

The encounter with the other in the couple relationship: the area of mutuality

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Translated from Italian by Daniela Molino.

“The couple is the most valuable – and most dangerous – intersubjective experience to open, sustain or block this recognition and subjectivation process” (Kaës, 2007)

Abstract

The thesis we have followed in this paper intends to highlight the features of the “couple” as one of the privileged places from which to look at the modes the partners use, following frequent unconscious regulation processes, to give rise to a third dimension, a field, their very relation that in its being a shared object at the border between the self and the other represents a third regulation pole that can be acknowledged as their own by both members and can give back to them a sense of internal consistency.

Key Words: group, unconscious, object relation, intersubjectivity, couple relationship

1. Introduction

The relationship existing between the external and the internal world is one of the most debated questions in psychoanalysis and different theoretical models have provided different answers in different periods starting from Freud who, in defining the factors that determine the construction of personality or the establishment of a neurosis, initially stressed the traumatic factors and later focused on the role of fantasy (Fonagy, 2005; Zavattini, 1999).

In the early 1900s, Ferenczi wrote that the neurotic looks for a solution by accepting what he can from the external world into his Ego and making it the object of his unconscious fantasies (Ferenczi, 1909) and Freud (1910-1917) with his successive definitions of the mechanisms of *introjection*, *projection* and *identification* well represented the effort of the psychoanalytical model to define and articulate the link between subject (internal organization) and reality (external world).

From the beginning of psychoanalytical history the need was felt for an explanation of the mechanisms through which the individual psychic organization manages the relation between *inside* and *outside*. The first conceptualizations suggested by the various models, however, had in common their focusing exclusively on the study of the individual mind and the modes through which this mind changes in order to cope with external reality.

In the Freudian paradigm the Ego-non Ego antithesis, i.e. the subject-object antithesis, rapidly reaches the attention of the person, who learns that, while he can silence the external stimuli by muscle action, he cannot defend himself from the drive stimuli (Freud, 1915). Through a series of strategies the mind eliminates unpleasurable contents from consciousness and leaves the Ego free from conflicts that are still present, but hidden. At the same time, what has not been well understood, always returns (Freud, 1909) and the individual is unconsciously driven to re-propose the traumas of the past in the effort of eliminating them (see Figure 1).

In other words, traumatic experiences fixated in the Unconscious are constantly *replicated*, in a more or less covert way, and the scenario of the “current” world becomes only the pretext for enacting the link with the primary objects. Based on these assumptions, with the introduction of drive theory, the role of the interpersonal context in the Freudian model gives way to the drive influencing the profile that the future object relations will assume.

In other words, as Greenberg and Mitchell neatly evidenced in their well-known essay, the object is “created” by the individual, based on his experience of drive satisfaction or frustration. There are no such things as an intrinsic object or a preordained link with the human environment (Greenberg, Mitchell, 1983).

2. From the Self to the Other: the evolution of the concept of projective identification

The contributions of the British School, while maintaining the classical view focused on the mechanisms through which the external world is *filtered*, further defined the modes through which it is possible to “treat” it. The external world in fact, would be managed not only by *avoiding* it, but also through other mechanisms that have the final aim of guaranteeing to the subject the possibility of controlling events. In general terms, we can say that, despite their great individual divergences, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Fairbairn and Winnicott all stressed the “horizontal” strategy of externalization as a defensive mode alternative to the classical “vertical” model of repression.

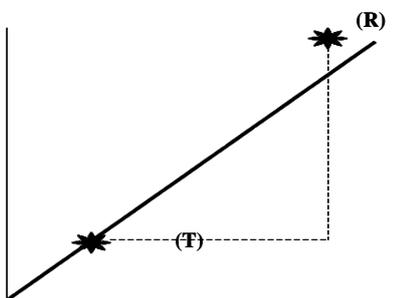
Specifically, in the Kleinian model, through *projective identification* it would be possible to *externalize* one's internal reality and change the other's reality too (Klein, 1946). Melanie Klein's contribution allowed to widen the scenario and to pass from the Freudian image of a subject committed to eluding external reality, because absorbed by internal conflicts, to a subject that tries to control this reality by *relating* to it.

In this model, however, the focus remains on the contents of the individual mind, even if the fantasmatic aspects characterizing it and in particular the relation to the object are considered as an element of mental representation. The object thus relates to the subject and mental life is <<[...] a world of internal forms intensely cathected>> (Petrelli, 2007) where aggressive drives can be transformed and give rise to the wish for repairing what has been damaged. In this sense, as a first step, we could say that the relation to the other is considered here as the *place* of the Unconscious where one tries to *resolve* one's *individual* internal issues, even if attention is not yet paid to the relation as such.

