



# What is being in a relationship *really* like?

Mary Morgan explores why relationships are difficult,  
and why we might need them

In thinking about the conference title 'Relationships: why do we bother?', I found myself reflecting on my work with couple relationships over the last 30 years. I thought about what it is that makes relationships so difficult to be in for all of us, but also why, nonetheless, we might want to be in them – in fact, why we might need them. I'm going to suggest three reasons why relationships are particularly difficult, these difficulties being true of most of the relationships I have encountered. We might all at times feel we don't want to bother with them, but I suggest there are some compelling reasons to do so.

## Reasons why relationships are difficult

### 1. Our narcissism

The first reason we find relationships difficult is because they involve being with another person. Although I think we are all fundamentally object relating – even if we choose not to be, or are unable to be, in a relationship – this doesn't mean it's easy. Ron Britton, in describing the sharing of psychic space in an analytic or couple relationship, likened it to sharing physical space. He says, 'Whether in marriage or analysis, the physical space we share is also psychic space. It is a room housing the mind of the other, and it is furnished by the thoughts of the other. It is not just the material reality of the room that confines us or intrudes on us; it is the psychic reality of the other person investing its contents with talismanic significance – that territory imbued with another's ideas, that room invested with someone else's good intentions, that couch or bed saturated with the other's desires, that domestic arrangement requiring acquiescence.'<sup>1</sup>

All of us have a degree of narcissism and some of us are deeply narcissistic. There is a part of us that doesn't want to relate and engage with another. We have our own view of the world, and being with another who is different and separate from us, is a challenge to that narcissism. It is not always easy to take in a new thought or a different view, particularly if it does not reside comfortably with what we already think, know or understand. Our own view is easily equated in our mind with 'reality', or the 'truth', and another person seeing and experiencing something differently, can be anything from annoying, to deeply disturbing.

In a couple relationship, there is always a tension between our own narcissism and our wish to relate to an 'other', who is a separate and different person. We can't always engage with the other, as an 'other', while at the same time holding on to who we ourselves are, and when we do manage it, it is quite a psychological achievement. James Fisher describes it in the following way: 'The capacity to pursue the truth of one's own experience and also to tolerate the truth of another's experience, acknowledging and taking the meaning of the other's experience without losing the meaning of one's own, especially when these experiences not only differ but conflict, is a major developmental achievement.'<sup>2</sup>

Some couples do manage to avoid this problem altogether by creating a relationship in which they feel they are, more or less, in total agreement – what we might describe as a merged or fused relationship or, as I have described, a 'projective gridlock'<sup>3</sup> in which projective identification is used to create a sense for the couple of psychically residing inside each other. Each partner feels they know the other or are known by the other from the inside. Usually this kind of relationship becomes claustrophobic, at least for one of the partners, who loses a sense of who they are, and as they withdraw from the gridlock,

they create an agoraphobic panic in the other. However, as I shall discuss later, this bringing together of two minds without either being annihilated, is also what makes relationships ultimately creative.

### 2. The loss of understanding

The second difficulty couples have in relationships is that they often feel they should understand, and be understood, by each other. One only has to work with couples for a few weeks to notice that understanding and being understood goes horribly wrong a lot of the time. When this happens, the couple can feel there is something wrong with the relationship, or worse, with the partner who doesn't understand – as in the well-known expression 'my wife doesn't understand me'. In fact, the idea that each partner can have a full understanding of the other is illusory. Monica Vorchheimer, an Argentinian analyst, suggests that the couple's difficulty in making themselves understandable and understanding each other can be experienced by them, not just as an ordinary problem, but as catastrophic'. Furthermore, as described earlier, each partner often does feel that they do understand, and that they have a view of the relationship, which is the 'truth'; but in fact the other may have a different view, also experienced as the 'truth'.

Vorchheimer points out that, in this situation, the other's different view can be experienced as a deliberate misunderstanding or a lie. She says: 'People would not think of themselves as victims of misunderstandings but exchanging lies; they think that misunderstandings are the result of second and hidden intentionalities, and they do not conceive of them as unavoidable.'<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, instead of the other's view being experienced as a deliberate misunderstanding, there is a belief in one partner that they are 'right', and it is just that the other doesn't 'get it', as if this is a cognitive problem rather than an alternative view.

