

# FUSION AND OBJECT RELATION<sup>1</sup>

*by Paolo Fonda*

There are few papers in psychoanalytic literature specifically devoted to fusion. In particular, I would like to mention the book “Fusionalità” by Neri, Pallier, Petacchi, Soavi and Tagliacozzo, published in 1990, to which I shall repeatedly refer to in this article. “The Search for Oneness” by Silverman, Lachman and Milich (1982), whose experimental section may be disputed, is introducing interesting concepts that are however basically assessing the therapeutic (adaptive) function of evocating *phantasies of total fusion*, while I am more interested in dealing with experiences of *real partial fusion*. I shall then refer to the work of Solan (1991) that is, in some respects, discussing the points of view I should like to discuss.

Often, in psychoanalytic literature we come across explicit or implicit examples, or short digressions, of fusion aspects in works that are discussing other concepts, such as the primary process, symbiosis, narcissism, dependence, identification, projective identification, empathy, Self-object relations and so on. In addition, it appears that fusion as such has proved to be interesting to authors mainly in its pathological aspects and, in any case, in conditions of massive regression.

In this article I should rather discuss the normal and physiological aspects as well as fusion functions in adult and mature mental life, with the aim of establishing the role that such *normal fusion* plays in the analytical process. Analysts’ attention has been increasingly focused on the analyst-patient relationship and its most hidden aspects. At the same time, there have been elaborated models of psychological functioning which are less schematic and simple. Such attempts have sought to establish models of mental activities which would provide a more adequate picture of their complexity and, above all, models concerning the dialectics of experiences, levels and positions, multiple realities or whatever name we would give to the continuous interaction of psychic levels that can greatly vary one from the other and sometimes appear even incompatible or paradoxical. What has often been considered as being in diachronic sequence is now often seen in dynamic synchrony. It is precisely from such dialectic integration that

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human experience seems to emerge in its full and rich complexity. In his two articles, Ogden (1992a,b) had introduced a path of analytic thought that develops itself along a line that goes from Freud to Klein, Winnicott, Bion and others. The following considerations on fusion could be placed in this context, as I wish to discuss the essential and continuous relation – we might as well call it ‘dialectic relation’ – between fusion and separateness levels that are continuously occurring in any human relationship.

### **Hypothesis of a path**

I should like to quote some excerpts about identification from “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”. Freud (1921) writes:

One ego has perceived a significant *analogy* with another *upon one point* — in our example upon openness to a similar emotion; an identification is thereupon constructed on this point [...] The identification [...] has thus become the mark of a *point of coincidence* between the two egos [...] identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object [...] it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person [...] We already begin to divine that the mutual tie between members of a group is in the nature of an identification of this kind, based upon an important emotional common quality [...] we are faced by the process which psychology calls ‘empathy [Einfühlung]’ and which plays the largest part in our understanding of what is inherently foreign to our ego in other people. (*my italics*)

I should like to add a further and rather banal consideration to what Freud wrote, which I would like to consider the starting point of my approach: *When the Ego perceives a significant analogy with an object upon one point, Self boundaries get weaker in that very area to such an extent that they are likely to fade away into an undefined-fusion space.* In other words, when we are unable to separate our own from that of somebody else, for the simple fact that they are equal and impossible to distinguish, *the common and shared perception* occurs and ‘*mine*’ is replaced by ‘*ours*’.

We would therefore face an automatic fading out of Self boundaries, in more or less defined and controlled areas, every time a *point of coincidence*, that is an identity, is established between some of the Self contents and an external perception.

More precisely, we could say that during fusion, rather than a dissolution of Self boundaries, we are facing a Self boundary expansion, as even the coinciding object, or rather its coinciding parts, are included and perceived as various degrees of the Self, which get separated from other areas characterized by diversity and separation that are thus perceived as non-Self. In 1929, Federn had already written about the permanent fluctuation of Self boundaries.

It is the exact coincidence of our movements with those of our image in a mirror that makes our Self boundaries to expand by encompassing such image and conferring it a high degree of belonging (although in case of the mirror it is not total, because the awareness that what we see is a reflected image, persists). In the very moment movements should not coincide, the boundaries would recede and the image would have a higher degree of separation and non-belongingness.

Therefore, it is not exact to assume that Self boundaries do exist yes or not, but we should rather consider the wide range of situations in which the *coefficient of separateness* may greatly vary. Self boundaries can therefore be more or less weakened, with larger or smaller eyelets.

Fusion relationship is marked by the fact that a subject is experiencing the object (or part of it), with which fusion is occurring, as a part of his Self. Some mental content can thus flow beyond usual Self boundaries and are not perceived separated from the analogous one existing in the object.

A limited fusion experience is therefore taking place between two people performing the same music, simultaneous movements, or between people who are wearing the same uniform or are discovering mutual similarities of mental contents.

