Can Love Last? Some relational perspectives in family counselling work.

(Paper presented at IARPP 10th Conference in New York, March 1-4, 2012)

Introduction

"*Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance over Time*" became the title of Stephen A. Mitchell's last book, posthumously published 2002. In here Mitchell explores the issues of intimacy, excitement, and emotional depth in relationships over time.

In an interview by Jack Drescher, Mitchell tells us about his high school years. One teacher asked them to write down the most important things in life. The answers were: "love", "finding a meaningful job" or "sex". If you had went back to the tenth century the answer had been "salvation". In the same interview Mitchell said:

"How do you imagine it is to live in a different mind, a mind that sees this life as a brief passage into something else which is where you´re going to spend eternity? [---] The whole thing opened up my mind and a way of thinking about things. It opened up the connection between the disciplines. It integrated what was going on in philosophy with a historical situation and with the literature. "

Besides having a historical perspective and an insight in the importance of the human social context, Mitchell also had an interest in understanding things by integrating different disciplines and therapeutic schools. This is an excellent starting point for trying to understand the complexity of romance and sexuality. In the foreword of *Can Love Last?* Margaret Black introduces us to Mitchell's attitude to learning and knowledge, something he wanted the reader of his books to apply:

*"While Stephen certainly wanted to be respected as a thinker in his own right, he was not that interested in getting his students to agree with his particular thinking; he **was** interested in getting them to think. [---] Stephen assumes in his writing that the most powerful impact comes from the reader´s deeply personal engagement in the process. He simply ask you to think things through with him, to puzzle over the paradoxical nature of the human experience of passionate connection"* (p.16)

In this presentation, I´ll try to follow Mitchell's device for the subject of couples counselling, based on my experience working as a family councillor in the social welfare system, the last couples of years. In Sweden, we have a law that says that all inhabitants should have the possibility to be supplied with local family counselling for free, or for a low cost by the welfare system. The intention behind this law was to prevent against increased divorces rates, which created much suffering for the children involved. Couples that get this help usually meet one councillor for a 90-minute session, on the average for about 4-8 times. Helping couples can be a tricky business, when the partners have different individual goals or agendas; one partner wishing for getting together or repairing the relationship, the other partner wanting a separation.

Psychoanalysis and Family Therapy

Psychoanalysis and family therapy are rooted in quite different historical and social realities. Psychoanalysis is a highly theoretical discipline, firmly based on clinical practice. It was born in the modernism turn-of the-19th-to-20th-century in central Europe; in the aftermath of the antithetical epistemological foundations of Enlightenments and Romantics. With the words of

1

the couples' therapist Mary-Joan Gerson, psychoanalysis "... valued inner subjectivity above all else. The true life was lived within". The material, worked with is "crossing three time zones – the past, present and future." There is a strong focus on trying to reconstruct *why* things became as they are.

In contrast, family therapy is a highly practical discipline. It was born in the second half of the 20th century, from American *pragmatism*. One theoretical underpinning of family therapy was general systems theory, seeing family members largely determined by their living together: sharing assumptions about each other, history and life. Family therapy focuses more on the *hows* than the *whys* of family relationships (2010 p.15). The assumption of the psychoanalytic approach is that self-examination leads to changes. On the opposite family therapy assumes that changes and conflict solving in the family relationships leads to self-scrutiny (p.56). The systems theory's definition of change is "a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson 1972, p.381) Both disciplines are serious "games" for learning and for changes; two disciplines with their different rule systems. Both are "not real, not fantasy" to use the words of Arnold Modell (1990).

