

DESTRUCTIVE EFFECTS OF THE FANTASY BOND IN COUPLE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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This article points out the damage caused by the formation of a fantasy bond in marital and family process. The fantasy bond is originally formed to cope with the pain of emotional or physical deprivation. Imaginary fusion attempts to heal the fracture by providing partial gratification of primary needs, thereby reducing tension. From that point on, the fantasy bond acts as a painkilling drug that becomes habit-forming. The author describes the dynamics involved in forming a fantasy bond, the resulting symptomatology, and psychological damage both to the relationship and to the individuals involved.

Personality theorists are accustomed to thinking of bonds as constructive attachments typified by long-lasting love and devotion or in terms of the positive bonding that occurs between mother and infant. This article focuses on *destructive ties* that damage marital and family relationships and enter into psychological disturbance. We refer to this type of fusion or imaginary connection as a *fantasy bond*.

Fantasy bonds are formed by individuals in early childhood to compensate for emotional deprivation. They are an imagined connection or linkage with another person, group, or institution. A fantasy bond can exist only in one's imagination; obviously, there is no *real* fusion. However, manifestations of a bond can be observed externally as those behaviors that lend support to an illusion

of being connected or of belonging to another person.

Hellmuth Kaiser (1955/1965) was an astute observer of this symptomatology in a wide range of patients. In "The Problem of Responsibility in Psychotherapy," he developed his concept of a "delusion of fusion":

He [the neurotic patient] wants either to incorporate himself into the other person and lose his own personality, or to incorporate the other person and destroy the other person's personality. When an opportunity for such fusion or identification seems to be offered, every function is drawn into the service of the desire for closeness, *in the regressive sense*. (p. 4, italics added)

For the most part, Kaiser limited his study to the patient in psychotherapy. He believed that the universal psychopathology was "the attempt to create in real life by behavior and communication the illusion of fusion" (Fierman, 1965, pp. 208-209). Kaiser's germinal idea that this illusion represents the "universal symptom of neurotic disturbance" is analogous to the author's conceptualization of the *fantasy bond* as the primary defense mechanism in neurosis.

A number of psychoanalytic theorists have referred to similar concepts in their writing. For example, Blanck & Blanck (1974) have described Mahler's and Jacobson's contributions to developmental theories about symbiotic states:

The tendency, traces of which remain throughout life, is to merge with the object in search of the gratifying experiences which emanate from her. . . .

Mahler's elaboration of ego-building factors in the normal symbiotic phase dovetails with Jacobson. This pleasurable merger forms the basis for future object relations and identifications. (p. 64)

Introduction to the Concept of a Fantasy Bond

The "primary fantasy bond" is "an illusion of connection, originally an imaginary fusion or joining with the mother's body, most particularly the breast" (Firestone, 1984, p. 218). As such,

the fantasy bond is the core defense or neurotic solution developed early in life as a basic response to inevitable deficiencies in the child-rearing process. The fantasy of being merged with another person is used to alleviate the emotional pain of rejection and the fear of separation and aloneness. Paradoxically, the imagined fusion that provided relief for the infant and young child later restricts one's adult life to a significant degree. As such, we use the term fantasy bond here as connoting bondage or limitation of freedom. The concept of the fantasy bond, as described in this article, refers to the *transference of the original fantasized connection to new objects in the individual's adult life*.

Most individuals form illusory connections in their important associations. Consequently, they become involved in self-protective styles of living characterized by seeking satisfaction more in fantasy than in the real world. The fantasy bond later plays an important part in the selection of one's mate and social matrix. It serves the function of protecting individuals against anxiety and pain, yet severely damages them as feeling persons.

Neurosis is the attempt to re-create a parent in other persons or institutions or even in oneself if all else fails. . . . It is the process of reliving rather than living, choosing bondage over freedom, the old over the new, and the past over the now.¹

Dynamics of the Fantasy Bond

The fantasy bond is effective as a core defense because the human's capacity for imagination provides partial gratification of needs and reduces tension arising from physical or emotional deprivation. The infant experiences separation and deprivation as a threat of annihilation (Winnicott, 1958) and draws upon its imagination for relief from emotional pain and anxiety. Sucking its thumb and other self-nourishing habits are also attempts to cope with deprivation. In an earlier article (Firestone, 1984) the author described the formation of the primary fantasy bond from a developmental perspective:

At this point in its development, the infant is able to create the illusion of the breast. . . . The infant who feels empty and starved emotionally relies increasingly on this fantasy for gratification. And indeed, this process provides partial relief. (p. 219)

Satisfactions achieved by the child in fantasy gradually come to be preferred over real gratifi-

cation because they are under the individual's control. In actuality, real gratification disturbs the fantasy process. Therefore, once bonds are instituted, there is genuine resistance to positive associations with others.

