

Envy, from feeling to structure of personality

Antonio Ferrara

Publicato in: Studies in Gestalt Therapy. Edited by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb. n. 8, 1999.

“The experience of anger and injustice.

“If I suffer, I will get what I want.”.

My contribution has as theme of investigation one of the feelings that produces most suffering and specific forms of pathology: envy. The optic is to analyse the factors that bring a feeling and therefore an emotional state, to organise itself under a form of a real structure of personality, assuming a model of adaptation that has specific connotations and that for its peculiarity, is differentiated from other models and consequent psychological organisations. My attention is directed to the fixed structures of personality and therefore to the internal configurations subtended to visible and observable behaviour. I think in fact that the therapy of process, traditional point of reference in Gestalt therapy, acquires great pregnancy when integrated with the comprehension of the contents.

If it is also true that treating the process affects the structure, it is also true that the process model is not by itself exhaustive. The comprehension of one's own inside organization and particularly the decoding of the cognitive models, has an important influence on the quality of therapy. I have also experimented through clinical work that knowing the cognitive maps connected to the emotional states and therefore the thoughts and ideas to which the behavior is inspired, offer to the patient, and not only to the therapist, a remarkable tool to give meaning to one's own actions. The patient understands that they are the result of a unitary logic in which personal history and the interpretations that the child has given to it's own experiences, become a coherent whole and a guiding line of big support during the course of therapy. Besides, becoming aware that his vision of the world has been filtered and distorted by a state of vulnerability and dependence, and understanding the logic subtended to his adaptation, helps to give meaning to present behavior. The patient sees clearly that his life is conditioned by a scheme of comprehension of himself and of the world that surrounds him not suitable anymore, based as it is on an archaic cognitive nucleus.

The modle so wich the organizational maps of personality are inspired are not so many. Rather,

even with the manifold tones through which they present themselves, the constitutive nuclei to a few typologies. I have chosen envy for this occasion, a complex feeling and difficult to treat, because very diffused amongst our patients. Envy is connected to a state of suffering and it has strong motivational components and therefore emotional. The emotions, as well known, are defined as states of excitement and they are firmly correlated to behavior. Characteristic elements are energy and motivation. Perls considers them the essential strength "that infuses energy to all our action" (1973). "They are the language" of our "organism" and they have an essential function: they allow to satisfy needs. We generally consider basic emotions: sadness, anger, fear, joy, love. Within these categories we can add many other emotional states, apparently not very differentiated. For instance, while fear provokes a reaction of escape, the most intense gradations of the same emotional matrix, panic, terror, horror, provoke usually a blockage in action and they present themselves with quite diversified experiences.

Also envy, a feeling that motivates human behavior strongly, can be considered an emotion, although it has complex characteristics behind which at times the motivational traces are lost and other feelings take space that are tightly associated to envy. This feeling, that some authors consider connected to the area of anger, like fear, can present itself in different forms, for degree of intensity and for the consequent reactions in those who experience it.

In the culture of psychoanalysis, that has mostly dealt with it, envy is considered a line of character. M. Klein, particularly, connects this feeling to the oral stage and more specifically to the weaning and the nostalgia of the first food. Something of good that isn't there anymore. We can extend the concept and connect the state of dissatisfaction not only to a loss of contact with the breast and good maternal milk, but also to a more generalized condition. C. Naranjo (1994) speaks of an ontological state, a primary feeling that is born with man himself and is tied to an experience of lack, not only relative to the phenomena of separation, but also to a lack at origin, ontic, that belongs to the human nature. Coming to the world the child soon contacts his limit. He cannot do all he wants, neither have all he desires. He aspires to a fullness that is difficult to accomplish. I think that, while in one way this condition produces suffering, in other ways it activates energy that gives birth to change, a real and proper power of transformation. If I am satiated I become lazy, if I still have hunger, if I feel the void, I move and I act. In the pathological exasperations on the one hand there is renouncement, losing oneself in a state of passivity and depression, on the other hand living in the obsessive action of those who continually "do", cultivating the illusion that with doing one's void will finally be filled.

