

# Developing Restorative Relationship Therapy: towards working safely with couples where there is abuse

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## Abstract

This article describes the journey of a counselling agency in its attempt to develop a safer form of working with couples where there is abuse; a “couple counselling in safe mode”. Within an object relations and attachment based perspective, we sought to work therapeutically and systemically, with the “relationship as client”, rather than being perpetrator focused. This was achieved without reducing our commitment to the well-being of the “identified abused”. Restorative and invitational practices were utilised, drawing on the work of Allan Jenkins (1990, 2009). Part of this approach involved working with “shame without shaming”. Using colleagues engaged in the work as a focus group, we developed a reflexive praxis. This led to practice modifications in our approach to confidentiality, supervision, group supervision, and risk assessment. In terms of technique, we introduced co-working dyads of therapists for each relationship, each partner being assigned their own therapist. We also adopted “time out training” as a way of managing tensions in the couple. A four-way session was inserted after every three sessions of individual work with each partner, borrowing a “Reflecting Team” format from family therapy. We argue that we have developed a safe and effective precursor to mainstream relationship counselling for couple relationships where there was mild to moderate abuse and have termed this Restorative Relationship Therapy (RRT).

*Keywords:* domestic abuse, restorative practice, relationship counselling, object relations, professional danger, risk assessment, masculinity, shame without shaming, praxis, Restorative Relationship Therapy.

## INTRODUCTION

This article describes a journey followed by a counselling agency, *Bright Light*, and some of its counsellors. Its goal was to develop a form of “couple counselling in safe mode” as a contribution towards reducing domestic abuse. In particular, we sought to find a way of working with couples, as couples, exploring the dynamic in their relationship in order to reduce abuse and increase the choices available to individual partners. This account also enables us to share some of the technical innovations that emerged.

## MIKE AND JANET

*Identifying features of this case have been disguised while the key psychodynamic aspects of their relationship remain real.*

Janet initially sought individual counselling, presenting suicidal ideation and thoughts of self-harm after arguments with Mike whom she was considering leaving. Janet's father was violent and psychologically abusive. Her mother had left him and was in a committed relationship with Janet's step-father by the time she was four years old. Her mother was verbally intimidating and implied that you control men by sexual and emotional manipulation. Janet hinted at her confident fifteen-year-old self as having been sexually assaulted and her confidence being damaged.

Mike's father was a long-distance lorry driver; consequently he was brought up mainly by his mother. She was frequently drunk, angry, physically abusive, and domineering. His father was distant, both literally and psychologically—when home, he spent most of his time with Mike's mother. He died after a protracted illness before Mike and his sister became teenagers. Mike was also bullied by his older sister. Hence, the women in his early life were domineering, violent, and at times cruel. Loving them was risky and even torturous.

Mike and Janet met in their mid-twenties. They argued frequently about his drinking, but Janet feared if she gave him an ultimatum he might leave. She acknowledges that she hates confrontation and cannot finish relationships. She says that she is "attention-seeking", but she does not get attention from Mike. Some of her anger and resentment seem to result from not being made to feel special.

In this relationship, there is mutual physical abuse and high intensity verbal conflict. He damages her personal property. He connected through sex and at the same time kept an emotional distance by demeaning and objectifying his partner. At his suggestion, they engage in "threesomes" with both women and men. When she began to enjoy the threesomes with men, he felt ashamed and disgusted, and projected these feelings onto her. Thus a highly sexualised form of relating dominated as long as Mike was in control. He rarely, if ever, allowed intimate vulnerability; it was too threatening.

### *Working with couples where there is domestic abuse and violence*

The "Bright Light" counselling agency (hereafter, "the agency") perceives domestic abuse, or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), as a relational phenomenon. It holds that domestic abuse is a socially learned way—as opposed to an "expression of natural givens" (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 346)—of managing anxiety in relationships and hence it can be unlearned.

An important, ethical, and clinical practice challenge came from research that showed that where there is abuse in a relationship couple, counselling can be dangerous for the abused (Stith et al., 2011). There have been a number of incidents in the English-speaking world where violence, including homicide, had ensued after a couple counselling session.

Nevertheless, there are other perspectives:

The decision to work with a couple relationship marked by violence is very contentious. There has been little appetite for trying to understand violence in the context of the dynamic of a relationship, due to the dominance of the paradigm of

the victim–perpetrator model of violence. It holds that violent relationships are those in which one person (usually the man) does something to the partner. As Clulow argues, “to explore domestic violence as a relational phenomenon is a potentially hazardous business, it can be misread as colluding with or detracting from what should be condemned as intolerable behaviour” (Clulow, 2001, p. 138). (Humphries & McCann, 2015, p. 149)

Our view is that in intimate relationships, “violence may be ‘explainable’, but it is not excusable, and it may or may not be forgivable. That is up to the victim” (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 344).

