The Discourses of Intimacy: Adding A Social Constructionist and Feminist View*

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Though most people desire intimacy in their primary relationships, it is more elusive than not. I argue that people's assumptions about intimacy interfere with their creation of it. Using a social constructionist and feminist perspective, two prevailing discourses of intimacy that shape our ideas about intimacy are identified and critiqued. Both tend to direct attention away from an assessment of particular interactions to a global assessment of the capacity of an individual or a relationship to provide intimacy. An alternative is proposed in which intimacy is conceptualized as built up from single intimate or non-intimate interactions that can produce a variety of experiences, including connection and domination. My critique of the two discourses of intimacy rests fundamentally on the belief that they obscure crucial distinctions that a discourse of intimacy as meaning-making would reveal, in particular, that there are politics nestled in the heart of intimacy.

Fam Proc 30:285–305, 1991

* I am grateful for the comments of Carol Becker, Michele Bograd, Richard Chasin, Christine Gilman, Rachel Hare-Mustin, Judith Kates, SallyAnn Roth, and Hilary Worthen on an earlier draft of this article. I also wish to acknowledge conversations over the years with William Kates, Victor Weingarten, and Hilary Worthen who have contributed to my perspectives on this topic.

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Bertrand Russell walks to G.E. Moore's house and, upon entering, notices that Moore has a basket in his lap: "Moore," I said, "Do you have any apples in that basket?" "No," he replied, and he smiled seraphically as was his wont. "Moore," I said, "Do you then have *some* apples in that basket?" "No," he replied. "Moore," I said, "Do you then have *apples* in that basket?" "Yes," he replied. And from that day forth, we remained the very closest of friends.

—Adapted from *Beyond the Fringe* (5)

INTIMACY—both one's experience of it and ideas about it—connotes a vast area of thought and feeling. Like so many other aspects of life, the maps one uses to understand, explore, and guide one through the territory of intimacy are changing. Whereas the dictionary can give a definition of intimacy, one's associations to its meaning are much more complex. One's associations, attunement to the word "intimacy" vary with the kinds of meaning—written, spoken, gestural, and symbolic—that one shares.

Schaefer and Olson (54) note that intimacy is an overriding cultural value. Wynne and Wynne (67) discuss intimacy within an epignetic framework, arguing that the current historical emphasis on intimacy "stands in stark contrast to the rarity with which intimacy has been regarded as important . . . in other settings and times" (p. 384). Though most people long for intimacy, and this desire in one way or an-

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other—is brought into family therapy meetings by clients, there is remarkably little written about intimacy in the family therapy field. Doherty and his colleagues (12) analyzed 13 models of family therapy based on chapters from Gurman and Kniskern's (30) *Handbook of Family Therapy* and from discussions with the authors; they found only five models that placed a primary emphasis on intimacy, defined as self-disclosure, friendship, and in-depth personal sharing. In *The Language of Family Therapy: A Systemic Vocabulary and Sourcebook* (55), intimacy is not listed as a key word. Schaefer and Olson (54) point out that the research literature has "barely paused to clearly conceptualize" the nature of intimacy (p.47). There is virtually no writing on intimacy, per se, by family therapists using a social constructionist view, and only a few pieces from a feminist view (7, 23, 25, 31, 41, 47, 61), the two theoretical perspectives I use in this article.

This is an era in which people increasingly say they desire intimacy but bemoan that it eludes them. Therapists commonly hear accounts of non-intimacy that may be banal or brutal. In this article I take the position that, in part, people are handicapped in their efforts to produce the intimacy that they desire in their relationships by assumptions about intimacy that interfere with their creation of it. I propose an alternative way of thinking about and understanding intimacy that shifts attention away from a global assessment of the capacity of an individual for intimacy, and away from the global assessment of the quality of a relationship. Instead, I suggest that attention be turned toward understanding how single intimate and non-intimate interactions are produced. By doing so, people may feel more empowered to create intimate interactions and more able to do something about non-intimate interactions.

From a social constructionist perspective (17), which is one of the theoretical paradigms I will be using to map my view of intimacy, people's thinking and understanding shift in relation to the vicissitudes of social processes, processes whereby historically situated people construct views of "reality." Intimacy is one such "reality" that individuals construct. At the same time, these unique constructions of intimacy contribute to, sustain, reflect, and are affected by prevailing discourses. In this article I will simultaneously describe individual constructions of intimacy and the prevailing discourses that shape these constructions.

I understand discourse to refer to at least five phenomena:

1. A discourse consists of ideas and practices that share common values (31).

2. Any discourse reflects and constructs a specific world view.

3. There are dominant and subjugated discourses (28,38,63, citing Foucault). Dominant discourses contain and constrain what we can feel, think, and do.

4. That which is not part of the discourse shapes our experience as critically as the discourse itself.

5. Finally, discourse evolves. Changes of discourse occur when the collective conversations people have about their lives transform culturally available dominant narratives about people's lives. "Then a space is created for resistance to currently influential discourses and new discourses and practices may emerge" (28, citing Foucault and Weedon, p.9). Individuals recognize the need to dispute and transform any discourse by reflecting on their conversations with others.

This article derives from the recognition

of such a need. I am trying to introduce a construction of intimacy which presumes that our experience of intimacy is mediated by social processes, such as a discourse of intimacy that is inextricably linked to other discourses—discourses of gender, power, domination, and sexuality. I present a critique of two discourses of intimacy and suggest an alternative construction of intimacy that breaks it into component parts such that one can conceptualize intimacy or non-intimacy as deriving from repeated intimate or non-intimate interactions. By doing so, attention is drawn away from a generalized feeling and evaluation to a specific interaction, about which the participants are responsible. In this way, a space is created for people to work with each other to transform non-intimate to intimate interactions.

Intimacy derives from the Latin word *intus*, meaning "within," and is related to *intimare*, which means "to make known." In its roots, intimacy connotes two different meanings. Corresponding to the first root meaning, "within," a discourse that I will name the *Individual Capacity* discourse implies that intimacy is a capacity that rests within an individual. Though the reasons for this capacity may be variously attributed, the discourse suggests that self-disclosure, often of personal feelings, is the way this capacity is expressed. Numerous popular books represent this discourse (48, 51). Several feminist psychoanalytic and developmental theorists also represent this point of view (11, 20, 57). Within the family therapy literature, Bowen (8) and Lerner (41), whose work is an explicitly feminist revision of Bowen family systems theory, emphasize the individual's capacity for intimacy as well.

