

Envy and the Evil Eye in the Obstetrical Ultrasonography: An Ethnopsychanalytical Approach

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Abstract

According to Briffault (1927) the primordial human group was a group of mothers. Men had a marginal role and the social organization was centered on the women's generative functions. The pregnant woman was the object of admiration and envy, as motherhood had to do with the administration of power inside the primordial group. However envy could not be directed to the pregnant woman, precious matrix of the very survival of the group. Envy had to be displaced from the mother to her child, as children were much more replaceable in a time when infantile mortality was so high. That is why children were believed to be the object of the evil eye, in every "primitive" culture. Obstetrical ultrasonography, thanks to its capacity of making visible what normally is invisible, can be experienced, unconsciously, as the realization of a magic look, an ambiguously dangerous look that can visualize the unborn child beyond the protective cover of the maternal body. The ultrasound can be experienced as an evil eye when it is performed without allowing the pregnant woman to look at her unborn child and to understand what is going on. There and then, unconscious fantasies of envious theft of the child's image by an evil sonographer/witch or wizard are likely to be evoked in the mother's mind. This unconscious fantasy is always reevokable, particularly during the pregnancies of women who suffered from mis-

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carriage, fetal loss, or death of a child (Nesci and coll., 1992). In such cases the death of the child is fantasized as a collective event where the envious, penetrating, looks of the group of the mothers play the major role. In this paper the authors report the transcript of the tape recording of an ultrasound session with Graziella, a pregnant woman who had a miscarriage in the third month of her previous pregnancy. She felt that the ultrasound probe was burning... As if the sonographic eye had taken upon itself, from other hostile eyes, a burning quality. The envious look of all the mothers, who crowded her family story and never supported her to separate and become an individual, were projected into the probe. Actually her relatives, like the relatives of her husband, did not accept that she could become the mother of a nuclear family. They would rather have her becoming the subjected mother of an extended women's group, the modern version of the primordial group of the mothers studied by Briffault.

Zusammenfassung

Die ursprüngliche menschliche Gruppe war nach Briffault (1927) eine Gruppe der Mütter. Männer spielten nur eine marginale Rolle und die soziale Organisation war auf die generativen Funktionen der Frauen zentriert. Die schwangere Frau war Objekt von Bewunderung und Neid, da Mutterschaft in der ursprünglichen Gruppe mit Macht zu tun hatte. Dieser Neid konnte sich jedoch nicht direkt auf die Schwangere richten, da sie für das Überleben der Gruppe wertvoll war. Darum wurde der Neid von der Mutter auf das Kind verschoben, da Kinder zu jener Zeit weit mehr ersetzbar waren, als zudem die kindliche Sterblichkeit noch so hoch war. Dies ist der Grund warum Kinder als Objekte des bösen Blicks in allen „primitiven“ Kulturen galten. Geburtshilfliche Ultraschalluntersuchung, die das normalerweise unsichtbare sichtbar machen kann, kann unbewußt als Realisation des bösen Blicks erlebt werden, eines potentiell gefährdenden Blickes, der das ungeborene Kind jenseits des schützenden Raumes des mütterlichen Körpers sichtbar macht. Das Ultraschallbild kann also die Bedeutung des bösen Blicks gewinnen, wenn die Schwangere ihr Kind nicht ebenfalls sehen kann und die genannten Zusammenhänge nicht verstanden werden. In einem solchen Falle können Phantasien von einem Diebstahl des Bildes des Kindes durch einen bösen hexenhaften Ultraschalluntersucher oder Zauberer in der Mutter hervorgerufen werden. Diese unbewußte Phantasie ist immer wieder erkennbar, besonders bei Frauen während einer Schwangerschaft nach einer Fehlgeburt oder Tod eines Kindes (Nesci u.a., 1992). In solchen Fällen wird der Tod des Kindes als ein kollektives Ereignis phantasiert, wo die bösen, schädigenden Blicke der Gruppe der Mütter die Hauptrolle spielen. In dieser Arbeit legen die Autoren das Transskript einer Tonbandaufzeichnung einer Ultra-

schalluntersuchung mit Graziella vor, einer schwangeren Frau, die eine Fehlgeburt im dritten Monat in ihrer früheren Schwangerschaft hatte. Sie hatte das Gefühl, daß der Ultraschallkopf erhitzt wäre und sie verbrennen würde, als ob das Ultraschall-Auge von anderen bösen Augen die Qualität des Verbrennens übernommen hätte. Die bösen Blicke all der Mütter, die ihre Familie bevölkerten und sie nie bei ihrer Individualisierung unterstützten, waren auf den Ultraschallkopf projiziert. Ihre Verwandten und die Verwandten ihres Mannes gestatteten ihr nicht, persönliche Mutter in einer eigenständigen Familie zu werden. Sie wollten sie lieber als Teil einer Frauen-Mutter-Gruppe haben, der modernen Version der ursprünglichen Gruppe der Mütter, wie sie Briffault studierte.

