

NARCISSISM: EFFECTS AND LINKING PERSPECTIVES – IS IT NECESSARY TO COEXIST?¹

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*... When I confronted you
Face to face
Couldn't see my face
Found what I saw of bad taste
a bad taste of a bad taste
It's because Narcissus finds it ugly
What is not a mirror
And the mind is scared of what still
Is not really old.
None of what wasn't before if we're not mutants...
Caetano Veloso, Sampa*

ABSTRACT

First, the importance of altruism or collectivism is retaken in group work. Then, the possibilities of how the concept of linking can be understood are presented, as well as how narcissism is seen by the author in the psychoanalytic model of linking. This Encounter between individuals provokes considerable instabilities and vicissitudes, representing a strong emotional change, especially concerning narcissism, whether in patients or in psychotherapists, and involves aspects of transference-counter-transference linking, and also what is called interference. Some topics in the theory of technique are approached stressing the possibilities of interventions not only related to the past, but also to the present, which provokes effects and shakes the ego. I also emphasize that, besides the three narcissistic wounds pointed out by Freud, since the human being would like to have something exclusively of his own, intimate and personal, the fourth wound is represented by the group. The narcissism of the therapist will always exist, and it is not an element that can be examined with precision, for it has the quality of being abstract. Nevertheless, such coexistence is necessary, as well as its management. Each participant of the group can do the same, when he or she is moving on.

Key words: Living with differences; Imposition of the present; Narcissism; Therapists; Linking.

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Introduction

Back in 1921, Freud referred to the importance of altruism in contrast to narcissism in human relationships. In fact, we live in groups, we communicate, we love and hate, always having the Other in sight.

From the psychoanalytic point of view, the work with families, couples, groups and institutions presents special features directly related to diversity and the availability to live with what is uncertain and new.

Then, nothing could be more opportune than to study how the Encounter between two personalities produces its effects, reflecting on what happens among the participants of the group as well, whether the therapist or the patients, in the due process of the psychoanalytical investigation that takes place during the group process.

Structural relationship, narcissism and altruism/collectivism

The psychic reality is the knowledge that really matters in the psychoanalytic work; it is fundamental to bear in mind a linking function that could give sense to the emotional experiences. That's what Bion called "link K" (1962).

The knowledge is only possible through tolerated doubt, through consciousness of ignoring something. This is true in the contact within us, and so it is for the structural relationship that arises among the members of a group, and each one and every one with the therapist.

Therefore, the Encounter between real people is an inter-subjective dimension that produces effects and creates a halfway space of exchange, very important to those who work with linking psychoanalysis.

But, I am not among those who conceive the link only as an inter-subjective dimension. However, there are renowned colleagues that do so and conceptualize the rest of the spaces with other denominations.

For instance, Puget and Berenstein (1986) call as "intra-subjective relation, the registers in the internal world of partial or full objects with which the ego maintains different kinds of connection", preserving the term *linking* to when there is a presence of an external referential.

Personally, I feel more comfortable defending a vision that I consider broader. So, as I see it, the linking expression refers to "a structural relationship, in which the emotional experience occurs between two or more people or parts of the same person. It includes intra-subjective, inter-subjective and trans-subjective dimensions, and involves transference and counter-transference" (FERNANDES, 1994, p.28).

The trans-subjective dimension comprises the myths, laws, culture, macro-context, and will be covered furthermore.

It's worth pointing that for the intra-subjective dimension, the classical psychoanalysis have been giving countless, valuable and useful contributions. The inter-subjective dimension, nonetheless, has been developed little by little.

The past, present and its vicissitudes – aspects of the inter-subjective space of the link.

W. R. Bion (1979) said that in an inter-subjective link, when two personalities encounter, an **emotional storm** takes place. If they have contact, an emotional state is produced by the conjunction of its two personalities.

And here the inevitable echo of the presence of the other real external occurs – strengthening the ego and explaining specifically the presence of the other and its differences. We will unavoidably have to live with them and that shakes our narcissism and our omnipotence.

Latin American colleagues have been giving a crucial contribution in this area, appreciating exceedingly the moment of the Encounter.

“It is considered that the present imposes its own meanings and signs, which go beyond the repetition of the past which is called imposition of present” (PUGET, 2009, p.114).

