



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUPLE AND FAMILY PSYCHOANALYSIS
ASOCIACIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE PSICOANÁLISIS DE PAREJA Y FAMILIA
ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE DE PSYCHANALYSE DE COUPLE ET DE FAMILLE

International Review of Psychoanalysis of Couple and Family

**N° 8 - 2010/2 – Suffering in the links
and its transformations through couple and family
psychoanalysis**

**ROLE OF LINKS AND SUBCONSCIOUS ALLIANCES OF
THE «NEO-GROUP», WITHIN THERAPEUTIC WORK IN
PTF**

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This is a small contribution from me to the common building of the theoretical edifice on the subject of links currently underway. It springs from my clinical questioning. To create links or be part of a group, subjects have to agree, to get on and enter into an alliance on certain points, either consciously or unconsciously. The notion of link has been particularly enriched by René Kaës's hypothesis on *unconscious alliances* (2009). I shall now expand on a few points:

- the family's unconscious alliances;
- their role within family suffering;
- specific work in couple and family psychoanalytic therapy.

Can we access, and how could we access, in a psychoanalytical situation, that which is the foundation of links, that which is inexpressible and invisible, that which is buried in the family group's intersubjective background? Source of psychic life, this area of the subconscious is sometimes the cause of the family group's dysfunction

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and the psychical suffering of its members, the cause of what breaks the bond between them, alienates them or even destroys them.

Some viewpoints and recent work from various authors on the link, would lead us to think *trans-subjectivity*, meaning that what belongs to each is put in common and shared in the links and is what links one to the others. The elements from the subconscious the subjects leaves in the links and unconscious alliances which constitutes them belong to him, but he cannot appropriate even part of these. We are talking not only of suffering negatives, waiting for transformation (which corresponds to group work), but also of *negative roots*. To reveal them, to put them back into play in the psyche disturbs its autonomy, its functioning and its ability to be critical. What is thus buried, bound, hidden in this space between the link's holders, cannot be taken back or changed by the depositaries and has to be kept as «beside the point», and dependent from the group. What each of us leaves, projects and delegates of one's own psychical reality, in a subconscious move towards an external nucleus, constitutes the common foundation of any link any group.

This psychic place, this trans-subjective space takes part in the psychical life:

- On one hand by leaving unworkable remnants, which, when forging alliances to another or to others, found and enable the secondary psychic processes, and also protect singular psyches from violence burdened indifferenciation and uncertainty;
- and on the other hand, the act of putting in common and sharing helps the working-through of a negative waiting for representation. This is the prerequisite for the subjects to stand together and be psychically self-sufficient. Because the necessity to be together comes first and it enables the psyches to become self-sufficient. And there we have a light to helps us understand the origin of psychic suffering in couples and families when the conditions needed for this work and this balance are not met.

This undifferentiated psychical space between those who are part of a link is, for the families, the space of the *transgenerational*, that is to say this bit of inheritance which has been imposed and cannot be appropriated, put in common or shared. Shot through with the social, the cultural, the religious and the historical, which are the guarantor of these alliances and which attempt to give them some sense and shape, the trans-subjective background corresponds to the basis and the cement of any group, and the family group in particular ; it answers the oldest need to belong for each of us: to be linked to the



others, to belong to a group, a family, be part of a whole (social, cultural, historical...) is at the foundation of all psyches.

Thus, *unconscious alliances* (pacts, contracts, and other subconscious agreements, as suggested by René Kaës 1993 and 2009) entered into by those who are in a link, bond and tie the person one to the other, within common belonging, creating an anchorage which is vital for their structuring and necessary for their exchanges. But these formations are also flexible, adjustable and sometimes fragile, and each new adaptation, each new agreement, questions these commitments, helps the original alliances to come undone up to a point, and these can be carried forward or renewed. Each new agreement also partly assembles the content of these formations. They will then necessarily be reworked in new alliances, new bonds: this is the model of the crisis and its transcendency. Psychical life needs strength and flexibility from these unconscious formations.

Their strength and reliability ensure a defence against the «threats» of disconnection and indifferenciation. Their disappearance or inefficiency brings about the risk of negative contents going back to their «depositaries», of imposed re-introjections of the archaic parts (specifically those of transgenerational origin) entrusted to the links, making the subject unable to undertake this burden, disorganizing and changing psychical life.

In her work on ambiguity in catastrophic situations, Silvia Amati-Sas (2010) mentions the need to search for new deposit places and how urgent it is to establish the new subconscious alliances and new links which are imposed upon the subject. Face with catastrophic or traumatic situations, with the severing of belonging links and the loss of identity anchorage, the subjects try to set up new alliances and find new «outside containers», «negative containers» (Granjon, 1998) to deposit what disturbs them and thus enable them to feel secure again and find this feeling of belonging: this is the condition needed for the psychic process to start working again. It's true, the families we see are not all affected by such traumatic or catastrophic situations, but I think that this model could help us understand what is at stake in the suffering of links within families as well as in the establishment of the conditions of the therapeutic processes in psychoanalytic family therapy.