These models, however, provide a “continuistic” view of the developmental process: what has not been solved in one's personal history (T) is passed to the actual relation (R) so it can be repaired (Klein, 1935), as illustrated in Figure 1.

Unlike the classical mechanism of projection suggested by Freud, where the projected aspects are seen as coming from the object, not from the self, in projective identification the externalization of parts of the self, accompanied by the effort at manipulating the object in order to control unwanted aspects, leads the subject not to disregard totally what is projected. Often the subject causes in others the same feelings that he earlier erroneously attributed to others (DSM-IV-TR, 2000).

Figure 1. The “continuistic” model (T = trauma, R = reparation)



The model suggested by Klein is strongly anchored to the Freudian view focused on the individual mind where, despite the major role of object relations, the objects to which Klein refers can exist *independent* of perceptions. The *internal world* she theorized is inhabited by pre-existing contents – innate fantasies – whose activity is guided by the life and death principles. In other words, for Klein fantasies prevail on external reality and shape it, while actual object relations in their existing *confirm* or

disconfirm pre-existing experiences, so that the self and the objects are structured based on continuous projection and internalization processes.

Post-Kleinian authors, in particular those called the Londoners, such as Joseph, Spillius, Steiner, Britton, put a greater emphasis on the role of the object in projective identification, i.e. on the feelings evoked in the other by the projection and on the quality of his reaction. According to Spillius (1992), a series of feelings related to projection would be *evoked* in the object. This more *relational* view allows to think that projective identification, in its *evocative* or *empathic* meaning, has the function of *letting* the other (the object) *experience* feelings and thoughts that are related with the object acting the projection, as Rosenfeld (1987) had already stressed. The projection could then be considered a form of *communication* and not merely a defence mechanism.

A greater emphasis on the relation highlights a *possible mutuality* between subject and object, where the individual mind starts to assume less value in favour of the “*relation with*” the object. In other words, the search for the object takes up a founding role and constitutes a *fil rouge between inside and outside*. In this view also the use that the other (object, mother, therapist) makes of the projection becomes crucial.

Bion’s contributions (1959) concerning the possibility that the object receiving the projection is not ‘indifferent’ and ‘impersonal’, but accepts it and allows some form of “metabolization”, favoured the reaching of a more articulate definition of the subject-object relation, introducing a principle of *circularity*: the idea that the subject reintroduces what he previously “externalized”. This would create a circularity, made possible by the metabolization of anxious contents, which in turn would allow the introjection of more “manageable” emotions.

With the illustration of this relation between container and content, Bion defines a first *form of relationship* where the undigested and anxious contents – the beta elements – made up of sensory impressions of emotional experiences that take place in the subject when he gets in contact with *external and internal* reality, are “entrusted” to the alpha function that both in dream and in waking time transforms sensory impressions related to an emotional experience into alpha elements, that, while proliferating, condense and form a contact barrier, that like an osmotic membrane, regulates the interaction of conscious and Unconscious and favours the delimitation of internal and external (Bion, 1962).

In this model individual growth is given by the capacity of thinking *about* and learning *from* experience in the sense that in the individual mind there are *proto-thoughts that through the alpha function* allow to build representations of the *internal and external* reality. If this restitution of the alpha function, made by the mother, does

not take place, a special kind of event happens, so that the world is inhabited only by beta elements and loses the ability to be represented.

Summarizing, the Kleinian paradigm – and most of all its developments – while remaining basically focused on the mechanisms through which the individual mind *filters* the external world (eluding or controlling it), opened the way to later conceptualizations aimed at defining the modes for relating with the external world. The later contributions to the concept of projective identification, in fact, placed more emphasis on the role of the object than the one attributed to it by the Freudian model, where it basically represented the aim of the drive, exactly because in the model of projective identification the possibility for self reparation was entrusted to the *responsiveness* or *compliance* of the other.

In a sense, in our opinion, albeit not in the sense of the Winnicottian paradigm (Winnicott, 1965), we could say that there is a unity of observation, which is *implicitly* dyadic, an aspect that will be widely discussed in the clinical practice with couples in the English, American and Argentinean schools.

In particular, the Bionian stance, especially the container-content model, contributed to focus attention on the outside and on a possible circularity between *inside* and *outside*.

