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**The psychoanalysis of the couple and the family
facing the catastrophes of our time**

The uncertain is our future

“We occur to navigate as in the river rapids, getting by among fast-flowing waters” (Racamier¹)

Elisabetta D’Amico*, Rita Frascari*, Anna Marcianò*, Sonia Melgiovanni*, Michela Melillo*, Mara Siragusa*, Valeria Tossichetti*, Cristina Truppi*

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Summary

This article assembles reflections of a working group that was formed during the Pandemic period, and which has continued its research during the current phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The authors question how much crisis can be tolerated by everyone, and what living and working with uncertainty entails for patients and therapists. Beginning with reflections on Silvia Amati Sas’ concept of “adaptation to whatsoever”, the authors compare theoretical themes relevant to clinical experience, where inner and outer worlds have been exposed to shock and change. The intrusion of an external reality that contains uncertainty about the future has entered and had an overbearing influence upon clinical activity, affecting

¹ Cited in (eds.) P. Balducci, C. Coratti, P. Hansen, P. Masoni, S. Melgiovanni (eds.) (2000) *Le Comunità Terapeutiche: ricerca sul funzionamento organizzativo e formazione degli operatori*, p. 347, Roma: Kappa.

* Study group of couple and family analysts trained at Post-Specialisation Course of Clinical Research in Couple and Family Psychoanalysis, managed by the Italian Society of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis (PCF).
elidamico007@gmail.com; rfrascari@gmail.com;
mariagrazia.giachin@gmail.com; anna_marciano@libero.it; son.melgio50@gmail.com;
michelamelillo@hotmail.it; marasiragusame@gmail.com; tossichetti.dottvaleria@gmail.com;
cristinatruppi@virgilio.it



both the intrapsychic dimension and bonds connecting couples and families. Analytical tools, and the analyst's mind itself, have had to adapt the setting and become flexible in order to make meetings possible. The social dimension of psychoanalysis has been highlighted by the various emergencies, while maintaining its identity and, indeed, acquiring an important role to help cope with these reality challenges.

Keywords: uncertainty, ambiguity, guarantees, meta-setting, future.

Résumé. *L'incertitude est notre futur. «Il faut savoir naviguer comme si l'on était sur les rapides d'un torrent, en bien dirigeant le bateau parmi les flots» (Racamier)*

Cet article est le fruit d'une série de réflexions issues d'un groupe de recherche qui s'est constitué pendant la période de la pandémie et qui a poursuivi son activité après le début la guerre russo-ukrainienne. Les auteures se demandent dans quelle mesure il est possible de supporter les situations d'urgence et quelles sont les conséquences de vivre et d'agir professionnellement dans l'incertitude, que ce soit pour les patients ou pour leurs thérapeutes. À partir des remarques de Silvia Amati Sas relatives à « la capacité d'adaptation quoi qu'il arrive », on observera la manière dont la théorie s'applique à l'expérience clinique lorsque le monde interne et le monde externe ont subi des chocs et des changements inévitables. L'irruption de la réalité extérieure, avec l'incertitude qu'elle fait planer sur le futur, s'est brusquement manifestée dans l'activité clinique et elle a eu d'importantes conséquences tant sur la dimension intrapsychique que sur les liens familiaux et de couple. Il s'est donc produit que les instruments analytiques eux-mêmes ont nécessairement connu des changements ainsi que l'esprit du psychanalyste. Celui-ci a trouvé dans le setting interne et dans la flexibilité une possibilité renouvelée de rencontre avec autrui. C'est précisément dans l'urgence que la dimension sociale de la psychanalyse s'est révélée encore plus évidente. Sans renier sa propre identité, la psychanalyse a acquis une valeur supplémentaire dans sa confrontation avec la réalité.

Mots-clés: incertitude, ambiguïté, garants, méta-setting, futur.

Resumen. *Lo incierto es nuestro futuro. "Hay que saber navegar como en los rápidos de un arroyo, apañándose las entre las olas" (Racamier)*

Este artículo es el resultado de una serie de reflexiones de un grupo de investigación que se formó durante el periodo de la pandemia y que continuó su actividad tras el estallido de la guerra ruso-ucraniana. Los autores se preguntan hasta qué punto es posible hacer frente a las situaciones de emergencia y cuáles son las consecuencias de vivir y actuar profesionalmente bajo la incertidumbre, tanto para los pacientes como para sus terapeutas. Basándonos en las observaciones de Silvia Amati Sas sobre "la capacidad de adaptarse pase lo que advenga", se indicará cómo se aplica la teoría a la experiencia clínica cuando los mundos interno y externo han sufrido choques y cambios inevitables. La irrupción de la realidad externa, con su



incertidumbre sobre el futuro, se manifiesta repentinamente en la actividad clínica y tiene importantes consecuencias tanto en la dimensión intrapsíquica como en los vínculos familiares y de pareja. Los propios instrumentos analíticos sufren necesariamente cambios, al igual que la mente del psicoanalista. Este último encuentra en su encuadre y en la flexibilidad una renovada posibilidad de encuentro con los demás. Es precisamente en la emergencia donde la dimensión social del psicoanálisis se ha hecho más evidente. Sin negar su propia identidad, el psicoanálisis adquiere así un valor adicional en su confrontación con la realidad.

Palabras clave: Incertidumbre, ambigüedad, garantías, meta-setting, futuro.

The title “The Uncertain is our future” is our best choice for the article’s contents. Our research group is made up of psychoanalysts with the same past specialization training in Couple and Family Psychoanalysis (CFP)² and we all worked as volunteers for the Covid-19 psychological Help-lines arranged by the Italian Ministry of Health. After the pandemic period we have been going on to discuss together as we felt an urge to exchange our thoughts about the unbelievable experiences faced in the last marking years.

We all have shared the same kind of feelings: incredulity, dismay, destabilization and uncertainty. Everybody’s mind had finally just managed to process a difficult change when suddenly a new adaptation was required in a rush for a new second emergency, after which for a third one, and soon in a never-ending cycle of emergency situations. All our certainties were insidiously invested by danger and our life became surreal, entering into the unthinkable dimension.

Therefore in our study group the question arose about what an extent the human mind could still tolerate such an emergency and what kind of impact would have followed onto everybody’s life. We realized at a certain point that most of the people simply reached the same awareness: after the Covid pandemic period that had obliged everybody to survive through a sort of “freedom-minus life style,” renouncing more and more to what we had considered definitely acquired as a consolidated right, include our simplest and usual daily habits, we discovered ourselves to be intolerable to any imposed limit, unprepared to the emergency and just well-closed into a simple narcissistic bubble.

Quoting Sarantis Thanopoulos (2022), we can admit that everybody has come out from the pandemic period “*psychically unstable, and deprived of a genuine wish for life*”. For many people the family played the role of a psychic container, whereas for some others it became a sort of violence “breeding place” especially in those family scenarios catalyzing the whole members’ persecutory anxieties so well described by D. Meltzer and M. Harris (1983).

Both the inside/outside, and inner/outer world experienced jolts and unavoidable changes. We witnessed the revolt against the reality and its denial, or at the opposite an exaggerated alarm out of control. Nowadays behaviors show people’s deep anger and their hidden wish

² Post-Specialisation Course of Clinical Research in Couple and Family Psychoanalysis, managed by the Italian Society of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis



for being indemnified. Resorting to a reasonable level of mental defense against the anguish arisen from recent changes is justifiable and necessary, without excess, but we must pay attention not to turn such defenses into a mental paralysis preventing from wider thought and hope.

