

Some reflections on the use and meaning of conflict
in contemporary psychoanalysis

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In this work I present some reflections on the concept of conflict in contemporary psychoanalysis, and more especially in European psychoanalysis within which, however, this concept as such does not seem to arouse particular interest. In fact, I do not recall that it has been the object of any theoretical examinations recently. This does not necessarily mean that the concept has been rejected or substituted; at most, as I shall mention later, some pre-conflictual stages of development have been hypothesized.

The concept of conflict is generally implicit in analytical work and in the subsequent conceptualization, and is used – as happens with many other concepts – with very different and at times diverging meanings, both by the various schools of thought and within the same school itself.

These notes will be accompanied by a clinical example that will attempt to illustrate some of the possible choices of the analyst at work concerning the use of the concept of conflict.

In these notes I will not deal with the history of the concept of conflict, or with the variations it has undergone both in Freud's work and in that of his successors; nor will I analyze the different positions of the better known theorists of conflict, who are mainly from North America. The excellent work of H. Smith (2003) exempts me from this task that he has done much better than I would ever be able to. The reader of these notes must keep this in mind, since for the most part they are conversant with the theses of H. Smith.

As H. Smith says at the beginning of his paper, it is true that "Time was when conflict was universally acknowledged as the defining focus of psychoanalysis...This is no longer the case" (p.49).

Since when, we might wonder? When did psychoanalysts stop considering conflict as the main focus of psychoanalysis? And to what extent have they done so?

If we carry out a research, using the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, on the use of 'conflict', more than ten thousand papers are shown that in some measure use the concept. Certainly most of these are not works specifically about conflict, but after a sound discrimination, at least thirty of them focus on the theme: psychic conflict and defense, psychic conflict and the structural model, the components of psychic conflict, inner conflicts, conflict and deficit, convergent and divergent conflict, conflict and splitting, conflict and compromise formation, conflict and reconciliation, etc. (For example: S.

Abend, 1981, S. Abrams, 1974, L. Boyer, 1971, C. Brenner, 1979, 1982, A. Kris, 1985, P. Pao, 1970, F. Pine, 1994, etc.).

One can argue, and it is true, that this research only includes works written in English, and that only recently have some English language journals, more specifically the *Int. J. of Psycho-Anal.*, hosted several works of analysts written in other languages and translated into English. It is also noticeable that most of the works written on the theme are by North American analysts, with a few exceptions corresponding mainly to that sector of British psychoanalysis that is close to the teaching of Anna Freud.

Lastly, there is no doubt that French psychoanalysis allocates to conflict an important place in its theorizations. However, as in other psychoanalytic cultures, this occurs with very different accents and lay outs.

But I do not intend – nor could I without a lengthy and detailed research – to follow the destiny of the concept in the various cultures. I only wish to make a simple observation that corroborates what H. Smith mentioned in his above-quoted paper, in order to think about when it was that the concept lost its explicit centrality.

The Kleinian psychoanalytical universe can be taken as an example. If we consider the four volumes of Melanie Klein's work (*"The Writings of Melanie Klein"*), in the first volume, in the Index elaborated by Barbara Forryan, the term is quoted many times (conflict, capacity to bear conflict, displacement of conflict, ego exposed to conflict and conflict of love and hate). We must keep in mind that these works were written between 1921 and 1945. In the third volume, that includes the works of 1946 to 1963, the term appears only once in the Index as 'need for conflict', where on page 186 M. Klein says: "The absence of conflict in the infant, if such a hypothetical state could be imagined, would deprive him of enrichment of his personality and of an important factor in the strengthening of his ego. For conflict, and the need to overcome it, is a fundamental element of his creativeness". From this quotation it can be seen that even though the concept appears once only in over 350 pages, the author attributes to it a fundamental role in child development.

