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Nezavedne fantazije v partnerskem odnosu

*Unconscious Phantasies within a Couple Relationship**

Povzetek

Nezavedne fantazije, koncept, ki ga prva resno vpelje v kontekst psihodinamične psihoanalize Melanie Klein, je ključnega pomena za razumevanje psihodinamičnega v psihoanalizi; označujejo namreč tako odnos do ponotranjenih notranjih objektov in odnose med njimi ter načine in mehanizme povezav med Jazom in zunanji objekti. Iz tega izhaja, da šele z razvojem nezavednih fantazij v polnosti vstopimo na področje objekt-relacijskega, saj le-te dajejo notranjim in zunanjim objektom njihovo dinamično in relacijsko kvaliteto. Nezavedne fantazije morda najbolj pridejo do izraza v kontekstu partnerskega odnosa, kjer alternirajo med obrambno funkcijo in funkcijo zadovoljevanja nezavednih želja in prav s tem določajo dinamiko para in ujemanje njunih individualnih psih. V prispevku avtorica s klinično ilustracijo psihoterapevtskega dela s parom podaja možne klinične implikacije razumevanja nezavednih fantazij za psihoterapevtsko delo s parom.

Ključne besede

nezavedno, nezavedne fantazije, emocionalnost, objekt-relacijska paradigma, psihoterapija parov, psihoanaliza

Abstract

An unconscious phantasy, a concept that was first advanced by Melanie Klein, is crucial for an understanding of the psychodynamic in psychoanalysis; it offers a portrayal of the ubiquity of a capacity for relatedness between internal objects and how this is mediated by the self in its relationship to external objects. Consequently, by attributing a dynamic quality and a relational role to objects, it is only with phantasies that we truly step into the domain of object-relations. A dual nature of unconscious phantasies, their defensive role on one side and their wish-fulfilling role on the other, can be observed to the utmost in a relationship setting between two individuals where phantasies in fact contribute to a construction of their couple fit and colour their interaction dynamics. In this paper the author introduces some clinical implications of the understanding of the concept of unconscious phantasies by presenting a clinical illustration of a psychotherapeutic work with a couple.

Key words

unconscious, unconscious phantasies, emotionality, object-relations paradigm, couple psychotherapy, psychoanalysis.

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1. Introduction

When I think of relationships it strikes me over and over again how some seem to start from a hopeful, optimistic state of two individuals looking up to a better future together, from the in-love state of togetherness, full of yearning for something not yet experienced but always dreamt of and eventually end in a disillusioned state, almost like a battlefield between the same two individuals. In his analysis Kelley (1983) proposes that love refers to positive feelings and behaviours and commitment to the stability of the forces that affect an ongoing relationship; however commitment does not necessarily refer to a conscious decision between two individuals to stay together ‘for better or worse’. In fact, there is a body of evidence showing for the “stability of forces” originating in deeply rooted unconscious psychological phenomena like attachment, projective identification, narcissistic wounds, to name the few (compare with Carlson & Sperr, 1997).

In this paper I would like to focus on phenomena of a fantasy. It is only through a development of this internalised and unconscious psychic construct that we as individuals truly step into a domain of object relatedness. The development of fantasies is highly connected to human emotionality as they are constructed around internal objects¹ by means of regulating and gratifying instincts on a somatic level and communicating them to the world outside on a cognitive level; moreover fantasies do not only incorporate objects (of the Self and of the Other) but also the way these objects function: what they do, what is expected of them and where and when they fail to meet instinctual wishes – their active, dynamic and relational role (compare with Tarsh & Bollinghaus, 1995).

From this perspective we can see how fantasies are very much connected to the process of projective identification. In fact projective identification is in itself a fantasy; as a conception of a process of splitting parts of oneself and projecting them to the other, thus identifying them in the other and recognising him accordingly (Segal, 1995). I am using conception here to emphasise Kleinian’s appreciation of a fantasy as of something “...universal, functioning unconsciously and consciously...” (Tarsh & Bollinghaus, 1995).

