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Psychoanalysis with new families and couples¹

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Summary

This article addresses the basic question as to whether the principles that guide us in analysing and treating heterosexual families and couples are sufficient to understand unconscious dynamics in the “new couple and the new family”. The first part challenges the definition of “new couple and family” suggesting that, in fact, it is an ancient structure, a proposition that is demonstrated by reviewing some biblical couples and families. The second part touches upon the traditional concepts of fatherhood and motherhood, including how psychoanalysis refers to these emotional and practical functions. The third part reviews psychoanalytic couple and family theorisation that serves as the basis for my clinical and theoretical perception. The last part examines whether the above can be applied to psychoanalytic treatment with two same-sex couples, who have established a shared family unit.

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Keywords: new couple and family, couple and family psychoanalysis, same-sex couple, transgenerational transmission of trauma, fatherhood, motherhood.

Résumé. *Psychanalyse avec les nouvelles familles et les nouveaux couples*

Dans cet article, j'aborde la question fondamentale de savoir si les principes qui nous guident dans l'analyse et le traitement des familles et des couples hétérosexuels sont suffisants pour comprendre la dynamique inconsciente du "nouveau couple et de la nouvelle famille".

La première partie remet en question la définition de "nouveau couple et de la nouvelle famille", suggérant qu'il s'agit, en fait, d'une structure ancienne. Proposition qui est démontrée par l'examen de certains couples et de certaines familles bibliques. La deuxième partie aborde les concepts traditionnels de la paternité et de la maternité, y compris la manière dont la psychanalyse se réfère à ces fonctions émotionnelles et pratiques. La troisième partie passe en revue la théorisation psychanalytique du couple et de la famille qui servent de base à ma perception clinique et théorique. La dernière partie examine si ce qui précède peut être appliqué au traitement psychanalytique avec deux couples de même sexe, qui ont établi une famille commune.

Mots-clés: nouveau couple et nouvelle famille, psychanalyse de couple et de famille, couple de même sexe, transmission transgénérationnelle des traumatismes, paternité, maternité.

Resumen. *Psicoanálisis con nuevas familias y parejas*

En este trabajo abordo la cuestión básica de si los principios que nos guían en el análisis y el tratamiento de las familias y parejas heterosexuales son suficientes para comprender la dinámica inconsciente de la "nueva pareja y la nueva familia". La primera parte desafía la definición de "nueva pareja y familia", lo que sugiere que, de hecho, es una estructura antigua. Propuesta que se demuestra al revisar algunas parejas y familias bíblicas. La segunda parte toca las concepciones tradicionales de la paternidad y la maternidad, incluida la forma en que el psicoanálisis se refiere a estas funciones emocionales y prácticas. La tercera parte trata sobre la teorización psicoanalítica de pareja y familia que sirve como línea básica en mi percepción clínica y teórica. La última parte examina si lo anterior se puede aplicar al psicoanálisis con dos parejas del mismo sexo, que han establecido una familia conjunta.

Palabras clave: nueva pareja y familia, psicoanálisis de pareja y familia, pareja del mismo sexo, transmisión transgeneracional del trauma, paternidad, maternidad.

Little is written about the "new couple and family" in couple and family psychoanalytic literature. In this article I address the basic question as to whether



the principles that guide us in analysing and treating heterosexual families and couples are sufficient to understand unconscious dynamics in the “new couple” and the “new family”.

The first part of this article challenges the definition of a “new couple and family” suggesting that, in fact, it is an ancient structure. I will demonstrate this proposition by examining some biblical couples and families. The second part touches upon the traditional concepts of fatherhood and motherhood, including how psychoanalysis refers to these emotional and practical functions. The third part deals with psychoanalytic couple and family theorisation that serves as a basis for my clinical and theoretical perceptions. The last part examines whether the above can be applied to psychoanalysis with two same-sex couples who have together established a shared family unit.

What is a new family?

