The Psychoanalytical Work with the Couples

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Following my view of the couple, this paper retraces the course taken by suffering couples who finally decide to consult a specialist, a couple’s psychoanalyst. I shall describe its principal phases, from the circumstances of the first consultation to the objectives and benefits expected of psychoanalytic work with couples, including technical aspects I introduced in this field of practice. Then, I offer readers a clinical illustration choosing the problems surrounding contemporary extraconjugality with Alice and Jean, and I formulate a personal view on this issue.

KEY WORDS: Couple · Work · Psychoanalysis · Extraconjugality.

My View of the Couple

For me, the couple is a historically and socio-culturally determined, living and composite–bodily-sexual, socio-cultural and psychic–reality with diverse and variable interrelationships. It involves several ambivalently transferential figures playing multiple roles within this inter-transferential dynamic organization determined by a compulsion of repetition of “infantile prototypes”. Inspired by Freud (1915) on the subject of analytic transference, I maintain that the couple creates and constitutes an inter-transferential neurosis, while nevertheless, presenting psychotic virtualities, in particular during critical periods and events that then reactivate each one of the partners’ depressive and paranoid-schizophrenic positions. This inter-transferential neurosis unfolds and evolves in accordance with varied verbal and non-verbal modes: mimetic-gestural, behavioral, fantasized and sexual. Vis-à-vis the other person’s body there are: reciprocal flows of drive investments (narcissistic, erotic, tender, and aggressive); representations (conscious, preconscious, and unconscious); projective and identificatory movements mobilizing the psychic bisexuality of each partner, which participate in the elaboration of a “psycho-bodily pairing”, or rather of a “fantasy of psycho-bodily pairing”.

For its part, the sexual act would, in particular, realize the group fantasy of an “imaginary common body”, bisexual, unconscious, fantasized body. Moreover, it actualizes the regressive desire for narcissistic union, conferring upon both a state of narcissistic completeness.

Its socio-cultural reality is characterized by the presence of two individuals living together and constituting a social unit of economic production and cooperation, of social reproduction, and of child raising, for the couple that has become parental. Inspired by Bion (“work group”) (1961) I see them as forming a “work couple” ensuring its material means of existence. Finally, they belong to a social group, occupy a position in the social structure, are endowed with roles and functions.

Their couple can be institutionalized by marriage as well as by other forms of social recognition. They thereby elaborate together a conjugal “culture” and “identity” (Smadja 2011).

Finally, its psychic reality consists of fundamental psychic
components ensuring its “psychic consistency”, made up, notably, of a plurality of conflictualities, of flows of drive investments, of fantasies of desire, of object-relations, of an interplay of identifications and of projections, imagos, anxieties and multiple correlative defense mechanisms applied in the structuring and functioning of this conjugal dyad.

Inspired by Kaës’ 2007 work Un singulier pluriel, I envisage three “logical levels” in my approach to the conjugal psychic reality:

– the group level, common psychic reality shared by its members, with its specific organizers and its formations;
– the level of the intersubjective relationship, with its modalities and variable levels of object-relations, its unconscious alliances (structuring, defensive, even offensive), the relating of Oedipus and sibling complexes, especially. The triangulation secured within the intersubjective love relationship by the co-creation of the conjugal group, common, shared fantasized living being and psychic cradle of the future child to be born would contribute to the consolidation of the partners’ oedipal organization;
– the intrapsychic individual level, with its own conflicts between the Ego and its internal love object (trauma-object, following Green 1983), between its two specific psychic objects, the love object and the couple-object, but also in the Ego’s tense relationship with the couple-group, between the similitude and difference of psychic spaces.

This conjugal, historical, reality is also alive with multiple conflictualities, antagonisms, both internal and external, that are in an ongoing relationship of tension with one another.

**Circumstances of the First Consultation**

The relationship between the two partners is experienced as being inadequate, difficult even blocked and they seem to suffer from this. They no longer understand one another:

On the level of erotic life, it may be a matter of a loss of desire and of any form of seduction, but also of certain forms of suffering. Indeed, certain forms of sexual dysfunction (frigidity, impotency, premature ejaculation, dyspareunia), often presented as being due to one of the partners, represent another form of setting limits on the density of the relationship and its fusional risks experienced within a satisfactory sexual union.

The other frequent situation comes from conflicts between partners.

Is it a “noisy” expression of the fundamental antagonisms between Ego/object, identity/alterity, narcissism/object-relations, and that of the difference between the genders (Smadja 2011) or a compromise-formation (Lemaire 1979), a mutual reaction of narcissistic, identity affirmation serving the self-preservation of each person and finding expression in hostile reactions?

