

## **The primal scene, the analytically oriented group and the Oedipal configurations**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to highlight how the changes in social contexts have potentially modified the fantasies and the experiences related to the primal scene and to the oedipal configurations, shrinking the space available to imagination and to the processes of subjectivation, ensuing the risk of negative aftereffects both on the subject and on his approaches to relationships. The author maintains that the analytically oriented group can be the place where the recovery of imaginative and creative thinking is allowed, a circle capable of nourishing the subject and expanding his approaches to relationships, without falling into the mistakes of exchanging the part with the whole and without falling prey to standardizing prejudices.

The group, actually, leads the participants to revisit the essential stages of existence, to review their fantasies about sexuality, about the relations between generations and about transgenerational matters, along with all the complexity of current oedipal configurations. The chance of dealing with the deadly aspects that weave through the Oedipal tragedy, such as the *unsaid*, the search for a culprit and a scapegoat, deadly potentialities for any human group, makes the small group analytically oriented a valid model for a more extended social dimension as well.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, primal scene, oedipal configurations, small group, current society

During a walk with a dear friend, I was saying that I was writing on *the primal scene* and suddenly I stumbled and hurt my knee. The scene aroused the hilarity of us both and stimulated a playful interpretation of the *acting out*. My friend, who had worked in theaters for years, reminded me that obviously the word *scene* referred to theater and classical Greece. The original term *schenè*, σκηνη' indicated the curtain behind which the leading character retired to change the make-up and above all to change the mask, with an implicit veiling function, the function of concealing the figure of the "medium" between the real and the imaginary, personified by the actor. Hiding from public view, the actor established a principle of distance, of extraneousness.

Later, reflecting on what I had been told, I thought that while extraneousness and distance estranged the spectator and excluded him from viewing the actor, they on the other hand opened the door to imagination.

After the incident, which had highlighted a not completely peaceful relationship with the primal scene on my part, I asked Rugi to advise me on a work he considered particularly interesting and in-depth on the specific topic.

Surprisingly he did not point to a book by a psychoanalyst but instead mentioned a novel, *Keep Your Crown* by Yannick Haenel. At the end of the exciting and amazing reading, I gladly thanked my friend and colleague who allowed me to spend really special, engaging, and also incredibly illuminating hours on *the primal scene*.

While I was reading the novel at the seaside, I enjoyed the company of my grandchildren. Dado, a thirteen-year-old passionate reader, asked me curiously what the book was about. I replied that it was difficult to summarize because the author used a very particular narrative style, and to explain better I suggested that he read the page I had under my eyes. After reading very carefully, he told me that it was really special and well written, because the facts were reflections and the images were the facts. I found his synthesis really perfect to describe the author's style in a few words, but also, and this particularly struck me, to synthesize the primal scene (I kept this last thought to myself). Excluded from the reality of the facts, the children – the boy and the girl – start to fantasize, constructing hypotheses to represent images, in search of a meaning, in search of *the truth*.

I am not a regular reader of novels but *Keep your crown* is a book (to speak the language of the author) *mystically alveolar* (1) and I am grateful to Goriano that allowed me to delve into this story, a vital source of fantasies and of mystery, of images, of tragic squalor, of loss and salvation, of anguish and hope. This is the primary scene: the search for a truth in continuous evolution, which hides on the edge of a forest, with losers and winners who exchange parts, with the fear of discovering the truth and understanding that it does not exist but that the truth is *to become alive*, to recognize the life that flows within yourself with pain and desire, beyond the annihilation of fear that leads to omnipotent fantasies, where the choice is a vitalizing *crime* – because as Spinoza (1677) said *omnis determinatio est negatio* – which opens to enchanted freedom, where the enchantment is not omnipotent but it's the acceptance of the limit, of a piece of luminous and decund reality.