I found myself struggling with the term “new family”. Is there is an “old family”? Will a new family become an old one? I have come across the phrase “modern family”, but I do not know if that solves anything, because what is the next step? A postmodern family? Intuitively, “new family” is a family that is not based on a mother-father-child model, but consists of diverse parental and child combinations such as same-sex parents with children, a single parent with a same-sex couple, and two same-sex couples. All give birth by artificial insemination and raise the children together. Heterosexual families giving birth by artificial insemination or surrogacy can be seen as new families as well, and we can add divorced parents, who together create a blended family.

The concepts of motherhood, fatherhood, and family seem to have undergone such far-reaching transformations that it is difficult to make permanent assumptions about them (Erich 2003; Ben Ari, 2015). But first, let us challenge the perception that we are really talking here about a new structure.

In the Bible, with the exception of Adam and Eve, the family structure is diverse, and family morality is complex. Our ancestors married many women. Abraham married Sarah and Hagar. The rivalry between Sarah and Hagar caused Abraham to expel Hagar and her son to the desert. We still seem to be paying the price of hostility, competition, and jealousy between their descendants, since the Jewish people originated from one woman and Muslims from the other.

King David transcends all morals, establishing a family that could be called a new family. While fighting Ammon, he committed adultery with the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah Haiti, and she subsequently became pregnant. In order to hide this, King David recalled Uriah from the battlefield and ordered him to go to his house, hoping he and his wife would have sexual relations so that the true father might not be revealed. However, Uriah refused, and King David then sent him to the



battlefield and to his subsequent death. For this, David was punished by the death of his firstborn son. His second son was Solomon, who later became King of Israel. King Solomon also established a new family. Contrary to the prohibition on a king to have many wives, money, and horses, Solomon married 700 foreign women and held 300 concubines. Some served political purposes. The prophets saw marriage to non-Jewish women as the cause of the kingdom's split, and the destruction of the Second Temple. It is possible that jealousy between the women or their offspring, difficulty in accepting the other, and other related factors contributed to the destruction.

But one epic love story may illustrate the intensity of the emotional forces of transgenerational transmissions with far-reaching implications for today. The queen of Sheba was intrigued by the rumours regarding King Solomon's wisdom and wealth. She arrived in Jerusalem with a large army, camels carrying perfumes, gold, and precious stones. Legendary tales and plays were written following the thrilling encounter described in the Bible between the exotic queen and the world's wisest king. According to the Ethiopian tradition, the two spent a night together which resulted in the birth of Manlick who became the founder of the Solomon dynasty. The emperor Haile Selassie who was born of this dynasty established particularly good relations with the State of Israel.

For thousands of years Ethiopian Jews have maintained Jewish customs. In 1991, when they were in dire circumstances and their lives in danger, an intelligence and military operation was undertaken. For thirty-six hours, eighteen Israeli aircraft evacuated Ethiopian Jews to Israel, in an operation that was called "Solomon's Operation". Since then the Ethiopian community has been a significant part of Israeli society.

This story illustrates the power of transgenerational transmission of emotional processes in a "new family". When sex, money, power, and dynasty come together in the making of a family mighty forces are in action. When transmitted through the generations they accumulate intensity, shaping the identities of individuals, families, communities, and future generations. These processes are so powerful that they caused one nation to rise up and risk their children's lives to save another nation, the latter being descendants of the historic couple from thousands of years previously.

This recognition places a great deal of ethical responsibility on every couple and family psychoanalyst. But it binds us to a heightened responsibility when it comes to families whose society is considered exceptional and for which we have not yet developed conceptual perspectives and clinical perceptions.



Mother/Father; Motherhood/ Fatherhood; Motherliness/Fatherliness

Psychoanalytic concepts of motherhood and fatherhood are built on the basis of the traditional family. One must distinguish between:

- Fathers/ Mothers – as actual people.
- Fatherhood/Motherhood – these are abstract concepts, around which ideals, emotions, stories, and myths are developed in a cultural context, attributing roles related to the child's biological birth and referring to their upbringing.
- Fatherliness/Motherliness – these are qualities and characteristics that are acquired or developed. Ideals and fantasies are attributed to them. Therefore, they change with social evolution and values. Motherliness is associated with positive qualities such as, warmth, empathy, closeness, and immediate understanding, and deep emotional participation in the child's experience. Fatherliness is associated with differentiation, order, logic, and protection.

