

## Section 4 - The Troubled Marriage

Axiom #1: All marital relationships involve both permanently fixed projections and acute, momentary projections. These projections all emanate from the unconscious baby core of the personality. The degree to which the baby level relationships, between parts of self and versions of mom or dad, are problematic, is the degree to which their recreation via projection in the marriage has the potential to be problematic.

Axiom #2: All difficulties in marriage that are potentially destabilizing of the relationship involve unconscious projective processes at a baby level of the personality.

### COMMON PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORAL COMPLAINTS IN MARRIAGE:

- 1 – Too controlling or too needy or too irresponsible or too crazy (i.e. characterological)
- 2 – Chronically angry, bitchy, complaining, etc.
- 3 – Explosive, violent, etc.
- 4 – Unhappy or depressed all the time, etc.
- 5 – Anxious, pessimistic, catastrophizing, etc.
- 6 – Cold, distant, unemotional, non-communicative, etc.
- 7 – Disinterested in physical or sexual contact
- 8 – Excessive alcohol or drug use
- 9 – Too involved with something other than spouse (work, kids, hobby, etc.)
- 10 – Infidelity

### POOR PROBLEM SOLVING PATTERNS COMMONLY SEEN:

(e.g. in relation to conflicts about sex, finances, child rearing, sharing responsibility, etc.)

- 1 – Blaming, guilt shifting, evacuation, etc.
- 2 – Sulking, collecting injustice, or exploding
- 3 – Failing to distinguish little from big problems
- 4 – Don't fight in fair manner that makes it safe to address conflicts
- 5 – Lose contact with loving feelings for partner who becomes all bad
- 6 – Inability to keep from "taking everything personally"

**TAKE HOME LESSON;** These are all behaviors. They tell you little about their underlying origins and therefore very little about what would be required to modify them.

### GENERAL CONCEPTS:

1 – All human beings have an "alive, active, baby core" to their personality that is composed of rather permanently fixed relationships between parts of self and various versions of mom and dad. These relationships form the templates for all other relationships, internally and externally.

2 – The "baby cores" of all human beings are formed by a relatively narrow range of human emotional reactions to experiences that occur in the first months of life. The most important of these emotional reactions include separation anxiety, envy, jealousy, persecutory and depressive guilt, all in an overarching matrix of love and hate. In response to these early life experiences and this relatively narrow repertoire of emotions, each infant reacts to and creates its own unique version of what happened and what meanings to ascribe to the experience. Thus, while the infant's feeling range is limited, it can give rise to an almost infinite variety of meanings and stored versions of what transpired, thus creating what Kleinian's refer to as unconscious phantasy. Put in other words, these unconscious phantasies are composed of the thoughts and feelings the infant has as to what is happening between a part of self and some version of mom or dad. That is, they give meaning to these unconsciously stored relationships which will in turn be used as templates for what to expect from and how to understand new relationships in the outside world.

### THE MARITAL SELECTION PROCESS (OR HOW DID WE GET INTO THIS MESS ANYWAY?):

1 – In the marital selection process, for two individuals to feel attracted to the other each other, consciously

and unconsciously, they must have a very substantial correspondence in these internal relationships between parts of self and versions of mom and dad. This amounts to having both a similar range of experience in life, especially infancy, and roughly similar reactions to it. Without this correspondence, especially at the level of their “baby cores”, the two partners would feel as if they were living in two different universes, having no common language with which to communicate.

2 – In the process of forming an intimate relationship, the two partners will unconsciously “divvy up” the components of these baby core relationships so that each will rather permanently “contain” various unconscious aspects, roles, figures, etc. These divvied up elements represent what I’m referring to as the “FIXED PROJECTIONS” in a marital relationship (i.e. aspects of parts of self or aspects of various versions of mom and dad. These unconscious projections, by virtue of being inherent in the marital selection process, do not require an act of “projection” in a given moment because they are “always there, waiting to be activated/exploited when the need arises”.

3 – The extent to which these fixed projections contain problematic elements usually determines the degree to which the marital fit is likely to be problematic in the long run.

