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**Melancholic reactions to loss
in couples and families**

**Projective De-compensation:
Mourning the loss of projective identifications in a couple¹**
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Summary

The author proposes the concept of “Projective De-compensation” to describe a clinical phenomenon observed in couples’ analysis. She defines this term as a mental state or stage when a break occurs in the interplay of projective and introjective identifications that had held and maintained a couple together for a period of time. The author also argues about the importance of analyzing and interpreting the projective de compensation to promote the mourning process for such a loss, a process characterized by the excessive, pathological use of mutual evacuative

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functioning, accompanied by intense anxiety. This process is illustrated through clinical material taken from two complete consecutive sessions in the analysis of Adolfo and Mireya, who had been in couples therapy for more than three years and were stuck in a pathological mourning process.

Keywords: couples psychoanalysis, pathological mourning, projective and introjective identifications, projective de-compensation.

Résumé. *Décompensation Projective: faire le deuil de la perte de l'identification projective dans un couple*

L'auteur propose le concept de "décompensation projective" pour décrire un phénomène clinique observé dans l'analyse des couples. Elle définit ce terme comme un état ou stade mental où une rupture se produit dans le jeu des identifications projectives et introjectives qui ont maintenu un couple ensemble pendant une période de temps. L'auteur argumente aussi sur l'importance de l'analyse et l'interprétation de la décompensation projective en cours pour favoriser le processus de deuil d'une telle perte, processus caractérisé par l'usage excessif et pathologique du fonctionnement mutuel d'évacuation accompagné d'une intense anxiété. Ce processus est illustré par du matériel clinique provenant de deux séances consécutives complètes dans l'analyse d'Adolfo et Mireya, qui étaient en thérapie de couple depuis plus de trois ans et qui étaient bloquées dans un processus de deuil pathologique.

Mots-clés: psychanalyse de couples, deuils pathologiques, identifications projectives et introjectives, décompensation projective.

Resumen. *Descompensación Proyectiva: duelo por la pérdida de identificaciones proyectivas en una pareja*

En el presente trabajo la autora propone el término "descompensación proyectiva" para describir un fenómeno clínico observado en el análisis de parejas. Lo define como un estado mental o momento psíquico en el cual se produce un quiebre en el interjuego de identificaciones proyectivas e introjectivas que durante un tiempo sostuvieron a la pareja. Muestra también la importancia de analizar e interpretar la descompensación proyectiva para favorecer la elaboración del duelo por dicha pérdida, caracterizado por el uso excesivo y patológico de evacuaciones proyectivas mutuas, acompañadas de ansiedad intensa. Lo hace a través de un extenso material clínico correspondiente a dos sesiones completas y consecutivas de una pareja con más de 3 años en análisis, Adolfo y Mireya, quienes se encontraban atrapados en un duelo patológico.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis de pareja, duelo patológico, identificaciones proyectiva e introjectiva, descompensación proyectiva.

Introduction

In couples' relationships, it is possible to observe the unfolding of bipolarity produced by the split of the internal object, as described by Klein (1946) with the concept of projective identification. It is also possible to clearly observe during analytic sessions with couples Bion's (1959) subsequent characterization of the projective identification process as a form of communication whereupon an individual gets rid of the accumulated internal bad objects. Through this processes, couples find a balance in the interplay of their mutual projective and introjective identifications, which allows each member of the couple to act as a continent of the most vulnerable aspects of the other member.

Almost two decades of experience doing psychoanalytic work with couples has led me to observe a mechanism that I have called "*projective de-compensation*", defined as a mental state or stage when a disruption occurs in each member's ability to contain the other member's projective identifications (Morabito, 2012).

The concept of projective de-compensation also defines a state of loss that brings forth unconscious fantasies, anxieties, and defenses pertaining to the most primitive and vulnerable aspects, which had been hidden or hold at bay within the equilibrium the couple had previously achieved but has currently lost.

In order to avoid a melancholic aftermath to perpetuate as a result of this loss, it is imperative to analyze and interpret the projective de-compensation that took place. The goal is to explore the possibility of creating a new balance where each member of the couple can take turns in acting as continent of the other, diminishing the excessive, pathological use of mutual evacuative strategies.

Adolfo and Mireya

Adolfo and Mireya started treatment approximately 3 years ago. They wanted to start psychoanalytic couple therapy after their individual analyses proved to be insufficient to overcome a marital crisis, when Mireya discovered that Adolfo was having an affair with another woman. Adolfo and Mireya had been married for 25 years. He had been in analysis for almost 20 years while she had started her individual analysis 6 months before.

