

PERPLEXITY: AN EFFECT OF SOCIAL TRAUMA

JULIA BRAUN, JANINE PUGET, Buenos Aires, Argentina

ABSTRACT. *This paper faces the challenge of building hypotheses that contain referents about social subjectivity and the effects of mental inscription of traumatic social events. The authors' starting point is the hypothesis that every link involves a subjectivizing potential. Also the 'unconscious principle of uncertainty' holds that every encounter exposes the individual to unforeseeable effects that cause emotional states bound to the uncertainty that underlies the construction of every link. This principle remains unconscious because the individual defensively implements the 'illusion of predictability', but a violent and unexpected attack may activate it, causing a state of disorganization whose clinical indicator is the feeling of perplexity. The paper discusses thinking disorders within the context of violent actions. Finally, clinical material about a patient being assaulted and held as hostage is discussed.*

Key words: social subjectivity, unconscious principle of uncertainty, hostages, perplexity

A CLINICAL EVENT

- 'You know me', states a patient P on arriving for his first interview.
- Several days before, some 13 to 16 year olds living in a nearby shantytown broke into P's house and took him hostage. The assailants refused to surrender to the police because, they said, their lives were not guaranteed. They demanded the presence of a judge (the law) and the media. Meanwhile P was threatened with a gun for four or five hours, during which time complicated negotiations took place and finally the assailants surrendered to the judge. The mass media gave wide coverage to the robbery and its aftermath.
- Several days later, P received a telephone call and was told that X (a relative) had been kidnapped. X would only be freed

if P paid a big ransom to a person who would be waiting for him. P did as he was told and then discovered that he had been blackmailed and that there had been no such kidnapping.

- A few months later young thieves broke into his office several times in successive weeks. On two occasions they found no money and left the place shouting threats and breaking things; on the third occasion they stole a valuable device.

These stories are part of everyday life in our country. They are frequently commented upon in sessions as crime stories, and psychoanalysts don't usually recognize their clinical value. We believe that the time has come to consider them as manifest content, indicative of unconscious traces linked to the constitution of social subjectivity. We face the challenge of building hypotheses

that contain referents about social subjectivity, and the effects of mental inscription of the present traumatic social events, without necessarily referring them to childhood traumas because of deficiencies in the theory.

UNPREDICTABILITY VERSUS CERTAINTY

Every encounter exposes the individual to unforeseeable effects that cause emotional states bound to the uncertainty that underlies the construction of every link. The reality principle and the pleasure/unpleasure principle do not seem to fully account for such dynamics. We therefore propose another principle that we have called the *unconscious principle of uncertainty* modelled on Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty. (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle establishes that it is impossible to make a precise and simultaneous determination of both the position and the movement (mass, time, velocity) of a body. The more accurate one of the determinations, the less accurate the other; and the indeterminacy of both when multiplied together produce a value approximately equal to Planck's constant.)

Whenever faced with uncertainty, a person defensively implements the 'illusion of predictability' arising from the production of certainties. Under different circumstances, losing such an illusion does not result in transcendental consequences: the certainties collapse and are replaced by others. But a violent and unexpected attack may trigger a sudden collapse of certainties; this in turn activates the unconscious principle of uncertainty and causes a state of disorganization, whose clinical indicator is *perplexity*, a state of mind characterized by puzzlement, hesitation, disorientation and anxiety. The latter can appear in the form of

either panic or fear, causing various mental effects: one of them, which we will further develop, is a disorder in the thinking process. Another factor to bear in mind is that certain violent actions introduce into the scene the logic of the attacker, which causes in the attacked person the overlapping of two incompatible logics. This affects a condition inherent to every subject: thinking about him/herself on a consistent, foreseeable, stable basis as a form of protection against the intromission of 'otherness'.

THE ASSAILANT-ASSAULTED LINK

The specificity of the assailant-assaulted link results from a sudden attack involving the risk of death, wherein the assailant exerts abusive power over the assaulted person, imposing both his strength and his logic with the aim of domination or annihilation. The assailant's logic contains what is basically a life-death choice; this leads on certain occasions to the aim of saving his own life at any risk. As for the attacked person, who does not share such logic, terror-horror-anxiety arise accompanied by a change in his/her capacity to think.

In order to account for thinking disorders within the context of violent actions, we propose two categories: necessary possible thinking (*pensamiento posible necesario*), and imaginative possible thinking (*pensamiento posible imaginativo*). (We consider two categories of 'possible' because although in general traumatic situations are responsible for introducing into our thinking the possible-impossible axis, and considering that trauma belongs to that which is impossible to be thought, we believe that the fact of introducing two categories of possible, called necessary possible and imaginative possible adds greater richness.)

Under certain circumstances necessary possible thinking is pragmatic in nature for the sake of making life-saving decisions. In such cases perplexity materializes into immediate action, whereas under other circumstances creative and imaginative thinking may be activated that will solve the state of perplexity by questioning certainties.

Summing up, we will postulate different defensive systems that show up on the activation of the unconscious principle of uncertainty:

- The assaulted person hastily constructs new certainties out of the imperative need to nullify the unforeseeable, and the resulting disorganization of the mind. The assailant reinforces his previous certainties.
- The assaulted becomes paralysed, wherein only a necessary thinking is available to save his/her life. The assailant becomes overactive towards the same purpose, that is to say saving his own life.
- The assaulted person comes up with an imaginative (creative) way of thinking that allows the production of new strategies to get away from the situation in which he finds himself. The assailant uses imaginative thinking to optimize his criminal techniques.

