

Intimacy and Power in Long-Term Relationships: A Gestalt Therapy-Systems Perspective

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In our society today, many view the ability to create, manage, and nurture long-term intimate relationships as the primary prerequisite for happiness and well-being (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Furthermore, an increasing number of psychotherapists and developmental theorists also perceive the capacity to relate to an other on equal terms as the essence of maturity. At the same time, our high interpersonal anxiety and catastrophic divorce rates reflect the difficulty of creating and sustaining intimate relationships.

Although the topic of intimacy has received much attention by the popular press (Lerner, 1989; Rabin, 1983), little has been written in the family therapy field (Weingarten, 1991). Even more surprisingly, we have found virtually no written discussion of intimacy by Gestalt therapists.

Our purpose is to begin to correct this omission. We will use a Gestalt therapy perspective to focus theoretically on long-term intimacy, a concept that implies a substantive relationship

between two or more individuals over an extended period of time. First we will analyze the concept of intimacy from a process perspective and list our working assumptions. Then we will describe four common relationship patterns that are sometimes mistakenly viewed as intimate. After listing the essential ingredients for the development of intimacy, we will introduce the Gestalt Cycle of Experience. We will conclude by focusing on the concept of power, first describing the connection between power and responsibility, and then outlining how power is managed in relationships.

One final note before starting. Unless otherwise noted, the term *long-term intimacy* will refer to Western, middle-class, heterosexual relationships. This focus is for clarity of presentation, and is not intended to place a higher value on this than on other forms of coupling.

The Problem of Defining Intimacy

Intimacy is a difficult concept to define. Some experts describe it as a closeness and depth between two individuals, an awareness of the innermost qualities of another (Sexton & Sexton, 1982). Other authorities emphasize reciprocity and an attitude of mutual permeability: "intimacy is an intentional action between like creatures whose will is to bridge the echoless silence of the universe" (Denes, 1982, p. 136). Still others take a more existential intellectual approach, defining intimacy as "a cognitive state that relates to knowledge of one's psychic reality" (Mendelsohn, 1982, p. 39). For some the emphasis is on the sense of wholeness in the moment that can occur even between antagonists in a boxing match, for example (Wilner, 1982). Lastly, some view intimacy as a capacity or a characteristic that varies more or less among individuals (Mahrer, 1978; Weingarten, 1991); and more recently the question of difference in capacities between men and women has been emphasized (Luepnitz, 1988).

Part of the difficulty in arriving at a consensus regarding the meaning of intimacy lies embedded in the powerful feelings, images, and archetypes that it evokes. Although we may disagree regarding a precise definition, we somehow seem to

know it when we experience or see it. For example, one can easily envision a mother nursing her newborn child, two lovers walking hand in hand along a deserted stretch of beach, or two elderly companions gently rocking side by side.

In our attempt at definition we will try a different tack. Our approach will be one of *process*, a perspective that is deeply imbedded in the Gestalt approach. By "process" we mean to describe the phenomenology of an encounter, emphasizing *how* experience is organized by looking at specific habitual patterns of energy exchange in two-person systems. Thus a Gestalt therapist might be interested in specific characteristics or patterns such as complexity, robustness, liveliness, creativity, and balance, to name a few. Because of its purely descriptive nature, a process approach allows us to avoid pejorative or judgmental constructs and language. For terms such as *dependency* or *autonomy* are ultimately contextual and refer to a certain aspect within a two-person system.

We have chosen to use the concept of *power* as our main way of organizing and describing the encounter between two individuals. For we believe that a long-term balance of power is the necessary condition for intimacy to flourish. Before proceeding we would like to list some assumptions.

Basic Assumptions

- A. The terms *intimacy*, *power*, and *abuse* describe aspects of relationships that exist between two or more people.
- B. All people have deep-seated yearnings to experience intimacy, power, and nurturance.
- C. Intimacy in adult two-person systems is based on an equal balance of experienced power within the context of a long-term relationship.
- D. Nurturance is a quality found in intimate relationships. Nurturance occurs when positive energy (in the form of food, words, touch, and so on) is absorbed from the environment by an individual or larger system. In a vibrant, balanced, intimate relationship both individuals receive as well as give nurturance.

