Borders, Ideals and cultural differences. From collective issues to individual pathways: a psychoanalytical approach

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Abstract

Different cultures may emphasize different 'ideals', which are installed in our individual and group identity, which is an aspect of our narcissism (ideal ego and ego ideal). Freud (1914) thinks of these aspects of identity as a "narcissistic prize" that is both transgenerational and cultural. They establish, in one's sense of self, the ideals that are held dear in one's culture, thereby providing ties that are both cultural, affective and inter-generational – they facilitate cultural continuity between the generations. But what happens in conditions of cultural discontinuity, such as migration? Often the experience of migration involves a conflict between two different sets of ideals. The painful internal "war" generated by this situation will be described, drawing attention to the guilt, anxieties and sense of betrayal and neglect involved due to cultural ideals projected from the group as a condition for mutual recognition and identification.

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Introduction

Cultural differences often involve different 'ideals' in both group and individual identity. As Freud remind us Ideal instances (Ideal Ego and Ego ideal) derive from a narcisstic core of identification processes. This narcisstic level of individual identity lies on a basis that is transgenerational and cultural at the same time. As Freud writes (1914) every child receives a 'narcisstic prize' as a link in a generational chain, as a descendant of a lineage that he/she has to confirm and extend and that gives foundations to narcisstic building. In this case familiar ties work both as cultural and affective ties: through the concrete affectiveness of primary relationships a specific cultural belonging is also transmitted. In situations of cultural continuity among generations, the parents know they can mirror themselves in their sons, even if there is a range of acceptable differences varying in different cultures. But what happens in conditions of cultural discontinuity as in migration?

Assimilated by Leon and Rebeca Grinberg to an experience of 'rebirth', migration often makes it necessary to redo a process of symbolization of the primary experiences, with all the risk that this operation of psychic re-symbolization will fail in the new context and serious psychic difficulties will arise (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984). The ideal instances are particularly strained in this transformation process since, as Paul-Laurent Assoun (1993) reminds us, the instances that are found at the heart of the functioning of social groups are the same that we find at the heart of individual narcissism.

Furthermore, adolescence is a critical time for the constitution of ideal instances, in which on the one hand the idealized figures of the parents of childhood are undermined and on the other hand a process of subjectivation of the symbolic assignments takes place, in which it is necessary to be able to 'place oneself', finding one's place in the genealogical order, in the order of symbolic belonging and cultural ideals (De Micco, 2016).

This vertical, historical dimension, which bases its origins in a memory and restores a solid sense of belonging, is often lost and broken in adolescent migrants, who often find themselves trying to hide the real hole that has been produced in the original fabric, therefore in the very foundation of the perception of the self.

Conflicts and ideals on the *border* between cultures

These troubled processes of identity concern all the declinations of adolescent migrants. Starting with the ambiguities and contradictions that are condensed in the reception of the so-called MSNA (unaccompanied foreign minors): in the Italian reality, especially late adolescent males mostly from North Africa and Southeast Asia.

Often departed on the basis of a precise family mandate, once they arrive in the country of immigration, the space of an acute conflict between loyalty to the original mandate and desires for independence and emancipation widens, a conflict in which they are often precipitated by the same modalities and implicit expectations conveyed by the functioning of the reception canters. In fact, the latter are inspired by a precise cultural model of the needs and requirements of a 'minor', a model that can be not only very distant from those of origin of the young guests, but above all in open contrast with their current needs.

The institutional systems reveal the ideal structure that supports social forums,

ideals that are perceived not by chance as non-negotiable values and that are literally 'imposed' on the other in the absolute conviction that they are desirable for him as for everyone, since they are in fact considered 'universal'. The risk of the conflict between cultural 'ideals', as can be guessed, is very high and, as we will see, it plays out in the everyday fabric of these young migrants, who often find themselves, in spite of themselves, becoming a sort of ground of contention between opposed 'visions of world'. For example, school placement, which seems the most obvious and natural opportunity to offer to a 'minor', can immediately cause a conflict with family expectations of contributing to the sustenance of those who stayed at home, triggering violent feelings of guilt and depressive anxieties, paradoxically even more intense if school results are encouraging. The conflict between individual desires, perhaps for the first time imagined possible and even supported by the new adult interlocutors in the host territory, and family expectations can become unbearable, so that the risk of a psychic breakdown becomes very concrete.

Youssuf, 17 years old, from Pakistan, proved to be extremely gifted, in a few months he learned to express himself in fluent Italian, his academic results are excellent, he is well-liked by teachers and classmates at school and has become L.'s, the manager of the reception centre, favourite; he has for some time been suffering from sudden epileptic-like seizures for which he is subjected to all the necessary investigations which are however negative. "How strange, it seems that it happens to him every time he has a good grade in school", comments the manager. Y. is the first son, his parents and two younger sisters are left at home, "I feel like a father since I've been here, I have a lot of responsibilities, I should try to work and send more money home, instead L. tells me that I am still a boy and I have to think about what is best for me, I have a war in my head!".

Squeezed between intolerable persecutory and depressive anxieties, suffocated in a tearing conflict of loyalty, Y., in order not to go mad, discharges unsustainable affects into his body and repeatedly seeks compromise solutions: he also begins to work but will lose many kilos, expressing once again in the body that incurable 'internal war' that wears him out, he accepts a part-time job and for a while he seems to find some periods of serenity in a sort of rediscovered family dimension thanks to the sympathy of the employer's family, but after a while he will leave the job despite many uncertainties because it was an irregular job that the managers of the reception centre did not consent to endorse. "It really is a shame if he get lost like this", comments the manager again. Meanwhile Y. finds himself becoming the bearer of a real institutional 'mandate' this time: even the representatives of the host territory are full of expectations towards him, ideal and idealizing expectations that are all the more rigid and demanding on both sides, so that does not allow Y any 'loophole', that is, he cannot 'get lost', failing even a little to achieve those goals to which his own abilities seem to direct him. It almost seems to be witnessing the condition of the 'wise baby' Ferenczi (Ferenczi, 1923) told us about, doubled in this case by a double request put to him: Y. seems called to ideally 'repair' both the flaws in the group of origin and in the host group, alternately confirming one or the other in the absolute *goodness* of their 'ideal'.

The guilt anxieties and the sense of betrayal of his origins and family go along with persecutory anxieties always coming from his neglected parents. At the same time he is

afraid to disappoint the welcome center's workers' expectations, and even to lose his right to stay there if he doesn't *obey* to the ideal image they offer , and at the same time charge on, him. The conflict of ideals between the country of origin and the country of immigration (country of *adoption* as we used to say) reveals itself through the different ideal images with whom he is forced to identify himself. These ideal images, very strict and severe as Ideal, narcisstic instances always are, push him into a loyalty conflict that can't be solved. The welcome center workers too, become part of this loyalty conflict with mutual projections.

Generally one of the possible defenses from such lacerating conflicts could result, for example, in repeated school or work failures, which will force/allow to remain in a powerfully regressive dimension in which to continue to 'exploit' institutional hospitality, colluding with that infantilizing attitude which the same institutional functioning actually exposes.

Just by imagining that they are entirely designed for the other, these operations can instead reveal our way of 'building' the other (Kilani, 1994). We must never forget that implicitly and preliminarily we are asking/forcing this other to slip into that 'grid' of thought and perception through which we can represent him to ourselves. It goes without saying that this grid is made up not only of conscious and manifest elements but even more of unconscious and implicit elements, even more constricting and even 'prescriptive', as we can well guess, and it is precisely on these implicit aspects conveyed by institutional functioning that it is necessary to question ourselves. Moreover, no less prescriptive, consciously and unconsciously, are the family mandates that literally 'burden' these young people, who are themselves expression of an 'ideal' instance of the original group that only at this price has 'authorized' so to speak the departure. Moreover, the very act of emigrating often represents a compromise charged with ambivalence between submission to this family expectation, obeying the mandate of the original group, and subterranean rebellion against it: I obey you only hoping to escape your power when I am out of your control.

These ambivalent feelings release all their formidable burden of anguish once they arrive in the country of arrival, resulting in opposing, violently conflicting or radically split thrusts. If the conflict is at least partially conscious and introjected it can result in a lacerating 'internal war' as in the case of Y, when the affects and anxieties become psychically unsustainable they will often be evacuated into the body as we have seen, or if the split prevails, such split parts can be projected and 'carried' by the members of the team of operators: very violent clashes between opposing 'ideal' positions can then occur which testify to the power of the projective cross-identifications at play.

It seems to me very important to underline at this point what Paul-Laurent Assoun notes about the function of ideal instances (ego ideal and ideal ego) in the Freudian vision of the constitution of the masses - of social groups - especially in relation to the formation of primary identifications (Freud, 1921; Assoun, 1993). Assoun underlines how while sublimation, operating in successful symbolizations therefore in the authentic *Kulturarbeit*, involves a change of the Object and the drive goal, in idealization instead, which is at the basis of social formations, it is only the object that changes but the drive goal remains the same, therefore "in the shadow of the social it is still sexual enjoyment that is pursued"

(Assoun, 1993). When cultural configurations are played out as ideals, we are therefore faced with an absolute impossibility of cultural 'mediation', which would presuppose the drive renunciation that is the basis of any type of cultural formation. If it is still possible to articulate a 'cultural conflict' we find ourselves in a psychic dimension in which it is possible to recognize the difference of the other, if instead we find ourselves in a condition in which it is necessary "to avoid the threat of the loss of the object by means of the ideal" (Assoun, 1993, p.152) it will no longer be possible to recognize a position that is *other* but only the need to *convert* to the only ideal will prevail, otherwise an unsustainable panic will arise, precisely due to the catastrophic loss of the bond with the object.

It is therefore understood that the more one finds oneself in a psychic condition in which the bond with internal objects appears threatened, or threatening, as in migrations, the more one will resort to idealization: not by chance as in the short clinical tranche that we have reported the original internal objects, both familiar and cultural, the more they become persecutors the more they are idealized and vice versa.

In the violent conflict between opposing cultural ideals that the different social groups place at the center of their identifying references, the "mirror function" of migration that Abdelmalek Sayad, author of the famous *The Double Absence*, spoke of, is highlighted (Sayad, 1999). This forces both individuals and social groups to look at themselves in the mirror represented by the 'foreigner', a mirror that often reveals the 'foreign' parts of oneself, those that have been expelled not only from the perception of oneself but also from the construction of the image of oneself, that is, from one's own ideal self-representation.

Transgenerational fractures in migration: growing up on the *border*

In migration real fractures in the identification processes can occur. Both MSNA and "second generations" children and adolescents have to face a severe instability of their own symbolic-cultural referents and deep transgenerational fractures, the consequences of which are felt on the possibility to recognise themselves in a genealogy and in a sense of belonging.

I would like to refer now a clinical tranche with Youssef to analyze this situation.

As Kaës underlines, the subject is always an 'inter-subject', the subject is born within an inter subjective reality and in the bond to a generational chain, that constitutes an affective and symbolic grid within which the individual can find its 'position' of subject in a set that endows him of sense and invests him of desire (Kaës, 2008, 2009).

This process of subjectivization is particularly difficult in migrations, because the reciprocal identification/mirroring between parents and children – which in the situations of cultural continuity is ensured by the *origin and sense of belonging* in common - is powerfully hindered and in the worst cases completely broken.

In migration, therefore, we see the activation of a deep precariousness and transformation of those "metapsychic and metasocial guarantors" (Kaës, 2008) that 'stabilise' the development of psychic and relational processes, processes that are builders of bonds and sense: all the primary fundamental relationships are deeply affected by such destabilising effects and it is here that the deepest and most hidden wounds of the migrant phenomenon nest.

Piera Aulagnier underlines that “while one remains in one’s own cultural system” (Aulagnier, 1975) the mother can effectively carry out her function of *word-bearer* for her child, but when she finds herself in a cultural system to which she cannot feel she belongs completely, this central function proves to be disrupted. And this is because the mother’s ability to ‘introduce’ her own child in *her* symbolic universe *through* the language as fundamental means of symbolisation of the primary affective experience is compromised.

This deep difficulty in offering an effective function of mirroring involves the crucial areas of word and gaze. According to Winnicott (1971, 1989), if the mother is sufficiently responsive the child sees himself reflected in her gaze and can identify with that loved image of himself which he sees reflected in his mother’s gaze. But if that same ‘founding gaze’ is inhabited by a constant ‘representative’ (symbolic) and ‘affective’ (emotional) inquietude, which corresponds precisely to the uncertainty of being able to mirror herself in the son, a formidable ‘hole’ in the image of himself can so be formed. In fact the formation of the *ideal* image of the self is in relation with the *beloved* image mirrored by mother’s look and with the cultural ideals projected from the group on the individual as condition for mutual recognition and identification.

When the conflict of ideals turns into a conflict of identifications too, one’s own origin can become *alien*, it becomes loaded with persecutory and ‘disturbing’ elements and becomes therefore *an origin that is no more useful as sense of belonging*: this therefore makes concrete the risk of real fracture through the generations.

In situations of a cultural break an essential link is broken, the link supporting the structuring narcissism of the child, as we said, that allows the parents to see their child as an heir, both bearer of the parental wishes and heir of a cultural tradition. Thanks to the "common" origin and belonging, taken for granted and "natural" in situations of cultural "continuity", the parents know they can mirror and be reflected by their child. In situations of cultural break instead the child runs the risk of being a stranger to his own parents, potentially dangerous and disturbing. René Kaës highlights the fact that in the development of the narcissistic contract set up between parent, children and sociocultural context, a "negative" is generated, which must be repressed when things go well, because "the new born ...is also a double, an unsettling intruder, a stranger" (Kaës, 2009). It is exactly, however, this "negative" that often in these cases cannot be repressed and remains as a split element, that cannot be assimilated, that can represent itself in the real world in the form of persecution, manifesting its dramatic effect sometimes by actual murder committed by immigrant parents of their own children, but their children "strangers", lived as an intolerable threat to their own world order, specially for second generation.

Declinations of the foreigner: across the *borders* of the Self

As Roussillon points out, in fact, “the relationship with the stranger emerges first of all from the relationship with oneself” (Roussillon, 2017, p.4). Foreign areas are then configured as deep, dark areas of oneself, non-subjectivated and non-subjectivable areas that can paradoxically be encountered only through a reflecting surface, a ‘mirror’ that sends back to us the most unexpected thing our own face ‘carries’: migrants, foreigners, bring to our

eyes the split aspects of the 'we', put us in contact, and in an intrinsically traumatic contact, with what is most alien to us in ourselves, with what we have necessarily expelled to be able to constitute ourselves as I/We, in order to be able to stabilize self-representative and identifying instances. Looking in the foreigner's mirror forces one to see something of the self that can be unbearable.

The very experience of migration, both for those who leave and for those who welcome, therefore consists in a mutual 'revelation' of one's foreign areas, a revelation that requires intense, and renewed, psychic and cultural *work* in order to be processed. If this work is hindered or becomes impossible, it translates into an unsustainable return to the reality of rejected and unassimilable elements, therefore elements that cannot be integrated by definition, which migrants and natives literally 'undertake' to embody for each other. These are therefore *intrapsychic areas, 'revealed' however only by and in the relationship with the foreigner.*

Paradoxically, therefore, the heart of the experience of the 'foreigner' is not placed at the level of the relationship with the 'external' object nor at the level of the 'external' world but rather at the level of an 'outside psyche', to use the expression of Aulagnier (Aulagnier, 1975), that lives however in the subject himself: the foreigner finds himself *ab initio* settled inside, indeed in a certain sense we could say that the foreigner is everything that has 'fallen out' of a primary organizational matrix, everything that the intervention of the other has not succeeded in reclaiming, which the maternal mind or the maternal word have not been able to present in a tolerable way to the immature psyche of the infant, to make it appropriable by him so to speak.

The 'foreign' element will then be made up of everything that falls outside of that beloved image of oneself sent back by the maternal gaze. Only with this beloved image will it be possible to identify oneself in fact: an ideal image of oneself in which narcissistic investment, investment of the primary object and of the primary group, of which in Freud's words the new born is "heir and servant", converges (Freud, 1924). So we can say that the 'foreign' part of the self is the anti-ideal one *par excellence.*

But that internal 'foreign' dimension will awaken with unusual force in adolescent migrants, when conflicting transgenerational dynamics are reactivated that are played out above all on the clash between belonging and cultural ideals.

This is a particularly intense conflicting dynamic that can play out, as we have seen, on two fronts, also involving the operators of the reception centers who are also placed in an uncomfortable parental position. The conflict of loyalty that is triggered involves not only parental figures but also internalized 'cultural' objects and, above all, results in an attack on one's entire genealogy. It will be remembered how Freud emphasizes that the newborn receives a sort of 'narcissistic reward' precisely because he belongs to a lineage, as a link in a genealogical chain of which he is heir and servant, which he contributes to perpetuate over time and, in the case of migrations, is 'committed' to transplant in another place as well (Freud, 1914). If, on the other hand, critical elements or desires for emancipation from the original cultural configurations begin to appear, all this is perceived as an active attack on one's own internal group, on the very source of primary identifications. Your *own* therefore begins to appear 'foreign', the element of 'foreignness' to oneself infiltrates

everyday life and pervades all choices and relationships.

That's why in the consulting room we try to find a 'neutral country', not too involved in the violent *war* of ideals between the family of origin and the welcome center , a *third* space: a place for the Ego, an instance of compromise as Freud calls it (Freud, 1923), just those vital compromises that are forbidden for *Ideal*, pure, positions.

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