The very base of group life, that is the *common* program shared by its members, implies a common-shared experience which is not entirely separated-individuated by each single member. Group mental life seems to be exceptionally rich of fusion aspects. However, in order to avoid a further diversion, I shall not discuss this any further.

Fusion undifferentiation experience can involve a subject rather globally (when singing in a choir, fusion involves those parts of the Self which are mostly active in that moment – namely the voice and some emotions – which are generating a moderate feeling of global fusion), or it can be confined to more limited Self areas (such as in case of emphatically experienced events, fusion may temporarily involve only particular conceptual-emotional areas or contents).

Rather different fusion experiences are therefore possible: partial or total, temporary or permanent, peripheral or central according to, as in the

latter case, they involve only peripheral areas of the Self or the core of the Self (Grinberg, 1976, would call them 'orbital' or 'nuclear').

Besides fusion experienced by some of our Self areas with the *coinciding* object areas, we can perceive other our Self and object areas as separated, as we perceive them as being different, differentiated, therefore as not being parts of ourselves.

Fusion disappears either because by a closer look at reality in the identity-coincidence area we are able to separate our own from that of other's, or because we are experiencing frustration and aggression. Aggression seems to reduce fusion, while it seems that libidinal-affective cathexis and fusion are mutually and increasingly connected.

Fusion can be used as a defensive mechanism, but here I shall not deal with this any further.

### **The search of common mental areas and fusion channels**

One of the aims of the basic fairbairnian search for an object, we may as well include that of establishing, after birth, a relation with sufficiently *similar* objects, with whom we can establish partial fusion relations that would generate *common mental areas*, through which mental contents can freely flow between the subject and the object (or objects). This is the basic situation in which human mind may develop, structure and function.

We therefore face a continuous need of exchanging part of the contents of our mind, in a more or less fusional flowing-exchange, with an external object. Among the aims of this process, would be that of meeting the continuous need of growing and adjustment of the Self with the ever-changing external and internal reality. It favors introjective and projective movements in learning, similar to the downloading of programs from one to another computer.

The need of fusion seems to be proportionally connected with that of growing, changing and re-shaping of the Self. Apart from a wide fusion component in childhood, we are regularly coming across an increase of fusion in object relations, during adolescence, primary maternal care, when falling in love or during the analytic treatment. Similarly, since its origins, group life is marked by moments in which we face important changes and we need to combine and integrate new contents. It is not surprising that this happens with rituals, in which an important role have singing, dancing, common-shared meals, as well as other elements in which individuals *coincide* and loose their individual boundaries, intensifying group fusion. Such fusion fosters the circulation of contents, the re-shapement of the

common-shared culture and the subsequent adjustment of individuals to it. This aims to preserve a persistent homogeneity which is the basic condition for a wide fusion fruition.

In order to achieve a desired relationship that is sufficiently rich of fusion and to avoid imprisoning within his own individuality, Man is ready to falsify whatever is necessary. He is not only digging into previous introjections and identifications to find what matches the outer world, He is also ready to change Himself by using introjection and, in particular, identification in order to become *more similar* to His fellows. In so doing, He seeks to find the necessary conditions that gives to His own the possibility to expand His boundaries beyond the narrow constraints of His Self. Man does even more: He does His best to change the outer world by using projective identifications and other means, in order to make it *more similar* to that of his Self. A painter lays colors on canvas in order to match parts of his inner world. If he is talented, he succeeds in matching his inner world to that of other people as well.

Desires and feelings constantly attempt to distort perception by creating illusions. One of the functions of illusion is that of blunting some *non-coincidences* with objects, therefore allowing higher degree of fusion fruition. Let us think about falling in love, in which the image of an ideal object is projected onto another, giving the impression that it is real by matching our expectations to such distorted image of the external object. At the same time, Man is stimulated to adjust Himself to the ideal image projected onto Him by the loving person. Consequently, we are facing a *crescendo* of *coincidences* that increasingly intensify fusion shared experiences to the extent of becoming “two bodies with one soul”. Eventually, first disappointments, the perception of being different, frustration and consequent aggressiveness reduce such excessive fusion to more physiological levels that, in case of unhappy love affairs, may culminate to a complete end of such relationship.

Obviously, most of what has up to now been said concerns also the mechanism and the finality of transference.

When facing an unknown object, even before *proposing* an area of fusion, a sequence of messages is sent to establish the feature of such object, i.e. whether it is living, human, sufficiently predictable, whether it matches at least in part familiar marks and whether it is culturally similar, in other words, whether it is suited to establish fusion *coincidences*.