Because, when indifferenciation, confusion and inability to work and choose reign, the subjects are in a regressive situation and are psychically fragile. It is also, as Silvia Amati-Sas underlines, the moment when certain outside manipulations (individual, social,



political, religious) are possible, creating a state of dependency through more or less helpful alliances, but it is also the moment for a possible therapeutic alliance.

A few words on the specificity of unconscious family alliances which present several types like *denegative pacts and narcissistic contracts*. These, essentially are the foundations of filiations, couple, parentality and brotherhood. These formations contribute to build the *family link*, which holds the family members together and ensures the narcissistic and generational continuity, according to, of course, their strength, but also their content. Some of these alliances are structuring and contribute to the agreement between couples and families and to psychic development: the denegative alliance pact, a real «*Pandora's Box*» (Granjon, 1994), binds and isolates what cannot be worked through and shuts in the trans-generational negative roots; Pandora's Box seals in and protects the founding alliance, that each of us has to maintain and protect, in his own interest as well as everybody else's. The narcissistic contract, which takes into account the founding alliances, and which already harmonizes each person to the group, founds the child's narcissism and is at the root of primary links. From this place which is offered to him and from the conditions imposed by previous alliances, the subject will be able to come about. These alliances structure and organise the family group and protect those who are part of it. Each thus can be the group's subject and subject in the group.

In «*Pandora's Box*» are buried and inaccessible not only what, under instinctual impulses'effects, could damage or go against the family's «being together» (incest, infanticide, parricide,...), but also some aspects of the transgenerational unconscious inheritance, deposited and stocked in the trans-subjective background of the group. Freeing and making these aspects real would represent a threat for the psychical life of the family and its members.

The Box which was given to Pandora by her father, a god, conjures up transmission and the forbidden as well as the power of disconnection of the negative transgenerational. It contains and locks away what cannot be under any circumstances be revealed. This is the reason why I chose this myth to describe the founding alliance of the family link , which seals all family links and will be handed down to all its members through narcissistic contracts and other unconscious family alliances.

But, of course, every family has its Pandora's Box! And in some cases, alliances, pacts or contracts are built with purely defensive or offensive



aims and can turn out to be alienating or pathogenic for the subjects. Some alliances appear to be proper fortresses set up to mask the unbearable; others are used to build an offensive force, a kind of power. Weapon or armour, they force each of us, but stop all process of autonomy.

So, as you can see in this quick presentation, it is through unconscious alliances that *generational transmission* (Granjon, 2006) happens, and in particular, the negative content of *generational transmission*, of what happens and imposes itself from one generation to the next and which cannot or has not yet been able to benefit from transformations allowing subjective appropriations. Traces, remnants, and other forms without memories, put in common in the trans-subjective background, cross spaces and time: «what you have buried in your garden will come out in your son's», as an African saying goes. Family alliances between and through generations ensure thus the generational continuity and join in the transmission of contents and subconscious processes. Store for memory and workplace of memory, they set and/or allow the transformation of the handed down subconscious contents. Because, in a family, the present brings up memories, is used to detect memory and can wake forgetfulness up.

But, with any new alliance, as we saw, some subconscious contents which up to then were buried and obscured, are being moved along and taken up or freed in the individual and groupal psychic spaces; in some cases, echoing one against the other, they will have cumulative effects or benefit from possible transformations. And there we have the question of a healthy psychic functioning of the group and the subjects which form it, of the «wellness» of subconscious alliances.

Thus, family alliances are all shot through with generational inheritance and are the vehicles for inter and trans-generational transmissions.

From this theoretical presentation, and basing myself on my clinical experience, I would like to express a couple of hypothesis:

1. The first is about "*family suffering*". The suffering of the links which brings us to suggest couple or family psychoanalytical therapy, seems to be in keeping with:
 - Either a «failure» of the family's structuring unconscious alliances (time of crisis);
 - Or a «constitutive flaw» in family alliances, that is to say in keeping with links built on defensive or offensive alliances which prove to be pathogenic or alienating for the subjects.