**Correlative crisis of the transition from the conjugal couple to the parental couple, from the couple to the family.**

**Physical and/or psychic conjugal violence**, which will have to raise questions for us regarding their transferential/intertransferential significance and their fantasy dimension or dimension of pure discharge of excitation without any representative content.

**Extraconjugal affairs or “extraconjugal acting” on the part of one partner: factor of crisis and/or critical symptom?**

The presence of a symptom in one of the partners troubling conjugal functioning.

We may cite depression and other psychopathological troubles, problems with conduct (alcohol, drug use), a more or less serious bodily illness.

**The presence of a symptom in a child of the family.**

One may discover that this symptom manifested by the child is tied to a problem the parental couple has. Thus, hostile reactions can be displaced from the parental couple to the child, protecting their idealization and avoiding the expression of unbearable ambivalence. The noisy pathology of an adolescent may sometimes be understood as a means of bringing about treatment of the parents.

**It may also be a matter of a conflictual relationship in a new couple within a reconstituted family.**

But these couples may also come to consult me in order to undertake “separation work” that will be to the benefit of both partners and enable them to attenuate the inevitable suffering inflicted, not without guilt, upon the children they may have.

These consultations, early or not, attest not only to a failure of couple work but also to a more pronounced contemporary concern accorded to the quality of conjugal life, as well as expectations for and demands made on it, something unprecedented up until now in western history.

However, these painful conjugal situations which a number of couples find unmanageable have become factors threatening to break up the couple, something that must raise questions for us.

**The Three Preliminary Interviews**

During the three preliminary interviews, customarily fixed as a weekly session, I proceed with a general exploration of the consulting couple, of their objects of suffering and of their request, which will enable me to propose joint psychoanalytical work or other therapeutic help more adapted to their current situation.

Let us also consider the first transferential and counter-
transferential expressions. In fact, essentially characterized by the intensity of its intersubjective transferential or inter-transferential manifestations constitutive of theconjugal relation, the couple is also the source of multiple individual and group movements directed towards the analyst and the ambiance of his or her office, in particular. Those coming from the conjugal group are oriented toward the analyst in order to merge him or her into the “therapeutic group” formed by the analyst and the couple.

Consequently, the counter-transference of the analyst, space of reception of the transference of each of the partners, inter-transferential movements and conjugal transference, but also tool of investigation and interpretation of these latter transferential movements, will also be composite and complicated.

At the end of my exploratory interviews, I have enough necessary elements available to me to enable me to set down indications for therapeutic work with the consulting couple.

Indications and Contra-Indications

The indication, just as, moreover, the limits of the therapeutic possibilities, depends on the exploration of the couple as well as the characteristics of the analyst—his or her personal analysis, psychic capacities, training, experience, interests in certain conjugal problems, counter-transference, in particular.

That is why good indications seem to be more inherent to certain characteristics of the analyst who would feel at ease, or more at ease, with certain types of conjugal dysfunction, as well as being exposed to certain individual and conjugal transfero-counter-transferential aspects, which would confer upon him or her the feeling of being capable of helping and accomplishing “good work” with these couples.

Then again, in patients, I shall mention the verbalization, the reciprocal investment of the partner’s psychical functioning and of the conjugal reality, as well as the two partners’ capacity to engage in self-analysis.

I consider that the multiple forms of insufficient and conflictual communication, even communication that has become complex, as well as lack of input and conjugal narcissistic wounds accompanied by reciprocal hostile movements, represent some good initial indications. Nevertheless, the evolution always remains uncertain. Suffering in their erotic life (absence or temporary or lasting loss of desire, impotence and premature ejaculation in the man, frigidity and dyspareunia in the woman) remain difficult and their evolution unpredictable.

Are there really contra-indications for therapy with couples?

Outside of rare situations like jealous delirium within the context of passionnal psychosis, melancholic delirium essentially dependent on the partner’s attitude, and those situations able to exacerbate the perverse and pathogenic effects upon one of the members, there would be situations in which therapy would rather have more drawbacks than advantages, could even aggravate, even temporarily, pathogenic effects, not to mention, of course, the analyst’s overall feeling of discomfort and inability to be able to help certain couples.

Presentation and Establishment of the Framework

It is at the end of the third preliminary interview, once the analyst has proposed joint psychoanalytical work to the suffering consulting couple, that he or she will present the framework for the therapy:

− One first rule concerns practical indications concerning the work sessions: imperative presence of both partners of the couple at each session, the absence of one of them therefore making it impossible: length (an hour): the frequency of the sessions (preferably weekly, if not, bimonthly): fixing the time and stating of the fees for the sessions.

− A second rule is the right and not the obligation to say what one thinks, what one feels and what one imagines, without being interrupted by one’s partner, but also to protect the inner spaces of each person and his or her personal secrets.

