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TRANSGENERATIONAL REPEATING, TRANSGENERATIONAL
WORKING-THROUGH, THE SHARED FAMILY UNCONSCIOUS
WORKING-THROUGH FANTASY

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Clinical experience has led many analysts to prove that certain symptoms that patients suffer cannot be understood only from their personal history. Its comprehension can be enriched if the individual is considered as the link of his/her preceding chain to which he/she also belongs, taking into account the existence of repetition processes linked to previous generations.

Both family setting and the use of the genogram as an auxiliary resource together with the possibility of counting with two or more generations in the therapeutical field allow us to enrich the knowledge about such processes

Already in 1910, towards the end of his study about Leonardo, Freud questioned himself:

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"May one not take objection to the findings of an inquiry which ascribes to accidental circumstances of his parental constellation so decisive an influence on a person's fate? [...] We naturally feel hurt that a just God and a kindly providence do not protect us better from such influences..."

He seemed worried and concerned due to the "mortifying" influences that denote the fate of the individuals beyond not only their consciousness but also beyond their generations.

Later, in 1912, he will add that *"No generation is capable of hiding the ones that follow it, the significant psychic facts"*

And, in 1914, he introduces the intergenerational dimension in his theoretical background: *"his majesty the baby'... shall fulfill those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out"*, which at the same time contain the representations that come from other generations: the constitutional, as *"sequences of our ancestors' experiences"* and also the inheritance of fantasies which precede the subject: the *urphantasien* or primal fantasies, regarding transgenerationally transmitted fantasies, as a product of cultural experience.

The subject appears then to be, on one hand, his own end (Freud, 1914c) and, on the other hand, a link of a chain to which he/she is attached to before his/her existence as an individual. A double chain in fact: the generational and the contemporary ones.

Pichon Rivière (1962-65) will express this with his metaphor of the cross: the individual appears in the intersection of the vertical branch (transgenerational chain) and the *horizontal* one (chain of his contemporaries).

That is why some people have thought that after the three injuries **to** the narcissism pointed out by Freud (1917), the one of Copernican discovery (the earth is not the Universe's center), the Darwinian one (man is an animal as others) and the psychoanalytic one (man is not completely the owner of his acts, because he is governed by his own unconscious), a fourth injury could then be added: man is governed not only by his unconscious, but by other people's unconscious.

Piera Aulagnier (1975) will later refer to the 1914 Freudian statement with her concept of *narcissistic contract*: the individual must secure the continuity of both the lineage and

the environment. To achieve this, the family and the social group must narcissistically invest the new member by giving him/her a social place which is signified as ideals, values or ways of reading and understanding reality, according to the family myth, allowing the individual to take a place in the generational chain to which he/she belongs. The subject is then “narcisized” by his family group, but he also must satisfy his family’s narcissistic needs.

The unconscious agreement between two or more subjects, according to which certain contents must be submitted to repression destiny (and other more “primitive” defenses) is named by Kaës (1989) as the *denegative pact*. This pact is structuring to the link, but it has a defensive function too. These defenses are not only intrapsychic, but also “co-defenses” established by the structuring and/or defensive needs of the family links from which they depend.

Ways of transmission

Following Kaës (1993), we will consider three different types of transmission: intrapsychic, interpsychic (or intersubjective) and transpsychic. In the *intrapsychic* transmission, described by Freud in his theory on dreams, the transmission of the psychic contents takes place from the unconscious to the preconscious or the conscious system, or, in the second topic reading, from one psychic instance to another.

The *interpsychic* (or intersubjective) transmission originates in the family group, as an *intergenerational* transmission.

Through this way narcissistic investments like the *narcissistic contract*, ideals, values, identifications, defensive modalities, trophic myths, separation experiences (Winnicott’s dis-illusion), together with intersubjective links that generate a psychic space among the subjects and the identifications are transmitted. Winnicott (1971) tells us about the mother’s (and the family) *mirror function*: it is the family that gives back the child the notion of being himself, recognizing and naming his affects, his moods, his desires, etc.

This is a structuring transmission that implies the plurigenerational support from the family group.

