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Psychoanalysis og group: 50 years of work report

On the concept of fusion
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1. The concept of fusionality arose from the work of a group of analysts who met in Rome between the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s. These analysts did not belong to a particular psychoanalytic current or subcurrent, but they managed to identify a common area of elaboration in the idea of fusionality. In your view, what led the group to converge on such a particular theme and how can fusionality be seen today?

The colleagues gathered in the group that created the book *Fusionality*, were analysts of different theoretical orientations united by the experience of clinical observations that all lead back to the theme of fusionality and the anxieties related to frustrated fusional expectations. Fusionality according to Neri, Pallier, Petacchi Soavi and Tagliacozzo is: "... a fantasy that probably draws experiential elements from a phase of prenatal and neonatal development. It is a fantasy and not only, traceable to any age of life, that presents peculiar characteristics:

- 1) It is linked to expectations of sharing and reciprocity
- 2) It does not present characters of aggressiveness and intrusiveness
- 3) It can occur in different forms and degrees in normality as in pathology.
- 4) It can occur with internal and external objects, it can be present in consciousness or be totally unconscious.
- 5) It may present itself in the form of a rigid defence towards affects perceived as dissonant or towards more regressive manifestations of fusionality.
- 6) It can be fantasised as the only possible solution to achieving total self-sufficiency.

2. In your opinion, is the sharing that characterises fusional experience different from the kind of sharing that is described by other psychoanalytic concepts such as, for example, projective identification or Bion's container-contained relationship?

The authors compare fusionality and Projective Identification, and make a distinction between the modifications the self undergoes due to IP on an idealised object and fusional fantasies. The idealised object in the former case will present itself with peculiar characteristics pertaining to grandiosity and its correlates (sense of persecutory nature, self-idealisation, seductiveness), aspects that differ greatly from the experiences perceived by a self fused fusionally with the object. This fusion would take place according to an extension of the self: "The extension would enclose the mother or analyst within an anonymous fluid container" (Pallyer). This concept of self-extension also differs from the containment mode described by Bion of content-container (Bion 1970). Fantasies of self-extension take the form of fantasies of fluid flowing into a communicating vessel whose wall tends to cancel itself out (Soavi). Fantasies of extension that, as Neri says, annul the two operations that we see at work in the container-contained relationship, i.e. that both the projective and introjective phases of the digested aspects return to the subject.

3. Narcissism constitutes a conceptual area of primary importance for the transit of psychoanalytic theories on mental functioning and reflects the passage from classical psychoanalysis centred on the figure of the guilty man to contemporary psychoanalysis centred on the figure of the tragic man. Do you think that the concept of primary narcissism described by Freud and the concept of narcissism revisited by Kohut have points of contact with the concept of fusionality?

In the introductory speech to the volume *Forms of Fusionality* about the definition and peculiar characters of the concept of fusionality, Claudio Neri adds that: "we are now able to recognise in the definition (of fusionality)accents similar to those in Kohut's writingsthis is particularly true with regard to what he writes about object-self transference." I make this quote because Kohut was the post-Freudian analyst who, more than others, revolutionised the concept of Narcissism. While Freud needed, in order to respond to the accusations that had been levelled at him by Jung, to insert, with the 1914 essay "Introduction to Narcissism", an intermediate stage for libido in evolutionary development, introducing, precisely, the concept of narcissism, considered an-objectal. Kohut, on the other hand, postulated in his conception of narcissism, the existence of objects and believed, that these performed functions such as: security, calm, pleasure, recognition and others, and that of these objects one recognised only the functions and not the intrinsic qualities of the person who provided them. Kohut believed, like his colleagues in the Roman Group, that there was a non-differentiated matrix in which the young child feels the caregiver to be only part of his or her self. In fact he believed that what was provided, and thus perceived, were object-self experiences, experiences that objects evoked in the self. In this view, it would