Corresponding to the second root meaning, "to make known," a discourse that I will name the *Quality of Relatedness* discourse construes intimacy as a product of a kind of relatedness in which individuals are able deeply and extensively to know each other. Both the popular press (14, 39, 40) and the social science literature reflect and contribute to this discourse. Though one might expect to find the family therapy literature representing this view, in fact, with the exception of a few articles and one book (21, 27, 36, 37, 46, 54, 66, 67), the family therapy literature pays it scant attention. Wynne (66) proposes an epigenetic framework in which intimacy is an "inconstant stage beyond mutuality," which he defines as a stage that involves "the processes of long-term relational renewal and reengagement" (p.308).

I am proposing another definition of intimacy that would be consistent with a discourse of intimacy as meaning-making. In abbreviated form, that definition is: *Intimate interaction occurs when people share meaning or co-create meaning and are able to coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning-making. Refraining from meaning-making and providing, imposing, rejecting, and misunderstanding meaning are associated with non-intimate interaction. Repeated intimate interaction may produce an experience of intimacy, while repeated non-intimate interactions usually interfere with or inhibit relational patterns that lead to the sharing or co-creation of meaning.*[1]

In this article I first present a critique of the two prevailing discourses of intimacy, and then I present an extended description

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[1] In the discussion that follows, I am referring to intimate and non-intimate interactions with reference to my definition. It is certainly possible that someone could feel that he or she is having an intimate interaction when he or she is having a non-intimate interaction by this definition. For example, a pedophile may experience what he calls "intimacy" when he is molesting a child who is not cooperating and is signaling that he feels coerced. According to my definition, the pedophile would be "mislabeling" his experience as intimate.

of my way of defining and conceptualizing intimacy. The Individual Capacity discourse and the Quality of Relatedness discourse direct our attention to some aspects of intimacy and, in so doing, divert attention from other aspects. I point out those areas that are potentially obscured by virtue of the discourse itself, and note some consequences of this. I use a feminist perspective to address issues of power and intimacy from a social constructionist framework. Finally, I conclude with some implications of the alternative conceptualization of intimacy.

CRITIQUE OF INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY AND QUALITY OF RELATEDNESS DISCOURSES

The Individual Capacity and the Quality of Relatedness discourses can lead to robust descriptions of intimacy and are compatible with sound clinical practices. The Individual Capacity discourse fits particularly well with and enables perspectives on the development of intimacy, whereas the Quality of Relatedness discourse fits particularly well with and enables perspectives on the maintenance of intimacy. Neither discourse draws attention to single instances of interaction that people construct as intimate or nonintimate.

Perhaps a musical analogy will help clarify the distinction. In this analogy, my definition of intimacy proposes that intimacy is like the harmony that two or more singers can achieve. Harmony does not reside in any one singer—the Individual Capacity discourse—nor is it an aspect of their relationship to each other—the Quality of Relatedness discourse. Rather, harmony is something they create together, in the moment.[2]

In the critique that follows, using a social constructionist and feminist perspective on intimacy, I discuss constraints in the discourses themselves. I will explore ways that those two discourses deflect our attention from the larger cultural contexts within which meaning exists.

Individual Capacity Discourse[3]

Self-Focus/Self-Disclosure

In this discourse, intimacy is conceptualized as arising from the ability of individuals to operate from a clear and informed knowledge of the self in relation to a chosen other or others. Within the family therapy field, Lerner's *Dance of Intimacy* (41) is a thoughtful, feminist account of intimacy that expresses and contributes to the Individual Capacity discourse. She states that:

> intimacy means that we can be who we are in relationship, and allow the other person to do the same. "Being who we are" requires that we can talk openly about things that are important to us, that we take a clear position on where we stand on important emotional issues, and that we clarify the limits of what is acceptable and tolerable to us in a relationship. [p.3]

Lerner's view is that intimacy is centrally connected to the individual's capacity to become an expert on the self. Implicit in this view is that there is a self capable of being discovered and understood, a self that has opinions, values, beliefs, feelings, and so on. According to Lerner, because of anxiety that is aroused in certain interactions, this self is also in danger of reacting

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[2] Those distinctions are related to Schaefer and Olson's (64) distinction between an intimate experience and an intimate relationship.

[3] It may be confusing to some readers that I say I am using a feminist perspective and then I critique the work of Chodorow, Gilligan, and Lerner, three women who have been closely associated with a feminist position. To state the case as boldly as possible, it is their self theory not their feminist theory with which I disagree.

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to others such that the crucial self-focus may be lost. Intimate relationships pose a continual challenge to the maintenance of a clear self.

On the one hand, while this position has provided impressive clinical benefits for large numbers of clients, it may also put forward a conceptualization of the self-in-relationship that is potentially confusing. Lerner's position directs attention away from trying to change another person in order to create an intimate interaction, to changing one's own self. But where is this self? Embedded in the Individual Capacity discourse of intimacy is a belief in a unitary, skin-bounded self that is at odds with a social constructionist view of the self. In the social constructionist view, the experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others (9, 26, 34, 50). As Goolishian writes, "The nature of self [is] an intersubjective phenomena—a product of telling stories to each other about ourselves. In this post-modern view we are as many potential selves as we are creative story makers and tellers" (26, p.3).

From a social constructionist perspective (19), the self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives. "This delicate interdependence of constructed narratives suggests that a fundamental aspect of social life is a reciprocity in the negotiation of meaning" (p.270). Rather than seeing this as a failure of a clear, differentiated self, by my definition of intimacy, it is seen as a sign that we are engaged in an interaction in which the self can be invented. From this perspective, a goal of relationship, and of intimate interactions, might be described as the ability to re-story one's life by co-creating meanings with others without constraint or limit, rather than the ability to bring to a relationship a clear story about one's self.

Gender Issues

The Individual Capacity discourse on intimacy uses gender as a primary distinction to conceptualize differences among individuals in the capacity for intimacy. The work of the feminist sociologist, Nancy Chodorow (10, 11) is consistent with, and has significantly contributed to, the Individual Capacity discourse. Chodorow (11) attempts to account for the way modern capitalist society creates and recreates feminine and masculine personalities such that women will be suited to mother and men to work in the alienating structures of capitalism. Using object relations theory and Marxism as her primary theories, she identifies the near universality of female responsibility for childcare—rather than biological, cultural, or economic factors—as the reason for consistent, gendered personality differences.