– Idealization can be thought of as the splitting widely apart of good and bad feelings and objects at a baby level within the unconscious inner world. The degree to which it is operative in each personality during the marital selection process (because it has not been supplanted during development by a more realistic, adult function in the personality) adds to the risk of the marital fit being problematic in the long run.

4 – The degree to which the marital fit allows repair and/or compensation for childhood injuries is the degree to which the fit will allow for a stable and potentially compensatory marriage which makes up for and allows modification of painful internal configurations.

– However, stability is often achieved by mutual unconscious agreement whereby both parties join in support of projecting the “bad stuff” into some outside container, usually a parent. This is akin to a folie a deux, is often difficult to alter, and is fraught with potential for long term failure.

5 – While it is common for people to resign themselves to their marital relationship, probably no married couple can significantly alter a “fit” that is substantially problematic without at least one member going into a therapy that generates (using appropriate models) sufficient understanding of the internal, unconscious situation such that there is a lessening of that individual’s externalizations and/or lessening of their response to the ongoing externalizations by their spouse.

Thus – Lessening their projections which are problematic.

Thus – Lessening their suitability for reenacting their spouse’s projections.

Thus – Lessening their problematic reactions to their spouse’s projections

#### IT’S THE REPETITION COMPULSION, STUPID!:

1 – The repetition compulsion = unconsciously recreating in the outside world, any of the unconscious internal relationships between parts of self and versions of mom and dad that exist in that individual’s unconscious inner world. The unconscious necessity to live out one’s unconscious internal situation is the engine that drives the psychopathology of a marriage. This relates to the fact that one’s unconscious inner world is composed primarily of these rather permanently fixed relationships between parts of self and various versions of mom and dad which are, in essence, the only game in town, in so far as they are all one knows of what a human relationship looks like and how it should be and feel. Thus, they inevitably become the basic template for all relationships. With insight into them, one can modify reenactment of them. Without an understanding, one is doomed to repeat them into perpetuity.

– This explains the fundamental inadequacy of conscious attitudes to influence the baby core of the unconscious inner world in terms of modifying behavior that recreates problematic modes of relating.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE REPETITION COMPULSION AND PROJECTIVE PROCESSES:

1 – There is a powerful drive in humans to externalize ones unconscious inner world in order to:

- Be able to see it and do something with or to it, esp. if the thing is felt to be a source of pain.
- Where the unconscious element is felt to be “bad” (which usually translates as “painful”), there is a strong urge to get it outside in order to change it or rid oneself of it

2 – Projection is the means by which the internal situation is externalized and thus recreated in the outside world. I am using the term as synonymous with the term projective identification (which I consider to be unnecessarily confusing).

3 – If the pathological structures in good and bad marriages are alike, then the difference must be in the way in which each partner responds to their own internal structures and to their partner’s internal structures. Thus how each responds must determine whether or not the influence of these rather fixed unconscious relationships is problematic or constructive.

– e.g. Is ones motive, for unconsciously projecting, a constructive one or destructive one, and is the partner’s response to the projection a constructive or destructive one?

## CORE BABY ISSUES WHICH MAKE UP THE CONTENTS OF THE REPETITION COMPULSION:

1 – There are an infinite variety of ways for couples to manifest marital difficulties. However, at the baby level of the personality, these manifestations tend to accrue around a relatively small number of core issues.

2 – The most fundamental relational emotions, originating with the mother but then impacting the marital relationship as they are recreated within it are:

- separation
- jealousy
- envy

3 – Two fundamental emotions of a more general nature are:

- persecutory and depressive anxiety
- persecutory and depressive guilt

4 – The most fundamental modes in an infant for coping with mental pain include:

- denial
- splitting and idealization
- splitting and projective identification (what I prefer to simply call ‘projective processes’)
- omnipotent phantasy/maneuver
- manic defensive maneuvers (essentially deny caring, concern, or harm done)

## WHAT DOES THE “REPETITION COMPULSION LOOK LIKE IN EVERYDAY LIFE?:

1 – Infantile separation experiences:

e.g. A woman who was abruptly weaned from the breast at three months of age came to see me in her mid-twenties because she was morbidly shy. Our work together went very well for a couple of months and ended a productive week with a very satisfying Friday session. On Monday she came in and immediately announced she was quitting. I had been feeling very positive about the work and felt stunned by her announcement, as if I had been literally kicked in the stomach by a mule. I was literally speechless for about 10 minutes, trying desperately to recover and think about what was going on. Fortunately, she was lying on the couch at that point and could not see my distress.