Abusive relationship dynamics often become apparent only after therapy has begun. To end therapy abruptly as a result can cause blame and hence danger for the abused. Faced with couples seeking our help to deal with abuse within their relationship, what were we to do?

*Our initial attempt to work with intimate partner violence: does one size fit all?*

Prior to 2008, in order to avoid working unsafely with clients, the agency had refused counselling to couples presenting with abusive traits. This cautious approach is understandable in response to severe and life-threatening violence, but this “one size fits all” approach prevents those couples, who genuinely want to understand why their relationship dynamic leads to abuse, from accessing relationship counselling. Further, a number of authors maintain that an individualistic, non-relational perception of domestic abuse offers an inadequate understanding of its dynamics, and so is less likely to ameliorate it (Humphries & McCann, 2015, p. 152).

In 2008, we made a concerted attempt to develop a “couple counselling in safe mode”. This work became known in the agency as Restorative Practice (RP), acknowledging the influence of the Australian theoretician Alan Jenkins (1990, 2009). The initial approach was lifted wholesale from Jenkins’ work with court-mandated, male perpetrators of abuse.

Reviewing our earlier attempts to work with intimate partner violence, the first author, and others highlighted a number of failings:

- 1) Therapy vs social control: an overarching critique was that the project was a form of social control rather than therapeutic in nature. The team did not deny that there was need for social change, for the involvement of the police and the courts, nor indeed that there was a need for social control. Nevertheless, the team felt a need to find a methodology that remained true to the agency’s culture of working with relationships. They wanted to be able to address the relationship in the room.
- 2) The initial RP work at the agency was aimed at individual members of a couple each working with a different and separate counsellor. Confidentiality had been viewed as for individual work, that is, counsellors working with individual members of a couple had been unable to consult and confer with one another
- 3) Thus, co-working was underdeveloped and safety was, to a degree, undermined by this, due to minimisation of abuse by the identified abuser.

- 4) The focus was on the individual client and that on the relationship was underplayed, despite identifying the relationship as key.
- 5) Specialist supervision was not available. We lacked a safe “holding environment” for counsellors.
- 6) Risk assessment and risk management were experienced as insufficiently robust and neither couples nor counsellors seemed effectively held by the organisation. This led counsellors involved to consider it as unhealthy for them, non-therapeutic, and unsafe.

In 2010, we were confronted with a practice that was broken and so focused on its repair before all else.

### *Developing our theoretical and practice framework*

The authors reviewed these insights and worked on practice protocols. We reviewed and developed the original training programme with the aim of incorporating the issues outlined above to achieve best practice. We also returned to Jenkins’ study, *Restorative Practice* (Jenkins, 1990, 2009), from which we borrowed further ideas.

### *Becoming ethical: a parallel journey*

Jenkins calls on therapists to embark on a parallel journey alongside their clients to discover their own ethical attitudes to abuse, own their own “shadow side”, and so develop their congruence, transparency, and accountability to the client and the process.

We embraced this because we had found that in some approaches to domestic violence, “The naming and interpretation of violence becomes privileged over the discovery of a sense of agency or the capacity to actualise ethical interests that might point towards respectful modes of existence” (Jenkins, 2009, p. xi).

Further, “Concepts of *becoming* place an emphasis on fluidity, transition and moving towards certain modes of existence, whereas states of *being* suggest fixed or stable forms of identity” (Jenkins, 2009, p. x) (italics in original).

However, the possibilities inherent in the concept of *becoming* include the hope for a positive response from perpetrators to invitations to change, to discover ethical ways of living and relating, and to change in and through relating.

We also had initially adopted an uncritical, radical, feminist perspective. However, our experience was that when we blame men for being men, their response is frequently one of a defensive anger. Consequently, we adopted another thread in Jenkins’ (1990) work: inviting abusive men to embrace a responsible, ethical masculinity.

We attempted to frame the concept of abuse within relationships in a cultural context that included the social development of masculinity and femininity, including the concepts hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity.

Hyper-masculinity is an emphatic form of masculinity based on traditional heteronormative patriarchy. It legitimises violence and the subordination of both women and children (Bowker, 1998).