− A third rule is abstention on the part of the analyst.

Technical Aspects of This Psychoanalytical Work

Dealing with the three levels of their psychic reality (group, intersubjective and individual), this psychoanalytical work with couples is a space-time intermediary between their suffering, corresponding to a failure of their couple work, and, on the one hand, the discovery of their conjugal functioning—but also of each partner’s psychic functioning—and, on the other hand, the advent of positive changes made possible by obtaining the means conducive to the realization of much more satisfactory couple work, the impact of which will be favorable to bodily-sexual and sociocultural realities.

The preliminary work, nevertheless concomitant with the interpretative activity

While the strategy is based on the interpretation of the multiple individual, conjugal, and above all, inter-transferential movements, through the counter-transference of the analyst, it necessarily involves some fundamental conditions and tactical aspects. Let us take a look at them.

According to Grunberger (1993), respect and restoration of the patients’ narcissism are fundamental elements of the analytic process, just as the analytic situation organizes a veritable “narcissistic union” between the patient and his or her
analyst which it is important to respect since its therapeutic potential is so great. And the analyst’s silence contributes to creating this union comparable to narcissism of sleep.

So, I must be attentive and respect, as well as quite often restore, each partner’s narcissism and promote the narcissistic reinvestment of the conjugal group, wounded, experienced as a “bad object” by each one. How? In particular, through the twofold “well-tempered” use of silence, not only on the part of the analyst, but also on the part of the conjugal partner who must listen without interrupting the speaker. Silence is in the service of the progress of the transferential investments, on the one hand, and of the interpretation on the other hand. Consequently, it is in the service of the analytic process.

In doing so, the “therapeutic group” will function as a “narcissistic union” making it possible to create a “group illusion” (“we work well together; we are a good group: our analyst is good”) helping narcissistic restoration of the couple as a “bad object” in order to make it into a “good object”, but also to restore a natural ambivalent position with respect to it, whence the establishment of a climate of security, prompting an investment of trust in both the analyst and the analytic work.

But the silent partner listening to the speaker reacts and comments by means of non-verbal language (facial expressions, gesturing, even postures).

Analysts must be able to act between two attitudes: make possible, promote common verbalization of the poorly defined thoughts, affects underlying the conflicts and symptoms, as well as facilitating the expression and flow of fantasies by inviting each party to express what he or she sees as the conjugal psychic reality and that of his or her partner. And the latter will have to be able to hear it and react to it by conveying some impressions about what had been imagined, both about the couple and about his or her own psychic reality. But analysts will also have to protect the speaker’s freedom to talk, by remaining silent.

In addition, it is necessary for analysts to make sure that individual boundaries are respected and pay special attention to the possible danger connected with the damaging psychic penetration of one of the partners by the other.

Analysts also lend support to the chain of individual and conjugal associations when they detect that they are not in the service of the resistances to the group analytic process. They may help “reformulate” certain contents expressed, as well as encourage joint formulation of certain conflicts by the two partners, which will become a group formulation.

They thus adopt a “well-tempered”, active position of essentially tactical value within a climate of security and narcissistic benevolence.

This fantasizing activity, as individual as it is conjugal, is in fact one of the expressions of this conjugal psychic reality, as well as corresponding to the interpretative activity of each of the partners. It will be able to involve each of the partners, their modes of communication, different events and situations of daily life in the home, as well as certain events of their life together or their respective families. However, underlain by common anxiety, or for pathological or sociocultural reasons, the forms of expression of this representative activity within the couple can be inhibited.

The work of interpretation

It is a matter of interpreting each of the partners’ transferential movements with respect to the analyst, as well as the predominant inter-transferential movements between the two partners, which structure their couple, and finally the transference of the conjugal group to the analyst.

But, first of all, I would like to indicate the wealth of open possibilities that compensate for the initial impression of being overwhelmed by the rush of stimuli and the complexity emanating from this “clinical living reality”, something which presupposes the mobilization of capacities for analysis of the counter-transference on the part of analyst, as well as his or her creativity. Then, let’s consider again the three dimensions of the psychic conjugal reality: group, intersubjective and intrapsychic-individual.

Thus, the interpreting would focus on the interplay of individual psychic processes in the group process as the expression of the functioning of the conjugal group underlying it, in particular, the common and shared formations or conjugal formations of compromise, resistance, symptoms and blockages of psychic life. Thus, the obstacles standing in the way of thinking, feeling, imagining, engaging in exchanges about what one imagines, underlain by anxieties aroused by some unconscious fantasies are an example of this type of resistance, as well as the blockages keeping the couple from carrying out its natural function of narcissistic support of each party, either directly or indirectly.