## Words, language and meaning

One aspect of this difficulty in understanding and being understood, is that words themselves are polysemic, that is they often have more than one meaning, as well as being approximations.<sup>4</sup> For example, to 'love' might mean 'being in love' or 'enjoying' something. But also when we take an expression like 'being in love', we all have our own definition of what that is or may mean, as Prince Charles famously responded when asked if he and Diana were in love: 'Whatever in love means.' History suggests that this couple had very different understandings of what that meant, and possibly this expression was inadequate in describing their conflictual and complex emotional states. Words are only approximations of what we are trying to express, so in that sense there are always misunderstandings. A word one partner uses to describe a particular thing is heard by the other to mean something else. In fact, to them, it does mean something else. In a healthier relationship, there is an acceptance of this; the couple probably don't even think about it, they more or less understand each other, and if something feels not understood or needs understanding more accurately, the couple pursue a better understanding, sometimes through arguing and later through something shifting and making more sense. But in more disturbed relationships, this difference in understanding can become a persecution and source of extreme conflict, with one partner trying to pin the other down, or insist that their meaning is the real one.

### We often don't listen very well

Another difficulty is that we often don't listen very well. Understanding requires a capacity to listen, and we are not always good at that. And even if we are quite attentive and good at listening, we might hear the words but not the message. And also we don't always want to hear what the other person is saying. We might not like what they are saying, and this has an immobilising effect on our curiosity. The experience of being properly listened to, in therapy or in relationships, as we know, can be a powerful emotional experience.

### We communicate unconsciously too

Then there is the fact that, to complicate things further, our unconscious is always at work. Often we are communicating something that is beyond the actual words. It is the way we say something, our affective state and behaviour, as well as what we do not say. Much of this, we are unaware of, and the partner responds in ways he or she is not aware of. Words are sometimes used to project feelings, not just with the wish for understanding but also with the wish to evacuate a feeling, for example, anxiety, into the other. Couples can find themselves in distressing cycles in which anxiety is passed between them, escalating it rather than containing it between them.

### Empathy is complicated

Finally, to really understand another, we have to be prepared to abandon what we think we know and try and understand the other's experience – from their point of view. But empathy is complicated. We might try and understand the other, we might really want to, but it can still go wrong, as our understanding of the other is based on our own experience, and it is difficult to truly get oneself into another person's shoes. A typical example here is of one partner, say a woman, who has come home stressed from work to her husband. What she wants is just someone to listen to her and empathise with how she is feeling. Her husband doesn't deal with stress himself in this way and sets about (with good intention) outlining how his wife should deal with the problem – talk to her boss, delegate more, cut her working hours, all of which makes the wife feel completely misunderstood and in fact more stressed because now she feels she has to deal with her husband's expectations. The husband is also feeling completely misunderstood as, in his mind, he has understood and been genuinely helpful. Being in a relationship is not being 'one', but this primitive idea that we think and experience things the same way is usually present in relationships to some degree.

### 3. Disillusionment

The third difficulty I'd like to address, is that being in a couple relationship involves a process of disillusionment. Falling in love is, for many, the mechanism that enables them to take the step of committing themselves to a relationship with one other person. While there are real aspects of the other that are fallen in love with, there is also illusion, as these real aspects are exaggerated, or other less attractive aspects are ignored. As a couple said to me many years ago: 'We really shouldn't have married. There was just an enormous sexual attraction and we thought everything else would just follow – but it didn't!' For many couples, 'being in love' is a temporary abandonment of Freud's reality principle, which, when it kicks in, can feel terribly spoiling. This couple felt it was unfair that, given the strength of

their initial attraction, they should then have to work so hard at the relationship.