Fatherliness vs. Motherliness in Psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytic approach to fatherliness vs. motherliness also influences the widening gap between motherhood and fatherhood.

Freud gave paramount importance to early mother-infant relationships. He understood all later relationships to be the discovery or “reinvention” of that ancient relation and emphasised the importance of the oedipal relationship in the development of the mind. Other central psychoanalytic inclinations even contradict the relationship with the father and his place in the relationship (Erich, 2003).

One of the immediate consequences was the depreciation of the importance of the oedipal junction.

Compared with the experience of oneness, unity, and similarity, which characterise the mother-infant relationship, the relationship with the father represents differentiation, separateness, and diversity, while experiencing a possible model of separate identity and existence. This experience enables new relational development. In addition, the parents' sexuality is felt by the child with its deep mysteries and occupies a central place in the child's unconscious internal world.

The psychoanalytic couple and family conceptions are based on the above, as is defined in Klein's depressive position (Klein, 1946), Winnicott's “potential space” (Winnicott, 1989), Ogden's “analytic third” (Ogden, 1994), and others.

There is a developmental significance in the capacity to experience an intimate relationship, that one is loved simultaneously along with the recognition of being “one in front of two” with whom we wish to be a part. As Britton defined: «The closure of the oedipal triangle by the recognition of the link joining the parents provides a limiting boundary for the internal world. It creates what I call a “triangular space”, i.e., a space bounded by the three persons of the oedipal situation



and all their potential relationships. It includes, therefore, the possibility of being a participant in a relationship and observed by a third person as well as being an observer of a relationship between two people...» (Britton, 2004, p. 47).

Without this experience as part of the developmental process, the ability to feel one's own agency, to feel at peace and creative even when alone does not evolve. One may be left with a life experience of loneliness, disconnection, or constant effort and demands that cannot be met.

The above theorisation forms the basis of our conceptualisation of the couple relationship as a third. David and Jill Scharff's *Interpersonal Unconscious* (2005), *Link theory* (Losso, 2017; Scharff and Palacios, 2017), Mary Morgan's *Creative Couple* and *Couple State of Mind* (2019), and more are based on the ability to be in a third position.

Couple and Family Psychoanalysis (CFP)

In order to be able to examine whether our existing theorising is also relevant to analytic work with "new families", I shall briefly summarise its principles in my work.

I define couple and family psychoanalysis (CFP) as: any therapeutic activity that focuses on unconscious processes in couple and family relationships and links.

CFP experiences and tries to identify first-hand defences and anxieties of couples and families. It tries to understand how individuals, couples, families and social processes unconsciously intertwine, mutually influencing each other, producing a constantly changing unique personal, couple and familial entities and structures.

CFP weaves together each partner and family member perspectives that are in relation to oneself and to the other [others], state of minds, internal object relations including unconscious transgenerational transmissions of trauma and unconscious cultural traits (Mann-Shalvi, 2018b).

CFP is based on psychoanalytic assumptions that, balancing between cognitive and emotional mainly unconscious factors, determines behaviour by unconscious organisation of the mental experience (Scharff, 2011).

In recent years, family psychoanalysis is less emphasised than couple psychoanalysis. Perhaps its processes are not easy to identify, contain, and process. CFP is based on the integration of some *object relations* attitudes:

- *Object relations* is based on the British School (Klein, 1946; Fairbairn, 1943; Scharff and Scharff, 2011; Dicks, 1967; Morgan, 1995; 2004).

It is based mainly on the way object representations and object relations are internalised by each of its members and are reconstructed in unconscious cooperation in their relationships (Mann-Shalvi, 2016; 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2020).



