

Talking about Love: Some Clinical Reflections on Sentimental Relationships in Cognitive Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Sentimental relationships in cognitive psychotherapy are important tools to understand the clinical conditions. Several mental disorders arise from changes inside attachment relationships; while in infancy, childhood and adolescence these changes are related to parenting, during adulthood variations in love bonds, like excessive closeness or distancing, may develop anxiety or depressive symptoms for example.

In this regard Guidano's theory of the Personal Organizational Meaning provided an important tribute to cognitive psychotherapy: the way to represent love is not the same for everyone, but it depends on personal meanings that maintain identity and the visions of the world, the others and the self.

Hence, talking about how people experience love during psychotherapy sessions is far more important than analyzing specific symptoms: only discovering personal meanings inside sentimental relationships, people may turn their choices, saving an important bond, or leaving wrong partners on time, in order to choose someone relevant and obviously in order to improve the psychological functioning, reducing the risk of exacerbation of mental disorders, as depression or anxiety.

Keywords: *Sentimental Relationships; Cognitive Psychotherapy; Guidano's Theory; Depression or Anxiety*

For many years psychologists did not study the effect of love in psychological functioning, hence there was a huge hole in helping patients improve their clinical conditions.

Only during the mid-twentieth century this interest seemed to emerge, thanks to Harlow's and Bowlby's theories and afterwards in the late 60's researchers and theorists started to spread works about sentimental attraction [1].

The theory of attachment illustrates the importance of having secure relationships in order to seek for comfort and protection in situation of peril and be reassured by the caregiver. The key concept is the very attachment behavior which is mostly evident and elicited by dangerous circumstances and which is activated to look for protection in the relationship with the caregiver (Bowlby, 1988).

Following this clinical background, in the 80's Vittorio Guidano's theory of Personal Organizations Meaning (POM) introduced the importance of attachment inside love bonds in adulthood.

According to Guidano, love reinforces identity, first of all self representations, expectations about other's behaviors and attitudes, and perspectives regarding the partner, elements that change during the relationship and that can be modified through psychotherapy in order to improve the psychological balance [2,3]. In other words, the images of the self and the partner that guide attitudes towards them

and the world itself, are not the same whether the partner shows closeness or distancing, so in these moments it is possible to see clearly personal meanings and understand patients' vulnerability, in order to integrate different self and other perceptions [4].

Some patients, for example, choose stable partners in order to feel protected, but as time goes by they may realize a lack of complicity inside the couple and fall in love with a passionate person that does not assure stability, though. Similar events may guide the patients to integrate his needs and meanings in order to find a partner that combines the both elements, stability and complicity, getting rid of double partners [5].

In this regard the theory of Personal Organization Meanings shows how people explain reality towards the same meanings, but when some events occur (like a relationship that becomes important) and perturbs them, the massive use of the same meaning induces different symptoms and in some cases severe clinical conditions.

Consequently, in order to regain the psychological balance, the individual must not correct his meanings, but integrate different ways to represent himself and others in order to make choices that could be more relevant to the self [3].

The POM are not clinical categories, but structures of the self that enhance the way people interpret the world, the others and themselves, in order to strengthen their beliefs about them. These are DAP (related to eating disorders), OBS (obsessive), DEP (depressive), PHOB (phobic) organizations.

Originally Guidano named DAP Organization using the acronym of Disturbi Alimentari Psicogeni, the Italian translation for Eating Disorders Organization, but like others, this structure is not specifically related to people affected by eating disorders: in every POM the meanings and themes draw from specific symptoms, but every clinical condition can occur in patients with different structures. Just to give an example, a person with DEP POM can be affected by anxiety disorders or specific phobia, but this condition arises from a failure of emotional regulation of anger and sadness linked to a pervasive sense of loneliness. In PHOB Organization, instead, anxiety disorders arise from an over-regulation of fear of abandonment and a perceived lack of protection by the attachment figures.

Thus, every Organization refers specifically the way people give explanations about their inner experience with the world and people with whom they interact [3].

