



## Long term effects of child parentification: the consequences on the new family

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### Introduction

The most recent studies and researches of the “Infant Research” about *The primary Triangle* (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Corboz-Warnery, 1999) show that the babies are able to have a “polyphonic” interaction (Stern, xxx) with the relational context from the beginning of their life. The functional development of the child involves the development of the triangulation between the children and their parents. In other words, the Infant Research is able to observe the *triangular developmental process* that leads the child towards a functional psychological growing, as the studies and the researches of Family Social Psychology, through different instruments in order to focalize the family unit, also do.

The “symbolic-relational approach (Scabini, Cigoli, 2000) underlines that the family is a system which connects the differences between genders and generations, drawing the boundary between who has the *duty* to care for younger and who has the *right* of being cared.

Molte teorie di psicoterapia familiare si occupano del processo di parentificazione e della conseguente *inversione di ruolo* richiesta ad uno o più figli: la Terapia contestuale di Boszormenyi Nagy, la terapia strutturale di Minuchin e la Terapia Strategica di Palazzoli Selvini, la Terapia sistemica familiare di Bowen, per richiamarne solo alcune, in modi differenti sottolineano la profonda distorsione che la violazione dei confini generazionali infligge al bambino quando il genitore non è in grado di legittimare se stesso e /o il proprio partner come “genitore sufficientemente buono”.

Freud, through the myth of Oedipus, remember us that the functional growing of the child at the psychological level takes places in a triangle constituted with the parents’ couple and the baby. The resolution of the “Oedipus complex” is due to the mourning process in respect of the incestuous fantasies and to the child’s recognition that his/her position in the family is not central, but in a certain sense “peripheral” and this painful recognition results crucial, because it is at the basis of a real, not only imaginary, process of psychological development both at the cognitive, affective and ethical level.

But what happens when the desire of the baby to substitute one of the parent and to put himself/herself at his/her place becomes reality?

Many family psychotherapy theories care of parentification process and of the consequent role inversion requested to one or more children: Contextual Therapy by Boszormenyi Nagy; Structural Therapy by Minuchin; Strategic Therapy by Palazzoli Selvini; Sistemic Therapy by Bowen in different ways underline the deep distorsion that generational boundaries violation causes to the child when the parent is not able to legitimate himself/herself and/or his/her partner as *sufficiently good parent*

In many families who ask the psychotherapist for an help, we can observe a problematic triangulation, for which the child, especially in case of parental divorce, is “caught between” the conflict between his/her parents (Buchanan & Dornbusch, 1996, p. 230), or is embedded in a dysfunctional relationship with one of his/her parent “against” the other one: we can do the examples of the *parental alienation* , in which the custodial parent, generally the mother, tries to bar the relationship between her ex-husband and their children (Gardner, 1998) and of the *malicious mother syndrome* who, because of her anger, sets up people and contexts against her ex-partner in a very destructive way (Hodges, 1991), two different ways of barring the relationship between the child and

one of his/her parent, generally the father. It is possible to maintain that this *use* of the child by one or both the parents is a form of violence that may lead the child to a more difficult entering in his/her adult life.

The presented case study shows a situation in which the weakness or the absence of the parental functions in a family represents a violence for the children, in particular for the eldest, who is often called to assume a parental role towards their younger brothers/sisters and sometimes towards their parent remained alone.

Crucial benchmarks are at my analysis basis. About parents-child relationship it was useful for me referring to the Manzano, Palacio Espasa Zilkhe Model (1998), according whom psychic space of a child is in some way "parasited" by the parental projections, through the unconscious psychic transmission (Freiberg, Kaës,) while the parent lives an identification complementary to his own projection.

In this context, the boundary between normality and pathology depends on the equilibrium between the child representation as "other" individual and child representation only as projections container. In this model, however, parent's figure results central and the child seems to be substantially in a passive position, even if the authors speak about the response of the child to parental projections.

Relationship bilateral nature is more clearly showed by Sandler thought (1990 b), according to whom each significative relationship is in a certain way a *role relationship*, because each partner tries unconsciously to induce the other to assume a specific role, on the basis of his/her own needs and desires, and sintonizes himself/herself on the role response of the other, as we can see regarding marital relationship in the sequent clinical vignette

