Fusion and Merger in Intimate Relationships

Black Butte Conference
Oregon, October 13-16, 1994

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FUSION AND MERGER IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding psychological and emotional union between two persons is a difficult undertaking. Our society and our profession values individuality and autonomy and is only beginning to value connection. For the most part, our psychoanalytic literature has focused on the pathology of dependent states with little focus on the healthy interdependence in coupling. To join in health with another, metaphorically or literally, is rarely examined.

This paper originates in my ongoing curiosity about the way primitive unfused states get lived out and healed in healthy adult relationships. The paper examines the dynamics in relationship that contribute to growth and development. It suggests healthy persons have un-integrated areas of the psyche that contribute to dysfunctional relating and offers suggestions for recognizing and working therapeutically with couples in crisis.

Even the healthiest person has moments when the un-integrated aspects of his or her personality are visible. No matter how healthy we are, or how well we function, there will be times when we regress to primitive states. There will be times when the stresses of our lives propel us backward to earlier more defensive postures that leave us functioning delusionally, and therefore, less efficiently with ourselves and others. These moments of primitive functioning are likely to appear first in our intimate relationships.

These regressions provide an opportunity to claim and integrate that which has been dissociated or repressed from our awareness. Such reclaiming can only occur within the container of a safe and supportive relationship. In times of stress, our most intimate relationships serve us. The other serves as a unifying and cohesive force to hold the Self together. The union enables us to function at our best in work or community because of the holding the relationship provides. The holding is possible because our partner remembers us over time, as healthy, as loving, as able to function.

It follows that our ability to make the most of ourselves is at least in part determined by our ability to choose lovers and friends who are good for us, who psychologically hold us when we fragment and disintegrate, and who energize us when we falter. This means our relationships can be healthy even when included in the union are primitive un-integrated aspects of the psyche that
are not integrated within the Self. Connecting intimately facilitates integration of these primitive aspects and promotes individuation. It promotes Self cohesion.

In thinking about the varieties of connection in relationship, I have been frustrated by a failure in the psychoanalytic literature to differentiate pathological joining from healthy joining. The literature does not have a word for healthy connection. In this paper, I use *fusion* to describe pathological union and *merger* to describe healthy union. I have deviated from the customary usages of these words in order to both recognize the depth of the healthy connection and to include the recognition of the pathology in everyday health. I believe the word *merger* accurately describes the ability of the healthy individual to join with another without loss of self and to come apart from that union without trauma, much like the lanes on a highway come together and separate.*

I am proposing a differentiation of the terms that I hope will prove clarifying. I am also suggesting that fusion and merger are two ends of a continuum that we all experience and that these modes of union are used to maintain self-cohesion. Fusion integrates a person temporarily while in contact with the Other. As a primary mode of relating, it facilitates functioning at the expense of individuation. Merger helps build internal structure, thereby healing less integrated parts and promoting ongoing integration. In this way, it promotes individuation.

My suggestion is that fusion be used in two ways: first, to describe intrapsychic cohesion of internal drive and affect states, and second, to describe interpersonal relating between persons who have not accomplished whole person functioning.*

(NOTE: The words fusion and merger are used interchangeably to speak of pathology. Sometimes in the same article, and even in the same paragraph or sentence, both words will be used. Presumably, they are intended to speak of the same process. For example, in a case presentation, Margaret Little (1989) describes a patient by saying:

Separateness was so far accepted, fusion, or merging, loss of identity has been more difficult. (p.73)

Taken out of context, her sentence is confusing. Even in context, I am not sure what she means.)

(NOTE: This usage is similar to the way Winnecott (1950-55, p.214) and Blanck and Blanck (1974, p.46) use the term.)
Winnecott* said:

We assume a fusion of aggressive and erotic components in health, but we do not always give proper significance to the pre-fusion era, and to the task of fusion. We may easily take fusion too much for granted, and in this way we get into futile arguments as soon as we leave the consideration of an actual case.

It must be conceded that the task of fusion is a severe one, that even in health it is an uncompleted task, and that it is very common to find large quantities of unfused aggression complicating the psychopathology of an individual who is being analyzed.

I also propose to use the word fusion to describe unconscious bonding between two people who have not yet managed to maintain whole object relationships.* I am choosing to use the same word for both of these experiences in that I see fusion as an attempt at integration. Fusion in interpersonal relationships also creates a temporary experience of integration that can be remembered and returned to. As such, fusion can provide an impetus for growth.

Intrapsychic fusion is an accomplishment for the infant. It signals the integration of aggression and Eros within the self and the recognition of the Other as outside the Self. It signals an inhabitation of the body and an ability to symbolize. Intrapsychic fusion plays an important role in reality testing, enabling the infant to differentiate inside from outside, body from environment, feeling from action, and self from other. Intrapsychic fusion brings about realization, personalization, and integration for the infant.*

The word fusion is also used to describe the interpersonal need for an object to complete the self. When there have been developmental arrests in early infancy that have resulted in unintegrated areas in the psyche, the use of an Other serves to cohere parts of the self and to maintain integration and functioning. The Other serves as holder of self, supplying memory

NOTE: Blanck and Blanck (1974, p 64), as well as Kohut, (1971, p 114; 1984, pp 184 & 185 ) use the word merger to denote this process.


NOTE: Winnecott, 1958, p 141
and desire. The Other influences motility, making it possible to activate and thereby accomplish the necessary tasks of adulthood. The Other also makes it possible to tolerate unintegrated affect, such as rage, terror, or self-hate.

