INTIMACY, INTENTIONAL METACOMMUNICATION AND SECOND ORDER CHANGE

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Recently, social psychologists have begun to devote considerable attention to defining intimacy and enumerating the characteristics of intimate relationships. In this paper, we argue that theorists have ignored the insights of family therapists such as Bateson (1972), Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), Satir (1976), and Watzlawick and Weakland (1977), and that this is a mistake because: The family therapy approach provides some unique insights into the nature of intimacy; existing case material adds a richness to descriptions of intimate relations; and the system's framework gives us a useful analytic tool for analyzing social encounters. We provide some examples of how systems theorists would look at intimacy, supplement our theoretical analysis with cases material, and present some concluding comments.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, theorists have begun to devote considerable attention to defining intimacy and enumerating the characteristics of intimate relationships. For example, in their recent review of theory and research on intimate relations, Walster and Walster (1978) reported a number of definitions of intimacy; they finally settled on one:

> Intimacy: A relationship between loving people whose lives are deeply entwined. (p. 9)

Hatfield (1979) argues that intimate relations are generally marked by seven characteristics:

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1) Intensity of feelings
2) Depth and breadth of information exchange
3) Length of relationship
4) Value of resources exchanged
5) Variety of resources exchanged
6) Interchangability of resources
7) The unit of anlaysis: from "you" and "me" to "we"

Theorists who are interested in intimacy have ignored the insights of family therapists such as Bateson (1972), Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), Sager (1976) and Watzlawick and Weakland (1977). This is a mistake. The family therapy approach provides some unique insights into the nature of intimacy: Existing case material adds richness to descriptions of intimate interactions; and the systems framework gives us a useful analytic tool for analyzing social encounters.

THE NATURE OF INTIMACY

The systems theory approach can add greatly to our understanding of intimacy. Following are some examples:

Definition of Intimacy

Walster and Walster (1978) have defined intimacy as a static state. We would argue that intimacy is better conceived of in process terms. For example, Perlmutter (1978) proposes the following definition of intimacy:

> A process in which a dyad—via ideation, sensation, affect, and behavior —attempts to move toward more complete communication, on all levels of the communicational transaction.

Characteristics of Intimacy

According to traditional social psychologists, the most profound way in which intimate/nonintimate relationships differ is in the depth and breadth of information exchange. For example, Walster et al. (1978) assume that people are multifaceted, complex and inconsistent. In casual encounters, acquaintances reveal only limited, stereotyped information about themselves. Bankers pretend to be solid, responsible citizens when they're dealing with their clients. Children pretend that they are scholars when talking to their teachers. Thus, in casual relations, individuals reveal only the sketchiest information about themselves . . . and possess only the sketchiest information about their acquaintances.

Intimate relations are quite different. In intimate relationships people feel free to expose more facets of themselves. As a consequence, intimates share profound information about one another's histories, values, strengths and weaknesses, idiosyncracies, hopes and fears.

Recently, Altman and Taylor (1973) reviewed the voluminous self-disclosure research. They concluded that, with few exceptions, as intimacy grows, "interpersonal exchange gradually progresses from superficial, nonintimate areas to more intimate, deeper layers of the selves of the social actors" (p. 6). The more intimate people are, the more information they are willing to reveal and the more they expect their intimates to reveal to them (see Altman and Taylor, 1973; Huesmann

and Levinger, 1976; Jourard, 1964; Worthy et al., 1969). Essentially, then, in intimate relations people risk more, disclosing more of themselves and exploring more of their partner.

These rather vague concepts can be easily operationalized in systems terms. For example, Perlmutter (1978) has argued that "intimate relations" are those which are marked by *intentional metacommunication* and *the possibility of second order change.*

The First Characteristic of Intimacy—Intentional Metacommunication. When intimates communicate, they engage on two levels simultaneously—via linear communication and via metamessages.

1) *Linear communication.* Family members communicate a series of literal messages by word and gesture. For example, a portion of the information contained in the greeting "good morning" is strictly denotative. It could be conveyed as well by a recorded telephone message or a computer printout.

2) *Metamessages.* Bateson (1955) argues that in every communication people devote a few neurons to the question: "What does this statement say about our relationship?" A metacommunication (or a command) accompanies every linear message. Consciously or unconsciously, by means of paralinguistic and kinesic signals—which include changes of facial expression, hesitations, shifts in tempo of speech or movement, overtones of the voice, irregularities of respiration, etc—people prescribe and proscribe the limits of their relationships.