At the root of the feeling of envy there are therefore emotional states, connected to the experience of lack, that contain motivations, activate behaviors and direct themselves toward objects of need responding to internal and environmental stimuli. It concerns essential impulses for survival and development, a primary form of dental aggression.

It follows that in its original form it is a feeling present since primary childhood, connected to a state of need. It has as characteristic the propensity to see that the other possesses more things and is more satisfied, that it provokes an acute desire to take from those who have more. This attitude is within a natural condition and it produces the push to action. It is associated to an aggressive power that induces to go toward the environment and to look there for the objects of need. The other has the things that I don't have, mummy has good milk, I desire it, I aim towards the nipple to take some of it. The push to look out of oneself allows to satisfy one's needs. Through a natural homeostatic disposition the child searches in the other and primarily in the mother, for the physical and affective nourishment. Subsequently he will address the more extended environment. Looking out of oneself, beyond the deviations due to not resolved symbiotic bonds, is an impulse that is evolved subsequently giving space to a healthy relationship between individual and environment.

When instead frustrations take over and these overcome determined limits, differences come to the foreground, the why "him and not me", the experience of anger and of injustice. The native impulses structure themselves in a feeling pervaded of malevolence toward the other, the other that possesses what the envious subject instead lacks. It becomes then an ineffective emotion overloaded as it is of badly directed excitement for which, despite having a strong motivational charge, paradoxically it doesn't conduct to destination. Through a cognitive confusion the object on which it fixes its attention becomes the other that possesses and the envious person loses sight of true necessities. Need goes on the background and the envied person comes to the foreground, he whom really or imaginarily so has more. As a result it achieves an irrational charge of destructiveness that replaces the original need of satisfaction. Vicious paths take place at the end of which the person continues to feel dissatisfied. Destructive behaviors are activated toward oneself and towards the other. All is organized around a complex experience from the center of which the need of love emerges. It is really in terms of love that the child desires most. He wants more love, we want more love. But with this word we evoke innumerable experiences. Lack can be revealed in fact on more levels and when we say need of love we refer in a generic manner to so many diversified necessities. It is

common opinion that only if there is love one can attend with fullness the new born child. But from the point of view of the child, that knows little around love, what counts is that its needs of survival are satisfied, of relationship, of recognition and of affective exchange. Finally we formulate that one needs a mother full of love to answer to such requests. From here the myth of the perfect mother, compensatory illusion of the insatiable human hunger, of that feeling of constitutional void that characterizes us.

The field of emotions is very articulated and it is useful to establish some difference in the ways of living them. They can maintain their original motivation, or become substitutive feelings of other feelings that would be more adequate to the circumstances. Since for some reason they have been opposed the person has learned to avoid them. The substitution of natural feelings with others more approved by the environment produces, as obvious, a deviation in the process of contact. Destructive feelings become stereotyped and repetitive models, used for manipulating the other.

They have lost their motivational charge and therefore they bring to partial destination... If instead of asking with assertiveness I do it whining, something at times I will obtain but in a different measure from that which I really needed

In other cases the emotion, even if natural, therefore not substitutive, is exaggerated and gives a constant coloring to behavior. It becomes a way of being in the world characterized by that specific emotion as a person escalating from a natural disposition of aggressiveness to an angry form of presenting itself that ends in characterizing a constant manner in its modalities of relationship. Emotion acquires "impassioned" tones, a particular attachment to the object of need, so strong that it pushes to exaggerate the application and energies involved, attitude that contains the illusion of the child, the idea that "if it does more" it will finally obtain the result.