### **The Clinical Vignette**

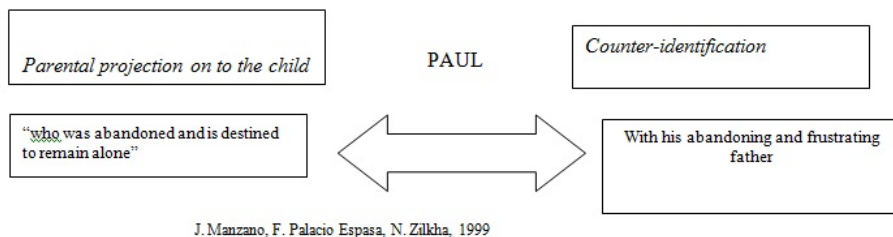
A young woman, 30 years old, Lucy, asks the psychotherapist for a couple help. On the phone, Lucy says that her husband Paul left her at seven months of her pregnancy, eight months before the contact with the therapist. Now, in fact, they have a baby, John, six months old. Lucy asks for a couple therapy because she saw that Paul, despite their separation, is interested in maintaining his relationship with their son and she would try to give their marriage the last chance. But at the first interview Lucy appears furious: why did he abandon her, who always took care of him and gave him the stability that he needed? So, Paul's family story emerges: Paul's father abandoned his wife and their children when Paul was 13, and Paul's brother, Andrew, 7 years old. Paul had to take care of Andrew, also for the meetings with his teacher, as if he was his father, "but no one went to meet my teachers for me!" More, he tried to protect his mother too, helping her and keeping a correct behaviour, not to worry her: "she was already so sad and troubled!". ers the long evenings spent in the marital bed with his mother and brother, crying together. He adds crying that at the moment he is realizing to have left his wife in advance, so that his child doesn't suffer in the future like he did.

Lucy says that she was very attracted by Paul's sweetness and weakness. She is the first of five children, and she always took care of her younger brothers and sisters, because both parents worked all day long. She was very happy to feel able to help Paul when they had met and at the moment she is very upset because she feels she's not "enough" for him anymore.

During the couple therapy, both partners have the opportunity to "put into words" the violence they suffered: Paul his father's abandonment and its consequences, Lucy her being forced to become adult very quickly, which she experienced as her only possibility of being accepted from the others. The conjoint narration allows the partners to "see" their couple joint and search for a better individual, dyadic and triadic adjustment.

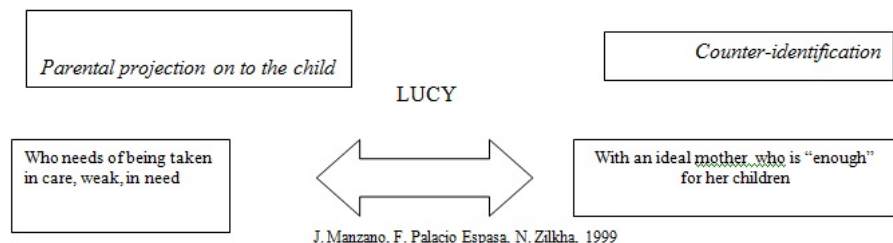
### **INTRAPSYCHIC PROCESSES AND COUPLE RELATIONAL JOINT**

According to Manzano, Palacio Espasa and Zilkha (1999), we can hypothesize the two parents' intrapsychic dynamics underlain to the relationship with their child.



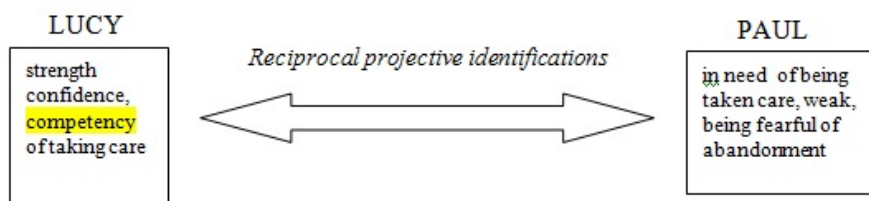
During his adolescence, Paul was the "ideal partner" for his mother: he remained close to her and helped her in taking care of her younger son. So he felt valued by his mother, as better mother's partner than his father was. This self-representation protected him from his anger against his father and from the confrontation with him, that is from the question if he could really be a better father than his own father. At the moment of the pregnancy of his wife, this question becomes threatening for him and pushes him to leave her and their arriving baby, "so that my child doesn't suffer in the future like I did".

We can see that, at the moment in which Paul is becoming father, his counter-identification with his abandoning father emerges in its strength, nonetheless its repression for many years.



During her childhood and adolescence she was "parentified", having to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. She learned very early that the only way to be valued by her parents was to cancel her needs as a child and to grow quickly, and she learned to comply them, to keep the crucial relationship with them. So, her identity is based on a representation of herself like "helping", "taking care", "feeling indispensable". To leave this representation is for her tout court to live her identity: this is one of the reasons for which an increasing anger explodes between the two partners.

RELATIONAL COUPLE JOINT



Lucy's parentification, introjected for many years and become for her almost her "second nature", will lead her to chose a partner "in need", with whom she can represent herself as the mother who takes care and is recognized as indispensable. Therefore she can't tolerate that Paul had left her, so declaring she is not "enough" for him.