Interpersonal fusion involves joining primitively and delusionally with another at a body level. The fusion makes a person psychically and unconsciously unable to differentiate Self from Other. Because the joining involves the coming together of two persons who feel incomplete, separation is difficult and traumatic. It is always painful and can be violent. As such, persons who are fused are locked in a static union that is rigid and inflexible. Growth and change occur slowly, if at all. Historically this degree of interpersonal fusion is seen to occur in the borderline states. However, I am proposing that interpersonal fusion occurs in all of us. Healthy persons, as well as unhealthy persons, have areas of unintegration in their psyches.

I am proposing that the word merger be used to designate the healthy coming together and moving apart of two whole persons in love. Love requires separation and coming together. In order to see the other clearly, we must both join and separate. This kind of joining, I call merger. Merger involves illusion, not delusion and becomes a basis for increased integration. Merger strengthens internal structure and fosters increased individuation and autonomy.

I am speaking of merger as the healthy use of an Other as a selfobject. I believe, with Kohut, that we continually need to be in relationship. Kohut describes a narcissistic line of development that stands outside of the borderline and psychotic conditions. Throughout life, healthy relationship enhances and expands the Self.

I am also proposing that our most intimate relationships involve a connection at our most primitive levels as well as at our most integrated levels. What gets acted out in relationship is often our least integrated parts.* Primitive unaccessed areas of the

NOTE: This usage differs from its current usage in the psychoanalytic literature (Blanck & Blanck, 1974; Kernberg, 1984, 1994; Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1981; Little, 1993; Winnicott, 1950) where merger is used to speak of archaic symbiotic yearnings.

NOTE: In other writing, I have called this, "connecting at the growth edge." (Eekhoff, 1992)
psyche are discovered in the intimacy of sexual union and body proximity. Nonverbal proximity invites previously unconscious fantasy to surface in a movement, a sigh, or an alteration of breathing. An attuned lover sees and reflects back what is present and perceived, enabling the realization, personalization, and integration of the unknown parts of the Self.

The value in this is an attempt at reparation. In a reparative relationship, we are able to access and to integrate unknown and unacknowledged parts of our Self. We are able to attach meaning and symbol to body memories. If we can prevent ourselves from dissociating or splitting from them and projecting these parts into our partner, we become better able to hold our own conflicts and anxieties and to activate our potentials. If our partner can reflect back to us our projections with a minimal amount of distortion, we can integrate those denied or disavowed parts of the Self.

Even when we do project into our partner, in a healthy relationship, there will be space for the Other to refute and refuse the projection. Each person will be able to hold onto their perception, even if each experiences something different from the Other. In this way, the ability to tolerate feeling and to tolerate ambivalence is strengthened. If we cannot process our interactions, nor prevent ourselves from taking on or giving back projections to the Other, we become caught in the cycle of re-wounding that occurs with fused couples. Reparation, if it occurs in fusion, is only partial.

When two people join in mutuality as equals, there is a dynamic nature to their relationship that promotes self growth, increased autonomy and individuality. The strength of the union holds the separateness of each person, making that person safe to explore all the facets of Self, thereby expanding the personal boundaries, strengthening internal Self structure, and realizing potential. In healthy relationship, there is a tension between autonomy and connection. Merger implies the ability to tolerate both ends of this spectrum: to be in harmony and be separate and autonomous, to value solitude and togetherness. The ability to tolerate ambivalence, to hold both persons in mind in solitude or union simultaneously, contributes to the joy in each.

The union provides more than just safety, however. It also provides pleasure. This pleasure is both physical and emotional and results in a transcendence of self, a movement to a more abstract, less concrete plane of existence where the senses, the emotions and the feelings hold equal value with the thoughts and ideas. In this way, the experiences of the body and the emotional capacity of the Self to tolerate feelings that arise from bodily
sensations determine the depth of the connection and the solidity of the union.

The union becomes a container for the experiences of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, weakness and health. It becomes a place where there is space for the two to play, to imagine, and to create. It provides a holding for the satisfaction of productive labor. This place becomes holy and sacred for it is unique and special to the two who have merged.

In the safety of the connection, differences can be held, valued, examined and altered. Each can venture far from that which is comfortable or known into unknown areas of delight or terror. Trusting the connection, each can push his or her own limits, waiting in the chaos that envelopes them for the clarity they know will follow, secure in the holding of the merger. The holding is a web that is tightly woven and strong because each person contributes all of it.

Although I believe that every relationship will contain both fusion and merger, the more successful dynamic relationships will function maturely with more merger and less fusion. Movement between the two modes of functioning is regulated by the internal and largely unconscious feelings of personal safety and absence of threat. Unintegrated areas in the psyche are discovered in relationship and in healthy relationships can be worked through in the safety of the holding environment of the union.

Moving in and out of and back and forth between fusion and merger occurs in relationship in much the same way that intrapsychically there is movement between the autistic-contiguous position, the paranoid-schizoid position, and the depressive position *. It is a movement between undifferentiation and differentiation, between body and symbol, between timelessness and timeliness, between spacelessness and space.

These shifts, or movements, between different modes of functioning are always in support of intrapsychic functioning. Understanding the reasons for interpersonal behavior can be enhanced by following the intrapsychic movement between undifferentiated and differentiated relating. In one, we are preobject or part object related and undifferentiated, and in the other, we are object related and differentiated.

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NOTE: Ogden, 1989
THE LIFE OF THE BODY

Contact between two people can only authentically occur when each is present to self and then to other. Being present to oneself requires an embodiment of the psyche. By this I mean that the person lives fully and intensely within the body. Full sensory and affective aliveness expresses itself as presence. Presence is felt as a vitality and fullness where affect and mental representation are not cut off from bodily sensation and functioning. Congruence between bodily and affective expression enables the self representations to be visible to oneself and for them to be owned and made available to the other.

When differentiating merger and fusion, it is important to identify both as they function in the body. Fusion occurs interpersonally as an uncompleted intrapsychic task that may be dissociated and out of awareness. Its presence is indicative of areas in the psyche where there is a lack of integration and an inability to symbolize. Because of this inability to symbolize, feeling frequently floods the person, making him or her unable to hold onto the Self during internal crisis. The Other then serves the function of metabolizing the feeling and returning it in manageable form, a temporary integrating function.

