
The intersubjective approach in psychoanalytical work

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ABSTRACT. – The authors propose a theoretical and technical reflection on the main characteristics of an intersubjective approach to psychoanalytical work. After considering some of the main theoretical orientations that develop the intersubjective relational approach and identify its fundamental elements, the authors consider some of the consequences in terms of therapeutic action and thus of technique in clinical work. The theoretical metaphors of ‘field’, ‘intersubjective analytic third’ and ‘intersubjective co-construction’ are considered as fundamental referents of intersubjective developments in psychoanalytical work. In the context of the intersubjective orientation in psychoanalytic work, the *relational frame theory* and related notions, such as ‘emotional belief’, as well as its value for diagnostic reflection consistent with an intersubjective relational approach, are also referred to. Elements relating to open research areas on the aforementioned topics conclude the discussions in this article.

Key words: Intersubjectivity; psychoanalytic work; co-construction; relational frameworks; intersubjective field.

In the current scenario of psychoanalytical work, following the so-called ‘relational turning point’ (Lingiardi *et al.*, 2011), an increasing amount of space is occupied by the intersubjective dimension. The issues of intersubjectivity, are in fact being increasingly addressed both in the areas of reflection and theoretical research and, consequently, in that of technique.

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It is therefore possible to speak of an intersubjective approach in current psychoanalytical work, which in our view is a way of understanding the theoretical and clinical approach, that takes on increasingly specific and recognizable connotations.

For several years now, intersubjectivity has been described as a new paradigm in the psychoanalytical field (Benetti & Mastroianni, 1986). However, there is a risk of interpreting a multiplicity of views and theoretical and technical connotations that may be quite different from one another, and this may sometimes lead to confusion.

We have on the one hand, the idea of an intersubjective approach based on the centrality of the patient-analyst interaction (Gill, 1982, 1994). From another perspective, such as that of Stolorow, Atwood and Brandchaft (1994), Stolorow and Atwood (1992) and Orange (1995), intersubjectivity also includes a deeper idea of the conception of psychological processes as essentially being co-constructed within the dual system created by patient and analyst. With these Authors we also have a partial revision of some aspects of the clinical work, which will therefore have to conform to this intersubjective conception. This involves, for example, thinking of interpretive work as a co-construction, and of therapeutic change as a process that affects not only the individual patient but also the therapeutic pair, that is, also the analyst. In fact, these Authors argue that: 'The psychoanalytic process is inherently intersubjective, modelled by the constantly changing psychological field created by the interplay between the subjective and differently organized worlds of the patient and the analyst.' (Stolorow, Atwood & Brandchaft, 1994, p.68).

Another view of intersubjectivity in psychoanalytic work comes from developments in Bionian Theory. His concepts of 'proto-mental' and 'basic assumptions' (Bion, 1961; Civitarese, 2021), to name just a few, are theoretical elements that predate later developments of more radical intersubjectivity work in psychoanalysis. Authors such as Ogden, Ferro and Civitarese, developed Bionian fundamentals (Bion, 1961, 1962, 1970). They evolved and radicalized the intersubjective concept in psychoanalysis. It thus is understood as an ontological theory according to which the encounter between the two subjectivities of the patient and the analyst constitutes a further psychic level, that is fully intersubjective, and transcends the singularities of the two components of the analytic pair. Ogden (1997) defines this through the concept of the 'intersubjective analytic third'.

Ogden (1997) illustrates the possibility of overcoming a dualistic view of transference dynamics, when defining a *transference - countertransference dimension* as: 'an unconscious intersubjective construction generated by the analytical pair. Personally, I do not believe that transference and countertransference are separable entities that arise in response to each other; rather, I interpret these terms as aspects of a single intersubjective totality

that is experienced separately (and individually) by an analyst and the person being analysed.’ (Ogden, 1997, p.18). In the same pages the author better defines what he means when he talks about this single intersubjective totality, via the notion of *intersubjective analytic third*: ‘I see the intersubjective analytic third as a third entity created by the unconscious exchange between analyst and analysand; at the same time, analyst and analysand *as such* are generated in the act of creating the third analytic. (...) The new subjectivity (the third analytic) lies in a dialectic tension with the individual subjectivity of the analyst and analysand and, in my conception, it does not constitute a static entity; rather, I intend it as an experience in evolution, in a state of constant change: the intersubjectivity of the analytical process is transformed by the understandings generated by the analytical pair.’ (Ogden, 1997, p. 20).

Ferro and Civitarese (2018) instead propose the idea of the analytical field, which is a conception that includes both a theory of mental functioning, on the basis of what Bion has already proposed, and above all, a clinical model, and an innovative vision of psychoanalytic technique. These Italian Authors talk about the ‘creative coupling of minds’ that is generated at the time of the analytical meeting: ‘When this happens, cycles of moments of creative coupling of the minds of the two participants to the analytical dyad follow, from which moments, variously referred to as meeting, emotional unison, ‘diadic expansion of consciousness,’ psychic growth, and the like are produced.’ (Ferro and Civitarese, 2018, p.101).