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According to Briffault (1927) the primordial human group was a group of mothers. men had a marginal role and the social organization was centered on the women's generative functions. The pregnant woman was the object of admiration and envy, as motherhood had to do with the administration of power inside the primordial group. However envy could not be directed to the pregnant woman, precious matrix of the very survival of the group. Envy had to be displaced from the mother to her child, as children were much more replaceable in a time when infantile mortality was so high. That is why children were believed to be the object of the evil eye, in every "primitive" culture.

Obstetrical ultrasonography, thanks to its capacity of making visible what normally is invisible, can be experienced, unconsciously, as the realization of a magic look, an ambiguously dangerous look that can visualize the unborn child beyond the protective cover of the maternal body. Such a disquieting experience is more likely to occur when the ultrasound is performed in the so-called "low feedback condition" (Campbell and coll., 1982; Cox, 1990). In other words, the ultrasound can be experienced as an evil eye when it is performed without allowing the pregnant woman to look at her unborn child and to understand what is going on. There and then, unconscious fantasies of envious theft of the child's image by an evil sonographer/witch or wizard are likely to be evoked in the mother's mind. The ultrasound scanner is experienced as an evil eye that can harm the unborn child.

This unconscious fantasy is always reevokable, particularly during the pregnancies of women who suffered from miscarriage, fetal loss, or death of a child (Nesci and coll., 1992). In such cases the child that had been actually lost can be fantasized, unconsciously, as a sacrificial victim who was put to death, for some obscure reason, by an imaginary group of mothers. Then, the death of the child is not the singular event of the individual story of his mother. It becomes a collective event where the envious, penetrating, looks of the group of the mothers play the major role. The individual mother was not supported by her actual and imaginary family group of the mothers. She was not able to hold her child within her womb as they, the mothers, were not able (or did not want . . .) to hold her

within their group matrix, during her pregnancy. She felt the unconscious envy and antagonism of all those who did not want to let her reach her motherhood. In their evil eyes she has seen again the mirror image of her own destructiveness toward her child: the reflection of her own ambivalence.

The Burning Probe

During an ultrasound session one of our patients, Graziella, who had already an abortion when she was in her third month of pregnancy, feels that the ultrasound probe is burning... As if the sonographic eye had taken upon itself, from other hostile eyes, a burning quality. In other words, the envious looks of all the mothers, who crowded her family story and never supported her to separate and become an individual, were projected into the probe. Actually her relatives, like the relatives of her husband, did not accept that she could become the mother of a nuclear family. They would rather have her becoming the subjected mother of an extended women's group, the modern version of the primordial group of the mothers studied by Briffault (Poliseno and coll., 1992). Let me read you some excerpts from the dialogue between Graziella and the sonographer of our interdisciplinary team.

Graziella: "I feel the probe burning..."

Sonographer: "Is it burning?"

Graziella: "Yes... It is warmer" (the sonographer laughs).

Sonographer: "May be it is due to the fact that I am holding it... anyway it is not the ultrasound probe itself that can heat... May be... It's... as if I had put my hand over there, for a while... I can take it away, if you want... I was trying to visualize better your baby's face... No... I can't see it better..."

Graziella: "He decided not to be looked at..."

The sonographer moves the probe in order to reassure the patient.

Graziella: "Are you sure that the ultrasound is safe to the baby?"

Sonographer: "Yes, absolutely. They did a lot of research on this issue... Sometimes, you know, someone rises doubts about this, but..."

Graziella: "Exactly! I was told myself something like this... that it would not be so... advisable, performing so many ultrasounds... they can give problems, they could give problems to the baby..."

Sonographer: "No. It depends on the kinds of... The ultrasounds can do it... Not ultrasonography itself... If one uses high frequencies ultrasounds, for a very long time, there could be, some times, some damages... But this cannot occur with the kind of ultrasounds... with the frequencies of ultrasounds that we commonly use in obstetrical ultrasonography... in any medical ultrasound... It depends on the kind of ultrasounds."

Graziella: "Yes, of course."

Sonographer: "These two black little circles are the child's eyes..."

Graziella: "Yes."

Sonographer: "Why did you want to attend to psychoprophylaxis delivery? One of the doctors, in the ward, told me you were interested in it."