The recognition of the role of the Other in the establishment of the individual psychic organization is an issue that has been widely discussed in the various contributions to the psychoanalytical model and further deepened in the concept of *field* introduced in psychoanalysis in the early 1960s by the Barangers (Baranger, Baranger, 1961).

In this conceptualization projective identification acts as a basic mechanism for the establishment of a *field*, the place where the (patient-therapist) couple's projective identifications meet and structure the mental functioning of both members. The place that in its organization imparts motions that did not exist up to that moment to affective links (Neri, 2007). By introducing the concept of bipersonal unconscious fantasy the Barangers focus on a *third dimension*, highlighting the need for seeing the psychoanalytical situation as a dynamic process engaging both partners in the relation. In their meeting they determine the field in which they are also included. Among the elements structuring this field, the authors focus on the role of bipersonal unconscious fantasies, the only ones that can be known by the therapist, that take place in a mutual interplay of projective identifications and represent the latent structure of the field. Their analysis is the focus of analytical work.

In this sense, <<[...] *the bipersonal field cannot ... be considered the sum of the two internal situations. Since it is something created between the two partners in the union they form... the bipersonal field is something completely different from what*

each partner is when separate from the other>> (Neri, 1993). It is a place between subject and object and includes both.

3. Co-regulation

In recent years the influence of *infant research on psychoanalytical practice increased* (Sameroff, Emde, 1989; Thompson, 1994; Tronick, 1989, Stern, 2005) and contributed to shifting the theoretical focus to a subjective organization no longer seen as the expression of individual competence but as a quality of a system made up of mother and infant.

In this sense, the motivational pull becomes the *ability or inability in attuning*, or its failure. The object of attention is shifted to the relation as significant matrix that gives meaning to exchanges. In other words, from the developmental process of the internal world attention is shifted to the interpersonal processes at the basis of individual growth in order to build a model where the infant's development cannot be separated from its relation with the adult and from the internal representations of this relationship: *the mind grows influenced by another mind and influencing it in turn*.

In this perspective the theory of attachment (1) can be justly considered one of the theories that most contributed to focus attention on interpersonal functions rather than on the study of the individual mind (Zavattini, 2007). One of the major objectives of the attachment relation, that in the neonatal period gives rise to the mother-infant dyad, is the regulation of the infant's emotional states.

Starting from the assumption that it is the parents-infant system that organizes the experiences of internal states during infancy, many authors in the 1980s (Stern, 1985; Lichtenberg, 1989) described how recurring models of the intersubjective transaction within the developmental system are determined in the establishment of unchanging principles that unconsciously organize the infant's later experiences (Stolorow et al, 1994).

Stern (1995) studied the mental forms through which infants can represent the subjective experience of *relating with*. He states that the primary object of representation is interaction. Infantile mental life would be based on basic units, short events that contain a single but consistent segment of experience (discrete intersubjective experiences).

Following this process Generalized Interactive Representations (GIR) are established as well as schemes of *being with*: the difference between these two concepts is due to the fact that the scheme of being with is conceptualized from a view subjectively

assumed by the infant in interaction, while GIRs are identified mainly from the purview of an adult observing the interaction from outside (Stern, 1995).

Beebe and Lachmann (2002), on the basis of contributions from infant research, stress how each individual is provided from birth with a complex capacity for pre-symbolic representation based on interaction models structured by the constant characteristics of infant-environment interactions. By means of these mental models the individual can create expectations on events and environmental responses. The authors stress the mutual influence between child and caregiver. Interaction models are considered as features of the (mother-infant) system organized both on the *self-regulation* of its members and on its *hetero-regulation*, mutual processes that cooperate and influence each other.

The Freudian insight of the presence of a non-conscious area of mental functioning and the intrapsychic processes postulated by various psychoanalytical theories received a further boost by the discoveries of neurosciences that not only confirmed the existence of this area but also contributed to the understanding of some of the neurological mechanisms involved.

The discovery of mirror neurons – activated during actions aimed at an objective and when the same actions are observed in others (Rizzolatti et al, 1996; Gallese et al, 1996) – illustrates in fact the <<[...] innate and pre-programmed ability to internalize, incorporate, assimilate, imitate etc. the state of another, and the mirror neurons represent the basis for this ability. But for reaching its full expression this predisposition requires as complement an adequate behaviour in the caregiver mirroring it, interacting with it in a consistent and foreseeable way>> (Gallese, Migone, Eagle, 2006).