We prefer this understanding of male violence because, otherwise, we are forced to accept that men are just naturally violent and unchangeable. So our work can be understood, in part, as deconstructing the dominant narrative of heterosexual masculinity. In this, we echo the stance of Goldner and colleagues who write that:

Relationships in which women are abused are not unique but, rather, exemplify in extremis the stereotypical gender arrangements that structure intimacy between men and women generally ... We tried to get beyond the reductionist view of men as simply abusing their power, and of women as colluding in their own victimisation by not leaving. This description casts men as tyrants and women as masochists, which deprives both of their humanity while simultaneously capturing a piece of the truth. (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 343)

### *An object relations approach*

In addition to the influence of Jenkins, our understanding of what goes on in couple relationships is informed by a British object relations framework. As relationship counsellors, our "client" is the relationship, and a major part of the work is exploring how each individual member of a couple has been shaped by their relationship history and how this has shaped each partners "internal couple" (Morgan & Freedman, 2009, p. 187).

Further, we make use of the concept of the "internal creative couple" (Morgan, 2005):

This concept includes the capacity for mature sexual relating. It also includes, as Britton (1989) points out, the capacity to observe and tolerate others in a relationship from which we are excluded ... disturbed internal couples give rise to disordered, and maybe even perverse, intimate relationships. (Morgan & Freedman, 2009, p. 187)

The presence of a disturbed internal couple was suggested by Mike's behaviour. He was possessive and demanding of Janet, obsessively checking her texts and phone calls. Further evidence of this disturbed internal couple lay in Mike's response to her growing autonomy associated with her individual therapy. He was clearly obsessed with his wife's counsellor, fantasising about the work and anxious that they engage in couple therapy. In the four-way sessions, he was confrontational and resisted the idea of them working separately with individual counsellors. In his individual sessions, his wife's sessions with her counsellor were never far from his mind. He was jealous and angry at his "exclusion".

We hope to increase clients' awareness of how their habits and expectations in relationship, both conscious and unconscious, play out psychodynamically in their primary relationships. This, in turn, allows different "ethical" choices to emerge.

One of our assumptions is that abusive partners struggle to “contain” their emotions and so act them out in a sometimes abusive manner. Therefore, part of our work is to gain a sense of their experience of emotional “holding” and “containment” (Ogden, 2004).

*Working with shame without shaming*

Much domestic abuse is driven by the abuser’s shame. Shame arises from the abuser’s narcissistic wounds. Relating becomes defensive, exhibitionist or controlling:

Shame is intimately associated with wounded narcissism, since it is the emotion experienced when we are exposed as not being all that we wish to portray ourselves as being. It can act as a prompt for personal reassessment, or it can intensify the struggle to ward off alien and threatening images that are experienced as being imposed by others. (Clulow, 2001, p. 147)

We became interested in Jenkins’ idea of working with “shame without shaming” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 62). When we feel ashamed we want to remove ourselves from the situation, to hide our shame. Being trapped in a shaming situation increases agitation and the possibility of abuse, and on escape, we seek to avoid re-experiencing these feelings. Because of this, shame can be difficult to work with therapeutically:

Our major responsibility in invitational practice is to help reposition experiences of shame from a *disabling* sense to one that feels *enabling* towards a respectful and ethical journey with an enhanced sense of integrity. (Jenkins, 2009, pp. 62–63; italics in original)

Jenkins draws on the Narrative Therapy concept of “externalisation” which enables clients to distinguish “between ideas and practices which have external origins, traditions and histories” and the clients “own ethical strivings and preferences” (Jenkins, 2009, p. 77; White, 2007). If they can soften their inner critic, then they can begin to stop agreeing with other peoples’ actual or imagined, negative evaluation of them. We talk about “opening windows on shame” to let in the light and air of reflection.

The identified abuser is invited and encouraged to understand and externalise their blueprint for relating, as, for example, that they are never good enough, or that men are tough, unemotional providers, or that women should never express their needs directly, but act in a seductive or manipulative manner. This blueprint is then explored in terms of how its aspects help or hinder making relationships and other wider social goals, such as to have a loving stable home life, or to be a good parent. In our work with Mike we explored his early male role models and his beliefs about being a husband, a father, and a “man”.

We also bear in mind the shame experienced by couples as they negotiate the territory between autonomy and relatedness in intimate relationships. This includes the fear of becoming infantilised and of losing oneself in sex.

Perhaps Mike and Janet entered into a “perversion” of their sexual relationship, as when they engaged in various threesomes, because they were defending against being swallowed up by intimacy and of losing self-identity and autonomy. “Perversion” is referred to here, in a technical, rather than a pejorative sense, to describe a way of managing intimacy: “Violent ‘games’ have a purpose, and that purpose is to defend against fearfulness associated with intimacy in their marital attachment” (Clulow, 2001, p. 134).