It is important to note that this more radical view of intersubjectivity in psychoanalysis finds its foundation in the philosophical roots postulated by the Authors who have dealt with the concept of subjectivity as being inevitably generated by intersubjectivity. Philosophers such as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty have in fact proposed visions of the subject as emerging from the wider intersubjective dimension that characterizes the human condition. More recently, J.L. Nancy (1996) speak of the ‘we’ as a condition of the possibility of the Ego.

An intersubjective approach to psychoanalytical work therefore has some inevitable consequences in terms of clinical action, technique theory and technique itself. One of these may be that everything we consider to be connected to the idea of transference can no longer be thought of as a directly or totally repetitive phenomenon, and that it disregards the real presence of the interlocutor. This forces us to move away from the original idea of transference as a mere repetition of an inner condition, established in the subject’s past, that characterizes his/her way of relating to the object. In the intersubjective space-time of the therapeutic relationship, which is unique and unrepeatable, there will be no phenomena of mere repetition of the past. The expression of the inner worlds of the patient and the analyst will activate a new generation, *a poiesis*, not a repetition; it will trigger the co-con-

struction of a trans-subjectivity that will be generated there, at that moment, in the here-and-now of that couple, of that dual system. This will certainly happen starting from the 'inner baggage' that everyone owns, but that will be expressed in a unique and singular way by the effect of the intersubjective combination in the field.

On the clinical and technical side, following an intersubjective approach in psychoanalytical work, we will also not be able to confine ourselves to an observation/listening plan that focuses only on the patient or the analyst, nor on their object relationships, on the vicissitudes of their internal objects and worlds projected to a greater or lesser extent onto the interlocutor. Nor will we be able to deal with mere behavioural interactions or communicational exchanges. The tools for us will be those that will also allow us to read and talk about that '*between*' that brings together and connects patient and analyst, in that place 'where otherness is connected to identity. (...) Inter-subjectivity is that space *between*, it is that filling that binds together (...) subjects and determines their presence in context, the quality of current existence.' (Cavicchioli, 2013, p.10).

Mastroianni (2016, p.99) reminds us that within the intersubjective perspective there is a specific concept of the subject: '(the intersubjective perspective) conceives the construction of the subject only at the intersection of an organism and the intersubjective environment that surrounds it. If it is so, the subject can be defined as a point of view that, located within a specific intersubjective matrix and starting from its own perspective, persists over time, observes, and builds narratives.' Following this he points out, in the same pages mentioned earlier, that the concept of construction is central, so that: 'the representation that the subject has of himself/herself and of phenomena is not automatic but consists in the result of a construction carried out by the subject himself/herself.' And, again, the notion of interaction: 'we place the 'observer' and the 'observed' on the same level, that is to say, both poles of a relationship; in this way, we highlight not only the inescapable influence on one another but also the participation of both in the interaction, and we place them on the same self- and other-organizing level.'

With regard to the analytical relationship, Mastroianni (2016, p.119) clearly states that he considers: 'the analytical relationship as a particular intersubjective context (or two-way system) of mutual influence between analyst and patient; the purpose of this context is to reactivate the invariant principles (*i.e.*, emotional beliefs) of both actors in the relationship and to integrate them, creating new ones.'

Referring again to the thoughts of Antonio Mastroianni (2013; 2016), we can consider that it is precisely in the intersubjective dimension of the encounter that emotional beliefs, unconscious principles that shape the way of meeting and relating starting from previous intersubjective experiences,

from the beginning of life, can be brought back to mind. We know, however, that this emergence will not be thought of as a mere repetition of the relational past; it will be greatly affected by the unique and specific encounter between the two subjectivities that together form an intersubjective field. It will be the specific configuration of that intersubjective field that determines which emotional beliefs are triggered. It is therefore evident that not only the patient but also the analyst, who will be direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious, in making an active contribution to determining or facilitating the emergence and expression of the transference, or, rather, in co-constructing that particular and unique intersubjective context that will take on the characteristics and configuration of a singular and unique analytical field.

The metaphor of the field therefore is well suited to represent this level of intersubjectivity, the emotional, communicative, unconscious phenomena and processes that characterize it and substantiate what we usually consider to be connected to the area of transference - countertransference: 'Intersubjectivity theory is a field theory or systems theory, in which one tries to understand psychological phenomena not as products of isolated intrapsychic mechanisms, but as elements that form the interface of worlds of experience in exchangeable interaction.' (Stolorow, Atwood & Brandchaft, 1994, p.32).

As is well known, the analytical situation is seen as a field starting from the work of the Barangers (1962), and before that, the field metaphor had been used by K. Lewin to theorize group dynamics and the group itself as a dynamic totality. The Barangers (1962), who were the first in the psychoanalytic field to do so, proposed the representation of the analytical situation as a bipersonal field, thus starting that line of theoretical metaphors that increasingly focused on the dynamic totality made up of patient and therapist. While in their pioneering vision there is an image of two people, the step forward and the decisive opening of a new and prolific path to the overcoming of the individualistic vision of the analytical situation is evident. These Authors speak for the first time of unconscious fantasies of the field, of the couple, not attributable to individual fantasies.