The acknowledgment of similar common-shared elements between two persons starts to soften Self boundaries by establishing limited fusion areas that are characterized by a particularly amplified receptivity of unconscious communication. Indeed, some kinds of messages (such as “I propose this *location of coincidence* if you have it, stay tuned”) are precisely aimed to enlarge the eyelets in the recipient’s Self borders and to amplify the fusion channels of communication. A stimulus, aimed to activate or rather induce the other person to stay tuned, to open himself by activating and directing his own receptors, which would then be able to catch the slightest expressive nuances of the other person, is provided. Such seeking-messages can be of a more regressive type, such as those of touching or their equivalent (i.e. the sound of the analyst’s voice during the session). Or they can be more evolved, when the *coincidence* is proposed in more elaborated mental contents on a symbolic level (for example in empathy). A similar function, that is by far richer, is the lock-and-exchange of glances that can instantly open wide eyelets in Self boundaries, as they can establish a deep sharing just as much as they are able to keep them at glacial distance. (And it is precisely because it is so hard to control such powerful device that analysts work behind the couch).

Fusion creates a passage, an opening in the boundaries between subjectivity and the outer world through which flowing contents can be also completely different from those that had established this channels. Thus, the unconscious finds in fusion a physiologic channel through which it can relate with the outer world bypassing the Ego.

In normal conditions, this spares the Ego a lot of work and allows it to devote itself to more valuable activities. Interpersonal communication, as well as the perception of inanimate world, can only to a limited extent, be considered as more or less conscious mental elaboration, that takes place through a secondary process. Unconsciously or pre-consciously we perceive, assess, store and integrate an enormous quantity of messages. As Semi (1999) writes: “Each individual floats on a sea of unconscious-to-unconscious communications of which He is not totally aware: the Ego, through a hard work is able to snatch few particles of these communications and is able – through language processing and verbal communication – to transform a part of them into a preconscious and conscious thought.” Also because, for many of them, we haven’t got the capacity to perceive them, discriminate them and mentalize them and they thus become both part of our “un-thought known” (Bollas, 1987), so as of our “un-thought unknown” that is, in any case, existing. Such an enormous amount of introjections, feelings and perceptions, intuitions and information of, is therefore directly flowing

to the preconscious or unconscious and I believe that this greatly occurs through a partial physiologic dissolution of limited areas of Self boundaries.

Upon these considerations, we are facing the image of a human being that is continuously urged by the need, similar to that of breathing, of establishing more or less restricted fusion areas within different areas of the Self, with different objects in a different extension and durability. We could spot three main areas in which this process occurs, namely the individual (human object), that pertaining to the group (culture) and the inanimate one, (physic reality) (Fonda, 1991).

Roughly speaking, we could postulate a basic human need of using an external space that is not empty but populated by external objects – living or not – with whom he establishes an exchange or on whom he is ‘depositing’ (Bleger, 1967) his own mental contents. It is basic for human existence to process part of one’s own mental contents in the minds of other humans. This kind of mental exogamy seems to be connected to that indispensable group psychism on which social life is based, out of which mental life is not be conceivable.

Skin-to-skin contact is a powerful device to widen the eyelets of Self boundaries thus increasing communication on the fusion level. Anzieu (1985) describes the basic and structuring prohibition of touching that precedes and anticipates the Oedipus prohibition. Through prohibitions, the child is urged to replace touching with sight and hearing – as far as the receiving function of the relationship is concerned – and to find words that are equivalent symbolisms of touching – in the emitting function. This is to replace, with a separate and symbolic modality, primary tactile communication that is too rich of fusion-concreteness. Such an early law in the family setting is later extended and becomes a general law in human relationships. In adult life, however, the function of skin-to-skin contact persists (shaking hands, displays of affection, sexual contacts), to favor more intimate relationships that have a higher degree of fusion component. Human relations have different, but very rigid, settings to control this powerful source of fusion. Anzieu (1985) writes: “the primary prohibition of touching [...] imposes to living beings [...] a separate existence.” That is, it imposes a modality of relationship with objects that is marked by a higher degree of separation and a lesser degree of fusion.

Replacing touching with speaking, is therefore a separation device. But, at the same time, the voice remains a powerful mean of sensorial contact (also by its sound, tone and modulation) and a vehicle of fusion. This is of particular interest when dealing with interpreting.

Reality seems to be rather complex, if we consider the continuous emission of signals of need to be tuned up, as well as the constant reception of similar signals coming from the objects and the outcomes of such continuous interactivity on Self boundaries.

### **Multiple levels in object relations**

We may assume that a child, from the very beginning, seeks in his mother those contacts that maternal care tends to make as *coincidental* as possible, that means establishing fusion. In this early need of tactile skin-to-skin relationship, we may notice the need of finding an object that is sufficiently *similar* – not *alien* – in its sensorial features: skin, softness, warmth (not metal, hardness, cold), in order to foster *coincidences* generating relations and fusion communication. Erogenous zones, in addition, offer privileged opportunities for contact-coincidence-fusion of special intensity.