I argue that fantasies, in a process of working through with a couple, are manifested around their aroused emotionality, serving two roles – alternating between a wish-fulfilling and a defensive one – and thus contributing to a development of their unconscious couple fit by means of transference and projective identification. In addition I would like to show, in a below introduced clinical vignette, how the couple fit in itself is a deeply rooted unconscious fantasy with a defensive function contributing to the rigidity of a relational dynamic, resembling a narcissistic way of functioning, preventing the shared internal couple to overwhelm them both as individuals.

2. Emotionality

Darwin (1921) was probably the first to systematically investigate the phenomenon of emotions both in humans and animals. In his work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* he

¹ An Object in Freudian terms represents a material or ideal carrier of discharged instinctual impulses, serving only as an object of their gratification (Freud, 1915) while in Kleinian terms it represents not only these innate instinctual impulses but also a fantasy of what it does with them and how they affect it; a dynamic quality is attributed to objects and thus they are given a relational role.

systematically selected primary emotions out of a range of emotional expressions in humans and compared them to animals'.

From his observations, Darwin concluded that there are five primary emotions, namely fear, anger, sadness, joy and aversion that are in common to humans and animals. They have an evolutionary function, he claims, because they were the means of communication in an early pre-verbal era of man-kind (Darwin, 1921). In fact, such is also the view of contemporary developmental psychologists, supported by neuropsychological findings (Damasio, 2000).

In a pre-verbal phase, physical expression is the only way for an infant to attract the mother's attention and emotionality plays a crucial role in it. Serving as means of communication, affects function as an inner compass for evaluating environmental stimuli and consequently for recognising bodily states (Schore, 2003). On the other hand, the mother's ability to become aware of her emotional state and to attune to her infant's affective state is not only crucial for her to understand the infant's needs but it also plays a regulatory role in the infant's brain activity and consequently in his psychic and physis development (Schore, 1994).

An interesting notion regarding emotionality, overlapping with Freudian concepts, is the one of the Social Constructivists. The inter-psyche dynamics of a Structural Frame of Mind is seen as interplay between Id, Ego and Superego that formulates one's personality, his behaviour as well as his position in a larger social context (Music, 2001). According to Social Constructivists, we try to regulate our emotions to fit in with the norms of the situation, based on many – sometimes conflicting – social demands (Averill, 1985).

The psychological development of an individual is a complex interplay between external demands of his social context and his innate demands. Social roles and 'feeling rules', the everyday social interactions and situations, are shaped by means of finding a compromise between the external and internal, constantly examining and assessing each other, and emotionality serves as an inner compass of where we stand as individuals (Adorno, 1951).

In his writings, Freud (1999) refers mainly to instinctual drives and affects being their derivatives. The way Freud understands them; affects are feeling states, a concept associating them with emotions. Freud's understanding of emotionality developed in parallel with his concepts of mental processes, tightly linked with them (Stein, 1999).

Within the early Affect-Trauma model, the so-called mental energy was associated with instinctual drives aiming to discharge whenever an energy level put the homeostasis of the mental apparatus off-balance; affects which are equated with emotions at this point, are thus seen as an energetic excitation² (Sandler, 1997).

Belonging to the system unconscious, affects represent a threat to the system conscious; threatening to get overwhelmed and disintegrated, the mental apparatus creates defence mechanisms

²Freud's early view of psychic functioning was rather mechanical: he thought of a Mental Apparatus as of energy content trying to maintain a homeostasis. Disequilibrium was created whenever an amount of (emotional) energy was too high, which then caused a drive towards discharge. Although he has developed his concepts and abandoned this early model for the structural one, the idea of instincts and their impact on human psyche is present all throughout his work. In fact the structural frame of mind indicates a development and incorporation of internalised agencies (Id, Ego, Superego) in relation to instincts, what resembles a development and internalisation of fantasies. I am focusing on his early, homeostatic concept in this paper, to offer more plastic illustration of the brain activity, recently proven by neuropsychological findings (compare with Baret, Niedenthal & Winkelman, 2005; Damasio, 2000, 2006; Gazzaniga, Ivry & Mangun, 2002; Schore, 1994, 2003).