With the Authors of the Pavia School (Ferro & Civitarese, 2015; Ferro, 1992, 1996, 2002, 2006, 2007; Ferro & Basile, 2011; Civitarese, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2014), the field metaphor allows for the construction of a radically intersubjective psychoanalytic model. The field is considered a dynamic system that identifies with the analytical pair, and functions as a space-time capable of absorbing, containing, and transforming emotional and unconscious mental content through perturbative/evolutionary processes, based on Bionian concepts of reverie, negative capability and alpha function. With analytical field theory there is an intersubjective evolution of the theory of technique and therapeutic action. This evolution,

Civitarese (2021) states, involves: ‘virtually listening to every narrative that enters the analytic conversation as having been co-created at the sub-conscious level by a group-of-two, made up of the analytic dyad.’ (Civitarese, 2021, p.101-102). Some technical elements, which we can only mention here, such as the use of the notions of character (which are in fact chosen), of transformation into dreams, *etc.*, are increasingly configuring the elements of this intersubjective orientation in psychoanalytical work.

Always in terms of the consequences on the technique, even the diagnostic dimension, in an intersubjective orientation, must be configured and experienced in accordance with the theoretical assumptions. From this point of view, in one of our recent works, we wrote: ‘The therapeutic process is ‘tailor-made’, specific to that subject. Thus, the response to the need for a diagnosis (which will necessarily have to refer to general, validated and shared principles) will also be specific, particularly with regard to the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of the diagnosis itself. Moreover, we cannot disregard an objective fact: therapy is with the patient and for the patient, but it is only possible in a relationship. Diagnosis must therefore necessarily consider both parties in the intersubjective relationship and what they experience in the context of therapy. Therefore, with regard to diagnosis, there can be no single route for the therapist, but more possibilities, considering the characteristics of the patient and the therapeutic relationship.’ (Scalvini, 2020).

The *relation frame theory* proposed by Mastroianni (2002, 2013, 2016) is, in this sense, an important and original theoretical-technical advancement that seeks to deal not only with the vision of the subject and the therapeutic process, but also with the diagnostic problem in a precisely intersubjective perspective: ‘The system organizes its interactive behaviours according to recursive modules that tend to create profiles, or frames, that sort themselves according to different degrees of stability, rigidity and flexibility. (...) It is therefore reasonable to identify some recurrent relational scenarios (or interactive experiential fields of mutual influence) within which the child is born and constructs, among the many possible ones, a particular organization of sense and emotional pattern that become the points of view through which he/she sees and reads himself/herself and the world and organizes interactive models or relational styles with which to relate to others. Outlining such scenarios (or relational frames) is useful because it allows you to sort into homogeneous groups some types of contexts that are organized with specific characteristics of that group, that make it up and differentiate it from the others. At the same time, it allows certain types of subjects to be grouped together in homogeneous groups, based on a series of behaviours that develop according to the rules of a particular context, that is, according to the recurrent module of that particular framework

and is capable of distinguishing it from the others.’ (Mastroianni, 2016, p.101-102)¹.

It however remains an open area of research, that corresponds to an evolution of the psychoanalytic technique that is organized more and more fully in an intersubjective sense. As Ferro (1996) clearly illustrates, the work on awareness on behalf of an analyst, on which theoretical-technical models or listening techniques are operating in him/her while he/she is at work, corresponds to a fundamental skill of the analyst himself/herself. At the same time, this attitude is also an orientation of the analyst to continuously research ‘in the field’ which, in our view, is also a fundamental and indispensable prerequisite for psychoanalytical work oriented toward intersubjectivity (Cavicchioli, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2020). In this open space of research and development of an intersubjective approach in psychoanalytic work, future progress can therefore be guided by: i) the subjectivity of the patient between intrapsychic and intersubjective aspects, such as complementary phenomenological areas and theoretical-clinical knowledge; ii) the subjectivity and functioning of the analyst, in general and in the specific patient-therapist system, and how to assess and know about the active contribution the analyst has in the intersubjective field; iii) the intersubjective interaction (Carli & Rodini, 2008; Eiguier, 2008), how to theorize and thus be able to observe and understand the dynamics and characteristics of the conscious and unconscious exchange, explicit and implicit, within the setting, between that therapist and that patient; iv) the question of ‘us’, that is, the constant development of tools to observe/listen, describe and know the plural neosubjectivity created in the intersubjective encounter, currently defined with different representations, such as: third intersubjective (Aron, 1996); third analytic intersubjective (Ogden, 1997); analytical field (Ferro & Civitarese, 2015; Civitarese & Ferro, 2020) and *vinculo* (Pichon Riviere, 1979; Bleger, 1967).

¹ For an in-depth look at the Relational Frame Theory of A. Mastroianni, developed within the clinical, educational and research activity of the Institute of Psychoanalytic Psychology of Brescia and the Italian Society of Psychoanalytic Therapy (SITPA), see Mastroianni, 2002, 2013, 2016.

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