

# THE LINK, THE BASTION, AND INTERSUBJECTIVE CONTRACTS IN COUPLES

James L. Poulton, PhD  
International Psychotherapy Institute  
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## PICHON RIVIÈRE: THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERACTIONS

- Each participant continuously “assigns a role” to the other participant and the other continuously incorporates that role in their responses
- There is a constant interplay between *internal* links, which exist in each individual between him or herself and internal objects, and *external* links, occurring in the here and now of the interaction, between the two participants
- Interactions can either be “closed” or “open.” They are “closed” when the participants repeat the same behaviors without resolving core anxieties; and they are “open” when participants “are able to switch from one behavior to another, integrate reality, and enrich their thinking and actions” – Losso, et al., 2017, p. 98).

## THE HEALTHY/UNHEALTHY INDIVIDUAL

- Healthy “when they grasp reality from an integrative perspective” and are able to “engage in a dialectic interplay with their environment” so they can transform both reality and themselves in successive attempts (Losso, et al., 2017, p. 24).
- Unhealthy when they approach their environment in such closed, passive, rigid, or stereotyped ways that they are prevented from solving problems in either the internal or external world.

## HEALTHY/UNHEALTHY COUPLES

- Healthy: partners are relatively continuously engaged in a dialectical push and pull – yielding, at times, one's own internal expectations to accommodate the reality of the partner's personality, and succeeding, at other times, in modifying the partner so they are more responsive to one's own needs
- Unhealthy: engage in stereotyped, repetitious behaviors without gaining perspective on the causes of those behaviors or actively intervening to alter them

## STEREOTYPED EXCHANGES

- Predominance of internal links
- When each partner assigns pathological roles to the other, and when each identifies with those roles, the result is the creation of a new “external link” – a repeating pattern that represents a “synthesis of the two roles” each partner assigns to the other (Losso, et al., 2017, p. 102)
- These links actively limit possibilities for the couple, constraining understanding and imposing requirements that both partners blind themselves to the real foundations of their interactions

## PICHON RIVIÈRE'S INFLUENCE

- Willy and Madeleine Barranger
  - The Bastion
- Rene Kaës
  - Diseases of Intersubjective Contracts

## CASE EXAMPLE

# PICHON RIVIÈRE AND THE FIELD

- Kurt Lewin: an individual's behavior is a consequence of "the mutual relations of ... factors" from both the individual and "the concrete whole situation" (Lewin, 1935, p. 41)
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty: all elements of a psychological event are inter-dependent and indivisible: if one element changes, the rest must change accordingly (Merleau-Ponty, 1942/1963)
- Pichon Rivière: The field as dialectical interplay of:
  - Internal links – the Intrasubjective Field
  - External links – the Intersubjective Field
  - The Vertical Axis – links each person to previous generations and to history and culture
  - The Horizontal Axis - links each person to family and wider current social groups

## THE BARANGERS AND SHARED UNCONSCIOUS FANTASY

- Asymmetry of the analytic relationship
- The unconscious of both analyst and patient contribute
- Shared unconscious fantasy - communicated via “the interplay of projective and introjective identifications with ... counteridentifications” (1961-1962/2008, p. 808)
- Madeleine Baranger: The shared fantasy is not “the sum or combination of the individual fantasies of the two members of the analytic couple, but an original set of fantasies created by the field situation itself” (2005, pp. 62-63)

## THE BASTION

- “an immobilized structure which is slowing down or paralyzing the process ... it arises in unconsciousness and silence, out of complicity between the two protagonists to protect an attachment which must not be uncovered. This leads to partial crystallization of the field, to a neo-formation set up around a shared fantasy ... Sometimes the bastion ... completely invades the field and removes all functional capacity from the process, transforming the entire field into a pathological field” (Baranger, Baranger & Mom, 1983, p. 2).