The adequacy of the caregiver's functioning, already stressed in different and non-comparable models in the theoretical contributions of various authors: alpha function (Bion, 1963), safe basis (Bowlby, 1988), affect attunement (Stern, 1985), capacity for mentalization (Fonagy et al, 2002), is thus confirmed by the neurocognitive models: <<All these conceptualizations, quite different from one another and coming from different theoretical backgrounds, stress the importance of the (external or internally represented) object in mirroring the self as a basic mode for restructuring the internal world>> (Gallese, Migone, Eagle, 2006).

This process would constitute a sort of biosocial feedback (Gergely, Watson, 1996) or a mechanism that allows the infant to *adjust* its emotions by monitoring the reactions of the caregiver, who in turn, mirrors them. In the infant-adult relationship there would then be a mutuality in regulatory systems entailing the activation of a *continuous scanning of one's own and the other's mind*.

At the beginning the infant would expect that its internal world and that of others correspond to external reality (psychic equivalence mode) and only later would it start to distinguish external reality from internal experience (pretending mode). In normal development the infant integrates these two modes arriving to the stage of mentalization or reflective mode, where mental states can be thought as representations. Internal and external reality can then be seen as linked and at the same time it is accepted that they differ in important aspects and must no longer be considered equal to or split from one another (Fonagy, Target, 2001).

This line is followed also by Peter Fonagy's more recent conceptualizations (Fonagy, 2001, 2006; Allen, Fonagy, 2006; Mayes, Fonagy, Target, 2007) on the role of interpersonal experience as a basis for the individual's ability to mentalize, i.e. to understand interpersonal behaviour in terms of mental states. This ability is not seen only as a cognitive competence, but as strictly related to the ability to modulate one's emotional states with others (affective regulation). As pointed out in a recent essay, the external world is not an independently existing given that the infant discovers, but an acquisition the infant reaches using the minds of others as teachers (Fonagy, Target, 2007).

The failure of this process could be translated into a difficulty in relating *internal reality* with *external reality*, or in completing the process of integration of conscious and Unconscious that gives rise to the continuity of experience. The extreme effort at defence from experiences too painful to be mentalized can be made by the subject through the *dissociative mechanism* which determines a discontinuity in subjective experience. The experience that generated the incompatible emotion or perception is in fact dissociated and remains present as a raw given that cannot be cognitively elaborated within the representation of the self with the other. It cannot be *symbolically* processed (2).

Fonagy attributes to this failure the development of an "alien self", i.e. an erroneous internalization of the object's mental state as a core part of itself (Fonagy et al, 2002). Instead of a primitive core of the self there would be an alien self that must be constantly externalized in order for the subject to recover a sense of integrity. The consequence of an inadequate parental mirroring would thus imply the development of a "foreign self" which would lead to the constant need for using projective identification mechanisms in all intimate relations in order to externalize this "foreign self".

It should also be added that the ability and quality at the basis of the "reflective function" are considered by Fonagy (Fonagy et al, 2002; Fonagy 2003) as part of a single interpersonal interpretative mechanism (IIM) that could have a neuro-anatomical basis. He thinks in fact that the attainment of the ability to represent one's own and the other's mental states is not only a component of the attachment

behaviours indicated by Bowlby but also a higher developmental target that allows the infant and later the *adult* to interpret the experience of the self and of significant others in terms of a cluster of stable and generalized attributions: as wishes, emotions, intentions and beliefs taken from invariant and recurrent models in the history of earlier interactions.

In other words, the security, insecurity or disorganization of attachment are important not only because they are behavioural models recurring from one generation to the following, but because they convey interpersonal interpretative mechanisms (IIM), i.e. relational tools that can be *efficient*, *little efficient* or *inefficient* (Fonagy, 2005).

The conceptual innovation of these ideas does not reside in the fact that IIMs contain representations of experiences or innate forms of relation, but in the fact that they represent *mechanisms more or less capable of providing adequate elaborations of new experiences* (3). These dynamics, in fact, is only in part determined by the partners' traits because it also depends on the intersubjective field established *during* the relation (Zavattini, 2006).

The reflective function has a fundamental role in the capacity to have a *representational independence* and a complex enough idea of the *relationality of the relation*, and it is *mindfulness* (4) that plays a determining role on the ability to put together interiority with a fully and harmoniously perceived sociality in the here and now.

Mentalization is thus essentially *relational* and includes the experience of the other in addition to the experience of oneself. The time frame of mentalization is wider as mentalization calls for the past and future in addition to the present, which is instead the almost exclusive focus of mindfulness.

