

EDITORIAL

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What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.

(Eliot, 1942)

I am delighted to be writing the editorial to this special edition of the *Journal of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis* focusing on relationship endings, particularly as 2021 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the implementation of the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, legislation that provided a route out of marriage without having to prove that a “matrimonial offence” had been committed.

The ending of the commitment that comprised two intertwined lives, soaked through with romanticism and love, hope and societal approbation, calls for the creation of new ways of working for the clinician. The seven new articles contained within this issue illustrate, from different practices, countries, and orientations, the how and why of helping couples and families face the unimaginable; to shake themselves loose of the history that binds them and garner enough agency to conceive a new life as two separate individuals with no shared couple space between them, with the exception of their children.

This issue starts with Avi Shmueli’s description of the Divorce and Separation Consultation Service (DSCS), based at Tavistock Relationships, a timely psychoanalytic article describing the extension of “normal” couple psychotherapy, taking into account the catastrophe on many levels that affects many couples faced with separation.

Shmueli begins with a reminder that separation and divorce is a product of a couple’s original unconscious dynamic that can no longer contain them. Whilst contemplating therapeutic technique, we are reminded of the intense pressure facing therapists trying to support two people dealing with unprecedented and simultaneous levels of change, the “who am I, where am I, what have I done and where and how do I live” questions that assault couples caught up divorce.

The couple’s projective system, defending against reality, exerts intense pressure both on them and their therapist, and countertransference can batter the clinician just as the splitting of blame, shame, and responsibility ricochets between the separating partners, demanding an availability of mind that will not appeal to all couple therapists. Shmueli and his team in the DSCS work to promote deeper understanding and containment to counter couple distress as these huge changes are absorbed. Clinicians symbolise the hope that life will continue beyond the unimagined losses that separating couples and their families find themselves caught up in.

The second article moves to California, the family law system in the United States, and Dana Iscoff’s way of working with narcissistically organised, high-conflict, separating and divorcing couples. Such couples will be identifiable

to therapists in that they are almost always devoid of any sadness at their relationship ending and typically lack curiosity as to their children's states of mind.

Iscoff details the task for clinicians faced by separating couples resisting contact with both psychological and reality-based losses. Having worked in such a service myself at Tavistock Relationships, where conflicted couples become embroiled in court proceedings, often splitting them further into a good and bad parent, and leading to a chronic loss of autonomy and confidence, the couples Iscoff describes are instantly recognisable. Early traumatic attachments are reignited and the therapist's job is often a psychic "battle" not to be pulled back into the fray of a relationship ending but, with new understanding, to move forward and help the transformation into a co-parent couple.

To facilitate this process, Iscoff advocates the use of a parenting plan as a Winnicottian transitional object, to serve as a concrete, practical co-creation between the parting couple and symbolise the birth of their role as separated parents. While occupied with this task, the therapist simultaneously utilises psychoanalytic thinking to address underlying psychological pain hampering mourning and future development.

Amita Sehgal's article reminds us of the societal cost of separation and divorce and the link to poor outcomes for children. Her article is a call for less fragmentation between agencies and more collaboration providing a supportive network for families caught up in legal disputes owing to divorce. She recalls the important work of Janet Mattinson, who identified unconscious defensive interactions originating within families being projected into the worker, whether lawyer, social worker, or medical professional. Providing vital clues as to underlying vulnerabilities within each case, Mattinson saw their replication in the worker undergoing supervision. Thus the need is laid bare for honest reflection on feelings stirred up in clinicians employed in separation work and awareness that shame and resistance is likely to be within the worker during supervision.

Sehgal describes hindrances to such a scaffolding framework around this difficult work and suggests the reintroduction of collaborative reflective groups, first introduced in the 1950s by Michael and Enid Balint for family physicians, which the author has trialled herself. Sehgal's successful group work with family lawyers encourages the sharing of their emotional response to divorce cases. Alongside providing vital support for the worker, this material is thought about from a psychoanalytic perspective and discussions link their feeling states to the internal workings of their clients.

The next article takes us back to divorce and separation work in the States and Kathy Sinsheimer's helpful adaptation of Mary Morgan's "couple state of mind" (2001) into the necessary establishment of a "family state of mind" to aid families where children are refusing contact with one parent, after a separation. Making use of analytic ideas, Sinsheimer's treatment varies at times from traditional family and couple therapy as she outlines several distinct functions of the family therapist working to restore an adopted adolescent's attachment to both parents, post-divorce.