be more appropriate to think of the object-self from the point of view of the self, and of object-self experiences as useful functions both for the development of the potential self and for the self that emerged from these experiences. This conception based its assumption on the idea that narcissism had its own autonomous line of development parallel to the one that runs from auto-eroticism to object-love. Infants before the differentiation between self and object presumably experience themselves in an unlimited fusion with the world. Emerging from this fusion state involves relations with object-selves that will continue to provide experiences and will be as object-selves only partially recognised as differentiated, but in their essence never perceived as separate and with their own autonomy. A concept that B. Bonfiglio, in the essay he presented in the volume *Forms of Fusionality*, expresses as follows: "... primary needs of the deprived patient, requiring such indispensable functions from the analyst and which the latter performs within a relationship with fusion characteristics."

4. Many authors speak of symbiosis to describe those forms of sharing that are characterised by excessive interdependence. But what difference do you think there is between symbiosis and fusion?

According to some authors (B. Bonfiglio, 2021) they could be considered overlapping concepts since both conceptions start from the idea that the child at birth is not able to distinguish its own self from that of the mother. According to others (A. Lombardozzi, 2021) there is a distinction in psychopathology whereby traumatic fusional ruptures can lead to regressive forms towards the 'archaic' object of the symbiotic type. In symbiosis, a certain degree of differentiation of the self has already taken place and one returns to it regressively in traumatic situations, whereas in fusion - at least in good fusion - there is an indistinct and undifferentiated flow between individuals, which occurs physiologically as a premise for the birth of the self and then throughout the course of existence. Perhaps one could say that the bad fusion experiences, those that occur to the detriment and not to the nourishment of the Self, coincide with symbiosis, which in this perspective would have a more negative valence, of regressive entrapment.

5. What are the most important steps from M. Mahler's idea of separation-individuation, and then Infant Research's competent child, to the idea of fusion-individuation inherent in the concept of fusionality?

The concept of Fusionality represents an original psychoanalytic perspective on how the human mind develops. It begins with an experience experienced by mother and child in which there is no differentiation, no inside and outside, no distinction between self and other, between past and present and

between reality and fantasy. This condition is only partly superimposable on the Mahalerian and other authors', in that the condition of fusion is not simply to be considered as a separate phase of infant development that evolves by transforming itself from a condition of primitivity and poor development over time, but is a way of organising experience, a way of experiencing relationships, that not only persists throughout life but is underlying other forms of organising experience and other more differentiated ways of entering into relationships. It is therefore a way that is not primitive but different from other, more complex ways of entering into relationships with the world. Research on childhood and in particular Daniel Stern in his *The Interpersonal World of the Child* (1985) theorised that the child is born already differentiated and with its own cognitive competences, in the conception of fusionality human experience throughout is organised around both undifferentiated and differentiated ways. Moreover, Childhood Research has not excluded moments of fusionality, which correspond to those described by colleagues in the Romano group. For Pallyer, fusion is: "tranquillity, absence of manipulation, joy, eventual stasis, absence of falsification." Or with the characteristics of the global as Soavi tells us i.e. 'being stable and being in oneself and in others: There is an opposition and complementarity between fusional fantasies and individuation processes.' Here it is necessary to make a small theoretical digression: in a beautiful 1985 article by Sergio Bordi published in the *Journal of Psychoanalysis*, "The Theoretical Perspectives of Contemporary Psychoanalysis" the author traces one of the theoretical changes in psychoanalysis back to a 1971 book by Peterfreund *Information, System and Psychoanalysis*, in which the system paradigm is introduced into our theory, and at the same time identifies the moment in which we move from discussing the neutralisation of psychic energy to that in which we speculate on whether or not metapsychology should be kept alive. I make this notation because in the same year, 1971, an article by Soavi entitled: *Proposal for an alternative to the subdivision of the psyche into Id, Ego and Superego* was published in the journal *Psyche*, in which not only did he consider the belief in the tripartite vision of the psyche to have waned in favour of a 'vision based on mental representations', but he also introduced the concept of the whole by which the various levels of the psyche are brought together: "guided by the principle of unity or of the whole as a whole", in which one finds behaviour, fantasies, the choice of objects, the representation of the self and of the world, the ways in which one relates to these objects, all within a defined configuration. Concepts of systems and ensembles that lead the way to that of fusion, where a resonance is established between two systems in tune with each other that Tagliacozzo defines as 'the communicative and mutually fertile harmony of two internal worlds'. Here it is possible to trace, in my opinion, the first hints of the

concept of fusionality, where the inner worlds of mother and child form a whole.