If we now turn to the last of the above mentioned volumes, the number of times the term is included in the Index increases, but its specificity becomes rarefied, and the editor of the Index associates 'Fights' to the term conflict, clearly indicating that it is used in many occasions and not always with the classical psychoanalytical meaning of conflict. Under the heading of conflict we find: between analyst and mother, attempt to avoid, about current relationship, about loved person, between love and hate, of loyalty, between nurse and cook, between parents, between parts of self. Some of these conflicts are

interpersonal, others are clearly conscious, the conflict between parts of self appears for the first time. These are the 'Notes to Ninety-second Session of "Narrative of a Child Analysis"', in which M. Klein says: "The collision between the good objects and what he felt to be the bad ones (because he had attacked them and wanted to deprive them) was also a conflict between one part of himself felt to be good and allied with the good object and the hostile part of himself allied with the objects felt to be bad". What can we deduce from these references taken from the Indexes and from this short quotation? It seems to me that during the first period of Klein's work the concept of conflict is used in more or less traditional terms; at the time of the third volume the only mention of conflict is used to give it a central role in the structurization and in the development of the infantile mind. During the last period it is possible to identify three specifically psychoanalytical uses: attempt to avoid conflict, conflict between love and hate and conflict between parts of self. However, one has the impression that conflict as a theoretical term "defining focus of psychoanalysis" (H. Smith), has been integrated into a more general theory of the functioning and development of the mind.

A superficial and rapid research among the Indexes of some of the better known Kleinian authors, reveals some interesting results. In B. Joseph, 1989, H. Rosenfeld, 1965 and 1987, R. Britton, 1998, J. Steiner, 1993, etc, the Indexes do not include the term at all. What is the meaning of this absence?

It does not seem reasonable to me to suppose that Kleinian psychoanalysis has eliminated the concept, or feels that it can do without it. Alternatively, one could think that Kleinian psychoanalysis - and not only that - takes the existence of conflict for granted, and yet declines it and integrates it into a conception of the mind that has substituted many terms of the traditional psychoanalytical vocabulary. An example is the above quoted H. Rosenfeld, 1965, in which the term "conflict" does not appear in the Index. However, the title and the theme of the fourth chapter: "Notes on the Psycho-Analysis of the Superego Conflict in an Acute Schizophrenic Patient", are mainly about this topic. Rosenfeld, who takes his inspiration from various authors including E. Pichon Rivière (1947), defends the centrality of conflict between id and superego (or the ego at the service of a primitive, sadistic superego). In the follow up to his interpretation of this conflict, his theoretical reference is explicitly the Kleinian theory relative to the early origins of the superego, to the 'paranoid-schizoid position', to schizoid mechanisms, to idealized and persecutory objects, etc. (p.70). It is fairly clear that the concept of conflict – in this case in partial contrast to the Freudian idea that places conflict in schizophrenia "between the ego and the external

world" (1924, p.152) – is omnipresent in Rosenfeld's thought, although it is not taken into particular consideration. In fact, after having emphasized the role of the superego in schizophrenia, the task that Rosenfeld sets himself is that of pointing out how a different theory of the mind in the "very early developmental stages" (p.70, paranoid-schizoid position and depressive position) can contribute to a better understanding of psychotic pathology. Conflict remains integrated within the general theory and is not dealt with as such. This can be deduced from the work of J. Steiner (1996) in which, after clearly explaining "the theory of mental conflict" he says that: "the conflict theory retains a central importance but has been greatly enriched by Melanie Klein's description of schizoid mechanisms, (Klein, 1946, 1952). In particular, the discovery of splitting and projective identification radically affects our understanding of mental conflict, alters the basic model of mental disorder and fundamentally affects the aims of psychoanalysis."

I think that the other theorists of the Kleinian area – as well as those of other orientations – behave no differently. This does not detract from the fact that, as H. Smith rightly points out, the concept itself, even for those who do explicitly refer to it, can assume very different meanings not only concerning the contents (this is obvious), but also regarding different levels of abstraction, different inferential processes, differences between intrapsychic or intersubjective conflict and differences between unconscious and conscious conflicts. This is a topic that Smith's paper developed very clearly in his careful study of the different positions of four North American conflict theorists, and I shall not discuss this here.

I would rather intervene on the compatibility – or not - of the different versions of conflict according to those authors who theorize it explicitly, as well as those who use it implicitly without dwelling on it.

But before doing so, I would like to propose a brief digression relative to the analysis of psychoanalytical concepts. I formulated what follows during the course of a research on the concept of projective identification in the various psychoanalytical societies constituting the International Psychoanalytical Association. This meant analyzing the variations that the concept underwent in the different psychoanalytical cultures and the use that was made of it in clinical practice. It was a conceptual research project on the material published in various countries. Even though the concept in question was different, the premises that it produced were the same as those that led to my reflections on conflict.