One of us has named this transmission modality “*trophic*”, (Losso 2001), in the sense that it is a “nutrient”, nourishing, transmission that stimulates the development, allowing a psychic work of each subject, that then re-encounters and recreates the parts of his/her own history that have been transmitted without his awareness.

This transmission implies that a *transgenerational working-through* process could take place, with secondary fantasies that allow the successive transformations of mandates and legacies from one generation to another.

The transmitted contents are incorporated into the psychism of the new generation. A transitional space between the subjects is then developed, creating a –mythical- family history, from which every member is able to take the elements to create his/her own myth.

We think that in contemporary society, there is a tendency to an absence or a rejection of anchorages to cultural and family standards coming from previous generations. Trophic legacies are minimized, tradition is devaluated and models are looked down on, disrupting the possibility of carrying out the transgenerational working-through transmission. There is a *trophic transmission deficit*.

Culture of the instantaneous of the immediate, or the image, makes the characters that become noticeable through mass-media prevail as *imitation* models (Gaddini, 1969) –not identification ones.

The myth of the individual’s “independence” as a virtual absolute value together with what one of us has named the “*3 E culture*” (*efficiency, efficacy, economy*- Losso, 1997) and the individuals’ valuation based on material progress as a change that can be “objectively measured” contributes to devaluate origins. This also favors the self-engendering fantasies that are antagonistic towards solidarity values and the sense of group belonging, which will disrupt the transgenerational working-through processes.

The *transpsychic transmission*, instead, is constituted by what comes from other people’s

psychism, external to the individual and belonging to other generations (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, significant characters of their family mythology) and that *goes through* the subject's psyche.

The transitional space is missing at this level. The transmission is not performed between the subjects, but *through* them. The contents transmitted by this way are contents "in a rough state", with no possibility of being worked through, and that may be felt by the recipient as something that "withdraws vitality" or as a presence of something "strange", an element that alienates and disturbs.. What was transmitted is not transformed. It is therefore a *repetitive transmission*. This prevents the development of a transgenerational working-through process.

Parents have received the command to transmit what they have not been able to work through, due to their shortages, structural failures and narcissistic requirements, as a defensive necessity to maintain their own psychic life. Frequently they resort to the use of *transpersonal defenses*, defined by Laing (in Muir, 1983) as those defenses in which the individual intends to control the other individuals' internal world, by acting on the other individual's experiences, in order to be able to maintain his own psychic balance. Subjects are pressured to meet impossible demands that are, in fact, demands from mythical characters, and remain tied to *invisible loyalties* (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). In this case it cannot be working through, but repetition.

The contents transmitted with no modification, remain as a schism, embodied, encysted – in the sense elaborated by Abraham & Torok (1978)- but cannot be introjected. Framo (1965) has named them "fossil remains". Abraham and Torok (1978) have defined them as *ghosts* (phantoms) that dwell in *crypts*.

The transgenerational repetition

The Freudian concept of *compulsion to repeat* refers to the intrapsychic world. But from the link theory point of view, we can propose the existence of a *transgenerational repetition*

(Losso, 1990), as a repetition of phenomena related to traumatic situations that couldn't be worked through by previous generations, a repetition in which more than one subject is involved and implies a sort of transgenerational violence.

We want to point out the fact that when we talk of repetition we refer to an "incomplete repetition". We know that nothing repeats itself completely, because time cannot be frozen. In every repetition there is something new. There is, we could say, a failed attempt of working-through.

The shared family unconscious working-through fantasy

Clinical experience has shown us that families which are in this situation of repetition with the impossibility of working through traumatic experiences, frequently develop a *shared family unconscious working-through fantasy*, which means that if a certain event happens, this will allow the working-through of what, that till now, has not been processed. When this happens, of course, the working-through cannot be carried out and a new repetition will happen.

The "C" family

In the following case we will show how the family develops the fantasy that the death of one of its members will allow to work-through the multiple mourning situations that till then had been prevented.

The "C" family was integrated by Norma (35), her husband Eduardo (37), and their two daughters, Cristina (5) and Laura (2). The family consulted because Cristina showed severe bronchial and lung problems that were threatening her life. In two circumstances she had to be hospitalized.

