

THE SELF AS MOTOR IN THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

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Methodological aspects of work with couples, following the principles of Existential Personalistic Anthropology and Sophia-Analysis.

An example of the application of this method is given in the context of a group of Psychodrama.

- The “**Department for Research on the Couple**” of the E.A. – Sophia-Analysis (Sophia University of Rome),
 - the “**Center for Couples**” and
 - the **Center for Psychodrama “EUNÒMOS”**
- have been carrying out work and studies on problems in the couple relationship for over 10 years. The methods used have been structured in the following way:
- treatment of a single couple, carried out by a therapeutic couple (two therapists);
 - treatment of couples in a group context, carried out by a therapeutic couple;
 - treatment of couples in Psychodrama groups, carried out by a therapeutic couple.

When we talk about the couple, we must make a distinction between living as part of a couple and “living – while being part of a couple”. Living as part of a couple can, in fact, end up becoming a way for the partners to create an alliance in their attempt to escape old wounds and existential emptiness which were already present in each of them.

When instead we speak of “living – while being part of a couple”, what we are talking about is initiating a growth process where the ability to love oneself, as a separate unit, and love of the other as separate from self, is developed. Love of self is not to be considered as egocentrism, but instead it is a refusal to pay any price so as to remain anchored in one’s conditioning or finalized to the other’s needs in an alliance that impedes personal growth and growth within the couple. Love is thus not just a sentiment, rather it is, above all, intended as a commitment and a project whose goal is the realization of the personal Self’s project as well as that of the Self of the couple.

Usually much more is said about the end of a relationship and the type of pain that this entails, than about when love is truly “born” within a couple.

In this light, the question we can ask is: does a couple in crisis indicate a pathology to be cured, or rather is the crisis an opportunity to free the essential potentialities and to encourage the growth, the expansion and the development of the person? Are hate and anger expressed only in response to external (or internal) causes, or are they directed towards the deep personal Self as well? What we are referring to here is the choice to remain in a negative symbiotic alliance by closing oneself in one’s psychological conditioning, thus renouncing the possibility to grow.

Our opinion is that the debate between nature and culture, which so often creates divisiveness among researchers in many fields, and which centers around questions about what is innate and what is acquired behavior, rises from the difficulty in developing a more global vision of humanity.

Psychoanalysis placed the accent on instincts and on their influence in development. Later, due to the influence of the models which uphold culture as the principle influence, the accent shifted from innate factors to those which have to do with the environment, from biological models to models which are based on the psychology of relationships (Klein, Winnicott, Sullivan, Fairbairn).

Human beings are no longer seen as simple bio-psychological organisms, which must continuously fight with antisocial instincts. Instead, they are now considered as much more complex entities, capable of experiencing themselves in external reality and of interiorizing this experience so as to integrate and transform themselves through their internal world. In this development of thought, a new tendency to consider humanity no longer simply as an energetic equilibrium capable only of responses and adaptation has emerged. Humans are also capable of developing enriching relationships and, as Winnicott said when describing children’s ability to be alone, creating their own world.

The contribution which Sophia-Analysis offers centers on the life project of the person and on the concept of freedom. In Sophia-Analysis, the reality and the power of psychological conditioning are not seen as fatalistic obstacles, but rather they are considered a sort of “field” where free choice can be activated so as to transcend them as much as possible, and within the individual’s sphere of possibility.

The cardinal points in sophianalytical theory are:

The Io Persona

The Corporeal Ego

The Psychological Ego

The Self

The Io Persona is the fundamental structure. It is capable of exercising free will and of making decisions, and its identity is unique.

The Io Persona, in certain life situations, will be faced with decisions regarding whether to live or to just survive, whether to defend itself and rebel against external factors or whether to activate its creative dimension and find the necessary solutions within.

The Corporeal Ego represents the human being's biological and physiological reality.

The Psychological Ego represents the psychological dimension and its various activities: mental, emotional, instinctual, sexual and aggressive.

The Self is the center of that dimension which contains the individual life project, the wisdom inherent in each human being and the positive energies which are available: it is the heart of humankind.

The sensation that one truly exists arises when the Io Persona and the Psychological Ego orbit around the Self.

Therapy must aid the couple not only in interrupting the involutive mechanism determined by the negative alliance between the Psychological Egos of the two partners, but also in creating a new, dynamic and dialectical equilibrium which favors personal growth while respecting infantile needs which have not yet been resolved. In other words, therapy is geared toward helping to reactivate interrupted growth and to develop contact with the Personal Self and the Self of the couple.