Therefore we wondered what could keep our thought “running”. A possible answer can be found in Simona Argentieri’s words (2022): «Nowadays more than ever it is up to the psychoanalysis to develop and strengthen the Ego resources in order to maturely face the new existence challenges».

Which mental impact will have the pandemic emergency first and then the Russian-Ukraine war with its climate of death and disaster?

Another view is also by Silvia Amati Sas (2020) highlighting the irresistible natural appeal of the “*pleasure of stillness*” for our basic psychic structure, thus anyway implying the risk of a dangerous decrease of our “*ethical alarm*” signal, as individuals, therapists and collective society.

The whole of our certitude wavered, from the merely daily habits concerning school, family and job, up to the primary needs (health, safety, personal affects) and therefore all of us have been suddenly upsetting for a very long period. Even the usual therapeutic setting was affected given the exceptional nature of the situation, requesting much more adaptability.

An imperturbable attitude was inappropriate for the circumstances, we could not act as if nothing exceptional was happening. We realized that “staying alive” was possible only by following the crashing wave, through a more flexible setting to meet our patients via new ways. An sicilian, italian dialectal metaphor, was useful for us to remember because it is allusive to such a special flexibility to be capable both for holding and “following” the storm waves at the same time: “*Calati junco ca passa la china*” (Rush bend yourself cause the sudden flood can pass through). It is an adaptive defense mechanism that can enrich the mind when, in circumstances as the current emergency, one’s own certainties and setting rules could need to be revised.

As a research group we managed to undertake such a flexible movement by keeping a joint thought «*while bombs are dropped*» (Bion, 1975, p.128). Our CFP group worked as a solid container to limit our anxiety, dismay and incertitude feelings so that through the exchange of our working experiences it allowed us to effectively restore a stable capacity of thinking. The group was a solid unobtrusive prompter’s box for a stable and continuous backstage support, an available space for meeting. With the help of IT devices our group could cover long distances and reach people all over Italy, to listen to their stories with their different level of sorrow, due to different places and periods of time.

The Covid pandemic circumstance allowed us to experience the emergency at different levels, as therapists, individuals and family members. Therefore our group has become more and more of mutual support: a space where we could think together about the unconceivable so to “withstand” the continuous emergency impact. It was of great support to find out some common elements between the different situations we were experiencing in our private sessions and institutional services where some of us were working. The extraordinary flexibility of our analytic tools was revealed even in the psychological Help-lines service, very useful both to help calling people and collect reliable data on the reality. In our research group we could deeply investigate and think together over the experiences of individual,



couple and family sorrow.

The theories of the major experts of Couple and Family psychoanalysis, well-known by the whole group for our common post-specialization course, represented our best compass or even the sextant to sail up the difficult river of the emergency experience and supported our efforts to understand it better through different possible interpretations.

The problem of the uncertain future, the loss of meta-social and meta-psychical guarantees, the risk of hyper-adaptation, have led us, for our specialization skills, to question about the following emergency effects as for new possible mental defenses, therapeutic setting assets and changes in any kind of bonds: between patient-therapist and among couple or family members.

As a result we found out an increase of some psychopathologies and higher aggressive behaviors within families and worsened by the lockdown period. All members of our group also reported higher levels of aggressivity, sorrow and pain especially among teenagers and young people.

The present article intends to illustrate the questions on which we focused our research in relation to the past and present emergency experiences, especially as for the possible changes affecting not only our personal life style but also our job methods. In order to better illustrate some issues and detail different therapeutic settings, such as the individual, couple or family ones, we have included in the present work some references to a film and some clinical fragments of study cases.

The meta-social guarantees' instability and its meta-psychical impact

In our group debates we often recalled Kaës writings as a theoretical support to find out new interpretations for some of the current social and psychical functioning aspects. According to Kaës theory we all agreed on the need to approach the general present-day uneasiness by investigating the relations among three different spaces: the intra-psychical space, the intersubjective bonds' space and the ones specific of the group, family and institutions frameworks.

Deriving the term from the sociologist Alain Touraine, Kaës used the concept of meta-social guarantees to analyze the relation between inner and outer realities, as he intended such guarantees as the frames able to guarantee solid stability and incontestable legitimacy to social formations. In the past the "solid", stable, enduring and predictable institutions were the ones which bound their citizens by law, and provide the society with frames for its vital processes so that any human action and its effects could be perceived as meaningful, included any social fight able to change the institutions.

The global changes occurred in the last decades shaped what Bauman (2004) defined as the *liquid modernity* due to its radical changes of family frameworks, job organization and relations, social bonds, authority and power structures. Such radical changes high-impacted onto the structuring processes of psychic spaces and identity foundations. Thus a deep feeling of instability arose at any level and in any field, both in family systems and individual assets, so to modify the quality of ties in a much more liquid, rapid direction based on apparent values.



Human mental stability can be threatened by the risk of a breakdown in the meta-psychical guarantees working as frame and support to any mind developmental process. For such a reason the recent social and cultural changes, due to the pandemic emergency first and then to the Russian-Ukraine war, increased the uncertainty feeling about the present and the future life and deeply changing the framework and functioning of intrapsychic space and its relations with the spaces of the psychic reality.

The group devices have demonstrated how the meta-psychic guarantees of psychical life provide an important frame to the individual mind. The group is a crucial emergency support of the archaic and a space where symbolizing a destructive power or an uplifting cultural work at the same time is possible. Our group working first, then our writing together played for us as psychotherapists the important role of a place where anxiety could find its words, current experiences its sense, so to think together and open our mind to new hopes. The group allowed us to feel a shared sense of membership and proximity, thus working as a supplying protection guarantee, in line with Kaës theories (1993, 2005, 2013). As a result of our group study and reflections about what we all were experiencing we found out from a clinical point of view, that the meta-social and meta-psychic guarantees' destabilization implied inevitably the destabilization of the mental family life and its bonds.

A family impasse case-study

A family psychological consultation request came from one of their members, the father, as an urgent need due to the repeated episodes of violence occurred in the last few months and that turned the family atmosphere into something unbearable for all its members. Any kind of dialogue was referred to as absolutely impossible among them all: the sixty-year-old parents and their three children, a twenty-year-old firstborn son, a second-born of eighteen years and the seventeen-year-old youngest daughter. After the latest violent quarrel the two sons left home and went to live away for some months without sending any news of themselves. From the family consulting sessions it was clear that there had been an increase in the conflict level of the parental couple, already in a state of crisis before the psychotherapeutic start. Such an increase was higher and higher in the last few years when some natural developmental changes of the family life cycle started to arise: children growing up, the grandparents' death, increased children preference and search for going round with friends of their own age. During the consulting sessions, detail after detail, it was slowly revealed that in the past years the married couple conflict had a barrier in the obedient behaviors of their babies, described as very accomodating and sometimes involved from the parents as "their witnesses" to take side with one of them and confirm which parent was in the wrong. Thus the family started to be divided into sub-groups and implied member alliances that paralyzed more and more the family developmental cycle (Kaës, 2010). Both parents were inclined to a certain family isolation that slowly led children to a dangerous developmental impasse that paradoxically reassured the married couple. It was interesting to notice how exactly



the lockdown circumstances worked for the children as a strong sound case of the usual family isolation, so much to drive them towards new life-styles upsetting the previous insane family balance. Thus the following request for help arose necessary. The children developmental process caused the collapse of the parental couple system order. The eldest son managed to say: "I suddenly realized I couldn't wait any longer, I had to change something in my life at once, look for friends and go out from home, otherwise it would have been too late. I have been living isolated, always depressed and without spurs."

