

## **From symbiosis to fusionality: observing the newborn to understand the adult**

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### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this article is to describe the path from symbiosis to fusionality, since, despite these two terms are frequently used in the psychoanalytic literature, they are often named in a way that is not always clear, especially the latter.

It is my personal belief that, instead, an explanation and correlation of these two concepts can be extremely useful and that, above all, it can help to understand the importance of studying the newborn for all the psychologists and psychotherapists regardless of the type of patient with whom one will work. The observation of the newborn allows in fact to approach those portions of infantile psychism that, escaping the evolutionary process, remain in the adult and which therefore always remains useful to keep in mind, not only as an immature and disturbing aspect but also as a creative and vital part of the personality.

**Keywords:** fusionality, symbiosis, mother-child relationship

### **The symbiosis**

To fully understand the concept of fusionality we must necessarily know the one of symbiosis. These two terms are in fact particularly linked to each other and their distinction is not easy. In the definition of Margaret Mahler, who is perhaps the author who has structured the symbiosis concept in the most systematic way, the term describes a phase proper of the very first post-natal moment, whose fundamental characteristic is "the somatopsychic and omnipotent hallucinatory fusion, with the representation of the mother, and in particular the illusion of a common boundary [with her]" (Mahler, 1975). The essence of this first moment is therefore the exceptionally intense relationship with the mother who has however a fundamental and very particular characteristic since it tends to deny the autonomous independence of the external object and, therefore, the relationship itself.

Gradually, we must remember that the newborn does not perceive the object in its entirety and in its independent existence. Rather, he incorporates fragmentary and essentially somatic objects and moments of interaction, not contextualized in a structured space-time. Thus, the child does not perceive the mother breastfeeding him, but rather the contact of the nipple in his mouth, her the body touching his, the sound of her voice, her smell and so on without connecting them in an united image of the mother as an external object and differentiated from his own Self (Tustin, 1981; Ogden, 1994). Therefore, even the relational modality is built within the

impossibility of recognizing the autonomous existence of the external object. Establishing a relationship at this time of life implies the incorporation of the Self of the others, the construction of a matrix of commonality so that, in an area at least, the two Selves coincide. Since there are no two but only one, movements such as communication and relationship, as well as all horizontal defenses, are in fact no longer possible, what is created is rather a common space where contents float freely, creating a continuous communication and reciprocal that acts under the characteristics of encapsulation, continuity and likeness.

Think of the image proposed by Fraiberg (1975) which depicts the mother-child couple still immersed in a common space and closed to the outside, full of their fantasies that fluctuate making their presence felt at primordial and unprocessed levels. Psychic contents that are not symbolized and therefore present at an almost concrete level, like ghosts, are communicated in a silent but continuous manner, giving life to a common matrix, an area of similarity that makes the boundaries of the two Self disappear, in an area which become the same thing. It is from this mixture of fantasies, from this amalgam, that the founding bases of the psychic structure of the newborn are born and, even more deeply, the possibility itself of building one's own autonomous identity in the future. It seems in fact that it is necessary to have experienced a period of total fusion (Tagliacozzo, 1990) to be able then, freeing itself from the symbiotic matrix, to proceed to the structuring of one's own cohesive ego (Bleger, 1967).

This conception profoundly changes the way we understand the human psyche and its development, modifying the basic presuppositions of the Freudian theory. In fact, although Freud in his works has repeatedly appointed concepts and provided ideas regarding the discourse that we are discussing here (Freud, 1924), however, there is no organization of these themes which, rather, seem to rest on "monistic" assumptions. The concept of symbiosis places the relationship with the mother as the first stage of development and wants to describe a relationship that is built when the child is not able yet to establish a real object relationship. As we have already said, in fact, the newborn is still within its hallucinatory sphere and the relationship with the mother is therefore subjected to the requirements of the symbiosis and has no characteristics of object relationship (Ruszczynski, 1995; Bleger, 1967).

This new vision of the relationship makes it possible to give it a whole new meaning. In fact, talking about it as Freud did, seems to imply that the child first lays the foundation of his individuality and only then is able to relate to his mother. In this view is implicitly present the idea that the first, fundamental, structuring of the personality occurs before an object relationship is possible (Eagle, 2011).

Instead, to assume that the symbiotic relationship between mother and child starts immediately, even before birth, means assuming that the baby's personality is built all within that agglomerated and narcissistic relationship, which then becomes an

essential component of it (Ogden, 1992). The founding assumptions of Freudian theory seem to describe an individual psyche on its own and the internal processes that it alone implements to confront the external world. Even at the level of the intrapsychic experience, in the Freudian formulation the difference between internal and external, between me and not-me is always clear to the subject, a time is not appointed in which the perception of it has not been developed yet and, indeed, it is precisely on the perception of this antithesis which is based on the whole psychic organization of the child. It is precisely in order to avoid the external world, in fact, that the baby tries as much as possible to immerse himself in his primary narcissism in which he seeks alone to reach the homeostatic quiet (Velotti, Zavattini, 2007).