Without the ability to symbolize via dreaming, fantasy, verbal expression, or crying, anxiety and tension will discharge themselves in the body, via psychosomatic symptoms. The person will be "disaffected", unable to bring together feeling and verbal expression. This inability to "put into words" will result in a physical manifestation of the internal trauma.*

I am reminded of a highly successful accountant who came to me when her husband of seventeen years disclosed that he was having an affair the same week that she went in for a radical hysterectomy due to cancer. This client described years of believing she had a good marriage in spite of the facts she presented to the contrary. Even as she told me her story, she maintained that she was not angry nor upset with her husband. She intended to make her marriage work.

She told me her husband frequently stayed out all night and rarely ate dinner with the family. They had not had sex for over five years, nor did he touch her. They did not talk about anything except the practical details of maintaining a joint household. They did not argue. When he learned of her cancer, he

said nothing. On the day of her surgery, he didn’t drive her to the hospital or visit her later. She drove herself there and home again. Nor did he stay home with the children, rather he spent the time of her hospitalization with his mistress.

As I listened to her rapidly and unemotionally relay the facts, as she perceived them, I felt my body contract. My breathing became shallow and constricted. My heart hurt. My back ached. I could hardly sit with her, nor could I slow her down enough for my sake. I needed more time to be able to better tolerate her story. In spite of my response which I contained, she was uninvolved emotionally with her own story. There were no tears, nor any words that described emotions. She was also uninvolved with me. I felt as though I was not in the room. There was no space for me. I had become the container for her emotional and physical pain.

When I asked about physical symptoms, her face lit up. She told me she rarely talked about them all at once. She said she currently had five specialists treating her case. Besides the cancer, she reported sleep and appetite disturbance, irritable bowel syndrome, allergies, sinus infection, migraine headaches, stomach "spasms", intestinal contractions, stiffness in her arms and legs and overall general fatigue.

Bodily clues such as those described by my client are the only communications of distress possible for "the disaffected." Such persons do not have words for their distress, nor do they link feeling and experience. Instead they express their psychic pain in physical symptoms. Any and all physical manifestations have meaning to the psyche.

Energetically, the fused person can be deadened or hyperactivated or some combination of the two. It is not uncommon to observe both the manic defense and the deadened "numbness" in the same person, as demonstrated in the case just mentioned. The alternating energetic expression depends upon the reaction to the Other as well as the response of the Other, even when the other is seemingly ignored. Both behaviors involve the use of energy to maintain the defense and to illicit fusion in the partner.

Because people who merge do not need to use their energy to maintain a defensive interpersonal fusion, they will appear more grounded. They will have a vitality and spontaneity that invites participation, without demanding fusion. Such persons express themselves congruently. Feelings and behavior and verbal expression fit each other.
The senses relate to a perception of Self. Each of the senses function to hold and integrate the Self. Early, preverbal trauma will deposit itself in the body as a body memory, that has no words. Therefore, what is held by the senses can be a primitive defense or a mature way of being in relationship. Whichever it is or in whatever combination it is found, the senses and the way they are experienced in the body are used to maintain the self structure.

Vision is both an actual sensual experience and a metaphor. Clients prone to fusion typically will use eye contact or lack of it to control the distance or closeness of any interpersonal situation. They may close their eyes and feel themselves disappearing or believe that the Other can’t see them if their eyes are closed in a primitive reenactment of early childhood cognitive functioning. They may avoid eye contact or actively seek it out as an induction for the Other.

A borderline male client looked intensely at me as I met him in the waiting room. His gaze stayed focused on my face as we seated ourselves in my office. After a moment’s silence, he said "what are you reading?" attempting to take me into him and have me speak for him. I commented that I thought he was reading me. He said he was reading me reading him and wanted to know how he was.

Clients who merge, who can move in and out of contact without losing themselves, are less fearful of eye contact. They too manage to use it to regulate distance. The difference is in the internal awareness of self-control and self cohesion. Healthy relating involves an awareness of both simultaneously without a loss of either Self.

Touching is a sensation that serves to clarify Self from Other. It defines Self, while discovering Otherness. The skin as a boundary to the self and as the sensate collector of touch serves to protect and delight us. However, persons who have fused object relations frequently have deadened themselves to touch or use touch to reintegrate the Self. Frequently, at a point of disintegration in a session, clients will reach out to touch my hand and calm in contact.

Such persons have bodies that are tight and rigid and the expression of the rigidity can be found in their lack of pleasure in touch. Either touch floods them with feeling that is too intense to appreciate or it does little to affect them. They feel nothing. This polarity will extend inevitably into their sexual expression which may be limited and unimaginative or compulsive and addictive. Either has a dissociative element.
Sound and Movement are connected in the beating and rhythm of the heart. Infants comfort themselves by feeling the maternal heartbeat and clients report to me that the ticking of the clock in my office comforts or discomforts them depending on their affective state. Rhythmic patterns, including those of the sound and sensation of breathing are life affirming. The surety of rhythmic breathing comforts and promotes self constancy. This movement or the illusion of movement can be perceived as safe, but more often in fused object relationships, the fluidity of movement is threatening. There is a need to create something else or to shut down, shut off, and stop what is happening in order to feel safe. Contracting against the experience involves breathing shallowly.

A not uncommon symptom of clients who fuse is a difficulty breathing and a history of breathing illness. Breathing, taking in and out, is our earliest regulator. It is reassuring and comforting. Breath is our life’s force and in holding our breath, we cut off sensation in orgasm, in touch and taste and smell. We limit and control our energy. In this way, controlling breathing, controls the amount of feeling in the body and in awareness of the Other. This is true for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is a confusion between inner and outer reality and a terror of both.