Kohut (1971) emphasizes this pseudo-independent function in his analysis of "transmuting internalizations." "The internal structure, in other words, now performs the functions which the object [mother] used to perform for the child" (p. 50).

The fantasy bond may be conceptualized as an addictive process, similar to the use of habit-forming drugs. Originally formed to compensate for what was lacking in the early environment, it later becomes habit-forming, with many negative side effects. Once this illusion of connectedness with another person has been formed, experiences of real love and intimacy interfere with its defensive function, whereas symbols of togetherness and images of love strengthen the illusion. Anything that arouses an awareness of separateness or a nonbonded existence can be anxiety provoking and give rise to hostile feelings.

Wexler & Steidl (1978) concluded that many individuals in marital relationships avoid experiences that would disrupt their illusions of oneness. They describe a state of "merged identity," where couples regress to an earlier symbiotic state "in the face of separation anxiety." In their analysis, they write: "Adults who seek to fuse with their mates are in many respects like the toddler who seeks to fuse with his mothering person" (p. 72).

By contrast, Boszormenyi-Nagy (1965) describes mature relationships "where the act of mutually trusting the Other is an important structural requisite of the dialogue" (p. 56). However, Karpel (1976), in commenting on Nagy's analysis of mature modes of relating, cautions: "But features that characterize *less* mature forms of relationship [pure fusion and ambivalent fusion, among others] will always be present to varying degrees at varying moments" (p. 81, *italics added*).

Fantasy bonds exist as implicit defensive pacts between individuals. Members of the couple or family conspire both to live with and protect each other's defended life-style. Both collaborate in order to preserve a fantasy of love. R. D. Laing (1961/1971) has demonstrated how "collusion" is an important relationship dynamic:

Two people in relation may confirm each other or genuinely complement each other. Still, to disclose oneself to the other is hard without confidence in oneself and trust in the other. Desire for confirmation from each is present in both, but each

¹ Firestone, R. W. (1976). *Closeness without bonds—a study of separation therapy*. Unpublished manuscript.

is caught between trust and mistrust, confidence and despair, and both settle for counterfeit acts of confirmation on the basis of pretence. To do so *both* must play the game of collusion. (pp. 108-109)

Laing's analysis of the development of collusion is similar to the author's conceptualization of the process of bond formation in the couple.

Individuals who have been damaged in their earliest experiences are reluctant to reveal themselves in new relationships. They are resistant to taking a chance on being hurt again. The tragedy of their retreat from their original investment and involvement with each other is compounded by mutual self-deception.

The Fantasy Bond in Marital Relationships

Destructive fantasy bonds exist in the large majority of couple relationships and are present to some extent in most marriages. This process of forming destructive bonds greatly reduces the chance of achieving a successful marriage, and conversely, to the degree that bonds are *not* formed, the marital relationship can develop and flourish. Most men and women are unaware, however, of their strong propensity for giving up their individuality in order to become one half of a couple or to merge themselves with another person for purposes of security. Indeed, early manifestations of this destructive connection in mother-child interaction are often mistaken for positive attributes of mothering.

In reality, the more rejected the child, the more desperately he or she clings to the mother and forms a fantasy bond with her. In a sense, the rejected child cannot leave home, cannot develop an independent life, and transfers this abnormal dependency to new objects. Consequently, he or she avoids or rejects any experience or person that is not a repetition of the early experience.

People attempt to re-create the original conditions within the family through three major modes of defense: selection, distortion, and provocation (Firestone & Catlett, 1981). 1) They tend to choose and marry a person who is similar to a parent or family member because this is the person to whom their defenses are appropriate. 2) Their perceptions of new objects are distorted in a direction that corresponds more closely to the members of the original family. 3) If these maneuvers fail to protect them, they tend to behave in ways that *provoke* similar parental reactions in their loved ones.