For the above-illustrated clinical case, the family setting was the most suitable to listen to and hold each family member's sorrow, so to raise the curtain and show any family unspeakable secret and phantom. Sometimes it was also necessary to adopt flexible and different clinical setting systems, including some separate sessions only for the married couple or for children. The implied therapeutic intent was to enhance generational differentiation and overcome family relations impasse.

Ambiguity and adaptation to whatsoever: a possible mechanism/attempt for survival

Some of us took part in a study-working group arranged by Silvia Amati Sas, thus being for us a valuable inspiration source to deepen Bleger's ideas which seemed to us well-suitable to interpret the present traumatic situation. Some here-below illustrated concepts were inspired by Silvia Amati Sas' book entitled *Ambiguity, conformism and adaptation to social violence*.

Bleger (1967) gave a broader treatment to Pichon Rivière's thought and developed the concept of ambiguity to be intended as a clinical evidence of a basic primordial state of psychic un-differentiation, the so-called "agglutinated nucleus" of ambiguity, prior to Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive position. The mind deposits such a nucleus into the outer world through a symbiotic link or bond with more or less favourite repository caregivers, whom the individual psychically depends on. That deposition provides individual with an inevitable and necessary complementary dimension implying for him/her a sense of safety and belonging. In line with Silvia Amati Sas the "depository" role can be played by family, institutions or socio-cultural contexts. Thus the individual depends on the outer context, therefore implying an unconscious sense of belonging and certainty. Something similar to Sandler's (1960) concept of a "background of safety", implying a basic trust in one's own contextual world.

What happens when sudden changes occur in a depository context (migration, mourning, economic crash, social terror or even a pandemic situation)? The ambiguous position can become in such circumstances the major defense and adapting mechanism. In fact serious traumatic experiences lead the outer deposit of the ambiguous agglutinated nucleus back to the Ego with a transitory disorganization of the most mature personality structuring aspects, thus implying acute symptoms of disorientation, perplexity, astonishment and a sense of estrangement, increasing individual's catastrophic and confusing anguish. Since Bleger's



preliminary statements remarked that the ambiguous core cannot be left without its depositories in the external world, it follows that if a depository context is lost the symbiotic link or bond tends to be immediately and automatically restored indiscriminately right in the external context where the individual is living in that specific moment. Such a concept seemed to us crucial to bring light to some forms of ties. The new depository restores the individual's sense of security and familiarity with current environment, so to allow always an unconscious familiarity sense, opposite to the estrangement ones. Silvia Amati Sas highlights the unconflictual and un-contradictory aspects of the ambiguous agglutinated nucleus, since right its unprecise, pliable, flowing and permeable features, enable its shaping, adapting and standardizing to any context, circumstance up to an extreme "*adaptation to whatsoever*". She affirms the existence of a basic human psychic capacity adaptable to any context and circumstance and working as a mechanism for survival in extremely traumatic experiences, such as those regarding the victims of violence, a topic she deeply studied. It is a natural human capacity that also belongs to the baby capable to adapt himself/herself to the life context and cultural environment met at his/her birth.

Bleger's ideas thoroughly investigated by Silvia Amati Sas came us in tune with our reflections on the different pandemic phases. On one hand one's capacity of adaptation to whatsoever widely allowed us to look for new possible depositories available in the situation each one had inevitably to accept. During the lockdown period we all invested our homes with the power of a "safe and secure refuge", relying on our capacity to arrange inside them new daily activities, such as in-home hand-made bread cooking, and find new creative ways to spend time together. We all shared a sense of "community", brotherhood (for example each one singing from its balcony) and gratitude to doctors and nurses perceived as heroes for a long time. On the other some of us managed to go on with their jobs and relied on smart-working to keep alive the relationship with patients.

We all experienced the relief for both providing psychological support to people and being listened from somebody, recognizing in it as in any kind of cure, the value of bidirectional and mutual support. Both us as psychotherapists and our patients keep in mind a sort of bitter-sweet memory of that period, due to the concomitance of anxiety for illness and death risk, never before then so much socially perceived with such intensity, and of the relief at the same time for a shared fight. We can affirm we all have experienced a necessary, and partially successful, adaptation to a destabilizing change.

It is a remarkable data to report from our clinical experiences that a sudden increase in the request for psychological support happened right at the "re-starting time" immediately after the lockdown. Just when people were allowed to go out from home most of them showed a massive symptom increase. Could it be explained through the hypothesis that the new situation, even if more comfortable, was perceived as a new threat for one's mind as if it were a new loss of the previous stability provided by the lockdown used as transitory depository? With the following effect of a re-introjection of subjective sense of loss, clouding and ambiguity that, in line with S. Amati Sas thought, required to be "deposited again"?

What about the following depository adjustments to the endless changes caused by Covid virus evolutions, available vaccines and the final acceptance of emergency co-existence? And now even by the Russian-Ukrainian war?

Our study group also investigated some specific social phenomena, such as anti-vaccine



extremism or the Coronavirus-Negation movement, intended as a search for new possible “Other Depositories”, felt as more familiar by somebody, like for instance the “virtual network”, a special entity, both multiform and formless at the same time, able to connect, separate, isolate or associate people, to create credible stories from fake news (such as the existence of plot groups), to be everybody’s spokesman, the “top place of Un-differentiation”. Here-below we illustrate a clinical case highlighting the psychic positions and defenses arisen in a married-couple-setting psychotherapy provided during the pandemic emergency.

A married couple’s swing between ambiguity and conflict

In their psychotherapeutic pathway during the lockdown Stefano and Monica were apparently quiet. After three years of married-couple setting sessions their bond was solid as symbolically well-represented by the real building of their new home, a wider house, more comfortable and suitable for a metaphorical re-integration of their past fragments. Even the uneasiness of their nine-year-old son had improved if compared with his state at the beginning of their psychotherapy. During the first lockdown the whole family was obliged to stay at home and they all spent a lot of time pleasantly together. For their analyst such a positive phase was the result of successful mutual holding function able to mutually reduce their anxieties arisen by the outside reality. In fact, quoting Anna Nicolò’s words well-describing the first lockdown period, we can affirm that for most of the people, «The mere presence of the Significant-Other, with his/her holding and reverie function, could reduce one’s persecutory anxiety so to re-establish a good capacity for self-holding» (Nicolò, 2020a, p. 602). The odd thing was that the couple described their family life as something idyllic, idealized, and totally unconnected with the anxieties from outside reality. The same symbiotic and un-differentiation aspects that had featured the origin of their liaison started to arise again. As already said, when there is a sudden change of the depository context, the ambiguous position seems to turn into the major predominant defense and adaptation mechanism. The mimetic quality of ambiguity seems to protect, through an effect of adaptation and mental clouding, the remaining parts of personality and the married couple itself, which stands as floating far away in the air. With months’ going by, the factory where Stefano worked was repeatedly shut for long periods up to the final short-time re-starting, thus his salary decreased and was no more enough to pay family debits and expenses. Those meta-social guarantees that up to that time had always been able to play a valid function to assure a basic family stability suddenly fell down. Some friction between husband and wife arose again and was similar to the one already showed at the beginning of their therapeutic pathway. Those aspects deposited into the Other resurfaced into the couple’s bond. Stefano accused Monica of acting coldly towards him, attacking him and making him feel lonely. Monica recriminated her need for help and empathy. The same initial past harsh words and constant quarrelling came back again. In a session the analyst



proposed them to think over a possible link between their starting again to be so much quarrelsome and highly confused and some outside factors such as the Covid pandemic lengthening, the difficult and often unavailable access to spaces outside their house, and shorter working time. They answered they were puzzled about that supposition because Covid and straitened circumstances “had nothing to do with” them, affirming on the contrary that they could widely benefit from the first lockdown period right for much more time available to spend together. The denial of some elements of the outer reality as well as of the inner one, seemed to have the function to limit the anxiety arising from the difficulty to face a thread perceived as impossible to contain immediately. The following therapeutic step implied a deep work with the married couple to process their starting dogmatic view and denial mechanism so to enable them to restore inside themselves those parts previously deposited into their bond and give the Ego back again some elements as restored with less ambiguity and confusion.

