

# **One dream for two people: dreaming in the psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper are presented the role and functions of dreams analyzed within the couple. Elements of applied clinical triggers a reflection towards the possibility of the dream on and helping to foster the communication process within the couple and therefore its own growth and evolution.

**Key words:** dream, couple, therapy of couple, psychoanalysis of the couple

*<<There is no such thing as a single human being, pure and simple, unmixed with other human beings ... That self ... is a composite structure ... formed out of countless never ending influences and exchanges between ourselves and others ... we are members one of another>>* (Rivière, 1927)

## **1. On reciprocity**

Everybody knows that love and the emotional values that constitute love are not just attributable to one's own self or to external objects, but also to "inner objects" that we may love as much as the external world objects, or that we may simultaneously love and hate in the same ambivalent way. This continuous relationship between inner and external objects, between internal reality and externalisation must be considered a human being feature. We may thus say individuals tend to use themselves "mutually". We are led to play parts in the other's inner drama, or to enter in the other's inner theatre, that is each person tries to "enact" in the couple bond phantasmal relationship he/she is bearer, so it is surprising how, from the beginning, in the partner choice we catch the other's features which fit to our own internal play . We are referring to what could be called an "unconscious joint", in the sense used by Dicks (1967) who talked of "shared internal worlds" that cannot be taken back to the simple sum of the two partners individual characteristics and that has to be conceptualised more in terms of unconscious complementarity or in those of collusion (Zavattini 1988, 2001; Norsa, Zavattini 1997).

## **2. Difference , similarity and couple's state of mind**

In this perspective the couple relationship may then be understood as the couple's internal working model each member is bearer and that signals the "unconscious schema" which orients the expectations on "being together" and upon which a relevant portion of the affective life is relied. We can say there is an internalised "Sense of us".

If the relationship is stable, a "third element" can be forged out of these representations. We mean the partnership itself and the pattern of mutual expectations that it implies (Britton 1989; Ruszczynski 1997; Morgan 2001). We can therefore

imagine a marital couple triangle such as that created by each one of the partners and by their relationship as a third element. In this sense the relationship has its own identity alongside that of its members and this might, or might not, interfere with the personal needs and interests of the two partners. In this view healthy functioning in couples depends on the capacity to see, think and talk about the relationship as an entity in its own right, separate from each of the two individuals who comprise it. If there is a failure of the process of affect-attunement and of the partners' containment, the disorganisation within the self disorganises affective relationships, by creating a constant need for excessive projective identification, that is the externalisation of the alien unmetabolized self in the relationship. Moreover separateness and independence of the object are denied as well as the dependence on the relationship: passing to third position could be difficult (Fisher 1999). The mental cost is a limitation of the knowledge of the inner mental affective state and a constriction of the representation of all relationship experiences into a pragmatic form. It could damage the ability to suspend the demands of the immediate physical reality and contemplate alternative points of view.

### **3. A dream for two**

Based upon these brief introduction, we will try to explore dreams within couple psychoanalytic psychotherapy along two possible directions. In one direction we will refer to dreams as the possibility to use a sort of unsaturated communication and narration upon the relationship. And 'let us say' a dream raised within the setting created by the attitude and the psychoanalytical containment on behalf of the couple therapist, may be considered as a chance to 'illustrate' the features of the inner world objects scenery and may offer to the therapist a way to understand to which part the partner is connected.

In the second direction the dream may also be considered the representative of a meaning and of a shared state of mind '*in statu nascendi*' that becomes structured with the possibility to be transformed both by the interpretations and by the matrix of meanings which emerges from the associations of the two partners. Differently from the individual analysis setting, the dream occurs 'at the presence' of the other and within a transformational process of the couple, representing not only a communication 'upon them', but also 'upon us' and 'upon us in that particular moment' of the relationship and of the therapeutic process.

With respect to these considerations we propose the dream as 'alluding' both to the self (and his/hers history) and the 'internal' other, and to the actual relationship and its present intersubjective organisation (conscious and unconscious).

It is the second year of psychoanalysis; Mrs A brings a violent dream (she had never brought any before) - she says - as a stroke on the head: "My mother was like X's mother (a novel's character) who moved from a lover to another while the son was bringing up the family. She was coming to Rome by train but would not stop to greet me".