(Sandler, 1997). Defence mechanisms prevent an immediate discharge of 'hostile' unconscious content, thus instinctual drives and their affective derivatives get manifested in dreams, phantasies as well as in psychopathological symptoms (Bott-Spillius, 2001).

Affects, although revealed through the mediation of, e.g. dream content, are understood as meaning bearers. Hence the focus point of Freudian psychoanalytical work in getting affects out and bringing them into one's consciousness and awareness (Sandler, 1997; Stein, 1999).

While early Freudian framework views affects as minute impulses that interfere with homeostasis of energy levels in the Psyche, Klein and her followers see their persistence and continuation of the dynamic across the life span (Bronstein, 2001).

Both Klein and Freud argue that we are born with two basic instincts, namely the death and the life instinct; however, for Klein, emotionality plays a more central role in the psychological development, being active since early infancy and throughout the entire life³. She argues that anxiety – an emotion that originates from the death instinct – is perceived in early infancy as an annihilation of life itself, which consequently activates defence mechanisms of splitting and projection (Bronstein, 2001).

In its attempt to get rid of unpleasant, threatening feelings, an infant projects them to an external object, an illusionary phenomenon that serves as a container of the bad⁴. By doing that the infant gets rid of the persecutory feeling within, however the threat is externalised now. Due to its persecutory nature, Klein named this phase the Paranoid-Schizoid Position as opposed to the developmentally more challenging Depressive Position (Segal, 2008).

She sees a developmental challenge in an integration of split parts; being able to tolerate feelings of persecutory nature enables us to see the whole object with its bad and good parts. Consequently the Depressive Position integrates object parts and since Ego identifies with both parts of the object, integration directly influences the Ego, strengthening it (Segal, 2008).

It is only with Bion that emotionality truly starts to play a central role in understanding mental functioning (Bion, 1962). Emotional experience, he argues, is an essential part of man's cognitive processes (Bion, 2007). His understanding of thinking is closely interwoven with processing emotions and thus essential for the understanding of phantasies as mental constructs resulting from such a dynamic (Stein, 1999).

Originating from Kleinian theory, he claims that emotions with a negative valence (i.e. envy, hate), being hard to tolerate, since they bring pain and discomfort, act destructively against the process of knowing, as they tend to bring about an inclination towards avoidance. Where Klein refers to the Paranoid-Schizoid Position and the Depressive Position, he writes of two modes of mental functioning: avoidance and containing, accordingly (Britton, 1998).

While Klein mainly refers to positions as processes of object formation Bion emphasises their role as functions of personality. The dynamic between two positions activates complex percepti

³A concept that was further developed in Britton's work; he argues we oscillate between the Paranoid-Schizoid Position and the Depressive Position all through a life-span (Britton, 1998)

⁴The concept of an Object is highly complex and for understanding it would be necessary to introduce a complexity of psychic phenomena which exceeds the aim of the paper. Generally, the Object stands for an emotional meaning (Bronstein, 2001). It is an illusionary construct of the mind that serves as a container of the persecutory emotional content (Britton, 1998) for the Ego to identify with (Bronstein, 2001).

ve, cognitive and emotional processes, according to Bion, integrated and manifested in so called linking. Linking refers here to a totality of human psychological functioning, a process converging intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions, a concept vastly important for understanding the nature of a therapeutic process and therapeutic alliance (Bion, 1959; Money-Kyrle, 1971).

3. Fantasies

In the scope of the above-mentioned we can now see fantasies, being closely linked with emotions, as mental constructs resulting from complex biological, cognitive, perceptive and memory processes (Solomon, 1997). In fact, Susan Isaacs (1948) introduces them in 'The Nature and Function of Fantasies' as: "... (in the first instance) the mental corollary, the psychic representative, of instinct. There is no impulse, no instinctual urge or response which is not experienced as unconscious fantasy."

