

Intimacy and its Vicissitudes

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Introduction

Intimacy stems from the Latin "intimus": "furthest from the edge, the furthest inside". To write about intimacy means dealing with a paradox: intimacy develops when one perceives and acknowledges borders during the process of becoming closer to someone else. Therefore, "the furthest inside" can only become possible when there is an anchorage to the edge. Figuratively speaking, one can imagine it as a touch being only perceivable as such when one border (e.g. a skin) meets another border (another skin): the border makes it possible to be touched.

Changing perceptions of intimacy

"Romance" in the meaning of a love affair experienced a squaring of the circle in the late 18th century and the Romantic period: marriage and passionate love, as well as self-realisation in love were thought to be possible at the same time. Excitement and arousal as well as security were all to be achieved, forever.

While previously, intimate relationships were much more regulated by social barriers and conventions, today the responsibility for love weighs heavily on the individualised subject. This subject is rather overwhelmed, standing alone, having to find the right partner by itself without the security of belonging to a defined class and without the boundaries of economic or spacial conditions. Today, all of these are able to be transgressed.

The ideal of romantic love does secretly exist, even in post-modern times, but it is fractured by self-irony. The wish for "the great love" stands next to the knowledge that there are more than one "great loves" in one life, and the knowledge that the overburdened concept of "the great love" may be a rather destructive one.

The pressure of constant personal, physical (sex-appeal, fitness), economic and professional self-optimisation makes people hesitant to invest in and dare to embark on long-lasting relationships. Societal acceleration is also an enemy of permanent relationships (Rosa, 2005; Baumann 2003).

The more fleeting modern society becomes, the less the demands of continuous relationships can be met. Interestingly enough, authors who deal with intimate relationships, and these difficulties, also address contemporary themes like sex-addiction (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 1997/2012).

If, as Giddens writes, intimacy requires the awareness of freedom of the other to develop (Giddens), at the same time that seems hardly bearable and endurable, because that would imply that intimacy is probably most satisfying when it is both transgressing borders ("the furthest inside") and respecting them.

This requires a great inner maturity, which includes tolerance and the ability to bear separateness and pain about one's one relative dependence on the other. And that then is demanded in a still expanding globalisation of our world with increasing experience of our helplessness in the face of the growing global problems that are becoming more and more existential.

Defence of intimacy in postmodern times

So what is to be done? The postmodern subject resorts to a perverse compromise. It's as if it dates via the internet, engages in virtual relationships, splits sex and love, consumes romance (Illouz) and then fails it: it's as if tomorrow a more interesting / better looking partner will come along, someone who complements me more and fits me better. Freedom in the liberation of sexuality can lead to an impoverishment if it's accompanied by a 'pornification' of culture (Illouz, 2015 – German edition, p. 117).

The subject might also seek being understood in self-disclosures in talk shows which constantly transgress the boundaries of shame of the viewers. At the same time it satisfies the voyeurism of the spectators and the need of the subject to be seen and to present himself. On the web, we find a great carefreeness in revealing oneself and one's intimacy, as well as on social media, both in images and text. This is often problematised as a new dimension that brings about structural changes, for example regarding the collective consciousness concerning changing norms, security needs, shame, etc. Here we celebrate a non-committal liaison. The awareness of being in immediate and constant contact consoles immensely and helps overcome the pain of replaceability.

The ease with which we make and sustain new contacts today in social networks satisfies, on the one hand, our need for security (the awareness of being in connected and in contact all the time). But with its non-committal nature, one has to ask, on the other hand, to what extent a compromise was found between the longing for physical-emotional intimacy and the fear of it.

In a perverse compromising solution the goal is to reassure oneself of not being vulnerable, helpless or embarrassing. Dependence, uncertainty and reliance on others have to be denied. In today's seemingly comfortable world, the subject is much more insecure, alone and at the mercy of powerful agents, and that is highly menacing to one's inner balance.

One form of distortion has already been described by Sennett (1977) as the "tyranny of intimacy", when one's private life is dragged into the public (as on a talk show), but then factual-public discussion on public interest issues no longer take place, because everyone only talks about his own sensitivities or proclaims his private opinion, as if this could replace a fact-based discourse. Both exhibitionism and omnipotent narcissism, spreading, for example, in "shit-storms", avoid a content- and discussion-rich discussion that seems more dangerous or at least more complex because it requires more tolerance for the unknown. Our current discussions about our ability for democracy thus also touch on the question of our capability for intimacy.

In the distortions described above comes as an intimacy, which is often rather a pseudo-intimacy that over-emphasizes the intimate in a perverse way, without there being a real opening up and mental connection between two subjects. This has to do with the overload of humans today, who must constantly deal with excessive demands on their self-actualisation and optimisation and who are asked to be extremely flexible and not bound to others.

Intimacy in psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis strives for authenticity, for the deepest understanding, with the consciousness that it can never quite reach it, and the recognition of this difference. When two people talk about the same thing they refer to a third and at the same time create it. An inevitable remoteness and a distance develop then, which at the same time produces intimacy – a kind of 'bifocal' intimacy which is not usurping, nor completely merging. This intimacy comes about because both parties acknowledge the desire to merge and simultaneously the analyst does not provide it (or at the most only selectively) while also interpreting it. In the enduring grief over this, new spaces of experience and possibilities

for the relationship can emerge, which continue for the patients and often also for the analyst

Here follows a vignette which should serve to illustrate this.

The patient is a 51 year old woman who always had men that were inferior to her and who "couldn't run away because they were dependent on me". She herself comes from an extremely traumatised and traumatising family in which there had been verbal violence, neglect and sexual abuse. Currently we deal with her "seen" need to split from a man who treats her disdainfully. However, she finds this necessity so painful that she cannot part with him.

She talks about the pain of always wanting more than the men, feeling unloved and being angry about that. In the end she always feels thrown back on the pain of feeling worthless because nobody wants her. Then she speaks about what she did after our last session:

P: "Yesterday I went to a place in the woods where I go sometimes. I just wanted to be left alone. I was listening to the murmuring creek. Around me there were dragonflies – it was as if they were coming to me. They were twirling around me and I imagined they were little elves (she laughs quietly). Then I said: 'Yes, come to me, my dears. You understand me.' And then I was listening to the creek, it made 'blubb, blubb'. It was like it was speaking to me."

A: (I felt drawn into an idyll in which the most fabulous could happen. A fragile, beautiful world, enchanting, which could make one forget all pain. The way the patient gesticulated on the couch and traced the flight of the elves with her hands was very touching and girlish. I let myself be charmed a bit and felt quite connected with the patient and with her pain about her feeling that it was never enough).

(Quietly): "Yes, this is wonderful - You are just taking me with you into a paradise in which we could keep the pain out if we only could stay in it. If I wouldn't go with you in there or if I would leave this world, or if I would confront you again with reality, you would still have the elves who understand you better than I do."

P: (Crying quietly): "Why does it always have to be like that? I don't want to die without having had the experience of being really loved."

A (I think about how it must be to not feel loved at all and that this is possibly a universal experience for every human being sometimes. I am silent. The weeping of the patient becomes louder and more demanding, she is sobbing angrily and jerkily).

P: "How can you be like that? To just not answer?"

A (I feel a bit guilty because I – like the man who she is referring to – have not answered. At the same time I feel as if I should console the patient and love her if nobody else loves her. The pressure increases with every loud sob).

A: "Maybe you just felt I wasn't with you because I didn't say anything. And because I viewed your idyll a bit critically instead of simply being together with you at the creek. Then you get indignant, and the anger that you cannot make it that I stay with you in paradise increases the pain."

P (the weeping quiets down and ebbs away, she is silent quite long): "I then start to hate everybody".

A: "You think when the other is not totally with you, you are not loved at all."

P: "Yes." (prolonged pause): "I always see that as absolute. Maybe I exaggerate a bit."

Discussion

The patient escapes when disappointed (e.g. by my interpretation of the other day that she obviously seeks men with whom it is hard to sustain a relationship) into an idyll in which pain has no entry. I let myself be enchanted a bit by this idyll and by the corporeality between us ("blubb"), and I can empathise with the longing of the patient. At the same time I am aware that this idyll is "made" and has to be left again in favour of liveliness and livability. I transmit that to the patient in a way that makes her see that her desire to turn her back on the world is understandable. She transforms the pain about the border between her and the desired object into anger and into an attempt to force me to give her what she wants. I can sympathise with the anger but also make the patient understand what she is doing (wanting to force me). Both enable the patient to mitigate her feeling of abandonment. She can perceive more accurately that her hatred and her pain in absoluteness are not the whole reality. At the same time I share with her that her hatred doesn't kill me by we are talking about it. As a result she doesn't have to hate herself that much or fear that she will never be loved. In that process an intimacy arises in which mental touching takes place. Also the pain about not being able to have and keep in totality can subside and become more endurable.

Even though the limits between analyst and analysand are experienced as more severe in the session compared to everyday life, life in general is about learning to bear limitations and boundaries and about the acknowledgment that "being the furthest inside" can only exist as an ideal.

References

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