## THE BASTION IN COUPLES

- "Second Looks" (re-analysis of an interaction, in-session or afterward, in order to discern what had been indiscernible - Baranger, et al., 1983) are rare
- Unanalyzed and unmetabolized anxieties in the couple create enduring bastions that dominate the relationship for months or years
- The couple therapist intervenes in bastions that are already entrenched long before the couple enters therapy
- The couple therapist's field: relationships with the individual partners, as well as with the couple as a whole, single, unified entity

# THE BASTION: CASE EXAMPLE

# THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF A BASTION, PART I

- Two kinds of psychic material in an intersubjective field
  - Emotions, attitudes, desires, etc. that are articulated by each participant and explicitly attributed either to themselves or to objects outside themselves
    - Arises from conscious, discrete and discriminative thinking
    - Accompanied by markers identifying where it comes from and what it's about
  - Unarticulated, unconscious and indeterminate material
    - Neither partner can identify its origin, its aim, or even its precise meaning
    - An atmospheric presence that automatically takes on a persecutory quality

# THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF A BASTION, PART II

- Emotional absorption
  - The other's emotion gets into you, so your response cannot help but reveal traces of their emotions.
  - Your experience is not strictly your own, but is rather a hybrid or partially decentered entity, made up of psychic material from your own mind and the other's mind
  - In the interactive field between two people, unarticulated psychic material acts like an unfaithful partner that takes up residence in both minds, regardless of which mind originally brought it to the party

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF A BASTION,  
CASE EXAMPLE

## KAËS AND DISEASES OF INTERSUBJECTIVE CONTRACTS

- An intersubjective contract is an unconscious “agreement” to behave, think and feel in a certain way as a result of our interactions with others
- Results from internalization of the *foreign* and un-representable in the other
- Becomes "a kind of unassimilated other dwelling as a permanent guest, unwelcome or unknown" (1993, p. 5; quoted in Kirshner, 2006, p. 1006).
- Creates mutual acts of repression, erasure, denial, splitting, misunderstanding, resulting in areas of non-signifiability, non-transformability, “zones of silence,” “pockets of intoxication,” “garbage spaces,” and “lines of flight that keep the subject a stranger to its own history” (Kaës 1995, p. 13).

CASE EXAMPLE: INTERSUBJECTIVE  
CONTRACTS WITH PARENTS

## THE BASTION AND PROTECTED ATTACHMENTS

- Barangers: the shared fantasy at the root of a bastion is created “in unconsciousness and silence, out of complicity between the two protagonists to protect an attachment which must not be uncovered” (1983, p. 2).
- Mary and Brian’s persistence in equating the other’s criticism or neglect with terrifying experiences from childhood meant they were abiding by their original contracts – for denial or misunderstanding – with their parents.
- By retaining those contracts, they were repeating an act of devotion, preserving their primal attachments to their parents.
- A pressure to preserve the status quo, to keep the cruel parent present, even though it was the source of anxiety for both

## THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION IN A BASTION/DISEASED INTERSUBJECTIVE CONTRACT

- Aims at uncovering and working through each partner's contributions to the process, both individually and jointly
- Kaës: therapeutic work with a couple or a group is accomplished when the “principal core of the organizing phantasy” is “decondensed ... allowing each participant to identify his own particular phantasy.” (2007, pp 88-89).
- “Traversing an organization of common and shared psychic reality is necessary if the group [or couple] is to function” (p. 89).
- “Decondensing” a shared fantasy means exposing the partners to childhood fear and pain, and the reality of unmourned lost objects

## THE TRAP OF THE UNMOURNED LOSS OF A PARENT'S LOVE

- On the one hand, patients try to hold onto the object, internally, under a vain expectation they will somehow transform it into the loving presence they always hoped it could be.
- On the other hand, the internalized parent necessarily retains its original characteristics – narcissism, aggression, condemnation – that led to its withholding of love in the first place
- A “damaged, reproachful internal object” (Steiner 2005, p. 84) sitting in shame-inducing judgment over the individual’s failure to have enabled its loving return
- The concepts of the field, the bastion and diseases of intersubjective contracts help to track the trajectory of unmourned losses, and the shared fantasies they engender, in couple interactions

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