Some general and epistemological premises

Some preliminary statements could be useful to identify more clearly the problem we are dealing with:

1) Even when we have in mind the study of the development of a specific concept, it is necessary first to outline the history of the general evolution of the psychoanalytic theory in each country, and to describe the training modalities in the psychoanalytic institutes and the general social and cultural orientation. The acceptance of a particular concept by the psychoanalytical community is the result of many factors. This is clearly illustrated in the article written by H. Smith. It is not by chance, as I emphasized previously, that the majority of the works explicitly dealing with the topic were written within the area of North American psychoanalysis.

2) From an epistemological point of view, it would be advisable to offer some preliminary specifications. Two interpretative positions of today's theoretical pluralism can be identified. One position states that psychoanalysis possesses a central indispensable nucleus composed of a small number of fundamental theoretical propositions, to which "puzzle" solutions (A. Cooper, 1985) are linked in an attempt to solve partial problems. The other says that we are dealing with divergent and complete theories concerning the psychic apparatus. My view is that each of the psychoanalytical positions presents a different theoretical picture, both in the sense of a global theory and as regards the details of the functioning of the psychic apparatus.

3) The unity of analysis, from an epistemological point of view, is the theory. The empirical data on which we work are the data of the methodological empirical basis, i.e. data that presuppose the use of material or conceptual instruments that in their turn respond to a theory. A different theory of the instrument (or the use of a different instrument) has an inevitable consequence on the methodological empirical basis, on the method itself and consequently on the theory. This assumption is the most definitive from an epistemological point of view, and certainly the most interesting for the problem with which we are dealing. It is to be confronted with the schema of Waelder (1962) that is definitely the most suggestive, but it could prove to be the source of some difficulties. If we admit, as H. Smith does, that the first three levels - clinical observation, clinical interpretation and clinical generalizations - do not present contradiction between the different views that he analyzed, then we must admit that we presume that different theories and different instruments do not modify the methodological empirical basis. The methodological

empirical basis, as I have already said, consists of data that although in its purest state has to be filtered through the “lens” of the theory to which the instrument responds. Let us take the example suggested by H. Smith: Paul Gray, says Smith, “has moved the theory of conflict and compromise to the forefront of the analysts mind at work, where the notion of conflictual interference with the expression of drive derivatives becomes a *kind of filter* (my italics) through which he views the patient’s associations” (p.68). This approach to analytic listening is called by Gray “close process attention”. Smith himself speaks about a kind of filter that obviously all analysts use in their listening to the patient’s associations and that varies from one analyst to another. But, by definition, this makes it improbable that different theories producing a different methodological basis can be declared to be considered compatible for sharing Waelder’s three initial levels. This would imply affirming, as was done in the past, that we psychoanalysts are divided by theory and yet have a common empirical basis. For the reasons expressed above, this is extremely contestable. Although the observation does not exclude that the different theories analyzed by Smith are compatible among themselves, but they should be so at a ‘high’ theoretical level, and not at the observational or interpretative level of Waelder’s schema.

It can always be argued that these are different ‘vertexes’ (Bion) of observation and one can always try to integrate them. We do this daily in our work, consciously or unconsciously. But in my opinion the compatibility of the theories cannot be determined at the low levels of observation or of interpretation of data.

4) If we agree with what has been said, we must ask ourselves whether we can use a concept taken from one theory in the context of another theory, without altering it or modifying it into something else, and without the concept in question entering into obvious contradiction with the theory into which it has been imported. I must say that, looking again at the bibliography on this theme, it is difficult not to notice that in certain uses the concept of conflict is rendered unrecognizable and incompatible with its guest theory, as well as making it incoherent.

5) Any concept of the psychoanalytic theory, cannot be formulated, discussed and put into practice outside a more general hypothesis on the development of the psychic apparatus. Consciously or not, every concept is embedded in a theory of development and cannot be intrinsically in contradiction with it.

Concepts and developmental theories of mind

Probably the last one is the statement that might prove to be decisive for matters concerning the concept of conflict and its use in clinical practice. My opinion is that rendering the different theories on conflict compatible is relatively easy, just as long as there is not a great difference in the hypothetical description of the development of the psychic apparatus. From a certain viewpoint, and taking into account the previously formulated objections, the four positions analyzed by H. Smith could become compatible at a 'higher' theoretical level than the one mentioned by the author, to the extent that although they postulate different theories of the mind, they do not diverge too much in the hypotheses about the development of the mind itself.