The above-illustrated clinical case seems to suggest a strict link between symptoms’ worsening, as reported from many people, and the impact with a destabilizing reality which not only leads everybody back to the origin starting process of one’s personality, but also obliges the individual to stand again face to face with the processing gaps of his/her past conflicts not yet solved and to realize one’s own proper defense mechanisms.

The defense mechanisms’ triggering off

In the very last few years, starting from the pandemic situation up to the current war, everybody has been high-impacted by the concrete risk for one’s own safety; initially due to the perception of a frail corporeity constantly under the threat of dangerous attacks, afterwards, and in an endless sequence of emergency events with no respite, due to the risk of a war repositing the sense of human transience. Both situations evoke a “concrete risk of death” (Ferraris, 2021), that is therefore perceived as doubly strengthened. The concept of death resurfaces with all its destabilizing power and compelling to come back to the body, suddenly plunged into vulnerability dimension, falling down from the highest peak of immortality illusion so well cherished by the pressing development of scientific and technological discoveries as well as amplified by the great deal of internet tam-tam.

It is worth mentioning Chiara Matteini about the function of the virtual in relation with the oblivion. She writes that in the virtual dimension “*The oblivion experience becomes obsolete*”, for as much as any mark referred to the instant’s living is kept safe by the virtual internet from any transformability risk. Both pandemic and war emergencies have reminded us the precariousness of human nature whereas the nowadays’ collective imagination was dominated by the illusion of immortality, so much well-fostered by the network illusory attempt to «*wipe away the oblivion by means of an alarmingly never-ending and infallible memory*» (in Matteini, 2019, p.67).



The concern for inflation, gas and power prices, Covid emergency and global climate change, in addition to the Ukraine-war images, has swarmed into our minds. The TV war images and violence towards Ukraine people had the effect not only to increase aggressivity levels in our cities but sometimes also to intensify mental activity through massive defense mechanisms as a safeguard refuge against group and community life's threat perception.

The unceasing impact of sudden changes arising more and more unexpected dangers perceived as past solved matters, such as an imminent risk for one's own life, the sudden loss of family members, of job and more generally one's own certainties, moved backwards the path way of one's own personality structuring as for the authenticity of the Self, the affective bonds, and the moral and value judgements criteria at the basis of Ego development. In the wake of Bion's theory (1974), the catastrophic changes oblige the individual to stand face to face with his/her caesuras, a sort of failles and fissures in the individual's way of being, those processing gaps of past events still living in small or large amounts in everybody's mind.

If the mind has no proper resources to meet that gap of processing at the origin of the faille or fissure, it is possible it will look for a compensation form through a surface adaptation to standardized mass thought.

So here we are back to the "adaptation to whatsoever" spreading, through acritical and unconflictual adherence, all over the intrapsychic and transpersonal areas, also permitting more advanced defensive operations. The search for an enemy target leads the individual backwards to a regressive paranoid-schizoid position and avoids the depressive feeling of helplessness so to keep him/her away from a deeper anxiety that could cause a return to the confusion and un-differentiation of the ambiguous position. That's why it is widely easier to choose any Other, for being perceived so different from other individuals and their membership community, as the best enemy target to attack.

By means of different defence mechanisms, such as splitting, idealization, projection and denial, the individual tries to avoid the anxiety arising from a situation with which one cannot currently cope. The emphasis onto the regressive return to the paranoid-schizoid position could belittle the importance of any mental operation preventing/avoiding a depressive collapse (Fonda, 2016).

Nicolò (2020a) argues that the impact with terrifying news, as well as illness and death experiences, can arise serious mass phenomena, such as contagious psychological influence of crowds, the folie à deux, and as the worst effect even total passivity and mental confusion. She also highlights the possible recourse to further defense strategies, such as repression, sublimation and idealization, in order to protect one's own mind from anxiety-producing reality or people perceived as threatening. Here-below a fragment from a clinical case illustrates the way some negation and denial operations can be brought into play and triggered off.

A married-couple clinical case: Covid or Covidite?

A young married-couple with one-year-old baby asks for a psychological consulting because they have recently noticed an increased conflict level obliging them to stay as much as possible separated along the day for many hours: so that the mother spends more time with the baby outside and comes back home only in the evening. At



once both partners express their intolerance of the restraint due to the mandatory use of medical face masks, refer that they do not work because they refused to follow the vaccine protocol and also show their economic concern asking about the session cost. The young man affirms the non-existence of Covid emergency and says: “it’s all an exaggeration and distortion campaign”. The psychotherapist feels a sense of dismay for the aggressivity he shows towards the outside reality of Covid pandemic circumstance. She thinks over a possible denial of reality and also notices the anger of the young man as a response arising from the limits imposed for the pandemic situation, including isolation and the mandatory use of medical protection devices. There was a massive denial of any risk since perceived by him as a non-existing danger. With the intent to investigate their contact with the objective reality the analyst asks them about their opinion related to the images they could watch in tv during the first lockdown period. Once more the answer comes promptly from him: “It’s all a Covidite and not a Covid matter”. The analyst also asks the young woman to express her own opinion about what he just said. She answers reporting her concern about their baby, since she and their baby spend many hours outside home due to the couple conflict. Both partners refer they had already and individually followed a previous psychodynamic-approach psychotherapy: the young man during his infancy at the time of his sister’s birth that caused him an impasse in his development progresses and the young woman at the time of her adolescence. Both them speak in a positive way about their past personal psychotherapies but at the basis of their couple’s origin there seems to be an unconscious collusion, a “relationship established to re-frame one’s own inner framework” (Norsa & Zavattini, 1997). The strong impact with changes due to the pandemic situation and the birth of their baby destabilized both their intrapsychic and interpersonal assets, showing again their past individual psychic problems and the frailness of unconscious collusive couple origin so that any persecutory anxiety was conveyed with aggressivity into their relationship and against the outside world. The collapse of meta-social guarantors obliged the young couple to look for other new context depositories: at the end the young man applied for his membership to an internet community and the young woman hyper-invested a real place that could give hospitality to her and her baby.

The couple’s denial of Covid thread and their detachment from the pandemic reality worked as defense operations and can show us how deeply the individual and its affective bonds can be involved in the complexity of reality up to the extent that if it exceeds a certain tolerability cut-off, the mind keeps it detached from itself. The above-illustrated pathological asset is interrelated both with the bond’s functioning and the couple life-cycle changes.

As argued by Nicolò, it is important to consider certain mental operations, such as externalization, Other’s border intrusion and the difficulty to recognize the Other as differentiated from the Self, as a way to treat one’s own psychic wounds through and with the Other and to identify them as defense functions closely interrelated with both intrapsychic



and intersubjective areas. (Nicolò, 2020a).

