

Dance is a term that is commonly used in systemic couple therapy to refer to the repetitive sequence of interactions or vicious cycles between partners. Lerner (1985, p. 56) described these circular dances as interactions “In which the behavior of one partner maintains and provokes the behavior of the other.” In the dances described in this article, the individuals’ defenses to intimacy intersect and mesh to form...
a collusive defense to protect the individuals and the couple from their fears regarding intimacy. In these cases, the dances are a collusive defense and are used unconsciously to resolve the individuals' conflict between their innate need for intimacy and the acquired fears of intimacy (Feldman, 1979; Feldman & Pinsof, 1982).

Of course, not all couple dances serve to regulate anxiety; some may be simply a result of the interaction of two partners' characteristic styles of relating learned from cultural and familial influences. However, I will address the subset of couples who incorporate the defenses of splitting and projective identification into their dances in order to defend against intimacy anxieties. These dances are considered to be universal and can be applied to any couple that has made an emotional commitment to make each other their primary attachment figure. Thus the term “couple” rather than “marital” will be used to include married, unmarried, homosexual, and heterosexual couples.

Solomon (1989) suggests that couples use their dance to maintain a comfort zone or a balance between the poles of intimacy and separateness. She suggests that the couple's behaviors help them to maintain a homeostasis; the defenses against intimacy are triggered when the marital system becomes “too hot,” and efforts to connect are triggered when the system becomes “too cold.”

Feldman (1979) and Feldman and Pinsof (1982) were among the first to develop a cybernetic model to explain how both interpersonal and intrapsychic factors may play a role in the stimulation and maintenance of these dances. Feldman (1976) applied a similar homeostatic model to couples with a depressed partner, explaining how the depression of one partner regulates the level of depression in the other partner. Feldman and Pinsof (1982) also applied this homeostatic model to couples who utilize a symptomatic partner or symptomatic child to maintain their marital system.

In this paper, Feldman's (1979) integrated model, which was developed to explain how conflict regulates intimacy anxiety in a marriage, will be applied to the following five marital dances: Conflict, distance, pursuer/avoider, overfunctioner/underfunctioner, and triangulation. Specifically, I address how these couples use projective identification in their specific dance to keep within their homeostatic limits for intimacy. It is important to note that most couples' dynamics cannot be explained by only one of these dances. Instead, couples usually combine the features of one or more dances (e.g., an overfunctioner/pursuer with an underfunctioner/avoider) or display the different dances in sequence (e.g., a conflictual dance that has evolved into one of distance).

PARTNERS' CAPACITY FOR INTIMACY DETERMINED BY LEVEL OF SELF DEVELOPMENT

Problem Maintenance Structures in Couple Dances

The five couple dances have a variety of problem maintenance structures, which means that a range of factors may serve to maintain a dance and serve as constraints to change a dance (Pinsof, 1995). Before exploring constraints to change at the intrapsychic level, it is very important to first consider constraints at behavioral, biological, and social/cultural levels. First, starting with constraints to change at the behavioral level, the therapist should first consider whether the couple has the necessary skills to communicate, negotiate, and problem solve. Second, it is important to consider whether biological factors, such as depression, attention-deficit disorder, or substance abuse are responsible for maintaining the dance. Third, the therapist would want to address whether gender or cultural factors are contributing to the maintenance of the dance. It is important that therapists consider the role of gender, ethnicity, and religion in the couple's dance, as well as the effects of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Considering constraints to change at the behavioral, biological, and cultural levels ensures that the therapist will avoid overpathologizing couples and engaging couples in long-term therapy that is not necessary to change their repetitive dances.

When couples have well-developed self and other representations, many systemic methods can be used to eliminate the constraints to change, alter the dance, and minimize the intimacy anxiety so the couple can tolerate intimacy without needing the collusive defense. However, when couples have constraints to change because of poorly developed representations of self and relationships, they will be limited in their ability to make or maintain change without the development of a cohesive self and resolution of splitting and projective identification.
The amount of intimacy that can be tolerated before individual and collusive defenses are activated is determined by the development of the internal representations of self and other. I will use Lerner’s (1989) definition of intimacy, which suggests that intimacy is not only about closeness but, rather, the ability to be oneself in a relationship and to allow the partner to do the same. In other words, in a truly intimate relationship each individual can present all aspects of self and can stay emotionally connected to all aspects of the other without needing to distort, change, or control the other.