### **The primal scene**

Watching an embrace or fantasizing, starting from various clues, about sexuality between one's parents is not a process concluded once and for all, but, like the development of oedipal configurations, it is in progress and it's repeatedly, in different ways, re-proposed in the course of everyone's life. About this matter Neri writes: *The confrontation with the parents' sexuality is an experience of great importance in the process of development, it's dramatic and generates anxiety: since the child cannot clearly understand what is happening, he feels both excited and scared. Depending on the personal experiences, different emotions can prevail: fear for the mother's safety, because adult sexuality is interpreted as an act of human violence on women, or envy and jealousy to be excluded from a secret pleasure. The primal scene (...) is a process that gradually takes on meaning; vague impressions of early childhood are subsequently resignified in hindsight in the course of further experiences and thanks to the maturation of the mind and the expansion of*

*knowledge. (...) At an early age, the primal scene may not yet be experienced as something that happens in the parental couple, but as a monstrous mutation of the mother, which changes from a familiar figure to a "stranger". Melanie Klein also speaks of a "combined parental figure" to convey the impression of a disturbing tangle of father and mother (...) of no distinction.*

While the primal scene can be considered a traumatic event, it's important to remember that it is also an activator of thoughts, images and fantasies, always different, related not only to sexuality, but also to gestation, to birth, depending on the family and on the social group and also on the historical context. It is no coincidence that Ruggi and Lombardozi, for this issue of *Funzione Gamma*, invited the authors *to reflect on how our current society, centered on the internet and on social media, has modified the very concepts of the primal scene and the Oedipus, which next to their classical configurations, have probably taken on new and more elusive forms, and perhaps even a more pervasive relevance in the mass imaginary, rendering the figures of sexuality and violence even more widespread and confused in a disturbing and constant overturning between fantasy and reality, between individual and mimetic desire, between depth and surface, conscious and unconscious.*

I share with G. Mariotti (2019) the thought that in this historical moment in our society fundamentalism, the internet world and the changes in gender roles are more deeply connected than it may appear, because they share the dangerous potential for *reactive slantization of resentment and paranoid identity solidifications*. This is also highlighted by the use of words that appear no longer suitable for containing and transmitting a meaning but refer to concrete objects, rocks for stoning enemies.

*Claims thrown to the wind are resounding, words that without shame or modesty freely insult without any awareness of their weight and of the consequences they entail* (Mariotti *ibidem*).

I believe in the importance of sharing reflections on these matters, to provide a space for thought and meaning in a society that needs time to fit the human being and flexible listening containers.

An appropriate container model, respectful of the times, can be the small group analytically oriented, an elective place for the activation of the preconscious inscribed in intersubjectivity. We know that the small group can also stimulate the emergence of very archaic situations, relationships with partial objects, also as reactions to the recurrence of issues related to the primal scene, whose elaboration can be conditioned by a high number of variables, today more than ever. The difficulty in reflecting and symbolizing, which currently characterizes our age, and the not infrequent exposure at an extremely early age to pornographic images where sometimes, in fact, only the genital organs are visible, beyond any logic and any story whatsoever, can be severely traumatic. Unfortunately it happened to me more than once during sessions, that dismayed patients would tell me about their sons and daughters who had gone to classmates' homes (and I speak of primary school as well) and that unexpectedly,

entering a room, caught fathers in front of pornographic images and they also told me about older boys, friends or older brothers, who had shown their children images of sex, often disturbing when not specifically pornographic. The premature and unexpected vision of genital organs or "exciting" scenes can entail anxieties and distortions of reality with negative repercussions in the conception of the relationships between males and females that risk to be fantasized as woven with violence and guilt and go on to cause a distorted and even frightening vision of the relationship between parents and of sexuality in general.

This blocks free access to curiosity, fantasies, dreams, and saturates the imagination imprisoning it in tangible and disgusting aspects, with the possibility of serious repercussions on future erotic and loving relationships, on relationships within a couple in which unresolved aspects of internalized object relationships will inevitably be reflected as well.

In the small group analytically oriented, be it a children's, adolescents' or adults' group, fantasies and experiences related to parental sexuality are allowed to become talkable, thinkable, shared, discussed and even processed. The elaboration of the primal scene, which obviously can take place in different ways depending on the specific contexts, is necessary to start addressing the fundamental aspects of oedipal configurations, the depressive anxiety of exclusion, the difference between the sexes and the generations, the recognition of parents as a couple – not just a generative couple – the inevitability of the passing of time and therefore of death. All thanks to the crossing of paths that can be even painful but that mark the passage between archaic and narcissistic modes of thought and others gradually more mature.