### *The development and provision of training*

These insights were incorporated into a new training programme, from which emerged a cohort of eight female counsellors willing to work with couples where a medium level of risk of abuse had been identified. At this point, we were very aware that we did not have a complete theory; we were trying to develop a praxis, an ongoing theoretical reflection on the experiences of the team. We wanted counsellors to feel confident that they had a road map that supported their practice and following consultation, we made the following changes:

- 1) The individual counsellors were paired; each worked weekly with one individual member of the couple, and communicated between sessions on a weekly basis.
- 2) The approach to confidentiality was modified by keeping it between the paired counsellors, thereby managing denial or minimisation of abuse and monitoring risk.
- 3) We offered case supervision every four sessions, facilitating a more in-depth discussion on the case and its risks.
- 4) The system of risk assessment and management was made more robust. In consulting with other agencies working with domestic abuse, we had been warned about, and sensitised to, the risk of “professional dangerousness”. By this, we mean that we are being presented with clients exhibiting such escalated attachment behaviours which are so entrenched and so potentially dangerous that conventional couple work is precluded. The litmus test appeared to be: do we judge the identified abuser to be capable of empathy for their partner and of tolerating another mind?
- 5) We developed the first session as a four-way session involving the couple and both counsellors (see description below). This was part of reclaiming our relationship focus where we were able to play to our strengths as relationship counsellors.

### *Risk assessment*

Humphries and McCann (2015) note that:

Kelly and Johnson (2008), distinguish between four types of intimate partner violence: coercive controlling violence, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and separation instigated violence. “Violent resistance” is seen largely

as carried out in self-defence by a partner (usually female) who, having been a victim of coercive controlling violence, reacts with violence of their own. "Separation instigated violence" is triggered by separation, usually without any prior history of violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008, p. 478). (Humphries & McCann, 2015, p. 150)

Humphries and McCann focus on:

... the distinction drawn between "coercive controlling" and "situational couple violence". The former is defined as "emotionally abusive intimidation, coercion, and control coupled with physical violence used against partners" (Kelly & Johnson, 2008, p. 478), and is predominantly male violence against women. One partner abusively controls the other through threats of harm or physical harm and fear. Violence occurs more frequently and severely than in the other three categories, but it is the presence of other controlling behaviours that most distinguishes it. (Humphries & McCann, 2015, p. 150)

Like the above authors, we think it is important to help the couple and ourselves understand the interpersonal dynamics that lead to violence and so potentiate more effective ways of managing personal and interpersonal issues.

Our experience is that where the issue is one of "violent resistance", the resistor may be the one initially identified as the abuser, and indeed may be the one who suggests couple counselling. It is often only during the work that the nature and direction of the abuse is revealed.

When the agency's intake procedures, or ongoing couple work, reveal that a relationship includes certain abusive practices or styles of relating, the couple are given a Domestic Abuse Risk Assessment (DARA) interview. This risk assessment interview is based on the work of Bograd and Mederos (1999). Their seminal paper shifts the focus from criminal profiling (which does not match abusive intimate partner profiles (Bograd & Mederos, 1999)) to behavioural patterns.

Prior to their seminal work, there was little clarity around risk assessment. Central to their couple assessment is a commitment to the reduction of risk and the optimisation of safety. We shared this commitment. Further, this approach has enabled our couple counsellors to do what they do best, work with highly distressed relationships.

### *Assessing freedom of expression and engagement*

Where domestic violence and abuse are present, it is important to assess how free each partner is to express their true feelings regarding their relationship, without fear of retaliation. Our approach is informed by the contradiction noted by Goldner and colleagues that in some cases:

If the woman were to act as if she were equal, expressing her opinions and emotions freely, she would put herself in danger after the session. If she protects herself and the fragile relationship that she, for whatever reasons, wishes to maintain, the therapy is inauthentic. (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 344)

One of the things that we noticed with our work with Mike and Janet was that, while in her individual sessions Janet presented as a chatty, bright, mature mother of three children, in the four-way meetings, with Mike present, she became silenced and child-like, rarely communicating directly with the counsellors.

Thus in line with Kelly and Johnson (2008), and Humphries and McCann (2015), we are attempting to gain a sense of whether the abuse is of a coercive controlling nature, or whether it is better characterised as “situational couple violence”. The identified abuser’s motivation is also assessed.

The assessment undertaken with Mike and Janet highlighted a number of risks, in particular, sexual coercion, property violence, and emotional neglect of the children and their physical punishment. Because of these risks, Janet and Mike were informed that the agency was unable to offer relationship counselling. We could only offer Restorative Practice.

### *Working with the identified abused*

We explored with Janet whether her desired outcome was an eventual safe separation or the eventual safe continuation of the relationship. Janet was supported in nurturing her resilience. This included a “history taking” by the counsellor and getting a sense of Janet’s internal world and its objects.