In the nowadays context of a war at its initial phase and traumatic states persisting, the same setting frame itself is influenced by the external reality strongly affecting the inner reality of the person.

The concepts of projective and introjective identifications seem to be a poorly stocked kit of tools to interpret the complexity of the links currently developing among people, partners, family and between analyst and analysand (Nicolò, Trapanese, 2005).

Which novelty in the way we can connect the current outer world with the patient's inner one? And what is the extent of change in the complex field of transference-counter-transference phenomena? The same analyst itself, affected by a traumatic reality perceived as overwhelming, could happen to protect himself/herself from it (Nicolò, 2010).

If we affirm the assumption that the analyst-analysand relationship has to be intended as a bond developing during the psychotherapy and becoming itself a topic for reflection, we need to investigate about the impact that the uncertainty of the world, where both analyst and analysand are living, can have onto the clinical activity. Ogden (1997, p. 18) remarks: «I do not consider transference and counter-transference as separated entities arising one in relation to each other, but rather in relation to aspects of the same unique intersubjective construction jointly made by the analyst and the patient» .

The counter-transference in individual analytic setting

Sara is a young woman asking for a personal psychotherapy pathway because of the worsening of her headache symptoms. Her liaison with her boyfriend is the initial predominant topic she speaks about in her analytic sessions and the analyst relates the symptom with the tension between the couple partners, present in her "head" as kept in mind by her. After three months of sessions Sara shows her concern for the news about the imminent risk that a war could suddenly break out. She works as a reviser for a newspaper and reads all articles before their printing and says: "I fear the war can break out, who knows what it will happen". The analyst asks: "How do you feel about such a news?". She answers she is worried and feels scared. The analyst goes on: "you have caught a serious danger in the reality of our world", and adds, "let's hope politicians will actively work in favor of peace". The analyst realizes her words were out of keeping with the real serious topic of their conversation and were minimizing the magnitude of anxiety arisen at counter-transference level. She has difficulty to connect inner emotions with outer reality, and in her mind the patient's words draw out from her memory of the first Covid lockdown, the images of her empty city, deserted monuments, not one person at all in places usually crowded by people, merely an unusual city, absolutely unfamiliar. The analyst becomes aware of her inner reality where no thought about the war could be made in addition to the pandemic concern, in a counter-transference dimension totally opposite to the patient being able to express her concern for further future traumatic events. In that immediate conversation it was very difficult for the analyst to go deeper inside the



emotional contents of the analysand and highlight the verbal authenticity coherent with the magnitude of the reported news.

Janine Puget highlights that “Uncertainty is a vinculo-regulating principle necessarily implying unpredictability” (In Nicolò, 2020b). Such a principle is a feature of any bond and deprives the future of its certainty. What an extent of anxiety can be tolerated by the mind and what is the maximum limit threshold for holding verbal contents? Certainly such questions arose in the mind of the analyst thinking over the counter-transference dynamics arisen in the above-described session. In the sessions concomitant to and after the war breaking out the patient, Sara, never went back to war subject and concern. Sara has no more focused onto the outer reality and preferred on the contrary to reason especially about her inner world and couple’s bond difficulties. The analyst often wondered if she should go back to the initial patient’s concern for the outer reality or wait that Sara did it by herself. Another question in the analyst’s mind was if Sara had perceived that the analyst could not tolerate further contents from her about traumatic emergencies, meaning the loss of analyst’s holding capacity, and for such a reason she started to elude any reference to the war as a sign of “respect” for the analyst’s mental apparatus. In this clinical case the analytic relationship, intended in Bionian terms as a container/contained function and reverie power, was somehow role-reversed since the patient seemed to undertake the container function that the analyst was not able to fulfil in that circumstance.

Just later the analyst could deduce that anxiety had overwhelmed her for the evocative power of war stories from past generations. She recalled Puget’s (2020) concept of feeling “saturated”, an experience of excess blocking the representative function. Therefore the same question once again: how many traumatic changes can we face while avoiding to collapse and keeping a valid analytic therapeutic function? Making good use of a joint thought by her group of workmates the analyst realized that the “astonishment” effect arisen in the here and now of the analytic session was the trigger for her counter-transference, so strong to be dislodged into a much more complex reality. Something unconceivable was about to happen and the patient’s words were presaging a new catastrophe.

In wider terms the psychotherapist is absorbed in the same world of the patient, can run his/her same risks, same restrictions and gets so much in touch with it to be “impacted” by it.

It is a situation to be considered as closely related to the psychic reality and conceived as the Other’s reality coming into contact with us (Nicolò, 2020a). The analytic concepts of the intrapsychic, inter-subjective and trans-subjective, as features of the bonds between the individual and its community space, have become visible facts, thus strengthen the “incertitude” and “in-jeopardy” jointly felt by both the bond’s members living in the same turbulent historical period.

Current changes can invert the positions between front- and back-stage. The assumptions in the backstage, previously believed as certain and unchangeable, have suddenly been thrown in the frontline to show their unsteady waves, thus reveal the plot of bonds among the psychic spaces and their pressing need to be well-focused.



The social dimension: Don't look up

The black comedy film *Don't Look Up* written and directed by Adam McKay is an exaggerated representation of mental defensive mechanisms used to cope with an imminent risk of death threatening the whole earth. By watching the film it is as if we were watching in a deformed mirror the distorted image of our current reality, just right when it happens. Although 2021-dated the film well-describes also the present-day drama of the war.

The plot of the film tells the story of a girl, Ph.D student in astrophysics, and her university professor, discovering a giant comet would hit the Earth within a period of six months, thus causing human extinction. They rush to alarm the President of the United States, who initially belittles their data and re-assesses their information with appropriate regard only later and for his own selfish advantage with the intent to have more votes from the electorate. Just right when the US missiles are about to be launched against the comet and change its direction, everything is blocked. The military operation steps are suddenly slowed down since a new reality arises from the possibility to exploit the comet raw materials. The apocalyptic story reminds somehow of the theatre of the Absurd with a "scenario" in which the difficulty to cope with the risk of death moves the attention focus onto an economic profit opportunity really impossible to make because of the imminent impact with the unavoidable threat.

The film story highlights the overwhelming dismay especially for the lack of a real crowd leader with a guide function, since in the plot the US President character is represented as a selfish scoundrel unable to protect himself and not even the whole mankind, thus he doesn't play his role of country leader.

The film is also a good representation of the collective folie phenomenon illustrated by Freud's mass psychology explaining how the crowd members can lose their own capacity to discern good from evil and prefer to join together around a leader.

Amati Sas and others emphasize everybody's need to conform and standardize oneself to others, to be fused in a unique joint totality with them; it is such a symbiotic need to cause confusion and destroy the capacity of discernment. It is a matter of ambiguity, that is the right term to identify exactly the same old mechanism that in the past century allowed the Holocaust to occur: even if somebody knew about what was really happening, some others resorted to the defensive mechanism of negation and went on living nearby the extermination camps "as if a mere nothing was happening there". Many wrote about the value of historical memory but nowadays we can see how the same old mechanism can arise again with the same past strength and features.

As film director, A. McKay depicted very ironically a sociological picture of the contemporary society whose his film characters are members, thus sharing same limits and weaknesses. As a sort of modern Cassandra among many other Cassandra's voices his film characters seem to have predicted the war we are really living at present.