Eduardo's father had died when Eduardo, the only child, was five and his grandfather had committed suicide by throwing himself onto the train rails. His mother suffered from a chronic depressive disorder and had once tried to commit suicide. On that occasion, she threw herself under the underground train, but she survived because she fell

between the rails. Eduardo appeared as an obsessive with a depressive background. Norma had a brother, who had been kidnapped and “desaparecido” (missing), during the military dictatorship in Argentina, but both she and her family denied the fact that he could have been dead, although more than fifteen years had passed by, then. During the first stages of the psychoanalytic family therapy, we as analysts in co-therapy, felt that the family, particularly Cristina, transmitted a menace of `psychic annihilation, of breakdown and of (real) danger of Cristina’s death. Consequently we were on a permanent alarm, with a menace that something serious could happen. The sessions material went around Cristina’s illness, her doctors, her treatments, her evolution and so on. But as Cristina was getting gradually better, the field climate began to be more “boring”; it became frankly depressive. The depression was in the place of the anxiety generated around Cristina’s disease. The family came punctually to their sessions, but we felt that “nothing happened”, as if they had been coming “to waste their time”.

Countertransferentially, we felt paralysis, futility, boredom and lack of hope. Eduardo said: *“all is pointless. It is better not to talk because if we talk, we’ll reach a total conflict with no return”*. “Total conflict” meant annihilation, breakdown and eventually death, which is the only point of no return.

The first consultation had been related to a death threat. The pediatrician had transmitted her concern about Cristina’s symptoms, which, she said, “expressed the family’s anger, their discomfort”. “It is as if she were committing suicide”, she added. Cristina said that “she would go under the ground” and communicated dreams in which she and her mother were captured by “monsters” that tortured them, tearing off their hair, and other nightmares in which her mother *was run over by a train* (let’s point out that she had never been told either how her grandfather had died or about the grandmother’s suicide attempts, or the missing uncle).

The transgenerational repetition became manifest in the analytic field through the “death mission” Cristina was doomed to fulfill, due to the “pending bills” of her previous

generations. Cristina's body was the place of resonance of non-worked through mourning. It summarized all the deaths.

The shared family unconscious working-through fantasy of "C" family was that the real death of the patient-symptom and the concrete presence of a corpse would permit the "working through" of all the mourning that the family had not been able to work through along at least three generations. *Someone had to die.*

We are here facing transgenerational repetition in the links. Both Eduardo and Norma bore in their respective families, traumatic situations with origins in a not elaborated mourning. The couple was built around this mourning, and a mutual feeling of misfortune, creating a depressive bond in which the shared depression somehow protected the breakdown (the threat Eduardo talked about). They configured a bond organized in the confusion between life and death, where death was "suspended" but it should reappear in the coming generation.

"A word buried in the father is a dead man without a burial in the child" (N. Abraham)

After having analyzed these fantasies in the analytic field, the family was able to start facing the deep pain of their not elaborated mourning and the thanathic delegations from the previous generations. They were able to disclose the ghosts, spreading the cryptic secrets in the therapeutical field and giving a sense to the repetition phenomena. All this helped everyone out and set Cristina free from the repetition and her death destiny.

The family approach, from the presence of two or more generations in the therapeutical field, facilitates the activity of disclosing the split, the contents hidden in crypts that have been working from previous generations through the transgenerational repetitions, as an expression of the symbolic debts to those generations. It can also help to undo the subjects from that non differentiated psychic space and build up, between the family and the therapists, a story and a working-through that gives rise to a differentiation process between what was transmitted without been processed and what was received and transformed by the subjects.

SUMMARY

Extending the Freudian concept of repetition compulsion, we introduce that of transgenerational repetition, in which the repetition is produced *through* the generations, constituting the *transmission-repetition* modality. We also develop the concept of *trophic transmission*, necessary for the constitution and development of the psychic apparatus, which permits a process of *transgenerational working-through* of the psychic contents, enabling a *transmission-working-through* modality. We discuss the similarities and differences between the concepts of intrapsychic working-through and intersubjective and inter and transgenerational working-through. We describe the obstacles to this process in “dysfunctional” families and state the presence of a *shared family unconscious working-through fantasy* in these families. We present a clinical case in which this fantasy was that the real death of the patient-symptom and the concrete presence of a corpse would “permit” the working-through of all the mourning that the family had not been able of working-through along at least three generations. .

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