- E. Abuse, the psychological, emotional, or physical rupturing of a boundary, also unfortunately occurs in all intimate relationships.
- F. As one's power in relation to another diminishes, one
 - 1. is more open to receive nurturance.
 - 2. is more open to being abused.
 - 3. has a diminished capacity to abuse the other.
- G. As one's relative power to another increases,
 - 1. the power to abuse or nurture the other increases.
 - 2. the opportunity to be abused diminishes.
- H. Intimacy can be adequately described through the use of the interactive cycle of experience (Zinker & Nevis, 1981).

Experiences That Resemble Intimacy

Many relationships when viewed from afar appear to be intimate in nature. However, when inspected more closely, we find them lacking in one essential ingredient or another. In this section we will describe four common forms: intimate moments, pseudo intimacy, isolation-a-deux, and certain forms of contact.

Intimate Moments

An intimate moment can occur when two or more people have the same degree of energy or interest in the same thing at the same time. In that instant, they experience an equal openness to know and be known. (A mild and benign example is when two strangers find that they have a friend in common.) Unlike long-term intimacy, intimate moments do not require a balance of power, but can be experienced in a long-term but unequal power relationship or in a short-term relationship with uncertain power equality (a soft glance during a blind date).

Although these moments do take place at any point in time, they often occur around events of significance such as birth, marriage, sickness, and death. These occasions, the great equalizers and levelers of society, serve to create a powerful and compelling figure that temporarily suspends the traditional boundaries and power differentials that usually exist between

people. Examples might include a father and a son hugging joyfully upon witnessing the birth of the son's child, or a therapist and patient crying together at the patient's announcement that she or he has cancer.

Intimate moments are usually experienced as something that "just happens" and is out of one's control. Although one can work toward achieving the conditions for these transitory experiences (in psychotherapy, for example, one of the goals is to create the potential for such intimate interactions), they do not require direct effort. In fact, they are characterized by the element of surprise and a sense of boundarylessness or confluence, accompanied by feelings of connectedness and mutuality. For in an intimate moment, one does not experience the other as separate and differentiated from the self. Rather, self and other, figure and ground, temporarily become one.

These transient interactions are best savored and completed. However, it is not uncommon to attribute a meaning and significance to them that can ultimately lead to sorrow and hardship. For example, many of us have mistakenly assumed at one time or another that the experiences of infatuation or love at first sight carry with them the necessary ingredients for building a long-term relationship. Similarly, too many psychotherapy patients have fallen victim to a therapist who at the height of an intimate moment has ignored the inherent power differential (Melnick, Nevis, & Melnick, in press). This abdication of therapist responsibility, unfortunately, has at times resulted in the emotional and sometimes sexual abuse of patients.

Pseudo Intimacy

A second form of interaction, sometimes confused with long-term intimacy, is *pseudo intimacy*. Pseudo intimacy exists when one incorrectly experiences oneself in an intimate relationship because she or he has failed to notice the absence of mutuality. Since the other person does not experience an equal sense of connectedness or relatedness, the interaction is one-sided. Thus the power of perceived intimacy exists for one and not the other. Unrequited love is an obvious example.

Pseudo intimacy requires an incorrect projection of a figure of intimacy onto another. It is often accompanied by an inability to turn away. Certain forms of positive transference fall within this domain, as do the imaginary relationships that ordinary people have with famous and powerful people. Such relationships may serve various purposes, but they are certainly not intimate.

A most powerful form of pseudo intimacy involves the one-sided ending of a long-term relationship. This can occur when one person's energy wanes while the other still experiences feelings of deep caring. The one who is still "in love" experiences an inability to move away, to turn to another figure. This fixed focus on a no longer nurturing relationship can result in much longing and pain.

Isolation-a-deux

A third form of engagement that may be mistaken for intimacy is an *isolation-a-deux* (McMahon, 1982). When viewed casually, it appears to resemble a long-term intimate relationship. However, upon closer examination one discovers that the interaction has a cardboardlike quality, never getting beyond surface depth. According to McMahon, the transference distortion in this type of interaction is so great for both individuals that the other hardly exists in his or her own right. The interaction takes on a compulsive, unsatisfying quality with both individuals making only narrow contact with each other or with their own selves.