Paul, on the other side, tries to live his needs eventually in his marital relationship with a strong, competent and holding woman.

But when the life asks him to take care of a child, he flies, because of the fear to be the same of his leaving father becomes intolerable for him.

The couple therapy helped them to recognize the reciprocal projective identification.

Paul's narration of his having taken care of his mother and his younger brother during his adolescence makes him and his wife recognize his competence in taking care of the weaker persons, and opens a new perspective both in his confrontation with his leaving father and in his couple relationship, in which he now feels not obliged to be always the weakest element. Lucy, moreover, could identify herself in the efforts of the adolescent Paul to repress his own need for taking care of the other's one, and her need of being the "ideal mother without any need" becomes less rigid.

At the end of the couple's therapy, Paul is able to take care himself of his baby and Lucy recognizes that she, not only her baby, needs of Paul's presence and she becomes able to tolerate that Paul takes care of their baby without her. So they put different fundamentals for a new marital relationship.

## Conclusions

It is possible to read the presented clinical case as the description of some of the possible long term effects of the child parentification. The hierarchical confusion of the family generational boundaries during the childhood and the adolescence of a child, with the consequent request to the child of assuming an adult's role, represents a form of violence against the children, because it does not respect their needs to be taken care and their natural rythm of growing. The intra-psychic consequence is , many times, the development of a *false Self* (Winnicott, xx) destined to crumble in different life contexts, very often when the life situation asks the young adult to cope with the new responsibility of becoming parent of a newborn child.

Couple psychotherapy reveals itself like a possible space for opening a new dimension in which the partners can think, for the first time or once more again, about themselves as individuals and as a couple (Matot, 2004). The re-visit of the individual's stories makes it possible for them to recognize their parental bereavement, projection, and counter-projection, searching a new start - point both for their couple relationship and their bond to their child.

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## Abstract

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The presented case study shows a situation in which the weakness or the absence of the parental functions in a family represents a violence for the children, in particular for the eldest, who is often called to assume a parental role towards their younger brothers/sisters and sometimes towards their parent remained alone.

During the couple therapy, both partners have the opportunity to "put into words" the violence they suffered: Paolo his father's abandonment and its consequences, Lucia her being forced to become adult very quickly, which she experienced as her only possibility of being accepted from the others. The conjoint narration allows the partners to "see" their couple joint and search for a better individual, dyadic and triadic adjustment.

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## Key Words

Child Parentification - Long term effects - New family.

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## Resumen

### Efectos a largo plazo de la "Parentificación" de los niños. Las consecuencias en la familia joven<sup>[1]</sup>

El tema que se presenta muestra una situación en la que la debilidad o la ausencia de las funciones de los padres en una familia representan una forma de violencia con respecto a los niños, en particular hacia el hijo mayor, el cual a menudo tiene que desempeñar un papel de padre hacia sus hermanos y hermanas más pequeños y, a veces para con el mismo padre que queda solo, sin su pareja.

Durante la terapia de pareja, tienen la ocasión de hablar de las violencias sufridas: en el caso de Paolo, del abandono paterno y sus consecuencias; en el caso de Lucia, de la necesidad de llegar a ser adulta rápidamente (hecho que ella consideraba como la única forma para que los demás la

aceptaran). La narración por parte de la pareja, les permite a los cónyuges que entiendan el modo de ensamble de ellos como pareja y buscar un modo mejor de adaptación a nivel individual, diádico y triádico.

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## Palabras Claves

Parentificación de los niños - Efectos a largo plazo - Familia joven.

[\[1\]](#) Versión supervisada de la traducción al castellano por Irma Morosini.

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## Résumé

### Des effets à long terme de la “parentification” de l’enfant: Les conséquences sur la nouvelle famille

Le cas présenté montre une situation dans la quelle la faiblesse ou l’absence des fonctions parentales chez une famille représente une sorte de violence contre les enfants, en particulier contre l’ainé, qui est souvent forcé d’assumer un rôle parental à l’égard des frères/sœurs plus jeunes et parfois même a l’égard de celui des parents qui est resté seul.

Pendant la thérapie de couple, les deux partenaires ont l’occasion de « mettre en paroles » la violence qu’ils ont subie: Paul, l’abandon paternel et ses conséquences, Lucie, le devoir de devenir adulte très vite, ce qu’elle a vécu comme la seule chance d’être acceptée par les autres. La narration en couple permet aux époux de voir l’enchaînement de couple et de chercher une adaptation meilleure au niveau individuel, de dyade et de triade.

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## Mots Clé

Parentification de l’enfant - Effets à long terme - Nouvelle famille.

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