6. What are the differences between the concept of fusionality and Kohut's concept of the self-object-self relationship?

For our colleagues in the Roman group, from the archaic phase of fusion, in which there is no distinction between self and object, unlike Kohut's self-self-object-self relation, one emerges with differentiation. It is possible to assume that Kohut's Psychology of the Self, at least in its original formulation, by focusing its formulations on the experiences of the object-self function has lost sight of the object that offers this function. The transition from the undifferentiated to the differentiated presupposes the recognition that the other is not only an object but also an autonomous subject on whom one can depend and whose identity and differences one can also recognise. Soavi is very clear on this point: "There is an opposition and a complementarity between fusional fantasies and the processes of individuation which, in their organisation, pass through introjective and identificatory modalities ... fusion assumes the characteristics of the continuous: globality: absence of classes; stability absence of time; absence of any goal or search for perfection, being in oneself and in the other: erasure of space:" On the contrary, individuation opens up the path of the discontinuous; the me and the not-me, the search for reference points and the perception of a distance of space and time. Alongside this opposition there is also a complementarity, which is to be found in the conviction that fusion, or rather a good fusion, precedes and makes possible the processes around which the self will be organised. A fulfilling life should see a harmonious relationship between the two complementary modes of fusion and that of being oneself when one sees fit. Another idea that unites the two conceptions, that of the self-object-self relationship and that of fusion, is the recognition that the need for relationality persists throughout life. One could say that the conception of fusionality has more similarities and overlaps with the more up-to-date view of the Psychology of the self that has moved towards a fully relational view.

7. What is the relationship between the construction of monstrous representations of the self and fusionality?

The essay "The monstrous child" as a threat to the integrity of the self by L. Pallyer empirically anticipates a series of studies on the construction of representations formulated in later years by analysts informed by childhood studies. Daniel Stern in his book on Vital Forms of 2005 argues that the preverbal unconscious communication that is evident in the mother-child relationship, co-creates an intersubjectivity between the two that can allow

the child to "put himself in his mother's skin" (another moment of fusionality), thanks to an innate imitative capacity that allows him to reproduce his mother's facial and motor expressions, as well as grasp the emotions linked to these perceptions. These imitative actions performed by the child are neither a reflex nor a learned experience, but occur through an innatism that is called transmodal, i.e. through the capacity to receive a signal through one perceptive modality, e.g. visual, and replicate it in another modality, e.g. auditory. This allows the child to grasp characteristics of the other and abstract categorisations of generalised prototypical experiences, which are recorded at the psychic level, albeit in rudimentary form, as a complex construction of pre-symbolic representations. This perspective shares with the concept of Fusionality the idea that at the beginning of life, there is no search for objects, no internalisation or expulsion of them. At this stage of development there is neither internal nor external reality, there is a total fusion with our objects, these and the self emerge from a dense undifferentiation charged with affect. The distinction between self and other, between inner and outer are psychological constructions, just as the construction of the intrapsychic and intersubjective are developmental constructions from a condition of fusion. By intrapsychic is meant that the internal objects are also successive constructions and stand for the other present in itself, as: 'it is only the end product of a complex differentiating process, or, from another point of view, self-salient, which has its origin in the primary unity of the mother-child psychic matrix'" (Loewald, 1978). In the Roman group's conception of fusionality, in my view, the processes of internalisation, projection and identification are not defences of the ego as a consequence of painful losses, but are a product of differentiation, otherness, and the choices of the secondary process, which is complementary and parallel to the primary process in which the undifferentiated reigns. As already mentioned, the fusional and the undifferentiated operate as parallel organisations throughout life. Roberto Tagliacozzo also argues something similar in my opinion: 'discontinuity (is) an overcoming of the fusional situation towards an introjective situation, towards processes of assimilation, recognition and the constitution of an internal symbolic world'. When fusion moves along tracks of affective attunement, the positive affects, even through normal processes of rupture-repair, will inhibit the negative ones. When, on the contrary, they present themselves as dysregulated experiences, relational traumatism will occur. These will restrict the transformation capacity of pre-symbolic representations, making them more rigid, fixed, static. These in turn, when repeated and unrepaired, will be inscribed not in the form of events, but in the form of a 'knowledge' of negative characteristics of the self, which will influence the construction of more evolved representations, which will not consequently have characteristics of plasticity and generativity useful for creating new experiences, but which will be the basis for the construction