When individuals have developed in a healthy way, they can tolerate both the positive and negative aspects of themselves and their partners that are aroused during intimate interactions. Furthermore, they can integrate the positive and negative aspects of self and other and thus are capable of ambivalence, self-determined by the development of the internal representations of self and other. I will use Lerner’s (1989) definition of intimacy, which suggests that intimacy is not only about closeness but, rather, the ability to be oneself in a relationship and to allow the partner to do the same. In other words, in a truly intimate relationship each individual can present all aspects of self and can stay emotionally connected to all aspects of the other without needing to distort, change, or control the other.

Capacity for Intimacy Determined by Internal Representations of Self and Others

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Projective identification changes the marital interaction by transposing the internal conflict into an interpersonal conflict and leads to polarized perceptions, which interfere with empathy and collaborative behaviors. If the internal conflict is around unresolved good and bad self representations, then the first partner perceives self as either “all good” or “all bad” and projects the opposite on to the partner. Some common polarities include hystericallrational, strong/weak, depressed/cheerful, angry/passive, and responsible/irresponsible. If the internal conflict is about an unresolved relationship with familial figures, one can project elements of the internalized relationships in one’s family of origin, also called transference. One can reenact one’s parent-child relationship in marriage, either by playing the part of one’s parent with the partner who is induced to be the child, or by playing the part of the child with the partner who is induced to reenact the role of the parent.

As Slipp (1988) explains, projective identification is both an intrapsychic and interpersonal defense mechanism as it serves to maintain both the self-esteem of the individual and the integrity of the system. When projective identification is required to maintain the stability of one’s intrapsychic system, it results in the exploitation of the partner to complete oneself and interference in the individual development of both partners. Projective identification requires that the partner deny the separateness of the other, which precludes empathy and discourages the other’s development because one must control the partner to stay in a designated role. Before such couples can increase their level of intimacy, they must make substantial progress toward the resolution of splitting and reinternalization of their projections.

THE ROLE OF PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN COUPLE DANCES

Integration of the Concept of Projective Identification into the Systemic Dance

This section will explain how couples with poorly developed internal representations of self and other use the collusive defense of projective identification to avoid the anxieties that are stimulated by actual or anticipated intimacy. As previously discussed in the description of the collusive marital dances, couples may maintain their homeostatic limits for intimacy and distance through repetitive cycles of interaction (Feldman, 1979; Feldman & Pinsof, 1982). When the level of intimacy results in an unacceptable level of anxiety, the couple’s collusive dance is triggered and reinforced by the reduction of the anxiety. However, in couples that have low levels of self, the dance escalates via the processes of splitting and projective identification to avoid the conscious awareness of affects and internal representations, which the partners are unable to hold individually. Couples are then caught in polarized perceptions of themselves and the other as totally “good” or totally “bad.”

Feldman and Pinsof (1982) have developed a circular diagram depicting the problem maintenance of the dances of couples who have conflicts about intimacy. I have expanded this model by integrating the additional steps of projective identification at either end of the cycle (see Figure 1). At the top of the diagram, the couple has reached their homeostatic limit for too much intimacy, thus stimulating their catastrophic expectations and resulting anxiety. At this point, one partner of the couple seeks to decrease the anxiety through the use of a characteristic defense, which triggers the defense of the partner, resulting in the start of their dance. In couples with low self, this escalates via projective identification to extreme polarized positions with one partner holding the “good self” (S+) or “good object” (O+) and the other holding the “bad self” (S−) or “bad object” (O−). (In Figure 1, the shaded parts represent the aspects of self that are disowned and projected onto the partner.) For example, “I am a loving partner who never attacks you and you always attack me.” The dance will escalate until the couple reaches its homeostatic limit for too little intimacy, resulting in the activation of the catastrophic expectations and anxiety about separation. At this point, one partner will seek intimacy and trigger the positive cycle of increasing intimacy. With couples who have not achieved the ability to simultaneously perceive both the “good and bad,” the partners will need to defend against their perceptions of their partners as “bad” or “dangerous” and to hide any part of themselves that would scare their partner. With couples that are prone to use projective identification, the cycle will escalate to the polarized thinking of “all good self” (S+) and “all good other” (O+). (In Figure 1, the shaded parts represent the disowned bad parts.) For example, “I love you one hundred percent and I can not recall a time when you did not love me.” This mutual idealization will continue until the couples’ intimacy anxiety is triggered, and then the cycle starts again.
Specific Projective Identifications in Five Common Marital Dances