When we speak of Self of the couple, we intend the positive alliance between the two partner's Selves which creates a project-oriented dimension on both a personal level and within the couple itself.

The alliance which becomes evident during the first therapeutic sessions often hides an element which is very painful to come into contact with. It is an unconscious mutual understanding which generally reproduces modalities acquired during infancy, and aims at interrupting communication so as to protect both from internal threats they are not capable of handling.

But, as with all defensive structures, they can go from being functional to becoming barriers that are impossible to overcome. They literally become internal tyrants.

Project Check-Ups: Alliances based on the Psychological Ego and alliances based on the Self of the couple

When an alliance is created based on the Self of the couple, it becomes a synergic force which furthers personal growth and the evolution of the couple. It is a force which is capable of making evident how and when transformations within the couple must take place. Instead, an alliance based on the Psychological Ego creates immobility and a non-sense of the couple relationship.

The conflict which is evident in the first few therapy sessions and is expressed through the heat of the collision between the partners, hides the expectation-demand to be compensated for wounds which have deeper origins. Psychotherapeutic help is aimed at using present conflicts as a means to reach the deeper one. When the meaning of the conflict is understood, the encounter between the two can be deeper and more constructive.

External conflict clearly indicates which direction the psychotherapist must take.

The therapist's job is to help both members of the couple to face the choice the Io Persona proposes: to either remain anchored in a position which considers the causes of the manifest conflict the only possible reality (the alliance with the Psychological Ego), or to develop a line of communication between the Personal Self of both with the Self of the therapist. The therapist's Self represents the therapeutic project.

In the second case, both members of the couple can learn to utilize their projections to contact the hidden and deep aspects of the conflict, so as to find new alternatives to complaints and accusations.

The Synthesis of Opposites

The choice of a partner is never casual.

The Psychological Ego that has not completed, or that has not even gone through, certain phases of its development is full of anxiety, anguish and pain, and will attempt to reconstruct in the present that which it hasn't yet been able to resolve. This type of choice can also be stimulated by the Personal Self. The big problem within a couple relationship, just like that within the individual, is that together with all the pain that must be compensated for, there is also repressed hatred.

In fact it is easy to point an accusing finger and say: you should have understood it's your fault ... I am this way because you ... etc. etc. In reality, unconsciously partners are chosen so that one can work on oneself.

At this point it's easy to fall into the drama well-known since ancient times and expressed so well by Ovid: "NEC SINE TE NEC TECUM VIVERE POSSUM" – I can not live with you because I must separate from you to encounter my Personal Self; I can't live without you because I'm a slave of my need for love.

If the other is seen as something or someone who must be gotten rid of, or to whom one must simply adapt, instead of as a "place" where one's internal wealth can be creatively expressed, the other person disappears, life loses its meaning, potentiality becomes a slave of external reality. The dance of the victim and the persecutor, the guilty and the innocent, begins. Roles, masks and those games involving tacit complicity within the couple are constructed. During the phase of falling in love, the partners tell each other they love each other because they're the same: sameness becomes a value and diversity, so essential to the realization of the Persona, is banned. When we use the term Persona, we refer to the ability to love oneself, to love others and to allow others to love one.

The synthesis of opposites is thus the result of the Io Persona's growth process. Excessive needs regarding dependency or separateness which follow abandonment or an experience involving possession and castration, bring the two partners to give the other a role which will be played out in the alliance between the Psychological Ego of each one. The partner chosen will mirror one's own role: if A plays the part of the one who is afraid of being abandoned, B will be the one who is afraid of being entrapped. In an attempt to avoid pain, the part of oneself that becomes the "other from self" is denied through projective mechanisms.

The Io Persona uses the Psychological Ego's energy to create a splitting, in the attempt to keep the disturbing element away from oneself. The need which is negated, for example the need for attachment, is transformed into its opposite, i.e. the need for separateness, which is then transferred onto the other. Thus it will be possible to use the other to express all of one's repressed hatred.

It's as if the Psychological Ego says: I hate you and I'm pushing you away because I'm afraid of feeling that sentiment. As a consequence of this, the internal battle against the part of oneself to which one is enslaved becomes a battle against the other. Thus: the need for separateness of one exasperates the other's fear of abandonment; the need for physical contact of one makes the other claustrophobic.