Utilizing these methods, people are able to externalize the fantasy bond, thereby re-creating

negative aspects of the family with new attachments. They preserve the internal parent by projecting his or her image onto a new object. The process of forming these new connections or bonds effectively undermines real relationships and damages the individuals involved.

Early Symptoms

The condition of feeling or being in love is volatile and unstable at the inception of a new love relationship. Fear of loss or abandonment, a dread of being rejected, together with the poignancy and sadness evoked by positive emotions, sooner or later become intolerable, particularly for those individuals who have suffered from a lack of love and affectionate contact in their early lives. Because they are afraid of feeling vulnerable, most men and women retreat from being close and gradually, albeit imperceptibly, give up the most valued aspects of their relationships.

As a couple's relationship unfolds, symptoms of the fantasy bond become more apparent. People who at the beginning of their relationship spent hours in conversation begin to lose interest in both talking and listening. Spontaneity and playfulness gradually disappear; feelings of sexual attraction generally wane; and the couple's sex life frequently becomes routine or mechanical. As the partners begin to withhold the desirable qualities in themselves that attracted the other, they tend to experience feelings of guilt and remorse. Consequently, both begin to act out of a sense of obligation and responsibility instead of a genuine desire to be together.

Another symptom of deterioration is a lack of direct eye contact between the partners. People who once gazed lovingly at each other now avert their glance. This symptom of diminished relating is indicative of an increasingly impersonal mode of interaction. The style of communication becomes dishonest and misleading, that is, making conversation, bickering, speaking for the other, interrupting, talking as a unit or in the stylized "we" instead of "I." Later on, they manipulate by making each other feel guilty and often provoke angry or parental behavioral responses in their mates. Self-doubts and criticism are often projected onto the mate, leading each person to complain about the other. They are critical as their spouses fail to live up to their *a priori* expectations.

When the author has seen couples together for conjoint therapy sessions, they are hypercritical of each other's traits, assign blame to their mates

for deficiencies in the relationship, and generally manifest considerable hostility. In spite of their stated attacks, on yet another level, individuals in a bond strive desperately to maintain an idealized image of the partner.

In a typical interaction, the husband complains about his wife's withholding, dependency, and childishness, while the wife in turn enumerates her husband's coldness, uncommunicativeness, and other shortcomings. It becomes apparent that they are accurate in their description of the other's behavior. When asked why they stay together, the usual response is "because we really love each other." It is difficult to believe in this pronouncement of love in the couple once habitually destructive patterns are established.

Although there is a lack of real affect or feeling in a fantasy bond, nevertheless, dramatic emotional reactions to imagined losses or threats to the bond are common. Indeed, this emotionality is often mistaken for real caring about the relationship.

It is commonly thought that marital relationships deteriorate because of the familiarity and routine of married life. The mistaken notion that "familiarity breeds contempt" confuses causes. The real source of indifference is the formation of the fantasy bond and the resulting sense of false security and guarantee of enduring love that together militate against preserving the excitement and vitality that characterized the early phases of the relationship.

As the process of deterioration continues, the couple's emotional responses become progressively less appropriate to the real situation and contain elements and distortions based on the frustrations and pains of their respective childhoods. Now each individual implements the other's neurosis and strives to preserve the fantasized connection.

Form versus Substance in Marital Bonds

Most individuals who form destructive ties are unable to accept the reality of their lack of feeling and the alienation from their loved ones. They feel deeply ashamed of no longer feeling attracted or interested as they were during the early phases of the relationship. Unable to live with the truth, they attempt to cover up their lack of feeling with a fantasy of enduring love. They begin to substitute *form*, that is, routine, role-determined behavior, all the customary conventions that support "togetherness," for the real *substance* of the relationship—the genuine love, respect, and affection.

Family Bonds

The paradox of the family in conventional society lies in the fact that it serves the function of protecting the physical lives of its members and nurturing their bodies, while at the same time distorting their sense of reality and stifling all but socially role-determined feelings. When parents are defended, they necessarily, albeit unconsciously, suppress the aliveness and spontaneity of their offspring in order to protect themselves from unwanted stimulation of repressed feelings.