I propose that certain projective identification sequences are triggered in particular marital dances. As Catherall (1992) has suggested, a therapist needs to have a grasp of each individual's core issues before intervening in the projective identification sequence. Understanding the underlying core issues can help the therapist to identify the unclaimed feelings and help the individuals to contain and express them, rather than disown and project them. In this section, I offer some hypotheses about the underlying dynamics in each dance so that the therapist can use them to focus on the particular aspects of self that are disowned and projected on to the partner and thus need to be reclaimed.

Dance of conflict. The dance of conflict is created by two people who regulate their interpersonal distance and their intimacy anxieties through blame and attack (Feldman, 1979). The dance of conflict at the deepest problem-maintenance level involves two partners with a high degree of narcissistic vulnerability who create an escalating cycle of attack and counterattack (Feldman, 1982). When a partner's narcissistic vulnerability has been assaulted either through direct criticism or a failure to be empathic, the emotional reaction of narcissistic rage is generated and expressed with intense hostility and a strong need for revenge. At the same time, an empathic failure or frustration of narcissistic needs leads to anxiety about narcissistic defenses failing and repressed negative self-images (e.g., inferior, unworthy, unlovable, or repulsive), surfacing and resulting in unbearable shame. In conflictual couples with the inability to integrate the "good" and "bad" representations or hold the shame, a second line of defense soon kicks in: Splitting and projective identification. As Feldman explains, this involves splitting off and projecting these "all bad" self and other representations on to the partner, who is then experienced as totally rejecting, harsh, critical, and so forth.
The “all good” self-representation is retained, leading to an experience of self as the innocent victim of the “all bad” partner. Through projection of any negative representations, the partners pass “bad self” and “bad objects” back and forth like a hot potato. They defend their goodness and innocence with the position that whatever one did is not bad because the other started it, does it worse, or deserved it. Therapy of conflictual couples needs to help both partners own all the affects from which they protect themselves with this self-righteous and blaming position, including hurt, shame, inadequacy, wanting to hurt, and dependency.

The dance of distance. The dance of distance is created by two individuals who use avoidance and cut off to manage their intimacy anxiety (Lerner, 1989). At the deepest problem-maintenance level, the dance of distance involves two partners whose low level of self results in little tolerance for either intimacy or conflict; thus, they use the schizoid defenses of withdrawal and fantasy. One partner’s withdrawal triggers a counterwithdrawal in the other, thus creating a vicious cycle of mutual withdrawal. Because of lack of differentiation between self and other, the self is constantly threatened by fears of total surrender or engulfment to the other and must keep distant to maintain a distinction between self and other. These couples are avoidant of conflict as well as intimacy because conflict threatens personal as well as dyadic security. Because they do not see a clear boundary between themselves and their partners, destruction of the partner would lead to destruction of the self as well. These couples use splitting and projections to create two polarized positions of good and bad. In one option, the partner must withdraw because the other is seen as an “all bad” object who is neglectful, intrusive, or exploitive. In the second option, the partner must withdraw to protect the other from anger, for example, “If I get angry at my partner, it will destroy my partner and because I am not separate, I will be destroyed too,” or “If I get angry and hurt my partner, it will mean that I am a destructive person who deserves to be destroyed.” Therapy with couples who distance should focus on helping them to own both their dependency needs for the partner and their anger at the partner for not meeting these needs.

