



## 8 - SYMBOLS ANALYSIS IN GENERATING INSIGHTS. A SMALL ANALYTICAL GROUP CASE STUDY.

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### **Abstract**

*Insight concept has a central role in the psychodynamic labour since beginning. Nowadays, in the light of new findings from neuroscience, insight can be conceptualized as outcome of analytical process also as the core of changes outset. Therefore, insights can play an important role in analytical psychotherapy approach, both in individual or group settings. The main purpose of this study is to describe the way in which symbol analyse, a central analytical technique, can stimulate and generate insights regarding important relationships, mental patterns or personal life events in order to support psychological reframing, inner growth and individuation process. For this case study were used qualitative analysis of 12 analytical group psychotherapy sessions transcripts (N=6). The results sustain that the same symbol generate different kind of insights related with inner psychological condition of participants. Analytical labour with symbols reveals the multiple possibilities to reframe the psychological contents and personal experiences in order to gain emotional balance and sustain personal development.*

**Keywords:** *symbol analysis, analytical psychology, psychological complex, insight, small analytical group*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During the stage of qualitative data processing of a previous research about the impact of using fairy tales in analytical group intervention program, new ideas appeared that had been condensates and used into a serial study cases presentation. For this case study, a brief presentation of some concepts would support the methodology and formulation of conclusions. There are two main conceptual fields: *symbolic activity* (contents, function, and process) related with fairy tales from analytical perspective and the concept of *insight*.

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## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. SYMBOLS. AN ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY OVERVIEW**

From analytical psychology approach, Jung (1921/1997) differentiates the term "symbol" from term "sign". Symbol concept comes up a wealth of diversity of meanings, in this way, any psychological content can be interpreted as mental semiotic (the sign indicating symptomatic facts that can be known) or as expression of psychological contents inaccessible to consciousness directly.

Symbols create "trails" of perception and organization of life experiences; establish new possibilities and potentialities for neural system (Sotirova-Kohli et al., 2013). Simultaneously, symbols provide a "notation" system allowing two forms of relations: with external reality and with internal needs, mediating the adaptation processes. Therefore, symbolization capabilities are involved in managing trauma experiences and internal trends of falsification of reality (Chang et al. 2013). From this standpoint, symbolic activity acts as an associative binder of experiences at emotional core creating in this way the meaning of experience. Analytical psychology proposes the concept "psychological complex" for this clustering of life experiences meanings. Only through emotions can be processed and transformed the experiences (traumatic or not) and not only through repression them or rational computations.

Jung (1934/1981) using Verbal Associative test came up with empirical results showing the connection between a certain type of emotional reaction and some personal psychological content, concluding that personal experiences are connected at an emotional cores or clusters. Psychological complex not only encapsulates personal experiences but influence future patterns of relationship and response. They represent split fractions of mental contents which have their etiology in early relationships and experiences. The dissociation became an autonomous mechanism generator of mental structures through which personal experiences are clustered polarized in a specific emotional state. Sporns et al. (2002) and Bob et al. (2011) showed that this cluster of patterns connect mental states and physiological responses producing temporary patterns for internal organization susummed to specific emotional, perceptive or cognitive state.

For this research next psychological complexes from analytical approach are briefly exposes: Ego complex is related with conscious identity summarizes all knowledge about our personal features, emotionality, thoughts and all conscious processes. Persona complex contains relationship patterns and also social image

construct. Shadow complex clustered all rejected features, instinctual reactions and undiscovered abilities. Animus or anima complexes encapsulate pattern of reaction or relationships specific to opposite sex, this facilitates not just couple relationship, but also the empathetic understanding of opposite sex persons or other more profound processes. Self as analytical concept is related with an organizational, holistic principle of regulation of all structural components of the psychic, originating individuation processes.

Preserving the psychodynamic idea (Haase, 2008) of symbolic language of fairy tales, Jung (1950/2005) approach fairy tales as „instrumental symbols that help unconscious contents to find the way to conscious, for interpretation and integrations”. Being „spontan, naive an unreflected products that represent the structural relations of psychic”. In this direction, fairy tales represent collective mental products that reflect the processes of symbolisation of the psychological inner and outer dynamics. Jung (1964) argues that symbols are objective ontological point of view, without having their own sense. In other words, attribution of personal meaning is coming from experiencing of world. Fairy tales can reveal the dynamics between psychological complexes as they are activated in the mind of analysands during some important life event and recollected during in analytic labor.