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Focusing on the first three years of life, the period that has been termed "preoedipal" in the psychoanalytic literature, Chodorow (11) states:

> From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate. . . . This points to boys' preparation for participation in nonrelational spheres and to girls' greater potential for participation in relational spheres. It points also to different relational needs and fears in men and women. [p.169]

Building on Chodorow, Gilligan (20) sees men and women as having different "images of relationships" that carry over in important ways to their daily lives. She writes: "As women imagine the activities

through which relationships are woven and connection sustained, the world of intimacy—which appears so mysterious and dangerous to men—comes instead to appear increasingly coherent and safe" (p.43).

Luepnitz (42) articulates implications of Chodorow's work for women and men in relationships:

> Chodorow argues that these differences predispose men and women to experience intimacy differently. They incline women to be less afraid of commitments than men, and men less afraid of discontinuity. There is risk for both sexes in this state of affairs—for women, that they will become too embedded in relationships and lose their autonomy; for men, that they will never learn to connect intimately with others. [pp.179–180]

This argument, and the gender position of the Individual Capacity discourse that it reflects and sustains, is problematic in several ways. First, even if one accepted Chodorow's argument and conclusion that women are predisposed to be more successful at intimacy than men because of gendered social arrangements—and there have been substantive critiques within social psychology (43), feminist psychology (32), and feminism (3, 15, 24, 68)—, one might wonder why the woman's task of maintaining clear enough self-descriptions, so that they don't fade in the course of being open to another, is less challenging, or more likely to be mastered, than the man's task of relaxing his self-descriptions sufficiently to be open to another. If the hypothesized risk for women, more than for men, is that they may confuse their own meanings with those of others, and the risk for men, more than for women, is that they may impose their meanings on others, how can it be determined that one risk is less problematic for the development and maintenance of intimacy than the other?

Second, Chodorow's argument, though reflecting the Individual Capacity discourse, has also been vulgarized by it such that it has become part of a more inclusive discourse on "natural" differences between men and women (32). Women are said to have the "natural virtue" of desiring intimacy more than men. An alternative explanation that is consistent with my definition of intimate and non-intimate interaction is that when women fear domination, they may well believe that intimacy—the co-creation or sharing of meaning—offers protection. When they do not fear domination, as with children, they may be no more desirous of intimacy than men, and instead prefer to provide, impose, reject, or evade meaning as often as men (32 citing Zuk).

Third, Chodorow's gender analysis of consistent differences in male and female capacities for intimacy explicitly directs our attention to the fact that the primary cause of these personality differences is that women, but not men, "mother." I fear that by focusing on this nearly universal and entrenched social "fact," our attention is drawn away from an equally urgent, but immediately influenceable area of concern, namely, males and females behavior toward each other.

If one believes that men fear intimacy and women yearn for it, then interchanges in which, for example, a man overrules what a woman says may confirm this point of view. This belief may then discourage one from believing that the man can modify his behavior and requesting that he do so. If, on the other hand, one has a point of view that is less saturated with the biases of the Individual Capacity discourse, one can imagine that men and women are equally capable—though perhaps not equally desirous—of behaving intimately and restraining from non-intimate interactions. With such a belief, one can more readily work toward the production of intimate interactions.

Talk About Relationships

The Individual Capacity discourse uses self-disclosure (20, 66) as a sign of a capacity for intimacy, and values especially highly the disclosure of feelings, in general, and feelings about relationships, in particular. Pogrebin (48), drawing on research on male friendships and intimacy that has shaped and been shaped by the Individual Capacity discourse, concludes that though at one time men's friendships were the "paradigm of human comradeship" (p.252), now men may bond, but there is little evidence to suggest they can be intimate. Pogrebin (48) observes, "*The average man's idea of an intimate exchange is the average woman's idea of casual conversation.* . . . The only topic about which men talk frequently and in great depth is *sports*" (p.261).

She then recounts a personal anecdote in which her husband, Bert, had lunch with five middle-aged men who spent the 2 hours of their luncheon discussing a recent football game and then the 1950 Phillies. Having spoken to his wife about her view of men's friendships, Bert then points out to his friends that they had not said a "single intimate thing. One of the men protested that they *were* intimate because they all had very warm feelings for the 1950 Phillies and the discussion was very nostalgic. Bert said nostalgia wasn't the same as intimacy and besides, you can't be intimate on the subject of a baseball team" (48, p.261).

This conversation fits within the Individual Capacity discourse, which views the expression of personal feelings as a key to intimacy.[4] Within this discourse, the content of a conversation is a clue to its intimate or non-intimate nature. In the view of intimacy I am proposing, what people talk about or share is less important than whether each person feels included in the production of meaning. From this perspective, the luncheon was not intimate for everyone because one of the participants, Bert, was having thoughts that prevented him from joining in the spirit of the conversation. If all the other men had an experience of intimacy, then they did so at the expense of, and insensitive to, one of their members who felt excluded. I would name the imposition of meaning, not the subject of sports, as the impediment to intimacy in that conversation.

While there do seem to be reliable gender differences in interest patterns and interactive styles of males and females starting as early as 4½ years and persisting into adulthood, and while males and females may have less in common with each other than the same-sex groups in which they spend more of their time (43), the widely accepted belief intrinsic to the Individual Capacity discourse, that one set of interests and one style is more likely to produce intimacy (20, 66), seems to me to be a social construction that contributes to the production of evidence that supports this assertion. Recent research suggests that men and women are equally capable of intimacy depending on the situation (49) and individual differences in such attributes as warmth and nurturance (65).

Watching a sporting event, listening to music, going fishing, cooking a meal, reading a story aloud, driving in a car, discussing a problem, building a desk, talking about a relationship can all be intimate or non-intimate interactions depending on how the two people think about the experience. Nor is it likely that someone observing the interaction will be able to say with certainty whether or not an interaction is intimate.

Additionally, I might suggest that the labeling of an interaction as intimate or not is related to the discourse of intimacy that is available. If there is a discourse that

[4] Lerner is careful to distinguish among recognizing, expressing, sharing, and venting feelings. She encourages the first three and discourages the last (41, pp. 203–206).

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speaks about intimacy as one in which people share and co-create meaning together about any activity, people who are affected by and participate in this discourse may construe their experiences in a manner consistent with this discourse.