The dance of pursuer/avoider. A common couple dance is between a pursuer of intimacy and an avoider of intimacy (Fogarty, 1979; Lerner, 1985). This to-and-fro dance is created by the combination of one partner who moves in with feelings and one who moves out with intellectualization. In the dance of pursuer/avoider, the internal conflict of connectedness and separateness is projected out to become an external conflict between partners. Higher functioning couples in this dance can become aware of their ambivalence about intimacy/autonomy at a conscious level and can resolve their ambivalence to develop a balance between the two conflicting needs for “I” and “we.” However, in lower functioning couples, the issues of intimacy and autonomy have been divided up between the partners; they have struck an unconscious deal in which the pursuer contains the needs for connection and the avoider contains the needs for autonomy. The avoider denies dependency needs because neediness is seen as a flaw, and connection is equated with giving up self to meet the other’s needs, “I must stay separate or I will disintegrate.” The pursuer denies the need for autonomy, believing that it results in abandonment and intolerable anxiety, “I must connect or I will not exist or die.”

Many of the lower functioning couples who display the dance of pursuer/avoider are composed of a borderline partner married to a narcissist partner (Lachkar, 1992; Slipp, 1988, 1995). When using the terms “borderline” and “narcissistic,” Slipp (1995) is referring to partners who meet the DSM-IV’s criteria for borderline and narcissistic personality disorders. The author suggests that the reader think of the borderline partner as the “angry pursuer” who is terrified of being alone and the narcissistic partner as “constricted avoider” who is terrified of connection. Slipp (1995) suggested that there is a special attraction between these couples because the obsessional narcissistic partner finds that the borderline partner’s emotionality counters the deadness inside, and the borderline partner experiences the narcissist partner’s containment of emotionality as calming because of the inability to provide calming internally. Slipp (1995, p. 463) proposes further that there is a complementary projective identification filling their deficits and a “Shared unconscious collusion between the couple involving dependency and anger”; that is, each partner has anger at an internal representation of a parent who did not meet dependency needs sufficiently. The narcissistic partner must idealize the parent, but the borderline partner expects abandonment and has nothing to lose by expressing the anger, so it is easier for the borderline partner to express rage for both of them. Through projective identification, the narcissistic partner induces anger in the borderline partner, who serves as an avenger to act out the anger for both of them. In addition, the narcissistic partner denies dependency and
appears to be self-sufficient. Through projective identification, the clinging and overtly dependent borderline partner can express the split-off dependency needs of both. The narcissistic partner provokes the borderline partner’s pursuit and angry demands through the defenses of withdrawal and isolation of affect, resulting in the lack of emotional connectedness. The narcissistic partner is provoked to be separate and emotionally contained by the borderline partner’s angry, critical pursuit. Hence, the borderline partner can experience vicariously the needs to be autonomous and contained. Before these couples can change their roles in the dance, the avoider needs to reclaim the needs for dependency/connectedness and the anger at the earlier frustration of these needs, and the pursuer needs to reclaim the needs for autonomy and self-containment.

The dance of overresponsible/underresponsible. Couples in this dance assume the polarized positions of the overresponsible caretaker/parent and the underresponsible patient/child (Bepko & Krestan, 1985; Kerr, 1981; Lerner, 1985, 1989). In couples with low levels of self, this dance also regulates their intrapsychic functioning because the overresponsible partner has to disown the need to be taken care of, and the underresponsible partner has to disown needs to be competent, self-sufficient, and caretaking.

When the symptomatic partner gets better and starts to be more functional and self-responsible, the overresponsible partner’s self-image as the protector/rescuer is threatened in that the needs for dependency can no longer be projected onto the partner. This creates the anxiety, “If my partner starts to look more dependable, I might get in touch with my needs to be taken care of and I’ll be let down,” or “I’ll have to grieve what I didn’t get in the past.”