From the very beginning, Adolfo presented himself as quite knowledgeable about psychoanalytic matters while Mireya felt somewhat disqualified for having preferred so far self-help courses and spiritual retirements, which she continued to attend simultaneously to her couple sessions. A similar relational pattern characterized almost all areas of their life. Adolfo was a physician and a well-regarded specialist, while Mireya, who trained as a lawyer, had been going from one job to another without really developing a professional career. Also, Adolfo was the breadwinner and financially supported their two children, both studying Medicine. Mireya on the other hand allied with their children in order to help them get Dad's permissions.

Adolfo and Mireya met in their poor neighborhood while attending Secondary School. Mireya had a European background. Her mother was diagnosed as Bipolar and died young from a heart condition supposedly associated to her psychiatric treatment. Her father and siblings earned a lot of money but remained uneducated.

Even though Adolfo shared Mireya's low socio-economic status, his degree in Medicine and subsequent professional development, as well as his music studies since a young age, allowed him to climb the social ladder and access a higher education level. This was hard for Mireya, who felt that Adolfo's progress was based on her willingness to stay at home taking care of the children. Adolfo did not accept such claim, arguing that Mireya always had his support to work outside of the home. If she did not take advantage of it, Adolfo stated, it was because she decided to do so.

During daily life as well as during the sessions, Adolfo did not talk much, while Mireya did not stop talking, complaining, and reproaching her husband. She could hardly contain her anger, frequently threatening with ending treatment if Adolfo did not talk and reassure her. Adolfo, on the other hand, would justify his silence saying that she was just waiting for him to talk to hit him hard.

After two years of treatment, Mireya was able to contain her anger just a bit better, while Adolfo started to be more communicative. They appeared able to function well in dealing with their children and problem-solving everyday life issues. However, they appeared to increasingly grow apart regarding their intimacy and emotional life. The sessions turned vague and circular with Mireya crying inconsolably and Adolfo staying silent and keeping to himself his ominous sense of guilt. Interestingly, when Mireya was able to contain herself Adolfo would provoke her to start shouting and becoming aggressive towards him all over again.

In terms of my counter-transference, I feel like a spectator of a vicious circle that none of them dare to break because, despite the crisis they're going through, what upsets them the most about each other is also what allows them to keep unconscious their respective most vulnerable parts.

Mireya and Adolfo are working through mourning of *projective de-compensation*. This is the reason why they both resist the change and keep themselves in a vicious circle of mutual complaints and demands, as typically occurs in a pathological mourning process where anything is preferable to feeling overwhelmed by anxiety. Consequently, it is through the analysis and interpretation of the *projective de-compensation* that Mireya and Adolfo would be able to gradually elaborate their mourning for the loss of the core projective identifications that had sustained their relationship for a long time.

To illustrate the previous formulation, I will present next some clinical material corresponding to two consecutive sessions in the analysis of this couple.

First session

Mireya: (Addressing the analyst). "As always happens, I was so eager for the Wednesday session to come to see if finally Adolfo would say something. I feel very sad because I know he's going through a difficult time and I would like a lot to support him, but I also have my own needs as a woman. And I'm not referring to my sexual needs, which I also have, but for Adolfo to be more affectionate, touching me a bit. But no, he is far apart with his problem. And what about me? How long do I have to wait until he decides if he wants me to be his wife or if he prefers to stay forever like brother and sister. Yes, I can understand him, but who understands me? If at least he would share what's going on with him. Last weekend he went alone to the beach. That's okay; I stayed here because he needed to be left alone. I understand. I have never been a sticky kind of person because I also like to do my own things. But then he comes back, silent and ruminating. And I welcome him as a king that should not be bothered. All my life I have been feeling that he

was the intelligent one, the one who had deep thoughts, because he was going to analysis and never shared with me what he was talking with the analyst. But then, you see that he remains equally or more confused. Me, on the other hand, always tell him what I'm finding out in my analysis. And I know that there is a long way to go, but I'm learning a lot about my childish part, which is huge, and I'm learning to control myself. But my adult part also has the right to claim what it needs".

Adolfo stays silent, looking sad, with teary eyes, looking down to the floor. I think he is in the position of a child, receiving deserved punishment. I know that if I do not interrupt Mireya, she will go on and on talking, as she has done many times before, giving Adolfo the opportunity to remain silent and undefined, fulfilling his own secret wish.