We wondered if she had an internalised “vicious” father figure whom she must placate and appease based on her biological father, and if she had another internalised father figure based on her step-father whom she must seduce. Janet had a strong internalised “inner critic” telling her she was bad, what has been described as a “moral defence” (Fairbairn, 1952). When things got difficult she easily blamed herself, something that Mike seemed to recognise and use against her. She is attracted to “bad boys” like her father whom she seeks to rescue. She herself needs to be attended to, but finds this difficult to accept. We saw glimpses of an internalised mother (or little girl?) who cannot express her needs in a relationship.

An aspect that she relates to is her fifteen-year-old self who is seeking greater self-expression and mature love. Her nineteen-year-old self fears abandonment and is desperate for attention. This plays out in the mixed messages she gives Mike around her sexual needs. Mike automatically sexualises his perception of her need for affection and emotional support, presumably as a way of managing the emotional distance between them. Janet’s internal benchmarks as to what behaviours were acceptable from Mike were explored and reflected back to her with interpretations around possible links to her personal narrative. Emphasis was given to nurturing self-esteem and self-confidence. A lot of effort was focused on developing Janet’s sense of agency, realising her autonomy and self-determination. She was also given information about her rights and statutory and non-statutory organisations in the area which might also help. Planning for safety is an essential element in the process of supporting conflicted couples.

*Working with the identified abuser*

In addition to seeking to understand each partner's attachment history and how these may play out "dynamically" within their relationship (as we go on to explore), we also sought to understand and explore Mike's principal influences in constructing gender relationships, roles, and power dynamics.

We surmised that Mike had an internalised violent mother from whom he must remain distant and control. He protected her if other people make criticisms, which suggests the existence of an internalised "good" mother object. He appeared to have no easily accessible internalised "good" male object. He feared that the current changes in Janet heralded her becoming an adult woman whom he will not be able to control and that frightened him. He objectified women, relating to Janet through sexual perversion as a part-object as a way of controlling a feared object. It also appeared that his children did not exist for him as he was a very neglectful father. Mike both idealised and hated Janet, fearing that she would leave him. He could not take responsibility for doing anything wrong and seemed unable to experience himself as a "bad object" (Fairbairn, 1952) for fear of being punished. He took no responsibility for suggesting and organising the threesomes.

*The struggle around intimacy*

As a couple Mike and Janet struggled with intimacy, and sex became a feature of the power struggle between them. For him, sex had to be distancing and humiliating for the woman. It expressed his control. For her, sex was also a form of control and of meeting her need for attention. She was willing to accept humiliating, demeaning sex to gain his attention, but another part of her recognised that there was in fact no true closeness or love in their relationship. Part of her felt anger at the hurt and abandonment. Sometimes she hated him.

It is important to note that in the work both counsellors have experienced their clients' very powerful sexualised, countertransference responses to them as individuals. For example, in their first session, Janet's counsellor experienced wave after wave of sexual images, "like watching an internalised porn movie".

The focus of the work is on ending the abuse, but rather than focusing on the abuser in a blaming way, abuse is seen within a wider social context where it is pervasive (Jenkins, 2009). The work involves exploring the harm being done to their family. It means reviewing how the abuser perceives family and relational values and where these might come from, that is, often from attachment insecurities. It means understanding the impact of their concrete abusive behaviour on others and becoming accountable for this. It requires coming to a point where this harm is repudiated and real restorative change is begun. This work requires firm holding, true congruence, and a call for an ethical stance which is defined by each taking responsibility for their actions and for nurturing the relationship.

*Adult attachment and abuse*

One team member, working with a couple where there was abuse, reflected: "Attachment is a mammalian response to danger. He fears being dropped and abandoned. He hangs on for dear life and doesn't care where his claws go or the damage that they do."

Bartholomew and colleagues used the attachment perspective to explore the dynamics of relational abuse. They write:

Bowlby (1982) viewed interpersonal anger as arising from frustrated attachment needs and functioning as a form of protest directed at regaining or maintaining contact with the attachment figure. In adults, such protest is likely to be directed at romantic partners and can take the form of verbal abuse, control of a partner's behaviour and even violence. Such abusive behaviour is most likely to be precipitated by real or imagined threats of rejection, separation or abandonment by the partner. As Bowlby stated, "violence ... can be understood as the distorted and exaggerated versions of behaviour that is potentially functional" (1984, p. 12). (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 45)

In a series of four studies they explored the associations between four attachment patterns, namely; secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful and relational abuse.

They found that for both men and women, what they called:

... preoccupied attachment was quite consistently associated with both the perpetration of abuse in relationships and the receipt of abuse (or the inclination to return to an abusive relationship). For women, there were few consistent associations between fearfulness and abuse, although fearfulness was common in women who had left abusive relationships. In contrast, the degree of fearfulness was strongly associated for men with the perpetration and receipt of abuse in all studies but one. (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 56)

This may imply that as fearful men get caught between the avoidance of intimacy and separation anxiety, their behaviour could escalate into abuse. The above studies found that in women fearfulness was sometimes associated with the receipt of abuse, but never with perpetration (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 56).