Although close family interactions could well serve to encourage family members to grow psychologically and develop their individuality and uniqueness, many times this is not the case. To the degree that parents are defended, children incorporate their parents' illusions and neurotic behavior patterns. Through the process of imitation, they learn to adopt defenses that isolate one person from the other, yet they are taught to cover up any indication that family members are not close. They learn to distort their real perceptions and deny the reality that their parents are distant, inward, or self-protective. Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973/1984) describe their observations of this distortion of reality in *Invisible Loyalties*:

Our experience with troubled families has revealed that the child's conflicts are directly connected with the interlocked, collusively unconscious, or denied processes which disrupt and interfere with growth of all the family members. It appears as if, in order to survive emotionally, both parents and children, husbands and wives, do exploit each other and are exploited in their efforts to have unmet dependency needs fulfilled. *There is a conscious and unconscious compliance to avoid exposure of the basis of unmet reciprocity between all family members.* (p. 251, italics added)

Hunger—Not Love—in the Family Bond

Emotional hunger is a strong need caused by deprivation in childhood. It is a primitive condition of pain and longing that is often mistaken for feelings of love. Parents tend to confuse actions based on strong dependency needs from the past with those based on true regard for their children. When acted upon, emotional hunger is a powerful feeling that is both exploitive and destructive to others.

Feelings of emotional hunger are experienced as deep internal sensations ranging in intensity from a dull ache to a sharp, painful feeling. Often a parent may touch a child or express affection

Thus, in many so-called "normal" families,² it appears that children frequently receive conflicting messages. Similarly, restrictions of free speech in these families can lead an individual to be distrustful and defended in his or her adult relationships which, in turn, sets the pattern for the new family.

Friendship and Love Relationships

In contrast to bonds, real friendship and loving relationships are characterized by freedom and genuine relating. In a friendship, a person acts out of choice whereas in a fantasy bond he or she acts out of obligation. Therefore, friendship has therapeutic value, whereas the types of bonds described here are antitherapeutic in nature. People cannot be coerced into feeling the right or correct emotion, and when they attempt to make their emotions conform to a standard, their affect becomes shallow and inappropriate and they lose vitality.

Men and women can remain close friends if manifestations of the fantasy bond are understood and relinquished. Healthy relationships are characterized by each partner's independent striving for personal development and self-realization. In a loving relationship, open expressions of physical and verbal affection are evident. Acting out of choice leads to a feeling of joy and happiness while diminishing one's self-hatred. Hostility and anger are not acted out but brought out in the couple's ongoing dialogue. Negative perceptions, disappointments, and hurt feelings can be dealt with, then dismissed, without holding grudges. In the type of relationship that is growth enhancing, partners refrain from exerting proprietary rights over one another. Each is respectful of the other's boundaries, separate point of view, goals, and aspirations.

The fact that many people prefer to pursue relationships in fantasy and reject genuine friendship and actual love in reality accounts for a great deal of their seemingly perverse or irrational behavior. An individual's fantasy source of gratification is threatened by genuinely satisfying experiences. For this reason, people's actions are often directly contrary to their own best interests. Understand-

ing the dynamics of the fantasy bond helps explain self-limiting and self-destructive behavior that interrupts the flow of goal-directed activity.

Therapeutic Approaches

A major problem with many psychotherapies is that both the therapist and the patient refuse to challenge the core defense—the fantasy bond. Intense reactions and strong resistance are inevitable when separating from illusory connections with one's family or mate. For this reason, the therapist very often is afraid of retaliation from family members. Further, therapists may conform to standard beliefs about the sanctity of the family units as protection against seeing the destructive processes within their own family.

Once a fantasy bond is formed, many patients falsely equate breaking the bond with terminating the relationship itself. In actuality, exposing destructive ties opens up the possibility of a renewed and better relationship. In this context, it is important for patients to recognize that, for the most part, divorce or rejection of the other may represent a step backward into an inward, unfeeling, or self-denying life. Despite the many rationalizations offered for breaking up or leaving a long-standing relationship, in the majority of situations, patients are preserving their defensive structure rather than moving toward a positive life choice.

Unless manifestations of the bond are identified and consistently challenged, there will be no sustained therapeutic progress. Therefore, in an effective psychotherapy, destructive bonds are exposed and understood in the context of an individual's fears and anxieties.³ This approach assists the couple in relating to each other on a more positive basis and frees them to experience genuine loving feelings.