Then, the interpretation concerns detecting varied modalities of the intersubjective relationship with its narcissistic, pregential and oedipal overtones. The interplay of individual problems could take the form of unconscious distributions of roles such as those analyzed by Willi (1975–1982) and Lemaire (1979).

On the individual plane, unlike other colleagues, I consider that the reciprocal investment of the partner’s psychic reality and functioning—one of the objects of my work—therefore, the discovery of certain finally verbalized aspects of his or her psychic life necessarily not involved in his or her conjugal life and, what is more, in this reassuring therapeutic, renarcissizing and relibidinalizing framework, can favor relational reorganizations through the suppression of ideas and fantasies
having interpretative value and pathogenic repercussions, then
proving mistaken.

The partners in fact constantly live with their interpretations—repressed, rationalized or denied, explicit or implicit, but always present and dangerously irrefutable—without any circumstances providing them with an opportunity to confront their own psychic reality and external reality, the partner’s psychic reality. Finally, each one will be able to make his or her projections, interpretations, fantasies explicit and, as for the partner, he or she will be able to challenge them in order to reveal his own experience. Within this stimulating climate of flow of fantasies, the analyst will explain that these personal interpretations are imaginary productions informing about each one’s psychic universe, whence their richness. Nevertheless, I shall keep an eye out for any possible perverse use by the latter.

Objectives and Benefits

As concerns psychic reality, this work would usually make it possible to realize:

– a veritable “unsticking” of each of the partners by reducing excessive identification movements, in particular of an adhesive, projective and introjective kind, thus favoring a process of separation/individuation in them, as well as a renarcissization expressing itself through greater autonomy;

– the acceptance of a certain degree of dependence upon the other and of invasion, both by the love-object and by the couple-object;

– a lowering of the level of conflictualities and less rigidity in their intersubjective relationship leading to making it more flexible, to its relibidinalization, to a better affective flow (reducing ambivalence and freeing tenderness, for example) and flow of fantasies, finally to a more open distribution of roles played alternatively by each one (father, mother, child, brother, sister, friend);

– an evolution of the representations of the love-object and of the couple-object, becoming then better integrated, therefore, less invasive;

– a redistribution of investments between the shared, common objects and the separate, individual objects. These changes will be able to motivate one or both partners to undertake individual work.

The effects of this psychic work will inevitably find expression in the bodily, sexual levels of reality, as well as in family (if it is also a matter of a parental couple) and social life.

The improvement or the resumption of sexual relations will have interpretative value and pathogenic repercussions, then proving mistaken.

The couple will discuss, notably, rearrangements (dynamic and economic) in the family, the repositioning of each person within the family group, the reestablishment of clear boundaries between the parental couple and the children, as well as talking about changes that have occurred in their “work couple” bringing about reorganizations of their home, professional reality, even of their various social relationships.

However, the evolution may be less patent, more limited, sectorial because of the existence of multiple, still irreducible, forms of resistance.

Finally, with or without success, certain couples decide to separate in the least heartrending manner possible.

Alice and Jean or the Problems Surrounding Contemporary Extraconjugality

They came to consult me in a rather critical state, sent by a sexologist whom Jean was consulting. Alice was engaging in an extraconjugal relation which was becoming unbearable for Jean because, according to him, and according to the “agreement we made together beforehand”, it was not supposed to have evolved the way it has.

Some historical and biographical elements

About the couple

They met 20 years ago in Paris during a dinner with friends. Alice was then 22 years old, an attractive beautician living in Belgium. Jean was 35 years old, a wine merchant, divorced, father of one child of which he was not the guardian, very rich in those days. For him, it was love at first sight, which was not the case for Alice, who experienced this first meeting differently. Nonetheless, she was attracted to this reassuring, very intelligent, generous, reliable man, upon whom she could lean. For Jean, Alice was such a beautiful woman. Apart from her sensuality and her intelligence, he was moved and touched by her sensitivity and her fragility.

Their relationship began very rapidly then, Jean plying Alice with gifts and talk of love. They settled down together very quickly. This was all the more surprising for him because he had not envisaged “starting life over again”, but rather having inconsequential affairs. Be that as it may, remarrying was unimaginable. And yet!

About their life as a couple, she all the same expresses certain reservations, but nevertheless accepts it. She would nonetheless still feel a great deal of ambivalence, the hostile component of which would remain unconscious and well counter-invested, but for an indeterminate length of time. She very quickly expressed the desire to have a child, something to
which he was not at all opposed. So it is that Jules was born, then Claire, three years later, and Alice would devote herself fully to them, at the risk of losing her autonomy. They would experience years of very happy conjugal and family life, theoretically. Stepping back, Alice would become aware of a certain alienation both in her relationship with her husband and in her family life, something which would cause her to enter into a period of profound personal and conjugal crisis. And Jean would experience serious professional difficulties accompanied by a sharp drop in income. They would leave France for Canada where he would try to get his feet back on the ground. He succeeded partially, but the crisis in their relationship was severe and profound. She brought up the idea of separating, a thought he considered unbearable to the point of wishing to commit suicide. They consulted a couple therapist, then began therapy which they interrupted prematurely. After some years, they returned to France, with Claire only, then a 15 year old teenager, while their 18 year old son Jules pursued his studies.