Dream background: Mr and Mrs A have been bitterly and violently arguing for months as regard to where to collocate a precious painting, they had purchased

together. In the analyst's mind, which feels obstructed by the problems brought by the couple, emerges the image, he reproposes, of a shared space 'obstructed' by an idealised and persecutory object. It is useful to add that the mother of Mrs A has died and her loss has had a very significant effect upon the daughter.

Mr A. observes he identifies himself and well understands the mother's position; he says the mother, usually associated with the duty figure, here, instead, escapes from duties and adds: "I am not able to leave, but I would like to". Mrs A. is disappointed, she instead identifies herself with the boy's anger and his burden to carry on the family".

Mrs A. is a lively, irascible, active woman and a rebel within the family and always unsatisfied, whilst the husband is slow, insecure, culturally refined, a specialist in passive resistance. He is also very generous towards others, evasive with respect to his and the relationship's emotionality, entangled with his family of origin. Within their couple relationship the woman pushes whilst the man is carried, nevertheless, the woman also secretly and latently holds to the man and he holds and contains her. In the next session Mrs A brings a second dream. In the dream she says: "I was carrying my mother on the shoulders and she was very heavy".

We have to say Mrs A always arrives to the session 'full' of anger, of things to do, of things she pushes her husband to do, in a word, of burdens. She now says, with a flash of sincerity, to feel less the burden when she is in agreement with her husband.

Mr A observes in the associations he has been feeling more awake, active, and energetic and adds a set of thoughts of the morning about the value of the wife's bond to him. He says with appreciation: "If she has been standing me for all these years !" After a while he refers to some unheard-of memories of his infancy regarding a sense of oppression by the family and of repressed rebellion.

#### **4. Final Considerations**

We want here to emphasise that these dreams have represented a cross-road and a shift in the therapeutic process: Mrs A begins to understand how her anger contributes to her feeling of loss as regards her mother and her relationship with the husband (my violence kills them, they become 'dead burdens', when I agree with him I feel less burdened), whilst Mr A with his explicit act of rebellion, identifying himself with the mother of the dream, gives voice to his wishes, in which the precious wish of and for the wife finds a place, and it also gives voice to the oppression of the guilt subtended to his idealised sense of duty. In this way Mr A is close to understand how 'his being carried' also damages the couple relationship, but he is 'unburdened' by being the only offender.

In other words being able 'to tell' the dream in the shared area of the couple setting, has represented not only the possibility to transform in alpha an anxious feature blindly violent of the inner world of Mrs A, but also the possibility to give body to and transform the reasons subtended to the unconscious joint we have referred to in the first part of this paper.

That is, a wider relational space is opened where there is a greater affective circulation: Mrs A acknowledging her anger is close to the possibility to elaborate

depressively the issue of guilt, avoiding to ‘hold’ exclusively on the husband’s shoulders.

In turn, Mr A may get used (the mother in the dream) with his impulsiveness and is kind of relieved by sharing the sense of guilt which becomes more tolerable. We allude to that ‘she stands me ...’ which brings once again to the issue of ‘carrying’.

Finally, we may say a sort of untying of the knots occurs as related to maintaining on one hand the ‘collusion’ subtended to the unconscious joint and to the use of the partner and the relationship as a depository of splitted and denied parts of the self. Nevertheless, what we are interested to show is that an increasing transforming ability emerges as regards mental processing, a possibility to reach the ’third position’ (Lupinacci, 1998; Lupinacci, Zavattini, 2001; Zavattini, 2001; 2002). The same dream sequence, in its emerging, we believe to already be its expression. We finally have to add that the quality of the relationship, the intimacy and the ‘Sense of us’ after this sequence of dreams has slowly turned about.

What is then the sense and the function of dreams in working with couples? Dreams do not always appear with such a developmental meaningfulness. However the analytical situation has certainly been the container of the psychic events from which the dream’s elements have come from and that has been recollected and given new meaning. In this sense there is a condensation, in the dream’s images, of crossed and shared elements. We thus have to consider them as preconscious elements already partially processed that have found in Mrs A the active member between the two, the place where to recollect and represent and the wish to communicate them. It is also important to consider the effect of the ‘looking over’ on behalf of the other and of one’s own into the images and the narration of the dream. The sequence of the dreams has certainly functioned as an organiser for the development of the couple, and has also been the product of the work of the couple with the crossed associations and with the mind of the psychoanalyst by means of connection and maieutics, maybe imagining and dreaming a single dream for two.

But should we not then talk of a dream for three?

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