Analyst: "Adolfo, Why don't you tell us about your thoughts? How do you feel about what Mireya just said?"

Adolfo: "What happens is that I have been feeling bad, so bad that I asked my analyst to increase my number of weekly sessions again. This is very hard to share...it has to do with a very destructive aspect that has accompanied me all my life...this is not new, but something I had to struggle with throughout my life".

Mireya: "Shit, Adolfo, I'm your wife! How can this be so horrible that you can't tell me? I don't understand, and it makes me mad. And when I'm mad, I start to think that these are all excuses. That in reality you're very comfortable with the way things are. You are at home, quiet, with a roof above your head, food, clean clothes, and a wife that leaves you alone so you can do whatever pleases you. Anyone would like that. I do not count, of course. The only important person is the Doctor, who has to be left alone or he will turn into Chucky (a monster). I don't believe that, you're such a good and calm person!"

Adolfo: "Do you see it? You want me to talk, but when I start doing so you don't like what I say and get angry. (Raises his voice) Do you see that? That's why I prefer to keep silent, so you don't raise hell and start manipulating me because you know I feel guilty. (Addressing the analyst) Because when you tell her something she doesn't want to hear, she gets angry and that's it".

Mireya: (Lowering her tone of voice) "That's true, Adolfo. But at least now I'm aware of it and I can stop it. It's true that I also feel guilty. What's happening is that I have a horrible fear that there is nothing left for me because you don't appreciate me as a woman. Because what I feel is that you consider me an idiot, an ignorant, and that you're ashamed of me. And when I think about all the time I've lost on you, on all of you, for nothing, because everyone is taking care their own business; that makes me very sad. Because at the end I am begging for love and no one appreciates me. (Starts to cry) What I need is for you to decide and stop plucking daisies. Because if you don't decide, I'll take my stuff and leave. I'm able to go ahead by myself. I don't need you. Maybe I have behaved with you as a child all my life, but I've been finding out in my analysis that I'm a capable person. If I have to continue being a submissive girl to stay with you, I don't want that anymore. I want to be treated as equal. I don't want and us being the powerful father and the needy girl anymore".

Adolfo: "Of course you can! I've always told you so. I got tired of telling you that and you always getting upset. I got tired of alerting you each time you got involved in a wrong business and you always becoming upset, as if I was criticizing you, instead of considering that I had the best intention to support you to grow and be proud of yourself. That's what's good of being a couple, to support each other, to give opinions. But you never accept anything without getting upset.

Mireya: "But I've told you a hundred times I was upset because I felt it like the mandate of the all-mighty who wanted to rule on me. Because of my insecurity and low self-esteem, I thought that you were disqualifying me. Now I know that all that rage came from my childish self-

conscious part. But you have to admit that what I was seeing in you as the all-powerful, know-it-all person, must also have been your own childish part. Because if we're going to talk at the same level, you have to start accepting that you loved being the all-powerful one. I'm not the only one being childish here".

Analyst: "Listening to you, I have the impression that it's very hard for both of you to give up on the way you're used to relate towards each other for a long time. It is as if, without being aware of it, when you got together you signed a secret contract you both swore never to betray. The contract would state something like this: Adolfo promised to take care and protect Mireya, and make her feel like an indulged kid, giving her what she never got from her mom. All this, provided that Mireya would make Adolfo feel that he was the most kindhearted person on earth. The problem is that this contract doesn't seem to work anymore. Instead of accepting this fact and keep on with your lives, you both remain resentful blaming each other for what you cannot provide each other anymore".

Both remain in silence for a while. As usual, Mireya starts talking.

Mireya: (Addressing the analyst) "I know you're correct. I'm aware and I can accept that things have changed. And I like the change. I'm pretty happy knowing how much I have matured and all I'm able to do now, even though it's hard and I'm scared at times, and I still get furious when I hear things I don't want to hear. But I immediately see it and rectify, and share with Adolfo my views and my feelings. Instead, Adolfo keeps being guarded and doesn't share anything with me. And this makes me feel sad, because I feel he's still with me because it's comfortable, not because he really wants to stay with me. At the same time, I see him so sad, so tormented. And I don't want him to suffer, because I love him. If he believes he would be better off without me, then he should leave because this situation is too hard to tolerate and it's hurting me deeply. And what hurts me the most is to see that he doesn't care, and that he only cares about himself".