THE LOGIC OF EXCLUSION: TAKING HOSTAGES

It is assumed that every link involves a subjectivizing potential due to the effects of the presence of two or more subjects. A linking space is therefore created with rules to legislate what is permitted/banned and to regulate exchanges. The mutually imposed relationships qualify the differences

between one subject and the other, while by violating the rules, the abuse of power hinders the subjectivizing function, invalidating one of the poles of the link (a subject becomes an object).

Regarding the hostage, he/she becomes a piece of merchandise – a mere object likely to be negotiated in a life for a life swap, lacking a symbolic mediation. The scene takes place in a universe of meaning wherein the one who abuses his power belongs to the ‘social exclusion’ space and acts on someone whom he considers alien and belonging to the ‘social inclusion’ space. Thus the lives-swapping game becomes legitimate: ‘if my life is worthless, I make use of someone else’s life, turn it into my shield, and thus give value to my life’. The hostage, submitted to a logic that is not his own, but that of the assailant/a socially excluded person, loses his/her own categories related to representation and belonging, a situation that can be maddening.

The hostage, as object, is nothing but a means to reach an aim. The assailant states that he has no personal link with the victim. The violent act stems from his condition of being socially excluded – he steals to eat – and for him this justifies his right to do what he does. He knows that his life is worthless for the socially included group, because he does not belong to a group ruled by the law. On the other hand the attempt to change his exclusion status and gain access to a social inclusion status through violating practices is doomed to failure.

ANALYSIS OF THE CLINICAL MATERIAL

Transferential fantasy

P was perplexed on coming to the first interview. He voiced his transferential

fantasy: denying the novelty of a first meeting he imagines that because he became a public figure the analyst should recognize him and know who he is. From such an identificatory position with the mass media P becomes the chronicler of his own life experiences: his demand for analysis seems to be grounded on his being a victim.

Perplexity also arises in the analyst, who runs the risk of being trapped by P's account of his case. The analyst frees himself from his perplexity on detecting the desubjectivizing effects suffered by P; he further recognizes the anxiety and confusion resulting from the difficulty of differentiating between being known as a public character, and what is implied in making oneself known to the analyst.

The analysis will involve recognizing P's difficulty in attaching meaning to his new subjectivity and belonging.

The three episodes

Let us go back to the three episodes that present particular traits and resolve the state of perplexity in different ways.

- Being taken hostage and having one's life seriously threatened, recognizing oneself as mere object of one's attackers involved in a life-for-a life transaction, unleashes a state of terror-anxiety and perplexity. This occurs on top of another source of perplexity that results from the fact that the assailants reject the police intervention, arguing that it involves a death menace for them. The difference between logics and their overlapping create an insoluble situation: the presence of the police that should be 'protective' for the socially included player is 'threatening' to the excluded party. Becoming aware of such situation led P to attach meaning to his state of perplexity, which allowed him to get into closer contact with his emotions and to start understanding the complexity of his experience.
- The blackmailing phone call that announces the threat to a close relative's life involves P in a logic that forces him to contemplate the exchange of life for money, an equally unacceptable proposal for his own logic (ethics). On being subjected to the duty of saving someone else's life, he could only carry out the order impulsively out of automatic obedience. This stems from the imposition of the assailants' logic and the activation of a necessary thought: 'to pay for a life or to become a murderer'. This option dissolves the conflict about critical values characterizing the subjective function, which oppose the values contained in the assailants' logic.
- A series of burglaries, not involving a deadly risk, attaches yet another quality to perplexity. This stems from the cumulative effect of successive thefts and the existence of secret pacts between the police and the thieves detected by P. As a result of such prearranged pacts the thieves identified were not detained. An overlapping of logics appears once again. Although the police are recognized as representing the law, it is also known that, in our social context, the police offer themselves to corrupt pacts. However, under such circumstances P is able to resort to an 'imaginative thought' and 'fantasize other practices'; for instance, to negotiate with the thieves the recovery of the stolen device. Identified with the thieves, P assumes that he can justify his request through 'the need to work', similar to the thieves' justification – 'we steal to eat' – which is in turn based on another identification: the

pact between the criminals and the police.

- As an indicator of the psychic work that is under way P attempts some answers to his initial questions: Why me? Who am I? Along those lines he reverses the questions: Why *not* me? Do I know who I am? He starts to become aware of the effects that belonging to a violent environment has on his social subjectivization. Thus he recognizes the price of coexisting with social groups that act under laws of their own, different from P's, where proposals of this sort are valid: exchanging life for life, exchanging life for money, secret pacts between the representatives of the law and the criminals, and so forth.

The suffering caused by having to accept that his capacity to think could have been affected under such circumstances and by the fact of having been included in a life-for-a life or life-for-money transaction or to save one's own or someone else's life at any cost, gave rise to feelings of humiliation and shame. Silvia Amati has described such feelings – in a different context – as indicators of the beginning of a psychic work, to work through traumatic situations suffered by patients subjected to torture (Amati Sas, 1989).

FINAL REMARKS

It is possible to think that violence increases an unconscious state of uncertainty. The search for certainties, speedy explanations, and/or banalization, are forms of denial or refutation that act as defences to deceptively protect us from the effect of change, disorganization or helplessness.

In a social context of growing insecurity, the 'other' becomes an unpredictable, *Thanatos*-loaded variable and the relationship becomes dangerously random.

This situation prevents us from constructing and preserving the necessary illusion that the unforeseeable is predictable.

We will be led into recognizing the need to further analyse how boundaries are established, somehow always fragile and sometimes illusory, between exclusion and inclusion pertinence. The conflicts arising from the permanent confrontation of social inclusion and exclusion spaces and the difficulties of their coexistence reveal the complexity of social subjectivity.

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Correspondence: Julia Braun, Montevideo 1404, (1018) Buenos Aires, Argentina. Email jotabe@house.com.ar.

Also Janine Puget, Paraguay 2475 1121 Buenos Aires, Argentina.