In Paris, the conjugal crisis persisted and intensified. Having taken up her studies again some years earlier, Alice became a nursery school teacher. She very quickly found a job in a childcare center, while Jean found himself jobless and in a very precarious financial situation. It was within this context that she brought up the desire to have an extraconjugal relationship. The meeting of her lover, “authorized” and “offered” by her husband, and the “unforeseen” prolongation of this extraconjugal relationship would worsen the conjugal crisis even more. The unexpected length of this relationship did not in fact suit Jean and it worried him. He asked Alice to bring it to an end, but she was against that, could not do it. She experienced doubt. She felt lost, indecisive, torn between the pressure of her husband and the perverse manipulations of her lover, whom she also used as a means of detachment, emancipation and decision-making power with regard to her husband’s domination of her. It was within this context that they came to consult me. They had in fact found themselves in such a state of distress that they assigned me the role of emergency couple therapist.

Alice

Born in France, the older of two children, with a brother two years younger than her, her mother quickly fell ill and would be too frequently hospitalized in the mental hospital for depressive decompensations. Her illness was diagnosed fairly early on. Alice was then quite young when her father abandoned them. Faced with this situation, they left for Belgium to live with their maternal grandmother, who would play a major role in her childhood and adolescence. She would take care of her grandchildren because their mother was incapable of it. But this grandmother was controlling, and the way she dominated Alice became unbearable to her. She would leave this pathogenic family environment, source of multiple dissatisfaction and dangers, as soon as possible. After secondary school, she studied to be a beautician by taking odd jobs, met men, without any desire to live together as a couple until she met Jean. But even with him, she did not at first desire to live with him as a couple, being indecisive and probably afraid of being locked into it and of feeling dominated once again. Alice’s disastrous childhood, marked by a very probable depression, then seemed irreparable. Her life with Jean and her desire to be a mother would therefore repair the little girl greatly harmed by the primary parental deprivations having determined early narcissistic traumas that still had not been worked out. The anti-depressive function of the couple and of motherhood proving then obvious.

Jean

He was born into a family, the father of which, a Jew of Polish origin, was deported to a concentration camp during World War II. Presented both as a hero and a womanizer, he treated Jean badly, which made him an object of great ambivalence. His mother is described as uninteresting, distant, not very affectionate. Jean was the middle child. His two brothers for the most part acquired satisfactory professional situations. After taking university level courses in business and enology, he became a prosperous wine merchant. He had therefore suffered from a lack of love on the part of his mother—whom he had to share with his brothers, producing fierce rivalry—and violence on the part of his father, admired as much as hated. He would not forgive him, for example, for having made his mother suffer through his many extraconjugal affairs. He married at the age of 25 and fathered a son. However, he and his wife separated fairly early and he became single again, not wanting to remarry, and even less to have other children.

The structuring of their couple and inter-transferential aspects

Their meeting was therapeutic, principally reparative and anti-depressive in purpose. It was probably the principal “group contract” of their unconscious alliance said to be defensive (Kaës 2009). For both of them, it was a matter of using the love-object and their couple to repair traumas, sufferings and deprivations—perhaps essentially narcissistic in nature—which had produced depressive affects. That is what I discovered rather quickly in the course of our work together and I told them of this interpretation very early on, no doubt prematurely so, given their evolution.

Through her motherhood, Alice was in fact repairing primary maternal deprivations. How? By identifying with her
children through projective identification, and by playing the role of a good mother, she was repairing both her defective mother, and, as a child, was finally enjoying the kindly, dependable care of a “real” mother, which in part explains the enormous investment of her maternal function, thus profoundly seducing Jean. In addition, the presence of her husband, though very controlling—something he was not conscious of—also repaired Alice’s experience of abandonment by her father. This paternal transferential component, though overestimated and overinvested by Jean, was playing an appreciable role. But it was associated with grand-maternal transference through the control and domination that Alice was experiencing painfully with, as it happens, some ambivalence. I in fact sense in Alice the existence of an unconscious hatred for men originating in a hatred first directed toward her father who had abandoned her and them, not to mention also the existence of powerful impulses of hatred for her incompetent, defective mother.