Let us now examine the experience when the coincidence between inner need and outer object response is matched. In Winnicott's description of mother's breast offered at the right moment in which inner baby's need comes out, we can see the prototype of the *coincidence* generating fusion. Such coincidence will be limited, from the very beginning, because of the frustration provided by *non-coincidence*, that means by the difference between inner and outer, which tends to define discriminative borders.

From the initial phases of extra-uterine life, we may therefore assume the existence of at least two types of experience, although partial and not yet integrated. On one side, there are coincidental-tuned-pleasant experiences that generate fusion. On the other, there are, just so early, non-coincidental-dystonic-unpleasant experiences, that provide a perception of a difference between inner need and external events. These second ones are the basis for initial, brief experiences of separateness.

Fusion experiences and (pre)objective experiences of separateness, therefore, occur simultaneously. As the child shows little tolerance for separation, which is a source of anxiety and helplessness, the mother seeks to take as much care as possible in *coinciding* with the child's needs. In this way she expands the real fusion with the child, so as the illusory one, connected with his fantasy of omnipotent unity with her. This generates, in early periods of life, a widespread *though not exclusive* feeling of global fusion. It will thereafter progressively decrease, thanks to the, more or less, *optimal frustrations* combined with the discrimination accomplished through

the “containment” mechanism (Bion) during the long phase of “weaning” (Winnicott) and “separation-individuation” (Mahler).

But, beyond the mother’s capacity of coinciding with the child and of keeping this degree of fusion with him, it is of vital importance that she also is able sometimes not to coincide, so as sometimes to accept, maintain and develop the child’s capacity of not coinciding. This is the maternal ability to accept and tolerate the paradox of being with the child, at the same time, in oneness and separated from him. Such maternal ability has an organizing function for the child, allowing the growth of his basic capacity to live object relations simultaneously on both sides, that of fusion and that of separateness (or rather, on all three levels-positions simultaneously, as I will further explain).

Kafka (1989) underlines that it is basic for the child development that the mother is able to tolerate the ambiguity of the meaning and the simultaneous presence of contrasting meanings. She is to transmit to the child such capacity allowing him to experience ‘multiple realities’. This would provide the child “to grasp only one reality as well as many realities”.

In the past, it was often schematically assumed that relations with objects in early stages of life were those of fusion type, whilst at the following stages, such component would disappear to be replaced by more mature relations based on the separation achieved. Consequently, the fusion component of mature mental activity was thus neglected, except for being considered as a pathologic feature if shown in a more or less relevant extent.

I don’t believe it has an explicative value while considering fusion relations as the expression of an urge to gain back a hypothetical earlier stage (Grunberg, 1971). It is undoubtedly that, in early stages of life a broad feeling of fusion has been experienced. It is likely that the experienced fusion has left a mnestic trace of a pleasant experience, however it is hard to believe that this provides an exhaustive explanation for the presence of fusion components in object relations during the following stages of life.

Should we consider partial fusion mainly as a reduced version of a hypothetical initial total fusion, we would consider – as its basic feature – the absence of a separated object. We would thus consider fusion, when present in adult life, only as an archaic and normally atrophic residue. Should we instead start from the natural partial fusion with an object, in which other Self areas or levels perceive it as separate, we should consider fusion as part of a more complex modality of relationship that does, by no means, imply the absence of the object. This eventuality is only an accidental phenomenon that tends to appear in an excessive expansion of fusion areas, therefore in altogether particular conditions.

Therefore, normal fusion is not the expression of an ancient and out-fashioned need that is re-proposed in the transference, but an actual need of an indispensable ingredient of the relation with objects.

*Indeed, I would consider the fusion component as one of the aspects of object relations. As such, it is fundamental in all object relations, as only the degree of its participation, as well as the participation of the separateness component, varies.*

This does not differ much from the role that Schafer (1968) gives to the primary process (which clearly implies fusion aspects) in object representations. In addition, Schafer (1968) speaks of the role of fusion that is present in any identification, even in those of higher levels. When it is impossible to trace fusion, identification is merely the result of conscious or preconscious copying or imitating. In identification, Schafer says, there is a simultaneous participation at all three levels (I would say these levels correspond to the three levels I am going to introduce): being similar, identical or fused. The secondary process (that is separateness) prevails in the first one, the second is a mixed one, while the third is basically a primary process phenomenon (that is fusion). His idea is, that it is by far more fruitful considering these three conditions and experiences as concurring aspects in the majority of identifications. He says that in fusion there is a high degree of fluidity and ambiguity in spotting features and experiences both in the subjective Self or in the object, as if the Self and the object could freely be exchanged one with the other, as if the interest for the individuation had almost been suspended and as if, finally, an undifferentiated unity would be experienced or sought.