- *Link* approaches based on Pichon Rivière (Puget, 2005; Losso, 2017; Vorchheimer, 2017; Losso *et al.*, 2017) illuminate the unique identity of each link, created as a result of the unique encounter between its various components and the unconscious traits of the environment.
- The individual and the family are born into links and an environment which includes conscious and unconscious messages from previous generations that are projected onto and into future generations. The transgenerational transmission of trauma should be given primary importance (Mann-Shalvi, 2007; 2014; 2016; 2017; Brenner, 1988; 1999; Faimberg, 2005; Kogan, 1990; 1993; 1995; 2017; Volkan, 2002; Mann-Shalvi, Sehon, Keogh, 2019).
- I like Scharff and Scharff's (2006) conceptualisation of *chaos theory*, which sees each family and/or couple as a system, within which there are underlying patterns, constant feedback loops, repetition, self-similarity, fractals, and self-organisation. Every system relies on programming at the initial point known as sensitive dependence on initial conditions. The system strives and thus organises itself around so-called "attractors" - a steady collection of situations. External events, including a therapist's entry, into the picture are experienced as "strange attractors" that violate the balance that characterises the couple's and family's system operation. In the therapeutic setting it presents an opportunity to elevate a healthier inter-subjective and intra-subjective internalised and actual object relations equilibrium.

Scharff and Scharff, Morgan, Vorchheimer and others relate to the *relationship* as their patient, rather than the individuals in analysis. Based on all the above, I come from a slightly different angle: I relate to *each family member* as my patient, in addition to *the couple and family relationships* that are also "my patients". Why? The couple and family's shared unconscious is created by unconscious interweaving of each family member's unconsciousness, creating a unique family structure in which all parts, including each member's internalised object relations, are in unconscious equilibrium. Therefore, a change in one undermines the unconscious balance of the others and activates defence mechanisms on various levels and in the system as a whole. Working through processes in one influences and elevates them in the other(s). Therefore, I think that meaningful working through processes require a parallel, in-person psychoanalytic process in each member of the family in the presence of the others, and of their interpersonal unconsciousness.

In terms of *object relations*, the internalised object relations of each family member unconsciously co-creates the actual couple and family object relations. Projective identification mechanisms structure the internal and external object relations and manage the division of identities and roles. In such cases each spouse splits unbearable thoughts and feelings, projecting them into the other. Both identify each other with the split and projected parts. They create a joint marital personality (Dicks, 1967) where the conflict that each could not contain is now between them,



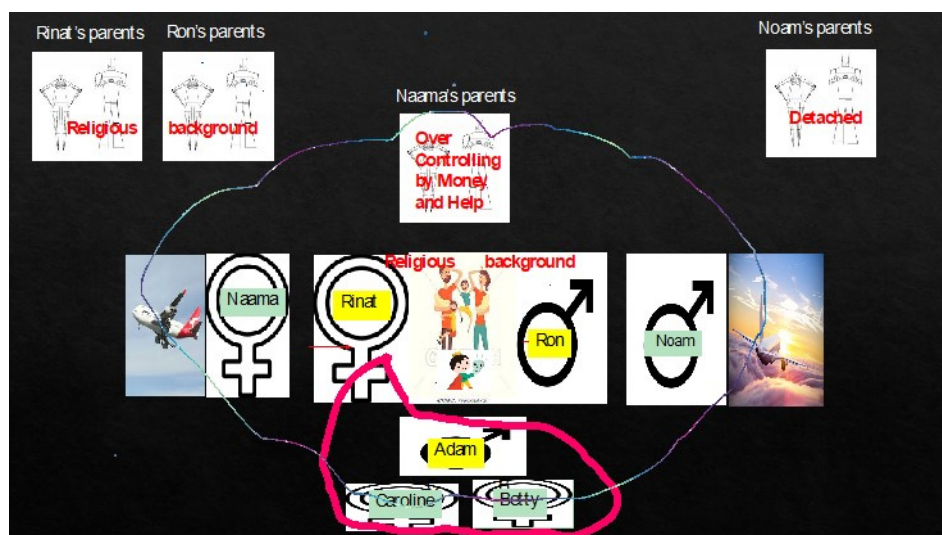
generating existential anxieties from the outside. Since unconsciously their emotional structure depends on one another, the process of returning the “lost parts” to their “source” requires an opposite process, which demands emotional working through in each other’s presence.

Are our theories based on the mother-father model allowing understanding of the unconscious dynamics and meanings of the relationships in the new family or do we need different theoretical and clinical concepts to analyse and work with these processes in the new family? Do new families have other developmental symbolic processes, or since it is an internalisation of emotional functions, does the actual family structure have no effect on the way we understand them?

