



Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self

**Using Transference  
and Countertransference  
to Understand Projective  
and Introjective Identification  
in a Couple**

David E. Scharff M.D.

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**David E. Scharff, M.D.**

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**USING  
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It is through the use of the therapist's own experience that patients' self and object

experiences can best be understood. A vivid example is offered by a couple I saw with Dr. Jill Savege Scharff for a videotaped assessment. Replay and review of the tape have allowed us to study the processes of projective and introjective identification and of countertransference with a fullness not ordinarily available.

Michelle and Lenny were in their late twenties or early thirties. She was blond, chubby, dressed in a flamboyantly colored blouse of bright turquoise with red, yellow, and orange flowers; he was thin and bald, wearing a muted turquoise shirt with thin stripes of red, yellow, and orange.

*Despite their dramatically obvious physical differences, I had the experience of seeing them*

*as variations on a theme, almost as fraternal twins.*

As soon as the interview began, the impression that there was a visual paradox extended to their relationship. They had been referred by a colleague, a Mrs. Taylor, who was Lenny's therapist and who had also occasionally seen them as a couple.

Lenny explained what brought them to therapy.

"We first went for therapy because of Michelle's question: 'Why can't I dump this guy?' She figured she could get the answer in one session. That was a year ago."

Michelle crossed her legs. Kicking her right foot furiously, she said, "I tried to get Mrs. Taylor to tell you to dump me, but it didn't work. Basically I'm interested in

ending the relationship, and he's interested in getting married. So we should do something about that." She turned to me and said impishly, "Do you have a cure? Maybe you can prescribe a pill?"

Dr. Jill Scharff asked, "Would you take a pill to get married or to break up?"

Michelle answered, "To break up! I don't want to marry him. Even though he did buy me a lovely engagement ring. I wish I had it to show you. It would make a great visual for a tape." She held up her hand as if showing off the ring.

I asked, "What happened to it?"

Michelle said, "I had to try it on, but I decided not to accept it. That was about six months ago."

"Yeah," said Lenny. "In December."

Michelle continued. "We decided to break up on New Year's. Basically I don't want to marry him, for reasons I'm sure



an hour isn't enough to get into. My problem is this: I'm here because I can't seem to dump the guy, but I don't want to marry him. So you could say, 'Michelle, get on with your life!' But there's a lot of good in him, so I can't dump him either. And he's in exactly the opposite spot. So we really need a cure."

Jill said, "I notice you get a lot of pleasure from taunting each other."

"We have an ongoing act," Michelle agreed. "You could probably book us into a few theater houses."

Lenny nodded. "We have it down pat." They laughed.

Jill continued, "Do you find your friends enjoy that or is it mainly for each other's benefit?"

Michelle answered, "For each other. Our friends don't enjoy it."

Lenny added, "She doesn't do it that much in front of her friends. They think

she's cruel."

Michelle was a bit more thoughtful, saying, "I admit I am being mean to him, although there's affection in it, too. He does bring it out in me."

## **THE INITIAL COUNTERTRANSFERENCE**

*I found this couple extremely amusing in a way that was exceedingly uncomfortable, reminiscent of Jackie Gleason's "Honeymooners." They shared an extremely aggressive sense of humor, full of confusing contradictions, so that right at the beginning of the hour I found myself feeling that they were a good match, yet I was jolted by the sadistic humor. It was disquieting right away.*

Jill continued the line of questioning. "How does he bring the cruelty out in you?"

Michelle said, "It's a mutual thing. We're diametrically extremely different people. That's why this relationship is doomed for failure. But it's been almost four years because, although I've dated other guys a bit, he's the one that stuck around."

Jill said, "You can't dump him, but you can't kill him off either."

Lenny confirmed her way of putting it. "You can't live with him and you can't shoot him, as they say."

Michelle said, "He just seems to be so resilient. He just pops back. And I hate that. My problem is that I hate people who like me. And, of course, he doesn't only like me, he loves me a lot. Which I can't stand! So basically, I mean this is one for the books!"

Jill said, "You make it sound funny, like a cartoon. But basically, you feel you're a person who really is...." She hesitated before finishing. "You feel you're horrible, don't you?"

*I was hit with the directness of my wife's language, but once she said it, I recognized it had to be said. I, too, felt a need to cut through the confusion and tantalizing quality of the comedy routine.*

Michelle was not flustered. She said, "I'm only horrible to him."

Lenny said, "She says I'm the only person she's like this towards."

Michelle nodded. "He is! I'm not really horrible, but I'm not the greatest altruist in the world either. I'm ambitious, assertive, and I have no patience for people who aren't. And he's not. He's a wonderful human being. I've never quite had a boyfriend this good. He's a born husband,

but it's never been enough. I want someone on my level intellectually, with the values my upbringing gave me. We have opposite kinds of upbringings, so that's not likely."