Adolfo: "I don't know if I would be better off without you, Mireya. How hard is it for you to understand that my problem is not with you. My problem is with myself, and I don't find peace anywhere. Nothing motivates me. There is nothing I'm interested in".

Analyst: "Seems like Adolfo is finding it difficult to tolerate the guilt he feels about Mireya's pain, forgetting that you are both responsible in this equation. (Addressing Adolfo) It is as if you would prefer to stay in a kind of limbo instead of accepting that your position as the absolute provider does not have a place anymore. This is not only because it has been such a huge and oppressive responsibility on you to play that role, but also because even though Mireya has quite enjoyed that arrangement, it has kept her insecure for too long".

Adolfo: "This is absurd! I always wanted to protect and take care of her, give her advice, and actually guide her, but my intention was for her to grow up, not to control her. And she would get upset, and ended up doing whatever she wanted and crashed and lost money. And I was always there to save her. And then now, when supposedly she finally wants to grow, and she is actually doing it, then I come and sabotage her".

Mireya: (Crying) "Well Adolfo, I also sabotage when I get furious. That happens to both of us. This is not about one of us being good and the other being bad. All I'm asking is for you to share your feelings with me and not to close yourself and leave me outside. I don't want you to keep on being an omnipotent father because I'm not your daughter. Even though I have behaved like that, I don't want it anymore. I want to be your wife and that you start seeing me and treating me as the woman I am. And if you can't do that, then it's better for us to separate in good terms".

Analyst: "We will continue in the next session".

Second session

Adolfo: “As I said last time, I’ve been feeling quite bad. Nothing motivates me. I’m feeling so bad that I asked my analyst to increase my sessions again. Also, we decided I’ll start taking an anti-depressant. It was very hard for me to accept, but I finally realized that I need it, even though I don’t feel satisfied. Let’s see how it goes”.

Mireya: “But, what’s the problem? You don’t have to feel bad about it. On the contrary, you’re a physician. You know well that it has to be done when it’s needed”.

Adolfo: “Yeah. The thing is that, as I told you the other time, I have always had a very destructive aspect. And while you see me trying to be the best dad, the best provider, the faultless doctor, I’ve always carried on with me some horrible thoughts. (Addressing to Mireya) Do you remember when I insisted on installing bars in the first apartment we bought? That was because I had thoughts of throwing our daughter off the balcony. And that is why now, when we moved, I preferred this apartment and not the other one. (Addressing the analyst) Do you remember that we checked out two apartments in the same building? Well, I liked more this one because it was in the ground floor and had bars. (To Mireya) And I didn’t tell you that it was because of it...but in reality, I’m always tormented by horrible thoughts like those. All my life I have carried thoughts like those, feeling very guilty and hiding them from everyone. Feeling like a monster. The first time, I remember daydreaming with my aunt being dead. Of course, I had good reasons, because she was so sadistic and aggressive with my mom and myself. But I felt equally guilty at that time. It is only now looking backwards that I can understand why I felt that way towards her. But with our daughter, I really don’t have the right to have those thoughts, especially not when she was a baby”.

Mireya: “But Adolfo, as the analyst said the other time, these are just thoughts, just fantasies, because in real life you have been an extraordinary dad and a good husband. You have always protected us, and this has to prevail over those thoughts that torment you”.

Adolfo: “That’s why I play my guitar when I come home, to get rid of those thoughts. (Silence, Adolfo cries) Lately I’ve been having thoughts of killing you. I’ve been wondering what could happen if I killed you. That’s why I went to the beach alone the other week, to take distance and see if the thoughts went away. (I’m surprised that Mireya is able to contain her anxiety and keep herself quiet). But you only care about what has to do with you, how all this affects you, and me saying what you want to hear. You don’t care if I’m tormented or not”.

Mireya: (Getting upset again). “What’s going on with you Adolfo? I was listening to you quietly. Stop the drama! You’re not going to kill me. I’m not scared of you...”

Analyst: “It’s interesting to watch how the same pattern between you comes back again and again. The information Adolfo shared today may help us understand in part why this happens. (Addressing Adolfo) It seems like you don’t only need external bars to keep your thoughts quiet, but also the bars Mireya imposes on you when she gets furious. That seems to be why, even though she is more able to get less furious, and that’s a progress in your relationship, there is also a part of you that keeps pursuing getting her mad and triggering her to explode. It seems like her fury, even though it has been harmful to your relationship, it has been at the same time what dissipates your guilt; as if you have experienced her anger as the punishment you deserved. The problem is that each time Mireya explodes, whether it is because she is irascible or because you’ve provoked her, it ends up having the same outcome for her. She feels bad, guilty, and then looks up to you, trying to exalt you as the all-powerful father, which alleviates your guilty for what you have described as your destructive aspects”.