The film proposes the idea of a post-truth society where constant new statements, projections and market estimates are rapidly issued in a very frenzied manner. As a result of our group debate on the film considered as the Manifesto of the end of survival instinct, we related it to some alarming phenomena occurred during the Covid pandemic emergency; the dogmatic anti-vaccine extremists sometimes put themselves at higher risk for getting seriously ill, or even dying from Covid-19, purely for their adhesive dogmatism of their membership



community and by unfaithfully hushing their instinct for both the individual's and species survival.

Which possible analytic setting during the pandemic emergency and afterwards?

Emergency situation obliged us to change the usual analytic setting really effective up to that moment. With the support of one's own personal past analysis and training, of the capacity to search for new ways of working that we could explore accompanied by the CFP membership power, we did the necessary changes. Anyway if we think back to the magnitude of what we all experienced, our first reflection could be that a transitory negation could really be the only possible form of psychic survival. Sometimes it is as if it were necessary to throw outside what is not yet conceivable, somehow attempting to build that metaphoric sterilized space inside the surgical room where not only any infective threat is eliminated but also the appropriate inner dissociation of the surgeon is possible so to allow him/her to lance the body of another person with adequate emotional detachment.

Similarly, in that period of utter confusion and dismay it seemed necessary to keep outside from the analytic room the anxieties and oppression of the outer world so to create a sort of happiness island where one could recover strength before plunging again into the chaos. At times along the coast of that happiness island some finds from a far-off land could be deposited and better observed, studied, identified. Right there, in that timeless dimension without imminent threats it was gradually possible to recover one's strength and thought and spare time for keeping the analytic mind clear and free from any dross. Poisonous dross derive from the mass media news as well as from the anxieties perceived through patients' stories collected session by session.

Backwards glancing at the whole pandemic emergency we can affirm it was a fundamental lesson to us. All our analytic tools become obsolete and risk to become empty envelopes whose meaning is lost in the passing of time and still worse a mere narcissistic shelter afforded to the psychotherapist. That's why in our study group we all decided to re-visit those authors whose writings could help us to view setting changes not only in terms of disadvantages but as opportunities. Among all our reflections about what possible analytic setting could better fit current needs the one reminding us of Libermann's (1972) concept of meta-setting was of great support: with such a term he refers to the whole aspects related to cultural levels and collective organizations that from outside the analytic room can anyway concur in the analytic process development. The meta-social guarantees influencing and being at the basis of social relationships represent a wider framework to structure the rules of the analytic relationship. Usually we are not accustomed to have a view from this perspective apart when sudden changes in the outer environment reach and upset our analytic setting, that is exactly what happened during Covid pandemic period.

From the beginning of Covid emergency we preferred to use a more pliable frame to fit patients' needs, on the basis of an adaptation capacity derived from sharing the same outer social context which inhabited both analyst and analysand.

Quoting Riefolo (2020) "*we can't do otherwise*" is an expression we are often obliged to say as referred to the patients with higher level of pathology that are more difficult to set in frames



with pre-established rules.

We wondered about the possible changes in the analytic setting function following the adaptations required by outer factors and we also wondered what space could be appropriate to host the unchangeable elements of the analytic setting that Bleger (1967) considered collusive with the psychotic part of personality, thus representing the symbiotic depository guarantee. Certainly and in agreement with Bion's assumptions (1975), it was the analyst's mind itself to keep the container function (inner setting) in order to hold and process the contents told by patients.

In line with teachings from our past and common specialization training, the analytic work with families implies setting adaptations and a more pliable perspective of its function without anyway missing its sense of containment.

In agreement with Lucarelli and Tavazza (2013), the family analytic setting more than other ones implies an adaptation, search, and new ways to be crossed together and jointly with its members.

Working with families means first of all to construct a relationship, rather than a setting; it is the inner setting of the analyst to be crucial in such an effort. The capacity to wait, tolerate and leave space for the Unsaturated are important tools to keep the family in mind even when absent. Since families are not used to think in abstract terms they often speak about concrete facts, with regards to their primary needs, thus the safeguard of their somatopsychic apparatus sometimes is guaranteed only by means of eluding any phantom and symbolic level of thought. Any enactment inside the analytic field is an opportunity for re-signification implying sometimes further hidden gaps which a shared space-time and jointly-constructed dimension is required for. During the initial steps, and sometimes even afterwards, certain psychotherapy pathways require to keep a "pliable" setting, so to allow the whole family to "use the setting-analyst object" able to stay there for them and withstand any family members' foray. This kind of pliable setting, being thought first and then put into action, is the only way to avoid the trap of Procrustes bed, meaning that sort of role inversion by which the patient is obliged to adapt himself/herself to a space unable to be adjusted according to his/her needs. The analyst's proposal of a setting change can be considered in fact as an interpretation act (Carli, 1983), a speaking action (Racamier, 1998 It. Transl.) in the analytic work with families. Establishing a setting framework inclusive of both defined and flexible rules enable to take into adequate account the unconscious family sorrow.

Ogden's (1994) concept of "*interpretation-in-action*" or "*interpretative action*" suggests something that can open a space for imagination and reality playing, an area where emotional conflicts can be explored even if unsolved. In Ogden's works an interpretative action conveys the analyst's understanding of the transference-countertransference to the analysand whose conflict is therefore well-held. Ogden suggests it is a silent communication behavior by which parts of the analyst's understanding of the unconscious meaning of analytic relationship are conveyed to the analysand. In the analytic treatment of patients with paranoid-schizoid functioning the interpretative actions allow to overcome the necessity to use a shared verbal and symbolic speech.

Here-below clinical vignette illustrates how the collapse of meta-social guarantors during the pandemic period caused a psychic breakdown, thus arising a new request for a psychotherapy towards the recovery of thinking capacity.



The Covid threat and the anxieties for current incertitude

Some weeks before the outbreak of Russian-Ukraine war, a 62-year-old man recontacts his past psychotherapist for “some booster sessions” necessary, he refers, for the worsening of his psychic state. He explains shortly his very difficult period: “A mess, Doctor, I made a mess. At the hundredth denigrating and aggressive provocation by my sister I burst out, I raged at her out of control and attacked her. You can guess my following anxiety, since in the past I was already in a bad situation with my family and had very few contacts with all members. I was feeling such a deep sense of failure, fear, prostration and loneliness that I thought to do away with myself”. He refers he had later really swallowed a massive amount of medicines but a quantity to let him just write his testament. At the thought he could risk to survive brain-damaged he called 118, thus he was hospitalized, submitted to psychiatric examination and put on a drip for a week. The analyst fixes a date for the first session just few days after his call, at which he arrives looking tried by what happened and worried for his extreme behaviors and vulnerability. He refers his concern for the relative “chattering”, the following isolation e loneliness in work, family and social contexts. He feels alone and guilty. During his previous psychotherapy pathway he got many achievements, such as much more expansiveness and a better self-benevolence, as well as the smoothing of his defense traits and manners. In spite of the past results he seems discouraged now. Anyway the analyst perceives the patient’s sorrow as the sign of a new possible inner power. In fact the man had bravely faced loneliness, his being in the wrong, his feeling forsaken, the others’ blame, and his final “breakdown”. Slowly during his therapy he starts to re-open himself to social relations. Initially he keeps in strict touch with the only two university- and school-mates who had always returned him his affection. On the contrary his family goes on showing detachment from him, thus he feels more and more alone but accepts to face loneliness and shame, meanwhile a new self-awareness arises and becomes a benevolent self-acceptance. That is his new source of strength that allows him to be more and more responsive to his mother’s material needs and to enhance differentiation from his brothers. The analytic work goes on slowly whereas the analyst continues to attend the CFP group discussions which help her to grasp a new perspective by which she can see the pandemic emergency as the trigger for her patient’s disarrangement of aggressive and dissociated aspects. The analyst also wonders about the possibility that such a collapse could also be a constructive and reparative spur, as a sort of power paralyzed by the guilty for too long a time. In fact in the period before the psychotherapy the man felt so deeply guilty that he had been looking to ease it by means of paranormal and esotericism via. His firm beliefs deriving from that via found a respectful listening attitude in the analyst who suspended any form of judgement. The second psychotherapy period, the one of the