*I was now struck by the pervasive paradox of opposite-likeness. The metaphor of the shirts had been organizing my thinking about their variations on a theme. So Michelle's introduction of the ideal of opposites appealed to me. But I felt intuitively that these were cartoon opposites—opposing yet dovetailing projective identifications in a raw caricature of intimacy.*

I asked, "How were your upbringings opposite?"

Lenny answered, speaking more than he had so far. "Michelle was a middle-class child. She considers my background upper class. I lived a sheltered life.

Michelle was thrust out into the world, yet she still had the protection of her family. There were stronger family relationships in her family than in mine. We're very different people, too. I'm laid back, where she's type A, quick to get going, can't sit still. She says I don't meet her three criteria for a man: fun, funny, and intelligent."

Michelle agreed. "You're not fun; you're not funny. And you're definitely not intelligent. I mean," she said, turning to Jill, "this is 3½ years and we can talk to each other fairly brutally and honestly."

Lenny said, "You might say she's been brutally honest."

I asked, "How do you feel when you're bantering like this?"

"It passes the time," said Michelle.

Lenny said, "It depends on my mood. If she gets me in a bad mood, she can make it worse. Most of the time, I ignore it and don't take it personally. She has

difficulty expressing affectionate emotions, so she uses opposites. Rather than give me a kiss, she'll give me a punch."

Jill asked, "So that's how you know she loves you?"

Lenny nodded. "That's how I look at it. Those are her words of affection."

Michelle gave an expression of equivocation with her hand. "Well, sometimes."

Lenny continued, "But of course sometimes she does mean the abuse."

Michelle said, "That's right. I'm not exactly forthcoming. But then again, I'm not in love. And that bothers me. I mean I'm fond of Len, affectionate, all that stuff. At times I love him. But I'm definitely not *in love* with him. Mrs. Taylor said, 'That's fine.' But it really bothers me because I think you have to be in love to have a good relationship. I know that lots of

times, opposites attract. Well, we're opposites, but. . . ."

My hopes were raised by her hint of insight. I asked, "How are you opposites?"

Michelle loved the questions and our interest in them. "In every way. Like Lenny said, his family is upper class. He's the youngest boy of four children. His mother is a Jewish mother and he's her golden child. She did everything for him, so he never learned to do things for himself. He grew up sheltered, so he didn't want to socialize. He didn't assert himself. I was the opposite. Our family isn't intimate, but it was intense."

Lenny's role was to punctuate her narratives. "Extremely intense!" he said.

Michelle went on. "My family dealt from crisis to crisis. They're a kind of depleted middle class. My parents were idealists who married young. We were a young family, but a family of thinkers. Very



different from Lenny's family. That would be fine in a normal relationship. But I resent him because I have to do all the work. Lenny depends on me for everything. He needs a mother, not a wife. So that would stand in the way of getting married. If I marry Lenny, I'm going to spend the rest of my life lighting a fire under his . . . under his tush. It sounds funny, but it's true."

Jill asked, "Do you see it that way, Lenny?"

Lenny said, "I'll admit that I lack motivation. The only time I'll push myself is when someone else relies on me. Otherwise, I don't just for myself. I'm lazy. Michelle says I should meet other women to see what I'm missing. I never wanted to. I'm happy with Michelle."

Jill continued to probe. "Does Michelle rely on you for anything?"

Lenny sighed. "I give her security. I tell her I'm the rock in the river. And I won't

move. I'll always be there for her. If she ever needs me while she's running through the river-both up and down stream. I give her the security she needs."

Michelle laughed. "He's a great date! The hell with security! He takes me out nice. He treats me like a queen. He's wonderful! Always the best. He was raised first class, and he's the classiest man I've ever met." She raised her hands in a gesture that seemed to discount what Lenny had said about offering security. "Fascinating so far, huh? You're both riveted!" she said sarcastically.

*I was now finding this couple fascinating! An oddly jarring combination of theatrical amusement and insight. Lenny's formulation of the rock in the river caught my attention. They were articulate and insightful, and yet Michelle was always destroying the meaning and attacking Lenny. Her nastiness was getting to*

*me, upsetting me as I identified with his steadfastness and with his fascination for her theatricality. I felt this tied to the theme of the shirts, which had been on my mind from the beginning of the interview.*

I said, "I'm interested in the question of whether you're really opposites. I've been looking at your shirts."

Lenny laughed. "She bought this for me."

Michelle said, "That's not his personality. It's mine."

I said, "Well, maybe." Michelle laughed again.

Lenny said, "But I like her taste. When she buys me things, there's hardly ever a time I don't like them."

I said, "What I noticed was that the shirts are the same colors. Yours, Michelle, is bold and right out there. And

Lenny's is a quiet statement of the same colors."

Michelle was still laughing. "It was a *total* coincidence. Total!"

I quipped, "I'll believe you. Thousands wouldn't."