In couples in which one of the partners is symptomatic (Feldman, 1976; Feldman & Pinsof, 1982), the nonsymptomatic partner will also have to reclaim the anxiety and/or depression that has been projected onto the partner. To avoid doing this, the overresponsible partner will display an increase in oversolicitous behavior, a subtle attack on the underresponsible partner’s functioning, or a withdrawal of attention, all of which serve to cue the underresponsible behavior in the partner.

Likewise, the underresponsible partner will experience great anxiety when becoming more responsible or the caretaker shows signs of failing because it is more difficult to project split-off needs for autonomy and competence. The underresponsible partner starts to feel the anxiety associated with being competent, for example, “If I try to be autonomous, I might fail or my partner will stop paying attention to me or I’ll have to grow up without ever getting taken care of.” To avoid the anxiety that is created when moving out of the dependent position, the underresponsible partner cues the overresponsible partner’s behavior by failing to live up to role expectations. Therapy should focus on helping the overresponsible partner feel entitled to have the need to be taken care of and on helping the underresponsible partner to feel competent, self-sufficient, and caretaking.

The dance of triangulation. In the dance of triangulation, the intimacy is regulated by focusing on a third party in a variety of roles including scapegoat, ally, hero, avenger, or patient (Feldman & Pinsof, 1982; Lerner, 1985; Slipp, 1988). Couples with low levels of self not only use triangulation to regulate the intimacy/distance in the marriage, but also to regulate the self system of the two partners through projective identification. One or both partners maintain their internal splits between good/bad self and good/bad object by projecting a split-off part onto the third party. Slipp (1988) has developed a typology of family interaction patterns in which the splitting and projective identification patterns are related to particular roles that the child plays. I propose that these patterns can be applied to triangulation of other parties in addition to the identified child.

In the scapegoat pattern, one or both partners have to split off any anger at the other partner because of the need to see the partner as “all good,” and all anger is displaced onto the third party. In this pattern, the projector needs to reclaim anger at the partner.

In the ally pattern, the partner uses splitting to view the other partner as “all bad” and the ally is recruited to be the “good object.” Hence, the projector needs to reclaim longing and dependency needs for the partner. In both the scapegoat and ally patterns, the individual must integrate the loving and angry feelings to achieve ambivalence toward the partner.

In the savior or hero pattern, the partner projects the ideal or good self onto the third party in order to protect the fragile “good” self from the more dominant “bad” self. The projector must reclaim the ideal or good self instead of living it vicariously through the third person.

In the avenger pattern, the third party is recruited to act out the “bad” or unacceptable aspects of self.
Therefore, the projecting partner needs to reclaim and integrate the negatively perceived aspects of self. In the two patterns of savior and avenger, the projector must reclaim the good or bad aspects of self and integrate them to achieve ambivalence about self. Therefore, in helping couples who use triangulation, the therapist needs to help the partners determine what affect or internal representation has been projected onto the third party, reclaim it, and resolve it intrapsychically.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY OF PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN DANCES**

**Goals of Treatment**

The major goal of therapy with projective identification in common couple dances is to reclaim the projected aspects of self and integrate them at the intrapsychic level. Techniques must focus on interrupting the collusive dance, gaining awareness of the feelings that were defended against, and resolving the internal issue. When each partner has been helped to reinternalize the externalized conflict and to resolve it intrapsychically, there is less need to split and project onto the partner, and each partner is less recruitable to the other’s projections.

Wachtel (1977) suggests that therapy must provide an opportunity for a safe exposure to intimacy and the activation of the split off aspects of self for the individual to experience a new reality: The catastrophic expectation did not come true. This safe exposure allows the feelings or aspect of self to be contained and integrated so that the defense is no longer necessary to protect the individual from an alarming or overwhelming experience. Therefore, therapy of the couple dances must provide systematic desensitization by blocking the collusive dance and helping partners experience that their specific anxieties about intimacy do not happen. For example, in the case of the partner who avoids sharing neediness for fear of shame or disappointment, therapy would need to provide a safe experience for that partner to disclose neediness and experience validation and satisfaction of the need by the other partner.