## 2.2. INSIGHTS

Gabbard (1997a) defined the insight as a form of a "new understanding", recognizing it as an important precondition for mental changes and transformations from many psychotherapeutic approaches. From this perspective, Sugarman (2006) highlights two important aspects involved in the emergence of insights: the capacity to *self-understanding* and secondly, *self-referentiality* (the understanding of the dynamics, often unconscious, behind of psychological content: thoughts, emotions, decisions, reactions, behaviors).

The insights generally have disruptive effect on the person, creating internal connections that reveal those mental contents. Boosting the capacity to produce insights in the psychotherapeutic settings, the effect would be connected with maturation and developing processes, guiding the transition from a naive, simplistic, rigid, disturbed condition to a more complexes advanced, open, flexible and integrative attitude (Fonagy et al. 1996; Grienberger, et al., 2005).

Insights capture the transition from different levels of unconsciously aware, showing how mental contents can be transformed. "It makes sense" in the

therapeutic meaning, means to integrate into a new psychological formulation, complicated and unclear psychological contents, unprocessed or rejected.

A genuine insight, as Moro et al. (2012) showed, arises from the need to liberate the ego from conflicts, to expand and strengthen it by mobilizing a new repertoire of adaptive behaviors. Gabbard & Western (2003) identifies three processes that can facilitate intrapsychic transformation through insight: weakening of associated psychological content network nodes that produce destabilizing effects; reducing the frequency of their neurotic activation; creating new associative connections to produce adaptive responses. These processes involve transition and transformation of intrapsychic symbolic activities (transcendental function) which can lead to a new psychic configuration. Insight is not an intellectual recognition of mental facts, but a complex process involving logical or rational operations and also a profound emotional response.

Kounios et al. (2014) sustained that insights involve the exploration of the mental contents networks and connections between them, contributing in this way to the consistency of Self, through structural changes. Kohut (1984) and Levy et al. (2006, cit. by Lacey, 2014) argue that a network of unconscious associations can support the emergence of maladaptive patterns of relationship, response, etc. “Verbalization of experience and behavior, tolerance of a wide range of emotional experiences, vitality, maintaining realistic self-esteem a relational life”, “a creativity and professional fulfillment”, mental flexibility and freedom of thought and action” support all changes according to Cogan (2007) and Shedler (2010). These issues are fully congruent with analytical description of the balanced individuated personality.

Castonguay & Hill (2007) show that insights brings from the unconscious to conscious level the connections between emotional contents, thoughts, behaviors, personal experiences arising from their interpretation in terms of efficacy (therapeutic relationship and therapeutic setting).

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

First purpose of this case study research is to describe an analytical group intervention program focused on using fairy tales as central instrument.

The second aim is to present the pattern of participants insights generated by symbols analysing during the analytical stage of group working with fairy tales “Cinderella”.

Another objective is to bring an analytical interpretation for psychological transformation observed, to find new explanations for their transformations and

propose new directions for future research on using symbolic materials in different areas (diagnostic, prognostic and intervention).

#### **4. METHOD**

The case study methodology was chosen due to four advantages. George & Bennett (2005) emphasised their potential to achieve high conceptual validity, strong procedures for fostering new hypotheses, usefulness for closely examining the hypothesized role of causal mechanisms in the context of individual cases, and their capacity for addressing causal complexity. Also, Starman (2013) argued in her research that case study is more than “just a methodological choice; therefore, we choose to define case studies as a qualitative research type”.

#### **5. PARTICIPANTS**

This case study presents the analytical group experience of one small group (N=6), that benefit from a psychological intervention program focused on research the psychological impact of fairy tales as therapeutically main instrument in analytical labour.

The general selection criteria used for all participants are: at least 18 years old, volunteer participation, absence of any significant: somatic illness or medical interventions (surgery, chronic somatic conditions), mental disturbances (including learning disabilities or cognitive impairment), stressful life events during last 12 months previous selection screening.