## **ENACTING CO- THERAPY COUNTERTRANSFERENCE**

*My quip is an expression of Jill's, which I co-opted here. In retrospect, I realize that in using it I had introjectively identified with Michelle's sarcastic jokiness. Using this phrase was an act of "stealing" from my wife, which echoed the way this couple took things in from each other. In retrospect, I could see that I used the remark in an introjective identification with the*

*bantering of the couple. I had taken in their way of relating and, in an elaboration in my own coupleship, had also magnified an introjective identification with Jill.*

Michelle took my joke in stride. "It is a total coincidence. But if you send Lenny to the store, he would never in a million years bring that shirt home. I bought it for him. It's not his taste at all."

Lenny agreed. "I'd bring home the solids, probably, and blues."

I wanted to give a trial interpretation to see how well they could work with it. I said, "Let me tell you my thought about the shirts. I had the idea you might share a lot, but in ways that reflect the opposite poles of things. You, Lenny, might be the quiet, deeper statement of some of the same characteristics and emotions that Michelle has. Something about you, Lenny, helps hold the two of you together. This has been going on a long time."

Lenny nodded and Michelle sat listening. I continued.

"So all these statements about how impossible the relationship is, that it's ready to break up—even if they're true, there's still something important about why each of you is so strongly attracted to the other."

Lenny said, "Probably if she knew the reason why we were so attracted, she'd find a way to get rid of that reason." Turning to her, he continued, "You keep wondering why you can't break up. So if you could find out. . . ." He smiled at her.

Michelle shook her head. "It's just a matter of time. This is so cruel. My own reasons for *not* breaking up are purely selfish. They have nothing to do with him. It's because he's a great boyfriend, great to have around."

Lenny grinned. "Why get rid of a good thing?"

Michelle said, "Exactly! How much does it interfere with me to have him around? Well, it interferes with meeting other guys. But even when I meet them, they're not that great. And I don't view myself as such a hot proposition that I could just go out and meet the man of my dreams or someone I'd be truly attracted to. But it also drives me nuts. I can only tolerate him for two or three days at a time, and then I go berserk."

Jill asked, "Am I right, Lenny, that Michelle *is* the woman of your dreams?"

Lenny answered, "Yeah! She is, although she would argue with that. ..."

Michelle, again laughing with sarcasm, interjected, "Because you probably don't have any dreams. Look, you say opposites attract. But not if they resent each other. He doesn't resent me. But I feel like he's a vacuum cleaner, you know. I'm going to be empty because he's removing everything I have because he's hollow himself. And that's not right. What I

have is golden. It's like buried treasure because of the way I was brought up. I'm proud of it. There's a lot of substance there. I'm independent, emotional, and I'm looking for someone that can communicate back to me, on my level. I'm from a family of discussers. Lenny's from a family that didn't talk. . . . It's fine to blame your parents for your upbringing, but when you get older and discover how empty or lacking your life is, you do something about it. And that I would respect. But he doesn't. And so I don't respect him."

*Michelle was going on in this vein. We were about twenty minutes into the interview. Our attempts to make sense of their sadomasochistic pattern were being rebuffed. In fact, Michelle upped the ante, and here was charging full force at Lenny's lack of good qualities. Our naming of his steadfastness and our pursuit of her use of him through projective identification led to an*



*intensification of her attack. Feeling helpless and deadened, but without realizing it, I got sleepy and had to fight off fatigue for the next fifteen minutes or so. The agony of the struggle between sleep and wakefulness dulled the pain of experiencing the contradictory seductive and murderous attachment to this man with whom I rapidly developed an identification around his valuing of reliability and caretaking.*

The interview moved onto other topics: Michelle's idealization of her father and family; her parents' divorce five years ago; the way Lenny's sister is a soulmate to Michelle, so understanding of her impatience with Lenny. Jill led the interview, and it now turned out that Lenny was a successful architect with a dozen employees, earning much more income than Michelle. Yet Michelle, who worked in a social

agency, was scornful of him here, too, for "being uninterested in the world" and in social causes. I listened to her, feeling that she was inflating the worth of her own social interests.

*Still fighting my sleepiness, I grew annoyed that each of Michelle's characterizations was more extreme. She was the brightness, the verve, the value. He was the stalwart, the blah, the dullness. I was glad my wife was there to carry the work while I, not quite grasping it, felt disabled by the murderousness the couple tolerated in the heart of their relationship. I had taken in the deadline. My capacity to work was, for the moment, killed off.*

They were now discussing Michelle's previous relationship to a man she said she had loved. Jill asked, "Lenny, what do you understand about that last relationship of Michelle's?"

Lenny said, "The only thing I understand is she was in love with him. She saw fireworks and felt true love. She said she was close to marrying him when she saw that it wouldn't work and got out."

Michelle said, "It was the same thing, only worse. The guy was passive! Actually, I read a book, *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*. He's on page 57. I sent a Xerox to all my girlfriends. Passive dependent! He couldn't even signal a waiter. The first thing I liked about Lenny was that he had no problem signaling a waiter. Why do guys that need self-confidence get attracted to me? I obviously have a need to feel needed. So I tend to settle for less when I go out with guys because I don't think highly of myself."