(a) *Process metacommunication.* Generally, family members do not consciously monitor their metacommunications. Perlmutter (1978) has labeled such unconscious communications "process metacommunications"—communications that are part of the norm setting process of ordinary communicational transactions.

(b) *Intentional metacommunication.* Sometimes, however, family members transcend the ordinary communication process. Instead of consciously communicating at the literal level plus unconsciously metacommunicating (engaging in process-metacommunication), they begin to metacommunicate intentionally. For example, a lover may observe: "Your tone was a little sharp there. Were you trying to tell me something?" In such instances, family members begin to talk consciously about the relational context of their messages;* the metamessage becomes the literal message. Perlmutter (1978) argues that intentional metacommunications are the *sine qua non* of intimate relations. An intimate moment occurs when the ordinary rules of human interactions are suspended, and people begin to talk about their own and their partner's thoughts, feelings, sensations and acts; these become primary. The literal content of a message—which is usually paramount—is relegated to a position of unimportance.

The Second Characteristic of Intimacy—Second Order Change. Watzlawick et al. (1974) argue that there are two kinds of change—first order change and second order change. In first order change, participants employ strategies and tactics which are designed to maintain the status quo: *Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.*

Second order change is truly ruleless. In second order change, participants spontaneously employ heretofore unknown strategies and tactics. Since the initiation of second order change is an impulsive and novel process, its outcome cannot be known until the change is accomplished. Perlmutter argues that intimacy occurs in

* For purposes of illustration, we have written as if intentional metacommunication always occurs via clear, precise sentences. Of course, this is not so. The withering look, which lovers use to indicate that they have detected "that tone" again is just as effective as a verbal message in conveying a message.

the context of impending or realized second order change. First order interaction, and the interaction rituals which maintain the system, are suspended, and participants step into an exciting/terrifying unknown.

A CASE HISTORY OF INTIMACY/NONINTIMACY— DEATH AND DYING

This case history is designed to illustrate the critical importance in intimacy of intentional metacommunication and second-order change.

Ellen was a 30-year-old single, professional woman. She and her former husband were patients of Perlmutter and cotherapist, Dr. Constance B. Ahrons. Their brief marriage ended in a divorce that was satisfactory to both partners. They had no children.

In 1975, Ellen was diagnosed as having a form of leukemia that would respond to chemotherapy; after the original diagnosis, her symptoms remained in remission for two and a half years. In 1977 it became clear that the disease had progressed and in mid-1978 it was diagnosed as terminal. Chemotherapy and radiation therapy were prescribed. Ellen chose to terminate all treatment. Her conscious decision was that, since the quality of her life was rapidly deteriorating and since treatment offered no hope, a life of pain and hopelessness was totally undesirable.

Ellen returned home in the fall of 1978 to set up her adjustable bed in a room which afforded her a lovely view of the out-of-doors. She surrounded herself with those who deeply cared for her and were willing to be present during the final stages of her illness and, finally, her death. It was a form of celebration.

Ellen lay on her deathbed for 10 days while the immediate family—mother and father (divorced, approximately 15 years ago), three brothers and a sister—and close friends milled about the rest of the house. Some semblance of routine was established with regard to meal preparation and household maintenance. The majority of the time was spent, by all members of the group, in attending to Ellen's needs and wants. Perlmutter and Ahrons were there as friends, but soon realized that the family and friends needed them more as therapists.

As Ellen's death approached, the participants shared moments of profound intimacy and deliberate avoidance of intimacy; there were times of unusual accord and explosive hostility. Ahrons (1980) has argued that after a divorce, most families eventually evolve a binuclear family system. The parents set up separate households, with separate rules, and with rules for how the binuclear families will mesh with one another. Ellen's parents had never worked out such a relationship. Ellen's mother remained shocked by the divorce experience. She and the children were tightly linked, and they all remained profoundly separated from her former husband. Ellen's father, too, remained equally distant from his former wife.

Since Ellen and her father had had no relationship since the divorce 15 years ago, it was virtually impossible for Ellen and her father to share the current realities of her life. The father was quite rigid in his moral and religious convictions. Ellen's impending death and her personal choices about it were foreign and upsetting to him. His abandonment guilt caused him to focus all his attention on his daughter, in an attempt to gain her forgiveness and help him expiate his guilt.