“booster sessions” as he called it, seemed to be a “re-visit” of the old pathway, more simply the “naming without grasping” phase. While the sessions go on the patient also copes with further bad experiences, especially the worsened health situation of his mother, her hospitalization first and then the Covid arousal in addition to another infectious disease attacked from hospital, with the relative medical prohibition of any visit to her, and finally her following death. When the other family members ask for him to take care of their mother he accepts without hesitating and he treats his sick mother up to the end. It is during his mother’s funeral that he can experience the peak of his isolation, family detachment and the great void where probably he had always been living, but it is only then he can really feel and recognize it inside himself, thus he reaches his rock-bottom psychic state. He is still in treatment at present, and in the last session before summer break the patient reports his concern about the risk he could be again out of control but he also tells about his sister sharing with him a secret, thus positive expectations for a new mutual trust and intimacy can arise.

As just illustrated, sometimes unforeseeable and unexpected events can move the analytic field towards trust in improving a new thinking capacity, fears endurance power and tolerance of mourning grief including the one for the loss of any certainty, far beyond any imagination (Lucarelli, 2022). The adequate “detachment” towards many situations that the man could enhance through the analytic sessions enabled him to create an inner space where relationships could finally “take place”.

From the pandemic to the war emergency...

We wondered if and what similar links could be possible to find between the pandemic and the risks deriving from the Russian-Ukraine war (including the war expansion to other countries and the nuclear weapons threat). From the pandemic emergency unleashing human death anxieties with overwhelming power a traumatic area has suddenly arose with few space for processing. We suggest that Covid could have triggered off a persecutory thought about any Other as a danger, a possible infectious enemy. In his article entitled “The collective life agreement coping with grief and trauma” Daniele Biondo (2020a) points out that: «Maybe such an excess of grief and sorrow went well beyond human psychic tolerability resources. As inevitable result one’s defensive apparatus which allowed to deny death was endangered, thus anxiety has overwhelmed us (...). Furthermore the forbiddance of funeral ceremonies, as a consequence of the pandemic, has increased death anxiety and made us more powerless. Freud had already highlighted the important psychic defense function of funeral ceremonies to conceive the existence of a world beyond life where the dead could be accompanied by the bereaved who in such a way could think about their own death while still alive. (...) Freud considered the disclaimer of death as an achievement of civilized mankind, a soul caress for not feeling oneself as an insensitive or wicked person. It is as if the civilian collective life were possible only if the individuals abolish the thought of death from their psychic horizon» (p.486-487).

The image of the long line of army trucks full of coffins going in the night through the



desert roads of Bergamo city and the military metaphors used in common speech to refer to the pandemic seem to be, maybe, an initial sign of a possible link between the Covid emergency and the war phantom.

Franco Fornari in *Psicoanalisi della guerra* writes about the paranoid grief processing in terms of an unconscious nuclear mechanism in the war phenomenon: «Since the bereavement grief is a depressive and also persecutory experience, (I remind you the popular fear for the dead coming back to pull the bereaved's feet as well as the primitive custom to leave a heavy stone onto the tombs so that the dead never come back), the war as a paranoid grief processing, should be essentially a defense both from depressive and persecutory anxieties.» The author also explains: «The war is a safety organization not because it is a defensive means against real enemies but it rather allows to find or even invent real enemies to kill; otherwise the society would risk to leave individuals unarmed (...) and without defense when facing with their own inner arousal of the Terrifying as pure inner enemy. Thus we could consider the war as a therapeutic effort attempted by a social institution which by means of institutionalizing the war itself would enlarge in excess what in the paranoid-schizoid phase was an Ego's basic mechanism of the defense» (Fornari, 1966, p. 11-13).

We moved from an invisible enemy, the Covid virus, to a visible one, the war.

In the period after the Covid pandemic our patients showed an arousal of some latent aggressivity areas already existing before the pandemic in a dissociated form well-hidden in unexplored niches that later have unexpectedly come out through the analytic work, as illustrated in the previous clinical case.

Biondo emphasizes that this sudden arousal of aggressivity, implies the risk to be entrapped inside a primitive form of collective group with a sort of herd-type mental functioning. He recalls about it Bleger's theory and further studies by Silvia Amati Sas and Nielsen. Here his description of this functioning: «What I grasped from my clinical activities in different institutions (educational, social and therapeutic) is the achievement that the group with excess levels of anxiety inside it deriving from traumatic and deprivation factors can defend itself from regression by triggering off powerful and primitive mechanisms of defense: degradation, breakdown, splitting, break-up, collapse into chaos, loss of identity and of sense-search capacity, attack to collective bonds, rapid ways to untie one's bonds, attack to thinking capacity and a massive recourse to enactments, and final despair» (Biondo, 2020b, p.27).

Here-bellow a clinical vignette can highlight this kind of primitive functioning triggered inside a group in institutional context and show it as both the signal alarming about group uneasiness and the group response to the arousal of anxiety.

An institution's disease

A woman tells in her analytic sessions her experience as hospital nurse during the second Covid wave. One of her workmates became seriously infected and was admitted to the subintensive care unite (SICU). He will take many months to recover from infection. As soon as the news of him started to spread in the hospital, everybody was concerned for the hospitalized workmate and for one's own health as well as for any hospitalized patient for the risk of a breeding ground. The person in charge of



the ward was away from the hospital, thus there was utter confusion in the hospital. His absence seem to represent the lack of a meta-social guarantee. The woman reports in one session that in the space of a few days her workmate got worse so much to run the risk to be moved to the intensive care unit. The whole ward was soon pervaded by depressive and powerlessness feelings as well as archaic defenses, thus paranoid and negation mechanisms prevailed. The ward Head and his substitute started inquiries about the ill workmate's behaviors to investigate if he had properly followed the required safety proceedings. There was the risk he could be submitted to disciplinary measures Board just right when he was hovering between life and death. That's how one's inner enemy could be reified by Covid pandemic emergency, as well as the Russian-Ukraine war. In fact here-below a parallel clinical fragment about a married couple whose exclusive and closed union was initially felt as an apparent guarantee of stability, a protective shield against the Thirdness and different Other perceived as a danger: a married couple whose perfect idealized peace could not, even should not, be supposed as destabilized by anything.