**Principles of Treatment**

My approach to psychotherapeutic intervention of projective identification in common couple dances is based on the principle that therapy of the dances should start at the current interactional level and proceed to the intrapsychic level (Johnson & Greenberg, 1995; Pinsof, 1995; Siegel, 1992; Slipp, 1988). Beginning at the interpersonal level prevents the therapist from proceeding to the intrapsychic level unnecessarily and reveals the specific blocks to intimacy that need to be addressed at the object relations and self levels. Therefore, starting at the systemic or interactional level before moving to the intrapsychic level allows therapy to be more efficient and focused.

As previously mentioned, the dances can have a range of problem-maintenance structures with different factors that maintain the problem and serve as constraints to change the problem (Pinsof, 1995). Healthier couples are able to use many systemic techniques to resolve contemporary and transgenerational constraints to change and develop alternate patterns of relating that enhance intimacy without provoking the intimacy anxieties. However, couples with constraints to change at the object relations and self level will not be able to utilize these techniques because the defensive dance is needed to regulate their internal functioning. These couples will require the addition of intrapsychic techniques, which serve to reinternalize and resolve the intrapsychic issues.

The object-relations model helps these clients gain insight into their use of splitting and projective identification in two important ways. First, clients develop an understanding of the role that projective identification has played in the maintenance of both the couple dance and their intrapsychic functioning. Second, clients come to understand the origins of their defenses and how they were adaptive at an earlier point in time but now are interfering with adapting to the current interactional context and satisfying their needs for intimacy.

In making interpretations of the projective identification, it is essential that the therapist present an empathic understanding of why the defense was necessary and why the defense still feels necessary to protect against intolerable affects and overwhelming anxiety. If the therapist’s interpretations cause the client to feel more shame, then the defense will not only remain, but it will be reinforced. However, if the interpretation can allow the client to feel compassion and empathy for the need to defend, the client is more
likely to feel safe to explore the underlying feeling and develop empathy for that aspect of self. This belief is similar to Wile’s (1984) concept of making “nonaccusatory” interpretations to help clients reduce their self-criticism and self-accusations about their feelings and reassure the client of the normality and validity of their underlying affects. Furthermore, it is important that interpretations are positively framed so the integration of object-relationships techniques does not dilute a focus on health and normalization of symptoms.

Slipp (1988) has developed three techniques for interpreting projective identification that minimize the client feeling attacked, blamed, or shamed, minimize defensiveness, and encourage the client to own any projected part.

Slipp’s first technique to positively reframe projective identification is to attribute a positive purpose, rather than a pathological or negative purpose, such as “dumping on” or “using” the partner. Positive aims of projective identification might include the following: To ask for help in expressing feelings, for example, “You learned that expressing anger was dangerous, so you needed help from your partner to get out your anger”; to protect the self or the marriage, for example, “I wonder if you had to withdraw and see your partner as the bad one so you could hold onto your fragile feelings of being OK”; and to get some empathy for how one was treated as a child, for example, “When you use that critical voice with your partner and she ends up feeling stupid, perhaps you were trying to get her to understand how you felt when your father criticized you.”

Slipp’s (1988) second technique for positively reframing the projective identification involves focusing on how past relationships are repeated in the present. This approach clarifies that the therapist’s goal is understanding and not blaming. Slipp suggests helping the partners to see the similarities between their current interaction and interactions from the past. One might start the interpretation with the following: “As you describe how you feel in interaction with your partner, it reminds me of how”: (a) You felt in your interaction with your parent, for example, “When you feel resentment about taking care of your partner, it reminds me of how you felt taking care of your depressed mother.” (b) How you described your parent interacting with you, for example, “When your withdraw and leave your partner feeling abandoned, it reminds me of how you felt when your father abandoned the family.” Or (c) How you described your parents’ interaction, for example, “When you put your partner down in that tone of voice, it reminds me of how you described your mother talking to your father.”