Graziella: "Well, you know... (she laughs) as my first pregnancy... you know... then it will be my first delivery... That's why I asked if I could have some childbirth preparation."

Sonographer: "We can still see his little eyes, anyway... He has his hand covering his chin... May be you feel warm as I have been putting my finger over your belly (she laughs) I noticed it only now... Then, probably, it's my finger's heat (she laughs again)."

Graziella: "May be . . . He doesn't want to turn . . . He doesn't want to be disturbed, that's for sure."

Sonographer: "At least he doesn't want to be looked at, he doesn't want to be seen in his face."

Graziella: "I feel bothered."

Sonographer: "All right, we can stop it now. Do you feel any pain?"

Graziella: "A little . . . It doesn't hurt, really, it's only a feeling of discomfort."

Black Little Circles . . . Little Eyes

During her first interview with a psychoanalyst of our team, Graziella recalled her miscarriage: "My gynecologist performed an ultrasound and told me it was reabsorbing itself, almost completely . . . We were shocked as he told it in a quite cold way." The warm attitude of our sonographer (who warmed into his own hands the ultrasound gel, before applying it, and helped Graziella to find the words to express her feelings and anxieties) looks like an unconscious reparation for the coldness of the gynecologist who kept her at a distance during her first abortive pregnancy.

The unconscious dynamics between Graziella and our team's sonographer, recall the well known anecdote of the porcupiness: the little animals felt cold and got close in order to warm each other; but they felt pain, as they stung themselves with their sharp bristles (envious looks), so they withdrew. Then their need for warm prevailed, so they got close again . . . But they pricked themselves . . . And, finally, after a series of attempts and reciprocal adjustments, they found the optimal distance. The distance that allowed them to enjoy some warmth almost without pricking each other any more (Freud, 1921).

At the beginning of the ultrasound session Graziella expresses her fear that the same contact that can give warmth (the doctor-patient relationship) could also sting (the probe is burning, the ultrasound can damage the child). The sonographer does not withdraw completely from her rather sharp words. Through a series of verbal and non verbal exchanges (there are also physical contacts during an ultrasound session) doctor and patient go on looking for the optimal distance (physical and psychological) within their relationship.

The sonographer suggests to Graziella, answering her anxious questions on the ultrasound eye (the probe), that there do exist two kinds of ultrasound: a good one (the benevolent look/low frequencies) and a bad one (the evil eye/high frequencies). Unconsciously, with this ambiguous communication (there are two kinds . . . but of the same ultrasounds) our team's sonographer tried to help Graziella to accept the reality of human ambivalence: love and hate, creativity and destructiveness, are always together.

We can find a sign of the working through of Graziella's anxieties, in the unconscious mind of the sonographer, if we notice the doctor's shift from one verbal expression to another, which is slightly different: "black little circles" becomes "little eyes", by the end of the ultrasound session. This is the sign that the doctor is holding the patient's persecutory anxieties, which are gradually bounded and circumscribed. Actually, Graziella's unconscious need was to experience a good holding by an actual and imaginary group of mothers who would not be

much envious, who would let her become a mother herself and join their group as an equal, who would not expel her as a sacrificial victim. The medical team of our clinic had already cured the physical expression of her unconscious anxiety by providing her with the womb cerclage that was necessary to prevent her from losing her baby. Now the time had come for our team to take care of the emotional needs associated with her pathology, by shaping around her a benevolent circle. In this way, our team could be experienced by Graziella's unconscious mind, as the benevolent imaginary group of the mothers that could limit the persecution she suffered from (the burning probe/evil eye) applying "little circles" to her death anxieties.

It was not without meaning, then, that our team's sonographer talked about birth preparation immediately after she spoke of "black little circles". It was not without meaning, finally, that the sonographer accepted immediately her implicit request to end the session. At that moment the ultrasound was only bothering . . . it did not hurt any more. Graziella and the sonographer had found the right distance in their doctor-patient relationship, a distance that was neither painful nor freezing. We do hope this can help her to find the right distance also in the relationship with her child.

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In the next issue (No. 2, June) will be published:

Power Dynamics Within the Group of the Mothers and Reproductive Pathology
T.A. Polisenio, D.A. Nesci, S. Averna, A.K. Mancuso, L. Ancona, S. Ferrazzani, S. De Carolis, A. Caruso, and S. Mancuso

The "Covert" Relationship Between the Mother and Her Unborn Child
D.A. Nesci, T.A. Polisenio, S. Averna, A.K. Mancuso, L. Ancona, S. Ferrazzani, S. De Carolis, A. Caruso, and S. Mancuso