I will share with you my theoretical and clinical thinking during an analytic session with a new family as the basis for starting to think about these questions. I shall refer to the following vignette and examine whether it enables new theoretical and clinical thoughts.

Clinical vignette

The family map



Rinat and Naama, a lesbian couple, and Ronnie and Noam, a gay couple, had a son and two daughters together, defining themselves as a family. They met through a website that supports finding partners for shared parenting who prefer that their children have a birth father and mother rather than a sperm or egg from an



anonymous donor. They managed their lives by coordinating expectations in advance and ensuring that they are implemented.

At the time of our meeting, Adam was twelve and Betty and Caroline were six year old twins. All lived within walking distance, dividing their time equally with the parents while allowing for flexibility.

Rinat gave birth to all the children. Adam was artificially conceived from the egg and semen of Rinat and Ron, Betty and Caroline from Naama and Noam. All were implanted in Rinat's womb.

Both couples were in a comfortable financial position. Naama was a successful career woman and her family supported them when needed. Noam had a successful start-up business. Both Noam and Naama travelled frequently abroad, leaving Rinat and Ron to care for the children.

I identified some overlapping couples (as can be followed in the diagram above):

- Rinat and Ron - Adam's biological parents;
- Noam and Naama - Betty and Caroline's biological parents;
- Rinat and Naama;
- Ron and Noam;
- Rinat and Ron - the caretakers at home;
- Noam and Naama – career parents, economic providers, travelling abroad;
- Rinat stood out alone as the mother of all the children.

I felt overwhelmed when trying to grasp the parents and children's system.

I wondered whether looking for parental units of two was not the result of my pre-conceptions, and actually a prejudice that did not allow me to think about this complex unit afresh.

The grandparents were divided as follows:

- Naama's family accepted her lesbian identity and life decision;
- Rinat's family was uncomfortable with it, and mainly developed close relationships with their grandchildren;
- Ron's family gradually accepted the idea, but were also mainly in a close relationship with their grandchildren;
- Noam's family had a difficult time coming to terms with the situation.

The children called them "Mom and Mom" "Dad and Dad". This suggested to me feelings of discomfort and guilt.

As Adam's bar mitzvah approached, the weight of tensions and anger surfaced intensely.

Noam and Naama revealed that while they worked abroad, Rinat and Ron secretly planned a traditional Bar Mitzvah: Adam reading the Bible, followed by a reception for synagogue members, friends, and family. They hoped that their families would come to the synagogue.



Had they not come, it would have meant that none of Adam's biological grandparents were present at his celebration (since he is the biological son of Noam and Naama).

When the ruse became apparent, the quartet entered what they called "a world war." We met once a week for a double session. The following excerpt is from the third session:

Rinat and Ron entered, looking nervous. Facing me, Rinat sat on the left side of the couch, while Ron sat on an armchair on her right. Naama and Noam arrived a minute later, and Naama sat on the right side of the couch while Noam sat on the armchair on her left. In this way, I found myself facing Rinat and Naama sitting on the couch, while Ron was to my left and Noam to my right, facing each other.

I thought that in terms of sitting there were four variations of couples:

- the mothers in front of me;
- the fathers on either side of me;
- on my left, Rinat and Ron;
- on my right, Naama and Noam.

Naama began with anger directed at Rinat: "*You betrayed me planning the Bar Mitzvah with Ron, pushed me completely out of the picture. Why???... Because I didn't give birth to Adam? Am I not a real mother? You've shattered the two families our kids have...*".

Referring to themselves as "two families" was new to me. Until now they had called themselves one family with two couples.

Noam retorted angrily: "I'm supporting the whole family" (I wondered: Which family?). "Working 24/7 to provide us with everything we have. Travelling as needed and present whenever I can be. Supporting you, Ron, in conflicts with your family, and that's what I get back?".

Naama: "I feel the same way. Shame on you Rinat and Ron. You live at my expense and betray me behind my back! I don't know if I can continue to trust you".