From the anger which expresses a need, one can easily fall into vengeful actions, which in turn totally negates the other's existence.

The Psychological Ego, which inevitably follows the pleasure principle so as to eliminate every type of tension and suffering, can end up invading the space otherwise occupied by the Self.

The goal of therapy is thus to help avoid that the need for vengeance, instilled by repressed hatred, creates obstacles along the path of the possibility for transformation and change.

The therapist is responsible for guaranteeing (like a sort of vault) that the therapeutic project is kept safe. By intervening in the right moment, the therapist can help keep the Self's positive energy flowing so that the conflict can be overcome and an alliance can be built whose goals are the realization of both the individuals' and the couple's projects.

In synthesis, during therapy the patient (s) go from working on primarily intra-psychological conflicts (Psychological Ego – Super Ego – external reality) to working on those which have to do with the Psychological Ego

and the Self. At this point, the Io Persona can, if it so decides, take a new position in regards to defensive mechanisms and conditioning and face the pain which lies beyond them, if this is necessary for life.

ANALYTICAL EXISTENTIAL PSYCHODRAMA

Analytical Existential Psychodrama is based on imaginary representations, which allows participants to speak about themselves by going beyond reality and directly reaching the unconscious. A scene in Psychodrama is like a photograph of the unconscious, which can be modified so as to transform it, just like in a photographic laboratory, so that afterward the subject can return to reality with something which has been modified on an unconscious level.

This method has been developed and continuously verified by the “EUNOMOS” Center in Rome, in over 20 years of practice in Psychodrama, with Sophia-Analysis as its theoretical reference point.

We have seen that conflicts and problems connected with what we call the “psychological ego” emerge usually in the first scene. In the following scene, a very important change occurs, because the various characters modify the scene, they become active after having been passive and they become freer in their attempt to heal trauma which is connected to childhood experiences. This is possible because they have reached greater awareness of the psychological aspects of the conflicts represented and are more in tune with their Selves, and are thus more capable of activating the possibility to make new decisions which is characteristic of that instance which we call the Io Persona.

Psychodrama, which concentrates on the here and now, stimulates transformation now and “then”. It gives the individual the chance to represent his or her “new” internal reality by re-elaborating memories, restructuring personality and by activating change.

The scene is divided in three parts or moments. During the first part, the psychological instance prevails, as pointed out above, which conditions the development of the scene according to its particular rules. How can this be changed? In Analytical Existential Psychodrama we use the following procedure: it is necessary that the participants become aware of the type of dynamic which is being represented and then listen to the Self. This complex instance is represented by the members of the group which do not participate in the scene’s representation. They are in a circle around the scene and they represent observation, silence and reflection. They have the same role which was typical of the Chorus in Greek tragedy.

When the scene reaches what seems to be a dead end, the group conductors block the representation, like with the “still” function on a video player, and the members seated around the scene express what they feel is happening (*function of awareness*) and afterwards express what they think is necessary to do so as to get out of the dead end situation (*function of the Self*). At this point, the attention returns to the members who are representing the scene. By stopping the scene, the group conductors invite participants to block the psychological ego expressed through their actions, and now they are invited to express the ability to transform it, according to the indications offered them by the Self of the group.

In this phase, the Io Persona is the primary actor (*function of the Io Persona*), in the sense that this is the moment of decision making, of transformation and creativity. This passage doesn’t always come about, and often the changes which occur are simply a repetition, in another form, of the same psychological dynamics.

The conductors, at the end of each scene, help the group participants to enter into their memories and their fantasies and to understand their meaning. They also help the group find what type of transformational project may be present in the situation by integrating the proposals which emerge in the various contributions, like many tiles of a mosaic which slowly takes shape in a choral fashion.

Sometimes it is necessary to face the problem in another way, and at this point it is decided to choose another scene from among those proposed by the group participants.

For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to present a three-hour group encounter which can serve to illustrate our work with couples as well.

1st Scene: The Rocking-Horse Game

The first scene which was represented was entitled: “The mask”. It was represented by two women and a man. The man represented a rocking-horse, one of the women represented a little girl, and the other represented a room.

The little girl almost always remained between the rocking-horse and the room (oedipal control), but was incapable of accepting the rocking-horse's invitation to play with him. When the little girl finally decided to accept the invitation, the rocking-horse avenged himself by withdrawing. The little girl would have liked to have the rocking-horse, but as soon as the room protested, she gave it up.