As for Jean’s needs for reparation, Alice’s exclusive love had to fill the emptiness left by his mother, source of narcissistic wounds that remained wide open. However, these reparative aspects of their conjugal psychic organization could not eradicate the deep undercurrent of lingering unconscious hatred greatly counter-invested by consciously expressed love, essentially by Jean. The infantile hatred of his mother was indestructible and had been transferred onto Alice, but all the more counter-invested by love and expectations of exclusivity, as well as by possessive attitudes.

Thus, this love was dominated by a significant anal component. This is why what brought them together, besides a need for reparation, was also an unconscious hatred of the parent of the opposite sex transferred onto the partner and greatly counter-invested by tender and erotic impulses. More precisely, I came to realize that they both share a profound, intense unconscious hatred directed both toward the parent of the opposite sex and toward that of the same sex, something which brought me to conceive of and anticipate a highly ambivalent individual and conjugal transference, marked by expectations of caring, narcissistic kindness and hostile impulses. Indeed, this negative transferential component manifested itself fairly early on Jean’s part. It was first of all a matter of paternal transference, characterized by an expression of admiration: “You are very intelligent, a very good professional; you do not allow yourself to be distracted or inundated by details.”

When I told them of my initial interpretation of the scenario they had worked out together regarding Alice’s extraconjugal relationship, which Jean thought of as a “gift of love”, therefore, a way of being in an active position (and) of mastery, he reacted by telling me that he was “90% in agreement with me”!, while Alice admired my ability to grasp the situation so quickly with a synthetic presentation of my understanding. Another negative transferential element was Jean’s manner of contesting certain interpretations, probably conveyed too early in terms of his own evolution and that of our work together. In particular, when I told him he had a need for mastery and control of Alice, he disagreed strenuously, all the more so, because he had always had the impression of being very liberal with her, letting her do what she wanted, of course, but with certain limits fixed beforehand. Alice understood me perfectly and subscribed to my interpretation. This control made her think back to that of her grandmother. He would contest other interventions on my part. Otherwise, his need to eat up the time of each session which, moreover, he prepared and waited for impatiently, suggested to me a revival of both a sibling inter-transferential and maternal transferential nature onto me.

Indeed, as in the family environment of his childhood, in our sessions, in my receptive, kindly maternal presence, he needed to capture my attention to the detriment of his wife within the framework of a painful sibling rivalry. This monopolization of speech and attention, being both an inter-transferential fierce sibling rivalry and transferential maternal, kindly, reparative in nature—aroused very ambivalent counter-transferential affects and attitudes in me, as much of solicitude as of irritation and injustice with regard to Alice, something which thus enabled me to picture to myself the lack of care she may have suffered from.

Having spotted this transféro-counter-transferential interplay fairly early on, I was all the same led to have Jean regularly to invite Alice to speak, notably to ask her how she experienced Jean’s need to spend so much time talking, which did not surprise her. She relived in this very old frustrations and injustices, and Jean was expressing in this way a need for the exclusive love he was deprived of by his parents and his brothers. Nonetheless, I also told myself that by having to interrupt Jean over and over and by his own persisting in this transferential attitude, he was placing himself in a masochistic infantile position, having himself punished, so to speak, by both a frustrating mother figure and a sadistic father figure, who mistreats him.

In addition, feeling his invasive side in our sessions informed me of his invasive attitude with respect to Alice, and I could thus identify myself with her and feel what she was experiencing with her husband. Another complicated aspect of the conjugal transference was that by being a nursery school teacher, Alice was fairly close to the “shrink”, so much so Jean felt a certain complicity between us, the forming of a couple from which he was excluded, reviving a painful oedipal experience, which he sought to compensate for by boast-
ing about reading and having read a considerable number of books on one subject or another, as well as having read and listened to my earlier lectures on couples.

Alice’s position with regard to Jean is not simple. On the one hand, she feels captive, controlled, stifled, intruded upon by him, something which she rejects and wants no more of, demanding freedom. On the other hand, she feels very attached to him, feels intensely grateful to him, but also considers him to be a child in search of love and recognition, who makes her laugh in certain respects by his excessive and pointless intellectualization trying hard to understand everything about her. I in fact understand very quickly that Alice no longer accepts having Jean exercise control over her life, neither professionally nor personally. And this is one of the latent meanings of her extraconjugal relationship, which continues quite unexpectedly for Jean. From this perspective, she represents a mother figure that he must “possess” for himself.

Apart from their common need for reparation, they are also impelled by a common, shared unconscious oedipal fantasy of triumphing over defective parents: “We will be better parents than our own parents” suggesting the constitution of an offensive unconscious alliance (Kaës 2009). And added to that is Jean’s fantasy of being a much better husband to his wife than his father was to his mother and Alice’s of being a better mother than her own mother, as well as being, unlike her mother, a wife capable of keeping her husband. But also for each of them, there is the fantasy of exclusively possessing the parent of the opposite sex for oneself.