(Adolfo stays in silence, visibly disturbed).

Mireya: (Crying as a terrified girl; then she says) “I feel exhausted. I need to break this vicious circle. If we don’t do it, we’ll have to separate”.

Analyst: (addressing to Mireya) “I have the impression that behind so much fury you have been very scared. I’m not referring to being scared about what Adolfo may do to you, because these are just his fantasies. I think that your fear comes from much earlier, and it’s related to fears of being vulnerable, needy, and dependent from a mother that could not protect you. That’s probably why you have demanded from Adolfo to fulfill that need, you have rejoiced in his protection, and it has been so difficult for you to become independent, even though you have been realizing that you’re able to achieve it”.

Mireya: “Yes, and this makes me feel pity for myself, lots of pity. And pain too. Even though it’s strange, because at the same time I feel very proud, because I can see how much I’ve grown up. On the one hand, to realize how childish, capricious, impulsive and dependent I have been makes me feel ashamed. I can even understand that Adolfo got entangled with a doctor, someone mature as he is. But he is also to be blamed for treating me as a child. And I don’t know if it’s late, if we still have time to fix things, because I see him too comfortable in his isolated posture. It’s precisely because I don’t want to keep relating to him as a small child that I think he has to make a decision. Either he makes a decision or he talks to me more, because I don’t want to keep on being left outside. I promise you that I’ll try as much as I can to not bother you when you tell me things I don’t want to hear”.

Adolfo: (Increasing his voice, visibly altered) “Yes, of course! Either I decide or we get divorced! Are you taking revenge? In reality, you don’t care at all about me feeling tormented. When you say that you love me and that you don’t want me to feel tormented, you are lying! The only thing that you care about is for me to decide. If not, we’re done, isn’t it? Do you realize what happened? I opened up, shared stuff with you, and you just hit me in the head!”

Analyst: “What’s difficult about this is the sabotage that both of you repeatedly mention. Because it’s not only that you are asking or demanding the other to treat you in a certain way from now on. The real challenge consists in allowing and nurturing such a change. For it to be possible, you both have to start giving up on satisfactions you both obtained from the unhealthy relationship pattern you engaged in until now. This means, for you Adolfo, to deal with your guilt and avoid as much as possible provoking Mireya to get mad at you. With respect to you Mireya, you have to deal with your fears and sense of helplessness, and avoid hiding behind Adolfo as the all-powerful father figure. Each one of you has to assume responsibility for your own needs and understand that there is a very intimate space that separates you from one another, a space that might not be shared. All you can do is to stand by it, and that would be quit something”.

Adolfo: “It’s not so bad to be different. We don’t have to be ashamed of it. (Addressing Mireya) I only ask you for a bit more time”.

Analyst: “We have to leave it here. See you next week”.

Final Comments

The previous clinical material illustrates how difficult it has been for Adolfo and Mireya to mourn for their *projective de-compensation*.

Giving up on the kind of bond they were accustomed to before this crisis could lead to a healthier relationship predominantly sustained by the more mature aspects of their personalities. To reach that point, they both would need to tolerate and understand the

real origin of the anxiety aroused due to the forced re introjections of those aspects that were previously contained by the other person.

The *projective de-compensation* analysis and interpretation does not bring the back and forth of projective and introjective identifications to an end. Instead, it only promotes a new equilibrium where the new, always changing projective identifications, are predominantly communicative instead of evacuative. Consequently, the new complicities can be sustained on the basis of alliances that are more conscious than unconscious.

Mireya and Adolfo are moving along this path, which implies several changes. The need to blame the other person should give way to accept shared responsibility. Unconscious demands yield to conscious complicity. Also, the infantile rage, resentment and need to retaliate should start to diminish and be replaced by compassion. Along this path, they should gradually develop the ability to discriminate between what is possible to demand from each other and what needs to be accepted. Finally, the new way to relate towards each other should promote increased frustration tolerance in both Adolfo and Mireya regarding what the new bonding can no longer contain. And thus, the repetitive revengeful hope should be allowed to go for the creative hope to come along.

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