Contact

Before turning toward a more detailed description of long-term intimacy, it is necessary to discuss one other form of interaction, *contact*. Contact involves the meeting of the self and the environment (often in the form of an other) at a boundary. Although all moments of intimacy involve contact, contact does not necessarily imply intimacy. Intimacy involves a syntonic experience between two or more people, whereas contact can occur between a person and an inanimate object or the envi-

ronment as a whole. Examples include being deeply touched while reading a book or feeling a sense of tranquility while walking through the woods.

Long-Term Intimacy

It is our belief that the most important requirement for the development of long-term intimacy is that it occur among equals. This means that there exists between intimate individuals a system of mutual and balanced caring and concern. Ultimately, the survival and growth of any long-term relationship rests on a genuine relinquishing of one's need to be more (or less) powerful than the other (Hatfield, 1982) and a deep understanding that individual resources equally belong to the system.

For long-term intimacy to develop, both parties must share a willingness to be neither strategic nor political. Thus each agrees to be open to the truth as she or he knows it. At its worst, this openness to the flow of experience can be terrifying, for it lessens the predictability and safety (or the illusion of safety) that many seek in long-term contact. At its best, it can create a lively, vibrant, self-correcting system capable of integrating new data and responding to a wide range of environmental shifts.

As stated previously, time is an essential component for the development of long-term intimacy. One needs to spend many hours with another for intimacy to start to develop. Not only must there be moments of connectedness, but the moments must be numerous. Furthermore, these periods need to occur in a wide variety of contexts. Thus long-term intimacy develops as the variety of content areas in which intimate moments are experienced increases.

Because the capacity to function in a long-term relationship involves learning, the couple can become more practiced in moving in and out of these experiences. Ideally, a trust in the self and the other evolves, so that a seemingly effortless rhythm emerges.

To reiterate, long-term intimacy is the result of individuals experiencing a wide range of intimate moments over a signifi-

cant period of time. Furthermore, these moments have a cyclical character. There is a definite structure that includes a beginning, middle, and end. Paradoxically, however, these time periods also have endless variety. Each event carries with it a special uniqueness. As one completes short, deep, long, shallow, fast, and slow cycles of experience with another over time, long-term intimacy increases. It is to this cycle of experience that we turn.

Interactive Cycle of Experience and Long-Term Intimacy

Varieties of experiences created through the interaction of two individuals in relationship can be articulated and analyzed through the use of the Interactive Cycle of Experience (Zinker & Nevis, 1981). The interactive cycle is an outgrowth of the Cycle of Experience model developed at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland (Zinker, 1977; Melnick & Nevis, 1987). The cycle describes an experiential continuum beginning with *sensation* and moving through the *awareness, mobilization, contact, resolution,* and *withdrawal* phases.

Because each individual's movement through the cycle is unique, much like a fingerprint, the cycles of any two individuals are often different. These differences are a function of a number of variables, including the time spent and the energy invested at each phase. As one moves through many cycles with another person, habitual forms, much like a dance, develop. Ideally each learns to respectfully modify his or her rhythm to create a mutual synchronicity that is satisfying to both.

A simple example might involve the eating of a meal that begins with a couple deciding to eat dinner at a restaurant. Assuming that the couple are able to reach a mutually satisfying decision, a whole new series of cycles begin as they enter the restaurant, choose a table, and determine seating arrangements. Upon receiving menus, they might find their selection styles to be discordant. He might prefer building a broad awareness before deciding. This can involve a complete reading of the menu, a look back at the foods most recently consumed, a caloric check of food items, and a list of questions to ask the

waiter. On the other hand, she might be a person who knows what she likes and so has no need for devoting energy here to this sensation-awareness stage. She quickly makes her choice and is waiting to order, while he is only beginning his deliberations. If the waiter appears at this moment, her mobilized energy might be transformed into impatience and his incomplete awareness might turn into anxiety. In a well-practiced system, he might learn to speed up his process by eliminating irrelevant possibilities more quickly, and she might learn to slow down. Furthermore, they might both learn to create a boundary around the external stimulation of the waiter by asking him to return later. And so it goes throughout the remainder of the meal. At the end, his preference for sipping a slow cup of tea while critiquing the quality of service will have to be considered by the couple in light of her need to "eat and run."