As far as concerns envy the natural drives are exasperated and become stiff. The person continues to look out of her/himself also for what at times s/he already possesses, in a painful and constant attempt to receive from the other or through the other that which in reality or in imagination is lacking. Feelings are associated to cognitive formations, nuclei of ideas and thoughts that, as already said, are elaborated on distorted interpretations and generalizations of reality and this in virtue of the fact that the child has the tendency to put a filter to the experiences that he lives. The filter, in the case of envy, has a connotation of experienced lack, an original void strengthened by environmental experiences. On this basis it builds its own vision of the world. The child not feeling loved searches an explanation to its condition, it asks

itself why. This process in the first phases of existence happens on a bodily base, it is the body that lives directly the stimuli and gives the answers. If the child doesn't receive enough warmth, it becomes stiff in the coldness and in that rigidity it organizes a primary cognitive system, without thoughts and without words.

In the case of envy the child elaborates some specific convictions on itself. It is not loved because it doesn't possess estimable qualities, rather it is not worthy and for this it doesn't count for the other up to conceiving to not be worth of living. On this base it creates cognitive schemes through which it makes an interpretation of oneself and of the world that will become a real map of reference. Personality is organized around a structure whose dominant emotional elements are based on envy and the connected cognitive schemes coagulate themselves around a deep feeling of devaluation that originates from archaic experiences through which the child deduces that he was not wanted, up to the point of thinking he doesn't exist for others: "you don't exist". The feelings of lack and the convictions that are organized around this, produce a type of constantly dissatisfied personality that permeates life of suffering. Dissatisfaction and suffering will become a guiding line for daily life. Therefore, beginning from the original experience of lack, by successive elaborations, a form of adaptation is structured that ends up in a rigidity of intrapsychic mechanisms, to which correspond behavioral forms that become repetitive and stereotyped. The map so built, with the intent of looking for the greatest advantage with the smallest possible risk, become a specific character that will accompany the person during life. Fantasies of abandonment are experienced and at times the idea that one as been an adopted child. For this he believed that he will never be loved like a rightful child. The relationship with the envious-suffering person can become indeed difficult, in sight of his rooted conviction to be different from others and that therefore nobody can ever understand him. Very centered on "I" it has less contact with the "you" and, capable of empathy, exaggerates often and sees his own suffering in the other who is suffering establishing symbiotic confusions, a risk which can also incur to the therapist that belongs to this typology. He can have the tendency to identify in the patient and, in the confluence, to lose the distance and the sense of differences. As a patient, he establishes at times imposing transfers, he claims engagement and attention in such a pressing way that the therapist can feel crushed by the weight of the requests. On the other hand the cognitive models have become organized around a thought of the kind that "if I suffer I will get what I want", conviction born from an ancient experience common to all of us, based on the fact that if as small children we need mum and

she doesn't come, it is necessary to cry even more strongly. That which is a natural experience, directed to survival becomes a rigid manipulative behavior that goes in to making part of a specific organization of personality, which ends up associating envy to suffering in its character structure.

In his behavioral modalities the envious person present himself different "masks". At times he is a timid and ashamed person that acts as a victim and tends to complain. He takes on a passive behavior looking for support in the other, he is emotional and cries easily, he is depressed in front of frustration. Others react to condition of lack and invent a false autonomy, a grandiose form of compensatory self-sufficiency. They impose to themselves to do alone and, through a stoic attitude they hide themselves their own needs, they don't ask for help and they refuse support. They undergo big efforts to make it alone. They display self-assurance and their expression is more hard and controlled. Still others rebel to their own state and become reactive. More directed toward the world they propose themselves with competitive modes and a big yearning for affirmation, they make themselves space in an aggressive manner and they complain accusing, in a pretentious manner, to all those who appear little available to satisfy their needs. What unites the different typologies is the sense of a deep, not replenishable lack.

In the history of these persons their relationships are characterized by the presence of a father "child" that takes on few responsibilities towards the education and the growth of his child. He is often a denigrated father by a suffering mother and "victim" that feels herself overloaded by the weight of the family and gives absurd requests of protection to the child through indirect and manipulating messages. The latter assumes a heavy burden, that of taking care of his mother, at times more rarely of his father, with the illusion that if she, mum, will be well and also more happy, even him, the child, will receive more care and more love. In this paradox, the child takes care of the suffering parent. Naturally the needs of the child are a little satisfied and it is the need lack that takes over the guide of personality.

