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Metaphor and metaphORIZATION

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Summary

The specific nature of family functioning opens us to therapeutic potential unknown to the individual analyst. Precisely thanks to its multidimensional functioning, the family introduces the analyst to those primitive states of the individual mind and the family unconscious where unthought traumas or operations that are not thinkable are deposited. In these settings, the analyst capable of decoding it often presents material accessible only through ways other than verbalization. The family acts, makes its members and also the analyst live emotions, sensations, somatic pains that are the expression of patterns that function at various levels, from those where repression reigns and the possibility of remembering to those where instead the thinkability itself has never been established. These are the levels which – in our opinion – Bion (1977, p. 67) defines inaccessible mental states, which are neither part of the conscious nor of the unconscious.

The family as a group and the other, the family member, is the bearer of this story, of this functioning that has been expressed in the same life as people, without having ever been thought of or remembered.

Starting from these premises, therefore, I illustrate the use of the metaphor that the analyst can use and which allows them with more agility to mobilize these frozen levels and which can represent an intermediate link towards thinkability.

The symptom or dream are metaphors for mental functioning or conflict. But even the analyst can use metaphors in the session and start a metaphORIZATION process.

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The characteristic of the metaphor is that of condensing many symbolic meanings. In this sense, it does not have a single meaning, but many can derive from it, and it is precisely this that allows the unthought of the family to manifest itself and find a possible representation.

Keywords: metaphor, metaphorization.

Résumé. *Métaphore et métaphorisation*

La nature spécifique du fonctionnement de la famille nous ouvre un potentiel thérapeutique inconnu de l'analyste individuel. C'est précisément grâce à son fonctionnement multidimensionnel que la famille introduit l'analyste dans ces états primitifs de l'esprit individuel et de l'inconscient familial où sont déposés des traumatismes non pensés ou des opérations non pensables. Dans ces contextes, l'analyste capable de les décoder présente souvent un matériel accessible uniquement par d'autres moyens que la verbalisation. La famille agit, fait vivre à ses membres et aussi à l'analyste des émotions, des sensations, des douleurs somatiques qui sont l'expression de schémas qui fonctionnent à différents niveaux, de ceux où règnent le refoulement et la possibilité de se souvenir à ceux où, au contraire, la pensée elle-même n'a jamais été établie. Ce sont ces niveaux que Bion (1977, p. 67) définit comme des états mentaux inaccessibles, qui ne font partie ni du conscient ni de l'inconscient. La famille en tant que groupe et l'autre, le membre de la famille, est le porteur de cette histoire, de ce fonctionnement qui s'est exprimé dans la vie même des gens, sans jamais avoir été pensé ou rappelé. À partir de ces prémisses, j'illustre donc l'utilisation de la métaphore que l'analyste peut utiliser et qui lui permet avec plus d'agilité de mobiliser ces niveaux gelés et qui peuvent représenter un lien intermédiaire vers la pensée.

Le symptôme ou le rêve sont des métaphores du fonctionnement mental ou du conflit. Mais même l'analyste peut utiliser des métaphores dans la séance et entamer un processus de métaphorisation.

La caractéristique de la métaphore est de condenser de nombreuses significations symboliques. En ce sens, elle n'a pas une seule signification, mais beaucoup peuvent en découler, et c'est précisément cela qui permet à l'impensé de la famille de se manifester et de trouver une représentation possible.

Mots-clés: métaphore, métaphorisation.

Resumen. *Metáfora y metaforización*

La naturaleza específica del funcionamiento familiar nos abre a un potencial terapéutico desconocido para el analista individual. Precisamente gracias a su funcionamiento multidimensional, la familia introduce al analista en aquellos estados primitivos de la mente individual y del inconsciente familiar en los que se depositan traumas no pensados u operaciones no pensables. En estos entornos, el analista capaz de decodificarlo suele presentar material accesible sólo por vías distintas a la verbalización. La familia actúa, hace que sus miembros y también el analista vivan emociones, sensaciones, dolores somáticos que son la expresión de patrones que funcionan a varios niveles, desde aquellos en los que reina la represión y la posibilidad de recordar hasta aquellos en los que en cambio la pensabilidad en sí misma no se ha establecido nunca. Estos son los niveles que, en nuestra opinión, Bion (1977, p. 67) define como inaccesibles los estados mentales, que no forman



parte ni del consciente ni del inconsciente. La familia como grupo y el otro, el miembro de la familia es el portador de esta historia, de este funcionamiento que se ha expresado en la misma vida de las personas, sin que nunca se haya pensado ni recordado. Partiendo de estas premisas, por lo tanto, ilustro el uso de la metáfora que el analista puede utilizar y que le permite con más agilidad movilizar estos niveles congelados y que puede representar un eslabón intermedio hacia la pensabilidad. El síntoma o el sueño son metáforas del funcionamiento mental o del conflicto. Pero incluso el analista puede usar metáforas en la sesión y comenzar un proceso de metaforización. La característica de la metáfora es la de condensar muchos significados simbólicos. En este sentido, no tiene un único significado, pero muchos pueden derivarse de él, y es precisamente esto lo que permite que lo impensado de la familia se manifieste y encuentre una posible representación.

