

Chapter 18

Intergenerational Couple Therapy



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18.1 Introduction

Couple therapy only started to emerge as a specific treatment independent of family therapy in the beginning of the 1980s. In recent decades, three methodologies have grown significantly: cognitive behavioural couple therapy (Dattilio, 2010; Baucom & Epstein, 1990), psychoanalytic couple therapy (Sharff & Sharff, 2003; Bartholomey & Horowitz, 1991) and emotionally focussed couple therapy based on the integration between gestalt and system and attachment theories (Johnson, 2004; Gottman & Gottman, 2015). These therapeutic methods seem to be very effective on changing couple's dysfunctional dynamics, distorted communicational patterns or focusing on the language of the emotions. However, all of the couple therapy treatments ignore or dismiss the possibility of enlarging the frame to include in therapy other significant family members by inviting to the session members from both partners' families of origin or their children.

Partners in a couple are in a reciprocal intimate relationship and, at the same time, are children in regard to their parents, with whom they might have still unfinished business or incomplete or conflicting separation. Once they start their own family, the partners will, in turn, become parents and we know well how the presence of children can unite and increase harmony or, at the contrary, can become a destabilizing event in couple's life. This complex network of functions and roles is structured along two dimensions. The vertical dimension comprises the various

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hierarchical levels – grandparents, parents and children – and is fundamental to observe and evaluate the quality of the intergenerational bonds. The horizontal one outlines the quality and the strength of the couple as a unit, which we call their *We-ness* as well as the sibling alliance and the system of friends. The main ingredients of this special bond based on an implicit pact (the couple alliance) are mutual respect, trust and intimacy and they seem to disappear when a couple is in a deep crisis or close to separation. Restoring respect, increasing trust and rediscovering intimacy are the major goal of any couple therapist regardless of his/her major orientation.

18.2 Enlarging the Frame of Observation

We have experienced that the more we enlarge the frame of our observation, the more we help the couple to overcome their difficulties. Through many years of clinical work, we learnt to appreciate the symbolic presence of family of origin (parents and siblings) in the session, often introduced (or pushed in) by one or the other partner from the very beginning of therapy as well as the centrality of their children in the middle of their issues. Instead of considering these presences intrusive or inappropriate for the goal of couple therapy, we encouraged and expanded all these presences, considering them as special resources in order to see the full picture of the family and, by doing that, to help partners to better identify themselves (Andolfi & Mascellani, 2019).

The description of each partner's *genogram* has been a special tool in therapy to explore developmental history and major events in each person's family world in order to understand and evaluate his/her family functioning and individual identity and personality traits. This is even more useful with mixed couples, when the story of emigration and family cut-off of one partner is deeply experienced in the session. In fact, couple's conflicts can be "interrupted" or reconsidered, if we give space to each partner to explore the map of his/her family life and personal growth without any intrusion or prejudice. Giving back individual agency to each partner is a first step to restore mutual respect and appreciation of the life experiences of the other one (Andolfi, 2015). Metaphorical objects and photos are other tangible and concrete tools, highly evocative, which might introduce curiosity and reduce competition and conflicts. For example, we can ask to both partners to bring into therapy the most significant photos of their respective families when they were children, or personal objects, such as a pendant, a bag and a musical instrument, that have a great affective value with regard to a deceased parent or a special grandparent or a sibling far away. It is like introducing a parallel process in therapy from which each partner can learn something very meaningful, often painful, about the other one in a collaborative way, allowing both partners to share a moment of intimacy. Once the family is symbolically present in the session, via images, metaphorical objects and intergenerational questions (Andolfi, 2015), it will be easier for both the therapist and the couple to request the families of origin to come to a joint consult.

18.3 Presence of Families of Origin

The presence of each partner's family of origin for a special session is presented as a great opportunity to re-visit the past, to repair still open wounds and to forgive feelings of neglect or abandonment (Bowen, 1978). Therefore, we spend time to prepare well this session, clarifying to both partners that the couple's conflicts or crisis are not in the agenda of these meetings and that parents and siblings are invited to help the therapist to understand better how they grew up in their families. Re-evoking the past travelled together allows its significance to be re-read from other points of view, but above all it allows the possibility of saying to each other (parents and children and sibling to sibling) what has never been said in a non-judgemental and blaming manner.

Even more important is finding the strength to invite distant or absent parents, since this allows to confront the issue of rejection. "*He/She will never come to help me, he/she never did it in all the years we lived in the same house*"! are some of the justified resistances of an adult in re-opening a dialogue with a no-caring parent. Rather than remaining in a sort of emotional limbo or chronic rage for the rejection of the past, we encourage the adult to try and make the invitation with an open heart. The response is often surprisingly positive, allowing to have a new understanding of the present moment, without being guided by the negative experiences of the past and open to the possibility of an intergenerational reconciliation (Framo, 1992).

A collective memory with multiple generations in the same room has an enormous restorative potential and has a transformative effect at the level of individual growth of each partner, with positive reverberations within the entire family of origin and indirectly in the couple dynamics (Williamson, 1991). For this reason, we have chosen to have both partners present in the special meeting with their respective families of origin, making clear that the "other partner" is invited at the session only as an attentive observer without interfering in the process.