Given that human personality is a complex field, most of people can show themes, cognitive schema and meanings belonging to different Organizations, so "mixed" ones are frequent and not at all rare.

On the other side, unfortunately, mixed organizations (DAP/PHOB, or OBS/DEP for example) are still less studied nowadays, hence, it is preferable to analyze main themes through emotional regulation, kind of thoughts and emotions mostly used in order to integrate what is lacking in every single patient.

Love meanings in DEP organization

Depressive POM is the organization characterized by a constant and pervasive sense of loneliness and expectations of rejection. DEP people grow up with the certainty that nobody can really help or understand them and relationships are bound to fail to confirm themselves their unavoidable loneliness. They are usually satisfied with their professional career and they believe that only with strong effort with high commitment is the key to success. Usually they have parents that pass down the importance of learning to count exclusively on themselves since childhood, with the minimum emotive support [2,3]. For this reason they develop the expectations to be refused and never loved by anyone that may influence and lead to real rejections.

Given that loneliness is normal and expected for individuals with DEP POM, they may fall in love with someone and experience connection in different moments, but suddenly they may feel alone and distant in order to not be involved in the relationship [4]. A patient with

DEP Organization considers love as an evanescent fact that comes to an end suddenly: initially he can experience surprise and euphoria because he doesn't think that someone could be into him, but soon he gives explanations like: "She is interested in my money, not in me" or "She makes compliment just to make me happy, not because it's true" to maintain the negative representation of the self as profoundly refused by everyone and never really loved. Plus he may shows implicit attitudes and behaviors, like anger outbursts, that leads the partner to leave him and confirm him (once again) that anybody can't really be happy with him, so loneliness is normal and expected [4,6]. Moreover, patients with DEP POM, for example, experience a long grief after the end of a relationship because abandonment confirms themselves to be unlovable. Grief does not depend on the duration of the bond. They can fall in love with a person whom they have been meeting for a couple of days, and go through a long grief; this is a way to reinforce a negative self. In this aim, the therapist has to facilitates the patient to understand how he/she he seeks for people who are bound to reject him, in order to enhance a self-perception developed through his personal story [6].

Given that for this Organization, an important relationship could last one day and be significant at the same time, the therapist should examine the way the patient represent the bond and the reason why it is so significant to him.

One of the important psychotherapy goals in this case is to regulate anger and sadness, the foremost emotions in this Organization: in this sense, the patient can go through loneliness in a more adequate way, allowing the him/her to get closer to the partner, without being overwhelmed by the certainty to be forever alone and refused [4].

Love meanings in PHOB organization

PHOB themes revolve around the seek for protection in caregivers and the fear of abandonment. A person with PHOB meaning usually construct reality in terms of peril and safeness, in which only relatives and close friends are worthy to rely on. Differently from DEP patients, the PHOB ones rarely experienced moments of real loneliness, because they were always surrounded by their parents who may be above all hyper-protective and warm (not distant and cold like in DEP families), so they don't perceive loneliness as a normal and expected, but as fearful event to avoid.

Parents usually threaten to abandon them or the partner in order to control their reactions and pass down the idea of dangerous world with selfish people from whom they have to protect themselves. In this regard, the self develops as weak and unable to be independent especially when attachment bonds appear distant, and at the same time strong when they feel parents' or partner' closeness and stability [2,3].

Some people with PHOB POM feel strong for the most, so psychological imbalance occurs when they perceive constraint by their caregivers, and others, instead, feel weak so they are perturbed by events in which they feel abandoned and left alone.

Love for PHOB people is described as a sense of warmth and protection. They used to selecting partners who proved to be loyal, but not constraining, in order to preserve their freedom and assure themselves other's protection. Normally before breaking up, they search for another person because they struggle to stay alone [7] and basically they leave the partner when they feel oppressed by his/her request: for example living together, getting married, having children and so on.

