

Ultrasound Research on Prenatal Life: Transcripts of a Clinical Experience

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Abstract: The authors have been following 13 high-risk pregnancies in the obstetrical pathology ward of a university clinic. The interdisciplinary team (liaison psychiatrists and gynecologists) has been working with a methodology based on the idea that primordial human groups were “primarily reproductive in function” and “maternal”. From this perspective human pregnancy is seen as a psychosomatic and psychosocial phenomenon, at the same time. That is why the authors structured a group setting for the ultrasonographic study of prenatal life, and constructed a group of observers around the mother and her unborn child. From the transcripts of one of such clinical experiences it is possible to discover and explore some unconscious dynamics of human pregnancy.

Zusammenfassung: *Ultraschalluntersuchung des pränatalen Lebens – Transkripte einer klinischen Erfahrung.* Die Autoren begleiteten 13 Risikoschwangerschaften auf der geburts-hilflichen Station einer Universitätsklinik. Das interdisziplinäre Team aus Psychiatern und Gynäkologen arbeitete mit einer Methodologie, die auf der Idee beruhte, daß ursprüngliche menschliche Gruppen in einer primären Weise kreativ und mütterlich sind. Dabei wird die menschliche Schwangerschaft als ein psychosomatisches und gleichzeitig psychosoziales Phänomen gesehen. Deshalb war das Gruppensetting so aufgebaut, daß um die schwangere Mutter und das Ultraschallgerät herum eine Gruppe von Beobachtern saß. Aus den Transkripten der Nachbesprechung von einer solchen klinischen Erfahrung ist es möglich, einiges von der unbewußten Dynamik der menschlichen Schwangerschaft aufzudecken und zu erforschen.

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We have been following 13 risk pregnancies at our obstetrical pathology ward (Ancona et al. 1991; Averna et al. 1991; Mancuso et al. 1991; Nesci et al. 1991; Poliseno et al. 1991). Our interdisciplinary approach differs from the application of the baby observation to the study of prenatal life (Piontelli 1992). It is based on an ethnopsychanalytic interpretation of the hypothesis which states that pri-

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mordial human groups were “primarily reproductive in function” and “maternal” (Briffault 1927; Nesci 1991). This perspective motivated us to structure a group setting for the ultrasonographic study of prenatal life. We constructed a group of observers around the mother and her unborn child. We assumed that this group would have been unconsciously experienced by the pregnant woman as a mental place where she could project her own internal group of “the mothers”. We also organized an “elaboration group” of the observers, where the unconscious fantasies of the expectant mother could be reconstructed, through the analysis of countertransference, immediately after the ultrasound session. This paper deals with one of our clinical experiences and emphasizes how the countertransference of the observers can be analyzed in our elaboration group.

Pandora: A Clinical Experience

Pandora (27 years) was submitted to cerclage for cervix incontinence and uterine contractions, at the 27th week of her second pregnancy. Three years before she had a miscarriage, at the 3rd month of pregnancy. The ward doctors insisted that she should be included in our research because she was very anxious. Changing our usual protocol, we began with the ultrasound session so that we could complete the case-study before Pandora’s imminent dismissal.

From the Sonographer’s Notebook

“Pandora enters our room and lays on the bed irresolutely. I wait a bit before putting the ultrasound gel on her, so that I can make it warm by holding it in my own hands. The child is in a breech position. I show her the child, kicking in her womb . . . Then I try to visualize his face in profile, but the child’s position does not allow it. Pandora comments on her baby: ‘He does not want to be seen, he does not want to be disturbed.’ I feel that Pandora is anxious and uneasy, as if she would not like to have the ultrasound. On the other hand, I notice that she tries to make her child move, pushing with her hand on her belly. She asks me if the ultrasonic waves are harmless, as she has read something different in this regard. I reassure her. Then I remain for some time focusing on the child’s hands, playing with the umbilical cord. Suddenly, he catches the cord in his hands and squeezes it. I feel panic- stricken and I think: ‘What is he doing? Is he killing himself?’ So I move the ultrasound probe, immediately . . . [and go back to my previous feelings], when he was kicking. I thought: ‘He looks angry, he wants to get out of that womb!’ [. . .] Pandora tells me she feels the probe is burning. I explain to her this is not possible. Maybe the warmth that she feels is due to my finger on her belly. [. . .] I think that she does not like how her child appears on the monitor screen . . . She says to me: ‘I feel some pain. Maybe it is a contraction. It is better to stop.’ Actually she has no contraction, but we stop anyway.”

From the Transcript of the Elaboration Group

Domenico: Here we have a woman that killed her first child and . . . she does not know what to do with her second one . . . Her lean little face, her thin nose gave me the impression of . . .

Simonetta: (whispering) of a grave-digger . . .

Domenico: It's not a vital face . . . rather a necrophilous one.

Tommaso: She has not a *facies gravidica*.

Alessandra: She has no humour, at all . . .

Domenico: But now tell us the fantasy you made during the ultrasound session.

Alessandra: There were three people, and one of them was talking about something. He was the spokesman; he said: 'Let's do it!' I remember that there was a stabbing planned by these three people . . .

Tommaso: This could coincide with my own fantasy about Pandora's husband as the killer [of her first child]. Maybe [my fantasy] is induced by the patient who thinks that her husband [was guilty of this crime] . . .

Simonetta: She gives her guilts to everyone . . .