This was a brief outline of their starting points, but many things have happened after this. Psychoanalysis has changed a lot in many ways, and the gap between psychoanalysis and family therapy has been bridged, especially with the development of the relational perspective. Compared to traditional psychoanalysis with its strong focus on the individual, relational psychology has an increased emphasis on the interpersonal processes. Harry Stack Sullivan was one early theoretician who expanded "our psychoanalytic frame to include field processes, with particular reference to the patient-therapist relationship (Gerson 2010, p.3)". The development of relational psychology with emphasis on intersubjectivity, has brought psychoanalysis closer to couples' therapy and counselling, where *the relation,* not the individuals, *is the client*. Relational psychology has also expanded the traditional psychotherapeutic primary intervention interpretation, with *enactments* and *improvisation* (Bass 2003, Ringstrom, 2010). These interventions come closer to family therapy where the therapist often is seen as being in the role of a participant observer.

When working with family counselling in the Swedish welfare systems, we also help the couple to sort out what are their individual problems, but we don´t do individual treatment in this context. To help the partners to define what is individual I sometimes use to discuss with them in what degree they think a certain problem would appear also in another relationship, with another partner or whether they believe this is something specific for just their relationship. Of course, a problem is often a combination of the two. Anyway, these discussions use to be helpful for the couple sorting out individual problems, unsolved old conflicts and vulnerabilities. Often the result becomes individual therapeutic consultations or direct problem solving, on the part of the partners, side by side with their couples' consular sessions. I have been much helped from my long clinical individual therapeutic practice when assisting couples in this sort out work. Especially, is this the case working from the realm of relational psychology, where there have been frequent theoretical and clinical discussions concerning how to discriminate between, and how to integrate one- and two-person psychology.

An important Sullivan concept is his concept of *a personified self* that questions "our illusion of uniqueness". Mitchell has noted:

Psychologists and philosophers have traditionally portrayed the self as a very knowable indeed: the self is built of stable and predictable structures; there is a continuous, core self; at the heart of the self is a singular kernel

that, if safety is presumed, seeks validation. But there are newer theoretical currents that portray the self as much more inaccessible, decentered, fluid, and discontinuous. (p.44)

Relational psychology has developed a couple of new concepts for a de-centered self, a self that is continuously created in its relational context, and also concepts for the phenomenon of multiple self-states and for self-experiences (Mitchell 1993, Bromberg 1998, Stern 1997). Mitchell notes the complexity of the self:

"We are multiplictous [---] Being a person seems now be much more complicated and involving than ever before; it requires discovering ourselves as well as shaping ourselves, exploring ourselves as well as controlling ourselves." (p.24)

In this passage Mitchell is talking mainly from an individual perspective. In a couples' perspective, we must add discovering, shaping, exploring and controlling the whole of the couples or family system as well. From the realm of family therapy there has been suggested an additional self-state, often dissociated: *self with significant other* (Gerson 2010 p.5). This concept has special relevance for long during relationships, signifying the effects on a person´s identity being mirrored by the same partner or the same persons for longer times.

During the 1990-ties there was a conflict between the psychoanalytic and the systemic approach to treatments in the Swedish public health care and social welfare system. Today this conflict seems to have faded away and there are no principal problems integrating the two theoretic perspectives of psychoanalysis and family therapy, as I see it.

Living in a steadily changing world

Because of fast changes in our social ideology and postmodern culture, there are many different ways to live your life today. Intimate relationship also seems to be more difficult to sustain today. Gerson (2010 p.2) asks: What is commitment in a postmodern culture? Does it still mean "forever" in any reasonable statistical or psychological sense? Couples and families must, to a greater degree than ever before, construct their own framework for *how* to live.

Despite a lot of possibilities of different ways of *how* to live your life, most young people I have met in couples counselling, are longing for a very traditional romantic family life. A deep wish from the little child in most of us is for mother and father loving each other and living happily together forever. On the surface this wish could be mutually denied by the partners, and they often spell out much ambivalence in this matter. Strong *longings* are far from always in accompany with a strong *faith* in be able to construct a good family life. Especially is this the case when one or both partners were brought up with a mother and father that had a bad relationship or/and did not live together. Bad faith according to relationships will very easily become *a self-fulfilling prophecy*. If you don´t believe things can be good together, you don´t communicate with your partner or solve problems in your relationship. This means that you don´t co-construct a necessary mutual framework for taking care of all family members needs. Instead the partners often try to live their own life, taking care of their own needs, parallel to their partner and family life. In my work as a counsellor I use to see this relational pattern almost daily. This framework for the family cannot be created once and for all; instead the co-constructing must become a steady ongoing process for meeting changing needs.