If the patient feels "trapped" by the partner's requests, but at the same time reluctant to leave her, the therapy should aim to allow the patient to tolerate sentimental duties, without feeling constrained. In other situation, if he relies too much to the partner because he doesn't feel strong enough to go through lifetime experience himself (for example he asks the partner to go with him everywhere during a period of perceived distancing inside the relationship) the therapy should guide the patient to strengthen his self perception in order to rely more on himself than on the parent [4].

Love meanings in eating disorders organization DAP

In DAP families parents implicitly pass on the message “We will love you, if we agree and think the same way” [3,7].

This Organization is characterized by a pervasive stance of confusion came from a difficulty in recognizing emotions, sensations and thoughts during sensitiveness to judgments fueled in family’s environments and reinforced in other places (like school or sports for example).

DAP individuals grow up with a sensitive to judgments and a compliant attitude towards parents or people feared because of their perceived superiority. Perfectionism is a way to preserve the self, avoiding critics and being accepted, but on the other side patients with DAP Organizations invest in daydreaming rather than in developing their talent, in order to escape hypothetical disappointments [2,7].

These attitudes and behaviors show a pervasive representation of the self and the others in terms of deception: they are most likely to feel themselves and the people around them as a “bluff” a representation that reflects onto love bonds. In this regard they are prone to feel disappointed by themselves and the partner, and for this reason they are likely to make confusing sentimental relationships that impedes to overcome the fear of judgments and rejection [3]. Differently from PHOB Organization patients with a DAP POM are used to perceiving intrusion when the partner shows too much intimacy and a sense of aliveness when he/she demonstrates detachment.

Furthermore, they dread to be excessively dependent on their partner and lose their edge, being influenced by him or her. On the other side these patients are constantly obsessed with the idea of becoming the apple of his/her eye: having a constant proof of being in their partners’ mind inflates the self-esteem, while emotional distance is often interpreted as a sign of disinterest that lowers the self perception [8]. Another important theme in this Organization is competition with the exfiance or the women/men related to moments of perceived distance: in addition to Guidano’s assertions it might add that DAP patients tend to explain companion’s coolness as a consequence of being not enough attractive (mentally, physically) [6].

In addition, patients with this POM usually feel wrong inadequate when their attempts to gain attentions and closeness fail: this aspect underlines how self-esteem is field-dependent, for this reason, therapeutic intervention should facilitate exploration of personal needs and understanding of the partner’s mind, in order to create a distance between personal and other thoughts and to strengthen the self perception.

Patients with DAP POM sometimes face confusing and unstable relationship, in which they may idealize and fantasize their partner in order to avoid deception: with this concept the clinician eases the awareness of personal cognitive schema [9] so the patient can understand that fancies are meant to reject different perspective about the partner that could lead to a change inside the relationship [6].

In this regard, fantasies are psychological mechanisms that maintain the self compliant who has to do everything he/she can to have a relationship and being loved, without understanding that this attitude attracts partners who end up feeling overwhelmed and reject them. Integrating different views about the self and the other, the patient could drift apart, being more focused on his personal needs and let the partner show his love.

Normally compliant attitudes and behaviors get reduced when people with DAP POM realize the difference between being sincerely available and being available towards the partner in order to regulate emotions like fear of being rejected, shame, and sadness [8].

Learning to name these emotions, and linking them to sensations and thoughts are actions that patients to create the right balance between giving and receiving, learning to express their wills without being overwhelmed by the fear to be rejected.

Love meanings in OBS organization

Obsessive Organization is characterized by themes regarding moral values and principles designed by internal standards: differently from ED Organization, people with obsessive patterns do not construct a confusing self, but an ambivalent one. Given that they grow up in a family in which the parents, usually show an ambivalence in approaching their children, giving comfort and cure but with a cold attitude. Very severe about the rules, patient's parents may force the family to daily routine rituals which are part and parcel of a moral-based upbringing: for example, they have to eat at the same time, learning languages during every Sunday afternoon, in order to be reassured by stability, harmony and precision [7].