People select a range of activities as ones in which it is likely that intimate interaction will occur between themselves and the people who participate with them. For many couples, sex or going to a concert or dinner are settings that are conducive to, but not predictive of, intimate interaction. Likewise, religious services or hiking may be settings that are conducive to intimate interaction for family groups. Individuals may need to negotiate with each other—develop interest, learn skills—in order to join with a chosen other in an activity that the chosen other finds a conducive context for intimate interaction.

If a woman experiences intimacy when co-creating meanings about relationships, then any man who wants to be intimate with her may choose to develop an interest in this as well. If a boy experiences intimacy when laughing with his buddies at the movies, then anyone who wants to be intimate with him may decide to go with him to the movies. If a young girl loves rough-housing and hates reading, then the parent who wants to be intimate with her may, for example, elect to overcome his or her fastidiousness to wrestle her. If a man loves sitting in a rowboat fishing, then those who wish to be intimate with him may find themselves in it with him.

Quality of Relatedness Discourse

Stage Theories

As mentioned earlier, family therapists daily consult with couples who desire more "intimacy," couples whose expectations have been shaped by contemporary values that "enshrine" intimacy (67). Yet, for a variety of reasons, including, I suspect, the preference for systemic analysis of process over content in many family therapy models, family therapists have written very little about intimacy. What little has been written often reflects both the Individual Capacity and the Quality of Relatedness discourses. In critiquing the Quality of Relatedness discourse, I will draw on popular books and professional literature as sources for this dominant, if not pure, discourse.

Wynne (66), though he has revised his view in a subsequent paper on intimacy (67), describes recurrent intimacy as the inconstant and by no means inevitable stage beyond mutuality in the epigenetic development of family relatedness. He eloquently represents the Quality of Relatedness discourse on intimacy that is also widely disseminated through the popular press. In this discourse, intimacy is believed to be a more likely fruit of long-term, committed relationships than casual ones. Lauer and Lauer (40) describe intimacy as a benefit of enduring marriages that can offer "an intimacy that can be our emotional salvation in an impersonal, competitive world" (p.22).

Whereas Wynne, even in his 1984 article, is careful to avoid naming "relationships" as intimate, the popular press versions of this discourse, and colloquial usage, describe relationships—not interactions—as intimate or not. In doing so, they totalize the relationship and obscure that the experience of intimacy is built up of intimate interactions in the absence of (a person-specific number of) non-intimate interactions. By naming a relationship as intimate, rather than as having the potential for intimate interaction, this discourse directs attention away from the necessity to behave intimately consistently if one wants to maintain intimacy.[5]

[5] I have found this distinction helpful in working with couples (adult-child, adult-adult, and child-child couples) in which there is emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.

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Stage-based descriptions of intimacy, one expression of the Quality of Relatedness discourse, direct our attention to enduring and ongoing relatedness as the location of intimacy, and suggest that experiences of intimacy with, for example, casual aquaintances or strangers, are unlikely to be "true" intimacy. In discussing the "passions in infatuated affairs between near strangers," Wynne (66) comments that these may be "erroneously described as episodes of intimacy. If the epigenetically earlier stages of relatedness have been bypassed, these infatuations are notoriously likely to collapse altogether or to be transformed into what I have called pseudomutuality" (p.310).

Viewing intimacy as related to the presence or absence of intimate and non-intimate interactions can lead to a different perspective. Since interactions, not relationships, are characterized as intimate or not, it is possible to imagine that in the limited contexts in which new acquaintances know each other, they are able to share or co-create meaning and coordinate their actions with each other sufficiently to produce an intimate interaction. For example, recent lovers may be able to share and co-create meaning and coordinate action with each other sufficiently well during sex to feel intimate, but not enough to sustain a feeling of intimacy while shopping and preparing a dinner.

Many people report having intimate interactions with strangers—on a train, at concerts, at a rally—that feel "real." When people are in situations in which the level of coordination of actions required by the context can be achieved with the degree of meaning that they share or co-create with each other, according to the view presented in this article, intimacy may happen. Wynne and Wynne (67) acknowledge this: "Indeed, as most persons can testify, intimacy occurs surprisingly often in encounters with relative strangers" (p.385). They also offer an explanation of this that is consistent with the social constructionist view presented here. They state that "intimate disclosures in 'one-time-only' relationships seem possible *because* of the unlikelihood of a further relationship and the attendant opportunities for betrayal" (p.385). Though their language is different, in essence they seem to be saying that intimate interactions can sometimes be facilitated by the expectation that subsequent, intimate and non-intimate interactions, that is, betrayal, will not take place.

Closeness/Distance Metaphors

A core metaphor that is used by those whose work is influenced by the Quality of Relatedness discourse is that of closeness/distance. People who think of intimacy as a relational process, but not necessarily also a stage-based one, often use the metaphors of closeness/distance or pursuer/distancer to discuss intimacy (16, 46).[5] Fogarty (16) writes, "When two people marry, they start moving toward each other. Over time, problems develop and adjustments or change will be called for. One of the most common adjustments used involves a pattern of distance and pursuit" (p.326). In a similar vein, Napier (46) explicitly links the move toward another with the desire for intimacy: "In all outward respects, [the pursuer] is unremittingly enthusiastic about emotional closeness[,] . . . talks about wanting an intimate relationship, and is forever strategizing to achieve this goal" (p.98).

The geographic metaphor of closeness/distance often impels people who are not experiencing the closeness they wish, to move closer: by asking questions, talking

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[5] As mentioned previously, the discourses are not pure. In this example, the closeness-distance metaphor belongs to the Quality of Relatedness discourse though relationships are discussed as a product of individual attributes, an idea consistent with a discourse of individual capacities.

more, offering help, encouraging the other person to talk, and so on. Staying with this metaphor, most therapists who use it advise clients to make a counter intuitive move. As Fogarty (16) expresses it: "A pursuer has to be taught the operating principle, 'Never pursue a distancer' " (p.326). Instead, pursuers are helped to "stay put" and confront their own issues, which are believed to include feelings of deep emptiness (16).

This strategy can be effective. At the same time, I think the closeness/distance experience can be "unpacked" to reveal additional parameters that are equally important in understanding people's experience. When two people feel distant or estranged, it is likely that non-intimate interactions prevail. Since non-intimate interactions frequently involve the domination of one person by another, for instance, a woman by a man, a child by a parent, attention to the metaphor of closeness/distance may obscure crucial power issues in the interaction.