I remember from my first group, in the early eighties, that Laura, a smart and pretty 22-year-old girl, had declared that, in her opinion, her parents had never had sex. Faced with a giggle from the group participants, of which Giovanna became a spokeswoman saying that at least one embrace must have occurred, since she was born, Laura smiled with difficulty and admitted that yes, that time they had to have made love, because they wanted a child, but after they achieved the goal, that was enough. Astonished and affectionately incredulous, the male and female participants tried to take her to a reality exam, reminding her of her happy relationship with her boyfriend. Laura blushed and said, annoyed, that she had never witnessed any kind of erotic gesture between her parents, just a kiss to say goodbye or welcome home, and that yes, maybe when they were young they would also have had sex some other time, perhaps in search of a second child, but now that they had both gone beyond their forties, they certainly hadn't made love for years and now, given the age, they would never do it again. Then looking straight into my eyes she asked me: is it not true that, after forty, that's enough?! At that time I still had a lot of years left to reach the infamous forty, but before I could answer the group in unison said with great amusement: are you crazy? Have you ever seen a movie? Have you ever read the novels, and above all have you ever looked around?

Laura reddened visibly and as I tried gently to bring her to reality, she burst into tears that left everyone feeling sorry and a little incredulous.

We were struck to find an unexpectedly desperate and lonely child before our eyes. Then the participants, in that and in the following sessions, casually and freely told and compared their fantasies, changed over time, about the sexuality of their parents, about their being lovers before being mom and dad, about the differences between sexes and generations and recalled memories of the primal scene, revisiting their own childhood experiences and fantasies, being able to compare and reread them through their adult experiences, making Laura – now welcomed and understood – a spokeswoman for ancient, but still present, needs for uniqueness and exclusivity. The intervention of the group mates, who in the course of several sessions discussed their experiences, not only of parental couples but also of lovers that remained such even after the birth of their children, allowed Laura to project herself into an adult perspective, able to generate but also to go on loving erotically the future father of her children, freeing herself from a potentially chastising chastity towards the man she loved, because of her omnipotent infantile fantasies, and to be able to identify herself also in her parents' aspects as lovers that for the first time she could see and recognize with emotion, and no longer with fear and anger, in their being still mutually erotic and courting.

Laura, climbing on the slide of time which has always inhabited the analytic scene, had turned back to when, as a child, having felt or fantasized an intimacy between her parents that excluded her, she had sought defence from pain and fear of abandonment, and transformed herself omnipotently in the sole purpose of that intimacy. Later I could say that she had reminded me of a friend of my mother from Abruzzo, who had told me that in her village, on the sheets of the wedding dowry, the women still embroidered this inscription: *I didn't do it for my pleasure but to give children to God.*

I was told that these phrases are no longer embroidered and that the sheets of the famous kit are now part of the stories of the past.

I discovered, however, that in Italy only in 1975 the new Family Law put an end to the obligation of the dowry on the part of the future bride, and that, up to more or less that time, in many Italian regions for every female daughter the embroidery of fabrics began when they were still small girls: this happened in all families, regardless of social background, which influenced only the number and richness of the fabrics. Of course when there were no washing machines the number of sheets had to be even greater... But many more important things have changed since then, even between the sheets. Similarly, even before the internet and the social networks, the oedipal configurations have changed with the increase of separations and the possibility of divorce, the legalization of the pill and the voluntary interruption of pregnancy, even if, as in everything that concerns humans, beyond what we know and rationally share, important passages between generations continue to take place at an unconscious level. The individual unconscious in fact does not belong to a single individual, but is

placed in the process of intergenerational transmission of which each person constitutes a ring as an heir and depends on, so that, beyond rational agreement to certain models, in moments of difficulty, tension or fear, archaic stereotypes that do not integrate with the presumed expectations suddenly re-emerge. So, despite the enormous changes on many levels that have occurred since the eighties, what happened to Laura could still happen.

Objectively more complex, however, have become the oedipal configurations that currently children may have to face, starting with the conditions of their conception.

### **The Oedipal configurations in the Internet era**

The passage "*From the alcove to the nest*" (1995), becoming a generating couple after being a couple of lovers, become three after being two, today may happen differently, as compared to the past. It's trivial but correct to remember that compared to the generations of grandparents, in the contemporary Western world children are not infrequently conceived at an age unthinkable in previous centuries, except for Sara and Santa Caterina, who became mothers in old age, but thanks to a miracle.