Alain de Botton, in an article for *The New York Times* titled 'Why we marry the wrong person', writes: 'We marry to make a nice feeling permanent. We imagine that marriage will help us to bottle the joy we felt when the thought of proposing first came to us: perhaps we were in Venice, on the lagoon, in a motorboat, with the evening sun throwing glitter across the sea, chatting about aspects of our souls no one ever seemed to have grasped before, with the prospect of dinner in a risotto place a little later. We married to make such sensations permanent but failed to see that there was no solid connection between these feelings and the institution of marriage... We need to swap the romantic view for a tragic (and at points comedic) awareness that every human will frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us – and we will (without any malice) do the same to them.'<sup>5</sup>

This romantic view is deep in our psyche. Being part of an adult couple is the first opportunity since being a tiny baby to have a totally intimate connection with another human being. The baby's experience feels to be an exclusive, magical relationship with mother, in which his or her needs were met – at least temporarily until the reality of the outside world, including mother's adult partner, had to be faced. Even if it wasn't at all like this, we might yearn even more for it to be like this now, if we can find the perfect other. While these feelings are likely to be unconscious, their outward conscious manifestations – fantasies about the other meeting all our needs, a perfect harmony, agreement, someone who takes care of our happiness and so on – are often more conscious. The manifestation of this phantasy in popular culture is seen everywhere in the promotion of the idea of a perfect other.

Not all couples report having been in love, or having found the 'one', reflecting the fact that there are many different ways for couples to come together and different marriage arrangements. But even here, the phantasy of who the other is and the wish for them to be this object, can be powerful. This might still include some 'in love' aspects. Whichever way couples describe it, there is usually a change to something more reality based, in which the other is freed a bit from the partner's phantasies and allowed to be more of their real self. This is not always an easy process because it does involve loss and finding out who the other really is, which can bring surprises – some challenging for the couple, some potentially deeply gratifying.

For others, this becomes a real stumbling block, as the other never lives up to or embodies the partner's phantasy of what they need them to be, and the disappointment about this becomes a paralysing force in the relationship. The wish for a particular predetermined object is so strong that new and unanticipated aspects of the other that could be satisfying, even exciting because new and different, are not noticed or not engaged with.

For others, the phantasy relationship is more deeply unconscious and takes the form of a belief about what a relationship is.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this is not only about an incapacity to mourn but also an inability to see that this belief is just a belief, not a fact. Drawing on the Kleinian notion of unconscious phantasy as something accompanying all our conscious relating, phantasies that we use to make sense of our experience and that change as they are brought into contact with reality, Britton suggests that there are some phantasies that lodge in the unconscious as fixed 'beliefs' about the self and the world. These beliefs are experienced in

the unconscious as facts. For example, some couples believe a couple relationship is about being 'perfectly attuned', or 'having all one's needs met'. Equally, relationships may be perceived as 'dangerous' and as needing rules of engagement to make them safe. For example, a requirement for 'total honesty', as any unknown thought of the other is a threat. This is how the couple see the world, it is not a case of wanting a relationship like this, and there is no 'as if' quality; in their minds, this is how relationships are. If the therapist does get hold of the unconscious belief that is operating and tries to open up the possibility of thinking about it, the couple may feel attacked, as the belief is so much part of their joint couple personality. Here, disillusionment feels not just a loss but also a threat.

### Why we might need relationships

Having described some common difficulties in being in a relationship and what may lead us to not want to be, I will now suggest two reasons why we nonetheless might want to, and why we might in fact need relationships.

#### 1. Regression and reintegration

We are not able, all of the time, if ever, to function as whole, integrated people. Being part of a couple allows for some

regression, but a regression that can lead to further reintegration and development. The study of unconscious partner choice in couple relationships from early on at Tavistock Relationships, showed that the choice of partner had deep significance. As Britton more recently described, 'It is a relationship we invest with a significance transferred on to it – from the past, from an internal world of dream figures, from unrealised ideal aspects of ourselves that we seek in others, or from an aspect of ourselves we repudiate and attribute to others.'<sup>1</sup>

The early writers at Tavistock Relationships showed that the choice of partner could be defensive or developmental, or very often containing both elements in dynamic tension. There may be a wish to make contact with or avoid split-off aspects of the psyche, and the couple relationship provides the opportunity to disown aspects of the self while maintaining close proximity to them. In the early stages of a relationship, unconsciously recognising parts of oneself in the other can be a very powerful experience. The potential of being able to get into closer contact with distant or lost parts of the self, which may be reintegrated into the ego, thereby enriching it, may feel risky but also creates a sense of possibility. This might be an unconscious component of the 'in love' experience, and needing to be with the other who may psychically seem to be one's 'other half'.