By using a social constructionist and feminist analysis to consider problems of intimacy, important material is revealed. A 45-year-old woman consulted me about a pervasive difficulty with attention and focus. She described going into a "fog" throughout her life at various times for no apparent reason. We talked about many aspects of her personal and professional life, and she told me that her relationship with her husband was "not close." She said she had learned to "back off" and now they had few arguments, but the relationship was not intimate. I asked a series of questions that were guided by and applied the conceptual framework of intimate and non-intimate interaction I am putting forward here: "Is he someone you want to share experience with or feel that you can share experience with?" Her interest in this question encouraged me to ask another similar one: "Are there times you spend together, talking or not talking, after which you feel you understand him better or that he understands you better?" She responded that she felt she listened to him, but that he rarely listened to her. In fact, she went on, he often expounded on subjects and expected that she would defer to his views whether or not her opinions differed. Moreover, she continued, he often refused to talk with her about topics she wished to discuss. I continued: "Well, if you were to disagree with each other, how does each of you handle that?" In thinking about and sharing with me her thoughts about these questions and others, she developed the idea that she produced her "fog" as a way of protecting herself from other people's imposing their ideas on her. She felt that she had adopted this strategy as a young child in her family and had carried it over into her adult relationships.

By drawing her attention to the nature of meaning-making in her interactions with others, she was able to see that she was fearful of other people's "domination" of her. She detached herself from her own experience, thus presenting a compliant but de-vitalized presence.

By drawing attention to each interaction, rather than by attending to a more global impression of the quality of the relationship each interaction can be assessed as intimate or non-intimate. By doing this, critical questions about power, control, and domination can be aticulated in the heart of one's awareness of intimacy. I will now present an alternative view of intimacy from a social constructionist and feminist perspective.

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INTIMACY DEFINED

Intimate interaction occurs when people share meaning or co-create meaning and are able to coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning-making. Meaning can be shared through writing, speech, gesture, or symbol. In the process of co-creating or sharing meaning, individu-

als have the experience of knowing and being known by the other. Intimate interaction can happen with one or more people, in actual or imagined encounters. Refraining from meaning-making and providing, imposing, rejecting, and misunderstanding meaning are associated with non-intimate interaction. Repeated intimate interaction may produce an experience of intimacy, while repeated non-intimate interactions usually interfere with or inhibit relational patterns that lead to the sharing or co-creation of meaning.

This definition is consistent with a social constructionist (1, 2, 17, 45) and a feminist point of view (6, 22, 31, 33, 34, 42, 61), the two primary theoretical frameworks I am using in this article. Central to this definition is the construct "meaning." Though I am aware of the focal place the concept of meaning has held in philosophy and other disciplines, it is beyond the scope of this article to summarize the complex and multi-faceted investigations into meaning that exist.[7] I am distinguishing meaning as internal representation that can be discovered by empirical methods from meaning as intersubjective and a product of dialogue itself. It is the latter definition I am using.

According to the view of modern hermeneuticists, experience is always "language-imbued . . . [and] even pre-reflective experience is . . . already molded by public ways of knowing" (53, p.249). We make meaning of experience. Thus meaning-making is always imbued with language, whether or not we use words. Meaning may be generated verbally, nonverbally, and symbolically, but it is interpretable only in the light of specific cultural practices.

Equally central to the definition of intimacy I propose are the terms "sharing and co-creation of meaning" (1) and "coordination of action" (44). I define "sharing" as the process by which meaning is transfered to and experienced in common with others. By contrast, I am defining the "co-creation of meaning" as the process by which two or more people evolve meaning about someone or something together. "Co-creation of meaning" can be further understood as implying that something that has not already been shared—something new to the relationship(s)—can be developed by the people interacting with each other. By these definitions, sharing and co-creation are reciprocally connected. "Coordination of action" consists of the process of coming to understand another as evidenced by verbal and/or nonverbal communication. As discussed by Gurevitch (29), understanding requires the "act of recognizing in another person another center of consciousness" (p.162). According to Gurevitch, this may mean that, in the process of moving from the "inability to understand" to the "ability to understand," one may need to develop the "ability to not understand" (p.163).

To clarify the ideas of intimate and non-intimate interaction, I will present examples of both, using personal and clinical illustrations. The decision to use both kinds of illustrative material is deliberate, and may provide some additional associations for the reader as to what kinds of material, shared in what kinds of contexts, produce an intimate or non-intimate experience.

Intimate Interaction

Experience 1: My second child had serious health problems at birth and we didn't know if she was going to live or die. I was also very sick after the birth, and I asked my father, who lives in a distant city, to wait to visit until I felt better. Waiting was stressful and difficult for him. After three days, I felt well enough to have him come to see us, and he did. He looked at

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[7] My usage is consistent with the wörk of Anderson and Goolishian (1), Bateson (4), Bruner (9), Gergen (17, 18), Maturana and Varela (44), Sass (53), Wakefield (60), and White and Epston (64).

me, looked at the baby, sat in a chair, and promptly fell asleep.

Experience 2: Several years ago, my husband and I had a particularly wonderful vacation. Each in excellent health, we hiked and read and kept up a running conversation. We were each talking about topics that were of great intellectual, political, and emotional interest to us. One day, late in the afternoon, I began talking with him about thoughts I had about my own funeral. With as much laughter as tears, we planned my funeral.

Experience 3: Recently my 11-year-old daughter had minor surgery that necessitated general anesthesia. In the aftermath, she had a lot of discomfort, and over the course of the several hours I was with her, my attention faltered and I felt impatient and bored. Her surgeon had insisted that she and I could go to a play that evening, and because she was so eager to do so, we went. During intermission, out on the lawn on this lovely summer's evening, she began vomiting, and she vomited more than I have ever seen in my whole life. Both of us got covered with her vomit. Just as she started to feel better, but before either of us was clean, and on the periphery of a group of what I can only imagine must have been horrified spectators, we began to laugh, and then roar until we had trouble standing up.

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These three anecdotes exemplify the definition of intimacy I am putting forward here. In the first, I interpreted my father's gesture of falling asleep as one more example of his characteristic way of expressing relief from stress, this time at being in my presence with his new grandchild. Falling asleep, he acknowledged nonverbally that he knew I would know what his falling asleep signified. Sitting across from him, watching his body relax into the familiar shape of his catnaps, the meaning we shared was about the intensity and importance of our relationship to each other.