## **WORKING THROUGH COUNTERTRANSFERENCE**

Jill said, "I certainly have heard in what you've said, Michelle, that you don't like yourself. You can't bear to be loved. You expect people to find the way you treat Lenny horrible. Before we began the interview, you said that you were afraid if people saw you act like this, they'd say 'What a bitch!' At the same time, the two of you cooperate to push Michelle forward, hoping to be really fascinating. For instance, you said, 'Are we riveted?' "

Lenny and Michelle looked at each other and laughed. Jill continued, and what she said finally woke me out of my stupor.

"At the same time, David, I looked over and saw you looking rather sleepy. I wondered if you were experiencing another side to it while I was listening attentively? Perhaps something that would help us understand their polarity?"

*I was shaken awake instantly by my wife's turning attention on me. She kept talking long*

*enough for me to gather my wits, and in the process, I suddenly realized what had been possessing me.*

Michelle discounted Jill's question. "Maybe he's tired," she said.

Jill continued, "When I saw you, David, sitting there in an uncharacteristic way, it led me to wonder if you were experiencing a feeling that Michelle carries inside, closer to a passive feeling, or an image of being a rock herself with the water running over her."

*My wife was being quite specific in asking what projective identification I had taken in that could help us understand the couple's experience. She and I share the view that fatigue in a session almost always represents a countertransference feeling, which, if understood, helps us recover sufficiently to demonstrate the underlying anxiety that*

*produces the defense. I was grateful by now for her intervention. I felt rescued from the rocks.*

Michelle quipped, "How about boredom?"

Finally I was able to speak. "I think not boredom," I said. "I don't think it's a boring problem. It's sad." Michelle laughed, and Lenny joined her.

Jill nodded. "I agree."

"I love this!" said Michelle.

I said, "Well, I felt a couple of things. Earlier when we began to talk, I felt I was supposed to persuade you, Michelle, to stay with Lenny. That's not my job, but . . ."

"No," said Michelle. "You were supposed to persuade *him* to dump *me*."

"That's what you say," I continued, "and the louder you said it, the more I thought that so many of the things you said about him were kind. He has so

many virtues, and you describe yourself as ungrateful and difficult but stuck on him. It did sound like a plea to persuade you to stay with him, which isn't my job."

*I was perseverating on how getting them to stay together was not my job. I felt guilty for having a wish to keep them together, as though that would be for my needs. I could not yet recognize that they had put that wish into me while Michelle continued to speak consciously for ending the relationship.*

Michelle shot back, "No!"

I continued, "I don't think you're literally saying that, but I do hear that underneath. When I had to fight my temptation to try to persuade you, feeling irreconcilable contradictions, I drew back and got sleepy. Because it's hard to know what to do. You present such a good case for leaving, so why are you here?"

Michelle said, "Because I'm stupid."

*I was suddenly struck with Lenny's broad grin as she made this self-effacing joke. I felt I had caught him colluding and could almost feel myself springing a trap.*

I said, "Well, no. But Lenny, you're smiling. You seem to be enjoying Michelle's jokes."

Lenny said, "I love listening to her."

I said, "Even though it's about how she's going to leave you?"

Lenny nodded. "I know." They were both smiling broadly.

I said, "The more you say you love listening to her and find she's the woman of your dreams, the more I feel that what fits is sadness."

Michelle nodded. "Contradiction is one of the things I'm working on in therapy."

"Let's work on it here," I insisted.



Michelle turned up one side of her mouth quizzically. "That's a big one! I'm a walking contradiction."

*She was a slippery one! She was trying to scoot out of talking with us in this session by referring it elsewhere, to her individual therapy. I could feel how hard it was to confront her despite her show of insight. I could feel a pull to confront her more openly, more sadistically. I had to check that pull, to keep it confined to limit-setting in the interview.*

I said, "What I'm saying, Michelle, is that I find you contradictory, right now."

Michelle said, "I know."

I said, "In the same way that there's the theme of the 'same-but-different' in the colors of your shirts, there's this theme of the wrong colors being used to say things, of bright dancing colors being used to express . . . almost a dirge."

Michelle laughed with disbelief. "A dirge!?"

I said, "Yes, about your relationship."

It was Lenny who confirmed my interpretation. "It's like in New Orleans where they have the jazz bands playing at a funeral!"

*I felt a sudden relief, a gratitude at Lenny's association to the New Orleans jazz bands. His association, which was humorous without being a joke, let her relax and speak in a more straightforward way.*

Michelle said, "I'm so sad, frustrated. Sometimes I look over at him and I think, 'Why do I have to leave him. It would be perfect. He would be a good husband, and we would be such a good team.' "

I said, "Really? That's a strong statement."