Long story made short, I convinced her to explore this decision further and she said she would give me to the end of the month, three weeks hence (more preparation than she had been given). What we ultimately came to recognize was that she had unconsciously re-enacted her own baby experience where she was now the mother and I was having her baby experience. She went on to have numerous dreams depicting a woman with her chest torn off and infant or small girl with her cheek or part of her face torn off. We came to an understanding that all of this suggested that she had felt very comfortably joined up to mom, until the weaning from the breast abruptly occurred, and it was a very traumatic surprise that she didn't see coming, as evidenced by my devastating shock and surprise when she recreated it with me.

## 2 – Jealous triangles:

– e.g. A woman had a deep resentment toward her father who had cheated on her mother several times during her childhood. She had two additional childhood issues, a weaning from the breast at four months of age by a depressed mother and the birth of a sister when she was about 18 months of age. In all three of these situations she felt abandoned by someone she loved because she felt/imagined that they were giving their love to someone else.

This all came crashing back into her life when she unexpectedly overheard her husband on the phone at home “having pillow talk” with an apparent girlfriend. She had married a man who had also felt abandoned as a child. Although they had a reasonably harmonious marriage, the man was, as it later became apparent in marital therapy, feeling “neglected” because his wife was so occupied with their four children, all of whom were under the age of 10. The affair came after he unwisely hired an attractive young secretary at his work.

It took six months of marital therapy to piece all of this together for them in a manner in which they both had some understanding of why this was recreated in their marriage from each of their inner worlds. The husband ended up going into individual therapy at that point.

## 3 – Bad (internal) parental figures who are rejecting, blaming, cruel, violent, intrusive, envious, depressed, inadequate, unable to contain mental pain, crazy, chaotic, etc.

– e.g. An elderly man came to me complaining that his wife of 40 years drove him crazy and he only felt comfortable at his office which he went to daily even though he could have retired some years back. In his history I found out two salient facts. The first was that his mother had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, and the second was that as a college student he had a period of several years of severe psychosomatic illness in which he felt certain something was “eating up his heart and intestines”. He met his wife in college and they married after graduation, never having children.

As he described his wife's complaints about him and life, and how she was crazy and drove him crazy, I could see that they “hot-potatoed” craziness back and forth and that this had been relatively stable, if unpleasant, process for decades. He needed her to be the container of his crazy internal structures and vice versa. A previous psychiatrist had told him to get a divorce, so he came to me, apparently not satisfied with that advice. After several meetings, I recommended to him that he stay married, think of his difficult marriage as his cross to bear life, and just never retire or stop going to the office daily. He seemed satisfied with the advice and I never saw him again.

## 4 – Unbearable states of mind such as guilt, depression, craziness, confusion, grief, etc.

– e.g. A couple had two healthy children, ages 3 and 6, when a third child was born. This child tragically developed a form of leukemia and after three very traumatic years passed away. The couple fell into an increasingly unhappy state over the next several years, ultimately coming to see me because their eldest child was showing signs of depression as she was becoming pubertal. We had several months of family sessions, during which it became apparent to me that everyone one in the family was depressed and unconsciously terribly guilt ridden over the youngest child's illness and death which had been an ordeal for

all of them. The eldest girl was the most open and honest about her feelings, and thus became the designated patient but was really speaking for all of them.