Pat is a woman who believes her mother did not want her. She was born when her mother was in her mid-forties and has siblings ten and twelve years older than she. Frequently she confused an inner fantasy of emptiness with an outer experience of being cut off from others. She has had numerous illnesses involving her lungs, everything from pneumonia to bronchitis to asthma. Her lungs frequently collapse causing her immediate panic attacks and intense pain. Recently, surgery was required to correct the malfunctioning.

One of Pat’s early memories is of standing at the foot of the couch watching her sleeping mother to make sure she was breathing. Following a cathartic experience in my office, she wrote:

\[
\text{Life’s Breath} \quad \text{Life} = \text{Breath}
\]

I’m not sure I can find words for this experience. The hollow that opens up in your floor is a dangerous and frightening place. I felt my body close off so I could not breathe and a sense of panic set it (sic in). I recognized this state (I am not sure it is the state or the place) as death. I needed to keep my eyes open. I needed to stay vigilant or I would slip away - disappear, yet my eyes kept wanting to shut and I would force them open again. Finally, I gave in and came into myself. Rather than disappear, my
breathing became steadier and calmed the panic and I was able to return to your office.

Then you mentioned my watching my mother's breath when I was a child, the tears came like a violent kick in the stomach. I don't know what that is about. I am left with a sense that at some point in my life someone tried to kill me. Sounds like the plot of a pulp novel.

Pat's fantasy of leaving my office during her panic and her inability to breathe as the feeling flooded into her was connected to her belief that she had to disappear in order to be loved by her mother.

To tolerate sensation, sound, light and color is to contain via mental representation, not only the physical sensation, but what each sensation and combination of sensation has come to mean within the psyche. To tolerate sensation and meaning, to be fully alive and embodied, requires an ability to tolerate the Self reflected in the Other. Ironically, a merger enhances one's ability to tolerate sensation and knowing while a fused relationship closes down on the possibilities, in an attempt at holding the physical and emotional experience of living static.

OBJECT USAGE

In our interpersonal relationships, the nature of our intrapsychic functioning reveals itself by the way in which we use the other as object. The mature and integrated individual, regardless of character type, relates in a balanced way that results in space for two people in the relationship. There are two whole and autonomous selves in relationship, joining to form a third thing: the relationship. There is an "I", a "you" and a "We".

The developing child's ability to hold both father and mother in mind without annihilating anxiety is dependent upon the earlier relationship between mother and child. It is in the first relationship that the idea of a third emerges. This emerges as both mother and child experience themselves in the context of the relationship and gain knowledge of themselves through the interplay between them. As both hold the relationship separate from themselves, the child gains perspective on himself. He is able to have a sense of self that allows for the holding of fantasy and reality.*

NOTE: Ogden, 1994, writes about this in Subjects of Analysis.
In immature relating, there is room for only one person in the relationship. A psychologically immature person relates to others either as objects to be used or as objects who will use them. At any given moment one person is predominantly in control while the other is subsumed. In some fused relationships, there is little change in the structure. Each plays the same rigid role without alterations. In others, there is a turn-taking that occurs with first one, then the other submitting in service of the relationship. Whichever the case, both are fused.

Whether a couple stays in locked patterns of dominance or takes turns dominating each other, fused object usage involves an inability to hold the other in mind as separate and distinct from self. Nor is it possible to hold both self and other in mind simultaneously. To do so would be to face the projected parts of the self and to feel the terror of annihilation and the emptiness of the interior landscape. In interpersonal fusion, there is no difference between symbol and symbolized, between Self and Other. Often what is unconsciously motivating each member is the primacy of the relationship because the relationship allows for a feeling of wholeness.

In the first instance of finding objects to be used, the Other is used for personal gain: feeding grandiosity, bolstering self-esteem, maintaining self image, and deflecting intense and powerful feelings of inadequacy, weakness, self hate, and powerlessness out of awareness. In the second of finding objects who will use them, the Other takes precedence over the Self, deflecting the focus away from Self and onto Other. The needs of the Other are met as a way of not owning personal need and longing. The Other becomes the recipient of all good feelings and the Self is sacrificed in order to maintain a delusion of personal strength, independence, desirability, and importance.

In both instances, because a person cannot tolerate an awareness of unIntegrated parts, the unwanted part is projected outward into the Other. This process maintains internal equilibrium and serves to cohere the fragmented self. Because both the Self and the Other cannot be "held in mind", one takes precedence over the other. There is a delusion of autonomy and intimacy that masks the dependency of both upon the other. There is also an inability to tolerate any difference for difference in the other is a threat to the fusion, the relationship, and ultimately to the Self.

An example of this can be seen in my work with a couple who were struggling with issues of sexual intimacy. In one instance, he described approaching her for lovemaking, feeling his physical need in a particularly intense way. He described coming to bed, finding her asleep and touching her breasts and her belly,
responding to her stirring with more longing and moving quickly to kiss her, to mount her and to penetrate her. He told me he became angry when she "just laid there," and jerked away, rolled over, and eventually left the bed angry as she slept beside him.

She reported a very different experience. She said that somewhere deep in her sleep, she could feel him touching her. She said she responded, first internally, feeling herself open to him, feeling the softness of his hands, the slow awakening of her body. She said she really did not awaken, yet felt her body receiving him and languorously enjoyed his wanting her. She said she was just awakening, moving into consciousness, when he became angry and jerked away. She felt abandoned, shocked, surprised and hurt when he responded to her saying his name by leaving the bed and the room.

In processing their very different experiences, he remained angry and rejecting of her, saying he would not initiate again. She felt saddened by this, telling him she felt she needed to "be you and respond as you would" in order for him to enjoy their love making. I wondered if he had been able to read her mind and know of her responsiveness to him, if that would have helped. He insisted that it would not. He wanted her to want him "in the same way" he wanted her.