Relating this to Janet and Mike, Mike always seemed to feel betrayed in relationships portraying himself as the victim, and he could react in a punishing way. Intimacy was desired and feared at the same time. His attachment style was clearly fearful with a propensity to avoidance, though flipping back and forward between avoidant and preoccupied as he became more desperate, what might be described as fearful dismissing attachment.

Bartholomew and colleagues declare themselves surprised at the degree of similarity they found in men and women's experience of abuse. This causes them to question the sufficiency of a simple patriarchal model of relationship abuse. They suggest that an attachment perspective does not necessarily lead to an expectation of gender differences in the underlying psychological mechanisms shaping abusive behaviour in relationships

(Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 56). They do however note that: "In mutually physically abusive relationships, women are more likely to suffer injury than men" (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 56).

They further identified three common pairings of attachment patterns consistent with our belief that abuse is relational (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 57):

- 1) Two preoccupied partners: "These couples are locked in highly volatile and conflictual relationships. Such relationships tend to be mutually abusive".
- 2) Combinations of fearful women with preoccupied men: "These couples show more unidirectional abuse from male to female, conforming to the common stereotype of the demanding and controlling abusive male and passive female victim attempting to accommodate to her partner to avert further violence".
- 3) Preoccupied females with fearful males: This pairing characterised "the most severely abusive relationships ... likely to show mutually abusive behaviour or higher rates of female abusiveness".

They conclude:

... to understand fully the development of abusive behaviour, it is necessary to consider both general attachment tendencies that individuals bring to their relationships and relationship specific patterns ... It is this complementary attachment dynamic of individuals within intimate relationships that we believe helps to keep couples locked in abusive relationships. (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 59)

### *Narcissism and the violent couple*

Clulow (2001) discusses the link between domestic violence and disorganised attachment. The term disorganised (or disorientated) attachment is derived from observing children undergoing the "strange situation test" (Main & Solomon, 1987) who, "... appeared to have no organised strategy for managing separation-reunion anxiety" (Clulow, 2001, p. 138).

This disorganised response to separation might arise, for example, where a child (like Mike) experiences repeated abuse/abandonment from their primary carer, who then becomes the anger-inducing and/or feared source of anxiety and simultaneously the safe haven sought in response to such anxiety.

Clulow transposes this dilemma into the adult marital situation and argues that there is strong evidence for a link between disorganised mental states and violent behaviour (Clulow, 2001, p. 139).

### *The holding environment is key to restorative practice*

One of our key learning and development points was the recognition of the importance of the agency holding one couple and two counsellors within, a Russian doll-like series of holding environments (Winnicott, 1964). In order to work as safely as possible, the way in which the couple is held by the

agency was modified. Although the two partners are seen separately, the counsellors' focus remains on the relationship. In fact, in the first session, both counsellors see both partners together.

*The first session*

The objective of this session is to take the mystery out of future individual sessions, especially to reduce the likelihood of individuals fantasising about their partner's sessions (as Mike did about Janet). The process is explained as clearly as possible. The counsellors model respectful co-operation and flexibility. They take it in turns to lead the process. They also continually check out with both clients whether they have understood the process and are in agreement with the programme.

During this session, the boundaries of the counselling relationship are clearly explained. The purpose of this "couple counselling in safe mode" is carefully described and the expectations of the couple are drawn out. The counsellors seek informed consent and active participation. They emphasise that the work is relationship-focused at all times. How confidentiality works in this setting is explained with counsellors sharing or not sharing information using the criterion: would sharing be beneficial to the relationship? It is also explained who is included in the circle of confidentiality (for example, paired counsellors, counselling practice manager, supervisors and members of the RP group). We describe the legal limits of confidentiality, paying particular attention to the context of domestic abuse and child protection.

Ongoing risk assessment and continuing risk management are explained as measuring the "temperature" of the relationship and that we aim to keep things "cool".

Each is asked to take responsibility for the well-being of the relationship and assume the task of maintaining a constructive attitude with the other. Most importantly they make a commitment not to be abusive or goading. They are asked what that would look like to each and they are then invited to make the commitment. Clients are educated about "time outs" based on Ripley and Robertson (2009) and are given a leaflet about it. The goal of time outs is to contribute to de-escalation including, in part, a commitment to re-engage safely with each other after an agreed period.