Evelyn Cleavelly, for example, writes: 'The marriage relationship provides a containment in which each feels the other to be part of themselves – a kind of joint personality. What at first attracts and is later complained of in the other is



often a projection of the disowned and frightening aspects of the self. It might be imagined that the best thing to do with unwanted aspects of the self is to project them onto someone or something and get as far removed as possible. That would, however, be placing a part of oneself in danger of being lost forever, and of losing one's potential for becoming a more complete person.<sup>8</sup>

As a consequence of projecting a part of oneself, the ego is left depleted, which may result in a weak sense of self. For example, it may be that the capacity to feel and appropriately express angry feelings is disowned, because such feelings are felt to be too destructive; as a consequence, one may live a restricted life, avoiding conflict and confrontations, or become depressed. Alternatively, loving feelings may be disowned because they are felt to place one at too great a risk of hurt and disappointment; this may lead to living a falsely independent and lonely life. The advantage of projective identification in the context of an intimate relationship is that the disowned parts of the self are not too far away, and seeing these managed differently by the other, may render these aspects less frightening.

Thomas Ogden, writing about projective identification, describes this developmental process in which, through witnessing the other managing the projected aspects differently, not being overwhelmed or destroyed by them, the subject can eventually re-introject this part of themselves. He says: 'The elicited feelings are the product of a different personality system with different strengths and weaknesses. This fact opens the door to the possibility that the projected feelings (more accurately, the congruent set of feelings elicited in the recipient) will be handled differently from the manner in which the projector has been able to handle them... If the recipient of the projection can deal with the feelings projected "into" him in a way that differs from the projector's method, a new set of feelings is generated which can be viewed as a "processed" version of the original projected feelings. The new set of feelings might involve the sense that the projected feelings, thoughts and representations can be lived with, without damaging other aspects of the self or of one's valued external or internal objects.'<sup>9</sup>

However, unconscious choice might not be a move towards integration and psychic development but quite the opposite. Sometimes, there is the wish to keep the projected parts of the self firmly located in the other; close enough that they can be controlled, and safe in the belief that re-introjection need never be contemplated. The recipient of the projected angry feelings may then carry a double dose of anger – both partners' anger combined – and be seen as aggressive, and the partner carrying a double dose of loving feelings, be seen as sentimental and over emotional. In the most disturbed relationships, one can see how each partner actively manipulates the other in order to maintain this defensive organisation.

In most relationships, projective identification functions in both a developmental and defensive way, the partners unconsciously agreeing to carry aspects for each other, feeling in touch with the split-off aspects of the self, expressed and seen in action by the other and with the possibility that, with changes in either partner, the relationship or the external world, these projections can shift slightly or even dramatically. For others, there can be a psychic balance in the relationship whereby the other can be relied on to carry this aspect of the self in a semi-permanent projective system. This is an unconscious collusion but one that supports the couple.

One partner may unconsciously agree to carry the more vulnerable or depressed feelings in the relationship because they are better able to manage these feelings than the other is. In this way, the partner who may appear to be less functional in the relationship, is in fact containing aspects of the other and giving support to the relationship as a whole. The problem for the relationship arises when, because of internal developments in either partner or because of changed external circumstances, there needs to be a shift in the projective system, but it has become too rigidified and cannot adapt.

## 2. Sex and creativity

The second reason we might need relationships is to do with sex and creativity. Sex is usually much more interesting with another than by oneself, because it is more unknowable and less predictable. As Ruth Stein<sup>10</sup> has argued convincingly, because our mothers cannot mirror our sexuality as infants, there remains something unknowable and enigmatic in our sexuality, and we discover it through another person later in life. As well as this, we need two to create a baby. I don't mean

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this so much in a biological sense, although that is true, regardless of different sexualities and the way parenting is configured. I mean it more in a psychological sense: that two people coming together in the context of an adult intimate relationship can produce between them, what they could not alone.