The interviews of a long-term research on follow up of couple therapy (Andolfi et al., 2000) have shown that none of those interviewed stated that they felt a sense of embarrassment or uneasiness in the meetings where the other partner's family was present. On the contrary, the presence of the partner at the session was seen as an important emotional support in the face of an undertaking perceived as difficult and painful. Further, there was a feeling of agreement in that the other partner had to go through the same experience. These positive effects were reported despite the fact that many of these couples had come to therapy as a result of a high level of couple conflict.

When we talk about meetings with family of origin, we do not refer only to parents; and the invitation of brothers and sisters to attend a session might be even more complicated, in particular, if in the past there have been rigid triangulations and favouritism with respect to one child over another. Episodes of rivalry and long-standing cut-off between adult siblings are often the result of distorted roles played from the time when the children were very young, causing very painful emotional distance (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Inviting siblings may allow

developmental phases relative to the sharing of important growth experiences to be retraced. Such an invitation may also repair any relational distortions tied to rigid roles played in the family and to the difficulty in building or maintaining a generational alliance between siblings.

18.4 Presence of Children

Children are the most precious thing and the strongest bond between two partners, especially when both wanted to have and grow children together. While inviting members of the family of origin to a session can be a complicated undertaking and might generate strong resistance in the couple, it is generally easier to request the children's presence to help the therapist get to know the family better. However, there might be a certain worry on the part of parents, who fear that children can become too involved and have a protective attitude towards them, above all if they are little. Parents are even more reluctant to accept the therapist's request when they are in the process of separating and the children have been in some way involved in the hostility and forced to take the side of one parent or the other. The feeling of guilt and embarrassment in relation to a judgement on the part of children, especially if they are adolescents, can prevail and represent an obstacle to exposing themselves in front of the children. Therefore, it is important to get the timing right and reach a full agreement from both parents.

The presence of children in therapy creates a context that is open to playfulness and creativity. We often use a *magic wand* and ask a child to wave it and do a "magic trick" so that harmony in the family will return. In this way we give a voice to the hope for change and the desire to end hostile or violent behaviour between partners. It is incredible to observe children's capacity for imagination and the emotional responses of their parents, who are able to participate in a creative game, as if it were the reality. At times, we create, together with little children, a *fairy tale* with a general script, which begins with the words: "*Once upon a time there was a happy family...*", then parents and child have to move on, describing what happened to make everyone sad or angry, to discover at the end that the path can go in a different direction and allow everyone to go back to "*living happily and contentedly*". The parents, through the fairy tale, can free themselves of the burden of rigid and defensive positions and transmit implicit messages of change to each other as a couple, to their children and to the therapist.

In other cases, a *drawing* can be used as a projective tool, asking children to draw the main figures of the family and the world that surrounds them. Generally, from the drawing will emerge how children view family relationships. Using their imagination, for example, anger can be represented by an erupting volcano or anxiety as a little snake that engulfs itself around all the members of the family. We can then ask the parents how much they see themselves in the images produced by their children. The drawing could be hung in the kitchen, so everyone can reflect on how to avoid the volcanic eruption and how to keep the snake at a necessary distance.

18.5 Presence of Friends

Friends represent the most important social network within which each of us grows and creates lasting and important relationships, starting from early childhood to late adulthood and old age. Friendships are chosen and renewed over time, even if generally the more genuine and available friends are those with whom we have shared experiences in our developmental stage. Friendships are an outstanding resource in the relational life and growth of couples, it strikes us that so little has been written in the international literature in relation to friends being involved in couple therapy. Russell Haber was the first to underline the importance of friends in family therapy in the book entitled *Please help me with this family: Using consultants as resources in family therapy* (Andolfi & Haber, 1994). We were inspired by his ideas and clinical experience in order to introduce friends as special resources in couple therapy. The presence of friends in the room facilitates a change of context of the session, moving from private issues to social bonds. With friends, common experiences and parallel developmental processes can be shared: from early age at school, to becoming a couple, to the birth of children, etc. Friends are special witnesses of each partner's development and they can add their wisdom and care in the process of couple therapy.

As can be evinced from what we have discussed until now, there are many positive results from the meetings with family of origin, children and friends in the dynamic of the couple's relationship and their capacity to handle conflicts. One of the most important outcomes is without doubt the increased solidarity within the couple, even in situations of open contrasts. It is as if taking personal risks with each other's family of origin or bringing in their own children unexpectedly produces a greater authenticity and a sense of benevolence on the part of one with the other. Often this closeness is perceived also through affectionate gestures and looks of encouragement and mirroring of one in the other's story. A second outcome is the increased curiosity and appreciation of one with regard to the other's history of development. Much information on life events, or losses, is not new, and it may have even been the subject of discussion, exchange or even a quarrel within the couple. What is new is the collaborative context in which the family narrative takes its form now.

By remembering experiences of abandonment, mourning and suffering together with privileged witnesses of their development, be parents, siblings, uncles or aunts, or their own kids or their friends, each partner can acquire a greater awareness of "Who am I" and of the couple's relationship and have a better awareness of boundaries and identities: my own self, the we-ness of the couple and the intergenerational bonds.

18.6 Conclusion

Intergenerational couple therapy opens the focus on a larger system of relationships, belongings and resources, indicating to couples in crisis the pathway to follow in order to rediscover mutual trust, intimacy and care.

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