Reality tells us about high divorce rates, and the wish for good relationships is not always possible to realise. If so the consequences must be taken to stop relational destructiveness, despite sometimes great sufferings from separation, particularly for the children, as I see it.

What is robustness?

Mitchell asks (p.25): "What is it that imparts to life a sense of robustness?" His answer suggests that *romance – has a great deal to do with it*. We want our life to sustain love and passion, but vitally and meaning is not easy to come by. Romance is a risky business that can easily be degraded. Mitchell shows that there are a lot of tensions to be dealt with in a relationship: between safety and adventure, love and desire, spontaneity and predictability, passion and commitment (p31ff). Anyway, Mitchell argues that love can endure, if we become aware of our self-destructive efforts to protect ourselves from its risks.

The presence and handling of aggression seems to be one crucial ingredient for sustaining romance in longer relationships. After the Second World War the reigning ideology within American psychoanalysis was Freudian ego psychology. According to Mitchell, the central value in this tradition was adaption, maturity and integration (p.132). Aggression was regarded as regressive and immature. But Mitchell argues that this vision of aggression has changed:

[T]oday [aggression] more often [is] regarded, when interspersed with other intense emotional states, as part of a healthy emotional repertoire, helping sustain verve and vividness in emotional life. And shared aggressiveness toward others can be an important feature of intimate bonding. (p.134)

There is a close connection between aggression, guilt and pity. Mitchell concludes there is no romantic narrative "without pain, hurt and loss" (p.146). There is a complex relationship between guilt and self-pity, which can be used by the couple in a complementary way that degrades their romance. Each member of the couple are both agents and objects, or in other terms, executioners and victims, according to Mitchell (p.154). I think this clinical vignette from my counselling work shows the importance of the couple being able to handle aggression and guilt:

Angela and John are both in the mid 30s, married for nine years. They have two children together, 3 and 6 years old. They seek family counselling for their marriage problems. A few days before of our first meeting, Angela has temporarily left the family and moved to her mother. Actually, everything seems to have been fine, nothing dramatically had happened before she left; both partners denying having had any arguments and conflicts. John says he loves Angela and doesn´t understand anything of what is happening? Angela tells that she felt forced to get away awhile as a step taken for reducing her high level of anxiety. But she can´t explain what this anxiety really is about. She likes John very much; he is a very good person and the greatest as the father of her children. When confronted by the councillor she says that she is a little unsure of her loving feelings for John. Angela denies having met another man.

When I meet them again, two weeks later, Angela is still living with her mother and the children comes there regularly to be with Angela. John is still hoping for her to come back to the family. But Angela has found an apartment of her own to hire. She is planning to move there in a few weeks. When confronted, Angela admits that she has no plans for moving back, but hoping for John and her being able to be good friends. John says that if they should not be a couple, he should live alone, working and taking care of the children. It will hurt too much to be friends with Angela, so in that case he has to minimize their contact only to handle their

children, taking or leaving them to the day care centre, without meeting Angela. When parents separate in Sweden their children usually live one week with the mother and the other with the father.

Both Angela and John are very non-aggressive individuals. She says she hates to see John crying, to do him this harm – the father of her children whom she likes so much. She hates herself for doing this and breaking up the family. Angela don´t know why she must to do this, but she has to. John says he´s waiting and hoping Angela will come back. He doesn´t show many feelings. When confronted, John admits having cried and also felt angry alone at home. Both participants say that their relationship has been fine and none of them can remember any arguments or fights in the past.

After the second session, they are sitting for 10-15 minutes, close together in a sofa in the waiting room, without saying anything. Angela is trying to soothe John who is silently crying. After another 10-15 min, the couple is in the stairwell outside. John is now sitting at the floor hiding his face; Angela stands bended over him still trying to soothe his crying, without saying anything.

I think this vignette illustrates the disaster when aggression cannot be dealt with. John can´t express any anger towards Angela; despite she´s totally going to ruin his whole world! The vignette also shows the phenomena of Angela´s self-pity as a defence against a more genuine sense of guilt and against taking responsibility for one´s own actions, as Mitchell had pointed out (p.155). Angela hardly admits an agency of her own and at the same time says she has to do what she´s doing, not knowing why. I think this illustrates what Mitchell (p.178) asks when discussing control and commitment: "Who is the choosing agent? Is it *me*? Something *inside* me? A *part* of me?" If aggression can´t be shown in any way, it will be impossible to articulate responsibilities and solve any conflicts. It will be impossible to sustain tensions needed for a vital romantic relationship and it will also make great difficulties in claiming their own needs and localizing the partner's needs. Angela´s and John´s record shows a very sad story leaving both partners confused, unseparated, and locked in together. Both partners will have great troubles taking further steps in relationships.

This is a rather unusual case where I think the individuals and their relationship would have gained a lot with more mutually confrontations. The other way around; couples that are steadily focusing at their partner when things are wrong, confronting each other and are fighting all too much, use to be a much more frequent relational problem.

What about sexuality?

Mitchell argues that no animal *even come close to being as sexually obsessed as human beings* (p.71). He writes:

No realm of human experience is more fraught with conflict, conundrum, and confusion than sexuality. [---] Sexual enticements and the promise of sexual happiness sell the products, from cars to computers, from clothes to toothpaste, that drive our economy. [---] And conflicts around sexuality and its place in intimate relationships are a key feature of the struggle to make sense of our personal lives, ... (p.58)

The importance of sexuality in romantic life is very easily verified when working with family counselling; individuals having different sexual appetites, conflicts, preferences etc. Anyway, I think we have to talk more about the *contextual influence* on our sexual life. We are living in

5

a culture that is strongly sexualized. Sexual happiness seems to be relevant to every aspect of life. Every day and everywhere we are grossly exposed to sexuality. In this over-sexualized media situation, it´s is very difficult not to be overwhelmed by sexual stimuli.

When Freud lived, a problem was society repressing the individual's sexual life, especially women. Today the situation in many ways seems to be the other way around: *the prevailing sexualization in society seems to repress the individual.* Gynecologists show us that vaginism - a psychosomatic reaction of the body protesting - is a common symptom nowadays. This symptom was rather rare before. This is only one example in what way the overflow of sexual stimuli does something bad with our sexuality. In the best of worlds our sexuality would be developed *from the inside* (of our bodies, from fantasies, longings etc.) When the right time comes, we would make a spontaneous sexual gesture that will be met from outside in a gentle and good way (Winnicott 1952, 1958, 1960). This is seldom the case for many young people. I believe most sexual discoveries today are made as defenses *coming from outside* as impingements from an overly sexualized environment. We have to put away what is too much; sexuality then becomes located *too much outside* us and *too little inside* us. It leads to confusion, and makes it harder to find our sexual identity.

I also believe we are living in a culture where the *general* overflow of stimuli is too much. This impinges, not only our sexuality but also our identity in a more general sense. Another aspect of stimuli overflow can be the communications on Facebook. When working as a family counselor you easily learn the bad side of this. Almost every day I hear people that can´t handle this media. I meet people who having hundreds of "friends" at Facebook, wishing them Happy Birthday on the computer. They hardly know most of these "friends", they never meet in reality and this makes them feel lonelier than ever before. Many individuals have "extra-marital affairs" by this channel, which often hurt the other part. The other part starts controlling this by looking in the first parts Facebook. The first part feels this as an assault on hers/his integrity. The couple creates at situation of mutually relational mistrust that could be very hard to undo.