But the situation becomes significantly different when the theories of the development of the psychic apparatus or 'mind' hypothesize a pre-conflictual period. This is what H. Smith implicitly admits when he says (p.49): "Some analysts, including some self psychologists, focus primarily on defects, deficits, and dissociations – or "vertical splits" (Kohut 1971, p. 176) – considering conflict to be a later developmental achievement, and in certain cases, a later focus for analysis".

This is clearly the case of Winnicott and of those theorists who, with different emphasis, are oriented towards the formulation of theories of development that are congruent with the theories of the British analyst. I shall take as an example the Italian analyst Eugenio Gaddini, because some of his ideas could be useful for a reflection on the clinical example that I shall present later. Gaddini – as indeed Winnicott and Greenacre, although independently and with sometimes quite noticeable differences – is among those who, contrary to M. Klein, do not accept the existence of an ego that functions since birth. In his thinking Gaddini develops the notion of self – a concept shared to a certain extent with other authors - by taking as a starting point what he theorized through the existence of a 'psychosensory area' that precedes the perceptions '*strictu senso*', inasmuch as the perceptions presuppose structures that, the author says, will develop later on. In Chapter 11 of "A Psychoanalytic Theory of Infantile Experience" entitled "The presymbolic activity of the infant mind", Gaddini introduces his main concept, the 'basic mental organization' (BMO), that corresponds to the period between biological birth and psychological birth, characterized by separateness. During this period it is a question of 'managing' the relevant and intense requests that the body demands from what is still *in fieri* and that we will subsequently call 'mind'. In other words, this means giving a 'mental' sense to the

experience that is conceived at first as sensorial and only later on as perceptive. This BMO is the result of sensorial activities that the author considers to be mainly of 'contact', although he includes all the modalities of the sensorial world, and it contributes to the formation of what will subsequently be the self. However, the BMO is of a fragmentary nature even though, after separation has occurred and before integration takes place, it serves to keep together the fragments that compose it. The prevailing anxiety is the loss-of-self anxiety that can favor or obstruct integration - an integration that in some serious pathologies may not succeed, or at least not in such a way as to allow the subject a sufficiently satisfactory structurization of the psychic apparatus. It is evident that all this will reflect on the psychoanalytic process in different ways, and will in any case represent a serious obstacle to the cure.

There are two main fears or anxieties resulting from a damaged OBM and from an inadequate separation-individuation process: the fear or anxiety of integration and the fear or anxiety of disintegration. The patient fears every change as it could annihilate him, and consequently he will be able to 'choose' to remain in a state of non-integration. These anxieties indicate two possible directions: either towards a greater integration or towards the hypothetical disintegration of the psychic apparatus, i.e. Bion's catastrophe.

In this brief note about Gaddini's ideas I certainly do not intend to give a full explanation of his theoretical frame. I only want to emphasize that conceiving a development of the psychic apparatus hypothesizing a pre-conflictual period, as Gaddini does, has its consequences. Firstly, in order to analyze conflict, whatever theoretical conception one uses, it will be necessary to resolve, if possible, the problems connected to the defects deriving from a deficient OBM, from a separation that did not take place or took place defectively, or from an individuation that was absent or *in fieri*. From this point of view, and as H. Smith rightly says, the conflict will be "a later developmental achievement, and in certain cases, a later focus for analysis" (p.49).

In an attempt to render compatible theories that at first sight seem to be noticeably different, let us try to find some possible solutions to this theoretical challenge. One could argue that the fundamental Freudian principle of "Nachträglichkeit" (retroactive re-signification) should help us to recompose the picture. Do we not say that the subject goes through all the hypothetical phases of development in his own way, but that each of them will be re-signified *a posteriori* according to subsequent experiences? Could we not say that the pre-conflictual 'phase' in the development of the psychic apparatus will in any case be integrated and re-signified according to what the subject will subsequently experience?

This is possible, but it does not solve a fundamental problem about the pre-conflictual area, i.e. that it is described as an area in which the concept of conflict has no specific meaning since the structure that would make it intelligible is missing. It is a pre-structural state of the mind.

One could, instead, try to describe a situation in which distinct areas of the mind coexist, some of which would be pre-conflictual while others would obey the rules governing conflict. Conflict would then need to be individuated between the different areas, both pre-conflictual as well as conflictual; but this is very much like suggesting what epistemologists call the construction of *ad-hoc* hypotheses whose purpose, in most cases, is to keep an unsatisfactory theory alive at all costs.

