Dreams in psychoanalytic couple and family therapy

MYTH[1]

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Myth may be defined as "a multidimensional structure, a code between levels of reality that starts as an unconscious group fantasy, but in time and with further generations becomes one of the manifestations of the family unconscious. It is a source of identifications and has a prescriptive function which organises knowledge and prescribes how reality is to be read". It can also take on a defensive function in pathological situations (Nicolò, 1987).

The word myth derives from the Greek *mythos* and is primitively and essentially the result of words that create meaning. As Kaës points out it is a form of public speech. The content of those words is a thought. The author gives us an overview of the history of myth. In the Homeric poems, for a process of secondary specialization, myth has the value of a fiction, a fictional story, a fable, or allegory. Myth is opposed to reality but at the same time is a true discourse. At the end of XIX (nineteenth) century, the myth was thought to show an idealized depiction of a past state of humanity, and its origin. In the twentieth century myth has a decisive role in the representation of a community (i.e. Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, 1958), or an individual (i.e. Lacan, The myth of the neurotic individual, 1979). For Freud there was a close link between myths and dreams. They both represent two forms of imagination, but they are also two ways to represent a meaning which needs to be interpreted, a primordial sense about the past and the past of the psyche of humanity. Although for Freud dreams

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are the privileged way to access the unconscious, myths also allowed him to explore it.

Kaës notes how by drawing on myths (but also on legends and fairy tales), Freud invented the Oedipus complex, narcissism, and the concept of uncanny. By inventing a myth he also reveals, in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1912-1914,) the removed part of the Oedipus complex.

This mythopoeic use of the myth illustrates the transformation of the relationship between ghost, myth and theory, through subsequent reversals, which (what is 'which' referring to?) is employed by Freud as a method. For Freud, myths, legends and fairy tales, consist of psychic material and are related to the more primitive parts of the psyche.

According to Kaës, dreams and myths are made from the same basic psychic material, but this material is organized according to a different logic and different functions. Dreams and myths are two kinds of discourse that have a meaning which is both essential and obscure. They both are two forms of the imaginary, the imaginary as explorer of the unknown (the dream) and the imaginary that explains it (the myth). The dream is the imagination of what is intimate; while the myth is the imagination of what is public, collective, social. In this perspective, it is appropriate to try to capture the way in which dreams and myths have two different fates and articulate their relations in groups, organised to capture the different steps and transformations between what is private, what is shared and what is public.

The function of myths in a family is more complex than what has been described by Malinowski (1926) and Ferreira (1963). A myth does not only tell a story, but speaks through its narrative.
The narrative material that forms the myth is the tool through which a myth communicates. Thus, as Lévi-Strauss (1962) said, it is rather a semiotic object, like a language where "a certain significant material (the narrative) has the function of conveying a certain meaning". For this reason, a myth links different levels of reality and cannot be read only at the anthropological, psychoanalytical, or sociological level. All these levels are present. A myth tells us how reality is made, thought of, and perceived. It also links different levels of reality and its great importance derives from its ability to be a true code between the levels. While a myth seems to describe reality, it also teaches and prescribes how reality should be read (Nicolò, 1987, 1997); it is therefore both a way to convey knowledge, of an event and of rules, and a code of behaviour. In this way, a narrative or iconic system is turned into a

prescriptive system that invests the level of acting action (a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Nevertheless a myth is not always a looming curse. Comparing this point of view to what Bion (1961, 1965) says about public myths considered as a reservoir from which symbols can be tapped, as a primitive form of preconception, one can realise that it is only the meeting of the myth carried on by the family with that specific member, his elaboration skills, and his experience that will produce a specific effect. To borrow Bion's words, myth is a precursor of our knowledge that meeting up with reality gives rise to conception. Its effects do not only depend on the family's functioning but also on each member's personality

Furthermore, a myth is a source of identifications. It works through, builds, and rebuilds an experience, a traumatic event thereby transfiguring it, deferring it to further elaborations and further impacts with other experiences.

Even if a group and a family have a great capacity for elaborating traumas because they have easier access to the coexistence of more primitive and more evolved levels, this functioning might encounter obstacles.

A myth can be a tool for this activity but does not allow a full elaboration, being in itself an obstacle. To the extent that a family builds a myth starting from a real life event or from a traumatic experience, it is also creating a metaphor with which it tries to master, contain, and represent the powerful emotions characterising that event. Therefore, a myth is an effort at elaborating an experience and a trauma and is grafted in the family group when a complete elaboration fails. Myth is an elaboration underway. If the elaboration had been full, a complete digestion, there would be repression and forgetting. But, as this is a difficult function, the group becomes a tool for elaboration and for passing on what couldn't elaborate through and across generations.