The questions become: How could we reduce stimuli? How should we defense ourselves from too much stimuli? I think a person in Sweden on the average spends about 4-6 hours every day watching media and computers.

How to sustain a relationship and the transmitter-receive analogy

There are many parallels between psychotherapy and a couple's relationship. In the IARPP Madrid conference 2011, there were some discussions trying to capture what the "therapeutic couple" could do to survive, and what makes the therapeutic processes good. Some of this seems highly relevant also for ordinary couples. The couple should try to:
  - follow and hold the relational process, study and analyze it
  - see what took us here, and how to get away from here, not come here again and localize what would be the next step?
  - make *a third space* where they can look at their relationship from above: what´s going on between us
  - negotiating instead of fighting for one´s own right
  - keep the tension between binaries, the individual's personal differences, go to new places together, to explore new things together, to learn new things together

Malcolm Slavin (2011) describes an analysis as *a serial of mistakes*; Anthony Bass (2011) says that we need to take responsible for our mistakes by trying recognizing, and talking about them. We can´t avoid making mistakes and doing silly things in our relationships; but we can try to learn from them.

I use to give the couple a small, very simple model for living in a relationship. First of all, it could be wise to remind the couple that their relationship is fully voluntary. Both partners must be *willing* to be and stay together – and choose each other: "You have to be willing *to give* (by your heart) - You have to be willing *to receive* (by your heart)!" If not any longer - the relationship breaks up or dies. In principle, you have to be able to choose each other anew every new day. You must actively engage for your partner's needs and good beings. To be able to manage this you must be willing to give time and place to discuss your relationship continually, now and then. Also, making rooms for each other's needs outside the couple's relation. Then I use to ask if they agree with this model? Most couples do and some find it helpful.

Today most young families are living under hard pressures of different kinds. Most young couples are good parents and also very satisfied with each other as parents. This presentation became some fragments of relational psychology ideas based on my counselling work, inspired of Stephen A Mitchell´s last book: "*Can love last*?"

<div align="right">

Tomas Wånge
relationell psykolog

</div>

References:

Bass, A.   (2011) Improvisation in 21st Century Psychoanalysis. Seminar, 2 July at the 9th IARPP Conference in Madrid 2011

Bass, A.   (2003) "E" Enactments in Psychoanalysis: Introduction. *Psychoanal. Dial.* Vol.13, #5, 657-676

Bateson, G.   (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind.* N.Y.: Ballantine Books

Bromberg, P.   (1998) *Standing in the spaces.* Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press

Gerson, M-J   (2010) *The embedded self.* N.Y.: Routledge

Mitchell, S.   (1993) *Hope and dread in psychoanalysis.* N.Y.: Basic Books

Mitchell, S.   (2002) *Can love last? The fate of romance over time.* N.Y.: Norton

Modell,A.   (1990) *Other Times, Other Realities.* London: Harvard Univ. Press

Ringstrom, P.   (2010) Principles of Improvisation: A Model of Therapeutic Play In Relational Psychoanalysis. (in press)

Slavin, M.   (2011) What does relational psychoanalysis have to say to work with difficult to reach patients? Seminar, 30 June at the 9th IARPP Conference in Madrid 2011

Winnicott, D.W.   (1952) Psychoses and child care. In: *Through Paediatics to Psycho-Analysis.* 1975, London: The Hogarth Press, p.219-228

Winnicott, D.W.   (1958) The first year of life. In: *The Family and The Individual Development.* 1965, Reprint 1989 N.Y.: Routledge, p.3-14

Winnicott, D.W.   (1960) Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In: *The Maturational Processes and The Facilitating Environment.* 1965, London: The Hogarth Press, p.140-152