The emancipation from the female role, often flattened on being a wife and mother, has allowed Western women to access, even if in certain areas still with difficulty, all levels of the world of work; despite this, however, motherhood is still considered an integral part of female identity. Interesting on this subject is the discussion made by Mariotti (ibidem) about the myth of the *good mother*: sharp is her criticism of the so-called *maternal instinct*, which is mistakenly considered a *universal obligatory behavior*, while according to Badinter, quoted by Mariotti, it is a *pure sociocultural invention, an improper de-historicized generalization*. The working woman has inevitably involved man to change his role, allowing both genders to break out of stereotypes and to creatively enhance their specific uniqueness. But this does not happen in a simple and clear way: these transformations, though full of positive potential, generate a sense of precariousness and confusion both on a social and personal level, since they need the ability to go beyond century-old stereotypes and to look for new ways of being, once the alleged reassuring certainties have come to an end. Even with respect to these issues, the small analytically oriented group appears as the most adequate device to deal with the aforementioned problems, since the group process in its development allows us to face the conflicts and the fundamental stages for the passage from stereotyped roles to authentic relationships, between the feminine and the masculine as well, outside and inside ourselves. Going back to the issue of conception, however, even today there are unsought and undesired conceptions, and the interruption of pregnancy may not always be the only or the best possible solution. The child on the way will be expected, in the best of scenarios, with profound ambivalence, or even with annoyance, guilt, anger. And what happens, on the other side, to the couple and the children wanted at all costs, who have had to use assisted fertilization, where often the erotic act has been heavily colonized by medicalization? Sometimes resorting to the internet can be useful, the site

www.cercounbimbo.net is one of the most important and serious and has reached thousands of users who exchange information and experiences, finding support and solidarity.

Many of my patients, both men and women, happened to be people who had to resort to medical care to procreate. Even when the search for a pregnancy is finally successful, in both spouses a somewhat traumatic experience remains, an unspecified feeling of powerlessness, never shared in words, to which sometimes the reaction are unexpressed fantasies of omnipotence. Then the unborn child (sought and expected perhaps for years), invested with particular expectations, will have to be a little Jesus, no longer therefore the best of the couple, but better than the couple, to console them for the narcissistic wound, for a conception out of the erotic encounter.

As the pregnancy progresses, however, as in the case of a natural conception, in both spouses the anxieties of exclusion and abandonment may recur. Unresolved Oedipal problems often lead to a clear split between the role of lovers and that of parents, a split further exacerbated by situations in which the transition from one role to another has been medicalized and did not occur in a physiological manner.

Thus the omnipotent child who dwells within each of us and who, in childhood, prey to the anxiety of exclusion, wanted to deny the coupling of parents, as we have seen in the case of Laura, risks to finally achieve his triumph.

However, with respect to assisted fertilization an important distinction is required between different cases, when the semen and the ovule belong to the couple or when fertilization, whether for men or women, is heterologous. Even in these situations it is useful to resort to the internet, to read the stories of other couples' experiences, to access the photos of the possible donors and be able to choose people who for some reason are felt more similar.

Being able to tackle the problem within an individual or group analytical perspective can be very helpful. I do not deny that knowing of a successful conception thanks to an egg arrived by mail from another nation, even if it was really possible, is hardly grasped by the mind, it is not easy to elaborate and it appears like science fiction even to the analyst who, at least here in Italy, does not have many similar experiences to refer to. In America, where this practices have been established for a longer time, there is already a large number of cases, even if the experiences are different from person to person.

Before the birth of that little human being growing inside the mother's belly ,and that is the result of a shared choice within the couple, new and unthinkable questions are generated for our patients and, depending on our age, also for us analysts. When the infant becomes an adolescent or an adult, will I have to tell him that he was born thanks to the generous donation of an unknown woman or man? This question is in continuity with, but also very different from, the question about revealing or not his origin to an adopted child. This question builds an immediate bridge with the essence of oedipal configurations: the *unsaid*. A bridge between an ancient past and the future, between a son, Oedipus, unwanted and

presumed bearer of death, and a son passionately wanted, bearer of life and of a transgenerational future.

The *unsaid* builds a further bridge also with the analytically oriented group, where we know that, together with the constitution of the *scapegoat*, the *unsaid* is one of the most dangerous destructive potentialities of the group.

Let us then review, in the light of what we have "discovered", how the oedipal configurations present themselves in an analytically oriented group.

### **Oedipal configurations within an analytically oriented group.**

*The sharing-individuation dialectic, which characterizes the group process, and the appearance in the group of parental figures allow us to face the oedipal problems in all their complexity and actuality, from the origins of the myth: the original violence embedded in the sentence of Apollo, which declares that one must choose between the son and the parents, violence that leads to lack of recognition and to the deadly abandonment of the infant Oedipus (Corbella, 2014).*

I must stress that it is precisely the group work, perhaps of a homogeneous group formed by parents who have had to resort to medically assisted fertilization – and in particular an heterologous one – that could allow participants to find flexible answers with respect to their individual stories in their uniqueness, starting the chance to remember if they felt like wanted or unwanted children. The group could be formed by participants for whom the birth of the child allows access to parenthood, otherwise impeded by a set of circumstances, but not weighed down by punitive and deadly oracular predictions.