It would also be reasonable to try to review our ideas on the concept itself of development, pointing out that it can never be conceived as a linear development; in the same way we should abandon the unlikely image of stages that follow each other in a certain order and with a certain rhythm, substituting one another as the previous ones are 'overtaken'. In an interesting work "Regression and psychoanalytic technique: the concretization of a concept" (1998, 2000), L.B. Inderbitzin and S.T. Levy present some ideas on development and, consequently, on the concept of regression, that are in agreement with what I have said previously. I myself (Canestri, 2004) have favored the possibility of considering the phenomenon of temporal regression as a quantic state of overlapping states that, at a given moment and in certain conditions, precipitates into a particular specific state.

But this updating of our ideas on development (and many others are also possible) does not solve the question at hand. The hypothesis of a pre-conflictual state continues to be incompatible with other hypotheses that suggest the existence of conflict from the very beginning. This pre-conflictuality will in any case be defined in function of the absence of conflict, since the structure that would make this possible and conceivable is absent. Certainly, hypothesizing the absence of a structure, of a self-object differentiation already outlined at the beginning, of a separation-individuation already existing at birth (even if in an embryonic state), of an incipient ego, etc. will have many repercussions on theory, and certainly not only concerning the concept of conflict. One example is projective identification: it is not conceivable unless self-object separation is postulated right from the beginning. A mother-child fusional state such as that pictured by Winnicott, does not authorize the introduction of a concept like that of projective identification from birth, not even as a very early and normal mode of communication (Bion). One could postulate a mode of communication with characteristics similar to those we suggest for projective

identification, but those essential theoretical presuppositions that define it as such will be missing.

It is understandable that accepting these ideas will not only have repercussions on the theoretic field, but inevitably also on technique and on how the cure is conducted. If the analyst is dealing with a pre-conflictual area, his interpretation of the phenomenon cannot be put in terms of conflict, whatever theory he may choose to conceptualize conflict. Instead, he will turn to identifying the prevalent anxieties of the patient who is fighting against loss-of-self anxiety, trying to find out whether the prevailing anxiety is connected to fear of integration or to fear of non-integration. The patient does not conceive of himself as being separate, and some times, for him, separation is synonymous with psychic death; at other times the patient tries desperately to oppose any form of progress, that would be represented by an increase of the level of integration of the fragments of the OBM in order to make way for an autonomous self capable of developing an individual mental life. The fear of integration prevails and the patient goes back on his tracks, remaining in a state of non-integration that seems to be more reassuring. Interpreting in terms of conflict - if one moves within this theoretical frame - proves to be inadequate and in some cases damaging, unless the analyst interprets a conflict between pre-conflictual aspects and conflictual aspects of the patient's mind. This is possible from a clinical point of view but, as I mentioned earlier, is unsatisfactory from the view point of the integration of theories.

This is the reason why I consider that the theory of development that the analyst favors becomes in this case (and perhaps in many others) a discriminating element between different psychoanalytical theories and models, and in some ways the main reason for the non-compatibility between them. The fact that these theories of development of the mind (I am not talking about development in observational terms) are purely hypothetical (Freud would say speculative) does not change the essence of the problem at hand.

In his analysis of different theories of conflict linked to certain American authors, and when discussing Bromberg's ideas, Smith proposes a solution that resembles the one I have been talking about. Quoting Bromberg, he says: "Thus, Bromberg (1998b) posits a "structural shift from dissociation to conflict" (p. 293) and advocates that "part of the work in any analysis...is to facilitate a transition from dissociation to conflict" (p. 275). More recently, Bromberg (2000) suggests that in a typical analysis, there is a shift from "a mental structure in which self-narratives...are organized primarily dissociatively" to one in which they "will be able to engage one another conflictually" (p. 82)". I will not enter into Smith's discussion of Bromberg's premises, except to say that Bromberg's hypothesis of a

shift from dissociation to conflict is very similar, from the point of view of logical presuppositions, to that of Winnicott, Gaddini, Greenacre, etc. who predict the existence of a primary pre-conflictual phase, with a subsequent shift that leads to the constitution of the structure and subsequently of the conflict. Smith's proposal is to consider that the activity of dissociation, when it appears in clinical work, is a compromise formation and can be analyzed as such, and that the self-states that are dissociated must be brought back to a state of conflictuality between them. While accepting the fact that, in spite of the similarities of logical structure between the statements made by Bromberg and those of other authors postulating a pre-conflictual stage, they are of a different nature (from the viewpoint of the development of the mind, a dissociative state is not the same as a pre-conflictual state), Smith's solution is to bring conflict back to the interaction between various areas - a solution to which I have already objected. To me, this is always an *ad hoc* hypothesis to salvage the theory of conflict as an organizing principle omnipresent in the mind. However, as Smith rightly points out in the introduction to his work, this solution belongs to a different level of analysis and of generalization than that characterizing the classical concept of conflict.