As soon as she did so, the room grabbed the rocking-horse, but soon gave it up as well.

The rocking-horse then said that he would like to play with the little girl, but stayed right near the room (dependence).

The only possible solution in this situation was that the rocking-horse be "passed" back and forth between the little girl and the room, as if it were a ball. This allowed each of the characters to control the others and to be controlled. The representation went on and on, because it was "lost" time due to the fact that the characters weren't able to express their true desires and act on them and instead they repressed them, or hid them behind a mask. It was a repetitive scene which eloquently represented the photograph of the immobility of the participants' unconscious. They were passive rather than active subjects, "instruments" in the hands of someone else, there was no trace of freedom.

Nothing happened, desire could not be expressed and the level of depression during representation of the scene was very high. The symbiotic tie to the mother impeded movement towards the father, towards desire and towards circular affects. Circular motion was created, but through control and inhibition instead of through the sharing of affects. No libidinal "couple" was formed and this choice implies a separation from that which is not the object of desire (in this scene represented by the room-mother), but instead the three create a depressive "group". The rocking-horse and the little girl know that if they want to play together they must separate from the room, from the tie to the mother. What is the mask made up of? It is made up of oedipal desire which must be inhibited and repressed by means of depression.

During the verbalization which follows this scene, the participants expressed how it recalled experiences from their childhood. The scene "represented" something familiar to them. It became clear that it was necessary to explore this theme further through the representation of another scene.

II Scene: The Game of a Frog, a Glass and a Spring

In this scene, the protagonists were three men. One of them represented a spring of water, one a glass and the third a frog.

The theme of the triangle was again clearly present from the beginning of the scene: the frog must choose whether it wants to drink from the glass or from the spring.

Memory of the former scene is still alive in the participants; the immobility and impotence experienced previously can't be repeated and something starts to happen; the frog decides to drink from the spring, he decides to separate and to show his desire.

With the goal of exploring this theme even further, the conductors suggest an "exchange of roles" in an attempt to bring out that which each of the participants has not yet been able to express.

What was "masked" in the previous scene with the rocking-horse, now emerges clearly from the very beginning. As soon as the scene begins, the glass occupies the center of the spring, announcing that he does so not for his own need but because others need him: a glass must always be full of water, in case someone passes by and wishes to drink.

The frog, too, has a vital need for water, and is in a position where he can enter into direct conflict with the glass so as to be able to possess the spring.

The frog has at least three possible ways of interacting with the glass in regards to the object of his needs and desires:

- initiate rivalry and conflict with the glass;
- renounce his desire and need and enter into depression;
- utilize the obstacles represented by the glass to achieve a synthesis of opposites between his desires and those of the glass.

How does the frog solve this dilemma? He is probably centered on his Self, because it becomes immediately obvious that he is not attracted to the solution represented by conflict, he is more concerned with his own desire for water and manages to find a small puddle which satisfies his needs.

By satisfying his need for ownership (the small and yet sufficient puddle of water), together with the type of decision that his Io Persona makes in terms of renouncing total possession of the mother-spring-breast, the frog is able to acquire autonomy and freedom with respect to both the spring and the glass. He does not become a rival of who is still in need of owning the mother, as does the glass.

The frog, by centering on his Self, does not forget, however, that he too needs, just like anyone else, to feel at the center of things. He manages to satisfy this need by deciding not to become the glass's rival. The frog asks the glass if he can jump inside, and, from inside the glass he enjoys the water that flows from the spring into the glass. In this way, he manages to express his need to be at the center of things without taking away the central role of the glass. To the contrary, he manages to transform the glass's absolute need to be at the center of things a source of well-being for himself. Once he has enjoyed being in the center of the glass, the frog expresses his thanks, says good bye and goes away, leaving the glass with the spring.

What was not possible to do in the first scene has become possible in the second one: desire becomes evident and can be seen.

The circular motion of desire, of love and of the ability to welcome others in moves from the frog to the glass to the spring. The Oedipal conflict, which requires that one of the three must be excluded, is resolved through the frog's ability to offer a gift, instead of his appropriation or stealing of the object of desire.

In this light, a daughter can ask the mother for the gift of being able to experience an intense and intimate relationship with the father, and the son does the same towards the father so as to create an intense and intimate relationship with the mother. After this passage, so fundamental in developing the ability to love, the daughter returns the father to the mother, and the son returns the mother to the father. Now son and daughter are capable of separating from the parents and of going forward to look for their own object of desire.