Palabras clave: metáfora, metaforización.

Metaphor and the process of metaphorization

I became interested in the metaphor early in my psychiatric career when I was attending sessions with families of schizophrenics by an American family psychotherapist named Carl Whitaker. This interest was later reflected in two articles (Nicolò, 1980, 1987) in which I discussed metaphor and the process of metaphorization in the family. In those papers I examined the usefulness of the metaphor as a therapeutic tool with a strategic aim, but also observed that it allows to each member of the family to highlight little known aspects of themselves thus leading to a work of sharing.

My subsequent training in psychoanalysis then allowed me to better understand this phenomenon and this therapeutic instrument. The preliminary aspect on which I will linger is that a good session allows a particular functioning of the psyche in the individual as well as in the family framing.

Freud asserted that because of the prohibition of all forms of action and the recourse to free associations, as well as a particular state of reduction of sensory stimuli, in the frame there is *a psychic state which has in common a certain analogy with the state preceding sleep* and in which *unwanted representations appear which are transformed into visual and acoustic images* (Freud, 1900, p. 101). And this is all the more the case in the family or group session.

The specific nature of family functioning opens us to therapeutic potential unknown to the individual analyst. Precisely thanks to its multidimensional functioning, the family introduces the analyst to those primitive states of the individual mind and the family unconscious where unthought traumas or operations that are not thinkable are deposited. In these settings, the analyst capable of decoding it often presents material accessible only through ways other than verbalization.

The family acts, makes its members and also the analyst live emotions, sensations, somatic pains that are the expression of patterns that function at various levels, from those where repression reigns and the possibility of remembering to those where instead the thinkability itself does not have never been established. These are the levels



which – in our opinion – Bion (1977, p. 67) defines inaccessible mental states, which are neither part of the conscious nor the unconscious.

This aspect is also facilitated by the analyst's capacity for "regredience" of thought, which, according to the Botellas (2013, p. 110), allows the mind of the analysand to open up to affects corresponding to states of infantile suffering of which he was until then unconscious.

This kind of unthinkable memories are deposited in the soma, in actions, in sensations and in my opinion in the links that each member forms with the other. The role of the other is crucial as repository of the psychotic levels of functioning or of primitive states.

In this situation the family as a group and the other as a member of the family is the bearer of this traumatic history, of this functioning that can be expressed in transgenerational heirlooms or, at times, in the very life of persons without having ever been thought or remembered.

How can we favor the "integration of feebly inscribed psychic elements"? (Levine, 2013). How can we think of something that has never been thought?

The frame with the family allows good work on these levels because the presence of the other and of the group is bearer of these contents.

The use of metaphors

In this emotional climate shared with the individual patient or with the family, it can happen that the analyst transforms into image an association, an experience, a perception born in the relationship with the patient or with the family. Or better still, he /she may use an image that may be present in a dream of a family member, in a story or in an association as an instrument to widen the field, to deepen it, to bring to light traumatic contents or buried, unthoughtful sensations that belong to the family history. This operation is also very therapeutic because it allows not only a sharing of these contents and a beginning of representation, but also a new construction in the relationship between family members. This new construction has, however, special characteristics because it represents an intermediate step in the path to representation. Freud says, in *The Ego and the Id*, that *to bring an unconscious representation to consciousness, it is necessary to create a certain number of, intermediate stages* (Freud, 1923).

Sensations propagate directly, sometimes carrying with them buried memories; but in order to be able to signify them, we need to create intermediate stages, and metaphor is one of them. Because of its ability to mobilize these levels, it can represent an intermediate link to thinkability. This operation, which then becomes a shared construction, also involves sharing among family members and with the analyst himself. Symptoms and dreams are metaphors of mental functioning or conflict, but the analyst can also use metaphors in the session and initiate a process of metaphorization. We can consider metaphor to be close to the process of play, which at some levels sets up a paradoxical process of hiding what one is communicating. If the child plays shooting, he activates a fantasy space where the



shot is true at one level without being a real shot (Winnicott, 1971; Scharff D., 1989; Scharf J., 1989). Or rather, we could say that, in the play as in the metaphor, multiple levels of reality unfold

I will now present a brief clinical example.

Fabio, twelve years old, comes to the family session with his parents because he is very distracted at school, does not accept the rules, sometimes gets his pants dirty and 'flies' here and there. His parents are obviously weak and they can't maintain any rules. The father is a computer scientist who works in smart mode and the mother, an employee, spends a lot of time away from home. Aldo, the brother, a university student, who seems calm and sad, sometimes performs a parenting function.