The long-awaited and desired son, however, remains ambivalently the representative of a "dangerous" new, of that otherness with which every human being will have to confront, crucially, for the constitution of his own identity. We know that the fantasies of parents and of the environment with regard to the infant will influence their feelings and relationships, demonstrating since the conception the strong presence of the conditioning of the social context, primarily of the family and of the culture in which it is embedded. Then the social context will be more influential than the genetic inheritance – could ask the parents who became such thanks to a heterologous fertilization? The expectations and fantasies of the primary group will stimulate in the child and then in the adult fantasies towards the family and the environment in a reciprocal embracing. Here lies the universality and actuality of the myth in all its transgenerational dimensions. But a child born of a heterologous conception does not already imply a particular grateful openness to the other, to the unknown, isn't it already an opening to the acceptance of the different, fundamental – not just theoretically but in this case factual – for the existence of the child? Could this not also facilitate the acceptance of the Other at a social level?

What happens in the group regarding the *third*? The potential group, the "nascent" group experienced as a monolithic whole, as an element of rupture in the narcissistically idealized therapist-patient couple, may be for the future participants

precisely the representative of the *third*, of the new, symbolically the unwanted *third*, the Oedipus to be eliminated. Oedipus, the third, will also be the “new” patient who enters for the first time in a group that would like to crystallize the balance already achieved. Thus in the group old fantasies of not having been desired children can be reactivated. As much as the participants may have had "sufficiently" good parents, in everyone's life there have inevitably been several occasions for misunderstandings and conflicts in which they have felt unrecognized and not accepted. But parents who want a child at all costs, how will they face their fantasies of having been unwanted children? Perhaps there will be an increase in ambivalence, a bit of envy? Express it in words, being able to tell it, sharing it with the group, would certainly be important for these "particular" parents.

Homogeneous groups, with respect to the theme of assisted procreation, could also share failures, microtraumas, fears and ambivalences, rendering them speakable and addressable. The *nocebo* effect (intended as the opposite of *placebo*) of excessive passivating medicalization, which violates the intimacy of the couple, and the invasive aspect of too many prenatal visits, can be explained. The formation of homogeneous groups of couples who are trying to wait for a child in an assisted way would be advisable, so as to help them prepare both for the eventual failure and for the success of their project. Let the limits have an identifying function, instead of creating guilt. Working with these couples will allow us to further highlight those problems that, in a less explicit way, are present in every couple, when facing the hypothesis and then the project of becoming parents. The group could be that protected environment in which men and women will be stimulated and supported to communicate among themselves, not to be ashamed of their shame about their difficulties, to explore and to face together their anxieties and their expectations, the differences and the continuity between women and men, valuing and not denying gender diversity. In particular, it will be possible to understand that in males the "shame" resulting from passivation and from that which can be defined as *forced masturbation* has taken on destructive connotations towards both the subject himself and the bond with the partner. Speaking together of humiliating but shared experiences will allow a gradual integration and the transition from a *toxic* destructive shame to what Kilborne calls *humanizing* shame. The author writes:

*«The first is associated with a sense of constriction, anger, withdrawal (...) The humanizing shame, on the other hand, increases flexibility and humility in responding to anxiety and to feelings of helplessness and limitation, sharpens the attention to the feelings of others (...) goes hand in hand with acceptance»* (Kilborne 2007).

The group through sharing, exchange and the function of mirroring will stimulate the transition to humanizing shame. It will be possible to experience directly that creativity, like motherhood and fatherhood, are prerogatives of the human being that go well beyond the fact of procreating.