Thus an intimate experience can occur when one is either in rhythm with another in terms of placement within the cycle, *or* aware of the differences that exist between them in the moment. This mutual awareness and connectedness provide the ground that supports the experiences of intimacy. In addition, there are typically other elements present, such as an individual awareness of the synchronicity of the moment as well as a shared (usually verbal, but sometimes visual or tactile) acknowledgement of the experience. This mutual acknowledgement supports the development of this "middle ground" of shared cycles successfully achieved (Zinker & Nevis, 1981).

Ultimately, intimacy has less to do with the quantity of energy expended than with the equality of energy focused around a shared figure. As previously discussed, if two individuals consistently display discordant amounts of energy within their system, a power differential has been created, and the potential for intimacy is diminished. It is to this issue of power that we now turn.

Power and Intimacy

The concept of power has been popularized as well as oversimplified by contemporary American society. The media speak of power as almost a concrete substance, as reflected in *power break-*

fasts, power suits, and even power desks. This indiscriminate use of the word ignores its process meaning. For *power* is a process concept describing the relative influence of two or more individuals in the creation of shared interests. In a two-person system, the one exhibiting greater influence in the moment is said to have more power; the one exhibiting less is consequently less powerful.

One may influence a relationship in many ways—sexually, intellectually, politically, and emotionally, to name a few. One of the most important uses of power is in the creation of a vision. A process perspective implies that a system involves more than its transactions. It involves a projected sense of what the system wishes to become, a prediction of what a healthy relationship will be in the future. How the vision is created, and how influence is utilized, provide a blueprint of the values, norms, and health of the relationship.

Power differentials exist in any system, intentionally or otherwise, because individuals bring different competencies to the relationship (for example, one is a better cook than the other). In an intimate system focus is constantly in flux, and so are power differentials. At any moment one individual is more aware, one knows more, is more grounded, than the other.

However, inequalities are not only the result of real and tangible differences. Often they are also the result of a shared myth created from the histories (both shared and separate) of the individuals involved. Typically, these myths are maintained by a projective contract in which one party amplifies or diminishes his or her power and the other supports this distortion.

As relative power in a relationship increases, be it a function of competence or projection, so does the capacity to nurture or abuse. The most common form of abuse occurs with the physical or emotional rupturing of a boundary, for example, a slap or a sadistic comment. However, more subtle forms of mistreatment also occur. For example, mistreatment might involve the silent inattention to the power differential by the one who is more powerful. For along with increased power comes the responsibility to be aware that a power differential (whether situational and temporary, or permanent and fixed) exists, and to

commit to increased responsibilities for the maintenance of both the relationship and the other individual. This issue of responsibility in relation to power is of great importance.

Power and Responsibility

The responsibilities of the more powerful in relationships are many. Primary is the necessity to know the effects of one's actions on the less powerful, for by definition the less powerful are less able to protect themselves from hurt. Furthermore, responsibility exists, even without awareness. Although the degree of culpability for one's actions is mitigated by degree of awareness, there are certain aspects of engagement that the more powerful must be held accountable for—conscious or not!

There are many examples in the legal arena concerning this long "hook of responsibility." For example, one is responsible for following tax laws whether aware of them or not. A series of recent legal decisions mandates the psychotherapist to break the confidential contract and act on incomplete knowledge if she or he suspects that the patient might seriously injure self or others. In this case, the therapist must choose between two potential negative outcomes: hospitalization of the patient versus possible homicide or suicide.

With power comes the responsibility to stretch one's awareness far beyond one's self-interest. This creates a dilemma exemplified by a male therapy patient enamored with a naive, married woman. Because he (the patient) has had previous extramarital experiences (power born of experience), he has (or should have) the wisdom to know the potential consequences of an affair, both to the woman's marriage and to other individuals involved. Does he have no obligation other than to act in his own self-interest? Or does his responsibility stretch a little further? Is his "conscience clear" if he explicitly warns the woman of the potential consequences of the affair? Or must he go even further? Is he responsible for suspending the relationship until the woman can regain her balance and realistically weigh the possible outcomes? Is he ethically bound to deprive himself for the good of the other? And lastly, what is the re-

sponsibility of the therapist in his or her unequal relationship with the patient? Is the therapist to sit nonjudgmentally, empathizing with the patient's plight? Or is it the clinician's job to confront the patient with the power differential implicit in his infatuation, and the ethical and moral implications involved?