What was of greatest interest to me was that both of the parents had siblings born too close in age and had grown up with considerable resentment about their childhoods, but could not face their negative feelings. The deceased child's conception had been an "accident" and the resulting ambivalence had never been acknowledged, and was then compounded by the illness and death. The constant marital bickering that had ensued consistently had a "blaming" quality about it, as if every unexpected problem in life now became an issue over which someone was to blame.

The couple managed to stay together but never really recovered from the trauma. I heard a number of years later that they had ultimately gotten divorced.

#### 5 – Unconscious envy

– e.g. A couple came for marital therapy on the brink of divorce as they fought a great deal and were often sarcastic and cruel. He was a very successful, highly respected attorney and she was a stay at home mom, happy to be looking after the three kids. When they married she gave up a successful modeling career and he was a rising star in his firm. They both came from successful families in terms of wealth and education, but she had a volatile relationship with her domineering and controlling father and resented his favoring her older brother even though she was the superior student and athlete. The husband's mother had been somewhat cold and remote, and it was clear that he imagined having such a beautiful wife would give him what he had lacked in childhood from his mom.

After some two years of marital therapy it was becoming clear to me that any substantive changes in how they treated each other were lagging far behind how much knowledge and understanding they had gained. I began to explore the possibility that deeply unconscious envious hatred of each other was ruining any progress. It became more apparent that he felt she was withholding all the desirable good things he wanted, particularly her body and sex. It also seemed that she had an underlying resentment and hostility toward men in general and saw him as no exception.

We ended marital therapy after three years with them only marginally better. I heard a few years later that they got divorced. My postmortem was that deeply unconscious envious resentment and hatred had undermined any ability to move to a more loving, generous position in their relationship. I have seen this insidious influence of unconscious envy a number of times since, always after an extensive period of therapy has not led to improvement commensurate with the insights gained.

#### A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF PROJECTIVE PROCESSES:

1 – To understand how basic and elemental these processes are to human nature, one must create a model of the earliest relationship in infancy between mother and infant.

2 – The model begins with the assumption that the infant has "raw, unthinkable, unusable" physical/emotional experiences for which it has no capacity to do anything other than empty these "mind/body" experiences into the outside world via crying, peeing, pooping, spitting up, etc. (Notice the function of the alimentary tract seems to be the natural analog for this tendency.) The infant imagines that what has been emptied (evacuated) into the outside world is taken by mother, into herself, where she can hopefully do two things of great importance for the infant.

First she can tolerate contact with (i.e. contain) the element in order to empathically feel something similar to what the infant must be feeling. Then secondly, she can organize in her mind what the significance or meaning of the infant's projection must be. Having done these two things, she is now in a position to give back to the infant its unthinkable, unusable state of mind/body in a form that is now suitable for "thinking" about because it has now been converted into an experience that has meaning.

She gives this meaning back to the infant by behaving in a manner appropriate to the feeling so that what was once unbearable and unthinkable has been detoxified of those qualities. By performing this process for the infant literally hundreds of times each day, the mother gradually builds for the infant, piece by piece, a mental apparatus that can perform these same functions on its own, i.e. think about and learn from experience.

3 – A consequence of these experiences, which are universal and hard wired to occur in all human beings, is that at a deeply unconscious level, almost completely outside conscious awareness and beyond the reach of “common sense”, all human beings operate daily with this unconscious phantasy that they can take what is inside their unconscious inner world and place it into the outside world, almost always “into” another human being.

– While it is common for these projections into another human being to elicit or evoke an emotional response in the recipient, often to unconsciously reassure the projector that the container/recipient has in fact received the projection, it is not always true that the recipient knows about or feels the projection. This is especially true of the class of projections that are inherent in the marital selection process where, by unconscious agreement to divvy up various internal relationship components, the couple create projections which are rather permanently carried by one or the other. In effect, these projections by virtue of their fairly permanent status, do not require a current, acute unconscious activity on the part of the projector in order to put the projected element into the other.

4 – Those projections which are the most problematic in a marriage are usually the result of an acutely enacted externalization in the face of some immediate emotional situation which is generating some emotional reaction which the projector is unable to contain.