In the second anecdote, my husband's willingness to enter temporarily into an area of concern for me and talk with me in my terms about my death and funeral led additionally to our developing ideas about my funeral that I had not thought before. We co-created meanings about my funeral that, in the process, co-created new meanings about the parameters of sharing in the relationship.

In the third anecdote, realizing that I was not disgusted by being covered with my daughter's vomit felt like an acknowledgment of our deeply personal connection to each other. However, it was the realization that we were both people who could find and respond with humor in the situation—and even the sharing of this realization—that made me feel we were having an intimate interaction.

Having been a participant in each of these episodes, I can use my own experience to verify they felt intimate to me. I believe that by using my definition, one in which intimate interaction is defined by the sharing or co-creation of meaning, all three episodes can clearly be designated as intimate, whereas the Individual Capacity and the Quality of Relatedness discourses would constrain me to think otherwise. Can falling asleep signify self-disclosure within the Individual Capacity Discourse? If my daughter and I have not arrived at the stage of mutuality, can we experience intimacy with each other? How can I account for my certainty that these relationships do not always feel intimate if each of us has a capacity for intimacy and a relationship to each other in which intimacy can happen? The two prevailing discourses of intimacy obscure that the experience of intimacy is built from repeated interactions, any one of which may be constructed as intimate or non-intimate. I believe that as individuals and therapists, we need

view of intimacy that supports thoughtful attention to non-intimate interactions in their own right, and recognizes their power to distort, diminish, and degrade people's experiences of themselves and others. In this article I am trying to provide such a view.

Non-Intimate Interaction

Though we seem to have highly elaborated ways of thinking about and describing intimate experiences, we seem curiously deficient in ways of describing non-intimate experiences beyond the global designation that an interaction failed to be intimate. One advantage of the definition of intimacy that I am proposing, in contrast to the two discourses of intimacy I am critiquing, is that the definition *by virtue of its emphasis on meaning-making* is capable of generating subtle distinctions about non-initmate interactions, distinctions that often lead into an analysis of gender and power issues.

In the following section, I describe a variety of ways that non-intimate interactions can happen, and suggest the range of settings in which non-intimate interactions can occur. I am suggesting that it is possible to consider any interaction between any two (or more) people in any relationship to each other as one in which an intimate or non-intimate interaction may obtain, in which meaning is co-created, shared, refused, imposed, provided, rejected, or withdrawn. In this view, no relationship is immune from considering whether the interactions between the parties are intimate or non-intimate. The following examples are a few of the ways non-intimate interactions can occur:

Refusing to particpate in a meaning-making sequence: An employee has written several memos to a boss requesting a time to discuss a possible raise. The boss refuses to see him and signals this by not scheduling an appointment and avoiding the employee so that she cannot be confronted.

Withdrawing from meaning-making: In the middle of an argument, an older brother abruptly leaves the room and refuses to talk to his younger brother any more about how they are going to re-arrange the room they share.

Imposing meaning: A woman is talking to her boyfriend and sharing that she feels lonely when he goes off with his friends for weekend fishing trips. Despite her protestations to the contrary, he insists that she is telling him this to control him.

Providing meaning: A mother tells her 3-year-old child that children must brush their teeth after breakfast and before they go to bed at night. A teacher tells his pupils that sentences should never start with the word "but."

Rejecting meaning: A police officer stops a speeding motorist who wishes to explain the reason for the excessive speed. The officer waves her hand dismissively and walks back to her car to write out a ticket.

These instances of non-intimate interaction will not strike everyone in the same way, nor will each one seen comparably problematic or negative. For example, it may be hard to imagine that there could be any harm in a more experienced person providing meaning to a person with less experience. Likewise, there may be some situations in which the imposition of meaning is welcome and helpful. However, both the provision of meaning and the imposition of meaning carry with them certain potential risks if the individuals who are in the interaction feel simultaneously violated or dominated. When people do not believe they have explicitly or implicitly agreed to accede to others' meanings, they may experience non-intimate interactions negatively. If, on the other hand, individuals consent to have meaning provided or imposed, as for instance those who volun-

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tarily put themselves in training situations often do, the consensual agreement about the nature of the contract may mitigate the impact of a non-intimate interaction, and minimize its risk. The potential for ambiguity in this regard is high. Therapy is one situation in which the ambiguity of these issues is particularly problematic (62).

Non-intimate interactions also frequently occur in the context of other people having an intimate interaction. For example, two little girls who are giggling about a third child are experiencing intimacy with each other at the expense of, and in contrast to, the non-intimate experience of the third child who is the butt of their joke. In fact, the pleasure experienced in the one interaction may actually serve to reinforce the maintenance of the non-intimate interaction. This pleasure may also screen out the distress signals of those who are having a non-intimate interaction.

For example, two teenage boys were discovered to be sexually harrassing a younger boy at an afterschool program. The two older boys confided to the program's counselor that they had been having a "great time" and they had been unaware that the younger boy did not find their "horsing around" fun. Many kinds of abuses, including sexual abuses, take place when one group of people is coordinating their actions and co-creating and sharing meanings with some but not all of the people with whom they are currently interacting. If all those interacting were equally attended to in the project of sharing or co-creating meaning, the nature of abuses of all kinds would dramatically shift.

Clinical Illustrations

The following illustrations show two situations in which the ideas about intimate and non-intimate interaction were applied clinically. In both situations, the introduction of distinctions about intimate and non-intimate interactions was related to the working through of the presenting difficulty.

Example 1:

A couple had been married for 3 years when they came to therapy because of a sexual problem. The husband was frustrated because frequently his wife strictly regulated the kind of sexual touching they could have, and the wife was unhappy that she didn't have more interest in and enjoyment of sex. The couple were particularly perplexed because these episodes could occur during times they both felt warm and affectionate toward each other. During conversation, it became clear that the wife regulated touching at times when she would have preferred to decline sex altogether but felt reluctant to deprive her husband of some sexual contact.[8]

As we talked about their experiences, we began to co-create a description of their experience in which we said that the couple's view of what was appropriate to talk about, think about, and feel during sex was a reasonable match for the husband's actual experience, but a poor fit for the wife's, who was frequently preoccuppied with sad thoughts and feelings that she believed she should not be thinking or sharing during sex. At these times, when the wife made the transition into a space with sexual expectations, the bedroom, she surfaced her expectation (learned in many different ways) that she "should" stop thinking her sad thoughts. Rather than share what she was thinking with her husband, she let herself go out of contact

[8] Sanders and Tomm (52) call this kind of "marital duty" socially responsible, but violent sexuality. Hare-Mustin (31) discusses behaviors that are enacted in the context of prevailing sexual discourses, of which at least one, the "male sexual drive" discourse, may be operative here. In this discourse, men are viewed as having more urgent sexual needs than women, and women are viewed as people who compliantly meet men's sexual needs.

with herself, and then with him. Once she believed that she was no longer sharing or co-creating meaning with her husband, she no longer felt "intimate" with him and sex became a chore that she had to figure out a way to get through as comfortably as she could.

By describing the problem in this way, the couple felt they had a number of options. They decided to try enlarging their ideas about what kinds of thoughts were acceptable during sex and what kinds of sharing could go on during sexual intimacy. The husband had a harder time than the wife imagining that he could do this. However, they were both committed to trying to make their sexual relationship as intimate as their relationship at other times.

Example 2:

A family consulted me after learning that their 10-year-old son had been sexually molested by an older brother of a close friend during an overnight. The brother had twice before touched the boy in a way that had bothered him, and the brother had been reprimanded each time. The family was in distress for a number of reasons, including that the child felt strongly that he didn't want his friend's family told this time, and the parents felt strongly that the child's protection depended on the other family's being informed. Additionally, the boy did not want to talk to his parents about the situation further.

During the session, it became clear to the parents that, based on his past experience, the boy did not feel that telling the other family increased his safety, and that he now wished to be in control of the way he protected himself. He had a number of thoughtful ideas about how he could avoid further contact with his friend's brother. In listening to their son, the parents realized that telling the other family was more likely to help them with their feelings of rage than it was likely to accomplish their primary goal of protecting their child.

At the conclusion of the single session, the family left uncertain as to how they were going to choose whose "meaning" would prevail. The boy, who had reluctantly attended the session, said he understood the value of continuing to talk with his parents since he observed that during the session his parents had attended carefully to his point of view, and he believed that they had shifted theirs during the interview. One might say that, through the dialogue, their previously non-intimate interactions—ones in which the son was refraining from making meaning in the way they desired with them, and the parents were considering imposing meaning on him—changed. As they each attempted to understand the other, they found their positions were less polarized, and they found they shared some ideas in common.

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The discussion of these illustrative examples is meant to contrast with the kinds of discussions the two discourses of intimacy permit. These two discourses of intimacy, though helpful and relevant, also turn our attention away from certain issues that are inextricably interwoven into the experience of intimacy itself. Each view is also associated with a theoretical perspective that informs certain kinds of family therapy practice. The Individual Capacity discourse is consistent with a psychodynamic and intergenerational perspective; the Quality of Relatedness discourse is consistent with a systemic[8] and cybernetic perspective.

The view that I am presenting derives from social constructionism and feminism and is consistent with poststructuralist or postmodern theory in general, and narrative approaches to therapy in particular (1,

[8] I am using the term "systemic" to refer to those family therapy practices that derive from general systems theory.

2, 31, 33, 64). It allows the practitioner to work with ideas that have been strange bedfellows in family theory and family practice heretofore, for instance, ideas like all meaning is intersubjective, associated with a social constructionist theory base, and ideas like a discourse of domination influences people's relations with each other, an idea associated with feminism. Using these two theoretical perspectives to explore the discourses of intimacy has allowed me to address the politics of meaning-making.

Sexuality and Intimacy

I now turn to a discussion of the sexual dimension of intimacy in which the ability to address the politics of meaning-making seems essential to me. Both the Individual Capacity discourse and the Quality of Relatedness discourse contain ideas, beliefs, and values about sex, sexuality, and intimacy, and reflect and participate in a discourse of a particular kind of intimacy, sexual intimacy. Hare-Mustin (31) states that "there are several different discourses concerning sexuality that define what is expected of men and women in relation to each other" (p.13). Though these discourses may be named in different ways by different authors, the set of ideas and their associated practices are experienced with a high degree of uniformity by members of the culture.

As Hare-Mustin (31) observes, therapeutic conversations between therapists and their clients cannot be "separate from the discourses of the society. The therapist may fail to recognize how embedded the conversation is in the cultural belief systems and how influenced it is by the dominant discourses that create masculine and feminine identities" (p.30). Both of the two discourses I have critiqued reflect and participate in the discourse of sexual intimacy. Since I prefer, now, to highlight their similarities to each other and the differences from the alternative view I am presenting, I will critique the Individual Capacity discourse and the Quality of Relatedness discourse together.

In a recent series of conversations published in Kantor and Okun (36) between three senior female and three senior male family theorists (five of whom were also family therapists), Don Bloch took the position that "intimacy and sexuality are interestingly opposed to each other. Intimacy builds entropy, it builds familiarity, it builds understanding, . . . valuable attributes, but they're in opposition to hot sexuality" (p.217). The men, but not the women, apparently, agreed. By contrast, Maggie Scarf voiced the opinion that intimacy increases sexuality. She said, "To me, trust isn't boring, it's sexy" (p.218).

Throughout the conversations, differences in perspective emerged among the participants along gender lines while they were discussing gender as a variable in the topic of sex and intimacy. Their comments, as one would expect, were saturated by discourses of intimacy and sexuality. Distinctions were made among kinds of sexual encounters such as sexual fantasy, casual sex, intimate sex, sexual abuse, low sexual desire, withdrawal from sex, and lustful sexuality.

By using the definitions of intimate and non-intimate interaction that I have proposed, it is possible to diagram types of sexual encounters[10] and place many of the sexual behaviors that were mentioned in this conversation in a chart. Using a framework in which the horizontal axis represents a continuum from minimal coordination of action on the one side to extensive coordination of action on the other, and the vertical axis represents a continuum from minimal to extensive co-creation or

[10] The framework for conceptualizing the graphic display of intimate and non-intimate sexual interactions derives from Tomm (58, 59).

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sharing of meaning, any episode of sexual interaction may be plotted anywhere in the four quadrants using the two axes (See Figure 1).