The discovery of the Other: the journey

Stefano e Franca, a couple of middle-aged adults, got married 40 years ago. Both them devoted their lives to their jobs, thus they did not want any child. They mutually considered each other as the only reference point of any stability and certainty. Although their initial bold manners, they express since their first session a strong anxiety for future, especially their couple future: "If he should die, me too I would not survive... if she dies, how could I go on with my life without her?". Both partners well admit to end up in catastrophic ravings that increased in the lockdown period more and more alarming questions in their minds. The couple was so much symbiotic that at any separative attempt by Stefano the wife had a fit of anger out of control. At that fit any recourse to a piece of reality was useless to trigger off her logic capacity, thus it was totally distorted by her and Stefano felt emotionally detached from her. That moment of detachment, as he reported later in their sessions, was terrifying: a deep vortex where they ended up with no hopes to escape, and where all emotions never expressed before were conveyed in such an utter disorganization to leave them empty and exhausted, where only the undifferentiated existed, a dimension of a unique joint present-past-future time. It reminded us Fornari's thought quoted by Lidia Leonelli Langer (2014): «There it is experienced directly through the body, thus unconceivable, a prototype of any no-name un-thinkable terror. It is that terrifying feeling called primary anguish and despair, prototype of any following terrifying experience, anguish and despair». The couple relationship was functioning through the alternation of vortex moments with periods of apparent calm when they used to arrange a journey to restore the peace of their symbiotic bond. Their relationship worsened during the lockdown period; compulsory proximity increased their quarrels



that could not be compensated by their usual journey to restore their symbiotic union as opposite to their daily detachment state. In the same period also the fear to lose the other arose as well as that of one's own detachment. After the lockdown period Stefano and Franca started to travel again but some changes had occurred, thus they could not experience it as before, as a means to restore their symbiotic union. The psychic defences they had been using for 40 years to keep their bond solid had suddenly collapsed. The images of the Russian-Ukraine war deeply upset Franca whereas Stefano seemed apparently indifferent to them: images of people losing their houses, leaving their family, losing any certainty, escaping from one's own daily habits, from the familiar towards the unknown, through a travel that had a totally different meaning from that of the couple. Through the impact of reality with its burden of concrete needs and state of emergency heavily affecting the couple, they are obliged to re-signify internally the concept of journey, as well as their bond, experienced as an escape-defence from any excess of proximity and paradoxically, as defensive protection from the bond itself, their bond. The Ukrainians' journey was an escape, not from an inner enemy but from a real concrete one, the killer. Therefore Franca decides to shelter in their holiday-house residence a couple of Ukraine refugees, a mother with her daughter fleeing from war and taking only a mere suitcase. Initially Stefano did not agree with his wife, but finally he accepts the two refugees. Even if the two refugee women live in a separate house from the married couple, Franca take care of them, console them, is interested in them. The "stranger" is taken care by Franca whereas Stefano stands in observation up to the moment when both them manage to accept the novelty. The couple make a psychological space for the strange third, though via their holiday-house residence and keeping their distance. It is worth quoting Anna Nicolò (2020a, pp. 607): "Therefore the problem is not about the existence of outer or concrete reality, rather the necessity to constantly build the Other's and ourselves' reality and contemporary keeping a joint between them". It is interesting to notice in the married couple story the fact that just right before a programmed journey the wife becomes infected with Covid, whereas the husband keeps safe. The wife's illness postponed sine-die the departure, thus forcing them once more to isolation. The wife bursts into an anger out of control, against the husband for being not ill, and also against the psychotherapist, she was not ill too, who represented in a projective way the submitting forced limit. The husband-psychotherapist couple is perceived by the wife as a powerful archaic parental couple limiting her freedom, causing her uneasiness, isolating her and keeping distance from her. In that session the psychotherapist is overwhelmed by feeling of both fault and anger and through identification with the husband she feels the drive to detach herself emotionally from the context, in a sort of freezing that increases Franca's powerless rage while the husband stands as observer comfortably laying on a sofa pillow in another room. When the psychotherapist verbally



underlines all these aspects, then Franca's rage, as well as the anger in the couple, starts to decrease and the session can be continued. The analytic interpretations allowed a reflection onto their bond changed by the pandemic: from protective and symbiotic to a conflictual and destructive living together. Therefore making explicit the couples' evolvment of changes they could start a new psychological process to re-signify and change their inner experiences.

Conclusions

The Covid pandemic emergency first, then the Russian/Ukraine conflict have led people face to face with a reality previously considered as unconceivable. As for the war it is still valid Freud's acute reflection reported in his work "On Transience" (1915), and referred to the First World War followed in 1918 by the Spagnola virus epidemy:

«The War shattered our pride in the achievements of our civilization, our admiration for many philosophers and artists and our hopes of a final triumph over the differences between nations and races. The war stained the sublime impartiality of our science, exposed our instincts in their nakedness, and unleashed the evil spirits within us, which we believed had been tamed by the centuries-long education of the noblest of us. It made our fatherland small again and the rest of the world remote to us. It robbed us of so much of what we loved, and showed us the frailty of many things we had thought unchangeable» (p.375).

What exactly did we have to tolerate and what else are we still able to cope with if emergency situations go on increasing and become stratified? Which self-preservation factor really enabled us to protect ourselves, what have we lost, and on the contrary what have we acquired even in such difficult circumstances?

Since the current historical emergency period we can consider the whole work of our research group as a reflection concerning the real meaning and value of regaining the strength and trust to construct and keep alive human bonds.

The fact that we were together while jointly crossing over the last few years emergencies was probably our power and best support, maybe it preserved our mind safe in the most difficult periods of isolation and allowed us, as well as our patients, to cope with the rapid and wide changes of setting (inner and outer ones).

As illustrated in the above-described clinical vignettes the whole issues of patients' speech in their sessions were deeply affected by the events occurring outside the analytic setting. The outer reality has come in the analytic sessions overbearingly and unexpectedly pervading the intrapsychic dimension as well as both the couple and family bonds, with both progressive and regressive effects.

Pandemic's restrictions imposed onto our lives have led to unusual situations and



changes of previous bonds. In the couples' partners we met in sessions there was initially a tendency to mutually take care of each other so to face any death anxiety. Then the proximity changed and lost the capacity to contain and limit persecutory anxieties: anxiety moved from the body to the bond. In some other cases denial and negation prevailed and triggered off persecutory states and aggressivity in the couple relationship.

Even the therapist/patient couple was affected by the impact with the war news, thus arising mechanism of defense and the necessity for us analysts to gradually make a psychic space to face the new arising anxieties. In the "Family impasse case-study" the lockdown has increased the previous isolation and led the sons to free themselves from the family bond whereas the necessity of a marked differentiation between generations arose in the psychotherapy pathway. While each of us went on with one's own job individually, the group could be the container for anxieties, uncertainties and allow the exchange of experiences and group thinking. We all experienced a new environment with our patients, sometimes a new proximity, an inevitable sharing that required constant reflections and inner changes.

Our analytic tools proved to be crucial to cope with the whole above-described situations with extreme adaptability. The social dimension of psychoanalysis could find wider forms of expression in the various emergency situations without giving up its own identity, indeed still acquiring an important role to cope with reality challenges.

We suppose that many issues can be left unsettled and overcome by new others; we can stay in "attentive and curious observation" wait, and keep a flexible attitude toward the complex magnitude of present-day reality. Now more than ever, since everything seems confused and undifferentiated, as well as under constant changes, we can bravely use our analytic tools. They enable us to deepen, differentiate and avoid categories and prejudices, to understand gradually the new realities we had not conceived yet and that constantly we have to deal with.

The incertitude we are living at present can be right the bionian faille (quoted work). Being face-to-face with a "crack" can be a great opportunity to find new solutions and restart mechanism of processing those emotional experiences that are not enough "thought", thus arising new way of being, potentially more effective, in favour of a wider capacity of creativity and adaptability. From this perspective the collapse of the old certainties can open new opportunities for a more explorative thought towards future*.

*The most beautiful sea hasn't been crossed yet.
The most beautiful child hasn't grown up yet.
Our most beautiful days we haven't seen yet.*

* Article translated from italian by Liliana Cocumelli



*And the most beautiful words I wanted to tell you
I haven't said yet*
Nazim Hikmet (1977)

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