In linking psychoanalysis, the otherness is fundamental. Dealing with diversity and factual presence of those involved leads to new meanings, without leaving behind the appreciation of unconscious content related to impulses and childhood.

As for what’s new, this real presence complicates, produces effects of astonishment and frustration. On the other hand, it can promote learning and personal strengthening.

The personal growth, as well as the learning process, involves having to deal with the new idea, always uncomfortable and persecutory.

The new provokes resistances and can up the conservatism and the establishment (BION, 1966), let alone the narcissistic wounds.

So, in the psychoanalytic process, patients and therapists will have to face the doubt, the unknown, everything that is new and strange.

It is fundamental to be available not only to the linear influence of historic time. If we can accept other influences and take in unexpected aspects, something new might come up, opening spaces and clearing up the mind.

Certainly, it is hard to hear something unknown without trying to bring up memories of something more familiar and already known so as to understand it. Actually, by covering this path, a misunderstanding might take place. “Maybe this way the disturbing character of the new and the questioning of one’s own certainties can be withdrawn, avoiding the questioning that this would activate” (PUGET, 2009, p. 123).

When referring to the effect of the presence in a session, Janine brings up a new concept that she calls interference:

The value of linear history and of the psychic determinism has changed, giving space to what is being produced at the moment (effect of imposition and interference), and as to what is not predictable, called Principle of Uncertainty, concepts that have activated resistances (PUGET, 2009, p.114).

Narcissistic barriers and trans-subjective dimension of the link

Back in 1917 Freud emphasized the narcissistic barriers in the process of self-knowledge.

Narcissism has been influencing human kind in its development, that is, a barrier that appears when reality imposes itself differently from what is expected and desired.

The personal growth and knowledge, however, depend much more on the frustration and non-immediate achievement of one's desires, as already proposed by Bion in *Learning from Experience* (1962).

Our vision of human beings as superior beings has been weakened narcissistically by the strength of reality, that imposes itself, and by the knowledge that men has been achieving, like, those concerning Freud's so called narcissistic wounds (1917): Copernicus', Darwin's and Freud's contribution for the discovery of the unconscious, which greatly bettered the concept of man over himself. Here's when the group comes in. "Groups are the fourth narcissistic wound... Considering the roots taken in each group experiences, the SELF does not exist by itself; it is an illusion, a by-product of the experience that the group promotes in its members..." (ÁVILA, L. A. 2007, p.21).

Along with Freud, Ávila compares the SELF to an onion, a vegetable that has a bulb formed exclusively by layers, without a core:

...because the core is the onion itself, its inner layers. The SELF is similar in everything. Our layers are the link SELF-OTHER... What composes me is my *SELF with the OTHER*... We would like to have something of our own, intimate and personal, that's the forth narcissistic wound (ÁVILA, L. A. 2007, p.24).

Link psychiatry and the tolerance to doubt

The issues proposed up to now are valid to psy professionals and also to health professionals and patients.

Focusing on the figure of the psychotherapist, I will reflect on what has given me the reason to do my study and research in the last years – psychoanalytic work with link configurations.

In these many years of clinical work I'm more conscious on the importance of dealing with doubt, my own ignorance, the unexpected, anyway, dealing with the absence – and learnt from that experience.

Fortunately we can learn from our patients, but only if we're open to their models of thinking, their theories, especially when those differ from ours.

A different opinion, a gesture, a look or an unexpected tone of voice could be a sign of communication that orients us in the study of linking, but can be transformed in a confrontation.

It is important to be aware of the possibility of wrong interpretations that the voice perceives. For instance, in a work fulfilled with Blay Neto (1987) we verify that the experience of the voice sometimes sweet, sometimes bitter and rough was related to fantasies concerning their agreement or disagreement with us. In the same way, a verbal concordance can be followed by a seductive look or a look full of rage.

Anyway, when uncertainty or doubt takes place, it is healthier to be uncertain or to have doubts than to agree all the time. From a disagreement we can talk and try to reach an agreement or even have a third point of view.

So we could say that the main characteristic of the work with the linking device is to **work with differences** constantly; therefore, the presence of the other

has a special value. In the group, when someone has a fantasy on other participant, besides an investigation on the transference issues, we can also confront the information with reality. In fact, rarely someone leaves behind something about himself or herself that doesn't seem real; they soon correct and clear up the misunderstanding. "To clear up misunderstandings is one of the most necessary things in life, and is a very positive device in the group" (FERNANDES, 2003, p.85).

