

Volume 8, n 1, 2020

## Editorial

### Editorial: Fear of Contamination

Salvatore Settineri <sup>1</sup>, Emanuele Maria Merlo <sup>2, 3 \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Biomedical and Dental Sciences and Morphofunctional Imaging, University of Messina, Italy

<sup>2</sup> Department of Cognitive Sciences, Psychology, Educational and Cultural Studies (COSPECS), University of Messina, Italy

<sup>3</sup> CRISCAT (International Research Center for Theoretical and Applied Cognitive Sciences), University of Messina and University Consortium of Eastern Mediterranean, Noto (CUMO), Italy

E-mail corresponding author: [emerlo@unime.it](mailto:emerlo@unime.it)



#### Keywords:

Anguish; Clinical Psychology; Contamination; Covid-19; Fear; Pandemic.

**Received:** 2 March 2020

**Accepted:** 11 April 2020

**Published:** 20 April 2020

**Citation:** Settineri, S., Merlo, E. M. (2020). Editorial: Fear of Contamination. *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 8(1). Doi: <https://doi.org/10.6092/2282-1619/mjcp-2424>

As this editorial is being written, the pandemic of covid-19 in Italy and the rest of Europe, is becoming more and more serious. Besides the epidemiological aspect that does not immediately fall within the aims of the Journal, there is the various pathological fallout on the subjects mediated by the mass media. The resonance and the consequences of this phenomenon will have been made visible at a later time, considering the necessary suspension of most of the healthcare services as of now.

Today more than ever, we are assisting to new challenges, with a particular reference to those psychic processes that we commonly call defence mechanisms. In adherence to the original meaning of defences, it is necessary to underline the adaptive role of such mechanisms, whose aim lasts up to a well-known threshold, beyond which the pathological outcomes manifest themselves (Settineri, Frisone, Alibrandi, & Merlo, 2019). The reference to the strength of the Ego is clear, defence mechanisms at least play a crucial role considering the last integrative and embodied perspectives.

Immunity falls within the field of the adaptation process, so that when Ego's strategies work properly its increase becomes clear both in psychological and biological terms. Although it may seem like a clear contradiction to the above mentioned as an integrative approach, the last distinction still continues in most of the healthcare professionals and in the current linguistic framework. In accordance to the transversal and symbolic perspectives, the immunity concrete meaning is accompanied by its metaphorical sense specially for the relational exchange of views.

It regards all ages, since the adaptation process has a dynamic trend starting from childhood and extending to adolescence and adulthood, through different paths of expression. Starting with childhood and adolescence, it is possible to notice how emotions and feelings take on different meanings along a continuum that goes from acting to symptomatic masks (Boeker & Northoff, 2018; Bourlot, 2020; Merlo, 2019a; Riley, 2019; Settineri et al., 2019; Settineri, Frisone, & Merlo, 2019).

It is surprising to see how individuals had to return to ancient scientific principles such as isolation, and superstitious beliefs, which contradict our model idea of globalization. On the other hand, we can find gestures of solidarity and touching words, the likes of which haven't been felt for a long time. Ultimately, it could be considered as a projection of affection, a sort of new herd immunity mediated by the internalization of experiences.

Considering the aims and scopes of this Journal, a reflection about the new challenges of Clinical Psychology is desirable. Clinical psychology always poses new objectives with a particular reference to a growing number of pathological conditions (Conversano, 2019; Merlo, 2019b) and among these the individual and collective paths of anticipatory grief. Other references are solitude which has been imposed and not chosen, problems related to foisted family relations in a society tending to split couples, generational differences and friendships. In any case, as M. Buber would say we assist to events and demands requiring answers regarding the different meanings of diseases, the economic and organizational profiles of sickness, the peculiar sense of illness. These responses can offer ways of feeling opposed to perception, new insights of what mankind would represent through psychological and social visions.

The search of meaning represents a crucial node of the human state, since relevant contributions pointed out the structuring force of linguistics on every individual existence. It would be sufficient to refer to the differences between signifier and signified, as highlighted by the father of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure in his lectures, organized by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (1916) and related to psychology by Jacques Lacan (1957-1958; 1966).

Some leading distinctions must be mentioned, as the phenomenological difference between anxiety and anguish (Imbriano, 2010; Kierkegaard, 1845; Shockey, 2016), perception and

representations (Jasper, 1913) and the regressions in the service of the Ego (Knafo, 2002; Kris, 1952a, 1952b, 1952c, 1952d) required to build an armor. We happen to know about these defensive necessities in everyday psychological and clinical activities, such as those related to psychodiagnostics for which the role of imagination is central and indispensable. A clear reference is due to apperception and its phenomenon-related psychodiagnostics practices directly inspired by the search of imagination manifestations (Bellak, 1954/1973; Schachtel, 1959; Schafer, 1958). The reference to the different existential possibilities has always been considered by the above-mentioned methods, including images related to possible catastrophes.

As M. Buber would say, for centuries many subjects have been subject to catastrophes, certainly nothing special in an evolutionary perspective, but not for those whose consciousness lives in the present. The significance of a “mental epidemic” has deep roots, since classical papers such as Ellis (1911), postulated the feature of mental phenomena related to pandemics. We are therefore called to relive history through our experience as we have the duty to study the existential changes caused by these events in depth.