The ethical implications of remaining silent in the face of potential abuse are great. For abuse once committed is rarely confined within the limits of a dyadic relationship. In the above example, the ripple of abuse could affect the woman's husband, children, parents, in-laws, work environment, and so on. Much like a virus spreading from person to person, abuse is hard to contain within immediate parameters encompassing the initial act.

Power in Unbalanced Long-Term Relationships

Be that as it may, power differentials of a consistent and relatively fixed manner do exist in many intimate systems. Furthermore, as an individual matures through living, the pendulum of power will fall more and more on his or her side of the boundary. In the previous section both the heightened responsibility and potential misapplications of power were articulated. In the following the positive aspects of power in an unbalanced relationship are discussed.

Well-used power generates a rich and protected interactive culture in which the less able can learn and grow. Effective parents are thus able to provide the protection, consistency, and safety necessary for the child to develop unencumbered by adultlike concerns and issues. Similarly, strong teachers take responsibility for the tutelage of the student, creating a milieu in which modeling and introjection of ideas and values can occur. Lastly, the able therapist creates a setting and atmosphere in which the patient can ultimately integrate more "negative" aspects of self that had previously been disowned and rejected.

Throughout this article, the heightened accountability that goes hand in hand with increased power has been highlighted. Unfortunately, as one's power increases, one has to give up the possibility of receiving ongoing maintenance within that

relationship. Thus, as one matures in more and more relationships, nurturance and substance are to be given rather than received.

Morris (1982) discusses this difference between what he terms a balanced versus a caregiving relationship. He points out that love, mutual regulation, and emotional safety characterize both. However, in a caregiving relationship the child is only expected to give cues as to its needs, whereas it is the caregiver's role to meet her or his needs elsewhere. Erickson (1950) in his theory of psychosexual development points out this aspect of generativity in which the adult is able to place the other first. Batson (1990), in a recent review of altruism (the ability to value and pursue another person's well-being as an ultimate goal), cites experimental research to support this characteristic in caring relationships.

If individuals are doomed to live in a world in which maturity means that they progressively give more and receive less sustenance, at least in their caretaking relationships, then pleasure within those relationships must be generated through other means. A cluster of values consisting of pride, artistry, philanthropy, universal connectedness, and humility serve as vehicles for satisfaction for the more powerful. The experience of pride in contributing to the development of another is one such value. For example, teaching a child to ride a bicycle and enjoying the child's excitement at his or her first solo excursion is an experience never to be forgotten.

A second form of pleasure is the artistic satisfaction connected to nurturing that is aesthetically correct within the context of the relationship. This includes the satisfaction of contributing to the growing autonomy of the other person. To be appropriately "caught," confronted and encountered, by a maturing patient is one of the bittersweet fruits of good therapy.

There is also a philanthropic aspect to support that is freely given. It involves the bestowal of a gift with no strings attached and with no need for acknowledgment. Thus the primary concern is the continuous well-being of the other.

Also, for many, along with the philanthropic aspect of nurturing, there emerges a far-reaching perspective concerning

relationships that transcends the immediate dyad. It takes the form of connectedness with "a higher power," whether family, society, world, or God. Further, it includes an understanding that the impact of any moment reaches forward into the future and backward into the past. To give of oneself for the betterment of others beyond one's immediate influence is the height of benevolent power well used.

Above all, if one is lucky, an increased sense of humility and ordinariness comes with increased personal power. Thus we come to accept the fact that, for better or worse, we are all fragile, imperfect creatures. To paraphrase Becker (1973), our minds can soar to the heavens, but at the end we are food for worms. Ironically, increased awareness provides a burden as well as a blessing, for the more one is capable, the more one has to carry not only his or her own weight, but the weight of others.

Power in Balanced Long-Term Relationships¹

In long-term intimate relationships where the power equilibrium ebbs and flows, individuals have the difficult task of interacting within a shifting flow of contexts. Both partners share in the creation and management of a system that supports the positive use of power in the service of intimate contact.