All six participants are young women (age 20). All of them are students in second year at Communication Faculty in Bucharest. They signed a contractual agreement for participation to research and intervention at the end of selection interview, offering as well their accord for publication of data collected from the entire research program under confidentiality clause and identity protection.

#### **6. INSTRUMENTS AND MATERIALS**

1. “*Clinical interview intake*” with open answers for initial screening and participant’s selection, created especially for research using “*Psychiatric Integral Intake*” (Marquis, 2008). Basic information were gathered relating with identification data, actual psychological condition (emotional life, recent events, significant relationships, etc.), medical condition (actual or recent somatic illness, injuries, impairments, medical interventions), also final but important task of this step is receiving the consent to participation to research.

2. "Protocols for transcript of video tape".

## 7. PROCEDURE

In order to understand the analytical process and also the context from where the symbolic materials were extracted, it is necessary to present briefly the analytical group psychological intervention using fairy tales. The design of intervention using fairy tales is inspired from a workshop program created by Kast (1995, p. 77-96). This group intervention consists in one introductory session followed by 12 sessions, 120 minutes each session, one time per week.

Each session has the similar structure, in order to decrease the probabilities to interfere biases: **warming up** (10 minutes) – introductory stage of the session to decrease the anxiety; sharing actual life experience; mental activation for analytical labour; **group activity** – analytical labour (approx. 100 minutes); **group sharing and feedbacks** (5-10 minutes) - participants share and explore feelings, thoughts, insights or sensations through the session; **closing up the session** (1-2 minutes) - with a preview of next period until next session and final salute supporting participant separation of group and of therapist, and reinsertion in outer reality.

## 8. CASE STUDY

**References:** participants were invited at research, using social internet networking and by announcement posted in university lobby, responding due to their interest for self-development, personal optimization, analytical group experience and curiosity for working with fairy tales.

**Introductory session:** after a short presentation of therapist and research program, group members introduce themselves; then, working in dyads, they exchange information about their interest, knowledge and experience regarding fairy tales, sharing important personal data, indirectly they learning about each other, without activating defensive mechanisms. Participant's feedbacks from this stage showed a low contact with fairy tales in present, but an increased curiosity and motivation for the intervention program.

**Analytical group labour during the program:**

**Session 1** was focused on creating group matrix, stimulating contact and experiencing the rules of analytical group working (authentic presence, honesty in disclosure, non-judgemental attitude and confidentiality, speaking in their own name and from their own experiences, no criticism and advices).

*Session 2 / 3* started exploring their personal needs for changes and inner transformation as purposes.

*Session 4 / 6:* group generate specific associations (psychological themes) to different fairy tales, choosing that fairy tales who reflect better their personal needs for changes and inner transformation. Summarising qualitative data extracted from transcripts, the results are synthetized in figure no 1, (name of fairy tales are red circle and psychological themes are grey squares) Participants chose to work with “Cinderella” fairy tales in analytical group setting. Also, fairy tales used in individual analytical vignette are: Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, Salt in food, Snow White, Cinderella.



Figure 1. Thematic map of psychological theme related with fairy tales

*Analytical formulation of the case after this stage:* the group needs for changes and inner transformation transposed in psychological themes are related with Ego Complex, especially with feminine side of their identity. Due to fact of their young age and contacts with so many feminine role models, their inner feminine identities are not yet clarified and confuse them. In the same time, become visible their need to change their psychological position toward the father figure, all participants showed qualitative deficiency in relationship with their real father containing high standards or expectations that created a neurotic attachment style with masculine figures and a compensative psychological internal pressure for

obtaining external mirrors to validate their personal capacities or for adaptation to external expectations. The themes as indecision and anger management are related with Shadow Complex that acts most of the time as an internal blocker or saboteur, disturbing their emotional life, personal or professional relationship. Life style themes and attachment style express an immature Ego Complex. Even though this group brings into their attention these themes, the participants have enough awareness on it, being conscious of their maturation level and working on it.

This is the starting point of analytical working with fairy tales. With these goals in mind, all group activities are focused on achieving their aims.