In general they are persons that suffer the external world and manifest evidently the introjected mechanisms. The parental models, the messages and stimuli received by them, become incorporated and often remain clearly separate. They don't reconcile inwardly and it is therefore difficult for a future possibility of integration. In the example of a patient two polarities are present: the creative and crazy and the reflective depressed, as she defines them. Both are models adopted to safeguard her own survival. The first one corresponds to the

father, artist/crazy kind and the other to the mother, reflective/depressed. And when she acts “crazy”, for an eccentric game of projections it is really the father that intervenes to calm her and the viceversa happens with her mother, that is sweet to her when she is depressed, that same mother of which she began to take care since she was a child. The incorporated parents and in general all the introjected models are alternated in her conscience and of time in time disappear on the background. Together they cannot cohabit. Carrying inside daddy and mum prevents her to love herself. “I am some of this and some of that... it is as if I love myself through others”. The prohibition to be, to exist emerges clearly. It appears to her that she can live only through the existence of others and for greater reassurance she puts them within herself, as parts of herself with the idea that in this way she won't lose them. In other moments she affirms: “It is as if I have accumulated wealth, one thing of one, one thing of another... of one sweetness, of another imagination, of still another strength... and so I have inside so much wealth... but I don't know how to spend it and then I alternate between being superficial or being rich, for the many keys of interpretation that I have”. In reality she never really has true experience because sweetness and strength that she borrows from the outside, are not integrated, they remain external bodies, introjects that she uses like occasional instruments. In fact hers is a false sweetness and an imaginary strength and therefore she can say: “In reality I seem generous, but I'm not really so”. She imitates what she has seen done but it doesn't belong to her. Behind all this the state of lack is hidden, once again the need of love. As she doesn't receive a true loving nourishment, through a mechanism of cognitive adaptation with which she avoids pain produced by the void of affection, she creates a deception, she imagines to fill herself possessing others, holding them inside through their characteristics. She supposes that they become hers, part of herself, so that she cannot lose them. Because of this attitude bonds, also when they become unbearable, are dragged along in time with great difficulty of resolution. The separation is lived like an intolerable tear that brings desperation. Tied to the past she assumes responsibilities badly avoiding to answer to present stimuli. She lives in a perennial confusion, with many different possible alternatives and with many contradictions, for which she doesn't choose at the end always struggling in a perennial impasse.

To strengthen affective immobility, not of physical action in which instead she can spend a lot of energy, and the persisting of the state of dissatisfaction, retroflexive mechanisms intervene. The not spent energy returns to herself and produces symptoms or emotional states determined by renouncement to achieve the destination. At times energy is only held back and

even if symptoms are not structured there remains a leading inactivity that characterizes this personality. T. shelters in an internal world in which nobody can enter. Active energy is changed in thoughts, needs are idealized. She creates a fantastic world and lives in imagination dreams that she cannot actualise in daily life. Active energy is changed in thoughts, needs are idealized and this fantastic world becomes a shelter in which to survive. Today she is afraid to face problems in a direct manner. "I am terrorized to enter the daily concreteness", all stays on a mental level, effective action is missing. In the case of M. instead the retroflexions are very evident and the rapidity with which they are revealed is impressive. As soon as in session she perceives some negative feeling towards whichever person, immediately a symptom appears in her. "Strange while I say these things I feel a sharp pain in the belly". In other moments it is a sudden pain in the tooth, that disappears immediately, or she feels her leg pulled. Also behind retroflexion there are obviously thoughts that sustain her and organize her. While the same patient is considering a behavior of her father by which she felt damaged, suddenly she interrupts herself and she says she is "fucked out" with herself and with me. Immediately after she adds with desperate tones that she wants to destroy herself because she is not worthy to be loved by him the father. The mechanism is sustained by a deep conviction "I am ugly, heavy, sticky and therefore my father pushes me away... he despises me and it is better than to die. "The central nucleus is the devaluation of oneself, the thought to be a nothingness. Because of her defects the father cannot love her, it was her the guilt, it was her that wasn't good and therefore she freed him of every of responsibility. This served to bear the pain to not have been wanted. "If I destroy him I will kill myself, I cannot bear the idea of not having had a father".