of the monstrous aspects of which Pallyer spoke. I would also like to mention in this connection that at this stage of development and up to the age of three and beyond, the child is not able to attribute the 'responsibility' of the ruptures to the other, always holding himself responsible for them.

8. In your opinion, is fusionality just a fantasy?

The evolutionary hypothesis in this theorisation is that alongside the need to acquire one's own autonomy there is always a desire to merge with the mother. This, while presenting itself as a fantasy, which appears to be separate from reality, seems to be a constant in the human experience and which, if well circumscribed and not undermining a positive idea of identity, is the source of every good object relationship and a feeling of wholeness. Pathological fusionality, an expression of separative ruptures, is superimposable on Kohut's concept of fragmentation of the self, where for this author in addition to the self the object-self is also fragmented with the presence of anguished perceptions and fantasies of being expelled into a cosmic space from which one is unable to return. For the colleagues of fusionality the object is preserved becoming a source of conflictuality in contrast to the tendencies towards individuation. For the Roman group, continuity in the analytic relationship is not only fantasised, but as a consequence of psychopathology presents itself as a real need with an analyst who is able to perform containment functions by allowing himself to be used unconsciously by the patient. Transference, therefore, performs evolutionary functions, and it is here that the concept of fusion meets Kohut's object-self conception of transference. It differs from this when the fusional relationship, for separative reasons, breaks down, and the transference takes on the characteristics of conflictuality and repetitiveness. As Pallyer maintains: "one of the tasks of analysis is to re-establish a healthy way of experiencing the continuum, a healthy capacity to fuse with the object, alongside the elaboration of the relationship with objects separated from the self", something, therefore, that has been lacking in normal evolutionary development, and when in analysis that capacity to experience the continuum is lacking the object becomes a source of conflict. The failures of normal fusion between mother and child represent the cause of the search for 'bad' fusion (Tagliacozzo) in adult life, a search that will manifest itself through pathological behaviour and anxieties predominantly of an agoraphobic and claustrophobic nature. .

There is an issue that is addressed, but not adequately developed in the group's work, and it is that of the ruptures of fusionality in the analytic relationship. Only separations are mentioned and not other forms of ruptures. Nor are the elements that lead to the repair of the bond that has been broken very clear. For example, it is not clear whether the interpretation

of transference and its genetic precipitates performs this function or not. Tagliacozzo refers to empathy considering it as a central element in the treatment even with respect to interpretation, which he sometimes considers to be an obstacle to the need for confirmation felt by the patient: "that the fusion system remains intact and is recognised and participated in by the analyst" (Tagliacozzo) not with interpretation, which could make him feel "expelled from the analyst's mind/body" (R. Tagliacozzo). Emphasising the role played by the influence of the analyst's positive emotions. All these ideas deserve more attention and development and also testify how Italian psychoanalysis and, in particular, the analysts who developed the theme of fusionality, contributed with the richness of their insights to the pluralism of psychoanalytic ideas.

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