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PSYCHOTHERAPY GROUPS FOR COUPLES

DEAR SIR,

May I add a few observations on psychotherapy groups for couples to those expressed in Mr. Cochrane's interesting recent paper in your *Journal* (October 1973, 395), for it would be unfortunate to leave the impression that such groups are ineffective. My own experience with them has been extremely favourable, and as they are conducted in exactly the manner he finally advocates, his conclusions are fully supported from another point of view. Though I subscribe to most basic psychoanalytic *concepts*, the *techniques* appropriate for individual therapy, and even 'stranger' groups, are indeed quite inappropriate for 'natural' groups, whether families or couples. In natural groups the projections and 'parataxic distortions' which come to make up the 'transference' are already fully developed between the members, and clarification of these *where they are* not only avoids delay but ensures that working through continues actively between the sessions, no doubt one explanation for the surprising rapidity of change compared with other psychotherapy, using this technique. Transference does become evident where ambivalence cannot be contained within the marital system, and then of course it must be interpreted, but to seek to encourage it in relation to the therapist is pointless.

However, these marital tensions are extremely powerful and felt by the couples as highly dangerous if unleashed. Whatever else the therapist does he must provide very clear structure and boundaries, giving a sense of control and safety, if the couples are to venture outside the ambivalent bickering in which their hostility is normally bound. I think Mr. Cochrane is absolutely right to see the role of referee as an appropriate one. I (or my co-therapists) often have to shout, to bang the table, and to wave admonishing fingers when couples go too far into a destructive spiral. For one domineering woman, endlessly blocking her spouse and the group by demanding interpretations of why she had to talk too much, the most helpful comment I gave (for which she was later grateful) was, 'why not just try shutting up for a while?' Such

control is valued by the couples, as by naughty children, as evidence of real care and concern for them, especially by those showing deficient inner controls and low ego strength, and capacity to provide it is rapidly internalized and taken over by the group members themselves. Passivity and neutrality by contrast is regarded as indifference and it is scarcely surprising if patients who observe it in the therapist fail to become involved with, and care for, each other. When adequate structure is provided, the couples are able to give up their ambivalent symbiosis, where clinging rage provides a compromise between excessive closeness (threatening loss of identity) and rejection (threatening abandonment).

This control can only be accepted, as Mr. Cochrane suggests, in a context of openness, warmth and support from the therapist(s). I find our marital groups enjoyable, often deeply moving and despite the explosive moments a psychoanalyst in the next room often complains that he cannot hear his analysand's associations because of the laughter.

Our experience also supports his suggestion regarding the value of co-therapy. Two therapists feel far more secure than one, enable support and control to be provided simultaneously, and offer a model of a relationship, as well as both sexual roles, for identification. After many years of work with professional co-therapists I now also work with my wife, which adds additional aspects to the model, and it is interesting that many family therapists in the United States have taken this step in recent years. However, co-therapy, like marriage, brings new problems and challenges as well as mutual help, and a careful choice of partner, as well as some period of work together is necessary if the collaboration is to bring more aid than difficulty to the situation.

The groups described are taken in private practice, where motivation and intelligence are likely to be higher than average, but have included a schizophrenic as well as several borderline characters and savagely destructive relationships. The most vicious interaction we have encountered, in a couple who had each received up to nine years of psychoanalysis from highly skilled practitioners, was satisfactorily resolved in fifteen months altogether of couple followed by couples-group therapy, and progress in general is a good deal more rapid than in the 'stranger' groups I take with similar patients.

At a teaching hospital where I supervise the marital and family therapy on the adult side, the trainees have not yet undertaken couples groups, but their work with couples of all social and personality levels, including psychotics, often shows surprisingly good results in cases intractable to other approaches. I find the main need is to help the trainees to over-

come their anxiety over becoming involved and behaving humanly, and especially in feeling free to use their anger constructively as a source of control. If it is of any comfort to Mr. Cochrane, I remember only too well the anxiety and uncertainty I felt when I began to break away from the traditional pattern of detached neutrality and attempted to reconcile the contradiction of 'being myself' within a disciplined, professional relationship.

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THE FEMALE ORGASM

DEAR SIR,

In the October number of the *Journal* there was an unfavourable review of Seymour Fisher's book *The*

Female Orgasm. It is only fair to inform readers that Fisher has written his own condensed version of the larger study, only 255 pages long, entitled *Understanding the Female Orgasm* (Bantam Books, 1973, \$1.95). This is most readable. It contains a summary of the myths and facts about orgasm (p. 40); a discussion on the negative findings and correlations in this study (p. 66); a description of fantasies during intercourse (p. 142); comments on the possible advantages of not obtaining orgasm (p. 224); and many other illuminating passages.

I hope therefore that psychotherapists, taking heed of your reviewer's warnings, will read the smaller book rather than the large one. But they should not remain ignorant of this important work.

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