It is not having him in terms of a loving presence that meant for her as a child not having him at all. She hurts herself, as she then says, to save the fatherly image without which, as it seems to her, she could not survive.

The introjective and retroflexive mechanisms while being in some measure presents in every type of personality, become particularly active and evident in the envious characters, so much as to constitute a useful diagnostic reference. In the illustrated cases the introjection allows to avoid contact with deep void, existential. It is more reassuring to fill oneself of "pieces" of psychic experience that come from the outside, even if they stay external, rather than to live the terrible experience of being with the nonentity. The retroflexion, allows M. to avoid anger, because if she protests and reclaims what was missed she could discover the pain for the refusal she received, pain that in his case would be lived as annihilating.

In many cases sexuality is jeopardized by incestuous ghosts that are the by-product of cognitive and cultural confusions on sex, sensuality and affectivity. The males of this typology as small boys often have a privileged relationship with the mother. In women instead there is a memory of a tight relationship with dad that cuddles more and shows greater affection than mum. With him the little girl plays and exchanges effusions. Then she begins to confine herself for fear of being misunderstood, dad could feel her too sexual, mum perhaps could become jealous. Also dad pushes away the daughter fearing to be misunderstood. A patient refers: "As a small girl I am very attached to dad also physically... I sucked his arms... mum is sorry for what I do... I feel guilty and then I must interrupt the contact and the possibilities. I can't hold the attention on me, that of dad, because I take it away from mum and she would suffer too much". These terms could induce to think of Oedipus complex, but really with Oedipus they have little to do. The child doesn't want sex with the father "I have never thought of this", and neither does she want him for herself subtracting him to the mother. She lives spontaneously her natural disposition to sensuality, she likes body contact and above all she searches for warmth, affection. In this interlacement of relationship love and protection become primary needs, without which the child feels lost. She has to choose and she addresses herself to the mother with whom she has a deep and complicated symbiotical relationship. The relationship with mum, however distant, often suffering and needy herself, in the end becomes prevailing, either for males than for females. The child falls into that which I call "renouncing to the father". It is a renouncement that one lives like a tear, with pain, a pain that takes one away from conscience and that at times resurfaces after years, often during therapy. To facilitate the renouncement intervenes the fact that the father doesn't show himself capable in protecting as one had hoped. He doesn't intervene to defend her not even towards the same mum that limits her and punishes her. He doesn't appear to her anymore like the strong and able man that she had imagined, he shows weakness, often is passive, concentrated on himself and mum suffers because of him, as she often confides to her. Not only, she feels betrayed by dad when he goes away from her. She can't stay in his arms anymore and all games end. The renouncement to the father will condition future relationships with the other sex. She will find companions by whom she won't feel sufficiently loved, or she won't stay long with anybody to not compromise herself in "definitive" choices she jumps from experience to experience with child-men that scarcely take on responsibilities. She seeks confirmation in the conviction, matured in relationship to her father, that relationships with men are difficult, they don't love her. Secretly

she cultivates the illusion that one day the blue prince will finally arrive. She has fantasies of a future compensation, a time in which she will be rehabilitated and she can show to the whole world how worthy she is, earning a full right to existence. In the meantime she moves between depressed states and moments of big hope, generally founded on processes of idealization and on illusions. She passes from feelings of not worthiness to experiencing being omnipotent, exasperated polarities that once more facilitate her in not choosing and “to float along” in life. Distant from reality she repudiates daily life as an experience that she considers poor and without stimuli.

