

Fusional experiences and fantasies in the analytic group

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Abstract: The present article aims to explore the fusional levels of the analytic group. First of all, a definition of the term fusional is reported, taken mostly from the work of Neri et al., (1990). Then the fusional functioning of the psychoanalytic group is investigated. Given that these conceptualizations are still in their infancy, it is important to emphasize that this text is an initial food for thought that certainly needs a more in-depth articulation. For this reason, the author focuses largely on the clinical material that emerged from group analysis, with the hope of providing suggestions and impressions that could form the basis for future evolution of the concept of fusional.

Key-words: fusional, group, groupal matrix, mother/baby dyad

First of all, I propose a definition of fusional. By this term, I mean a relational modality but, above all, an area of the psyche that is always active alongside more advanced functional units. This fusional area draws on a primitive epoch of psychic life - in which the perception of the external Object had not yet reached the psyche and in which the first mechanisms of splitting, projection, and introjection had not yet begun - and, even later, it works in these ways.

Fusional seems to originate from the first symbiotic mother-child relationship, from a period of pre-object functioning, in which the Self and the Object were not yet distinct but held together in an omnipotent fantasy of indissoluble union. The fusional area of the psyche aims to rebuild this original fusional state, firstly experienced in fetal life (Petacchi, 1990). With this aim, the fusional drive tries to re-create a psychic world without differences, discontinuities, fractures, or separations but instead made of continuity, homogeneity; amalgamated or agglutinated as Bleger would say (1967). An internal world free of time and space, and, mostly, without movement. Indeed, fusional looks for stasis, stability, the lost and forever wanted homeostatic equilibrium. In fact, given the presence of a differentiating drive, we should as well recognize an opposite thrust, which aims at undifferentiation and dependence on others. Tolerating one's individuality, indeed, is not easy, it requires frustration acceptance and fatigue, as a consequence, every subject always desires to find help in others and forget this huge task for a while.

At the relation level, the fusional drive silently blurs the differences between the Self and the object and enhance similarities and resonances to reconstruct the illusion of oneness with the object, enclosed with it in a single envelope.

The fusional functioning dissolves or at least fades the selves boundaries, building of common space, a third area made only of the aspects common to all the participants. Just think about the loving couple (Piermattei, 2020), or about the image two sets that

intersect creating a subset. In this existing area, the subjects are not differentiated, instead, they are amalgamated, united in an undifferentiated and indistinct oneness.

Generally, fusional is considered only in its pathological aspect, as a drive aiming at undifferentiation and dependence and therefore adverse to the construction of a mature and cohesive self. This is certainly true when the fusional desire is too imperative and does not allow the personality to tolerate frustration, change, and separation. However, some authors recently underlined that the fusional drive, when in balance with the separative one, is constructive and necessary to build a receptive, creative and curious internal world (Tagliacozzo, 1990). Given that without separation there can be no symbolization, it is also true that without illusion there can be no creativity.

After this brief description (for a deeper definition see Piermattei, 2019) is necessary to underline that the fusional model is qualitatively different from the Kleinian one. Usually, indeed, psychoanalytic literature explains the unconscious relational modalities using the Projective-Identification concept. I refer to the Tavistock Institute, (Fisher, Morgan, Ruszczynski) which makes use of the Id to describe couple relationships, as well as to the Bionian model that describes the group movements through the concept of Id and that of container/content relationship. These models are for sure useful and this article does not want to criticize them. However, in the last decades, psychoanalytic research has found new psychic areas and functioning, which destroyed the monopersonal and intra-psychic vision of the development (Bonfiglio, 2018) and which now need to stand next to the Kleinian models (see Fonda, 2000; Ogden, 1989; Bleger, 1967; Neri, Tagliacozzo, Pallier, et al., 1990). Recently, for example, Mary Morgan, a known exponent of the Tavistock Institute, opened to a different vision from the Kleinian one (Morgan, 2016).

With the schizo-paranoid position, Klein describes an articulated and complex psychic reality, albeit in a primitive way. The neonatal mind described by Klein is a crowded theater of a multitude of partial objects to which the child relates, creating a continuous movement between inside and outside and between different parts of his psyche. It is a fragmented and eventful world, sometimes chaotic when not violent and explosive. Klein is concentrated on the relationship between inside and outside, between good and bad objects, postulating an oscillation between different poles (Lussana, 1989). In this model, therefore, duality is already present, there are pairs of opposites within which there is movement.

Fusional describes a different internal world, made of a totalizing unity instead of duality, of stasis instead of movement. In this space, the internal objects have not yet arrived, the perception of the external world is labile, there are no paranoid anxieties but rather of dispersion. Various authors (Neri et al., 1990; Bleger, Ogden) believe that this can be considered a level of functioning preceding the schizo-paranoid one - and then in constant oscillation with this and the depressive one - in which split has not yet fragmented internal objects, and horizontal mechanisms are not yet possible, since space and duality in which to act them are not contemplated.

To best exemplify the difference between projective identification and fusionality, I report two brief clinical fragments taken from two different moments of the same group analysis.

First vignette. Marica is a 30 years girl, when she was five she had a car accident with her family, in which her father died. Right now, she talks about how she manages her love relationships. The speech is very agitated, all of a sudden she says: "I'm afraid to let the boys approach because then I fear it will kill.... I would leave them". This sentence explodes like a bolt of lightning in the group space and produces a disruptive effect. Another patient says she almost saw a body, that of Marica's father, standing next to the patient, almost a hallucination.

Second vignette. The group wonders about the analysis, expressing the feeling of being stuck on the same topics, of being immersed in quicksand, sinking deeper and deeper into the same topics, without any possibility of going on. One patient says: "My head feels muffled, like when you have a drop in blood pressure, like I'm about to pass out". When asked about her state, she claims to feel almost "out of herself" as if floating in the group space, scattered among the chairs that make up the group circle, she adds that it is not an unpleasant sensation, on the contrary, she likes it.

These two clinical vignettes describe moments in which the group was deeply involved in the therapeutic process and, in this participation, strongly cohesive and united. However, the events that this union gives life to are qualitatively different.

In my opinion, the first fragment exemplifies the action of projective identification: a not-elaborated content, which cannot be processed or approached by Marica, is violently projected, expelled into the group space, thus reaching the second patient who, capturing such a concrete content, perceives it rather than thinking it, sees it rather than imagining it.

The second fragment describes a different union. The group talks about feeling amalgamated and static in the winding of quicksand, that is to say: it describes a state of fusion that arouses claustrophobic anguish, there seems to be no way out. In this context, the patient who intervenes becomes the spokesperson for this fusional state, claiming instead that she enjoys it. The girl seems to describe the pleasure of spreading her individuality, of perceiving a continuity with others, thus being able to temporarily abandon the responsibility and weight of her subjectivity (see Corrao, 1993).

The real topic of this text is now emerging: fusionality within the psychoanalytic group. Indeed, why should we insert the fusional modality within the group? Well, the group seems to be a space in which fusionality stands out markedly.

To begin, just think about the image of the circle - typically the shape of the group - the only figure without corners, therefore without interruptions or differences, continuous and equal to itself in every point. The setting of the group itself - a circular space composed of the seats of the participants - seems to evoke the fusional image of a single aggregate held together by an envelope (Neri, 1990). The group offers a space - the internal one - unsaturated enough to psychically fluctuate, to

disperse in it, but protected by a firm boundary - the chairs of the participants - which reassures from excessive dispersion anxieties.

Group communication - favored by the circular arrangement, which allows all participants to see each other - takes place largely through non-verbal language, using a different logic from the conscious one (Corrao, 1995a). Looks, mimic expressions, postures and movements, create a common rhythm that acts as a protective sheath, a group Skin-Ego (Anzieu, 1996), promoting a sense of continuity and undifferentiation. Enveloped by this common rhythmicity, several identifications, mirrorings, resonances are established and multiplied, which echo in each member, giving life to an amalgam of affects, mental contents, somatic states that constitute the very essence of the group entity, of the Group Self (Corrao, 1995b). It is indeed possible that the presence of a multiplicity of persons, differently from the dual analytic situation, acts as a catalyst for these movements, amplifying and circulating their effect.

A patient once said that he saw the group internal space as a cauldron, in which each member's contents were amalgamated, creating a single mixture.

In the group setting, identification phenomena are frequent: it is not uncommon for patients to "exchange" symbols, for all participants to have the same dreams for a period, it also happens that one patient experiences the emotions of the other. I remember, for example, the case of Marino, a young boy who arrived after losing both parents in a serious accident. He had looked for the help of the group because he had never cried since the tragic event, but he feared he could collapse soon. For a long time, Marino did not cry, but the group did it for him, indeed, almost every member cried in turn when he carried painful content without showing the slightest emotion.

Also, in a group, the analyst canceled a session, and in the next one, almost every patient said he dreamed of brides or weddings. They then discovered that the analyst had missed the previous session to participate at his daughter's wedding.

How can we explain these phenomena? For sure, we can use the Kleinian or Bionian conceptualization. The vision of the group in the basic assumption, for example, is very close to a fusional approach (Bernabei, Fadda, Neri; 1987). However, some differences remain; Neri, for example, clearly exemplified the difference between fusional containment and container/contained relationship (1987). In the reported fragments there is no characteristic of the schizo-paranoid position, as impetuosity, idealization, manipulation, or persecution. Rather, there seems to be a slow, quiet, at times ecstatic sharing of mental contents, which makes everything belong to everyone, thus, a patient cries for someone else's pain, and one can pick up on the other's unspoken things.

From this brief description, we can easily understand that the group situation recalls the first mother/child relationship, and this is probably its strength (Pines, 1982). The group matrix seems to offer a shared space in which to disperse and from which slowly differentiate, as the mother originally did with her child. Both are

relationships in which a circularity of looks, smiles, shared rhythms is created. Likewise, both, by providing the perception of an envelope, act as a para-excitement for the subject (Pines, 1982).

It is, therefore, necessary to re-experience, in the group, an archaic psychic state, the fusional one - in which to contact the most primitive dimensions of one's psychism - to then be able to slowly exit from it (Pallier, 1990), as shown by the following dream.

"I am on the entrance step of a building, with my mother and my grandfather. More precisely, we are in the internal courtyard of some buildings, arranged in a semicircle. I have the impression I know the place but I can't understand what place it is. In front of us there is a pool of water, quite large, circular. First I see a group of tadpoles, they turn together confused, aimlessly, remaining almost in the same place. Then I see a fish, quite small, swimming alone under the water. Eventually, a much larger fish, perhaps a dolphin, leaps and comes out of the water. I think I should be afraid but I am not. "

This dream appears within a psychoanalytic psychotherapy group. It is the story that a patient brings in an advanced stage of her group analysis, and it seems to be a small story of evolution. It is a story of a transformation: from tadpoles, which wander confusedly, to a dolphin, that jumps out of the water.

It is a dream of growth, of structuring borders, and mature, complete identity. Also, it appears as the evolution from a group identity - the group of tadpoles - to an autonomous, individual one - the single fish that swims and jumps on its own. It seems, therefore, an evolution that consists of emerging from an amalgam, from a confused whole, to build one's singular, well-defined, autonomous individuality.

Without going into the details of her story, we can report that this patient, a young girl of about 23, was unable to describe herself at the beginning of her therapeutic path. Indeed, at the time of the introductions with a new member, she claimed she had no words to define herself and her life, she did not know why she was in the group or what exactly she was doing. Only over time, following a path of evolution and structuring of her own identity, she could finally discover - and communicate to others - who she was, she could select the right words to describe herself.

This aspect, although it is a detail and does not describe the patient's personality, lets us perceive the girl's identity lability, her unstructured personality, such as not to allow her to perceive continuity in her existence, her internal structure.

This dream, therefore, seems to show the advent of a more solid identity structure, almost telling the path taken up to that moment within the therapeutic group. From tadpole to dolphin: from shapeless to structured, from group to individual.

Therefore, it seems that the patient describes how she felt when she arrived in the group and the image she has of herself now. She entered as a tadpole (fetus), or, perhaps, the arrival of the tadpoles was already the first effect of the analysis, and she

has now grown to become a dolphin. She has not developed legs yet, she is not yet a human being, but she has at least entered the class of mammals, common to dolphins and humans. (I recently discovered that Winnicott in "The Piggie. An account of the psychoanalytic treatment of a little girl"(1977) reports a very similar dream made by the little patient at the very end of the analysis).

This patient, as often happens when it comes to this type of person, will say, at the end of her analysis, that she feels that she was born in the group, that she does not know who she was before as if her life had begun within the psychoanalytic group.

However, her story of evolution takes place in a specific place, which takes us directly to the group setting and its fusional levels, thus explaining the meaning of this dream in this article. The entire dream scene takes place in a circular and collected space that recalls the group space: a circle composed and delimited by the chairs of the participants (the buildings surrounding the courtyard).

The dream, therefore, tells us that this change took place in therapy, within the group field. To confirm this, in the following session, the patient will report that, leaving the studio, she had suddenly recognized the scene of the dream in the inner courtyard of the analyst's office. It seems clear, therefore, that it is the circular and reassuring space of the group in which this patient feels that she has grown up, that she has acquired a more solid structure and boundaries. Paradoxically, therefore, this patient needed to find a fusional space in which to disperse her subjective identity, in which to mingle with the group, to then be able to build her individuality in a more structured way.

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