Over the course of several months of treatment, he and she were both better able to tolerate their differences. He came to believe they could be different in their responses to lovemaking and still make love. Both came to recognize the way in which they had projected their unwanted parts into the other: he projected his fear of sexual intimacy and dislike of his body's sexual needs into her: she projected her aggressive sexual longings into him, both disowned the Other as a reflection of their unknown selves.

The internal maintenance of one's sense of self is the primary motivating factor in object choice. We seek a love object that will uphold our internal images of ourselves. If this unconscious image is one of inadequacy, we will choose someone to maintain that belief for us by criticizing us and pointing out our faults. If it is one of grandiosity, we will choose someone who adores us and idealizes us and sacrifices themselves for us.

TRANSITIONAL SPACE

Our ability to tolerate separateness in relationship is at least in part dependent upon our internal landscape and our experience of our own internal fantasy and reality. If we have had good enough parenting, our internal landscape will seem to be rich and textured and filled with known and unknown entities. We may
experience a curiosity about them and an occasional dread of uncovering something unacceptable in ourselves, but we will not deny the importance of our internal selves to our sense of ourselves.

We will think of ourselves as moving out of our internal selves into the world. Internal motivation and a familiarity with our own processes will contribute to our valuing what we have even without knowing exactly what that is. Our knowing will be grounded in our physical sensations and in the life of our bodies and translated to our feeling, our thinking, our language, and our behavior.

If our parents have faltered (and all parents do falter), we may experience our internal landscapes as barren and empty. This emptiness will be terrifying to us and we may wipe from consciousness any awareness of "the void". We will be anxious. If we even can think about it, we may then feel that our internal emptiness provides us no guide for action, but rather is something to be avoided, denied, and hidden from others. If we cannot "think" about it, the anxiety will reveal itself in our disaffectedness or in psychosomatic symptoms.* We will perceive of our unconscious as something alien and of no practical value to us.

We will find any external evidence of open space as discomforting and anxiety provoking. We will be unable to tolerate its existence. Our lack of tolerance for open space may reveal itself by an avoidance of silence, inactivity, relaxation, solitude, or self reflectiveness. This will effect the way in which we relate to our physical selves as well as to how we relate somatically and affectively to the Other.

Persons who fuse cannot tolerate their own internal spaces. They have a high need to know, to have control, to be clear. There is no doubt or ambivalence in them. Rather they maintain their sense of themselves by forcing others to conform to their version of reality. Behaviorally they cannot tolerate silence nor ambiguity. Not knowing is akin to moving into the void. The opposite response can also be seen: they will look to the Other for control, guidance, knowing and avoid having to face their own deadness and lack of motility.

Physically, they may demand their own space while violating the physical space of others. They may be cut off from their own bodily sensations or need drugs and alcohol to numb what

sensations they do have. Sexual perversions become attempts at discharging unwanted and unintegrated affects and can be used to integrate temporarily. Sex can be used as an attempt to join with the other and maintain the delusion of "no space" between them without being an experience of two distinct persons coming together.

The shared reality of a fused couple is extremely difficult to challenge for it is bound by unconscious fusion that serves to maintain self functioning and to deny the threat of disintegration. Any threat to the fusion of the relationship is a threat of disintegration of the self. However, awareness of this threat to self is denied by attributing the discomfort to the behavior of the Other and to the importance of maintaining the relationship. Without the relationship, each feels isolated and terrified. Therefore what happens consciously or unconsciously for each member of the couple is that the relationship becomes primary, more important than either of its members.

Couples who merge as a primary mode of relating are better able to tolerate separateness and space between them. They move in and out of themselves and each other. Differences are to be explored and attuned to as sources of discovery. One couple who was able to stay connected in spite of differences were discussing an argument they had following his disappointment in her. He said: The funny thing is I have felt much closer to her these past few weeks. It’s ironic because she has in fact been telling me what she doesn’t like about me and my relationship with my daughter. I think it’s so, because I know her better. I know what she feels and why.

There is an openness to the Other that invites the other in and recognizes the impact. Ogden (1993) in a different context, speaking of what a reader does when reading a book, describes this experience as:

...one of the most mysterious of human experiences and one of the most commonplace - it is the experience of doing battle with one’s static self-identity through the recognition of a subjectivity (a human I-ness) that is other to oneself. The confrontation with alterity will not let us rest: that perception of the other I-ness once perceived will not allow us to remain who we were and cannot rest until we have somehow come to terms with its’ assault on who we had been prior to being interrupted by it.*

Merging then requires an ability to both stand together and to

NOTE: Ogden, 1994, p 3.
stand apart, to unite and to separate. It is an act of imagination that links Self to Other. Parting creates a space between persons which mirrors the internal space between reality and fantasy in each of us. As such, it is welcomed as necessary solitude that enriches the Self and the Other, thereby facilitating the Union.

Winnicott has said that I is the most aggressive of words. The statement, "I am " automatically implies a separation between self and other and in the separation is at once celebration and loss. The ability to tolerate the loss of the other and to celebrate the I is dependent upon the internal ability to tolerate the space between fantasy and reality.

Such space is the area of play, of imagination, of creation. It makes possible the dynamic interaction between two persons and stimulates the ongoing growth and development, separation and individuation of both. In this way joining and parting facilitates individuation. In merger, we bring what is inside to an object on the outside and we mingle Selves, leaving both forever altered. In this way, merger is a creative act.