We have therefore reported an aspect that strongly differentiates the "symbiotic vision" of the mind and of the development from the Freudian one. However, this does not imply a total detachment from classical psychoanalysis.

The symbiotic child, indeed, retains many of the characteristics of the narcissistic child described by Freud. In fact, he saw the child as completely focused inward, on his own body, and feeling omnipotent hallucinating the satisfaction of desire.

The concept of narcissism has been widely criticized and some discoveries of empirical research, first of all the Infant Research line, have disconfirmed the vision of a child "impervious" to the perceptions that come from the outside and totally passive to them.

It is possible, however, that this type of knowledge, although very interesting for the understanding of the cognitive level of the newborn, can not exhaust our vision of the child's internal experience. For example, knowing that the baby recognizes the mother's smell or voice does not necessarily imply that he represents her as an autonomous, integrated object endowed with all the characteristics that actually belong to it.

This type of work does not therefore seem sufficient to abandon a narcissistic vision of childhood and part of the adult personality.

In fact, I think that a relational vision of the human being in which the narcissism continues to be present remains possible and I believe that the symbiosis and, later, the fusionality are the most important proofs of it (Bonfiglio, 2018).

The postulation of the symbiotic phase makes it possible to think of a relationship mode that is appropriate to the narcissistic demands of the newborn, at the point that we can consider the symbiosis as a relational version of the primary narcissism.

The mother bends to the child's narcissistic needs, finding the way to relate to him without breaking the omnipotent barrier, without asking the child to turn his attention from the inside to the outside. Starting from a Freudian vision for which the newborn wants nothing more than to contemplate his own image and can not tolerate the presence of another external, we can ask ourselves whether he would accept to tolerate another presence if this contemplates his image in the same way, not asking to be seen or recognized as an external object. Wondering about the myth of Narcissus<sup>1</sup>, I

<sup>1</sup> According to the myth, Narcissus was a beautiful young man, of whom all, both women and men, fell madly in love. However, Narcissus did not take care of any of his suitors. Among these was the nymph Eco that, rejected by Narcissus and consumed by love, would ask myself if he could have loved a nymph who, rather than asking him to look at her, had admired his image reflected in the water with him. We can thus imagine the maternal role during the symbiotic phase (Anzieu, 1985; Bick, 1984b). In fact, the mother must be able to operate as a child's auxiliary ego without affecting her omnipotent sphere. She must provide his son with the necessary means to feel good, to overcome the difficulties, leaving him the possibility of believing that he was the one doing those things.

Only later and gradually the mother will show her child the external world, helping him to confront each other (Winnicott, 1970).

We can then imagine a narcissistic child but within a relationship with the mother, until we think that narcissism is no longer a phase in which the child does not have relations with the outside world, but rather a period in which the child is dominated by a single relational modality, the one of fusionality.

### **Fusionality**

Fusionality is therefore a perceptual, relational and internal organization modality, also present in the healthy adult mind, whose main characteristic is to annul the experiences of differentiation, independence and separateness and which acts by weakening the boundaries between different objects and creating between them. areas of commonality to deny the existence of the external object. The symbiosis, as we have already said, is therefore that period of life in which the fusional mode prevails in the psychic functioning of the newborn. This evolutionary moment remains impressed, in an extremely archaic part of the mind, as a period of perfection, in which the homeostatic equilibrium was maintained precisely and the frustration expelled immediately. In this sense, symbiosis offers to fusionality the historical antecedent on which to lean (Fonda, 2000), like that phase of life to which one would like to return.

In fact, the newborn uses expulsive and somatic defenses that completely free him self from negative emotions. Growing up, one must learn to use less raw and rigid defenses, which allow one to tolerate a dose of frustration (which the newborn is unable to do) and, therefore, bear the weight of never being able to reach a perfect homeostatic equilibrium but only the most stable and continuous possible. This causes man's desire to return to the total quietness, to the undifferentiated and oceanic feeling (Freud, 1926) that belongs to the intrauterine and perinatal life. One can think about the image of the mermaid that, half woman and half fish, has remained in the water, never developing her own legs on which to stand alone. It almost seems to never have come out completely from the maternal belly, from the amniotic fluid, continuing to live a symbiosis that does not allow a real individuation. Her song is, for human beings, irresistible as it is mortal, since following it means, inevitably, to

run away in the woods to disappear, destined to remain only a distant echo. For the pain inflicted, Narcissus was condemned to fall in love with his image reflected in the water. Desperate because he could not satisfy the passion he nurtured, he pinned in useless laments until, realizing the impossibility of his love, he let himself die right next to the water that reflected his image.