5 – Projective processes can be thought of as being composed of: (1) a content that is projected, (2) a motive for the projection, and (3) a consequence (i.e. impact) for the recipient, actually experienced by the container and/or imagined by the projector.

– This makes it possible to sort out the third component if you can discern any of the other two, much like an algebraic equation.

6 – There is a very wide range of motives for one of these “acute” projections, some of which are far more potentially problematic than others. (Note: I am making an arbitrary distinction between the motive for the projection and the content of the projection.)

– The motives can be usefully conceptualized as falling somewhere along a continuum which has several possible qualities at each end which can vary in quantitative and qualitative intensity.  
e.g. evacuations ----- versus ----- communications  
narcissistic/hostile/destructive object related/loving/constructive

– The first question to be asked about any projection is to what degree is the projection an evacuation because the projector cannot contain it any longer? In this circumstance the projection into the object is not motivated by an awareness of or concern for its impact on the object, i.e. it is “nothing personal”. The recognition of this fact can make it far easier for the recipient to tolerate containing the projection.

– A second distinction to be made relates to the degree to which the recipient of the projection is being viewed unconsciously as a distinct, separate human being or more just a narcissistic extension of oneself. The latter is a far more potentially problematic and pathological situation with very different implications for coping with the situation. This contrasts with a more object related situation where there is a much greater possibility for communication as a motive or ultimate achievement.

– The third area of distinction in motivation is perhaps the most obvious, is the projection meant to be of help or to do harm? Since what is projected is often felt to be a source of pain to the projector, one common

motive is that of making the other feel the pain that one is currently feeling (here I'm emphasizing something more linked to evacuation or revenge than communicative sharing). Where unconscious envy is prominent in the motive, the desire to spoil the recipient's state of well being is often central in the motive to the projector unconsciously. This often includes simultaneously an unconscious phantasy of reversing roles or identity states with the container. This amounts to spoiling the envied object while enhancing oneself.

7 – The content of the projection is any aspect of an internal object relationship. This includes parts of self, aspects of internal mom or dad, states of mind that exist between them (probably always conjoined with an aspect of self or object), and even mental functions.

– More often than not, the content is felt to be a source of mental pain. It is, however, possible for the content to be something to be preserved or to be shared in a positive sense.

8 – The consequences of the projections are a function of the motive and content. If the content is felt by the projector to be a toxic element, or if the motive was to harm the container, the result has a greater potential for being seriously problematic. If the motive was caring, the recipient may feel enhance and the projector will expect a positive reaction.

– It is axiomatic that anything the projector gets rid of because they cannot deal with it, once it is lodged in the recipient, they will be equally unable to deal with that area in the recipient. This is the explanation behind the incompetent behavior so often seen in “co-dependents” with an addicted or violent spouse, etc.

9 – The responses on the part of the recipients, to the projection, can also be place on a continuum from constructive or benign to very toxically destructive.

– Generally, any response from the recipient that gives the feeling to the projector of being listened to and understood (i.e. constructively “containing”) tends to lessen the toxic element in the projection and potentially benefit the projector.

– Generally, ignoring, rejecting, misinterpreting, etc the projection tends to exacerbate the situation, leading to more projecting with increased intensity and distress.

10 – As a general rule, neurotics project into reality. That is to say, there is a recognizable correspondence between the container and what is projected into it. As the mental pain increases in the projector, the degree of violence in the projective process tends to increase and the need for the “shoe to fit” tends to erode. The latter situation of leaves the container feeling increasingly “crazy” or befuddled in a “what did I do?” fashion.

11 – It is important to note that virtually any projection can be converted into a communication if the recipient can constructively do what the good mother does, i.e. tolerate, organize, understand, and behave appropriately back.

12 – One final note: Whenever marital partners, especially after learning a lot about what the problems are and potentially how to cope with them, fail to develop generosity and good will toward each other, one should consider that unconscious envy in both partners is at the root of their inability to improve their relationship. In effect, unconscious envy is leading to an inability to stop toxic projections into each other.