In this regard a patient with OBS POM develops the tendency to find regularity and certainty though precise moral codes. Differently from DAP Organization, the self is not defined by others' opinions and standards, but it is shaped by inner ones: the patient with OBS POM feels virtuous when he pursues attitudes and behaviors regarding his own values, and at the same time morally ignoble when he violates them, feeling a bad person. They usually live by rituals, religious precepts that epitomize a coping strategy to enhance a perception of themselves as good and respectful people.

When they fall in love, people with Obsessive POM usually feel a sense of harmony and stability and they usually choose partners who can be easily influenced by them, so they can strengthen the perception of being a role model [10].

Love troubles come from the doubts about the partner which are totally different from DAP patients' confusion: in OBS POM people generally think "Is he/she the right person for me, the way he/she is?" in spite of "Does he/she like me the way I am?" [4].

These patients struggle to understand whether partner's and their behaviors and principles are morally corrected, consequently they choose people to correct and guide, for whom being a role model; on the other side, no infringement of their codes is welcomed with boredom, for this reason they fall in love with people that sometimes show unpredictable actions and ideas they cannot control.

Psychological imbalance can occur when they realize they can persuade the partner to embody their value or when they fall in love with a lover but they are married; these events are welcomed as a self perception of being bad and unable to achieve moral codes and influence people.

In this case, the therapeutic aim is mainly to help the patient tolerate partner's perspectives without struggling to change his/her mind: this can be achieved throughout emotional regulation of despise towards points of views in contrast to the personal ones and lowering the sense of guilty if he may not embody inner codes in order to be helpful for the partner [2,4].

The Affective Style repertoire in cognitive therapy

The affective style is a repertoire created by Guidano that enlightens the personal meanings inside love stories [6].

The therapist guides the patient to the exploration of the most important relationships, differentiating the most excruciating ones to the least significant: the logic of identity becomes clearer during interpersonal changes, in terms of closeness and distancing only if the bond is relevant, in other words, it evoked sorrow, long grief or lots of discussion, for example.

Cognitive psychotherapy may use different tools in order to facilitates awareness inside the affective style repertoire: this is not an interview with certain questions to follow, but precisely a theme that includes specific aspects of sentimental bonds, especially moments of intimacy and distancing in which personal meanings are clear.

These aspects can be studied during the different periods of the relationship: Guidano suggested to split the most significant ones to the least important, analyzing the previous ones individually. Every story should be divide into three sections: beginning, middle and end

[6]. The beginning shows which attitudes, behaviors life events, drive the patient to get closer to the partner and see him/her as he/she is (and not as a person they just date without any purpose, but as a person for whom they want to share lifetime and know fully), the middle describes the psychological mechanisms that maintain the relationship: particularly the way the couple experiences fights or reunites after short or long period of separation, his feelings about it, prevalent emotions and thought and behaviors and attitudes that show his pain.

Afterwards, the end of the relationship corresponds with a long period of separation that is not reversible: for example when the partner starts a new relationship or move to another house or country.

In order to consider important elements, the therapist uses ABC, slow motion for episodes and dreams that guide the person to understand the role inside the couple. During the end every person experiences grief, but the prevalence of emotions and feelings change regarding on relevant themes: the therapist has to guide the patient towards the discover of different ways of approaching love relationship, respecting his own meanings.

A confusing love: Alyssa the girl of the twist plot.

Alyssa is a 23 years old student and she asked for a therapy because of a lack of concentration and a sense of loneliness that impeded her to study.

The patient started to feel constantly wrong and inadequate when she happened to know that Mario, her ex boyfriend, was having a stable relationship with another woman, Lucia.

Unless she was surrounded by many friends, Alyssa used to feel upset and not accepted, and when she met Mario, she thought that he would be very different from them and similar to her.

Her relationship with Mario appeared ambivalent and confusing since they begun dating and the couple complained a lack of intimacy without finding new ways to achieve connection. He finally broke up the relationship, but after a month he kept on contacting Alyssa once a week and so forth, but he never clarified his intentions.