**Analytical group work with “Cinderella”**- follow the guiding line offered by von Franz (1982, 1996) and Kast (1995, 1996). Analytic working with “Cinderella” fairy tales started without participant B. that is missing. Participants are invited to take a relaxation moment, re-memorize in their mind „Cinderella” fairy tales, recreating together the version of this group. After a short lecture of the group version, three areas are synthesized: **symbols** (midnight, **aches**, rich / poor, number “3”, shoe, the dance, pumpkin, little animals, lentil beans), **themes** (Helplessness, Separation, Attachment, Loneliness, Searching identity, Loosing natural mother, Father left, Abashment, Power, Devaluation, Competition, Rivalry, Envy, Revenge, Threat, Uncertainty, Catharsis (by crying), Magic, Transformation, Love (finding), Loss, Escape, Anger, Sacrifice, Punishment, Justice, Forgiveness, Triumph of goodness) and **characters** (*Cinderella*, father, step mother, two step sister, prince, fairy godmother, little animals, servant).

First, participants approach the character of „Cinderella”, starting to present their own perception on Cinderella, showing different mental images and attitudes toward Cinderella: admiration, compassion, justification, criticism, rejection. These features stimulate recollection of personal memories from different moment of life. In this way, the abandonment and separation personal theme activated a compassionate attitude and own experience related with rejection from equals. The obedience is used as defensive mechanism to prevent exclusion and come up with two significant relationships: first this participant learned the obedience as a defensive mechanism from her father and secondly, she used it in her friendship relations. Another attitude is exculpatory; another participant offers arguments for obedience linked with the respect of father choses. Critical attitude on Cinderella naivety mirrored a low self-esteem projected as criticism toward own feminine features and immaturity. The most positive attitude is admiration of Cinderella kindness, and consistency showed in confrontation with difficulties and abandonment expressed by another participant that reveal a good self-esteemed and ability to manage relationships and emotional life.

Secondly, participants analyse the symbol “Ashes”. Each contributes with his own association. Participant Ava started first chain of associations with “protection”, “caress” and “support”, next Sora associate “adjustment”, Ada and Mia associated both “abashment”, then entire group, in one voice came with “the end”.

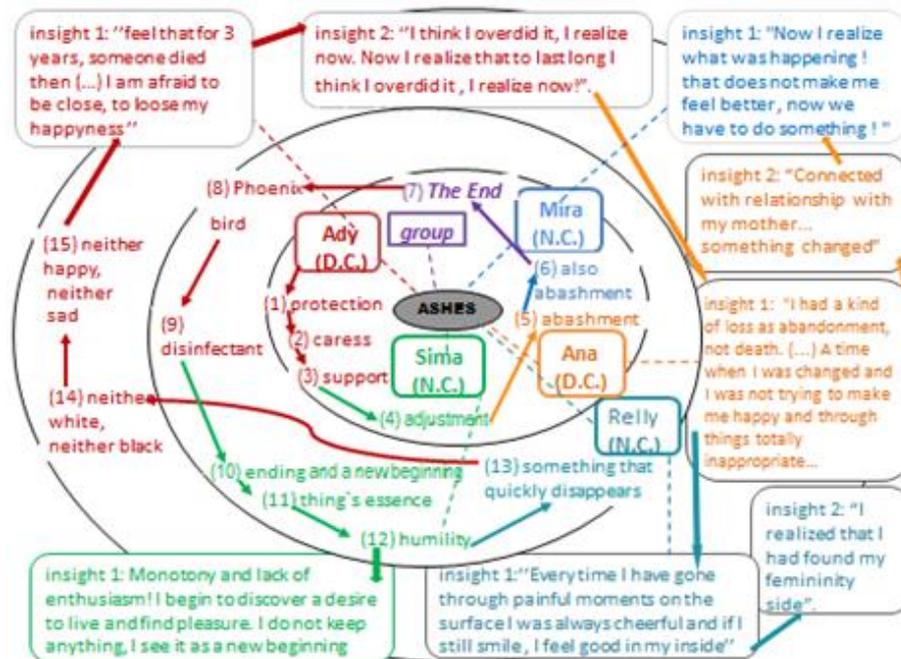


Figure 2. Pattern of insights generated of analyse of symbol “Ashes”

Follow a second round of associations. Again Ava brings “Phoenix bird” and “disinfectant”; Sima came with “ending and a new beginning”, “things’ essence” and “humility” (develop this idea with the expression “to but ashes on the head “that express humility). Roxi bring “something that quickly disappear” that inspire Ava to make next association:” neither white, neither black” nor “neither happy, neither sad”. For this group after two rounds of associations, insights related with their own life experiences, started to appear. Patterns of this group (figure 2.) showed that one insight brings another one; the insight of one participant stimulates another participant to produce another insight.