The father and mother's encounters were a study in nonintimacy by design. Many couples who hate one another are intensely intimate. They metacommunicate freely about their relationship "Don't you look at me like that," they hiss. Their relationship may teeter on the brink of second order change. But this couple studiously avoided intimacy. They didn't talk, didn't look at one another. They communicated their angry feelings by word and gesture and to everyone else—anyone who would

listen—but carefully avoided any intentional metacommunication with one another. Some examples: The mother complained to Perlmutter that her husband was monopolizing Ellen. When he suggested that she tell her husband how she felt, she observed bitterly that she could never talk to him. "He'd hit me." "But that is unlikely here, in this place." Nonetheless she was adamant. "I don't want to get that close." The father was equally adamant. When Perlmutter suggested that his vigil must be exhausting; couldn't he allow his wife to spell him, the father observed that he had never confided in his wife. "I don't want her to know that much about me."

With Ellen it was a different story: The mother struggled to intensify their long-standing intimacy; the father struggled to reestablish an intimate relationship with her. For example, in one encounter, Ellen's mother broke down sobbing. Ellen consoled her: "Don't be so upset. *I'm* not." Her mother demurred. "I'm not upset for you; I'm upset for me." Then they discussed the experience of confronting death. Again, Ellen consoled her mother: "You've been a good mother. Think what a good job you had to have done in order to raise a daughter as capable as I am." It was a touching and deeply intimate moment.

A CONCLUDING NOTE: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM THIS CASE?

What has this case to tell us about the relationship between intimacy, intentional metacommunication, second order change and death?

On Intentional Metacommunication

Of course, one can successfully avoid an intimate breakthrough when confronting death. If parents, friends and colleagues carefully limit their transactions with the dying person (and with one another) to the level of literal messages and process metacommunication (as the father and mother did in their interactions) there will be no intimacy. People may sense a "bond" or "affinity" with the dying and with those sharing the death, but this bond is something less than intimacy. It is only when participants risk intentional metacommunication (as with Ellen and her mother) that a relationship can progress to a deeper level.

On Second-Order Change

Similarly, one can avoid intimacy by approaching death in a ritual way, by refusing to risk second order change. Religious and other social institutions attempt to provide a framework for how death ought to proceed. They attempt to specify what its structural outcomes should be. [An interesting and alarmingly paradoxical situation may be brought about by the fact that these social institutions are now being buttressed by death technology (e.g., grief counseling, hostels, etc.). This technology may actually militate against intimacy, by making the death experience occur in the context of interacting ritual. As long as everyone's interactions remain on a polite, stereotyped, predictable level, the dying and bereaved can successfully avoid intimacy.]

Yet, when people confront death, the possibility of intimacy—of second order change—always exists. In fact, there can be no "rules" for the process of death. Nor can one know what the final structure might be. Death remains the ultimate second order change. In this case, it was when participants were willing to violate

rules—to risk second order change—(to refuse to deal "reverently" with death, to talk about sex, to make morbid jokes, to talk about one's own problems) that their encounters became the most deeply intimate.

A Paradox: Avoiding Terror by Confronting It

The preceding speculations lead us to a paradoxical conclusion:

On one hand, people have every reason not to risk real intimacy—not to intentionally metacommunicate, not to risk second order change—when dealing with death. It is difficult, under the best of circumstances, to intentionally metacommunicate. To intentionally metacommunicate about death is even harder. In the face of a profound unknown, observers are faced with the inordinate difficulty of stating the parameters, dimensions and characteristics of that which terrifies them the most —a totally ruleless state. This fear is expressed in the tautology "I am afraid of that which I am afraid" and, additionally, "I am terrified of the terror I experience."

On the other hand, at the meta/meta level, we are suggesting that people have every reason to risk intimacy in just these circumstances. Only by becoming intimate with another, only by risking intentional metacommunication and second order change, only by confronting death, does one gain any possibility of ameliorating one's terror. By the very act of engaging in intentional metacommunication, one gains a structure for dealing with transactions about death. At best, when people risk an intimate exchange, they have a chance to find out that their feelings are shared, permissible. Of course, at worst: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."* In risking intentional metacommunication and second-order change, then, one is risking everything.

In essence, therefore, we seem to be suggesting that one is damned if one risks intimacy and, paradoxically, one is damned if one does not. What then are the choices? One clear choice is to risk intentional metacommunication and the possibility of second order change within the metacontext of the expectation of emergence. That is, if people choose to initiate the process of intentional metacommunication, confident that an unknown relational form will emerge, they will have provided one another with a meta/meta structure which will be comprehensible and completed as new relational forms emerge.

The Final Resolution: No Resolution Is Possible

No transactional metastructure can account for all communicational interactions. Thus, it must be understood that, if an intimate relationship is to remain intimate, each time a serious issue arises at the literal level one must invoke an intentional metacommunication and face the prospect of second order change.

* Yeats, W. B. "The Second Coming."

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