Enza Pulino Fidelio, quoting Barthes, argues that a myth depletes, distorts, and suspends the sense of an event. We could say that historical (geographic, environmental, temporal) data is cancelled. What is left in its place is a plot, a network of links, "a system of values that becomes a system of facts" (2001, p. 82). Yet that event could be so disrupting that it completely overwhelms the subject's or the group's ability to contain it. A first containment effort is represented by the myth.

Nevertheless in a group holes can form in elaboration and can be passed on from one generation to the other. Granjon (2000) defines these gaps as "rough objects, containers of negative" which don't allow further

elaboration. In her conceptualisation of the mythopoeic function in groups and families she describes in particular how myths create a structure for both family thinking and the individual psyche. Myths, according to her view, carry and contain what "keeps together", and are an expression of the narcissistic contract which ties the individual to the group. Nevertheless myths are not only a way of constructing meanings, but also a tool for reconstructing and deconstructing them and are therefore modelled around a negative, often tragic sense.

All families have their own myth. In some families it can play a structuring function, but can be disproved, elaborated or changed by any member. When this happens, each member can find his own personal route. In families where this is not possible, because their functioning is based on control, and the ego of each member is fragile, a family myth becomes the only safety net. Acting in the unconscious dimension, rather than in one known to all, it ends up becoming a tyrannical law that prevents any trespassing. In this sense it plays an important function in the most difficult moments and becomes a defensive tool with which the group can face anxieties about catastrophic change.

In some situations myths have a pathological meaning but in others a myth can be mitigated, disproved or trespassed upon by any family member. In families where the ego of each member is fragile, a family myth plays functions as a substitute ego and cannot be easily changed. In fact it counters fragmentation and the loss of continuity, by maintaining the traditions of a social group and providing a model where the present can only be a repetition of the past.

Some authors distinguish between various types of family myths (heroism, seduction, filiation, etc.) (Nagy, Stierlin, Byng Hall, Eiguer). Eiguer (2001) states that a myth manifests itself in the form of a narration which implies a belief shared by the whole family. He states that a myth has no author or origin. The story has an allegorical structure and its function is calming: it resolves contradictions, overcomes suffering and helps to find the courage to fulfil a difficult project. Moreover it creates ties between members. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the features of dysfunctional myths. A first criterion could be rigidity and timelessness or, conversely, a flexibility that allows for regression and reintegration. Another criterion is how much a myth is secret and sequestered from family life. In some situations the myth's defensive organisation corresponds to that defensive construction that Steiner (2004) calls "retreat". Seriously ill adolescents use these fantastic retreats, which can be masturbatory or delusional. In adolescence this fantastic production, when it is not excessive and does not sequester the mind, can be useful for growth or

as a defence from imbalances. An additional aspect of myths is their relation with identification. A myth is a source of identification both for the individual member and for the family, providing a sense of group identity. Another aspect of myths is that they may become a source of alienating and abusing identifications: situations where the subject builds part of his identity on a mythical character that cannot be easily changed because it does not belong to the present and has lost its real features, having been transfigured by the projections of all family members. These identifications become alienating because they alienate the subject from himself, aggressively enslave him to an alien identity and increasingly invade his true and spontaneous personality.

As García Badaracco (2000) noticed, they are pathological and pathogenetic, in that they exert a constant action. But they are very dangerous and not easy to address because they do not concern only one member but all the other members tied to the one the analysts are working with. Using the example of the heroic grandfather, a son will identify with such an ancestor in order to try to replicate his deeds or, on the contrary will feel overwhelmed and unable to stand up to him. Moreover, a parent can also be enmeshed, possibly hoping that his son can replicate the deeds of a celebrated ancestor, thus adding the burden of his own expectations on the son. Relieving oneself from these identifications and/or transforming them can then become a goal not only for the son, but also for his parent(s) and all other family members.

(As Freud taught us, one cannot defeat an enemy in effigy. Myths are the transformation of a system of values and, one could add, of rules and relationships into a system of facts, in an articulated form. So in the analytic scenario we need to change this emotional form of the myth (as Pulino, 2001 says), turning it into a meaning that can be elaborated, represented, and then forgotten. To enact a myth can be the best way to give back time to an atemporal element in the here and now in order to deconstruct it, starting from its unreal dimensions, rebuild it with its historical dimensions, and extract it from the family's unconscious to make each member aware of it. In analytic sessions the therapist must play the function of reconstruction-construction of the myth through the narrative of all family members present. Most of all he will have to highlight how the myth acts in the here and now and determines identity, challenging what each member knows and reconstructs, putting them in touch and in opposition with the aspect of our personality that wants to escape it and decode it.)

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