Eigen (1993) in the Electrified Tightrope said:

The self moving between spacelessness and space is transitional. What a beautiful thing it is to help a person open and work with his capacity to vanish-return, empty-fill, fall apart-come together. One comes through catastrophe after catastrophe.*

What Eigen is saying about therapy can be as easily be applied to a healthy loving relationship, a merger. No therapist or lover can help another move through these spaces without merging, coming together with the Other and coming out again. Space and spacelessness are two parts of merger. It is the moving back and forth, the "coming through" that strengthens the Self.

TIME

The element of time is particularly important in differentiating fusion and merger. By time, I mean that which exists in relation to other things. To be aware of time, is to fully value the transitoriness and preciousness of the moment while holding on to its context within the past and the future. To be aware of time is to embrace what is and mourn what is lost, to grieve and let go, to know and recognize change without attempting to hold reality static. To be in the moment is to focus intensely on what is without the perspective of what was or will be.

NOTE: Eigen, 1993, p 265
A relationship, the creation of threeness or of the "we", involves bringing together the internal and the external of two separate individuals in a transitional space over time. What is brought together over time comes to take on meaning, to gain significance, to represent the "we". The over time part is important because it differentiates a connection from a meeting and implies an attachment. It also implies distance and separation.

Connections develop and grow and are maintained by the accumulation of meaningful interaction. Meetings happen between strangers, between two people who are not accumulating experience. By accumulation, I mean that mutual experience is stored in the memory of two persons and gains significance in a mutually defined manner for both and for the union. The accumulation of intimacy results in an increased depth and scope of attachment which in turn accounts for an increasing ability to hold the mutual space sacred. Once sacred, one is able to rely on it in the future. It assures constancy.

The ability to hold the Other in mind over time carries with it the ability to repair that which was damaged at an earlier time. The accumulation of experience allows for disappointment and disillusionment without the destruction of the connection. Anger can be tolerated and worked through in relationship because of all that has gone before and because of the assumption of a future. Instead of accommodating or disconnecting from the Other, the two assimilate and incorporate, become changed and impacted by the relationship.

It is possible for two people to meet again and again, to experience sexual and bodily pleasure one with the other, but to not give meaning to it and therefore to not store it in context to an accumulated holding environment. Meetings do not contain. Connections are bonds that accumulate and form holding environments that are bigger and stronger than either of the participants. They endure beyond the moment. They build the container of the relationship.

Persons engaged in fused object relating have difficultly holding the entire relationship in mind over time. They confuse the relationship, as well as the Other, with the Self and engage in behaviors that destroy what they hate. They hate that which they do not value in themselves, in the other, and in the relationship. Hate destroys what was good in the relationship and it interferes with the accumulation of meaning through devaluing experience.

Fusing with another in order to feel whole is a hostile act. It involves destroying parts of the Self and parts of the Other
in order to maintain intrapsychic balance. In its extreme form, it serves to discard unacceptable parts of the self into another and then attempt to control it in the other and involves projective identification.

As a result feelings are perceived as facts that apply to both persons, not just the person experiencing them. Feelings and facts are not differentiated in context of the whole history of the relationship. Rather the moment takes on the importance of the whole and does not relate to past or future. Whereas the moment then may have an intensity that is unmatched in experience, it is fleeting and not grounded in the reality or context of time. Dissociation and splitting occur along with coming together and interfere with self cohesion.

Object constancy develops with the consistency and reliability of the Other and the relationship over time. It involves the recognition of the self and the recognition of the other as having separate but connected experiences. The areas of reference to time are accumulation of experience and meaning, historicity of experience, object constancy, as well as the ability to remember and give meaning to behavior.

IDEALIZATION

It seems impossible to speak of fusion and merger without also addressing the phenomenon of idealization. Kohut speaks eloquently of the human need to idealize and to find in the other what is perceived of as lost to the self. Through the process of idealization and incorporation, the self increases in its functioning capacity by internalizing that which was outside and bringing it into the internalized landscape of the Self.

Idealization serves an important function in holding and maintaining the cohesion of the self. Through the process of transmuting internalization, disappointment in the idealized Other results in the creation of the longed for ideal within the Self. What was imagined as available outside is developed inside. This process is interfered with in fused relationships.

It is interfered with because the idealization contains a delusion of the interior and is not integrated into the reality of the Other. To maintain the delusion, it is necessary to hold onto the idealization at all costs. Disillusionment which serves to clarify the reality of each person and to invite growth and development cannot be tolerated. This means that the connection is static and dead and each person remains relatively unimpacted by the Other.
The devaluing of Other or the defensive idealization of Other becomes a rigid code of behavior that must be adhered to and allows no alteration. To admit disappointment in the Other is to cause violence to break out in the relationship. Often if physical violence is avoided, psychological violence is not. There is a high need for power and control. The idealization, once broken, threatens the existence of the internal delusion. Since the delusion of perfection in the Other must be maintained to prevent temporary psychosis, the relationship is broken. The rift becomes irreparable and results in the eventual break up of the relationship.

Defensive idealization is unrealistic and delusional. It involves a denial of self power and a projection of the ideal outside of the self. Defensive idealization occurs in fused object relating as a means of maintaining the illusion of perfection in the Other. It falsely bolsters self esteem by reifying characteristics both of the Other and of the Self in contact with the Other. The association itself takes on ideal proportions and no entrance of reality is tolerated.

Information that threatens the idealization is denied or minimized and once accepted into awareness results in disillusionments that bring chaos, confusion, despair and emotional flooding. The flooding contributes to the inability to tolerate the reality of the Other. Inherent in the idealization is a demand for action: the Other is in charge of the emotional well-being of the Self. Inherent in the idealization is a fear of change: the Other is charged with maintaining the status quo.

Healthy idealization is possible between two merged individuals who are able to tolerate differences and value autonomy. The external trait can be accepted and tolerated without threat to the Self or to the union. The illusion of greatness found in the other serves to stimulate the Self to achieve to its potential.