Noam and Naama sounded like a couple betrayed by Ron and Rinat.

Betrayal, guilt, and shame came up in this context.

I thought that these feelings were the expression of an unprocessed emotional world that characterised each of the four's relationship with their respective parents, who felt betrayed, the shame facing their children's choice of same-sex identity, the formation of such a non-traditional family, and with Rinat and Ron leaving the religious lifestyle. All the grandparents experienced their children's choice as their own failure, and felt guilty and angry.

Emotions that the grandparents expressed in different acting-out modes were indulgence and spoiling the grandchildren (repressing their aggression), distancing themselves from them, and ignoring the parents, while creating warm relationships with the grandchildren (as can be seen in the family map above).



I wondered whether the current crisis was an expression of transgenerational emotional baggage re-enacted in the new family unit. But I cautioned myself not to fall prey to my pre-conceptions.

Noam: “You Ron were cheating on me... Now I see how you feel, that I am not a real father to Adam... Now the issue of blood relatedness is coming up. You took advantage of the opportunity when I wasn’t here ...”.

Rinat whispered: “I am sorry... but no one responded”.

Ron to Noam: “You are present??? I’m doing it all by myself. I could have had an impressive career. But someone had to pay the price. Do you think taking the children to school once a week is called *paternal presence*? You go away for two weeks every month... You’re on the phone all the time and I gave up my career to be with the kids”.

Rinat looked absorbed within herself.

I tried to listen to her silence.

I felt that this was the tip of the iceberg of unconscious conflicts repressed by the “special ideal family” façade which had existed before. I thought that the unexpressed and unprocessed aggression in each of the couples’ relationship with their parents, due to feelings of betrayal, shame, guilt, disappointment, and more was now being enacted between them. Rinat was feeling its intensity and trying to repress it, but unsuccessfully.

The lack of clarity around the questions about who is the mother and who is the father and what do they mean when they refer to “family”, supported my hypothesis that perhaps the current conflict is an unconscious enactment, which expresses a transgenerational unconscious conflict. In the meantime, these were preliminary thoughts. I listened to them, and set these thoughts aside.

In CFP, in addition to treating the spouses as separate individuals, we focus on the way that each spouse relates to the marriage consciously while exploring the level of unconscious relating, looking at shared defences, the marital fit, and the onset of the problem (Hewison, 2011).

I thought that one “shared unconscious phantasy” was that anger and/or aggression is dangerous; therefore there is no place for anything that causes disappointment in the “good family” they created.

In addition, I thought that their ambivalence towards their choice to establish a same-sex family unit is expressed by their choice of calling the two mothers “Mom” and the two fathers “Dad”. In addition, this is expressed by the formation of two normative couples in which there is one father and one mother, with one couple supporting financially and often absent and the other physically and emotionally present. This ambivalence was repressed and not dealt with.

I thought of another possible unconscious meaning inherent in the family structure they formulated. They created a possible ideal situation for the children, in which one couple cares about the financial situation without the emotional cost of the



children who then stay with the other couple, who care about their mental and physical well-being.

The two dynamics together I thought, synchronise with the perfect family façade. At the same time, I was aware of Rinat's silent anger. I thought that she who bore all the children was now pregnant with all the aggression.

I said: "You tried not to fight, as if in *ideal families* there are no quarrels. I wonder how Adam's Bar Mitzvah touches on feelings about betrayal, about being a non-birth unreal mother and father and about anger. I notice that while the three of you are quarrelling, Rinat's uneasy quiet holds a meaning".

Rinat straightened up: "Each of you is caught up in your own world, and I try to please you all. I don't want to be here..."

She said to Naama: "I'm sorry".

I thought: So that's one of the things she unconsciously "holds" for everyone: the need to please and satisfy everyone at the expense of true self-expression.

She continued quietly: "I gave birth to all the children. I have a child with each of you. And now what will happen to them?"

Her voice changed: "I really have the right to decide on Adam's Bar Mitzvah. It is true I do not make money, but it is because of me that our entire family exists. It's difficult for my parents that I'm not religious and that I'm a lesbian. Now with the Bar Mitzvah I want my parents to be proud. At least they will have pleasure from their grandson..."