In her interesting paper, Solan (1991) underlines the continuous interaction between experienced separateness and experienced fusion (what she calls “jointness”), which are continuously and simultaneously present, although by different extent, and integrated. However, she sees this from a perspective of continuous dialectic between separation affecting narcissism and fusion experiences that restore it. Although I could agree with this point, as well as with a large part of her article, it is still my wish to emphasize what is, to my mind, an even more primal function of fusion: the establishment of a particular and essential condition for the inter-exchange of certain contents among human beings and most importantly, for the very existence of human relations in general.

## Self boundaries related to Melanie Klein's positions

We may attempt to introduce a model of normal, full and mature object relations and observe it from the Self boundaries perspective.

By using a spatial metaphor, we may, starting from the bottom, establish the simultaneous presence of *three levels*, within a reciprocal dialectical exchange and integration. In reality, it could be more correct to consider Self areas characterized by three types of boundaries. However, to provide a clearer explanation, I shall refer to them by calling them "levels".

At the first *fusion level* there is no distinction between subject and object, as there is no boundary between the two Selves. Mental contents freely flow within their common space. A diffusion of contents is taking place and it can be more or less indiscriminate and non-conflictual (conflict can occur only at the two higher levels). Such diffusion of contents is therefore not generating suffering. The contents are either apparently mute or they are perceived, but generally not thought, at least up to when they get *recuperated* at the third level, the level of separateness. This fluctuation (that has not yet a direction, which can only occur when relating with points of reference provided by partial or fragmentary Self boundaries, that give a meaning both to the *in* and *out*), is evident in the Mahler's idea of *symbiosis* and it is also close to the idea of *deposit* suggested by Bleger (1967). At this fusion level, spread just slightly differentiated feelings, which provide the background, the colour, the basic ingredients of affection, the fusion component of empathy and so on. These contents can both be part of the inter-subjective milieu and part of the trans-objective one. At this level, many elements of group psychism are likely to be absorbed.

At the second level, the *level of fragmentary separation*, Self boundaries change (going upwards to the third level) from being disconnected fragments of separation, they become more or less extended areas of uncompleted boundaries, but they still have large eyelets. They eventually become rather defined boundaries but with a yet unclear intermediate (*potential*) space. This may not be yet well established or it may be in some parts obliterated by traumas. Here prevails a functioning based on concrete thinking. At this level, communication with objects is mainly by projective and introjective identifications. These assume an even incomplete and fragmentary distinction between inner and outer, between subject and object. Projective identifications can serve different purposes: from evacuation to control of the object, up to normal communication. These

ones are probably by far more numerous than what we could imagine. Up to when they are part of a normal and rather harmonic exchange of contents and messages, they cannot establish discomfort and therefore they do not force the Ego to deal with them. They lay in the Self neither generating suffering, nor they exercise pressure to be acted in a non-synthonic manner. They could create, like innumerable pieces of a puzzle, along with fusion level contents, a “psychic bottom” or “background of the Self” (Correale, 1997), on which can only take shape symbolic communication at the third level. It is at this second level that the subject projects into the object the contents which need to be contained, it is to change undifferentiated contents into thinkable elements, in order to return them to the subject on the third level, in form of a symbolic thought. The first phase of Bion’s containment, would then take place at this level.

At the third *level* we encounter a *defined degree of separation*, characterized by *sufficiently stable Self boundaries*, allowing the existence, between the subject and the object, of an intermediate *potential space* that makes symbolic thought possible. An exchange of symbolic thoughts is therefore possible and their pertinence to the subject or object is clear. A fully human communication is however given by the simultaneous presence of the *background* provided by the messages flowing through the first two levels.

As far back as 1967, Jose Bleger had introduced and added to the two classical kleinian positions an earlier and more primitive position, in which non-differentiation and symbiosis prevail. He called this position “*posicion glischrocarica*”. Tagliacozzo (Neri et al., 1990) introduced a *fusing position* (F) preceding the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Ogden (1989 a,b, 1991) describes a *contiguous-autistic position* which also precedes the two classical positions.

The starting points and approaches of these three authors greatly differ one from the other. Neither Bleger nor Ogden thoroughly discuss real fusion aspects. Nevertheless, I think it seems right to me referring to what is only outlined or clearly implied in what they had written. Far from excluding it, both authors assume the presence of fusion aspects in earliest position (Ogden, 1989).

As far as Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position is concerned, it is clear that this implies an incomplete separation from the object, to such extent that the border line between good and bad is clearer and foreground compared to that between subject and object, which is sometimes so incomplete that it

allows the subject to perceive the good and the bad parts of his Self as identified (we could as well call it 'fused') with the analogous part of the partial object. When dealing with projective identification, Klein clearly states: "In so far as the mother comes to contain the bad parts of the self, she is not felt to be a separate individual but is felt to be the bad self." (Klein, 1946). The depressive position in itself is, on the other hand, characterized by the accomplishment of the separation from the object, which also implies that in earliest stages this had not been present or that at least, it had not been complete: "The child becomes aware of himself and objects are perceived as being separate from his Self." (Segal, 1964).