Disillusionment occurs within the time and space of a larger relationship and as such can be managed via grief, acknowledging the loss of the ideal, internalizing the ideal, and remaining connected to the Other. Disillusionment brings about growth and change without the loss of the relationship.

In merger, the idealization moves to internalizing at the moment of disappointment. The self recognizes the ideal as valued and as possible, internally: if not externally with the other. The disillusionment serves as an activator, pushing the self to new and different behaviors that increase self structure and increase competency. The activation can occur because the Self values change and can grieve losses without disconnecting from the lover.
Frequently lovers who seek therapy complain about their inability to communicate. Whereas this statement is almost inevitably true, it is not the communication, per se, that is the problem. Rather, it is more likely to be the fusion that poor communication represents. Persons who have unintegrated aspects in their personalities will frequently use language as an attempt to "hang onto" the parts of the self.

This is accomplished either by excessive intellectualization where speech is marked by wordiness and a high degree of abstractness or by wordiness that is notable for the extreme amount of concrete detail that seems to go nowhere. There may be a continual attempt to get the Other to agree with a certain viewpoint and no tolerance of difference. In extreme cases, there will be an inability to hear what the Other has said.

A friend told the story of meeting her lover's father for the first time and attempting to tell him about herself. He had heard that her parents were Baptists and remarked about how happy he was that his son had found a "good Christian girl." My friend explained that she was not a Baptist. He went on telling her how important religion was. She said she was not a Christian. He went on telling her that similar values meant better relationships. The third time my friend said that she was spiritual but not religious. Her boyfriend's father continued in the same vein, denying what she had said. She commented on how difficult it was to stay clear and how she had noticed her voice getting softer and softer the longer the conversation continued.

Often clients with a tendency to fuse will misuse language. Using language in an inaccurate way, being vague and unclear seems to foster the fusion. The Other is drawn in by attempting to understand and "fill in the blanks." They may use shortcuts like "and stuff" "like that" "you know" "all that" "it" when what they mean is unclear to a neutral observer, but understood by the romantic partner. They may say "you" when they mean "I"; "us" when they mean "me"; "they" when they mean "her". They expect to be understood. When gently probed, their vagueness collapses into confusion or undifferentiated anger. They may "fog" and appear blank. They may attack your ability to help them if you don't know what they mean or they may simply not hear your request for clarification.

In mostly healthy clients, this misuse of language occurs usually during stress. Less functional clients, who use language well normally, will make some surprising language errors. For example, a high functioning borderline woman who discovered herself too
quickly in a relationship with a man who was not what he said he was, described her fear of him by saying: 
I'm feeling paranoid and trustworthy. This is the time in a relationship where I would normally leave and he's still here. I was actually scared to sleep in the house without him on Saturday. I feel safe with him. He asks me where all this stuff is coming from. He says he just wants to coast, which sounds healthy to me.

Note the shifts between herself and him, the mixed antecedents, the confused contradictions. These indicate the permeability of her boundaries and her shifting in and out of herself during this paragraph. She is confused about what is her and what is him as well as what is inside of her and what is outside of her.

Communication between lovers is often without words. Sometimes one or two words will be enough to let the other "in". Sentences remain unfinished. This vague communication can mark either fusion or merger. However, if it is the primary mode of communication, it will most likely signal a relationship that has more fusion than merger. Any attempt to clarify the meaning will be met with frustration and anger. The vagueness serves as a cover, protecting both partners from the differences in the other. Because difference is perceived as separateness and separateness as a lack of connection, differences signal a threat to the relationship and to the Self.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper has attempted to differentiate interpersonal fusion and merger in intimate relationships. Differentiating the two allows us as clinicians to value and hold what is health in our clients and to consciously move in and out of joining with them so as to foster the development of internal structure and the realization and personalization of the Self. Fostering merger enables our clients to individuate and stay connected to their partners. The balance is maintained between autonomy and connection, between separation and intimacy.

Understanding the degree of interpersonal fusion present in a couple we are working with takes time and careful observation of how each relates to the other, how both relate to us, and how they use language between themselves and with us. Noticing what works and what does not work in a therapeutic encounter provides information about the degree of interpersonal fusion and guides us in our verbal and nonverbal interventions.

Acknowledging theoretically that there is fusion and merger in every relationship aids the therapist in creating a holding environment that will facilitate structural change and
development in each person as well as in the couple. This is most readily accomplished by holding the union "in mind". By holding the union in mind, the therapist creates a safe place for the individual to emerge from the fusion and for the merger to contain the resultant anxiety.

I accomplish this first and foremost internally and bodily within myself. When I notice a pull towards one or the other member of the union, I mark it silently and wonder whether this is a place where the two collude with each other via their projections and projective indentifications or whether this is a place of collision where they are locked in a struggle for individuation. The appropriate timing of a naming or an interpretation may not be until much later.

Behaviorally, I hold the union of the couple by: 1) honoring their spoken request regarding their relationship, 2) gathering information about their initial attraction, their length of courtship, and their first disillusionment. This aids me in understanding their union as it has developed. I learn about their ideals, their ability to tolerate disillusionment, their ability to grieve and remain connected. I am able to "get inside" and create a space, to become the "third". 3) I interpret to the union. Only rarely, will I interpret to one of the members; rather I assume, until proven otherwise, that what is true of one is true of the other, what is said about one belongs to both. In this way, I come quickly to the points of impasse: the collusions and collisions that make collaboration difficult.

Often clients that appear relatively high functioning will surprise us when their primitive states appear. Assumptions that they have made about each other and their relationship cover unconscious projections that defy interpretation and confrontation and seemingly cannot be reintegrated. Words do little to clarify or disentangle the impasse.