I said: "It seems that you remained silent for too long and now you have decided that you are going to *have it your way*, no matter what. As if you have an unspoken understanding in your family that there is no place for genuine feelings and wishes, when they are in conflict with the people you love. Then you have to do it by deception or by force".

They were all quite immersed in themselves.

Rinat looked at me sadly: "I think you're right. Maybe it's important that it surfaced".

From that moment on they were working through these pockets of unconscious aggression, feelings of betrayal and revenge, rooted in the former generation and expressed in their own relationships.

They could identify how the four patterns of the grandparents' behaviour were characterised by an inability to contain anger and disappointment at their children's choices while continuing loving relationships. The transgenerational roots of the shared unconscious phantasy whereby aggression is devastating in all families was informed by their parents' histories in the Holocaust, in the migration to Israel from Arab countries, and from an early loss of one great-grandparent.

They identified its relatedness to their need to produce an ideal family.

A projective-identification dynamic was identified between Naama's parents' absolute acceptance and over-involvement versus Noam parents' detachment and total lack of acceptance. In addition, despite striving for their parents' recognition



and acceptance Ron and Rinat became aware of the obliviousness of their parents towards them. They were also able to identify how their parents were using the grandchildren's love, in the service of revenge for them being secular and homosexuals.

We could identify that the emotional baggage which they unconsciously carried and acted out was transmitted from former generations. Understanding that helped them develop empathy towards their parents while at the same time allowing them to find their own true voice.

They worked through their ambivalence, mourning for what they had lost, and found new boundaries between the two families. That they now realised that the children were now removed from the "battlefield role" they had served between the parents and the grandparents was a relief for me.

Conclusion I did not find any unique, unconscious, emotional, intersubjective or intrasubjective characterisations either in this case or in my experience with other "new couples" and "new families". As in any couple and family, the dynamics we encounter in "new couples and families" may be the expression of a wide variety of unconscious emotional conflicts. Therefore, we are required to use all our theoretical and clinical tools to allow unconscious meanings and working through processes to occur.

A "new family" can be characterised by emotional maturity that allows freedom of choice and the strong ability of "accepting the other", a family whose adults have successfully crossed the oedipal intersection and can allow themselves mature self-realisation. At the same time, it can also be the result of "acting out" of rebellions against the family of origin, such as against the other opposite-sex parent who was estranged or violent or a same-sex parent who was missing or any other circumstances which caused oedipal fixation. As a result, the establishment of a same-sex family or any establishment of a "new family" might be a defensive expression that neither allows acceptance of the other, nor permits a mature individual realisation.

In the family described above, it is possible that the children who grew up with examples of a mother and father who provide economically while being frequently absent and a mother and father who cared for the children at home, may internalise concepts of motherhood and fatherhood as functions rather than pre-defined roles. In addition, we see how the four parents tried to create a perfect world for their children in order to cope with feelings of guilt that accompanied their unique choices.

A situation in which there are four primal care takers and eight grandparents might allow the existence of a greater variety of meaningful, primal, emotional relationships. At the same time, it is an extensive relational field which enables several parallel enactments of unconscious conflicts with the primary objects. This calls our attention to the unconscious dynamics, exchanges, and relatedness between them all. For example, unconscious reciprocal relationships may co-exist



between conflicts that erupt in both couples and that in terms of visible content seem to have no connection between them. Conflicts that are intertwined unconsciously between the parents' units might be projected onto the children, as was the case in this family.

There are parental tasks which may become more complex in a multi-parent structure. For example, parents' ability to produce a coordinated parental position in front of the children without the children's awareness is overwhelmed; or in other words, how can the multi-voices within the parental unit be turned into polyphony rather than cacophony?

I think that the challenge of containing, holding, contemplating, and interpreting the multitude of conscious and unconscious processes in a complex family is very demanding for the analyst. And yet, the theoretical and clinical tools at our disposal were effective in trying to do so in the above case.

Further research is needed to understand how complex parental systems are translated into the children's unconscious psyche. Couple and family psychoanalysis need to continue to develop in this area of new couples and families.

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