Michelle said, "I know it is. And I've known it for so long. This relationship started out on a horrible note. I was dating several men. One of them was the man I was in love with. And Lenny wouldn't leave me alone. I liked that about him. The fact that he stayed consistent for three and one half years drives me nuts. It makes it harder to leave him. Because I don't like myself as much as he likes me. So I lost respect. Here I am telling him he doesn't have a snowball's chance in hell, and I told him that from the start."

*Even in this more serious tone, the sentences in which she confessed attachment and gratitude to him came right next to the ones blaming him for exactly the same behavior—his steadfastness — which she immediately claimed she hated. This impossible contradiction seemed to be the knot that must be understood.*

I said, "The main strike against Lenny is that he's stayed."

Michelle nodded. "That he loves me. That's pretty bad, too."

I said, "Anybody who would want to be involved with you..."

Michelle finished my sentence, "...has gotta be a loser! Yeah. I'm working on that, too. Because intellectually I've known it's not so, but emotionally obviously it is...."

Jill said, "I think the question is if you felt better about yourself, and if you were then able to accept his love for you, would that change him?"

Michelle said, "No, it wouldn't change anything, but it would certainly help my development as a human being."

I asked, "Is he unchangeable?"

Michelle, full of certitude, said, "I believe the guy's unchangeable."

Lenny said, "I change. Just too slowly for her."

I said, "You're like the rock in the river."

Lenny agreed. "Yeah. I change, but very slowly."

I said, "You could be worn down, but it would take a few millennia!"

Lenny nodded in agreement.

Jill asked, "But I still think that's a question, too. If you knew Michelle accepted your love, would you still love her? I think that must be what's worrying. ..."

Michelle said, "That's a really *good* question."

Lenny said, "Do you mean if things changed and all of a sudden she started loving me? I don't know why I would change."

Jill asked, "Could you accept that?"

Michelle said, "Yeah. How would you deal with that? If I was nice to you all the time and I never called you names?"

Jill shook her head. "Oh, no! I don't think that's what love is."

Michelle laughed. "It is in our case."

"Do you mean it would be the opposite of what happens now?" I asked.

Michelle said, "Right. I wouldn't call him names and ignore him half the time, and treat him somewhat like. ..."

"You'd probably keep the names," said Lenny in a self-deprecating joke. To Jill he asked, "You mean if the challenge wasn't there anymore? That wouldn't change my feelings toward her."

Jill said, "I hadn't thought of it as a challenge. But I'm interested in your using that word."

Lenny said, "I look at it as a challenge. She keeps saying. ..."

Jill said, "It sounds like this is your way, Lenny, of taking on the world. It's all right there in Michelle."

Lenny nodded. "She's more than the world to me!"

Jill said, "I got that feeling."

Michelle asked, "Would you conquer me?"

Lenny said, "I never conquer. I always say, 'You don't have to win as long as you come in as a tie.' I'm happy enough to just tie. I don't have to win."

I said, "'Tie' is an interesting word. You don't have to win if you get tied together. You're just hanging on for the long haul."

Lenny shook his head. "No. I'm not hanging on for the long haul. I love her. I like being with her."

Michelle said, "Because I entertain you twenty-four hours a day."

Lenny said, "No, you don't." Then he smiled, back in the old joking mode. "Twenty-three, maybe!" He turned to me, pleading. "She's different, very different. I don't mind her being in the forefront. I

guess it's good protection. But I'm also there *I feel* as a support for her. Maybe she doesn't feel that."

Jill said, "That's clear: she's very different. She's entertaining and she certainly fills the time. She fills any void you may feel in terms of not being interested in what's out there. You don't have to look out there when you've got it all right here! But there must be a worry about what is there if there's no entertainment. And it relates to what David was saying about the sadness, and to what Michelle said earlier about an emptiness in Lenny. There's a great worry about a bleakness you would discover if you stopped this bantering."

I said, "The way you said, Lenny, 'I'm also there *I feel* as a support for her,' made me think that what you were saying was that you only feel, only come alive, when you're functioning as a support for Michelle. That's what makes you feel most alive."



*I found that Lenny's language had clarified for me the way in which his relationship to her gave him a sense of purpose. From his point of view, she did him an enormous favor in allowing him to be a support to her, and the greater the odds against him, the greater the victory, the more alive the triumph. She was split into two objects for him: the one who fought him and over whom he could triumph, and the one he loved and who was grateful. She was the rejecting and the exciting object, and his victory unified his inner world in a perverse version of repair that gave his self life.*

*At the time I was able to say this, I was feeling considerably centered myself by Jill's highlighting of Michelle as "all the world" to Lenny. Her formulation catalyzed my own work, and thus our work together on the way in which*

*he was dedicated to finding his internal world in Michelle-that is, dedicated to projecting his own lost inner worlds into her and then refinding them, hoping to introjectively identify with the life he found in her. It was the reason he put up with the bruising while finding himself in her unknown world. This recognition came as Jill and I were pulling together to make sense of our experience. Putting the couple's perversely split relationship into perspective constituted our own reparative work.*

## **CLARIFYING THE COUPLE'S ENVY AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP**

We now tried to pull together a picture of the pattern that the couple enacted together, one made up of their efforts to shore up Michelle's

self-esteem and conviction that she was unlovable, and Lenny's need to introject a sense of being alive.

I said, "We'd like to see if you can hear what we think without having to banter it away. This pattern is something the two of you maintain together. When Michelle gets frightened, Lenny acts like more of a rock because he's given you, Michelle, all the flow. He stands firmer, digs in as the rock that makes the ripple possible, and you, Michelle, ripple faster. Then you get bored-which is a terribly deadly feeling."

Michelle said, "Yes. I think that's right."

Jill continued, "The two of you form this pattern together. It's as though the two of you are one personality. He stands firmer, more solidly so the rapids don't wash everything away. You, Michelle, would feel the terror if you weren't bored. But the terror you have covered with your boredom returns when you then begin to

fear you'll end up your life in a relationship with a rock."

*I felt relieved that we had been able to pull together an image of the two of them that described their mutual contribution to their dilemma. I felt I could now see it instead of being caught in the whirlpools around the rapids their pattern formed.*

Michelle threw off our formulation with a quip. "So how do we improve on that? Any medication?"

*My satisfied feeling was thrown by her defensive banter.*

I said, "That joke expresses your sense of hopelessness."

Michelle said, "Yes. It does."

I said, "You're hopeless about being able to do it any other way. Then you turn and blame him for being boring."

Michelle said, "There's one point I want to bring up about the boring that ties to my upbringing. Being boring is being average. I've always considered Lenny average. I was brought up thinking I was special. My whole family was special. I believe I'm special and destined for ... I don't know what. But how can a person who's so special hate herself as much as I do? Somehow because I was the older child, I got it from my mother. My brother, who is two years younger, has that specialness and all the confidence to go with it-a complete winner! And I really envy him because of it. Because I'm missing that little part! There's a part of me that constantly finds holes in herself."

*This language, about envying 'that little part' of her brother's and 'finding holes' in herself, is the kind of language that makes analysts sit up and listen, and we did. One needs the experience with analysis (such as the portions given elsewhere in this book) to grow the conviction*

*that a woman like this has tried to solve her own feeling of emptiness by the early and persisting fantasy that if she only had a penis, she could be whole. Once one has that conviction, the language leads us to this constellation. Here, near the end of the interview, at the point of loss of us, Michelle volunteered material with deep unconscious resonance, and in the interview, we were pulled to stay with her and with them for a while longer.*

I asked, "What little part of your brother?"

Michelle said, "Whatever it is that he has-the confidence that makes him a complete mensch—I'm missing."

*The language was focusing on his genitals as making up for everything. In the countertransference, I experienced it as arousing*

*of interest; that is, it had the standing of being an exciting object and an interpersonal seduction.*

I asked, "Do you envy his being a boy?"

Michelle said, "I used to, as a child. I used to see the world as a man's world. And I used to be an extreme tomboy. I dreaded becoming feminine. Now I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I used to see things as a man's world. Maybe I do envy his being a man, but I also envy his confidence. I just don't have it."

Jill said, "This envy you feel for your brother, we can see you feel it for Lenny, too, who is also his mother's great little kid, right?"

*As always, the envy was not just for the man's penis. It was for the things that boys and men seem to have. In the hour, it was a sign of the couple's forthcomingness that they could*

*bring the envy so clearly to the surface after they lived out Michelle's envious attacks on Lenny, which he tolerated for still unknown reasons.*

Michelle laughed.

Lenny said, "I was brought up by women, my mother, my sisters, and my grandmother. My father didn't bring masculinity into the family the way Michelle's father did. In my family, I'm the more confident male."

Jill said, "So it's a kind of phallic quality Michelle's brother has?"

*I experienced Jill's use of the word "phallic" as jarring, as too technical and too far from the couple's experience. I feared it would increase their defensiveness. But Lenny proceeded to translate it into their own language, and they moved right on.*



Michelle said, "I don't know about that, but. ..."

Lenny cut in. "Cocky! Self-confident! Her brother knows he's good."

Michelle said, "Yeah. He's self-confident and cocky. But he also has an incredibly sensitive side. It's not just me that's jealous of him. Lenny is, too."

Lenny agreed. "Yeah, I'm jealous of him, too. I'd love to be like her brother."

*Here were more clues as to what Lenny saw in her. At the same time he was continuing to fill in for the missing masculinity of his father as in his family growing up, he was identified with Michelle's internal object of a man, tied to her brother. He was trying to get that into himself through sticking with her.*

Michelle continued, "I'd love to marry someone like my brother. He's the epitome. He's not completely perfect, but

he's that kind of guy. He has that chemistry I'd be looking for in a man. It's not the kind of men I've gone out with. It's the men I'm chicken to go out with. It's the men I never let be attracted to me—by gaining a lot of weight or whatever. So this settles it. Lenny doesn't have that confidence. When he's called on to be a mensch, he's not. Well, he is in certain cases, but not where it counts to me."

Jill asked, "What about where it counts in bed?"

Michelle was visibly hit by her comment. "Excuse me? In *where*?"

Jill repeated, "In bed?"

Michelle said, "Ahh. Umm. . . . You talk about that, dear."

Lenny shook his head. "Why should I talk about that?"

Michelle said, "Because I don't want to."

I said, "See if you can, at least in general terms. It may be embarrassing, but it's important."

Michelle vigorously agreed. "It's as embarrassing as hell!"

Lenny was able to begin. "I think I'm her release in bed. I free her of tensions."

Lenny's beginning also released her to talk in the session. Michelle said, "That is something that's grown in our relationship, because at first I couldn't stand him."

Lenny looked at the floor. "At first you couldn't stand it."

Michelle said, "I hated it. It was awful."

I asked, "And was that different than with other men?"

Michelle said, gathering steam, "Completely different! There hadn't been that many." She looked down at the floor, too. "The guy I was in love with couldn't function at all in bed, but it didn't seem to

matter to me at the time. I was new to the whole experience. I loved him, so it didn't matter. But when I went with Lenny, I realized how lacking that guy was. So I learned a lot. It wasn't easy. The transfer from the man I loved to the man I definitely couldn't stand."

I asked, "In bed especially?"

*I was confused again here, by now a familiar feeling with them. She seemed to be saying that Lenny had taught her some pleasure in sex she had not known before, but while saying that, she maintained her disparagement of him as though he were contemptible for doing so.*

Michelle said, "Oh, it was awful. It took a couple of years before I realized 'This isn't so bad.' So obviously there wasn't a lot of sexual activity. Sex isn't one of my favorite things because I'm one of those self-conscious people that hates her body. So who's going to love me and my body? We don't have to get into the

details. You can assume the rest. But Lenny has taken the time to find out what feels good, so I gotta give him a little credit. Although it's still not number one on my list, there has never been anyone quite like him. So I can't complain about that. Because sex is really more a pain than anything else to me."

I asked, "Literally painful?"

"Yeah," said Michelle. "Physical pain. Real pain. It's not highest on my list of things to do. But with Lenny, I have learned to enjoy it more, though we're still not real active."

Jill said, "But that's not because the passivity lies with him in this instance?"

Michelle said, "Oh, no! He's certainly not passive there."

Lenny said, "I'm probably too aggressive. She says I'm always horny."

Michelle said, "Well, you are."

Lenny said, "She generalizes and says, 'All men are.' "

Michelle said, "There's one thing I love. He's attracted to me no matter how fat I am. How many men would be like that? They always want skinny people, and I've never been skinny. I take everything out on my weight, and this man is still wildly attracted to me. When I look horrible, he thinks I'm beautiful, even if it's a lie at that moment."

Lenny said, "It's not a lie."

"And that makes me feel like a million dollars."

I asked, "How do you feel about her body and her looks?"

Michelle laughed. "Don't be specific, please."

Lenny said, with a new confidence, "I think she's beautiful. There's nothing about her that makes me cringe or anything. Everything about her I love."

With humor, he added, "It probably makes her sick to hear it, but I enjoy being with her, touching her, feeling her."

I asked, "How do you feel about her sexual reluctance?"

Lenny said, "I understand part of it. The pain is a big thing."

Jill asked, "What do you understand the pain is due to?"

Lenny said, "I don't know. It's physical. No! It's in her mind, which is always running and not always on the topic at hand. At a certain point during sex, her mind wanders. ..."

Michelle said, "We just lose it."

"Lose the arousal?" I asked.

Michelle said, "He doesn't lose it."

"That's right," said Lenny. "But I'm always sensitive to any pain she may be in."

I asked, "Michelle, is the pain you have only on penetration or with continued intercourse?"

Michelle answered, "Intercourse isn't high on my list."

I said, "Because it's painful?"

"It's painful and a pain in the neck. It's a nuisance to me. I like to get it over so we can do other things."

"Like holding and cuddling?" I asked.

Lenny said, "We love to cuddle and snuggle."

"Only nonsexually?" I asked.

"Sexually, too," Michelle volunteered. "Lenny has never been with any other woman, so I don't know how he learned. But he can make it a release for me. It used to be a stressor, but now it's a release."

"In intercourse, or in other ways?" I asked.



Michelle said, "It almost never happens in intercourse. But otherwise I'm completely comfortable with him. Well, sort of. I'm never completely comfortable."

I said, "You're not comfortable with yourself, so there's no way."

Michelle agreed. "Right, exactly! I'm as comfortable as I can be. You know for a girl who had penis envy as a child, I hate them now. So there's something obviously wrong with me."

"One thing about Lenny you appreciate is that he doesn't force himself on you in this way," Jill said.

Michelle said, "Right. He's very good to me."

Jill said, "But as a child, you saw the penis as a source of power."

Michelle said, "I don't remember anything about the penis itself."