These group functions are specific to all the small analytically oriented groups and not only to homogeneous ones. Returning to the Oedipal configurations, I need to

underline the specificity of the group within which it will be possible for each participant to "play" in the first person and to see different roles being played by the other members, by the therapist, or by the group as a whole: that of son or daughter, of brother and sister, of father, mother and third, in every possible articulation and modulation. Each participant will therefore have the chance, at different times, to identify with both the infant and the child at the dawning of the Freudian Oedipal era – between three and five years old – when, having abandoned the mother as a fundamental source of security, he will start to refer more and more to the father, and also to other people of the outside world, in conjunction with the access into kindergarten and into the social dimension of a group. All this will allow him a first "taste" of the complexity of life and will also give him the opportunity to face for the first time the real oedipal conflict (the rivalry with the parent of the same sex). It's not a coincidence that precisely at this time the child begins to ask questions about his origins, about existence, about life and death, about roles, about his future: "And where was I? Why wasn't I there? And who is he? What does he do? Who are his dad and mom? Who are the parents of the grandparents? What were they doing? And I ... what will I do when I grow up?"

One evening (1999), at a business meeting with Lopez, I remember I told him that as a child, walking with my mom, I asked her if I could marry my father, when I grew up, and that she had answered "But if you marry Dad, what will I do? "The mother!" was my answer.

Lopez had so commented on my memory: *In my opinion, Dr. Corbella, that girl had really solved the oedipal conflictual problems: dear mom, I will marry dad and you will remain the mother! If we understand these words in their symbolic meaning, not only in a sterile psychoanalytical symbolic meaning, but in a libidinal-emotional meaning, that's what matters in symbolism, because according to my conception the symbol is transporter of the essential, libidinal-emotional meanings, of the symbolized objects, and not as self-sufficient because of a narcissistic pride, then everything becomes clear, transparent: the girl, once she becomes an adult, will love a man who has been able to gather and concentrate on himself all the meanings of gender represented by the father, by the father model, and will fully identify herself as a woman with the mother model where both parents have been raised to such exponents of gender, that is, Persons.*

Thinking back to my memory today, I well understand how easier it is for a child who does not want to lose the love of both parents, to "adequately" face the occurrence of oedipal issues, and how it is more complex to face them when they recur in adolescence, although this is precisely the phase of life in which, in an ambivalent way, we would like to emancipate ourselves from the parental couple in order to develop our own uniqueness, our own identity, being able to authorize ourselves, at best, to keep in mind the possibility of a *creative couple*, a possibility that first of all *represents a stage in psychic development, in which it is possible to observe different thoughts and feelings which, united in one's mind, lead to the*

*development of something different even outside oneself* (M. Morgan, 2007). This will allow us to conceive the couple as a creative container, but this is only possible if a sufficiently good, affectionate and vital relationship has been observed between the parents. It is a long process that does not always reach the goal.

It is no coincidence that the Oedipal conflicts arise in the group in a particularly intense manner when the adolescent phase is relived. Unresolved issues are reactivated, sometimes even transgenerational issues, related to facing *only* the sexuality of fathers and mothers, which in the contemporary world does not necessarily mean facing the sexuality of the parental couple. In our society, characterized by the presence of divorced couples and extended families, even the Oedipal issues take on new configurations. In particular when a separation occurs between the parents, despite the feelings of pain and loss, the boy and the girl can also experience a feeling of triumph and at the same time of guilt, going to occupy the place of the father or mother in the *big double bed*. I know this happens more often and for longer than would be desirable. Often the son or daughter, especially if they are small, are welcomed, when not invited, into the *big double bed* by the "abandoned" parent. This slows down or even prevents the development of mindset enhancing the separateness and the possibility of evolutionary movements of profound sharing but also of healthy individuation, to which instead the group work prepares. In my childhood memory, which I mentioned before, it is evident that the ability to distinguish different aspects within the same person can begin to help differentiating roles and therefore stimulating a process of symbolization and identification and to give confidence and hope for a project that opens up towards the future. Conversely, when the different aspects of the rival parent are split up and projected onto actual external people, such as the mother's lover or second husband or the father's lover or second wife, there's the risk of blocking the process of symbolization and of re-enacting the area of impotence-omnipotence-guilt, at times attributed to the subject, sometimes to the parent engaged in a new love affair, or more often to *that woman* (to remain in a non-scurrilous language), more rarely to the man with whom the mother has created a new couple. All this can lead to a reading of the events that devitalizes hope, leaving room for mistrust, distrust and sometimes even despair. Desperation that hypothesizes a future that not only does not keep its promises but rather fills the subject with anguish and disappointment. However, when the father or mother or both are trying to create a new love relationship, there are also positive potentials. The evolution of events depends very much on the relationship that the parents had already built with their children before the separation. The awareness of the risks and the empathy for the difficulties and the pain that the children have to face can allow careful parents to transform the difficulties into advantages. The parent who does not project or take all the blame, but vice versa assumes his realistic part of responsibility, can offer his children a good model of identification and can also seize the opportunity to repair previous mistakes thanks to the new relationship. In fact, if the child is given adequate and empathetic acceptance

even in the new family unit, it becomes possible to widen the ways of seeing reality in its sometimes painful but sometimes joyous and creative complexity and, in the most fortunate situations, also to provide him with a model of adult and personal love that had either lacked or failed within the parental couple.