We are witnessing various senseless attitudes, such as not respecting the rules useful for avoiding contagion, the case of those who think that science is a fact to be believed or not and the case of those cunning egos who take advantage of the general condition. Individuals acting like sharks, finally expressing their pathological narcissism, pretending through the media to be compliant to rules.

In this context, the fear of contamination arises. It is more than the fear of contact with the threatening external object and includes an internal phantasm that cannot be cured, sterilized, or prevented. The figures of the “prophets of misfortune” are always alert, as usually personified by the plague-spreader, or present figures of every epidemic. The *plague spreaders* are also those who in the story of a current Decameron, run in the mountains or hills and then return, too early, as the real vessels of the infection.

It is not enough to be indignant but only to obey the effective isolation strategies, even if they clearly limit the sphere of individual possibilities. Of course, we will have to ask ourselves if possible, changes in psychopathological manifestations (as in times of war) demonstrate a psychosomatic effect:

Could we learn from a type of intimate resonance from the real possibilities of contamination?

Can we turn a psychic event into a moment of permanent growth, an objective datum implementing the skills of us as involved psychotherapists?

At the moment the scientific production is only in the collection phase and highlighting just a part of the phenomenon, even if some aspects need a deep reflection.

Melli et al. (2017) deemed it necessary to distinguish a type of contamination aimed more at the avoidance of damage than the removal of disgust. In research conducted with protocols aimed at distinguishing among mental contamination, contact contamination, propensity to disgust, DOC, anxiety and depression, the authors concluded that contact contamination was based on mental contamination.

Therefore, the feeling of protection deriving from the use of masks is strongly linked to the ritual phenomenon. It informs us about the use of protective devices as not necessarily linked to an opportune scientific indication, but instead due to erroneous information reached through mass media. The role of fear of contagion has been highlighted by other correlation studies involving disgust, whose role as an emotional factor in the genesis of psychopathology (Zanjani, Yaghubi, Fata, Shaiiri, & Gholami, 2018) has been less emphasized compared to anxiety. It is not always possible to distinguish emotions' specific qualities (Verwoerd et al., 2013) and symbolic equivalences.

The reflection on the frame of emotions is relevant in the field of science as well as for political decisions and difficulties in epidemiological choices, especially if the pandemic is entirely diffused.

It is also evident that the impending vulnerability leads subjects to cognitive distortions as observed and documented with respect to the current pandemic of covid-19 (Elwood et al., 2009). Known models of behaviour observation during stress (Kelloway, Mullen, & Francis 2012) if on the one hand frame specific situations in relation to stress, they do not observe the phenomenon in a global way.

However, we would not be faithful to other purposes of Clinical Psychology if adherent only to psychodiagnostics, without considering the clinical intent of the therapeutic relation with patients. In this specific field, the rhetorical figures such as metaphors help us to confine the emotions we feel. As Sontang (1971) pointed out, diseases are not metaphors but only through their study of word-substitutes we can free ourselves from them, expanding their significance to common meanings. If the nineteenth century had a metaphorical disease paradigm with tuberculosis (TB) and the twentieth century had cancer, the spread of covid-19 risks taking its place both for the size and high incidence of deaths. The daily bulletin informs us of the number of cured people and deaths. General awareness derives from both mass disclosure and self-diagnosis in which respiratory symptoms represent an obvious indicator.

It is always for this reason that, as pointed out by some regional governors, infected people are more than those estimated by epidemiological investigations.

It should also be emphasized that the current pandemic is also experienced by that group of the population maintaining an ancient set of beliefs. Themes as punishment, guilt and sin are understood as failure to pursue the right path. Among these factors, the spread of fake news has built up the belief about a possible laboratory generation of covid-19: more effort for researchers to deny falsity in a documented and experimental way. These interpretative models remind us of the explanation about the appearance of leprosy and plague.

Even the metaphors related to the historical periods must lead us to further reflections, so if the tbc was the romantic disease par excellence (although for most modern listeners difficult to match with Verdi's Violetta from *La Traviata*), the psychosomatic relationship between emotions and cancer links it to the unsustainable body-mind issue (Motofei & Rowland, 2015, 2018;) and in particular to depression and life events. In these frameworks, complex representations, emotions and above all the resilience mechanisms that should be taken into consideration in the causes of a pandemic are often overlooked. In other words, it is to be considered today as fifty years after Sontag's essay (1971), how psychology often forgets the different epistemology of the medical sciences. There are still other aspects going beyond the institutional aims of clinical psychology and perhaps decline better with social psychology: we are witnessing an escalation of poverty, to be clear of that type of non-metaphorical hunger.

In highly technological Europe, since we are facing a social regression, we must also observe the tendency to stock excessive quantities of food that will soon expire, without considering the impossibility for some families to have enough resources.

A bitter conclusion for an introduction to the first issue of 2020 but which does not fade our scientific purpose:

- 1) solidarity with all readers, authors and members of the editorial staff and Scientific Committee of this Journal with whom we share the current emergency;
- 2) the willingness to keep this Journal active, moreover it is part of the DNA of non-hybrid Open Journals like MJCP, to face difficulties and to document this historical period;
- 3) the solicitation of search for new therapeutic paths aimed at improving the quality of life of those who suffer and need to express their pain.

In particular we are referring to those humanized traits that bring us together, different from happiness which currently seems to be far from us as individuals and a society.

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**DOI:** 10.6092/2282-1619/mjcp-2424