In clinical work with a patient the different dissociated self-states must be brought back to integration and perhaps to reciprocal conflictuality among states, and this is definitely a therapeutic task for psychoanalysis; but this in itself says nothing about the theoretical status of conflict. With the same end in mind (the progress of the cure), Gaddini postulates the importance of working with the patient on the need to generate a process of integration that will lead to the separation-integration of the subject and to the consolidation of the structure; but this 'desiderata' does not illuminate us on the likelihood or not of different concepts on conflict or on the inexistence of conflict in certain areas of the mind or during certain moments of the analytical process. The question must be resolved at another level of abstraction.

The idea of the omnipresence of the compromise formations (Brenner)¹ deserves reflection. The theoretical status of this concept has, in its turn, different possible levels of analysis according to which level of abstraction is taken into consideration. The meaning, use and relevance of this concept are clear in C. Brenner's theorization. Also clear are the problems created by the generalization of the concept, as Goldberg (quoted by Smith) and Smith himself rightly point out.

¹ Compromise formation: Kompromissbildung.

It is however possible to think of compromise as a general principle of mental life and not only in terms of a necessary articulation between wishes, defenses and self-punishments. In the Freudian theoretical vocabulary the term “reconciliation” (*die Versöhnung*), prematurely fallen into disuse, was initially used to indicate (first section of Part III of The Project, section E of Chap. VII of the *Traumdeutung*, Schreber, etc.) a mechanism of acceptance of repressed material (the homosexual fantasies of Schreber); but already by 1911 (Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning), it appears as a regulating principle of the overall functioning of the psychic apparatus at work in the artistic mediation between fantasy and creation of a new reality. The scene becomes complicated and is noticeably enriched by the appearance of the second topic concerning the various dependent relationships hosted by the ego entertains. Ego Psychology, although not explicitly including the term and its theorization, interprets *die Versöhnung* as a function, an activity of the ego that depends on the relative strength of its organization. On other occasions (Canestri, 2003) I have believed it useful and reasonable to consider *die Versöhnung* as a principle specifically linked to the functioning of the entire psychic apparatus and not limited to the ego agent, as one of the principles regulating the “solution” that the apparatus permits to the subject, a neutral principle that does not necessarily function in the name of progress and growth.

We know that subsequently, with M. Klein, the concept of reparation appears on the conceptual psychoanalytical scene. Though Freud homologates reconciliation with restoration (1926, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, “*Herstellung oder Versöhnung*”), Klein initially uses the *Wiederherstellung* to indicate reparation, a term that will be substituted in her later writings by the term *Wiedergutmachung*. M. Klein has abandoned the concept of reconciliation and has introduced a concept that, despite the initial relationship with Freudian ideas, is without doubt conceptually very different. I do not think it is necessary to insist on demonstrating this statement. It is up to Bion to re-create something that bears a relationship to Freud’s original concept. He does so, as is his habit, with very original proposals. In his “Transformations” he emphasizes that, if psychoanalysis has to be a science, “it must be a science of at-one-ment”. Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, under the heading “one”, gives various meanings: a) in a state of unity of feeling, in harmony; b) of an identical or sympathetic frame of mind; of the same opinion. To the heading “atone” it attributes the archaic meaning of: a) to bring from a state of enmity or opposition to a state of toleration or harmony: RECONCILE; b) to make reparation to: CONCILIATE. Lastly, the word “atonement” (leaving out Bion’s

hyphens) means: a) restoration of friendly relations: RECONCILIATION; b) reparation esp. for an offense or injury.

I will leave it up to the reader to work out Bion's construction, but I think that in it there reappears Freud's idea of a general principle that regulates the functioning of the psychic apparatus.

Something similar, although from a different theoretical point of view, is proposed by C. and S. Botella (1992, 1996, 2003) as "*principe de convergence-cohérence*" (principle of convergence-coherence) that would have the function of rendering intelligible to the subject what occurs in psychism.