The above described three levels would therefore characterize also the state of Self boundaries in each of the three corresponding positions.

However, I would like to draw your attention to Ogden's idea (1989b) about the importance of the dialectic integrating relationship within the three positions in every human experience. Only after having diachronically developed and assessed their functioning, all three positions can fully interact. By using such dialectic interaction, the human being can propose himself to the other to accomplish a relationship at all levels (including Self segments that are shaping up in a continuum, from a total absence of boundaries up to well-defined boundaries). In all kinds of relations, and particular in that of analysis, it is through fusion areas that can be activated and perceived internal object relations which trace their origin in early infant experiences, which are rich of fusion and are inscribed in primitive body feelings. Only then they can be eventually integrated to more developed contents by the secondary process. We may as well say that fusion component is meant to perceive and establish a contact with these aspects of the relation with objects for whom the secondary process has no knowing capacity.

Kohut (1978) writes: "Through empathy we try to understand in a single act of proven acknowledgment, complex psychological understanding that we could otherwise define only using a difficult display of a series of details that could even be too hard for us to be understood". He then says: "The capacity of empathy belongs to the given nature of the human psyche and remains somehow associated to the primary process." He also says: "Theoretical work (in psychoanalysis), deprived of this constant contact with the matter that can be observed only by using empathy, would soon become hollow and sterile and limited to a thorough exam of the mechanisms and psychological structures losing contact with the breadth and depth of human experience on which, in last analysis, the whole psycho-analysis should be

based.” (Kohut, 1971). I would say that such a *contact* is accomplished thanks to the interaction between the two components of empathy: the fusion component and the one characterized by separation or - in Ogden’s words – thanks to the simultaneous dialectic activation of all three positions. Conversely, an analogous flat perception of the other at only one level, as that mentioned by Kohut, has also been sketched by Ogden (1989b) as a result of an over-activation of the depressive position (I should like to add: also in the feeling of separation which is typical of it) at the expense of the other two.

What has been written up to this point, allows us to imagine a human being characterized by an extremely sophisticated and continuously changing boundary system. Due to stimuli (coincidences) of either inner or outer origin, the eyelets in the boundaries widen as much as they disappear in some areas, while becoming narrower in others. This must occur in a way so that an adequate quantitative balance is preserved within separate and fused areas in order to provide a sufficient stability to the perception of the Self identity.

### **Delimitation of the concept**

In this paper I use the concept of fusion in an undoubtedly extensive way. There is therefore the need to contain it as regards similar concepts.

Let us start from *symbiosis* that is often confused with fusion, especially in the equivalent meaning of the terms “symbiotic bond” and “fusion bond”. In my mind symbiosis and fusion should be considered separately as it should be borne in mind that fusion is one of the elementary modality of a relationship and that it can either be ephemeral or durable. Symbiosis instead, is a complex whole that is relatively stable and durable. It is a modality of existence in the relation with an object. In such modality of relation, fusion plays an undoubtedly widespread role.

As far as *identification* is concerned, we may say, as does Schafer, that no identification can occur without fusion, however a plus is needed in addition to fusion to establish a mature identification. The term *primary identification* is often used to name identification in which fusion has a quantitative, overwhelming and even exclusive role thus becoming synonymous of fusion.

Let us dwell for a moment on *empathy*. Bolognini and Borghi (1989, 1979) define it as “A privileged, intra-psychic relational state connecting

two human beings, enabling sensitive and sensible perception of the inner, in situations of conscious separation and integration of understanding and perceiving”. The nature of such “privileged” contact, through which contents are communicated from the patient to the analyst, is however difficult to define. The analyst becomes aware of such contents only when they are already in his Self. (In 1926, Deutsch wrote on the meeting of two unconscious entities). The analyst is forced to act introspectively in order to separate his own contents from those of the patient, which he finds within himself. These two authors list various assumptions, which may be found in the literature on the nature of this passage, which range from fusion, through projective identification up to telepathy. Schafer (1968) claims that the identification process is implied in the higher forms of empathy, in which fusion is present as one component (the others include similarity and identity). In this case the subject “perceives what the object perceives, though in his own interest, as well as in the object’s interest, he preserves at the same time his own individuality and perspective”.

Fusion is an essential though not sufficient element of empathy, as it must as well have a conscious component of introspection and processing based on separation (“feeling with the patient and then thinking about the patient,” Beres, 1968).

Also during counter-transference we see a flow of contents from unconscious to unconscious through an area of contact, that I believe to be of the fusion type and that deserves a further investigation when I shall discuss projective identification.

Many kleinian analysts do not make use of neither the term fusion, nor the term symbiosis, as they consider these concepts are useless for their phenomenology can be sufficiently explained by using the concepts of *projective and introjective identification*. Fusion experiences would be the result of a massive use of such mechanisms. Here, we face the problem of how far one may go and how useful it is to broaden the meaning of a concept.

In fusion there is a free fluctuation of common-shared mental contents between the subject and the object. It is assumed that such movements have no clear direction. This flow resembles the idea of ‘*deposit*’ introduced by Bleger (1967) in the context of undifferentiated symbiosis. Neri et al. (1960) say that fusion “...is not accompanied by intrusive violence”. In the same work Tagliacozzo asks himself whether this is “expression of an earlier modality that precedes the establishment of special processing allowing the mechanisms of introjection and projection to occur”. In the area of fusion

centrifugal-projective and centripetal-introjective streams can be generated (at this point at least a fragmentary *inner* and *outer* experience, that is a fragmentary and blurred border should appear). Only then, we could experience a projective or introjective identification. I therefore believe that projective identification imply more or less confined areas of softened Self boundaries. Also for this reason they would be more evident and frequent in immature or regressive stages. We may as well assume that the invasiveness of projective identifications grows as much as the violence by which they are transmitted is growing and it is also correlated to the fading out of Self boundaries in the areas affected both by the subject and the object.

This brief outline on some of the concepts related to fusion is aimed to underline fusion itself as an elementary mechanism and as their basic component.

### **Fusion in the analytic relation and in interpreting**

Let us now try to investigate some aspects that are taking place during interpretation by observing the analytic process from the Self boundary perspective. This is also connected to the core of one of the most discussed issues in contemporary psychoanalysis: to what extent is the therapeutic effect of analysis the consequence of interpretation as such (which occurs mainly at the third level), and how much does this depend on relational aspects (which are involving, to a greater extent, the first two levels). This is a rather complex issue in any case, as the answers must take in due account the various patients' pathologies as well as what we really mean by 'interpretation'. Considerations vary as we consider as a real interpretation only that which clears a conflict or also that which gives words and representation to feelings, contents, which earlier had not been mentalized and thinkable.

When we discuss on the analytic field, we know that, besides patient contents, analyst contents are present and active as well and that part of them are inevitably shared with the patient during the analysis. The analyst transference is always occurring (although to a lesser intense and disturbing degree). This generates a certain counter-transference in the patient. The trans-subjectiveness of both is present too. The transference phenomenon can also be considered as an expression of the constant need of human beings to make the other – in a more or less illusionary way – more *similar* to what is already present inside of them, something that is already familiar

and known. It is also an attempt to find and establish stronger *coincidences* that would open wider channels of communication. In the analytic context, such attempt starts both from the patient and, though to a lesser extent, from the analyst. This would generate a relation, though disturbed by resistances, that reveals wider openings in the boundaries, through which communication is more expanded and can affect all three levels. The regression connected to the transference neurosis (which increases the paranoid-schizoid position at the expense of the depressive one) also serves the same purpose in therapy.

We may assume that the patient feels a need to share his own suffering with the analyst in the same way as a child puts his wounded hand in those of his mother's in the belief that the best cure can only be achieved inside of her body, by being in fusion with her. Similarly, the patient is offering, during the relation with the analyst, including fusion too, those areas of his Self that, being suffering, need to be contained in order to be mentalized, symbolized, represented and elaborated in more harmonious and less painful patterns. The analyst, by empathizing with this suffering is basically –although in a controlled manner– ‘letting it in’. It is a limited and partial fusion with this suffering that allows a better understanding and (on the ‘third level’) a containment of it. At the beginning of the analysis, the patient feels like having many such areas to be shared and contained. A wide flowing of fusion areas would however generate a global fusion. The patient does wish this to happen but, at the same time, he is afraid of this, as it generates feelings of being trapped as well as a feeling of losing his identity. This feeling produces an intense resistance to such relationship. By gradually overcoming this resistance, beneficiary and productive fusion outcomes start to occur and a re-balance is taking place as containment-metabolism starts to increase. Together with the interpretation device, this process tends to exhaust the needs of suffering areas and therefore it will diminish the need of fusion by reducing it at normal ‘maintenance’ levels.

The analyst receives symbolic contents from the patient as well as elements which are not symbolized through projective identification and the freely flowing contents within the fusion level. A good interpretation that, according to classic criteria, sufficiently meets the material contents, timing needs, etc., will then stem from the analyst's mind upon the contents coming from the patient from all the above-mentioned three levels, which would match the corresponding three levels of the analyst.

The communication of the analyst's interpretation to the patient will also inevitably occur on all three levels. This will happen due to different

non-intentional communication modalities, that the analyst cannot avoid (such as infra-verbal and meta-verbal messages, emotional tone, words' selection, pauses, body language, etc.).

The symbolic content, though central, will be unavoidably accompanied by communicative projective identifications and floating contents. Such a whole is the necessary background of any human interaction as far as it has a communicative value. Obviously, what is provided by the analyst is not the same of what he has received, as a part of the contents has been processed and modified. Elaboration implies working on the third level which is characterized by both separateness and capability of symbolization. Interpretation is thus helping the patient to find a more pertaining setting between symbolic representations in the mental scenario of the third level or fostering the passage to such level of contents which, being formerly on the inferior levels, in which concrete thinking is prevailing, had not been able up to this moment to be adequately represented, processed and used. This operation would then result in a beneficiary restructuring outcome on all levels.

Interpretation, beyond its explicit value, makes also the patient perceive that what the analyst thinks and feels in that very moment – in all three levels – is *matching* what is already present in himself. This increases the area of coincidence, whose borders are increasingly fading out thus generating wider fusion areas and common mental spaces. This fosters a freer flow (in both directions, although in a different proportion) of less differentiated mental contents.

Interpretation is therefore either a source of fusion, created by *coincidence* of the analyst's interpretation with some contents of the patient's inner world (this especially holds true for interventions expressing the emphatic feeling of "I am feeling what you are feeling" kind), as well as a resolving of fusion in so much as it discriminates and symbolizes the elements by clarifying their belongingness. In this way, it is facilitating the restructuring and resolution of conflicts and it is reducing the need of fusion in that very area too.

The setting itself is for the patient a source of fusion experiences, as it is characterized by coinciding repetitions and reliability and it is, at the same time, a source of separation because of its 'optimal frustrations' (Fonda, 2000).

It may be assumed that interpretation is to contain a balanced relation between its symbolic and fusion components. In the event that symbolic components (based on separateness – depressive position) are over-represented in relation to fusion components (paranoid-schizoid and fusion

position), the interpretation will result “rational”, “uncoordinated” and would risk to be pointless. ‘Over-syntonic’ interpretations, generating an excessive degree of fusion, would on the other hand, excessively make fade out boundaries and they would be thus concretely ‘penetrating’ the contents instead of ‘knocking on the door’ of the boundary to foster the inner creation of corresponding symbolic representations.

We may ask ourselves what other roles can have, in the broaden sense of the analytic process, a wide exchange of fusion and projective or introjective identifications at the two lower levels, even when this is not combined with a sufficient gain at the third level. In other words, can therapeutically valuable modifications result from a simple, mutual and limited (or mostly limited) contact occurring at the first two levels? A certain therapeutic benefit of such an exchange could be implied in what Gittelson (1962) calls ‘the diatrophic function of the analyst’ and in the function that Kohut (1971) ascribes to empathy. We could assume that the fusion component has a relevant role in ‘non-interpretative mechanisms’ of analytic therapy, such as the ‘meeting moments’ and ‘common-shared implicit relations’ introduced by the Group for Studies of Changing Processes (Stern et al., 1998). About this point, I should also recall what I have already said about the basic human need to expand one’s own boundaries to make one’s mental contents go beyond the narrow limits of one’s individuality. We can imagine that an exchange channel, such as the fusion one, favors a certain harmonization and tuning up of given areas of two subjects’ inner worlds that could provide the basic conditions for a further development and growth.

However, a further development requires that a certain part of shared floating, projected or introjected contents is gained from the lower ‘levels’ to the ‘third level’, being mentalized and given back to the patient by the containment process. If such containment is insufficient, a blocked symbiosis could indeed persist, a condition which is perpetrating without any growth and that could only be traumatically interrupted as we see in pathologic conditions. In such pathologic symbiosis (where functioning is significantly limited to the fusion and paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive one is insufficient), there is a striking evidence of a continuous exchange-fluctuation of contents and an intensive projective identification activity. But the contents are not sufficiently discriminated upon their qualities and in their pertinence with one or the other subject. Fusion itself doesn’t reach a sufficient therapeutic effect if not combined with, maybe in different moments or stages, to the symbolic elaboration which cannot elude

separation. However, even symbolic elaboration cannot fully exercise its function if it is not occurring in a relational context on which fusion aspects play an essential role. All the different aspects of object relations, the ones that are more or less of the fusion type and that of separateness, are therefore indispensable in all object relations as well as in the therapeutic relation and interpretation. Their degree varies according to different circumstances and it is important for the analyst to be able to use their settings at best.

I have introduced a conceptual approach that needs further investigations and of which many questions have not found a clear answer. My aim was that of introducing a global hypothesis and I would expect to discuss in another occasion some of its conceptual issues as well as a thorough understanding of clinical aspects.

## SUMMARY

Fusion physiological functions in mature mental life are here examined in order to stress the essential relation between fusion and separation in every object relationship especially as far as the analytical relationship and interpretation are concerned. The simultaneous presence of three levels of mutual and dialectic relation of integration is stressed in object relations: the level of fusion, the level of incomplete separation and the level of complete separation. The three levels correspond to the three positions (one more primitive: fusion and the kleinian paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions).

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