Interactions in each of the four quadrants will tend to be experienced in certain ways. In quadrant 1, when people share or co-create meaning to a great extent and are able to coordinate their actions to a high degree, most people tend to experience these sexual interactions as intimate. In quadrant 2, in which there is a high degree of coordination of actions, but low levels of sharing or co-creating meanings, sexual interactions may be characterized as casual. In quadrant 3, people share and co-create little meaning and have a low degree of coordinating actions. Sexual interactions in this quadrant may be characterized as estranged or abusive. In quadrant 4, in which coordination of actions is low, but co-creation and sharing of meaning is high, sexual fantasy may occur.[11]

During this conversation, which reflected current discourses on intimacy and sexuality, women were more often described as prefering sexual encounters in quadrants 1 and 4; men as enjoying sex in quadrants 1, 2, and 4, with their lustiest sex taking place in quadrants 2 and 4; and neither men nor women as enjoying sexual interactions in quadrant 3. This apparent difference is commonly accepted; the Individual Capacity discourse and the Quality of Relatedness discourse share a perspective on why this is so.

The observation that a woman's sexuality increases in a relationship in which she feels emotionally connected to her partner—intimate—whereas a man's sexuality may be more lustfully experienced before he has made a genuine emotional connection to the woman, is said to be explained by the fact that men and women's earliest sensuous experiences are with the mother. Thus, "for men, the erotic aspect of any relationship remains forever the most compelling, while, for women, the emotional component will always be the more salient" (51, p.103). This way of conceptualizing the difference illuminates one set of distinctions while obscuring another. The distinctions that are obscured have to do with power, domination, and control.

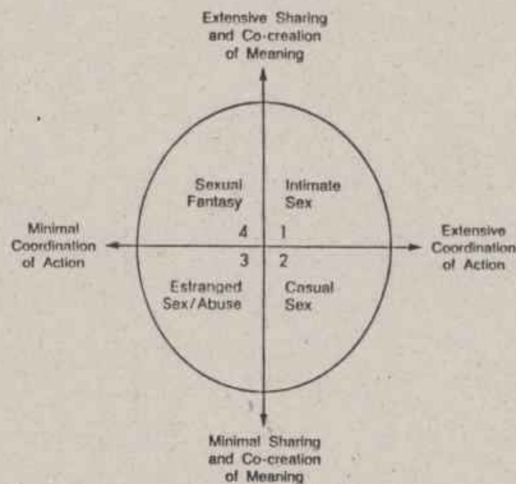

FIG. 1. Intimate and non-intimate sexual interactions.

An alternative explanation, using a social constructionist and feminist perspective, is based on an analysis of the differential in power and domination between men and women in the sexual encounter (23, 31). In this explanation, women try to protect themselves from men's historically situated, greater control of meaning-making (56) that in the sexual arena is supported by men's greater physical strength. A strategy that women are taught and develop includes forming an emotional con-

[11] In the original definition of intimacy, I wrote that intimate connection can happen in actual or imagined encounters. In fantasy, the person imagines that meaning is shared or co-created with the fantasied other. In fact, the other, if he or she learned about the fantasy, might be appalled and experience the fantasy itself, and perhaps the telling of it, as a non-intimate interaction.

nection to a man in the hopes that, if intimacy develops, aggressive attack will be less likely.

While connecting emotionally may be the most common and effective way women try to protect themselves in the sexual encounter, there might be other ways, which, if adopted, would free women for casual sex to the same degree as men. In some cultures, women's organizing prostitution may serve precisely this function (35). I think it is sobering to consider that we may know very little about women's or men's sexuality under conditions in which women are not fearful that their sensual exuberance may be taken advantage of and men are not striving to prove their virility.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have tried to suggest that viewing intimacy as made up of intimate and non-intimate interactions forces us to attend closely to non-intimate interactions not solely as impediments to intimate ones but, in their own right, as interactions that may demean, delimit, define, diminish, demoralize, or devastate others. By making distinctions between intimate and non-intimate interaction, it is possible to analyze the ways in which meaning is used to connect or dominate. It allows us to consider the political dimensions of meaning-making that are nestled in the heart of intimacy. My critique of the Individual Capacity discourse and the Quality of Relatedness discourse rests fundamentally on the belief that these discourses of intimacy obscure crucial distinctions that a discourse of the politics of meaning-making in intimacy makes possible.

As we try to make sense of the violence and degradation that take place in families, alongside of intimacy and care, viewing intimacy in this way has much to offer. Writing that sentimentalizes intimacy obscures vision where it is urgently needed and puts off action when it is due. It is only in confronting the tensions and ambiguities of intimate and non-intimate interactions that people will be able to give themselves wholeheartedly to intimacy, certain that pleasure is not taken at another's expense.

While I think it is essential that people attend to the intimate or non-intimate dimension of interactions, I am aware that people will not always agree as to the designation of any interaction as intimate or non-intimate. There will never be universally reliable or valid criteria for identifying an interaction as intimate or non-intimate. The assessment of an interaction as intimate or non-intimate, whether as participant or observer, is an intersubjective not an objective activity. As such, there will be those with whom one agrees and those with whom one disagrees. Nor will people agree that all intimate interactions in every context are positive and all non-intimate interactions in every context are negative. Life is not so orderly. However, I think these are ambiguities and complexities well worth considering.

Therapists are particularly well situated to take on the challenging project of exploring which interactions are considered intimate and non-intimate, positive and negative. If therapists attend rigorously to the ways that non-intimate interactions are produced, important issues will surface. Additionally, therapists can help clients develop skills to recognize non-intimate interactions and restore intimate ones (62).

By calling for increased attention to intimate and non-intimate interaction, I am in no way seeking to join those theorists and therapists who decry the lack of intimacy among people and encourage "intimacy enhancement." I agree with Wynne and Wynne (67) who state that "professionals in the marital and family field should take the leadership in challenging the enshrinement of 'intimacy' as a primary goal" (p.392). In my view, this "enshrinement"

of intimacy—associated with both the Individual Capacity and the Quality of Relatedness discourses—has interfered with rigorous attention to how intimacy is produced, and has contributed to the failure to scrutinize the ways that non-intimate interactions occur and the consequences when they do.

There will certainly be repercussions in increasing people's awareness of, concern about, and readiness to challenge any interaction that is non-intimate. There will also be much to gain. In response to the question of what he thought a normal person should be able to do well, Freud (as quoted by Erikson) said, "to love and to work" (13, p.136). In this view of intimacy, among other things, love takes work.

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Manuscript received December 7, 1990; revision submitted March 18, 1991; accepted April 17, 1991.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro