

Couple dynamics and adoptive parent relationships.

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore some of the aspects involved in the dynamics of the interaction between narcissism and object investment. We know that the oscillation between these two psychic configurations influences the subject and his relations: the dynamics of his couple and his role as a parent. We feel that within the emotional complexity of adoptive parenthood, primary importance must be given to the “adoption” of aspects of the self and of the relationship that have been split off and projected outside that self and relationship.

We describe some episodes from a couple psychotherapy treatment using the concept of the analytic field, with reference to developments suggested by post-Bionian models in individual psychoanalysis. We refer to the field that is created in a joint session where the different subjects come together, forming a continuous tension between mutual recognition, narcissistic preservation, the need to make space for the other, and feelings of responsibility towards the relationship. From this perspective, through recognition of the emotions present in the session, the therapy activates a process of transformation which allows the couple to think new meanings for themselves and for the decision to adopt.

Key words: adoption, couple, parenthood, narcissism, object relation, field.

“Luckily, there are always “foreigners” in our home who urgently need to be adopted and this is the only thing that guarantees a constant development of our psyche”. (Ferro, A. in Claudia Artoni Schlesinger “Adozione e oltre”)

Years of clinical experience corroborated by the psychoanalytic literature (with special reference to the authors mentioned below), has shown us how the complex and interdependent dynamics of the psyche, through narcissistic aspects and object investment, are fundamental to the functioning/dysfunctioning of the couple relationship, but also how they form the basis of the experience of becoming parents. The development of psychoanalytic thought has led us to the conviction that it is precisely the fluidity of movement between these different, and in some cases, opposing psychic configurations that allows two individuals to be part of a good-

enough intimate relationship and that allows their minds to satisfactorily fulfil the function of parents.

For this to occur, there needs to be appropriate individual psychic development that results in the formation of a complete, separate and distinct self, based on early interaction with a mother who, through her capacity for containment and rêverie, is able to guarantee the experience of the continuity of existence (being alive). “As one gradually learns to experience oneself as a subject, one acquires at the same time the capacity (through projection and identification) to experience one’s “objects” as subjects in themselves” (Ogden, 1989, p. 27). Moreover, the core of the true self, as Winnicott (1958) reminds us, is expressed through an individual’s capacity to be alone: one of the most important signs of developmental maturity. In fact, toleration of the temporary absence of the object, without this absence being filled with feelings of persecution, is the result of a primary experience of interaction with and mirroring of an equally alive and mobile object, able to oscillate between an investment in the relationship with the other and a return to a position of solitude and separateness (Ferruta, 2011).

We maintain that the idea of a continuous movement between different psychic configurations supersedes the theory of development being a progression of evolutionary stages, and sees the development of the mind rather as a continuous, fluid coming and going between positions (Ogden, 1989). The development of the mind, because of this capacity for oscillation, acquires the necessary means to confront that which is not yet known of the self or of the other. The alternation between safeguarding the narcissistic and investing in the object should therefore be a prerogative of intrapsychic functioning and consequently an indispensable prerequisite for the ability to live with the other (Ogden, 2012). In the same way, the isolation and the relating expressed through the subjects’ movements of drawing close together and moving apart from each other should coexist in a mutual and often painful state of flux.

Meeting the other (including one’s partner), an indispensable condition for the reproduction of the species and for the development of the functions of the mind, cannot, however, for the purposes of the development of thought and creativity, exclude isolation as a necessary experience “for feeling whole”, in which the mark left by the relationship with the other is not so dominant as to destroy the possibility of contact with one’s own personal feeling (Ferruta, 2005). We consider these aspects to be of primary importance in the complex experience of parenting.

Therefore, for a couple relationship to function, we believe that it is paramount that each partner arrive at the capacity to oscillate between the narcissistic position (not necessarily pathological) and the position of object investment towards an object which, in turn, is able to activate the oscillation (Ferruta, 2011).

However, we also know that if, on the one hand, the object is indispensable for the development and growth of the individual and his or her mind (an infant only exists inasmuch as it is in relation to the mother), on the other, it becomes at the same time

the cause of an imbalance and by its presence obliges the subject to continually reorganise itself and induces fear of invasion and substitution.

If giving birth to a child satisfies the narcissistic desire to reproduce another self or, as Guyotat (1980) would say, for “the reproduction of the same”, it also inevitably leads to comparison with an unknown external object; this occurs through a continual interplay of recognizing and mirroring oneself in another the same as oneself, and at the same time through “clashes” due to the child’s innate differences and foreignness. How are narcissism and object investment expressed in the couple and in their exchanges? How do individual intrapsychic/relational dimensions co-determine and condition the way a couple functions? How can these aspects be treated in the clinical session from the theoretical and technical perspectives of the field?

Our clinical illustration aims to examine how these two levels of functioning are played out and are interwoven in the case of the adoptive couple.

A couple sought treatment after their umpteenth miscarriage, the latest an “adoptive” one, and their painful but controlled and rational account of their suffering gave rise to exchanges of thoughts and emotions that, over the course of treatment, grew increasingly more impassioned and profound. The therapy that we outline in this paper contributed, through a process of emotional “literacy” (Ferro, 2007) i.e., receiving and redelivering the name of unrecognised emotions, to a “conception” (or to an insemination) in part due also to the “adoption” of aspects hitherto rejected as alien by both partners.

Giuliano and Carla, a married couple in their forties, sought therapy after the traumatic experience of a failed adoption. The tone of voice on the telephone sounded like a plea to be listened to and, we can say in hindsight, to be urgently “adopted” in order to be able to tolerate that which had just befallen them.

In the first session they spoke of leaving for an Eastern European country about one month previously to start the process of adopting a 5-year-old girl, Maria, living in an institution, who had been assigned to them; and of returning without her because they could not cope with the impact the experience had had on them. Maria stayed behind in her country. Giuliano had suffered real panic attacks when faced with the prospect of bringing home a child whose turbulence and aggression might jeopardise the couple’s survival; faced with her husband’s reaction, Carla gave in and relived, with a deep sense of desolation, yet another interruption of an attempt to become parents. The idea of adoption had come after six years of pregnancies and subsequent miscarriages, which were complicated by the need for surgery and hospitalisation. Giuliano and Carla tried to reduce these painful episodes to mere medical incidents, divesting them of any emotional meaning, in order to be able to bear them and not be overwhelmed by suffering and feelings of helplessness. “It was just something that had to be done”, they said about the hospitalisations and surgery. “I reacted mechanically”, said Carla. “when I came home from hospital I switched off and didn’t think about it anymore, otherwise I would not have been able to carry on”.

They describe themselves as a couple who, until the time of the adoption, had not experienced any conflict but are now aware that the experience with Maria has left a

deep, open wound in their relationship, and for this reason have decided to undergo psychotherapy.

For this couple the succession of miscarriages represents a unilateral loss of a dreamt-of child (both longed for and feared), but whom they had never actually encountered in its otherness. Their life experience had bounced off a “white screen” (Giosuè, 1992) and was immediately returned unchanged. They froze the pain and anger at what had happened to them within their solitude and their paralysis of thought.

Their disappointment and surrender in the face of these setbacks were balanced out by the decision to try another route, that of adoption. Giuliano agreed to the idea but was assailed by doubts which he never fully expressed and which only in the therapy sessions are explicitly stated, perhaps for the first time. He recounts that “unlike Carla, I have to admit that I have always felt apprehensive about the arrival of a child. How can one desire to be a father? I don’t feel the desire for it and the idea of having a child has always frightened me, especially the thought of an adopted child. Who would we be letting into our home? A newborn baby can be moulded and brought up the way you want, you can get used to it little by little. But would I be able to bring up a child who was already a few years old? What sort of life would a child like that already have had? I felt terrified when faced with Maria”.

Maria, who came into their untroubled and unremarkable relationship, was the person who traumatically opened the way to their experience of being parents.

They are able to talk about this Maria, a new character in the field, who actually exists and is not a miscarriage or a white screen, and they are able to talk too about her forceful presence which upset the balance of their relationship and their life and led to the creation of thought. For both of them, Maria was a known, thinkable daughter. Giuliano’s fears came face to face with Maria’s uncontrollable rage and sudden outbursts that violently conveyed the suffering of a child abandoned at birth and brought up in an institution. Maria would throw herself to the ground at the slightest feeling of frustration, would lash out with her fists and shout at her new mother, “you’re bad!” Faced with the child’s reaction, Giuliano felt helplessness at not knowing how to calm her and felt anger exploding inside him, the only emotion available to him at that moment to deal with his great pain and the threat that Maria posed to their “balanced” life as a couple. He felt the danger looming that his life, his and Carla’s life, would be ruined and completely upset by the fury of this “little demon”.

Carla, for her part, saw in Maria a real, present daughter at last; the meeting between two experiences of loss, that of an almost mother and that of a rejected child, aroused in her a powerful desire to save Maria and to heal the wounds of abandonment that life had dealt to them both. The violent clashes of the first moments of the adoption process were blotted out by Carla as soon as Maria calmed down.

The decision not to go ahead with the adoption was devastating for both of them, but while Giuliano saw it as the way out of a nightmare, Carla describes parting from Maria as a funeral ceremony during which she felt the grief of a definitive separation

from a daughter she had known and loved. In the session she cries at the painful memory and at not having her anymore.

We must now ask ourselves what was meant by their urgent request for therapy on their return. Can the therapist become the figure to whom one can turn in order to adopt split off parts of oneself, that until that moment had been totally foreign? Can the joint session be a fertile environment (or field) where one can really begin a pregnancy?

To expand on the relational aspect, we shall use the concept of contained-container (Bion, 1962) and the model of the field (Baranger, 1969, Ferro Vender, 2010, Neri 2011) to observe what happens in the therapy room. The former concerns the construction of mental activity and the development of thought, while the latter pertains to the emotional state created during a session of analysis.

In this model, which affirms that when individuals come together, something is created which differs radically from that which each person is, separately from the other(s), the subject and object are not distinct in a stable way but, from a functional point of view, can be considered reversible. The therapist no longer takes into account relational activity alone but includes all the mental lives present in the field (including that of the therapist) and all mutual projective identifications. The continual interaction between the container, which is function and receptive space, and the elements contained therein determines the development of thought.

The first function that must be introduced into the field, therapeutic for each of the two patients, is therefore that of the analyst's mind re-gathering split off functionings. This results in a broadening and extension of the container, aware that the containing process involves the development of the individuals' minds, the couple relationship and the different groupings or multiplicity of personalities within that relationship.

Our knowledge of what Ferro describes as an inexhaustible source of well-being, the "listen to me" and the "tell me a story" (Ferro, 2012), convinces us that the session has to be a place where patients' communications can be attentively received and shared.

Giuliano and Carla described their couple relationship as "a happy island, where the sharks swim out at sea beyond a protective barrier reef": free from conflict, aggression, pain, depressive thoughts, and all emotions considered negative for the relationship which have been denied or split off and projected outside the couple.

Over the course of therapy, words and images were found to speak about their desperation and dismay. Emotions that could not be put into words, because they were not recognised, were described as "thoughts hammering inside one's head" that prevent one from sleeping at night or, we might say, proto-thoughts which are not yet thinkable because of the absence of a containing mental function to hold them.

Giuliano describes Maria as he imagines her in the future: an unscrupulous adolescent, half hooligan, half Black Bloc protester, an ungovernable daughter completely alien to him and to his own experience of being a child, an adolescent and a son. He says of himself, "I have always been an adult, even when I was a child. I hate conflict, I have always tried to mediate, to be accommodating, to get everyone to

agree and to adapt to what others want; a sort of Zelig”. Carla, through therapy, was able to give voice to the pain accumulated over a series of bereavements that she had never properly grieved. “I have always been a very decisive, resolute person”, she says. “I have a black belt in karate, I have always been careful not to feel sorry for myself, but now I have to admit that I find it difficult to put one foot in front of the other. I have always swallowed my tears so others would not see how I felt but I was afraid I would not be able to get back on my feet again”.

We might say that the “adoption process” has come into play through the course of treatment, rearranging the space in each person’s mind so that unthinkable thoughts can be brought to light.

The field activated its adoptive function towards aspects thought of as foreign and as such dangerous and therefore rejected. The same function allowed Maria’s violence to come closer and to be less foreign, a violence which was probably the expression of a pain too strong to be expressed in words,

The field model allows us to deal with characters who, through the patients’ accounts, enter the session as spokespeople for emotions which until then had not been recognised. It was possible to talk about the characters of the Black Bloc protester, the shark, the black belt, Zelig; it was possible to make contact with aspects which until then had not been processed because considered completely foreign and dangerous for them both and for their relationship. For example, the pile of beta elements, unthinkable black holes, and proto-emotive elements borne along by huge projective identifications (Ferro, 2012) in the Black Bloc character (a compact mass of people dressed in black) was able to be deconstructed through the various characters who entered the session: the black belt, Zelig, and the Black Bloc rebel dressed in black, the mark of on-going mourning.

The process of “adoption” was found to be of fundamental importance for coming into contact with feelings of anger and pain, among others. With regard to frustration experienced in the workplace, Giuliano commented, “until now I have been something of a puppet who has always said yes to everything in order to be liked by everyone and I expected to earn recognition for this but it was not forthcoming. This made me absolutely furious, I am no longer willing to be so accommodating and my colleagues have seen another Giuliano.” Carla has been able to express her suffering: “if, previously, after each miscarriage I put everything behind me to start all over again with a fresh attempt at becoming pregnant, now, after the experience with Maria, I just cannot do that anymore. If tears come to my eyes it is because I need to cry.”

We may say that the encounter with Maria, a totally extraneous external object, brought about a violent process, in the minds of each one and in their relationship, of engaging with split off aspects. “The other” was encountered and induced a process of mingling in the relationship which then, thanks to the rêverie of the therapist, generated a form of transformational development leading to a particular form of adoption, which this time was possible for both of them.

“When we started to come to you,” explains Giuliano after two years of therapy, “I could not understand how anyone would want to become a father. Now I feel that my gestation as a father began the day I came here”. In fact, the couple underwent assisted conception using egg donation which gave rise to a successful pregnancy. In her seventh month of pregnancy Carla remarks, “Now I can enjoy my pregnant tummy, I can allow myself to think about a pram and a cot, I am sure this baby will be born, also because I know that the egg donor is a very young foreign woman, which is a great advantage”.

In conclusion, we feel it is important to emphasise that the session was the place where it was possible to make contact with and adopt an extraneous object/self of unknown origin and therefore felt to be persecutory. Furthermore, through a series of minute transformations, it became possible to credit the stranger with hitherto unimaginable potential for generation.

Fertility as a mental function (for this is what we are dealing with) cannot be separated from the relationship between the diverse and often discordant parts connected to both one’s individuality, including the process of individual development, and the potential and creativity that the relationship with the differentness of the other brings.

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