These various theoretical formulations give the idea of another and higher level of generalization in which the concept of "compromise" can be conjugated, without necessarily having to think about the omnipresence of the compromise in clinical work in terms of articulation between wishes, defenses and self-punishment.

But these brief indications are only to say that, in my opinion, it is necessary to consider a higher level - Waelder's fourth level, i.e. metapsychology – in order to indicate the points of congruence and/or divergence of certain theoretical concepts in the different models or theories that psychoanalysis offers to us today.

After the presentation of a clinical example, I will attempt to comment on some possible derivations of these ideas.

Conclusions

From what I have said, I think it is clear that, in the first place, I do not consider all theories on conflict to be compatible; moreover, the comparison between different theories cannot be put into practice in Waelder's 'low' levels (clinical observation, clinical interpretation, clinical generalization that lead to clinical theory). I think that, inevitably, the theoretical discussion has to be proposed at a metapsychological level.

From the viewpoint of the development of the psychic apparatus (theories of the mind), the hypothesis of the inaugural, pre-structural and pre-symbolic existence of a pre-conflictual state, whoever's ideas it is based upon - Winnicott, Gaddini or other authors - traces a clear demarcation line relative to those theorizations that, instead, place conflict at the center of mental functioning since the dawn of life. And this is why the above-quoted authors, (Winnicott and Gaddini for example) think that between the biological and the psychological births there is a fairly long period of time that will subsequently lead to the

psychological birth, characterized by self-object separation and by the constitution of the structure.

Environmental deficits and other factors connected to the complementary series of Freudian theory, could create obstacles to the full realization of this process, and leave areas of non-conflictuality where the presence of fear of integration and/or fear of disintegration could oppose change and the consolidation of separateness and of the structure itself. In these areas the loss-of-self anxiety is predominant and forces the subject to defend himself from change in order to survive.

From a clinical point of view, I consider that one can obviously verbalize these vicissitudes in terms of conflicts between different areas of psychism, as Smith proposes relative to Bromberg's theory for example (conflict between dissociated parts); but I think that this solution is unsatisfactory from a theoretical point of view. It would once again be a descriptive use of the concept of conflict and, from an epistemological viewpoint, of an *ad hoc* hypothesis to keep alive the idea that, in mental life, conflict is always and in any case the fulcrum of the organization of the psychic apparatus.

There remains one very important issue that Smith mentions in his discussion on Bromberg's position, and also in other parts of his paper. Of necessity I will have to be very brief. Smith wonders whether in Bromberg's case "we are talking about different organizations of mind or different ways to address the patient" (p. 83). In reality, the question already implies thinking about the problem in a way that could give rise to divergences. Smith is fully aware of this when he says: "I am arguing here, as earlier, for a looser coupling of theory and practice than we are generally taught in our institutes. This habit of mind is promoted in our literature by those who would support their technical recommendations with theories of mind to make it look as though the practice followed necessarily from the theory, rather than, more loosely, the other way around" (p. 83), and he quotes in a footnote a work by P.Fonagy published in the same issue.

I fully agree with Smith concerning a looser coupling of theory and practice. For many years, in a "working party" of the European Psychoanalytic Federation, we have been carrying out a qualitative research project on the relationships between practice and theory and the use of the implicit theories (private, preconscious) of the analyst in clinical practice. In this project the definition of theory that we use says that a theory in the psychoanalytic practice is the sum of public theory based thinking plus private theoretical thinking plus the interaction of private and explicit thinking (the implicit use of explicit theory). We think, as did Sandler before us (1983), that the exploration of the analyst's

private theories, when used as I have specified above, has a high heuristic potential. We also agree with Smith that the relationship between theory and practice is not as close as we infer, or as is taught in psychoanalytic institutes, especially in function of the fact that the analyst at work, as Sandler asserted, creates systems or partial constructions that try to take into account in the best way possible whatever his experience with *that* specific patient suggests to him.

Having said this, the dependence between practice and theory is not eliminated; at most, the latter might be more subjugated to the effective modalities of what we are *really* doing in practice. A different theory of conflict that derives from a different theory of the mind – e.g. that produced by hypothesizing a pre-conflictual phase - will naturally have to produce differences in the way of confronting in clinical practice, problems of the kind that I have tried to illustrate in the clinical example.

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