This formulation represents an attempt to integrate the Freudian conception of fantasies as wish-fulfilling activities and Kleinian view of phantasies being the primary, unconscious, content. Additionally, Bion refers to so-called Bizarre Objects – which could be understood as fantasies – mental constructs that are persecutory and damaging in their nature. As opposed to so-called Alfa Elements, they interfere with functional mental processes, deforming perception and judgement as if they were true elements of the thinking (Stein, 1999).

Although early fantasies have a regulatory role in the sense that they serve as a defence mechanism against persecutory, overwhelming states, in her book 'Fantasies in Every Day Life', Julia Segal (2005) illustrates the destructive power of such early unresolved fantasies in our every-day lives when they fully take control over our assumptions, thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

Due to such a defensive function fantasies belong to the Paranoid Schizoid Position and are mainly constructed around emotional content with a negative valence. As such they enhance splitting mechanisms and prevent developmental integration; in fact, they serve as a wish-fulfilling substitute in a domain of projective identification (Isaacs, 1948).

The dual nature of phantasies, their defensive role on one side and their wish-fulfilling role on the other, can be observed utmost in a relationship setting between two individuals where phantasies in fact contribute to a construction of their couple fit (Tarsh & Bollinghaus, 1995). Each of them with an internalised phantastic mental construct, they enter a sphere of a relationship which represents a potential for fulfilling their individual needs and expectations of the other; thus a relationship becomes a shared creation, an entity on itself however, highly rooted in both individual's unconscious past experiences and coloured with their fantasy (Ruszczynski, 2005).

A relationship as a shared thing, as a shared unconscious phantastic construct, gradually evolves from an idealised being-in-love state towards a more mature form of modified individual expectations (Segal, 2005). In a healthy relating it has a potential to grow from a narcissistic stage, where it is highly influenced by splitting and projecting mechanisms of two individuals trying to force the other to realise their expectations invested (projected) in the relationship, to a more mature, integrated (depressive) way of relating, where there is a space and containment for a disillusionment of an individual as well as for acknowledging the shared creation, a relationship as a third (Britton, 1992). Similar to a psychological development of an individual from infancy to adulthood, relationships seem to undertake an analogous developmental process; therefore an

adult romantic relationship revokes same developmental issues in individuals and it claims same developmental needs of an infant namely nurturing, caring, holding, containing (Clulow, 1989)

4. Working through: A clinical illustration

Mr and Mrs A*

Mr and Mrs A have sought counselling due to a lack of communication in their relationship and very tense, conflict situations that contributed to Mr A's frequent angry outbursts. At first they seemed to be very contrasting, for what they have thought is a crux of their clash, we have managed to explore and identify their shared fit by identifying that there is no space for the shared thing in a relationship – in fact there their relationship stagnated in somehow narcissistic phase where there was no space for recognising and accepting the “otherness”.

They both come from contrasting backgrounds: in addition to different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, Mr A comes from a structured, rigid family background, Mrs A from an unstructured, unpredictable one. As individuals they are both highly functional and self sufficient, with a strong sense of a self for what turned out to be a rather rigid and defensive construct as they each developed a highly defensive – therefore rigid – way of being in relation to the other.

What first attracted Mr A was Mrs A's difference. He said that she was so much different than anyone else he ever knew, so much different to how he was, that he's decided to 'give her a try'. Coming from a very structured family background, where everyone knew what had to be done, when and how to fit in with the structure of the family system, Mrs A came as refreshment. Her somehow care-free, relaxed attitude to life at first represented something he looked up in his life; in fact, unconscious at the time, it was his desire to develop these qualities himself. In a therapeutic process this turned out to be his projection, a wish-fulfilling fantasy of living the way he never dared and managed in his family of origin and later on in his adult life. Gradually the same desired quality, projected and sustained in Mrs A, turned out to be his worst night-mare. The unpredictability of a life lived by somehow reckless attitude towards the future and the newness of it – in a realm of his family background it was the “otherness” of it – it stirred up too much anxiety he could possibly bare.