Differentiation of fusion and merger is particularly important in helping to choose treatment methods. Because intrapsychic fusion is a largely preverbal task, interpersonal fusion is a preoedipal and therefore preverbal defense. As such, treatment methods that attempt to use interpretation as the primary intervention are less likely to be effective than treatments that recognize preverbal defenses as requiring holding in nonverbal ways.

This means that the primary choices to be made in treatment are about the treatment frame, actively engaging or not activeing engaging, touching or not touching, joining or not joining, and explaining or not explaining. Whereas the ultimate treatment goal is to differentiate Self from Other, thereby strengthening
the relationship, interpretation that does more than name the situation will be largely useless when fusion is present. The only value lies in the holding function interpretation serves, as the sound of the voice, the tone in which it is delivered, and the understanding of the therapist will register with the clients, whereas the interpretation may not. Timing then becomes crucial. Another holding function is the presence of the therapist as an observing other, "the third". This creates the possibility of transitional space.

Not naming fusion as it occurs in our offices means we may be caught unawares by the development of a psychotic transference. Or we may be in the midst of a partial fusion that needs holding before it can be interpreted. Such occurrences leave our clients locked in their defenses and us, as therapists, blocked in our efforts to interpret. This is true because fusion occurs at a body level and at a nonverbal level. As such, interpretations are useless in that they come before an ability to name. Naming must happen first and naming requires a space between Self and Other.

It is at this point in the treatment that active intervention such as bioenergetic exercises, gestalt role plays, two and three chair interventions, and communication training become helpful. I believe that such interventions are "fusing" with the clients. Moving into an active intervention supports unconscious fantasies of being understood and taken care of by an idealized Other. Naming the need and explaining the purpose and goals of the process, while not necessarily understood in the moment, serve as a bridge between primitive and less primitive functioning.

As therapists involved in "the talking cure", we must facilitate the development of a sense of self, involving a space within the psyche for observing and noticing body and psychic experience, before we can facilitate a space between ourselves and our clients. Once these two therapeutic tasks have been accomplished, our words will have more meaning for our clients. Interpretations will then "hold".

Merger on the other hand, assumes a differentiation between Self and Other and an ability to symbolize and use language to make meaning out of experience. Clients who operate primarily in this manner will benefit from our interpretations. Whether or not they tell us, they may resent, as intrusive, our attempts to try active interventions, to explain, or to teach.

Clients who vacillate between fusion and merger will perhaps present the greatest challenge for us. At one moment they will require one thing from us and at another, something entirely different. We may be tempted, by our own narcissistic needs to
make a difference or to be clever with our interpretations, to notice the merger and not the fusion.

Clinical experience has taught me to look for and respond to language usage, projections and introjections, as well as body language when working with couples. I also look for "parallel play". By that I mean often two tracks of conversation are proceeding towards me simultaneously without either speaker appearing to notice the disjointedness.

In a recent session with a couple arguing over step-parenting issues, I noticed that she was complaining to me about her husband's habit of making unilateral decisions "like he always does" and expecting her to carry them out. He responded by saying that he was a very literal and concrete person and when she tells him "a part of the relationship has died", he takes that seriously and withdraws, ruminates on the loss of the relationship and becomes angry and resentful. Both were satisfied with this exchange.

I alone felt like the subject had been changed from her upset about his decision to his feeling bad about her statements. She added that there was "no space for me in this relationship." I felt like there was no space for me in the therapeutic relationship and waited for an opening.

The biggest difficulty technically is finding an opening for the intervention. This is true of both verbal and nonverbal interventions. Initially it is often necessary to get inside of the fusion in order to experience the projections and introjections and to take on the "joint feelings and beliefs" of the couple. The challenge is to be able to move in and out of the fusion at will, not remaining enmeshed in the system thereby perpetuating an impasse.

In the above example, the couple have clearly worked out a pattern of interacting that is comfortable and satisfying to them. Each appeared satisfied and even appeased by the interaction. Each felt heard by the other. The fact that neither was asking for nor receiving any response from the other did not get noticed although I silently took it to mean that I too should "listen and be satisfied". The unconscious fusion of two people who were reporting a disconnection between them is shaken when a third person reports a different experience.

Finding analytic space can in and of itself feel like a threat to a couple's relationship. To point out the parallel nature of the above conversation, as I did do, resulted first in anger at me, then in despair regarding the relationship. Holding the union in mind served as a bridge between both feelings.
Another time, with a different couple in an earlier phase of treatment, I might hold my observation and use the relating of the story as a way of holding both as separate and the couple as a unit. When listening to two versions of the same story, I may look for the common theme, articulate the links, (as I did in the above instance by searching for the associations in each person that led to their statements) as well as hold both individuals in mind while I value the unit.

Clarifying the difference between fusion and merger in interpersonal relationships enables us as therapists to assess and interpret more clearly the dynamics of couple relationships and to hold the couple relationship while the fusion is explored and the merger is supported. This is particularly important when working with fused couples in that the relationship attains preeminence in the unconsciousness (and sometimes the consciousness) of the couple, and any attempt to untie the fusion is perceived as a threat to the relationship and to the Selves of its members.
My position on fusion and merger is perhaps most effectively summarized via the following chart. The chart is not meant to show polarities. Rather there is a movement, shifting back and forth between positions on the fusion-merger continuum that serves to meet the individual needs of the moment.

**FUSION AND MERGER IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

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<th>MERGER</th>
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<td>Whole Object Relating</td>
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<td>Obsession</td>
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<td>Mind/body split</td>
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<td>Feelings are Facts</td>
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<td>Incongruity of Affect &amp; language &amp; Behavior</td>
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<td>Vague &amp; Unclear Communication</td>
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<td>No separateness</td>
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<td>Isolation</td>
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<td>&quot;Two for One&quot;</td>
<td>Two for Two makes Three</td>
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<td>Flooding &amp; Acting Out</td>
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<td>Acting out of the Shadow</td>
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