Working with the family as a whole in her mind, Sinsheimer engages with different family alignments and attachments to ease communication, offer containment, and demystify perceived catastrophe, utilising her counter-transference to identify shared anxieties and unconscious fantasies. Her work brings to mind that a separating couple doesn't equate to parents divorcing their children but recognises that, at times, this distinction can become blurred.

Next comes an article written by Isabel Cristina Gomes and Lidia Levy, two couple psychotherapists working in South America. The central tenet behind their article, an echo of the notion that every romantic encounter is a reunion between subject and object, considers how difficulties in a second marriage evolve out of unresolved, unconscious couple dynamics and interlocking phantasies that contributed to the breakdown of the first.

The authors provide us with an in-depth clinical case example made all the more remarkable in that the second marriage was embarked upon precisely in the belief that it was the opposite of the first and would therefore remedy the problems that led to divorce. As couple and family therapists, we will perhaps not be surprised to read that these self-same problems re-emerged in the second marriage. There was one crucial difference, however, in that the couple managed to seek help for their confusing and painful interactions, and Gomes and Levy share their considerable achievement in helping to reduce destructive projective cycles within the second marriage and help the couple gain a clearer understanding of their unconscious drive to be together.

The next article moves to look at divorce in China and a fascinating description of David Scharff's clinical consultation to Chinese couples in distress, conducted over the past thirteen years. Scharff traces the history and development of Chinese divorce law since the 1950s, spanning the Communist victory in 1949 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. His thoughts on Chinese custom, culture, and law and comparison to Western values, principles, and legal practices set the scene for two clinical case examples that highlight the differences in Chinese family and legal structures.

The Chinese legal system sits squarely within a paternalistic state that prioritises social stability over individual need, despite the evolving role of women in Chinese society. The availability of divorce, its unbalanced outcomes, with child custody predominantly resting with fathers, is unique to the Chinese situation. However, as Scharff describes the couples he works with, readers will recognise dynamics familiar to many Western couples. Even aspects of divorce that are uniquely Chinese, such as "parent-driven divorce" could find some purchase for Western couples unable to individuate from their families of origin, allowing parents to exert undue pressure on their intimate couple relationships.

The final article by Brett Kahr begins with the premise that most couples inflict daily traumas on one another, be they gross acts of brutality or fleeting rejections. Placing his article within a rich context of psychoanalytic thought and attachment trauma, citing research conducted with neglected children, or those that have lost a parent, to concentration camp survivors and Broadmoor inmates, spanning back to Freud's writing on defences against

mourning, Kahr explores micro-separation as it occurs in long-term intimate relationships.

Kahr illustrates his thesis with contemporary clinical examples ranging from couples disconnected due to frequent trips abroad, excessive use of digital gadgets, and even infidelity by one partner. He advocates couple psychotherapy as an effective source of healing and a means to understand unconscious triggers and attachment trauma, activated within intimate relationships through separation.

The issue concludes by reviewing two new books: one on attachment, neurobiology, and psychotherapy, written by Jeremy Holmes; the other a collection of articles on psychoanalytic approaches to loss, edited by Timothy Keogh and Cynthia Gregory-Roberts; followed by two films, *Marriage Story* and *Hope Gap*, both focused on the end of a marriage. Finally, there's a review of a filmed interview with Professor of Family Law, Mervyn Murch, on his life's work.

As I write this editorial, we are still in the grips of a global pandemic but my sincere wish is that when this edition is delivered, the severity of the situation will be mitigated and the world will be beginning to get back on its feet. Instances of divorce are predicted to rise, owing to couples and families experiencing intense claustro-agoraphobic pressure which, in some cases, has contributed to a rise in domestic violence. With a surfeit of uncertainty, inflicted by Covid-19 and living in lockdown, compressing some relationships to breaking point and jeopardising security and safety for many, my hope is that this collection of articles acts as a resource to aid all clinicians tackling this crucial work.

To close, some important notices. I would like to draw your attention to the New Writer Prize and ask you to consider entering yourself or to pass it on to others who may be interested. The next special edition of this journal is themed around "Therapy in the time of Covid-19", please see the back of this issue for more details. Keeping our psychoanalytic community of colleagues in mind, this issue maintains the journal's international links, more important for a post-Brexit UK than ever, by including information on the *International Review of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis* and *Dialogue*, the journal of *L'Association Française des Centres de Consultation Conjugale*.

All that remains is to offer my thanks to the journal's editorial board, Christopher Clulow in particular, our publishers, the book and arts editors, all the peer reviewers who have been generous with their time and the articles' authors and the wealth of psychoanalytic thinking and clinical experience contained within them.

References

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