What first was a wish-fulfilling fantasy constructed around the desire to be and do differently, it re-evoked an anxiety due to the newness, the otherness of it. This then triggered another phantasy of a defensive role, putting him deeply to a pre-existing way of being, one of a rigid, controlling individual he desperately wants to move from (also by choosing Mrs A as a partner). Eventually he acted-out his frustration of sitting with the overwhelming anxiety by moving out of the country, what was interpreted as his attempt to gain some control over the situation by distancing from it and to take care of himself.

When asked why he had moved, it was as if an internalised object was saying to him: “I am better off alone where at least I can take care of myself and regain some control over my life”.

The anxiety was transferred to me by his frequent complaints about the therapeutic process, what was felt in my counter transference at the time as an anxiety of whether I will manage and sustain

* To protect privacy and confidentiality, all identifying client information has been altered throughout the text; I have endeavored to maintain the basic principles and thrust of the therapy being presented.

working with them as a couple. Mrs A's attitude towards what has happened was in accordance with that too; emotionally completely distancing from it, she managed to find numerous intellectual reasons why he did what he has done. It was only after three weeks working with them on the matter that she managed to come to terms with her own anxiety and frustration, feeling as if he has left her with all the responsibility and hard work for the outcome of their relationship.

In fact responsibility and effort invested in solving a conflict situation it turned out to be something she tends to avoid not just in her relationships but also in every-day situations. According to this it can be assumed that her motto: "Go with the flow," serves as a defence against facing a distress of every-day adult living. From this perspective it can be seen as a fantasy serving two purposes: 1) a wish-fulfilling one in a creation of an image of an idealised life, where all problems melt like lemon drops, and 2.) a defensive one in a development of an avoidant tendency preventing her from getting overwhelmed with anxieties, conflicts and distress of an every-day life. Mr A's role in their relationship is unconsciously matching hers by carrying all the above-mentioned, thus he (unconsciously) keeps her locked in her rather immature, adolescent way of being, where she can be free of all responsibilities. Her avoidant tendency is thus only reinforced.

From the abovementioned we can see how Mr A's fantasies about Mrs A's qualities, or more precisely his fantasies about certain qualities he desired to develop in himself that he had projected to Mrs A, gradually transformed from having a wish-fulfilling role to a catastrophic expectation threatening his integrity and predictability of a way of living he had developed and internalised within his family of origin and later on in his adult life and contributed to a development of another fantasy of a defensive function with which he has identified strongly (the abovementioned rigidity of his sense of self). However, there is Mrs A's fit in the dynamics too.

Although we have not explored what has attracted her to Mr A in the first place, I can only speculate, it was his predictability, structured calmness what fits in with her family background, full of unpredictability and ever-changing current, as the wish-fulfilling "otherness". By projecting these features to Mr A she kept him in his defensive role; eventually he refused to take in the projection of a father figure to what he has attributed unpleasant feelings related to responsibility, control, rigidity. In addition, in five months working with them, it also became evident that Mr A's projections kept her in a rigid role of a care-free, almost immature adolescent way of being and his angry outbursts, fighting the projection, only reinforced her avoidant manner. In fact, I believe, anger is what she has been unconsciously but excessively, almost sadistically transferring to Mr A.

At first it seemed as Mr A is the one who had had expectations of how a relationship should be which were highly idealised almost unreal; he projected his fantasy of a relationship as a smooth instinctive interaction, a flow of two individuals, so attuned that there was no need for communication in it. There is a similarity in this fantasy of his with how he described his parents' relationship in which they live passing each other, without communicating.

Mrs A's expectations of how relationship should be both fit in with Mr A's but clash as well. Although it seemed she is somehow more realistic about it, as she believes there is no such thing as an ideal relationship therefore her motto is 'go with the flow,' it soon became obvious that this is an idealised, fantastic construction based on her parents' interaction, also without communication, where they just did not care and tend to avoid each other.

Their relational fit – as far as fantasies of how relationship should be – is in non-existence of relational of the relationship, of a relationship where there is no space for the “otherness”. They both have internalised a model of couple interaction from their individual families of origin, and although coming from a contrasting backgrounds, a “non-relational” type of interaction is common for both of them. The internalised couple model is of a couple who lives by passing each other⁵.

In the transference, working with them, same features have been manifested in Mr A’s frequent complaints directed to me about the therapy. When asked what his expectations were, he said to give them some guidance and to produce some change in them. His fantasy about relating in a highly attuned way was present and re-enacted in it by his expectation for me to attune to their problem and find a magical cure to fix it. Mrs A’s transference was somewhat different but it still resembled her, rather avoidant manner: the way she engaged with a therapeutic process was highly intellectualised, abstract for what, I believe, was her defensive attempt to avoid reliving (re-experiencing) the existing however unconscious problem. It was as if she was saying (rather cynically that is): ‘whatever you do, whatever you offer [it is] I [who] will [have to] make the most of it’.

I believe they both were transferring a rather impotent parental figure to me, a relationship where on Mr A’s side an object is unable to attune to his needs, on Mrs A’s side an object who does not actually care and tries to avoid the ‘issue’ by offering meaningless interpretations she has to make use of and from the perspective of a couple an endless stagnation in a disillusioned non-existing state of being where no space for analysing a deeper meaning has been created.

The process of working through was aiming to integrate their different approaches constructed around similar internalised couple model. By creating a space for bringing in and reflecting upon their individual characteristics and innate fantasies, the rigidity of their projective identification interaction pattern lessened and they have managed to develop a more depressive characteristics. Whereas Mr A experienced Mrs A’s carefree, take-it-as-it-is-given approach to life anxiously, he managed to tolerate it by realising that the anxious feelings belong to his past experience. On the other hand Mrs A’s perception of Mr A as a rigid, controlling person, altered as she stepped out of her idealised go with the flow attitude by starting to acknowledge her avoidant tendency.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I argue that fantasies are psychic-mental constructs formed around an aroused emotional state, alternating between dual roles of a wish-fulfilling one, on one side, and of a defensive on the other. In the presented case I have tried to illustrate how two individuals joined together in relationship rooted in a shared fantasy of an internal couple, created their couple fit by a mutual process of projective identification transferring anxieties, conflicts and defences to each other as well to a therapist working with them.

Emotionality plays an important role in our psychological development, existence and the totality of being. Emotions serve both as an inner compass, bringing information about the environment and our position in it, as well as means of communication and relating to others.

⁵ I could have used narcissistic as a notion identifying their relationship interaction; there certainly is a strong narcissistic component in it – as described in Ruszczyński’s (1995) *Between narcissistic and more mature object relating* – but I sense, by doing that, I would strip the dynamic of a non-relational emphasis, of a strong element of neglect underlying it.

They are inevitable facts of our lives and repressing them, although as a functional defence preventing us re-experiencing stressful experiences, will only act against us.

However, integrating them into our every-day reality, tolerating them and keeping them in consciousness is a developmental challenge – not without a reason, as neuropsychological findings demonstrate. As the Latin origins of the word indicate, emotions put out of balance the homeostasis of what Freud referred to as energy in the mental apparatus. His understanding of our mental apparatus – the brain – was surprisingly accurate: while aroused, the brain systems responsible for processing emotional experience get literally flooded by chemical substances, which consequently prevents activation of cognitive processes (i.e. thinking, reasoning, abstraction, symbolisation).

In the scope of the above-mentioned fantasies, unconscious mental constructs serve as a functional defence mechanism preventing such flooding. However, on the other hand, in case of an unresolved event, fantasies become dysfunctional, preventing an integration of emotional experience with reasoning, what Bion referred to as a process of getting to know.

Such unresolved past casts a shadow over the present by transferring emotional impediments stored in fantasies. From this perspective, fantasies colour and deform our perception of reality,

A process of identifying and analysing such constructs of a predominant emotional content claims an emotional space and time – a therapeutic container where by a process of working through a new outcome is possible. It is only an integrated experience that can truly effect clients (and therapist's) body and soul.

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Opomba

Maja Malovrh je doktorska kandidatka Zakonske in družinske terapije na teološki fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani. Vzporedno zaključuje klinični trening na področju partnerske psihodinamične-psihoterapije na centru Tavistock v Veliki Britaniji.