### **MIKE AND JANET IN RESTORATIVE PRACTICE**

At first, the therapy seemed slow, but on track. In the individual sessions, Janet identified a fifteen-year-old self who wanted more freedom and felt constrained by marriage and children. Another part (perhaps, nineteen years old?) felt that she would be lonely (abandoned?) and that she would be criticised by her family for not keeping her marriage together. She began to realise that, at times, Mike acted towards her as if she was his mother.

After three months, however, there was a huge fight involving physical pushing and pulling. Both seemed to feel frustrated at their experience of being stuck. It seemed they were caught in a cycle of him wanting to stay in

the relationship, but not being able to secure that, and part of her wanting to leave, but feeling unable to realise that dream. We explored this “blow up” in the individual work and in additional four-way sessions.

Janet felt that her personal power was growing and she felt hurt and humiliated by what had happened and angry that Mike did not look after her. She wanted love and affection, but was not sure if she wanted it from him.

Mike experienced separation anxiety, but also acknowledged his fear of intimacy. He grew to see the contradiction, at least rationally. This shift occurred mainly during an exploration of Mike’s ideas around masculinity. Mike got in touch with his experience of his paternal grandfather whom he remembered as a just man, speaking of him with tenderness and affection. He grew to see the injustice of his coercive demands on Janet.

In the light of the deepening of their understanding of their relational dynamics and re-commitment to a non-abusive way of relating on Mike and Janet’s part, it was agreed in the final four-way that Mike and Janet would move into conventional couple counselling with a new counsellor within the agency.

#### *Reviewing the work: interviews and focus group*

After a period of six months, when counsellor pairs had worked with at least one couple, we conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each member of the Restorative Practice team. We identified a number of salient themes which were offered to a focus group made up of the RP counsellors.

#### *Results: what did we learn?*

- 1) It was the experience of over half the counsellors that identifying who was the abuser and who was the abused was not always straightforward, and that a complex interpersonal dynamic of projective identification was being played out. So, for example, we observed verbal goading by the identified abused. We hypothesised that this might derive from the conscious aims of eliciting less intense abuse or of seeking a place of safety post abuse, and/or the unconscious wish to have one’s partner carry aggression that is felt to be personally intolerable.

This fits with the view of Bartholomew and colleagues who write:

Although the most severe relationship violence is probably most often perpetrated by men against their female partners ... Much, if not most, relationship abuse is bidirectional in nature ... In such cases, it can be hard to distinguish the role of abuser from that of victim. (Bartholomew et al., 2001, p. 50)

- 2) There was a real challenge in remaining non-judgemental when there was abuse which as one counsellor noted was “an awkward uncomfortable place to sit”. The stance we eventually adopted was of the order: “You have come here because you recognise that there is an issue with your relationship. We agree and we are here to help you work on your relationship.”

In this way, the centre of judgement remains with the couple and we hoped to steer clear of taking a social control-type stance (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 344) while working ethically and focusing on the relationship as our client.

- 3) The couple's relationship dynamic sometimes played out in countertransference between co-counsellors in the form of parallel process. Thus, we noticed that members of collaborating counsellor pairs would find themselves disagreeing around themes and in a manner that paralleled the nature and form of disagreements within their client couple. This reaffirmed the need for regular case management where we might explore our countertransference dynamic and parallel processing as a way of understanding what might be going on inside the couples' relationship.
- 4) The drivers of the work were confirmed as safety for the identified abused and nurturing their self-esteem. The work goes at their pace. Issues around safety are shared by the paired counsellors, but not necessarily with the identified abuser. We learned to be cautious about what messages we give to the identified abuser and that it is best to focus on de-escalation first, rather than outcomes.
- 5) Working with the identified abuser, the important aspects appeared to be finding innovative ways of helping them figure out what it is they are trying to achieve by their behaviour (which seems to relate to attachment/abandonment issues) and to help them "walk through shame".
- 6) Another important focus was encouraging the development of basic empathy for the other and an ethical appeal to take responsibility for the welfare of their relationship. From a theoretical perspective, this could be conceptualised as facilitating a move from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position and recognition of the other as "other" (Humphries & McCann, 2015, p. 161).
- 7) The importance of "holding" the fragile couple, who are working through narcissistic wounds, by the counselling pair who are in turn held by case management and the team was strongly affirmed. They are all held by the organisation.
- 8) Recognition and identification of mechanisms that couples used in order to avoid intimacy and to keep the other at bay, for example, perversions and objectification (Bartholomew et al., 2001; Morgan & Freedman, 2009).

*From Restorative Practice to Restorative Relationship Therapy*

As our understanding has developed as a team, we have found that the basic perpetrator-victim model is too simplistic and we increasingly focus on the relationship dynamic. Our approach, while being a development of Jenkins' work, was growing from our own experience into something new which involved insights from object relations and borrowings from systemic approaches. This included the practice innovations outlined below. We began to refer to our approach as Restorative Relationship Therapy (RRT).