Given that here, obviously, I do not intend to approach the Oedipal tragedy by proposing a new interpretation, but I would like to highlight those aspects on which my experience of individual and group analytical work led me to reflect, I want to emphasize that what makes Oedipus's destiny so tragic, right from the origin, is the total lack of love in the relationship between Laius and Jocasta, the inability to access the symbolic level, to experience death as a symbol of transformation and incest as the desire for an exclusive relationship with the mother, and therefore the inability of the couple to wait and welcome the child, even under the transformative aspect towards the acquired securities, and to love him as a distinct person.

The story of Oedipus becomes a tragedy because the negative situations potentially present in every relationship are exaggerated and crystallized without any symbolic contextualization. The tragedy of Oedipus is the loss of humans' symbolic potential. Rejecting the separating possibility of thought, Oedipus realizes what Segal defines as a symbolic equation, which characterizes a specific way of thinking in which everything is desymbolized and reduced to its actual, biological supports. *Oedipus, rendered impotent by extreme events, will react with fantasies of omnipotence and will take all the blame blinding himself, unable to see his own limited responsibilities, scapegoat for the faults of others. Let's look at the facts: he freed Thebes from both a bully, unfair, pedophile and infanticide king, and from the Sphinx and he accepted the prizes destined for the winner of the monster, which also included the marriage with the queen: Jocasta. He made her the happy mother of three children and perhaps also loved her (since, until the end, she tried to defend him from the truth so as not to lose again, and this time in the same person, son and husband). With the courage to go and see the truth, he again saved his city from the plague. However, he did not have the ability to recognize what the truth was and thus he allied himself with the aggressor, linking himself with a dull "rationality", to concrete facts, and unable to access the symbolic aspects, he lost sight of his own "limited" liability and assumed all the blame. He could revisit the laws and look at the fault in a dimension extended to all temporality and not nailed to a past in which our unborn hero had already been predestined guilty of parricide and incest.*

*Even in psychoanalytic work, both individual and in groups, we know how difficult it is to lead the patient to deal with limits, to tolerate complexity and relativity, to distinguish between the variables that can be controlled and those with respect to which he is powerless.*

*Thus, in this case too, Oedipus highlights a universal way of reacting to the feelings of powerlessness that such an overwhelming and cogent destiny inevitably raises, and assumes all the guilt, thus returning to the archaic area of omnipotence, an area that*

*is always potentially seductive and therefore never completely abandoned (Corbella-ibidem page 97).*

In the Oedipal tragedy there is also a generational clash which, perhaps until the new generations, had a universal meaning, but which today, in the Western world, seems in part to have changed. The difference between generations has been "blurred". Parents rival their children on an equal footing and, envious of their youth, do everything to try not to grow old, to appear as the elder brothers of their children. We live in an age where old age is viewed with shame, almost a symptom of inadequacy. Along with this we happen to witness no longer the fear of the child losing the love of the parents but the fear of the parents to lose the love of their children. Recently a patient told me that in a school meeting she had told parents that it was necessary not to allow 15-year-old children to go out every night and come home after midnight, but to limit this possibility to Saturdays. And with astonishment she was told by a mother, a spokeswoman for a shared thought: "what if the boys don't like us anymore?"

It seems that today parents are the ones who want to avoid conflict. In this regard, I consider it useful to report the reflections of N.Fina (2019) on contemporary parenting. *The value and cultural drift that we are witnessing today has inevitably involved parental roles and functions, which are mainly compromised by the need for narcissistic nourishment and reassurance of the parents themselves. They undergo a reversal of roles and meaning, determined by their own need to be "the ideal object of love" of the son, the one who embodies perfection in the relationship (...) It is a relational dynamic, a "bad education" that involves the negation of differences, be they generational, be they connected to the development of one's individuality as a separate and different subject (...). Much of the physiognomy of social culture reflects and reinforces these private modes of relationship between subjects, with a disturbing similarity. All this contributes to disqualifying the subject, placing him in a vulnerable emotional condition and in a perception of himself as a subject crushed by an almost absolute inability to self-regulation.*