*Session 7/11* is the next stage of intervention (individual analytical labour), when in small individual vignette, each participant benefit from a personal immersion in inner psychological life, through symbols analysis facilitate by fairy tales.

*Session 12: Closing the process. Final feedbacks.* The focus is on obtaining feedback from participants regarding their participation at analytic group and their opinion on using fairy tales in intervention programs. Also another aim is participant's separation from other members of group and from therapist.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This case study tried to offer first of all an "inside look" for using fairy tales in analytical group setting, in order to support individuation processes revealed in personal optimization and development, in creative attitude toward themselves etc. Secondly, and most importantly, illustrating the connections between symbols and insights could be opened new direction for further research from different approaches: theoretically, clinically, cognitive processes implied, psychotherapeutically, etc. There are two directions to discuss conclusions from this research, one related with fairy tales as a container of symbolic materials and secondly symbols analysis as a generator of insights.

Fairy tales activate a large amount of psychological themes; many of them were clustered in five areas, according with their psychological actual needs: growing self-esteem, external confirmations, indecisions, anger, attachment and life style. Choosing one fairy tales for group working, bring deep psychological contents, each participants have the opportunity to contribute at group co-unconscious and became a supportive resource for others insight. Associations guided participants to recollect painful memories like separation or unsecure relationships. "Ashes" is still for the modern people, not just for ancient time, the symbol for unhappy state, blackness, darkness, death, mortality, the perishable nature of the human body, shame, despair, destruction, grief, sadness, mourning, humiliation, renunciation, descent into hell, the negative aspects of mother. Without knowing before these aspects, participants bring them in the mental space of the group. This collection looks to have enough power to connect participants with deep inner memories, otherwise repressed and unconscious, well encapsulated in order to protect Ego. Symbols in this way of working on it, became not just a secure medium but also a facilitator in order to reframe the significant that different events can have in people minds. The insights that they have open new creative perspectives to look at their sufferance, disturbances or symptoms.

The symbol analysis support Chang et al. (2013) idea that symbolization capabilities could help in management of traumatic experiences and identify the internal trends of falsification of reality or phantasms activities. The participants

not only recollect painful memories or associate elements of negative mental patterns, but find a way to recovery the positive side of it.

As Messer & McWilliams (2007), Shedler (2010) showed that insights are importance for psychodynamic psychotherapy in long-term results, bringing the idea for new research on long-time analytical work with patterns of insights related on different kind of mental disturbances, also similar intervention programs can be developed using other creative techniques that can be studied which will bring new empirical evidence as a supporting tool.

Regarding participant's feedback, there is a difference between participants with mild depressive condition and clinically normal participants. Both two participants (Ava and Ada) with depressive condition showed a preoccupation on their negative feelings and they shared insights become aware of their focus on important but negative side of relationships patterns that involve dysfunctional attachments patterns or disruptive separation processes that affected their trust and self-images. Analysis of symbols, fairy tales characters help them to reconnect at least partially with positive aspects of their life experiences. Participants with clinically normal condition shared insights regarding their maturation stage or their preoccupation to optimize and grow their inner resources, finding diverse ways to adjust themselves to external or internal requests; they showed a better capacity to project themselves into the stories and to discover more and many meanings in symbols.

Regarding their self-achievements trough the interventions, participants clinically normal recognized more aspects and benefits then participants with depressive condition. Also most of the participants, show a different attitude about fairy tales as a creative and rich opportunity to discover new features about themselves.

This research, similar with Bowden et al. (2005) study, supports the importance of insight through a combined methodology for helping the deepest developing mechanisms. Studying in further research the mechanisms of producing insights into the therapeutic settings even though it is a difficult journey, can bring new data on the mechanisms of training, triggering and supporting adaptive changes and transformations mental and harmonizing.

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