**drown, cancel and annihilate one own self.**

This seems to be a perfect representation of the symbiotic call that fascinates with the promise of a perfect homeostatic quiet but whose price is the loss of one's individuality, or annihilation. If the thrust towards symbiotic regression is excessive, it obviously represents a pathological aspect of personality, an archaic and inattentive push back to the past, however, what we here want to deepen is the daily and non-pathological presence of fusional. At this level we can consider the fusional thrust like that part of the psychic world denoted by the characteristics of the continuum, stasis and similarities and that allows to lose momentarily the perception of its own autonomous existence which inevitably involves, as we have already said, a certain amount of frustration and energy expenditure.

We can imagine a psyche characterized by coexistent forces of individuation and fusional, in which the former aim at the construction of one's own independent and well-structured existence and the latter in the exact opposite. When these two modes coexist, fusional allows the passage from moments of presence and commitment in the external world, in which one's individuality is well defined and organized, at times when it is possible to retreat on one own self leaving the boundaries of one's own Self dissolve, at least in part, thus loosening the meshes of their individuality and the demands that this entails.

The processes of individuation and the fusional fantasy are in fact simultaneously opposed and complementary (Soavi, 1990). On the one hand, fusional rests against the structuring of one's own individuality by operating in a way that nullifies the boundaries between different internal objects and between one's own Self and the other and not allowing the structuring of one's own well-defined personality.

On the other hand, a positive experience of the fusional mode seems to be "an indispensable ingredient of any good relationship and the possibility of experiencing it preserving the notion that a positive and constructive identity is always recoverable seems to be the requirement of normality" (Neri, 1990). After all, to have evolutionary and identifying movements there must be a fundamental stability, given by a sense of continuity in the relationship with others and in one's personal history (Tagliacozzo, 1990), just as, on the contrary, it is necessary to know that one has a support to which return to let oneself go.

These two modes are therefore necessary to each other, the fusional aspects of the adult psyche have long been considered especially in their pathological side, however it seems that this type of modality has a fundamental role in maintaining its own internal structure that is firm but yet flexible (Saraval, 2003). Within a conception that sees the psyche engaged in the primary objective of avoiding, or at least protecting itself from any kind of stimulus that interrupts the homeostatic quiet (Laplanche, Pontalis, 1967), one can imagine that any stimulation, even positive,

leads inevitably with it a request for economic expenditure to the detriment of the psyche. This is therefore in the perennial condition of dispersing energy, which it must then recharge, finding for a period that level of homeostatic quiet, no longer perfect but still sufficient and sufficiently stable, which allows one to reappropriate the energy needed to interact with the outside world.

It therefore seems that the possibility of "deconstructing" momentarily one's individuality is not necessarily in conflict with the structuring of an individualized and integrated psyche, it could rather be a necessary ingredient, as the pushes to individuation, to guarantee one's own cohesive and integrated Self, making sure to recover the necessary energy dispersed in everyday life. This type of process takes place every day, just think about the common need to find your own things, your loved ones and your places after a busy day. Getting home from work and relaxing on the couch, watching television, falling asleep, taking a bath or reading a book. But also the moment when the lights of the cinema are softly turned of, making us almost forget our own presence, to immerse ourselves completely in the film; the feeling of engulfment and melting in front of a majestic and enveloping natural landscape, a painting, a song or any other form of art.

These all seem to be moments in which the fusional mode, with its englobing, magmatic and disruptive mode, returns to be imperative in the psychic functioning allowing to forget for a moment of the external world, and then return more able to sustain its individuality, with all the dose of frustration that this entails. It is in these aspects, therefore, daily and numerous in the daily life, that the fusion mode appears in its positive and enriching aspect for the personality.

On an oniric level, the fusional mode shows its characteristics through images like deep water in which one dives, alone or in company; containing objects such as a car or an elevator; pregnancies and umbilical cords; the cosmic space, astronauts in their spaceships (Pallier, 1990) or that, remaining attached to them by means of a tube, come out into the sidereal void, perhaps getting irremediably lost; shapeless amalgams, such as a bunch of colors (Neri, 1990) and, finally, tunnels, catacombs or dungeons from which one is about to exit into a blinding light or in which it is instead blocked (Cimino, 2015). All these images represent the push to absolute calm, to a closed place in which to float, a mother's womb in short, to which one would like to return or that, instead, one fears.