If we can leave behind a certain dose of omnipotence and narcissism and emphasize the patients and the theories they have in mind, we won't ignore their communications, neither consider them simply as resistant to analysis, just because they are unexpected and different from ours.

The psychoanalytical work with groups – personal experience

All the phenomena thoroughly described related to group dynamics can occur with any participant of a group and also in subgroups. The way the psychoanalyst coordinates the group is fundamental here.

In the work with the group, the silence of the therapist is an important transference instrument, which does not answer to the expressed demands of the patients but allows the emergence of the latent material. Sometimes the silence of the therapist becomes persecutory. The obligation of always bringing transference aspects to the figure of the analyst may intensify and confirm the pursuit. It could be more effective to deal with transference aspects among the rest of the group experience. It could also be profitable to verify the interferences that take place in the Encounter between people, as well as the misunderstandings without rushing into interpretation.

I don't think that the **mission of the therapist** is to interpret all the time. I even believe that we might compromise the development of the group with that attitude.

In my point of view interpretation shouldn't be the only healing factor or the most important one, but, if so, I believe that it is much more useful if interpretation comes from another patient of the group and not from the therapist which promotes the development of the group. The problem is to verify if the therapist is able to place himself or herself in the background, while other participants put themselves as main characters.

Zimerman (1993) refers to those situations when the therapist is more disturbing than helping as "Pathology of Interpretation", since his or her motivation is not to help patients, but to enlarge the ego.

For example, sometimes the most relevant issue may not be interpreted or interpretation may be used as an instrument of power and indoctrination. Its use can be excessive which would form what I call "interpretative frenzy" (Fernandes, 1989). The style may be rhetoric, accusative, master of truth, pedagogic, pseudo-erudite etc.

Another important aspect is that many times we leave out some positive aspects or do not recognize the progress of the patients, taking into account that we all have the need to recognition.

A safeguard is appropriate. It is important not to forget that the line between the need to health recognition and the pathological lack of constant support (false self) is very unclear and also involves a special care to the therapist

who might be moved by **narcissism**, working to “receive recognition of being someone very special, important etc., a true reassurance against basic gaps, as seen in other works” (FERNANDES, 1989, p.63).

The pathology of interpretation is directly related to the non-acceptance of the impotence, intolerance to doubt, therefore, to omnipotence and narcissism.

Conclusion

Recently, I concluded that the difficulty that I had been experiencing in gathering new groups had to do with the lack of adaptation to changing times, directly related to the attachment to the routine I was used to.

The fact is that 40 years ago, group therapists had various groups but nowadays a minor number of therapists have a working group.

In a recent congress, I presented this data, a little bit downhearted, but in the middle of a discussion it became clear that I was being resistant to adapt to the new demand. “Now I believe that the fact that I am no longer highly requested as a group therapist today as I used to be in the past, represents a narcissistic wound hard to heal” (FERNANDES, 2009, p.12).

Today, in a time of immediacy, it’s hard to accept that people look for us to have a relief and, if possible, to heal every disease, disorder and syndrome created by colleagues who give patients diagnosis for their general discomforts, from mourning related to loss to everyday frustrations.

Instead of passions, a calm, instead of desire, the lack of desire, instead of subject, nothing, and instead of history, the end of the history. The modern health professional - psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse or doctor no longer has time to spend on the long duration of psychism, because, in the liberal depressive society, his or her time is restricted (Roudinesco, 1999, p.41).

But one issue comes up: with all the developments in psychoanalysis and group analysis, it is necessary for us to be in conditions to satisfy the current demand.

Since the majority of participants in groups, even therapeutic groups, is not searching to clarify the past, but to have a better quality of life in the present and future, we might conclude that *the group is the continent space and facilitator of such search for better conditions for a better present and future.*

We have seen that some activities that allow some personal development to the suffering individuals would have been useful, given everyone’s possibilities. Short groups may be an alternative because with the progress, some resistances slowly tend to reduce, as well the sensitizing of the process. So, here’s a challenge: Are we ready for what society is offering us? Will we remain like *Quixote’s*, attacking mills? Or, since we can use the psychoanalytic principles that are at our disposal to think widely and the group device as a tool to ease their personal development, will we try to survive and help those who look for us to live with a better quality of life?

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