*Developing the four-way sessions*

It is standard practice, when working safely with couples where there is abuse to separate the partners. However, by doing so we lost sight of the relationship. Holding on to the relationship without compromising safety remained a conundrum and central focus of the work.

As a response to this conundrum we inserted a four-way session after every three sessions of individual work with each partner. This allowed the pair of counsellors to test their impressions of the couple dynamic by observing it *in vivo*. In these sessions, themes such as abuse and minimisation as well as safety and well-being were addressed. Safety was further enhanced by “measuring the temperature” of the relationship; that is, the likelihood of it boiling over into abuse, helping the couple to focus on process over content, and encouraging them to hold the welfare of their relationship in mind. We focused on hope, strength, human solidarity, and highlighted “moments that were sparkling” (Monk et al., 1997) in order to help them create a “new conversation”.

It was felt that by having both counsellors in the room, a strong holding environment would be experienced by both clients, again contributing to increased safety.

*Reflective conversations*

As a further development of the four-way sessions and in order to avoid a clash of voices arising from the counsellors, we adapted the *reflecting team* format from family therapy (Anderson, 1987) as a way of helping a couple see their relationship dynamic from a third position. We also hoped that these four-way meetings would nurture the development of a group focus and “team spirit”.

The two counsellors organised themselves into the lead therapist and second counsellor as “the reflective voice”. The second counsellor/reflective voice sat to one side, as unobtrusively as possible and observed the session led by their colleague. Two-thirds through the session, the lead therapist would pause the session and allow space for the reflective conversation with the second counsellor. Clients would be asked to listen as the counsellors turned to face each other and talk about the case. Being both positive and motivational, the two counsellors have a conversation, led by the reflecting counsellor’s observations on the relationship, especially any changes detected in the way the two clients treat one another. The clients are not talked to, but are asked to listen to the reflective conversation and think about what is being said about them. Afterwards, the clients are asked what they felt made sense about what they have heard, especially what has been useful to them. They have the freedom to focus on whatever makes sense to them. They are liberated from the need to construct a reply. Hopefully, it becomes easier for them to listen.

All the while, the relationship is being observed for non-verbal messages between partners, empathy, minimisation of abuse, and the growth of responsibility in the identified abuser.

The whole process only ends once the relationship is either successfully reconfigured as a safe and secure attachment, allowing the couple to be seen in mainstream couple counselling; or ended well and the one-time victim is safe, resilient, and self-empowered as a relational person.

After completing the work and having begun the process of writing up, we were signposted to the work of Virginia Goldner and her colleagues around working with violence in intimate relationships (Goldner et al., 1990). They refer to "The Alliance" or "fatal attraction" that we have also observed between couples, where it exists alongside abusive behaviour. They write, "To react only to the violent 'face' of the behavior without viewing its other face, the face of atonement and redemption, is to deny the power of the bond that fully possess the couple" (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 353).

In responding to this, some of their technical innovations and conclusions were very similar to our own:

Early in our work with these couples, we listen for any positive descriptions of their relationship, and we encourage those commentaries as part of our therapeutic conversation ... we invite the couple's curiosity by calling their attention to their confusion about the relationship ... Initially, and implicitly, the couple's bond is positioned against their families of origin and against the world at large. Tracing the history of this theme through the reconstructions of both partners led us to speculate that each of them was looking for a magical rescue from the loyalty binds and gender injunctions they experienced in their original families. (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 353)

## CONCLUSIONS

The development of Restorative Relationship Therapy (RRT) at Bright Light has been a reflective-inductive process where we have listened very carefully to our colleagues as they work with abusive relationships. One of our major discoveries was that the relationship bond cannot be restructured until the couple are finally brought together in full relationship counselling. The RRT element is a precursor to this. The focus of RRT is de-escalation of traumatising behaviours that distort the relationship bond, making the relationship unequal, entrapping, and abusive. Evidence that RRT was experienced as a safe and effective precursor to mainstream relationship counselling was the fact that with the exception of Mike and Janet's "blow up" no client has acted out in an abusive manner during or after an RRT session, or while a client of the agency.

Reflecting further on this, we suspect that our procedures of risk assessment, contracting, call to ethics, reframing of confidentiality, and the four-way sessions prompt really dangerous, sociopathic, and narcissistic clients to exclude themselves.

We believe that our RRT approach allows couples, where there is mild to moderate abuse, to explore their relationship in a relatively safe manner, where they are "held" within a consciously structured process. This may

allow them to identify the origins and patterning of their relational dynamic and to make more informed choices concerning them, including whether to remain together or to separate safely.

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