We stress this because it is extremely important in the experience of being together to be able to acquire and maintain a *sense of interconnection with the other* and a *sense of separateness* and continuity of the self. Only in this way, by reaching the ability of sharing experiences with other persons without being invaded, one can arrive to be in experiences for what they really are and not for what one dreads or hopes they are (Zaccagnini, Messina, Zavattini, 2007).

We should also add that these abilities are *particularly relevant* for the harmonious development of *any* human relation. The reflective function is indispensable for a person to be able to develop successfully his personality during his whole life cycle through any significant relation with any human being.

This is true also for that special human relation that is the *couple relationship*, as we will see below. In this case these qualities do not only help the development of each partner's personality but also the harmonious development and the survival of the relationship itself.

4. “It does not all depend on me”: on couple relations

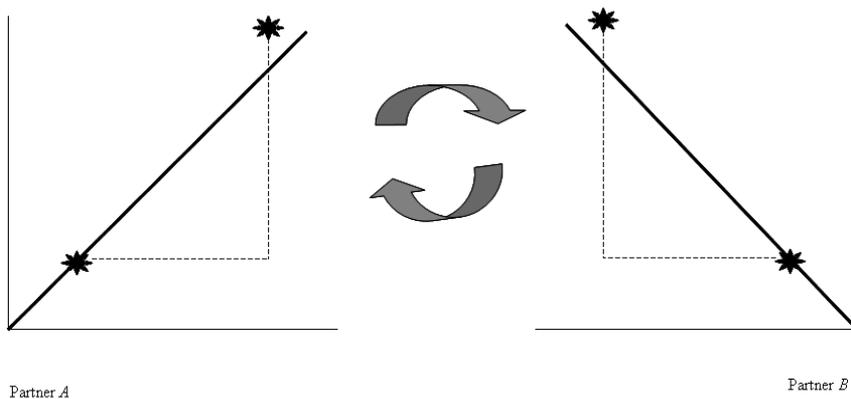
In the past few years couple psychotherapy and its conceptualizations found a wider diffusion in psychoanalytical practice. Freud (1915) had considered the couple mostly in terms of the unconscious motivations determining the choice of a partner (narcissistic when the other's otherness is not recognized or supporting when the distinction self/other cannot be acknowledged).

The shift from the idea of an isolated mental apparatus to the new theoretical paradigms where “affectivity cannot be seen as the product of an isolated intrapsychic mechanism but instead as a property of a mutually self-regulating system made up of two or more individuals and as a constant characteristic during the whole life cycle” (Zavattini, 2001) certainly fostered interest for the work with couples.

The various “views” of couple relations in psychoanalysis show great differences that cannot be specifically discussed here, but we think that just the possibility of seeing object relations in bilateral terms, paying attention also to the contribution of the other and adding to the classical issue of the *use* of the object (other) the issue of the *use of mutuality* represented a central point in the psychoanalytical understanding of the links between partners (Eiguer et al, 1984; Puget, Berenstein, 1989; Sharff, Scharff, 1991; Rusczyński, 1993; Norsa, Zavattini, 1997; Fisher, 1999; Losso, 2000; Clulow, 2001; Grier, 2005).

Among the early theories on clinical work with couples in a psychoanalytical perspective we find the work of Henry Dicks (1967) who defined significant affective relations as natural therapeutic relations. In particular he suggested the concept of carrying spouse who acts as a container of an internal object of his partner to whom aspects of the self are entrusted (Rusczyński, 1996). In this sense he defines the couple as the <<*joint of two internal worlds*>> (Dicks, 1967).

Figure 2: Unconscious Joint



As can be seen in Figure 2, this view entails that what has not been resolved in the personal history of both partners (T) is entrusted to the actual situation (R) in order to be *repaired*, returning however to the *continuistic* model mentioned above, for which fixated portions of the past are re-presented to the current relation in the effort of repairing them. What is innovative in Dicks' paradigm is that the concept of *mutuality* becomes a basic dimension of human relations. The dimension at the basis of the joint of two internal worlds, or the "horizontal" strategy under which we use interpersonal relations as a chance to repair what has not been resolved or as a sort of adaptation or, lastly, as permanence of unresolved object relations. The concept of *collusion* in neurotic, when not frankly psychotic, mutuality indicates that for Dicks the unit of clinical evaluation and intervention is the *quality of the unconscious joint* and no longer the individual mind.

The work with couples started in the Family Discussion Bureau continued in England with contributions from Rusczyński (1995), Fisher (1999), Grier (2005). Referring to the Kleinian concept of *projective identification* and the Bionian concept of container/content, these authors defined a specific theoretical model for couple relationships.