Some considerations about identifications

Jean, he, who was set upon a paternal role, unconsciously adopted a reparative maternal role with respect to Alice. But, inter-transferentially, she also identified Jean with the figure of her controlling and overbearing maternal grandmother, thus reawakening “claustrophobic” anxieties. Probably too, by taking on the role of a good mother to his wife, Jean projects himself in her as a child, which enables him to find fantasized satisfaction through identification. Finally, his mother’s lack of love for him is repaired. By assuming the role of a good mother in this couple formed with Alice, he is therefore repairing two children, her, and through her, the wounded child he also was.

For her part, while Alice at times plays the role of a frustrating mother with Jean, during the extraconjugal relationship, to Jean’s unconscious, she probably represents the figure of the father with many lovers, making his wife suffer. Jean is thus placed in the masochistic position of his own mother enduring the female conquests of her husband as played by Alice, something which reawakens unconscious infantile hostile impulses in him that find expression in their present conjugal life. I in fact have the impression that all his present hostility is to a large extent infantile in origin, directed against his father and his attitude with regard to his mother. In this position and this role, Alice seemed to have a certain power, that of deciding, consequently, of no longer being subject to her husband’s desire to dominate and control. Thus, her phallicity, dormant up to that point, reawakens and asserts itself in this way. In addition, identifying with her abandoning father, she places Jean in the position of the child she was, who endured this traumatic experience, also, moreover, identifying with her depressive mother absent over and over, she also makes her husband identified there with little Alice endure her instability, her indecision and her absences, all that within inter-transferential interplay determined by a compulsion to repeat “infantile prototypes” (Freud 1914).

Thus, in this inter-psychic structuration of their couple, we find:

- the involvement of oedipal, pregenital and narcissistic components;
- the presence of unconscious alliances—both structuring, their “narcissistic contract” from the beginning of their time together, and defensive, revolving around the repression of their well counter-invested Oedipal hatred, and without repression, with the denial of their traumatic primary parental deprivations determining common narcissistic flaws, depressive affects, but also offensive ones (being better parents together than theirs were);
- the mobilization of the bisexuality of each of the partners;
- as well as the presence of unconscious, common and shared fantasies building their group reality, such as that of a symbiosis, reparative of early narcissistic traumatisms and deprivations that have not been worked out, but also a pregenital fantasy of mutual possession, finally an oedipal fantasy of triumph over the parent of the opposite sex and over the flawed parents: “I will be a much better mother and wife than my mother. I will be a better father and a better husband than my father. We will be a much better marital and parental couple than our parents were.”

During this brief therapy, jobless at the time and in a more than precarious financial situation, Jean recontacted former Canadian colleagues who proposed that he take part in a project to advertise wines that he found rather interesting. He would therefore soon have to travel over there. Upon his return, this project enthused him, and he expresses his desire to go back and live in Quebec, where his son is a student. But Alice was not willing. She still had not extricated herself from her extraconjugal affair and foresaw an opportunity for professional advancement. So, the continuation of our work together was threatened. Once again, I was placed in the position of emergency couple therapist. Their upcoming voy-
age to Canada to attend a celebration among friends marked the first stage of this. They were supposed to reconnect me upon their return, with the idea of possibly resuming our sessions before Jean’s definitive departure. It turned out that for him, one of the objectives of this therapy was the interruption of the extraconjugal relationship and the “reintegration-re recuperation” of Alice into the couple. This did not take place. On the one hand, she had not yet broken it off. On the other, she did not want to return to live in Quebec. This was disappointing and hurtful for Jean, going against the program he had worked out in his mind beforehand. She was in fact unconsciously trying to thwart her husband’s desire for mastery and domination, which was connected with the reactivation of an old depression.

Not having recontacted me upon their return to Paris as we had agreed, I have unfortunately not had any further news of them.

Thinking Alice’s extraconjugal

We see that Alice’s extraconjugal affair clearly fits into a multifold framework:

– that of her own life marked by critical and mutative stages, including the one she has been going through for some years.
– that of her conjugal life with her husband, also marked by a critical period linked to a certain number of factors.
– that of the transference onto her husband within the conjugal inter-transference and the diverse figures of it discovered in the course of our brief work together.

– This form of extraconjugality experienced by Alice must also be envisaged within the framework of their couple work. So, is it expressing failure of their couple work? And what kind of failure? What would be the nature of it and in what area of their conjugal life, bodily-sexual, sociocultural or psychic, would it manifest itself? Would the conjugal function of reparation expressed by an unconscious fantasy of symbiosis, which treats their anxieties of abandonment and restores their narcissism, be the cause of it, along with the common, shared fantasy of oedipal triumph over their parental couple and over the parent of the same sex? Moreover, if one wishes to speak of failure of their couple work, has this been the case for many years, without any other obvious expression?