Conclusion

The fantasy bond represents a neurotic solution in that human beings depend on inner fantasy for gratification and progressively give up actual gratification in the real world. In their coupling, men and women surrender their individuality and unique points of view for an illusion of safety and a fantasy of eternal love. As parents, they retreat from real contact with their children because this would awaken painful emotions from their own

² "Srole and his co-workers suggest that there are more individuals who are emotionally disturbed than are asymptomatic. If this be so, then this midrange group is probably larger than any other group, including healthy families, no matter how generously defined" (Beavers, 1977, p. 83).

³ For further discussion of relevant issues in marital therapy, see the 58-minute videotape *Closeness without Bonds* (Parr, 1985).

with ostensibly loving gestures in an attempt to relieve this ache or longing. However, this type of physical affection drains the emotional resources of the child rather than nourishing him or her. It represents a form of *taking from* rather than *giving to* the child.

Restrictions on Communication in the Family Bond

Because of the dishonesty and pretense involved in maintaining the fantasy bond, personal communication between members of a couple and in most families is customarily duplicitous and manipulative. Freedom of speech is also curtailed, as certain topics are forbidden. Generally speaking, any communication that threatens to disrupt the fantasy bond or interrupt the illusion of enduring love between parents and family members is not permitted. Any suggestion that a parent might be inadequate or weak, any hint that maternal love is not an inherent feminine quality, any indication that a husband is not preferred at all times by his wife, any sign of unfaithfulness or sexual infidelity in either partner threatens the imagined connection.

Realistic perceptions of children are also frequently taboo. The fact that after a certain age, children are no longer the innocent creatures that many people imagine them to be, or that they are far less helpless and incompetent than they pretend to be, is unacceptable in most family circles. Having a more accurate view of children would tend to disrupt the parent's sense of having proprietary rights over them. Similarly any notion that one's family is not superior to the families of one's friends and neighbors is not tolerated because it would destroy the image of the family as special, that is, the superior attitude that "my family eats the right food, has the right political and religious beliefs, wears the right clothes, drives the right car, or raises children the right way."

Within many families, children are afraid to speak their minds out of fear of retaliation, fear of causing pain and regression in their parents, or fear of loss of the parents' love. Furthermore, real communication involves an intimate sharing of thoughts and feelings that makes a person aware of his separateness and the distinct boundaries of the other person. People who have become dependent upon repetitive, habitual contact without much feeling are intolerant of this awareness.

When personal communication is limited or restricted, the resulting hostility and resentment

create a toxic environment for the developing child. However, the child must not show his or her pain or unhappiness, because this would betray the destructiveness of the family and break the fantasy bond. Perceptions and feeling responses that would disrupt the illusion of closeness are suppressed, which increases the child's tendency toward inwardness and cynicism.

Studies have shown that being forced to go inward with one's perceptions in a defended family structure is a primary causative factor in psychological disturbances (Bateson, 1972). The greater the discrepancy between what is communicated and what is acted upon, the greater the potential for mental illness.

Lidz et al. (1958/1967), in focusing on aberrant forms of communication in families of 15 schizophrenic patients, notes the quality of "imperviousness" in the parents' inability to "hear or feel" the child's emotional needs. He describes also the process of "masking," which "confuses communication" and refers to "the ability of one or both parents to conceal some very disturbing situation within the family and to act as if it did not exist" (p. 285). Lidz suggests that "some degree of masking may exist in all families."

In a sense, schizophrenic persons know the secret of the family, which they attempt to reveal in a metaphoric or symbolic form through their symptoms. The patient's self-feeding, pseudo-independent behavior, on the one hand, and regressive dependency on the other, points up the lack of love and nourishment in the family.

"Masking" and restrictions on communication occur not only in the families of schizophrenic patients, but they also are fairly common in less disturbed family constellations. For example, in describing a sampling of families which were studied in relation to their styles of communication and "encouragement of autonomy," Beavers (1977) writes:

Severely dysfunctional families invade and attempt to distort individual reality. *Midrange families believe in external absolutes and attempt to control by intimidation and coercion. Only the optimal families showed many areas free from efforts at thought control.* (p. 147, first italics added)

Beavers (1977) defines the midrange family as approaching the norm. He states:

A third definition of normality is statistical: It is the average. With this orientation, midrange families would probably be closer to the normal than . . . [healthy families]. (p. 124)

childhoods. The formation of the fantasy bond within the family structure ensures the perpetuation of the neurotic process into the next generation.

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