When we think about psychic development from infancy to adulthood, we can see that at each stage there are important developments. From earliest infancy, we learn about dependence on an object that gradually we allow to become more separate from us. With Oedipal development, we learn about and have to come to terms with the part of the parental couple's relationship, the sexual, that we are excluded from. In adolescence, we take over ownership of our own separate and sexual body and separate from our parents. And then, for most of us, at some point, we choose to make an adult sexual relationship of our own. Is that then the end of psychic development? One of the things adult couples do is produce babies, and this fact, this possibility, realised or not, is one of the central ways in which psychic development continues in the adult couple relationship. Being in a relationship that is functioning well means that there are two minds, as well as two bodies. When there is something difficult to manage, the two can come together in their different ways to try and think about it. Their different experience and thoughts come together in a unique way and lead to new thoughts, the new thoughts being a product of their relationship. This is the opposite of narcissistic relating, described earlier, in which one person's view can annihilate the other's. It is through being in a relationship that this creative couple development comes

about, and further, becomes internalised into each of the members of the couple as an 'internal creative couple'<sup>10</sup>

With this development, the individual has the sense of existing and functioning in the context of a relationship with another or others and experiences this as creative. This state of mind does not depend upon being in a relationship *per se*; as while being part of a couple may be the desired state, not every individual chooses or achieves this. The creative couple state of mind can of course be expressed by someone who is not in a couple, but it is perhaps expressed most fully in the context of an actual intimate relationship.

This has been described from a slightly different psychoanalytic perspective, that of 'link theory'. Isidoro Berenstein, for example, speaking of the couple relationship, says: 'Its product is an expanded, modified, renewed subjectivity that makes it possible to negate the ego's (narcissistic) confinement in its identity and to establish this subjectivity as novelty. The couple has its own life as an aggregate, which is different from the sum of its parts. Its members carry in them the psychic developments of their own history and childhood as well as those produced within this aggregate, which is ceaselessly being constituted in each of the numerous "nows" they experience together. The present time gives rise to a past, a history, and a future in the form of a project that may not necessarily be realized but is a determining factor nonetheless.'<sup>12</sup>

The whole point of being in a relationship is that there is an 'other' and a continuous exchange between the partners. If the relationship is functioning creatively, two people, separate and different, come together, are changed by each other and have the capacity to produce a third between them, symbolised by the 'baby'. Rather than 'third', perhaps I should say 'thirds', as the couple who function creatively, produce many 'thirds' as an outcome of their relationship.

The final point I want to make about the creative couple is that the continuous outcome of the couple's relating becomes a 'symbolic third' for the couple. In other words, their relationship is experienced by them as an entity, subjectively experienced as a resource, something they have created and continue to create together, the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. The relationship is something the couple turns to in their minds that functions, as Warren Colman has described, as a container for the couple. This is tremendously helpful to a couple who are having a difficult time together because there is, somewhere, the belief both that the relationship can withstand it, and, that while it may not be immediately apparent, an as yet unknown creative outcome to their difficulty might be possible.

## What is being in a relationship really like?

All the challenges I described earlier are part of the reality of being in a relationship for most people. It is not always easy being with another person; it challenges who we are or think we are. Quite a bit of the time we don't understand each other, and we have to manage the disappointment of the other being not quite who we imagined. Being with another means being changed by the other, and unless there are brick wall defences against the impact of the other, we inevitably are. This is why we might want to be in a relationship but also why we might fear it, and why we might find relationships more trouble than they are worth. But we might find that, in the safety and intimacy of a good relationship, we can work through unresolved aspects of ourselves and discover more of who we

really are, and be less driven to re-enact the past. We might also find that engaging with the difference and otherness of the other leads to new outcomes, thoughts, ideas and solutions, which we could not have arrived at on our own. ●

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