According to them, the psychoanalytical study of the intimate relationship of an adult couple provides the clinician with the opportunity to experience and bear witness to the couple's *externalization* of significant shared aspects of their unconscious internal worlds (Rusczyński, 2001). At the same time <<[...] *the basis of the unconscious partner choice is not only projective identification but also a sense of resonance with another, the experience of the recognition of the self in another which allows the self to grow, almost literally in that it involves an expansion of one's ego boundary to include the experience of the other*>> (Colman, 2001).

This model allowed for a complex shift from the analysis of the relational structure internalized by the individual (Britton, 1995) to the analysis of the relation, a *third* element produced by the context and capable of affecting the individual's internal and external relations. In this view, <<*the patient is the relation*>> (Rusczyński, 1995) and no longer, as mentioned above, the mere individual mind.

Other contributions, in line with the assumption that the patient is the relation, focused on the use of the relation or on the quality of the <<*sense of we-ness*>> (Norsa, Zavattini, 1997; Zavattini, 2001) carried by the couple and paying attention both to the feelings of *differentiation*, evidenced by psychoanalytical models, and to the feeling of *belonging*. If aspects of the self are *entrusted* to the other, it is possible that fantasies and expectations on the relation become one of the elements of the *field* containing both partners, as a psychic location where internal worlds, objects and emotions meet and intertwine, *disprove* and *repair* or *confirm* and *determine* the establishment of a worsening combination, a *negative relational constant*, i.e. a painful vicious circle that confirms the partners' expectations.

This problem is present also in Sandler's contribution (1993) to the question of love relations when he notices that in couple relations each member tries to consciously or unconsciously impose an intrapsychic role relation to the partner, assigning a role to himself and a complementary role to the other. The actualization of this role relation can be unconsciously accepted or rejected, but the risk of this "entrusting" is that when this mutual circular movement fails the partners might increase their splitting and projection processes, *externalizing* the alien parts *actualizing them in the relation* in order to maintain a certain consistency, as we have seen above.

Based on these assumptions, the more recent view we have been discussing, affected by the more relational contribution of the concept of projective identification and of those deriving from the paradigm of attachment and infant research (Clulow, 2000, 2007; Beebe, Lachmann, 2002) and from what has been shown by intersubjectivism as capacity to remain in space (Bromberg, 1998; Mitchell, 2000), is oriented to the idea that couple relations are an area where prevailingly, but not exclusively, the issue of *affects* is managed, i.e. one of the places in the self's life where *the internal state of a person is regulated in the relation with the other*.

As Siegel writes, this system, just like the person, in order to remain healthy must strike a *balance* between flexibility and continuity, between individuation and intimacy in an endless motion towards more and more complex states of being. Otherwise it can risk to dwell on aspects of denial and splitting (Siegel, 1999). If more or less dramatic episodes of *affective disconnection* take place, deeply unregulated dyadic states can ensue that generate interdependent negative states whose origins are often found in the attachment models of one of the partners, generating situations that lead to *defensive distortions* rather than to *resonance* processes of mental states.

The couple is thus trapped in a spiral of misunderstandings and incomprehension where the breaks in affective communication are not followed by reparation processes (5). Interdependent in this context means that the mental states of the two partners are mutually affected in a negative sense, and feed a pattern of

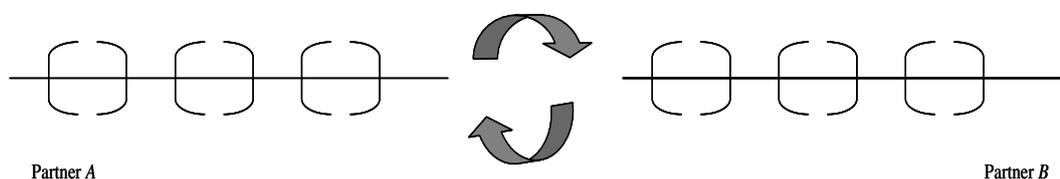
communication that confirms the insecure attachment models generated by their past experiences. These states give rise to especially rigid interactions that prevent the two partners' minds from advancing to a greater flexibility and complexity.

The theory of attachment, in fact, admits that in new relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1982, 1988) IOMs can be reviewed and reprocessed up to their deep restructuring (Kobak, Hazan, 1991; Scharff, Bartholomew, 1994). In fact, if a partner can disconfirm the negative expectations held by the other on relationships, this experience can entice a person to "upgrading" his IOMs (Hazan, Hutt, 1990; Mikulincer, Goodman, 2006).