Jill said, "I mean the boy's world, the things boys had that you didn't. What I'm

saying is that now that you've taken possession of your adult femininity and enjoy a woman's world, it's sad for you that you can't take pleasure from the penis. You see it as a source of envied and threatening power."

Michelle said, "I see it as an intrusion! I hate it. I've come a little distance, but I used to see it as a man sticking it to a woman."

I said, "Now you don't see it that way, but you still *feel* it like that."

Michelle said, "Not as much as I did. I used to see it as another way of a man's control, which I hate. But it's never, ever been like that with Lenny."

*This discussion of the current status of Michelle's attitude toward sex and the penis revealed more than we could have expected to learn in a single interview. She had converted her envy of men generally because as a child she*

*thought they did not feel the empty longing she did because they had the things she was missing, including a body part, the penis, whereas her vagina seemed to capture the hole, the emptiness she felt in her inner longing. In her adulthood, the penis continued to be threatening because it could enter that painful hole, and because her envy of it meant she was in danger of feeling the hatred she felt toward it and toward the man who had it. In this way, the better Lenny did with her sexually, the more she had to attack enviously. But being able to see this in the first hour was a good prognostic sign. It led me to feel she might well be able to work on this in therapy.*

I said, "The two of you share this idea, too, that men can be harmful, their aggression and their penises can be

harmful — that unless you're careful, sex will mean sticking it to a woman."

Lenny said, "That's true. I don't like the way men treat women. I was brought up with women and was taught how to treat them. I take the man's world on my shoulders, the way men act. I don't like their games. I never did and never will."

I said, "But the cost to you of bending over backwards to make sure you are never aggressive is that you can't do things. And then Michelle says you're just passive. Although she requires that bending over backwards of you in bed, for instance."

Michelle said, "That's not passiveness."

I said, "But he's so caretaking, it's hard to separate out the passivity."

Michelle said, "The passivity I would see if he wants to make love and I don't. He doesn't give me one minute of pain in the neck about it. What we're hearing

about right now is part of him I just adore!"

Jill said, "There had to be some parts of him."

Michelle countered once again with a joke. "There's a lot. He's sensitive. He's got credit cards."

I said, "He's got a lot of credit, period."

Michelle now agreed. "He's true to his word. He wouldn't do anything to hurt me. And he does handle it as a man of the world, whom I do usually see as sticking it to people. I'm just scared of men in general. Not real men, but the ones I have intimate relationships with, even nonsexual relationships, I'm scared of them."

Jill, signalling that the session had to close, said, "The point is that there's a lot of work needing to be done here, both in individual therapy for each of you, and in couple therapy if you care to work on it together."

Summing up, I added, "In these last few minutes we've been hearing about the loving and caring that have been encapsulated in the sex. It was as though the caring part of your relationship had to be saved for the end, where it could not be fully considered but also would not be fully exposed. Until then it was as though your relationship was made up of envy, anger, the feeling that men will damage women—all to be countered by Lenny's holding firm like the rock in the river. These aspects seem to call out for understanding."

Michelle said, "It certainly does! So what should we do?"

Jill answered, "There's a lot of positive feeling covered up by a lot of fear in your relationship. If you dared to hope you could have a better relationship, therapy together would be worth it. In any case, individual therapy is also a good idea for each of you, too. Thank you both for coming in to talk with us."

We'll talk with Mrs. Taylor, as we agreed, about our thoughts. Good luck!"

Lenny shook our hands. "Thank you."

Michelle could not part without a joke about whether they had been interesting enough to us. "Nice meeting you both. I hope you got something for a book out of this. No real names, please!"

## **CO-THERAPY AND COUNTERTRANSFERENCE**

During this interview, the flamboyance of the couple's dress and behavior, their use of mutually deprecating humor, and the caricatured quality of their projective and introjective identifications became quickly apparent. The couple and their way of relating got inside us, as it does in every hour with a therapist or with co-therapists, where it influenced our attempts to

understand the couple, to join with their request to be understood and with their defenses against that request.

During the interview I was taken over by a fatigue that represented an introjective identification with them, which disabled me in a way that ultimately gave me an experience inside myself similar to their disability. In working my way out of this momentary disability, I was able to obtain insight into the strength and experience of the couple's relationship system, and especially to understand the crippling emotions that characterized it. In this process, work with my co-therapist added enormously to my capacity to understand the couple. Without her, I would have had to absorb the total experience and work my way out of it alone.



However, I usually work alone and have to struggle with similar countertransference situations by myself. Usually the internal struggle eventually results in the same end point, yielding—often with a similar relief—a sense of understanding a patient or couple from inside of my own experience. This often goes on silently and preconsciously—outside of awareness—when I work alone. The co-therapy relationship requires an open, more verbalized demonstration of the issues to be absorbed, metabolized, and given back to the couple. For this reason co-therapy is particularly useful in demonstrating the work of countertransference and in training therapists to use countertransference.

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