Domenico: Two ideas come now into my mind: the first one deals with an ancient Athenian ritual where an animal was sacrificed, but then an action was brought against the victim's killer. Finally, the knife was condemned . . . [The second one is represented by] the drawing I made during the ultrasound session . . . I drew [two circles, one inside the other. The outer circle] represents the three of us, the observers. [The inner circle] is [formed] by Simonetta, the patient, the child, the monitor screen, and the ultrasound scanner . . . And there is the probe, linked with a line to the machine . . . Thus we could figure out a plot by [an external circle of] murderers . . . the three observers . . .

Simonetta: And I could be the inner one . . .

Domenico: And you were the inner one, together with Pandora and . . . the machine. Each circle was formed by a triad of murderers who were attempting to kill this . . . poor fellow/child by knife, i.e. through the probe . . . If the guilt has to be displaced on someone, then the ultrasonic waves are guilty, the machine is guilty! We have to look for a plot, here, in this story . . .

Tommaso: The paranoid level . . .

Domenico: . . . The doctors could be the guilty, or the ultrasound scanner . . . whoever we want: Pandora's husband, her mothers-in-law, [the group of the mothers] . . . Anyone, but her. She has nothing to do with it . . . So we have taken it all upon us. Also the ward doctors, maybe . . . That is why they insisted we should take her in [our research protocol] . . .

Tommaso: They are worried because they can't hold her, and so they sent her to us.

Domenico: Yes, of course . . . [silence] I wrote something else, here [each observer has a note-book where he/she can write during the ultrasound session] . . . the probe 'heats' and, between brackets, 'burns' . . .

Tommaso: I wrote 'the probe is burning', too.

Domenico: At that moment you were visualizing the baby's head and it seemed to me like a monkey's . . . I even wondered: 'Why do I think about a monkey?' After all, during every ultrasound session I could have fantasized about a monkey . . . but I never had such an impression . . . Maybe Pandora also experienced a negative feeling about her child. Maybe she thought: 'What an ugly baby!' There and then she said that the probe was burning . . .

Simonetta: Yes, of course. She wanted me to move the probe, she didn't want me to look at her baby . . . also because she couldn't see him clearly . . .

Domenico: It was not that she couldn't see him clearly . . .

Simonetta: She rather saw him ugly . . .

Alessandra: I also had a bad sensation . . . it's the first time that [looking at a child's forehead] . . . I feel as looking inside a coffin . . .

Domenico: Thinking of a monkey, I also think of a brainless person . . . a stupid person, I mean . . . [silence]. There has to be something 'burning', here . . . And I would go on with another association, dealing with your finger: 'the finger in a sore.' I wonder if in her family, within her extended family, there could be a monkey . . . i.e., a fool or crazy person . . . This would made her funk for being pregnant even more understandable . . .

Simonetta: But this time . . .

Domenico: It seems that she wants him to be born, this time . . .

Tommaso: She really wants help . . .

Domenico: She should feel better, by now, as she has been able to make us feel anxious . . . [laughs]

Simonetta: So she is happy as she passed on a lot of her guilt . . . Do you really have to feel so bad with these people [every time they do this to you?] . . . My goodness, I still have my belly swollen!

Domenico: Yes, because you are really in touch with these things . . . you really touch bellies . . . Tell us, how did she react to your touch?

Simonetta: Did you see how long I waited before putting the ultrasound gel on her? As she laid on the bed she said she was having contractions . . . 'Bye, bye! What a beginning . . .' I thought. So I waited for a while, and then I asked her: 'May I put the gel on?' And when she told me: 'Yes!' I put it finally. It was well warmed by my hands, so it didn't bother her . . . I was very kind to her, but I would have preferred treating her badly [she laughs]

Domenico: Why?

Simonetta: Probably I thought she would give us all her guilt, so I didn't like her . . . I didn't want her . . . We could have had her stay here one more day, so I thought: 'Imagine if she thinks [that she has to remain in the ward one more day to complete our research protocol] . . . what a mess!' It was not a good beginning . . .

Tommaso: She is an intestinal woman . . .

Simonetta: Intestinal, I agree [she laughs]

Tommaso: Intestine wars inside her home . . .

Simonetta: That's why my belly is swollen . . . Intestine wars!

Domenico: Tomorrow she will tell us everything . . .

Simonetta: You will see, tomorrow, how long you will have to wait for her to come . . .

Discussion and Conclusive Remarks

The day after, our first interview with her was scheduled at 8.30 a.m. Pandora had to attend her dismissal visit, so our appointment was cancelled. Finally, her interview took place at 8.30 p.m., for she had to remain one more day in the ward for clinical reasons. The day after the clinical story was collected and the intuitions by the observers were verified. In her childhood, Pandora suffered from

the conflictual cohabitation between her paternal grandmother and her mother (mother-in-law / daughter-in-law). This conflict was reenacted in her marriage: her mother- and sister-in-law faced her as a hostile front. They grudged she had “taken away” their brother / son. They did not accept she was going to constitute her own nuclear family with their own relative. Pandora’s first pregnancy (that ended in a miscarriage) occurred when she was living in the same building of her husband’s family. In other words, it developed within an in-conflict situation (the plot, the intestine wars). Instead Pandora’s new pregnancy began with the project of setting up a new house, quite far from her husband’s family. Furthermore, Pandora told us that her husband has four blind, deaf, and dumb uncles (the “burning” topic of the monkey, the “finger in a sore”). All these elements confirm, a posteriori, the countertransference nature of the observer’s fanatasies.

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