Moving on to the more purely relational side, fusional mode expresses the need to create moments of direct connection with the other, which allows one to process part of one's psychic contents outside, not in an empty space but in the mental world of others. In fact, it seems that, as we must have experienced, during childhood, a period of total dissolution in another, under the all-encompassing and incessant need to find a container for our physical and mental experiences, so, throughout our life, it is necessary to be able to resort to a fusional mode which, coexisting with the others, allows "to live confidently the moment of abandonment with closed eyes" (Soavi, 1990). In fact, fusional mode makes it possible to extend the meshes of the Self, to

broaden the boundaries to include another, denying its independence and autonomy, it is, how Fonda says: "a gap, an opening in the boundaries between subjectivity and the outside" (Fonda, 2000).

The contents that this mode brings out are the oldest and most archaic of the mind, dating back to the first moments of life after birth and perhaps to the fetal period. These, remaining at a non-symbolized, fragmentary and essentially somatic level, re-emerge under this same form: it is therefore a matter of somatic sensations, moments of deep connection with what one sees / hears and also of the living recognition of one's own Self (Ogden, 1989).

In this case too, what has usually been studied in its problematic side, is now revealed in its positive, constructive and creative aspect. At a certain level, indeed, not re-elaborated and not-symbolized contents can be harbingers of a difficulty or a pathology, however, on another side, these allow a sense of deep connection with one's own individuality, with those fusional aspects of the Self that can provide new resources to be elaborated and with one's own bodily Self that allows a global and integrated vision of one's own Self, not only mental but somatic also.

To better explain the level of deep connection to which fusional leads, we can look at the works of Lydia Pallier and Cristiana Cimino who have described perfectly, in independent and particularly evocative works, psychotherapies in which many co-identifying phenomena occur in which the patient, without even knowing it, perfectly describes the analyst's house (Cimino, 2015), a particular event or, even, her transgenerational history (Pallier, 1990). These also happen on the part of the analyst, who sometimes, rather than listen to the story of a certain event, finds himself "experiencing it" with a considerable impact, as Cristiana Cimino (2015) perfectly describes: "the power of the scenery [...] is such as to solicit not only an image in my mind but a complex experience with a strong sensorial resonance, as if, for a moment - how long does such a moment last? - we were really there - here? - on the scene, together".

This aspect is presented here in its most extreme form and it is certainly the consequence of a psychological organization in which the fusional mode prevails. However, I believe that these phenomena show us the capacity of deep connection between two Selves, or even with one's own Self, present not only in a pathological situation but also in a well-structured mind.

These are moments of direct correspondence between unconscious, not mediated by the symbolic elaboration of the Ego (Fonda, 2000) and which allow the communication of contents that are not symbolized or represented in any way.

The communication of this type of relationship, therefore, is not much the verbal one as, rather, the less symbolized ones like the physical contact, the look, the gestures etc. (Pallier, 1990b). This type of expression allows a much more direct and less elaborate communication of the content, which remains in fact imprinted in the mind in an archaic way, as pre-representations or sensual perceptions (Tustin, 1981) rather than as an integrated and representable object. It can be postulated that this type of

"fusional" relationship is a component, to a greater or lesser extent, of any relationship one undertakes during one's life.

Each relationship basically has its own dose of non-verbal communication and it is through this, constantly alongside the verbal communication, that messages are sent and captured much more directly and intensely.

It seems to be like a more intimate speech that, not mentioned, is barely mentioned throughout the relationship. The fact that it is unconscious and not openly expressed does not mean that it is less important or pathological, indeed, this aspect can be considered the true link between two people, that part of the relationship that creates fusional areas, or areas of strong bond and correspondence. It is this component of the relationship that makes us feel that we have a deep connection and understanding, which then allows the maintenance of the bond and the subsequent symbolic and representable communication.

I think that noting the link between the experience of the first weeks of life and that of adulthood can further confirm the importance of childhood observation, not only because of the value it can have for the mother and the child observed but also for the formative function of the therapist, even when this will not directly work with childhood (Bick, 1984).

We have said that, through the fusional mode, the mechanisms that pervade the newborn remain functional even in the adult, although certainly less visible and mediated by the activation of different modalities.

Having observed them in their clearest form in the newborn can therefore help develop a greater sensitivity that will help to recognize this type of modality even when facing an adult. Within a discourse that believes that psychoanalytic theories and practices must find and relate to the more archaic parts of the Self, this seems to be a fundamental discourse and the key reason why one can even think of observing a newborn with the purpose of understanding then the adult.

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