Bowlby noticed that in order to reach a good couple adjustment (Bowlby, 1973) IOMs must assimilate not only the new experiences and the preceding ones, but must also *adapt* to and *synchronize* with the features of the partner's IOMs. He referred to these representational adjustment processes when he talked about revision or updating in case of drastic changes such as the formation or the breaking up of a new attachment link (Bowlby, 1980). These revisions are required to maintain accurate enough models and to generate an adaptive behaviour in relations, more realistic expectations on the partner and less difficult couple adjustment processes.

The view we are outlining here seems, then, to stress the various adjustment modes, the changes in environmental circumstances in so far as the representational models of partners fit, thus suggesting a theoretical model oriented to *revision* rather than to continuity, as shown in Figure 3.

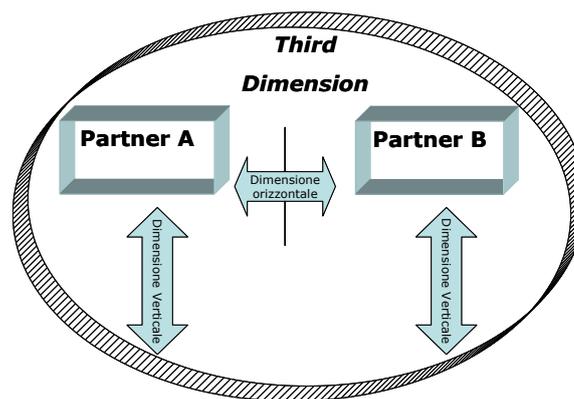
Figure 3: Revision model



The attention paid to the other and to the subjective meaning of his presence, that mutually and constantly affects reflection, makes it necessary to understand that in the processes of mutual regulation each partner in a couple relation "organizes" his own mental processes based on the experience with the other and what events are signified and signalled as significant. Each member of the couple, in fact, elaborates and systematizes the expected and unexpected interactive experiences (those characterized by regularity, foreseeableness and constancy in interactions) and affective moments.

As indicated in Figure 4, some aspects of the current situation can lead the system to new modes, in discontinuity with the past and we can assume that the actions of each partner develop by means of micro-adaptations complementary with those of the other (Mitchell, 2000) (6).

Figure 4: Co-construction model



The theorists of attachment, as mentioned above, state that partners are regularly engaged in *alignment* and *resonance* processes (Zaccagnini, Messina, Zavattini, 2007), where <<the security of the partnership might be assessed on the basis of how adaptive the membrane is to the changing balance from “we-ness” and “I-ness” is>> (Clulow, 2001).

The experience of *being together*, which implies the representation of the fact of “being together as a unit”, seems as important as the feeling of being a separate individual. Some theorists stated that psychic health could be considered as the ability to engage in a mutual dependence relation, as Winnicott had already shown.

This view highlights the fact that *identity* does not derive and does not shape itself only from the discovery of the difference, but also from the recognition and acceptance of the fact that one belongs in a group. The sense of one’s separateness and individuality, *autonomy*, inevitably implies the ability to acknowledge and give value to the difference and to the *belonging*, the mutuality. We can fight both for feeling separate and for feeling part of, just like we can be afraid that the individuality of the other is opposed to our being a couple, or that being two, i.e. acknowledging the importance of the relation, is negative and an obstacle to being an autonomous person (Messina, Zavattini, 2007).

The *thesis we have followed in this paper* intends to highlight the features of the “couple” as one of the privileged places from which to look at the modes the partners use, following frequent unconscious regulation processes, to give rise to a third dimension, a field, their very relation that in its being a shared object at the border between the self and the other represents a third regulation pole that can be acknowledged as their own by both members and can give back to them a sense of internal consistency.

Under these assumptions we should see the couple relation not only as *organizer* of the encounter of two shared internal worlds (Dicks, 1967), a thesis that has been important from the theoretical point of view, but that explains mostly how what has not been solved in one’s personal history is actualized and embodied in the current relation with the risk of not explaining fully the new processes related to the encounter between two organizations and strategies for handling affects.

In our opinion, the opportunity for a re-definition and re-structuring of self identity – or for its crystallization and drying up – should be considered in the evaluation of the couple’s relationship non only in reparative terms, i.e. as a link that can contribute to continuing and/or emphasizing the sense of self alienation or psychic impoverishment, but also a developmental chance (7) that does not need to be reduced to the individual histories of the partners, but can be explained in terms of what has been called the dyadic nature of the relation (Feeney, 2003; Crowell, Waters, 2005) or the third dimension deriving from the intersubjective field or the encounter of two minds.