2. The second hypothesis is about *the therapeutic situation* we offer: grouping the family and/or the couple, implies building new unconscious alliances in the neo-group and facilitates a certain untying of family alliances; the gathering of their contents enables them to be taken up again in the links of the group in therapy, and particularly in the transference links.
- 1) A lot of work has been done on the symptoms of «*family suffering*», and I shan't add to it.
 - This later can be linked to the frailty or inconsistency of family alliances which find themselves overwhelmed or inefficient, because of a change in the links or a revealing moment; they cannot then contain their load. In this critical situation, which affects the subjects and the links, it hurts each member to be together, and the family or the couple tries to «knit again» the links in a protective and defensive alliance, but the cost is individual suffering and loss of psychic autonomy. In some case, to try and solve the crisis, the family finds an ideal, a symbolic character or a shared common project, a *raison d'être* for each member, that one member of the family might have sometimes to take on, take responsibility for.
 - But in other cases, family suffering seems deeper; more alienating for the subjects, and linked then not with the strength or efficiency of unconscious alliances, but with their *raison d'être* and their content. Trying to maintain in the subconscious and therefore inaccessible, trying not to know a traumatic reality or an unbearable, unacceptable and irrepresentable inheritance, defensive, alienating or pathogenic alliances are built, impose themselves and are an answer for the subjects who contracts them; based on denial, rejection or exclusion, they settle and freeze the traumatic and unbinding elements. At this cost, they provide a founding link. But any mobilization of their content might put back into play the intolerable, with its shame, its venting violence and its destructive effects. In those cases, suffering affects the whole and the individual in the deepest part of the psyche. And when the re-linking and resumption of the work cannot happen at a groupal level, some subjects volunteer and are assigned the containment and carrying of the destructive negative, thus becoming «*a container of negative*». Taking on this *phoric function* which enables the group to hold



together, these subjects come to represent, in their bodies or psyche, the unthinkable and impossible memory. If it can't benefit from receiving unconscious alliances and the groupal work, the return of the trans-generational exclusion and splitting might be happening through actions and symptoms, in compromises held by the subject and by the link.

2) How can we access these expressions of suffering which affect the subjects in their subjectivity and their belonging links?

How can we access these areas of the subconscious buried in unconscious alliances with radical negativity, the unspeakable, the unthinkable, and the *memory of the forgotten*»?

We know that only groupal work enables us to access these subconscious levels in which the subjects and group are involved and tangled up. This is the project of *psychoanalytic family therapy*.

Coming into a therapeutic group makes demands on the alliances in place; grouping the family and/or the couple, implies building new unconscious alliances in the *neo-group* (Granjon, 2007) and facilitates a certain untying of family alliances. In this critical situation, the urgency felt to find a place where to deposit the wandering negative elements and which would receive them and take them in urges the family to set up new alliances, which would bring security and a feeling of belonging.

Thus, the founding alliances of the *neo-group*, the therapeutic group, contain the most radical negative aspects of the family, in particular, those from the trans-generational transmission; they form an echo with the most inaccessible areas of the therapist's psyche, which are deposited in our family, institutional and theoretical viewpoints. This mobilisation on both parts and this bonding in the constitutive alliances of the *neo-group* founds the therapeutic link and carries the whole of the group along into a regression, the effects of which we share.

Building the psychic aspect of this group with a therapeutic project in mind is done from the formulation of the psychoanalytic rules of free association and abstinence, for which the psychoanalyst is responsible. They contribute to the organisation of the transfero/counter-transferential field.

The alliances of transferential links are in principle structuring, but we must beware of the risk of defensive, even offensive or alienating alliances built on denial or exclusion pacts. They show themselves through some counter-transferential distress and induce our



«listening», but they also cause some of our attitudes which are compromises for possible expression of elements which have not been worked through and are not contained. Because our theoretical references are not always sufficient guarantees and we need to be pay careful attention to counter-transferrential manifestations.

In this situation, some unconscious content comes back into the transference field and, as analysts, we are entreated into the *building and listening of an associative groupal chain* which unfolds in the neo-group.

But other aspects of this situation need to be taken into consideration: some very archaic negative contents, mobilised when first entering the group, can be projected on the groupal scene and burst into the inter and trans-subjective space of the neo-group. Within the words, inaccessible and inexpressible, some manifestations, some emotions or some manners catch our attention through breaking or sticking effects. Silences, noise, «*rough objects*» and other disseminated and senseless fragments, as well as some distress impose themselves upon us and disturb our listening. All this material needs to be gathered up, because it is the expression of the effects of the negative coming from trans-generational transmission (Granjon, 1994).

Thus, a polymorphic, heterogeneous and complex associative groupal chain unfolds in the neo-group, from individual formulations as well as manifestations and unconscious family representations. It carries traces of bonding and articulations between these various levels. The family alliances' unconscious contents (repressed, rejected or denied) show themselves and «give a sign» in the transference and counter-transferrential links. The family's unthinkable and irrepresentable will then be able to be taken up again and imagined on the basis of these new alliances, in the transference and counter-transferrential links. It's in this field that we do our listening and that we operate, aiming to receive, connect and transform the elements mobilised in the neo-group, prior to their representation.

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