Arriving at the session with a slight delay, they tell me that they waited in the street for Aldo's arrival. While they tell me what the teachers have said about their son, Fabio starts touching and playing with a velvet box that is next to him on my desk. I am certainly disturbed that he touches something that belongs to me, but also intrigued by his curiosity. I decide to try to use it as a metaphorical object. I then take the box and ask Fabio to think about what might be inside. Taken by surprise, Fabio apologizes but I suggest that we imagine the contents of the box together. We'll also play this game with his parents and his brother. Fabio starts by saying that there might be some sweets; the mother says that Fabio is always very curious, that he wants to know everything, but there are some things you shouldn't know, especially at his age. Asked again, the mother says there might be business cards or pens; the father adds that the box might contain something secret, like a patient's notes. The brother, Aldo, imagines that there could be important communications; the atmosphere becomes more and more interesting and what at first seemed like a game begins to become a flow of free associations. I notice that they are saying interesting things, for example that in the box there may be secret things that should not be communicated. The mother intervenes by saying that her grandmother kept her jewelry in a box that she hid in a drawer. From there, I talk about the precious things that each of us could keep in our minds so that we don't lose them and so that they don't get stolen. Fabio adds "so that we don't see it" and he says that his mother hides things in her wardrobe. The parents laugh and the father says that Fabio is mischievous and that he seems to know a lot about everyone. Fabio defends himself by saying that the most secret person in the house is Aldo, who locks himself in his room and talks for hours with his friends. Aldo intervenes about his brother, saying that he doesn't stop spying, and that he shouldn't because everyone has the right to be alone and to do what they want; Fabio replies that even their mother is sometimes curious about what Aldo does or says and that she asks him questions, but that he doesn't tell her anything.

The mother is obviously embarrassed and says that this is not true. The father makes a doubtful face and ends up concluding that his wife is controlling and spying on everyone a little.

I say then that they are talking about something confidential and secret that everyone could rightly keep in their minds, especially Aldo who is a late teenager. I continue to work on the box and ask each person to say what they think the other might put in



it. A significant aspect has emerged: all of them, especially the parents, point out Aldo's secretive attitude, perhaps linked to his sentimental and friendly relationships; perhaps he has a very close friend that he doesn't want to talk about. I notice that they are all interested in the contents of Aldo's box. I am referring to the theme of intrusiveness which seems to be present; but I add that one can be intrusive because one wants to get in touch with the other one, like Fabio at the beginning of the session who was perhaps interested in me, in what was on my desk and perhaps also in what I was thinking.

Fabio seems reassured, and the parents tell Aldo that he can talk with everyone – but also, if he needs to, with the analyst in a one-to-one session – about all the things that are worrying him because, as the father says, the parents feel that the boy has become sad and worried. In the rest of the therapy, Aldo will talk about his fear of being gay and his feelings about a friend; his parents, although troubled, are supportive.

Conclusion

Metaphorà means transport in Greek. The symptom or the dream are metaphors of mental functioning or conflicts. But the analyst too can use metaphors in a session and engage in a process of metaphorization (Nicolò, 1980). The characteristic of metaphor is to condense many symbolic meanings. In this sense, it does not have a single meaning but can give rise to multiple meanings, as we have seen in the clinical example I have just illustrated, where the circulation of the metaphor between family members was gradually enriched by new meanings and new images. Each one adds a memory, an image, and the metaphor becomes a living object that carries with it additional aspects. This is what allows the unthoughtful or family's secrets to come out into the open and find a possible representation. The unthoughtful present in the folds of family interaction and in the bodies of certain family members can move towards manifestation and elaboration through the process of metaphorization that the analyst, listening to his or her personal or counter-transference experience, perceives as an important associative point within the family. The content of the metaphor thus belongs to the family, but its development and its transport towards the symbolic belong to the new relationship co-constructed between the family and the analyst.

Increasingly and in several fields, both psychoanalytical and neuroscientific, we speak of double memory encoding, in a verbal and non-verbal form (Bucci, 1997), of the double register of memory (Kandel, 2001) and, even more so, of the double modality of unconscious elaboration, both verbal and gestural-procedural (Sapichin, 2013). According to the latter, the individual is constantly engaged in the attempt to link the archaic residues, never thought of verbally, of libidinal narratives with the objects of intersubjective reality. Hence – again, this is Sapichin speaking – the existence of multiple registers of psychic functioning and in relation to others, a kind of scripts that persist throughout life and determine different ways of being with the other.



If the analyst is capable of playing with his psyche, he stages and acts in the dramatic play of the session the unconscious content to which the patient does not have access. Metaphor is a privileged instrument from this point of view.

Metaphor has also favored an expansion of meaning which, in certain sessions, allows a particular climate to be created by generating a field where continuous passages from the concrete to the symbolic, from sensations to representations are possible because it sometimes gives rise to transmodal passages, as in ancient koans. Oriental masters used mainly metaphorical narrative to teach their students. Instead of using logical, intellectualizing thought, which blocked emotions and facilitate the establishment of resistance or defenses, they told stories or anecdotes. The masters of Zen Buddhism used illogical paradoxes, such as: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "What is the sound of silence?" which were called koans.

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