This does not contradict the fact that one of the most interesting theoretical questions under discussion – especially fostered by the study of couple relations – concerns the balance point of these mechanisms, i.e. the attainment of a position that allows the subject to maintain an *internal consistency* – a *negative relational constant* – in the light of different relational experiences that determine different co-construction processes. It should also be added that to allow for change, some parts of the system must disaggregate the existing stabilized models. The new models thus represent emerging properties of the system. They are not linear, they cannot be automatically forecasted based on what happened in the past (Beebe, Lachmann, 2002).

Along this line, we believe that intrapsychic phenomena should be seen in the context of the interactive systems producing them and that the psychoanalytical approach can allow to access the subjective organization of experience in an *intersubjective* context. As we said above, we think that instead of seeing a self interacting with an other, there is a continuous co-construction of self regulation and interactive regulation processes. Interactivity is a central property of the continuous organization and reorganization process (Beebe, Lachmann, 2002).

Couple relations could be seen as one of the most important combinations of affective life where *co-empathy* or its failure are expressed. We think that a long enough significant affective link could be seen as the *place* of the Unconscious where in a continuous mutual scanning process, the regulation of emotions and the well-being or ill-being of the self is managed.

Notes

1) Bowlby thought that on the basis of its continuous experiences with caregivers the infant established prototypal mental representations, Internal Operational Models (IOM), that included Operational Models of the self and of caregivers, and models of the self with the other. These mental representations allow the individual *to make forecasts and to create expectations* on the events of his relational life. In this model, the mind, unlike what was suggested by the Freudian drive model, establishes the rules of its functioning during development in his *relations* with others.

2) Focusing on the concepts of trauma and dissociation, Albasi developed the concept of Dissociated Internal Operating Models (DIOM) to illustrate the developmental outcomes of a lacking environment, an environment that does not acknowledge the infant's regulation needs. When attachment relations do not acknowledge regulation needs, the infant builds DIOMs of attachment configurations that are different from insecure attachment, where the infant is capable of organizing defensive forms of affect regulation and defences from disorganization, where the loss of strategy consistency prevails. <<*DIOMs are the primitive memory of waiting for an intersubjective recognition as an interrupted expectation of an affectively significant encounter*>> (Albasi, 2006).

3) The three basic functions of IIMs are stress regulation, focused attention and reflective functioning. The novelty introduced by Fonagy and Target is the importance paid to focused attention, seen as a basic component, just like reflective functioning and stress regulation.

4) It is worth stressing that for Bateman and Fonagy (2006) the capacity for mentalization and mindfulness are two concepts that overlap but do not coincide. In its original meaning, mindfulness is not something related only to mental states and in the meaning it has taken up later it can be applied both to the physical and the mental world.

5) It should be noted that here Siegel uses the term reparation with a different meaning from the one used in classical psychoanalytical models. He sees reparation not as the entrusting of unresolved aspects of the self to the other, but as the ability to re-establish affective communication.

6) In US psychoanalysis the function of the *relation with the other*, seen as one of the human motivational systems, contributed to the definition of a new theoretical view. From an infant *defending itself* from the world to an infant *relating* to the world and affected by it, to an infant *affecting and affected* by the environment around it. As Mitchell neatly says, from this angle the basic unit of the study is no longer the individual as a separate entity, whose wishes clash with external reality, but an interactive field, within which the individual originates, trying to get in contact with himself and to articulate his personality. The wish is always felt in the context of the relation that defines its meaning. The mind is made up of relational configurations. Experience is deemed structured by means of interactions (Mitchell, 1988). In this model the minds (of the self and other) are deeply interrelated and in addition to the experience of differentiation of subject and object there is a mode for organizing experience where the distinctions between self and other and internal and external are cancelled. Mitchell (ibidem) talks of a relational self and of an integral and continuous self, the first one related to the multiple configurations of the self, variously structured in the various relational contexts. The second one related to the subjective experience of the configuration in its development. One can well understand that in this view, Mitchell sees that the co-presence of multiple levels determines the transformational nature of love relations, to which he later paid special attention (Mitchell, 2000).

7) Developmental chance in the sense indicated by Bowlby, according to which the theory of attachment, despite its assumption of a relative stability in attachment models during life, accepts that these models can be *reviewed* and *reprocessed* during new relations, among these, love relations (Bowlby, 1988).

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