In the meantime Mario was dating Lucia: Alyssa discovered this secret relationship by some friends' rumors, so she decided to stay in touch with him hoping that sooner or later they would have been together again, minimizing the fact that Mario was about to live together with Lucia.

Several months passed and nothing between them really changed, but Alyssa kept on waiting for him to leave Lucia and come back to her. At the same time, she had not the faintest idea whether he was really into her and willing to construct a stable love bond.

Sometimes she struggled to get up early and delayed her daily routine, feeling tired for the most. At the same time, in other moment, she did not know how to prepare a difficult exam, consuming her energy into different pages and researches without going on, and postponing her preparation.

These two issues occurred in two different periods of the relationship with Mario: When Mario didn't text Alyssa, she basically felt extremely tired and without energy, but confused and anxious when he texted her.

Alyssa thought to be stupid and incompetent, because she kept on waiting for a "twist plot"; she was expecting him to clarify his intentions once and forever, but she realized that she ended up spending most of her time into daydreaming, hoping to receive a message.

During the therapy session she used to find different excuses to confirm herself to be not so involved and she continued justifying and contacting him, settling for receiving a couple of dates and conversations sometimes.

But the real twist plot happened when she explored her anger, sadness towards ABC, slow motions and dreams. She was not able to contact these emotions in the attempt to comply Mario's expectations to create a relationship in which texting and seeing without being she started to feel focused on the tasks and she passed all the exams with high marks.

Linking symptoms to events, Alyssa realized how she depended on Mario's thinking, without working on feeling her couple and personal needs. Every time Mario texted or invited her, she felt suddenly surprised and appreciated, thinking that the he was eventually sure to stay with her.

But she got confused, she felt suddenly stupid and wrong in the moment she realized that he just wanted to write a couple of messages without the "twist plot", and she was trying hard to have a profound and stable relationship without success.

Understanding her fears of intimacy during love bonds, she realized one more element that impeded her from taking the plunge and clarify spontaneously her willing to have stable and intimate bond.

Training constantly to link emotions, thoughts and inner sensations to her sentimental events, she decided to meet up Mario and she broke up the relationship, although he tried to persuade her to wait for again without giving her any certainty.

Alyssa's prevalent meanings revolved around DAP PMO; her self representation depended on Mario's behaviors towards her, consequently studying was easy and fluent when the relationship worked and he shew closeness, and hard and confusing when he disappeared for months or weeks and she did know what to think.

Unfolding encysted emotions when she was waiting for Mario's response, Alyssa felt more capable to decide herself and to break up, feeling free and not wrong.

Remembering her previous progresses during the sessions, like reducing the frequency and intensity of daydreaming, contacting him less and less, she felt more motivated to break up the relationship, feeling proud of herself, and more focused on the performance. Now she's going to be graduated.

The therapy helped Alyssa rely more on her needs rather than Mario's expectations and decide by herself, feeling more self confident and independent about her choices.

Conclusion

Despite the effects of love in mental functioning are still less studied by psychologists and researchers, it should be noted that sentimental relationships are the most important bonds in adulthood that can trigger various symptoms.

Guidano's theory of Personal Meaning Organizations has given a crucial tribute to understand how love is part and parcel of identity and for this reason meanings are related to different ways to live sentimental bonds and to reinforce the self and other perceptions [6].

Patients with different meanings look for partners that confirm core beliefs developed from the relationship with the caregivers [2], hence they react distinctly towards their closeness and distancing.

Integrating others meanings in psychological functioning, the patient can really search for more satisfying relationships pertaining to his/her needs.

Now studies should be focused more specifically on love themes in mixed Organizations: given that the majority of the patients could have both DAP and PHOB meanings [10], the next researches could aim to look into the evolution of the whole relationship since the first

interactions, factors of attractiveness regarding different POM. This could help therapist understand more and more personal meanings inside love bonds in order to regain a psychological balance and improve clinical conditions, reducing the risk and the impact of severe disorders in mental health [11].

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