There are a variety of ways to introduce the concept that past relationships are being reawakened and/or recreated in the current couple interaction. One can use common phrases to suggest that the current behavior is bringing up old hurts, for example, like a “bruise on a broken bone” or “salt in an old wound.” Siegel (1992, p. 96) suggests that it is useful to define the couple’s sequence of interaction as “Existing in the present but as echoing the past.” Pinsof (1991) likes to use the phrase “River with many feeder streams” to indicate the multiple sources of the current feeling. Solomon (1989, p. 161) asks, “Does either of you know anything about your histories that would shed some light on this feeling?” Wile (1995) suggests that partners have a historically determined sensitivity to a common couple problem. Using his approach, one might ask, “What about your history would make you sensitive to conflict? Need to be alone?”

Slipp’s (1988) third technique for positively framing interpretations is to clarify the need to disown parts of self or feelings. Three suggested reasons to disown a feeling or part might be the following: (a) To protect a person, for example, “You would have had to disown any needs to be taken care of, because you had to grow up fast and take care of your alcoholic father”; (b) To protect self, for example, “You learned not to express your need for autonomy because your mother took it as rejection and punished you with withdrawal”; or (c) To follow family rules, for example, “Maybe you had to disown your hurt to follow the family rule about not showing weakness because it gives others an advantage.”

INTERPRETATIONS OF PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION IN COMMON COUPLE DANCES

I will present some examples of how these techniques for interpreting projective identification can be applied to the five common couple dances. This is just a sample of how one might help a couple gain insight into how their projective identification works. Readers are encouraged to develop their own style for making interpretations and individualize them for each couple. In working with each dance, it is important to keep two basic questions in mind: “What are the most likely feelings and parts of self that are being disowned...”
and projected and thus need to be reclaimed?” and “How can I create a safe environment to facilitate the conscious awareness of these feelings and parts so the client can reclaim them?”

Dance of Conflict

Interpretations of aim of projective identification. Example A: “When you criticize your partner and she ends up feeling stupid and inadequate, perhaps you were trying to get her to have an empathic understanding of what it felt like when your mother criticized you” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).

Example B: “Because you did not have enough positive early experiences that left you with a sense of yourself as ‘good enough,’ any criticism is threatening and it feels safer to perceive your partner as the one who is not ‘good enough.’

Interpretations of historical linking. Example A: “When your partner sounds critical and you react with anger, what does it touch inside of you? What does the feeling remind you of? Does either of you know anything about your histories that would shed some light on this feeling?” (adapted from Solomon, 1988).

Example B: “When your partner talks in a voice that makes you feel small and stupid, what earlier experience does this remind you of and how did you react then?”

Interpretations of the need to disown. Example A: “You learned to disown your vulnerable parts because showing your hurt in your family of origin brought you shame and humiliation” (application of Slipp’s [1988] technique).

Example B: “You need to disown and project feelings of being bad or worthless, because you are afraid you could sink into a pit of shame.”

Dance of Distance

Interpretations of aim of projective identification. Example A: “I wonder if you withdraw from your wife to protect your relationship from you becoming blaming like your father was to your mother” (application of Slipp’s [1988] technique).

Example B: “Does it seem like you had to withdraw and see your husband as the “bad” one so you could hold onto your fragile feelings of “goodness?”

Interpretations of historical linking. Example A: “When you show a pattern of withdrawal and counter-withdrawal, it reminds me of how you described your parent’s marriage” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).

Example B: “When I see your intense pain when your husband withdraws, I wonder if it is so painful because it is like a “bruise on a broken bone” or “salt in an old wound”?

Interpretations of the need to disown. Example A: “I wonder if you had to disown your needs for connection and anger over unmet needs because you learned that you were not entitled to have dependency needs?” (adapted from Wile, 1995).

Example B: “If you saw your partner as an available source of support, what would have to change inside you? (“I need you.”)

Dance of Pursuer/Avoider

Interpretation of aim of projective identification. Example A: To pursuer: “It seems like it is hard for you to see any white spots on your partner’s black hat. What would happen if you did?” Client: “Then I’d be the one all wrong, wearing the black hat.”

Example B: To avoider: “When you feel enraged at your partner, you withdraw to avoid becoming like your father was with you, and you don’t want anyone to feel the way you did back then. However, I wonder if over time you have learned that your withdrawal and passivity also serves to express your anger at your partner” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).