The refusal received at times goes up to the moment of birth. A patient, born prematurely, lives the experience like being “chased away”. The mother wants to free herself, she is a weight to hold in the womb. A prematurely interrupted symbiosis that the “victim” will try hopelessly to reconstruct and from which at the same time it escapes, desiring it and fearing it at the same moment.

In some persons strong competitive mechanisms are activated. They have the tendency to conquer positions of prestige in the search of their ransom. It is a form of compensation to the experience of refusal. E. tells of so many blows received by his mother, mother that besides had abandoned him, leaving him to the grandparents, when following the birth of a second child she moved to the country, because physically too weakened to attend both children.... He tells that while his brother escaped to not be beaten, he stayed still, he suffered passively, convinced of being guilty and contemporarily asking pardon. He didn't want to lose once more the mother. He compensated the humiliation and pain for so much refusal becoming a person of “superior” intellectual qualities. In this way he could differentiate himself and prevail, at least in this area, on the brother. He learned to use the intelligence and knowledge acquired as an instrument to show his value, that value that was denied to him in terms of love. The repressed anger is manifested through slight forms of aggressiveness hidden behind a critical and sarcastic attitude that make him unpleasant to the eyes of most. He knows things that others don't know and he despises them scanty and limited as they are from their ignorance. He knows how to see poetry; the others, niggardly and attached to material things as they are, cannot follow him in his privileged world. Women who belong to this typology tend to assume masculine characteristics. “To show that you are worthy you must be like a man... since I was small I wanted to be a man”.

Other are more openly aggressive and they show with great evidence their envy. B. is person that claims, he does so in a suffering manner, he revendicates his space and striggles against whoever seems to hamper it. He is convinced that the world doesn't give him enough and therefore he doesn't actively look for solutions. He awaits that others do for him and, since it doesn't happen, he lives in a state of deprivation that makes him even more angry. He starts from a vengeful position that create notable difficulties in his relationship with others, with which he competes in empty disputes that don't come to a result, if not to being again refused. In the end he can say, thin satisfaction "I am not worth anything but you also are not worth anything". He lives in a state of perennial excitement and he never lets go of his hold.

Most part of therapeutic work with the envious type is centered in finding a point of equilibrium and acceptance. If we begin from the hypothesis that the state of envy constitutes one of the polarities in respect to the point zero pointed out by Perls, that takes inspiration from Friedlaender as the condition of void from which the phenomena take place, the fertile void from which the new equilibrium will be born and if we consider envy characterized by a state of lack, true or presumed that it may be, the completeness is given by satisfaction, that is from a state of fullness... Now in the envious type polarities are lived in a particularly exaggerated manner, for which lack is a state of unbearable void and satisfaction is based on a grandiose idea that supposes a total replenishment. This unattainable ideal, produces a form of attachment to a gratifying result that, not being ever reached, creates a consequent state of suffering. Suffering is the motor that maintains the tension toward satisfaction alive. Since it is not attainable in the imagined measure, the missed satisfaction provokes a relapse in lack. From here we start again. The therapeutic result will come from the attainment of a form of equidistance between the two polar points that may allow realistic satisfactions and an ability to "contentment" that implies the acceptance of things and, a really difficult thing, the acceptance of daily life.

REFERENCES

- English, F., (1971). *The substitution factor: rackets and real feelings*. T. A. Journ., The, 4.
- Klein, M., (1957). *Envy and gratitude. Tavistock of unconscious*. London.
- Naranjo, C., (1994). *Character and neurosis, an integrative views*. Nevada City: Gateways/IDHBB, Inc.

Perls, F., (1973). *The Gestalt Approach & Eye witness to therapy*. Science and Behavior Books, Inc.

Perls, F., (1942). *Ego, Hunger and Aggression*. Copyright by F. S. Perls.

Shaver and other, (1987). *Emotions knowledge: further exploration of to prototipe approach*. In "Journal of personality and social Psycology".

Thomson, G., (1983). *Fear, Anger and Sadness*. T. A. Juorn. XIII, 1.