Power can be used positively within a balanced system in a variety of ways. When the long-term balance of power is endangered, one must have the awareness and capacity to empower the other. Foremost, the liveliness of the relationship must be valued over domination or manipulation for individual gain. The environmental texture must be constantly manipulated so as to protect and enhance the couple system.

To use power wisely one must be wary of winning or of "being right," yet still be willing to stand behind beliefs and convictions. Using power positively implies a willingness to put one's pride on the line in the service of the relationship. Further, when conflict occurs, the individual must have the ability to favor contact over withdrawal in dealing with interactional injuries. Thus hurt must be viewed as a by-product of intimacy—painful yes, but completely avoidable, never.

Powerful individuals in a mature system know how to move between provocative and evocative stances. They are able to make power shifts gracefully and with awareness. They know when to move toward the other with intention and focused energy and when to give ground. To be willing to be dependent, to surrender, allows the other to serve as a model, guide, consultant, nurturer, and resource. On the other hand, in a mature system individuals know when to support their own autonomy by using energy to nourish their own creative process.

In a balanced long-term relationship both individuals carry within them the experience of the other as a choosing person separate from themselves. They each can stand alone, and each respects the capacity of choice in the other (McMahon, 1982).

Further, both are willing to risk revealing their innermost styles and characteristics. Also, individuals are capable of regressing and of welcoming regression of the other. These slips into unintegrated primitive structures of the past are viewed by both as spontaneous opportunities for deep-seated learning and connectedness.

The powerful individual displays an ability to lend energy to potential transactions. This commitment to the enhancement of common pleasure is not limited to contact but to each phase of the entire interactive cycle of experience. Thus in a system with shared power it is not just figures but ultimately the ground that becomes available to the other. Each has the capacity to create and supply a supportive structure in which the other might grow. Competency is used not to cancel but to inspire vision and create meaning.

In a balanced relationship individuals know how to live within the life space of an impasse. They have the capacity to temporarily move away from another and turn toward themselves graciously, even when not satisfied. Upon turning back toward the other the interaction incorporates playfulness, humor, and philosophical humility. It is these qualities that soften resistances and foster reconnection and reconciliation.

The art of reconciliation is practiced in well-functioning long-term relationships. One needs to know not only when to

move forward and when to move backward, but when to give up autonomy, experience dependency, and stretch one's sense of responsibility to include far-removed others. To risk interacting with someone who has injured you requires not only courage but a wide range of skills. Well-schooled intimate systems have developed interactive structures designed to support reconciliation.

Lastly, members of long-term intimate relationships have learned to manage hurt well. Hurt, the experience of having one's boundaries stretched or broken, is a necessary component of relationship. An extreme avoidance of hurt leads to confluence and stagnation. A lack of respect for the short- and long-term consequences of hurt can result in sadism and ruptured relationship. When hurtful words or actions must occur, the initiator must be committed to remaining in contact and to not turning away. For the hallmark of a long-term intimate relationship is the willingness to bear fully the impact of one's behavior on the other.

Closing Comments

Our discussion of intimacy suggests a radical change in how we view the mature individual. For our society was built on the autonomy of the individual, and on the belief that self-support is the hallmark of maturity and high-level functioning in the world. We instead believe that the responsibility for one's actions in the world does not stop at the contact boundary between the self and the immediate other. Instead, the concept of the boundary must be extended not only to other individuals, family, community, and the world, but forward and backward in time. We must honor not only our grandchildren but also our grandparents.

We also differ with the traditional American perspective that values independence as the highest ideal. Instead, we advocate embracing dependence as a value to be acknowledged and moved toward. Intimacy includes the willingness to give up autonomy, experience neediness, and stretch one's sense of responsibility to include far-removed others.

What of maturity as self-support? Independence and self-support are necessary when no "intimate other" exists for dependence and support. However, dependence and awareness of the other are necessary for relatedness when an "intimate other" is available. For in a true intimate relationship, both individuals have the capacity to aesthetically blend the poles of the autonomy-dependency continuum.

Note

1. We would like to thank Joseph Zinker for his contribution to this section.

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