Interpretations of historical linking. Example A: To pursuer (application of Pinsof’s [1983] technique):

Therapist: When your partner is late, what do you feel?
Client: Totally invisible, like I don’t exist.
Therapist: When was the first time you can remember feeling this way?
Client: When everyone ignored me in my family.
Therapist: What did you do then?
Client: I bit my nails until they bled so they would know I was not being taken care of.
Therapist: Do you have other ways that you could let your partner know that you would like to be taken care of?

Example B: To avoider (adapted from Pinsof, 1983):

Therapist: When your partner is yelling at you, what do you feel?
Client: Totally worthless, like I don’t deserve to live.
Therapist: When have you felt this way before?
Client: With my father, when he corrected me.
Therapist: What did you do as a boy when your father was angry at you?
Client: There was nothing to do. I would freeze and withdraw. I felt I could never be good enough so why bother trying.
Therapist: What can you do now that you have other options as an adult?
Client: I can tell her that I am angry that she treats me like I am not worthwhile.

Interpretations of need to disown. Example A: To avoider: “Maybe, you learned to disown your needs for connectedness because being needy led to being controlled and exploited.”
Example B: To pursuer: “I’m wondering if you learned not to express your autonomy because your mother took it as rejection and punished you with withdrawal.”

Dance of Overresponsible/Underresponsible

Interpretations of aim of projective identification. Example A: To overresponsible partner: “Is it possible that you have learned to deny your own needs and take care of others, so you need help from you partner in expressing the need to be taken care of?” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).
Example B: To underresponsible partner: “Maybe you are trying to get your partner to behave in a special way with you, a way you wish a parent had done when you were a child” (adapted from Lachkar, 1992).

Interpretations of historical linking. Example A: To overresponsible partner: “Do you think there is some type of need to perpetuate this form of a relationship? I wonder if you are recreating being a savior like your father did with your mother?” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).
Example B: To underresponsible partner: “As I listen to how you frustrate your partner by procrastination, it reminds me of how your described your mother and your father” (adapted from Slipp, 1988).

Interpretations of need to disown. Example A: To overresponsible partner: “It would make sense that you disowned your needs because you had to grow up fast and take care of your alcoholic mother.”
Example B: To underresponsible partner: “It might have been smart not to show your competence because it threatened your father and resulted in being cut off at the knees.”

Dance of Triangulation

There are so many possibilities for interpretations in common couple triangles, that I will just suggest one interpretation for each of the four triangles described by Slipp (1988).
Example A: Scapegoat: “You learned it was not safe to express anger at someone you needed because they would withdraw. Do you think that you might be trying to get your son’s help in expressing anger at your wife?”
Example B: Ally: “When you feel disappointed by your husband, do you turn to someone else to reassure yourself that you are lovable and to protect you from sinking into feeling depressed and worthless?”
Example C: Hero: “We all feel better when we are in a relationship with someone that we can idealize. I’m wondering if you get more involved with your favorite mentor when your partner is behaving in a way that is hard to respect?”
Example D: Avenger: I wonder if you’ve learned to disown the parts of yourself that want to be more rebellious and separate, so you need your daughter’s help in expressing them.”

SUMMARY

This article has explored how the focus on individual dynamics increases the couple therapist’s ability to help even the most distressed and difficult clients to improve the functioning and satisfaction of their relationships. By having an empathic understanding of the fear of changing the couple dance, the
therapist may be less frustrated with these couples and realize that they would change if they could. Understanding the projective identification in specific couple dances helps the therapist to be empathic to the specific dilemma of change for partners in each dance and to develop hypotheses about the underlying dynamics that must be changed so the dance is no longer necessary. I recommend the use of both systemic and object relations techniques to block the projective identification sequence, reclaim and accept aspects of self, integrate the conflict at the intrapsychic level, and develop new patterns of relating. In conclusion, I would like to point out that this model of therapy not only improves the couple’s functioning, but it also helps individuals who are unlikely to enter intensive individual therapy to make deep intrapsychic changes that will benefit all aspects of their lives.

REFERENCES