It seems to me rather that Alice accorded her couple work priority to the detriment of her individual work, therefore, in the service of her “own interests” through lack of subjectivization, in particular, whence a certain disequilibrium between these two psychic components in Alice, which is not the case for Jean because of his extensive professional investments. In addition, the domination exercised by Jean altered their mutual function of reparation. Their symbiotic fantasy was transformed into a “conjugal prison” for Alice and into love on the anal regressive model of mastery and object possession for Jean. In that respect, there was indeed failure of their couple work.

Some psychoanalytic reflections on the polysemy of extraconjugal

“Extraconjugal acting”, or an extraconjugal relationship or love affair can arise at different times in a couple’s life, in the man and/or the woman.

– Apart from the path of narcissistic and/or libidinal instinctual satisfaction responding to deprivations and frustrated expectations, extraconjugality also constitutes a protective, defensive solution to some depressive, but also fantasized, pregenital and/or oedipal dangers falling into the inter-transferral and group category. Indeed, they may occur preventively, in order to limit the density of the love relationship from the start, therefore, as a means of protecting against pregenital fantasies such as that of being absorbed, devoured, by the love-object and that of being invaded by the couple-object, which leads to the multiplication of secondary partners.

Consequently, through its not mutually exclusive dimensions of satisfaction and of defense, extraconjugality displays bipolar organization, which reflects the bipolarity of the choice of conjugal object.

– Apart from an individual or conjugal critical period, if one partner lets it be seen and known with an exhibitionistic dimension, this may be part of a perverse exhibitionist-voyeuristic (as well as), sadomasochistic game with the other partner, which the latter may reject or accept implicitly. In the latter case, through identification with his or her partner, he or she will be able to experience fantasized satisfaction from this–this scenario would then respond to an unconscious distribution of roles where one is designated to act out the other’s fantasy (phoric function of Kaës 2007), both of them being satisfied in two different modes, direct and fantasized. This is Alice’s and Jean’s situation.

However, if the one partner remains secretive, without any appreciable conjugal dimension, it could have a more individual symptomatic significance, such as a defensive modality against castration anxiety, a troubled primary oral relation being dealt with by a compulsive genital relationship, a desire for conquest or the fear of incestuous fantasy.

– It may also be understood by the beginnings of dissatisfaction, with the impossibility of introducing perverse components into the conjugal erotic life, therefore, of satisfying certain fantasies.

– In a period of individual and/or conjugal crisis, if there is personal fragilization, fits of depression or narcissistic disconfirmation by the partner, he or she may seek this lost re-

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assurance and/or narcissistic confirmation from another person. In this case, the quest for input and narcissistic confirmation prevails over erotic satisfaction.

There may be advantages in this, notably a relibidinization of conjugal bonds, therefore revitalizing the couple settled into a fatal state of extinction.

– But, one may also be in search of a lost amorous state impossible to experience again with one’s partner, that “honeymoon”, that largely dulled “group illusion”. Eroticism then combines with narcissism.

– This acting or this affair can also have a hostile aim, seeking to disqualify the other person becoming an object of hatred, basis for the projection of bad and rejected parts of oneself. In the story of Alice and Jean, I identified the common existence of a highly counter-invested unconscious hatred both of the parent of the opposite sex and that of the same sex. So, Alice’s extraconjugal affair could also serve to satisfy her repressed hostile impulses directed against the transferential father and mother figures that Jean would represent for her.

– It may occur after the birth of a child or children, the lovers having become parents, something which involves a disruption of the couple’s libidinal economy, the new mother over-investing her child or children with a possible, relative disinvestment, both erotic and narcissistic of her partner, whose new role as a father would reawaken the fear of incestuous fantasy, and it could be so reciprocally for the man.

In Alice, there is also a desire to free herself from Jean’s control and domination, therefore, a desire for separation-individuation, emancipation, but above all of subjectivization, which adopts a genitalized, but also sadomasochistic, erotic language. What cannot be verbalized will be expressed by this type of erotic acting in particular.

– The existence in a heterosexual conjugal partner of extraconjugal acting or affairs with homosexual partner(s) should also be mentioned. Light is shed on this complex situation by every subject’s instinctual economy and the way it is reworked as the events of his or her life play out underlain by the mobility of his or her libidinal investments, both homosexual and heterosexual.

– Other means of understanding this will obviously have to be investigated.

Acknowledgments

The contents of this article were presented at the academic meeting of the Korean Association of Psychoanalysis on June 24, 2015, Seoul, Korea.

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES


