

The Emergence of Early Prenatal Traumatic Imprints in Psychoanalytical Practice – From Preconception to Birth –

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Abstract

In her paper, Joanna Wilhelm approaches a new subject in psychoanalysis. She considers the existence of imprints of all the early biological experiences, registered on a protomind by means of a cellular memory, from preconception to birth.

She considers as basic for the constitution of pathological mental patterns, all the biological *traumas* that the human being undergoes since his experience both as sperm and/or egg, at the moment of conception, later as a concept, embryo and foetus, considering that each early biological trauma, receives a psychic correlate.

These traumatic imprints will constitute nodal points for the development of future psychopathological patterns. Unless these nodal points have a chance of being worked-through, they will keep on expressing their negative shadow through a “dream-life” atmosphere which in fact has more to do with the past than with the present. Thus these ghostly shades from a very early beginning, will impregnate present reality.

The author proposes a monistic model of the mind: she considers the existence of one only instinct – the *life instinct* – whose early basic pattern is provided by the movement of attraction of the sperm towards the egg; she thus proposes the non-existence of a death instinct, considering that the opposite of the life instinct is its lack.

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Zusammenfassung

In ihrem Beitrag behandelt Joanna Wilheim einen neuen Themenbereich in der Psychoanalyse. Sie untersucht die Engramme all der frühen biologischen Erfahrungen von der Präkonzeption bis zur Geburt, die von der Protopsyche auf dem Niveau des zellulären Gedächtnisses gespeichert sind.

Als Grundlage pathologischer Konfliktmuster sieht sie all die biologischen *Traumen* an, die jemand seit seiner Existenz als Samen und / oder Ei, seiner Konzeption, im Stadium der frühen Zellteilungen, als Embryo und als Föt erfahren hat. Sie geht dabei davon aus, daß jedes biologische Trauma ein psychisches Korrelat hat.

Diese traumatischen Engramme stellen Knoten- und Krisenpunkte für die Entwicklung künftiger Konfliktmuster dar. Wenn diese Knotenpunkte nicht durchgearbeitet werden, dann fahren sie fort, ihren negativen Schatten in Form einer „traumartigen“ Atmosphäre auf das Selbstgefühl zu werfen, was in Wirklichkeit mehr mit der Vergangenheit als mit der Gegenwart zu tun hat. So werden diese Schattengeister aus der Frühzeit die gegenwärtige Realität färben und beeinflussen.

Das Triebmodell der Autorin ist monistisch: Sie nimmt nur die Existenz eines Triebes an – *des Lebenstriebes* –, dessen frühes Grundmuster sich in der Anziehungsbewegung zwischen Samen und Ei darstellt; deshalb verwirft sie die Annahme eines Todestriebes und betrachtet als Gegensatz des Lebenstriebes sein Fehlen.

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In order to enable you to follow the description of the path I followed to establish the psychodynamical pattern that I shall present, I shall start by stating my psychoanalytical identity.

A couple of years after I had started my psychoanalytical training in the mid sixties in the São Paulo Institute of Psychoanalysis, which was at that time of Kleinian orientation, I found myself caught in the middle of a turmoil. All of a sudden the frame of reference changed into something completely new and different: Wilfred Bion's new model of the mind was being suddenly introduced. Kleinian models dealing with the manifestation of the death instinct through greed, envy and projective identification, the setting of the Paranoid-Schizoid Position and its leading towards the Depressive Position, giving place to Bion's Theory of Thinking, focusing on Thought Disorders, stress being laid on the Destructive Part of the Personality and on the Attacks on Linking.

Throughout the following years in the mid seventies, I had the opportunity of sharing some of Dr. Bion's experience in Brazil: supervisions, clinical seminars, lectures and in 1979, a short-time individual analysis in Los Angeles. All of it changed my whole approach to the understanding of the psychoanalytical experience and session. I started looking at it as an encounter of two minds, fol-

lowing the biological model of conception as a result of the mating of the two germinative cells, whose outcome was meant to be the discovery of the unknown.

I then observed surprising and curious situations: while I would offer my mind to be used as an available mental space to contain the mind of the analysand, in order to help him process his concealed “unknown”, I started noticing that a) he would either start acting destructively towards this space and function put at his disposal instead of keeping his communication at the level of free association as I had been taught to expect him to do, or b) he would behave in a treacherous way, misleading me by producing false material to be interpreted, or c) he would withdraw into an ‘autistic’ protective shield, or d) he would turn against any positive gain from our psychoanalytical work and attack it destructively.

I was puzzled.

The available psychoanalytical theories were of little help to really understand and handle such situations in order to achieve psychic change. My supervisors offered me worn out Kleinian or Bionian theoretical notions referring to greed, envy or an urge to destroy. Such interpretations would not produce any real effect or mental change. I realized their ineffectiveness to undo the psychopathological patterns.

They were merely descriptive. I felt an urge to reach beyond the surface. I wanted to understand ‘why?’, ‘where did it come from?’, ‘what was it that produced such destructive mental movements?’. I wanted to understand the origin of envy, the origin of the psychotic part of the mind, of the attacks on linking, of the perverse part of the personality. I wondered why would a mind avoid mating with another mind? What sort of pain was feared and avoided? why would a mind suddenly retreat and hide beneath a sort of protective shield? Where did it come from? What was its origin?

I had at my disposal years of listening to Bion’s contributions communicated through metaphors. It was a matter of deciphering the metaphors. And so I did.

Eventually I realized that the mind was reediting, when brought into contact with another mind, the experience of the biological conception of that particular individual – the circumstances of the getting together of the two germinative cells – and that the impediments that arose for the achievement of the psychoanalytical encounter were difficulties which reproduced some traumatic event that had occurred and been experienced at the moment of conception, having been imprinted – by means of a cellular memory – on the unconscious matrix of that mind.

I realized that the psychoanalytical setting and encounter favours the appearance of patterns of behaviour – that were once biological, and were now but mental – registered on deep protomental furrows, which would emerge in the here-and-now of the psychoanalytical experience, because they are imprints of traumatic, hence undigested, experiences that had established points of trauma which turned out impeditive for the development of normal mental growth.

I therefore realized that the psychopathological patterns which I was facing in my psychoanalytical practice when the two of us – analysand and me – came together to accomplish something (psychoanalysis) must have originated much beyond the time and place to which the current theories would attribute their ori-

gin. They were manifestations of something very early, very primitive, belonging to the prenatal period of that existence.

I then put forward the hypothesis that the destructive performance in which my patient's mind would occasionally engage, was a way of telling me about things that had happened to him, and were imprinted on his unconscious mind, since a time where there was no access to verbal speech nor verbal thought. I realized that the patient was telling me, through this acted out language of communication, of some terrible experience that had happened to him at the very beginning of his biological existence: somewhere on the way from preconception to birth.

I also realized that this sort of "acting-out" could be looked upon as a "Rosetta Stone" of early primitive imprints and could thus mean a precious and valuable source of information. It could represent an important tool for grasping the meaning of communications about very early life-threatening experiences that had been registered only on a sensorial level. They represented a knowledge that the mind did not "know" about. They were there, imprinted on its basic unconscious matrix, passing valuable informations concerning something very threatening that had once happened to that self, which now the self felt an urge to "know about", in order to be able to transform it into thoughts and thus deal with it mentally, working it through. Otherwise it would go on reappearing, repeating compulsively its auto or hetero destructiveness: suicide or murder.

Through deciphering my counter-transferential feelings and reactions aroused either by the patient's projective identifications or some other dissociative mental process, I realized that in the here-and-now of the analytical encounter I would sometimes be assigned the role of the patient's once endangered, suffering or victimized self: either as sperm, or concept, embryo or foetus.

Thus, through this new way of looking at the analysand-analyst interaction in the analytical process, a new light could be thrown on the meaning of the negative therapeutic reactions in psychoanalysis. The disruptive mental movements and attacks on analysis, on the analytical link, on its products or achievements, could be looked upon as reiterations of very early prenatal traumatic experiences imprinted by the concept or foetus, feeling threatened of being annihilated, aborted or destroyed. All these being situations that the patient is unable to communicate through verbal free association, as classical psychoanalysis would consider proper – because his mind does not "know" about them. The only language he can employ to convey such early experiences, is acting them out in the transference.

In 1983 at a scientific meeting of the São Paulo Psychoanalytical Society, I presented my first psychoanalytical paper on this matter. It was called "Anatomy of the mind" and had been preceded by an unpublished "Anatomy of a Murderous Mind". This was my first official daring in this so new psychoanalytical field. It was followed by two other papers, "Geneses" and "Crime and Punishment", presented at the Latin American Congress of Psychoanalysis in Mexico City, in 1986. They raised anger. The proposition was too inconvenient, too threatening to the established knowledge. A colleague from Mexico thus wrote to me referring to this experience:

“When we approach a group of colleagues whose own theoretical ideologies or convictions had not fully crystallized, our intrusion with a new idea is so threatening to them that they must eliminate us. And by their eliminating us, they are telling us that their old ideology, their old theoretical structure, has not been fully crystallized (...) We should only tell them that we are not eliminating anything of the established ideas. We are just supplementing something genetic that has not been considered before. It is important not to threaten them in their convictions, but how can one avoid it ... It is important not to feel threatened by them. And that one can avoid.”

I did not know, by then, of the existence neither of PPPANA nor of this European Society. My encounter with PPPANA came about in San Francisco in 1987 and it represented an important turning-point. I there found out that I was not alone: others, through different paths, had arrived at similar discoveries referring to the existence of imprints of early traumatic experiences. It was no longer “madness” to consider the existence of the trauma of conception, nor the imprints of the sperm’s traumatic experiences on his journey on his way to his “promised land”, or to consider these as prototypes to the Kleinian Paranoid-Schizoid anxieties, nor unreasonable to consider the existence of a cellular memory through which are registered all the experiences from pre-conception to birth.

I thus found out that I had company in the persons of Thomas Verny, Graham Farrant, William Emerson, Josephine Van Husen and others. I went back home set at starting a prenatal multidisciplinary association in Brazil. In 1988 I published a book called “On the Way to Being Born: A Link Between the Biological and the Psychical”. And in 1991 we started the “Brazilian Association for the Study of Pre- and Perinatal Psychism”.

I shall now state briefly some main theoretical conclusions, drawn from the paper I presented in 1983:

1. In the utmost depths of our minds lays a basic matrix which contains the imprints, done by means of a cellular memory, of the whole process of our biological experience, from pre-conception to birth.
2. From this basic matrix derives the raw material of the unconscious phantasies.
3. Thus, phantasies are memories. They correspond to the psychical representations of the imprints of the early sense impressions, which are stored as raw material for thought, into which they will later be transformed when a mental apparatus, enough developed, will be available.
4. The first expression of the life instinct is the drive of the sperm towards the egg; it represents the first manifestation of Eros.

Freud first considered libido as being the expression of the sexual instinct, which he later incorporated in the category of life instincts.

I propose the anticipation of the establishment of its matrix – sexual instinct as equated to life instinct – to the pattern of the coming together of the two heterosexual germinative cells, sperm and egg.

This matches with Freud's further "extension of the concept of libido to the individual cells" and of his "transforming the sexual instinct into Eros" and from then on considering Eros as being the instinct which "seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance".

In this sense, libido means love equated to Eros, in the strict sense of the life instinct – drive towards a life-giving object – mutual attraction, meeting, mating and creating.

5. The carving of this movement establishes the matrix of love and passion, the basic difference being that love means getting together and creating, while in passion something desperate is involved.

Passion – or passionate love – is a desperate urge towards a goal. It refers to an unconscious need of being rescued, involving a matter of life and death, that was only true once in the first original search and mating. What is being sought now is to solve, by way of some means – art, science, a cause, an idea, a person, activity or profession – something that remained unsolved since a remote prenatal past, an urge to save something which was at that time really threatened of being destroyed: its matrix is carved by the first heterosexual cellular mating; it represents the sperm's passion for life, journeying in search of his mate, his place of rescue and perpetuation.

6. This drive of one towards the other, will establish the basic pattern for all further dual object relations and will provide the basic mental pattern for human sexuality: heterosexual mating of two to make one.
7. This experience will provide the matrix of all further dual situations of container and contained: it is first the egg containing the sperm, then the mother's womb containing the foetus, mother's mental "reverie" containing the infant's emotional needs, the mother the child, the analyst the analysand.
8. I do not consider the existence of a *death instinct*. I propose that the opposite of the life instinct is its lack, and not the death instinct. When the striving for life ceases, death may set in. To die is to give up life. Death settles when the struggle for life – which is the expression of the life instinct – is given up by the living organism.
9. Consequently evil, cruelty, sadism and destructiveness, are not expressions of a death instinct, not instincts at all, but impulses. They result of the incorporation by the self, of the destructive attacks that it undergoes on behalf of the mother's physiology – from preconception to birth.
10. Aggression is the expression of the life instinct on the part of the aggressor: when the mother's physiology attacks first the sperm, then the concept, as foreign bodies, it is the mother's instinct of self-preservation that is at work.
11. The incorporation by the concept of the destructive movement directed at him, will provide his protomind with the matrix of a pattern of destructiveness. His physiological cellular response to his mother's destructive attack at him, represents his impulse of self-preservation. Thus, it is not an instinct, but an impulse: a self-defensive response to a destructive aggression.

Sadism or masochism will be the outcome of the mind's identification either with its own aggressor or with its own self.

12. The carving of the matrix of the feelings of hope and hopelessness, depends basically of the sperm's vicissitudes on his journey towards his aim.
13. The strength or weakness of the sense of acceptance or belonging, depends on the mother's physiological conditions to receive and welcome the sperm, the concept, the embryo and the foetus. On this will depend better or worse conditions for keeping a balance of emotional or psychical integration and consequently, psychical or emotional growth.
14. The matrix of the feelings of rejection and adoption is carved at two basic moments: conception and implantation.

The place and moment of conception should be considered a *main place*, because it is there and then that a basic matrix of psychical representation of integration is carved and established. Also, of being taken in, accepted; of fusion; of gratitude for having been rescued, nurtured, taken care of; of compassion.

But it also represents the place of birth of the feelings of exclusion, displacement, lack of contentment, homelessness, motherlessness. Thus of resentment, rage and anger. Of envy and greed, when the identification of the mind will be with those excluded from life.

It thus represents the birth-place of psychopathology: of the psychosomatic disease, of the autistic encapsulation, of the feelings of castration and annihilation, thus of homosexuality, of loss of identity, of sadism and perversion; of psychopathy; of psychosis; of difficulties for discrimination, thus for thinking clearly; of impairment of the capacity to learn, to trust, to mate. Of everlasting dissatisfaction, of the feelings of infinite misery, helplessness, abandonment. Thus of depression and melancholia, when the identification of the mind will be the experience of exclusion.

15. *Envy* has a multiple etiology and its quality will depend on with which one of the following situations does the mind identify at a particular moment:
 - a) it may refer to the rivalry of the sperms' competition to win the contest for life;
 - b) it may refer to the "feelings" of inferiority experienced by the sperm towards the big, "omnipotent" egg;
 - c) it may refer to the mother's secretions attacking the just conceived new life. In this case it will represent an identification with the aggressor. This will give origin to the most destructive and malignant sort of envy: the envy that kills, and provides the self with the core of a feeling of joy to kill.

Thus, envy is a phantasy. Its "feeling" is the stirring up of these unconscious imprints by some actual experience.

16. For the etiology of *anguish* – ANGST – I propose two basic original imprints: threat to life being annihilated and threat of loss of the object which represents contention.

The experience of feeling anguish is the actualization of some early imprint of when:

- a) a real threat to life was experienced at a very early time, either by the sperm, the concept, the embryo, the foetus, the being born baby or the newborn, or
- b) a real threat of losing the providing and containing object, once originally experienced, stirred up now by some actual situation. It now corresponds to the psychical representation of the experience of having lost or, been expelled from, the main place of contention. It is a momentaneous mental experience of feeling as if no trustful containing object was available or, of not being "in" the main place, or yet, of having lost the place which represents a life assuring place, as was once the egg to the sperm, the womb to the foetus, the mother to the newborn.

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