Conversely, in group work, when the adolescent phase is re-enacted, there is always a patient who acts as a spokesman for the therapist about a conflict or a rivalry, which in the family of origin had never been able to be expressed due to the absence of an adequate interlocutor who knew how to accept the challenge and be present when necessary, and also how to withdraw in good order, should he consider a free exchange of opinions among peers more useful. The therapist, on the other hand, involved in a functional way in the relationship with the patients, should be able to take on the role that the group and its members need from time to time. In two occasions, however, I had to face a great deal of trouble dealing with a violent attack from two patients, once a man and once a woman, both colleagues and specialists in schools who also included group analysis among the subjects taught. They risked turning the Oedipal conflict into a dangerous confrontation, to the point of causing the possible collapse of the group. Obviously the rivalry towards me, on a

professional level as well, had aggravated the intensity of the conflict. It would be too long to re-propose the narration in this text and I refer to *Storie e luoghi del gruppo* (pp. 167-170, 241-246) and *Liberi legami* (p. 99-104).

Having passed successfully through these experiences, fortunately, allowed the group to feel stronger and cohesive and allowed me to understand how the group is the elective setting to deal with Oedipal configurations in all their laborious complexity. As I have reiterated several times in my writings, in the small analytically oriented group each participant, present from the outset in his psycho-physical entirety, can revisit all the possible Oedipal configurations with a particular richness and articulation, thanks to the actual presence of several people. Each member, regardless of his own history, experiences, in some cases for the first time, a belonging in which he feels like a wanted child, welcomed and valued in his personal being within a common and shared history. The tolerance and acceptance of the new is precisely the attitude that reigned in the court of Polibo and Peribea, where Oedipus was welcomed not as a danger but as a desired child whose absence was felt.

In the tragedy, Oedipus himself tells that, during a banquet, a drunken guest had reproached him for not being his father's son. Having left for Delphi to question Apollo about his origins, he had not received an answer but was threatened with a terrible fate: he would become the husband of his mother and murderer of his father. He therefore decided to leave the safe place in search of his own truth.

Thus the patients in the group, after having been able to experience movements of fusion and individuation that have begun to structure or re-structure their sense of identity, can face the search for their "truth", which in group work will take place not in the obsessive search of cause-effect relations to resolve the "enigma of man", but rather in the availability to make new experiences, to broaden their point of view and be free from compulsion and able to make responsible plans, as far as possible, for their existence.

Depending on the situation, the participants can alternate in representing both, in certain moments in a sterile and repetitive way and in others in an original, innovative and prospective way, the different characters of the human and universal myth of Oedipus, thus allowing the passage from tragedy to vital nourishment, giving presence and voice also to Ulysses and Telemachus. I remember that the relationship between Ulysses and Telemachus was considered by Kohut (1989), a good model of resolution of the intergenerational conflict. The author believes that the semicircle traced by Ulysses with the plow is proof that authentic love and respect for the son is possible and that the conflict between generations is not the only option. I therefore believe that every parent can be, in alternate moments, part Ulysses and part Laius and even himself, with all the possible modulations that make every human being a unique individual; so that every son will find himself to be part Telemachus and part Oedipus and in the end himself, in his own unrepeatable uniqueness.

The group gives the opportunity to meet and represent all the characters of the current Oedipal configurations. This recognition in different aspects in a personal way allows

everyone to become aware that parents and sons must know how to accept each other in their mutual complexity and unknowability, without evading conflicts and tensions but also knowing how to go beyond them.

It has been very interesting for me to have been able to experiment and therefore understand that the deadly aspects underlying the Oedipal tragedy, namely the *unsaïd* and the constitution of a *scapegoat*, correspond precisely to the destructive potentialities that characterize not only the group setting but every human groups. Tackling and resolving these issues makes the small group psychoanalytic guided an important reference model.

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## **Notes**

1) This term in the novel is recalled by the author from a phrase by Melville in *Moby Dick*, that regarding the sperm whale speaks of the *mystically alveolar inside of its head*. To be sure, I searched in the vocabulary for the meaning of *alveolar*: *with alveoli | dome, cellular roof, (arch.) Consisting of several ring planes of decreasing diameter upwards, each with a series of open niches outwards*. Beautiful metaphor to indicate the communication between the internal and external world.

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