

ISSN 2241-2638 (print)

ISSN 2441-2778 (on-line)

## WORKING PAPERS SERIES

# Working with Attachment Patterns to Encourage a Positive Self-Image: A Pragmatic Case Study

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Issue 2017.1 Athens

ΤΙΤΛΟΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΗΣ ΣΕΙΡΑΣ: Σειρά Κειμένων Εργασίας του ‘Λόγω Ψυχής’

ΕΚΔΟΤΗΣ: Λόγω Ψυχής ΕΠΕ- Ινστιτούτο Εκπαίδευσης και Έρευνας στη Συστημική  
Ψυχοθεραπεία

ΤΟΠΟΣ ΕΚΔΟΣΗΣ: Αθήνα

ΗΜΕΡΟΜΗΝΙΑ ΠΡΩΤΗΣ ΕΚΔΟΣΗΣ: Ιούλιος 2011

TITLE OF SERIES: Working Paper Series of Logo Psychis

EDITOR: Logo Psychis LTD- Training and Research Institute for Systemic Psychotherapy

PLACE OF PUBLICATION: Athens

DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION: July 2011

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**Abstract**

The present study is based on the case of Anastasia, a young woman in her late twenties. She came to therapy reporting work-related, relationship and self-image issues. During the entire therapeutic process, the enriched systemic perspective SANE (System, Attachment, Narrative, Encephalon) was used in order to assess and treat the client's issues. The case was conceptualized by drawing upon attachment theory and its relation to the systemic approach. The goal of therapy was to help the client develop a more coherent view of herself aiming at replacing restricting roles from the past with more adaptive ones.

Key words: relationship issues, self-image, attachment, systemic approach, therapy

## **Case Context and Method**

The present study was based on the therapeutic model of the enriched systemic perspective SANE – System Attachment Narrative Encephalon, in which I was trained in (Androutsopoulou, Bafiti, Kalarritis, 2014). As its name suggests, the systemic approach is enriched with three more theoretical perspectives: attachment theory, narrative/dialogical psychology and contributions from neurosciences. It conceptualizes therapy as a process that passes through stages, utilizing at the same time guiding questions deriving from all the aforementioned theoretical perspectives. It is a flexible approach in the sense that it involves different types of sessions (individual, family and group), timeframes (short term/long term contracts), interventions and techniques used.

In the present study the case is conceptualized from an attachment theory perspective and its relation to systemic notions. From an attachment perspective, the SANE model suggests stages adjusted from Holmes (2001). These involve: (i) Building a therapeutic relationship that is safe enough to allow both self-discovery and the exploration of the external world; the key goal is for the therapist to create an environment where corrective attachment experiences can take place. (ii) Acknowledging vague and/or unresolved attachment issues, how they relate to ‘ghosts’ from the past and consequently how they affect present living (iii) Challenging those ghosts by encouraging the expression of the unsaid; here, the therapist welcomes the representation of situations that are taken out from the client’s life and willingly participates in those allowing the expression of emotions otherwise not spoken (iv) Reconciling with the ‘ghosts’ by allowing acceptance to flourish,

enhancing thus, the development of relationships that are more meaningful and functional to the person's present status of living (Androutsopoulou, Bafiti, Kalarritis, 2014).

The therapy took place privately in individual, weekly sessions. Since the client lives abroad, on-line video and chat application software was used to accommodate the process. It was agreed, however, that when she would be visiting Greece, sessions would take place in my private office. The therapeutic process is still ongoing but for the purposes of this paper material from the client's first year of therapy (forty eight sessions) is going to be used.

### **The client**

Anastasia is of Greek descent, born and raised in Northern Greece and currently living abroad. She is twenty seven years old, single and has no children. She holds a university degree in Law and works as a senior manager at an international company. She enjoys her job and feels satisfied with herself for having made it in such a competitive environment. She values prestigious living and takes pride for being on the top five percent of most well-paid employees. Her parents are in retirement while she has an elder sister who also lives in their hometown. Anastasia is a healthy, very sociable and outgoing young lady with a good affiliation network.

She sought counselling one and half years ago in order to better understand herself, face her insecurities and deal in a more decisive way, with the relationship and work-related problems she was facing at that time. She was referred by a colleague who was treating her sister. This has been her first attempt to therapy. Our meeting was arranged shortly after our first e-mail communication. During that time

she gave me the impression of a strong, perceptive woman with a fair touch of humor yet having an unstable sense of self and a black and white thinking pattern.

### **Ethical Issues**

Due to the nature of our sessions, it was thoroughly explained to Anastasia that the process is no different from that taking place at my office, both in terms of protecting personal information and in creating a strong therapeutic alliance. Regarding the present paper, before proceeding with the writing, she was informed about its purpose of it and about the personal information that would be disclosed. She was given the opportunity to set her queries and was reassured that she had the option to refuse participation. It was made clear that if she accepted, her story would be altered so as to eliminate any chance she could be identified by the reader.

### **Guiding theoretical conception with research and clinical experience support**

Attachment is a deep, affectionate, close, and enduring bond to others that allows people to feel safe, protected and cared (Bernstein et.al. 1997). This bond lies in the heart of family life (Byng-Hall, 1995) and it is most notably observed with primary caregivers, usually the mother. During the course of life however, attachment transcends those important figures, affecting also the relationship with other adults. As Bowlby (1977), the founder of this evolutionary theory eloquently wrote, “attachment behavior is held to characterize human beings from the cradle to the grave” (p.129). By examining the interaction between the mother and the infant, he suggested that all infant actions and behaviors have as a main goal to maximize intimacy to the mother in order to feel security and ensure survival chances (Bee, 1999).

Because attachment is an internal state it cannot be easily and directly observed. What can be observed are attachment behaviors that are elicited when someone longs for attention, comfort and safety. Hence, it is not the frequency of these behaviors but their pattern that provides information about the nature of the bond.

An essential part of Bowlby's theory is the concept of the "Internal working models" that defines how attachment influences a person's sense of self and value (Bowlby, 1988). Internal working models are cognitive representations of the self, others and the world. They regulate affect and behavior, shape self-image and guide interaction with others. These contingencies tend to endure in time, therefore affecting psychosocial functioning and the emotional stability of one's self-perception (Procaccia *et.al*, 2014).

Since attachment patterns are so important to how individuals perceive themselves, if secure they can provide safety and care throughout a person's life time. If not, they can lead to various problems and difficulties (Byng-Hall, 1995). Mary Ainsworth, an influential developmental psychologist who greatly contributed to and expanded Bowlby's attachment theory, created a classification system so as to test, measure and explore differences in attachment patterns. Using an experimental procedure called the "strange situation", she managed to distinguish between secure attachment and two types of insecure, the avoidant and ambivalent. By examining both the child's responsivity toward the mother and the parenting style of the mother, she concluded that the later one is crucial to the child's behavioral and emotional expression (Donley, 1993). Her work proved fruitful in predicting and explaining not only children's but adults' behaviors as well. Indeed, a wealth of past and current studies (Fraley & Davis 1997; Cassidy *et al.*, 2013) has supported Ainsworth's



findings by showing that constant and responsive parenting is related to mature and secure adulthood.

More recent studies however, have gone beyond the mother-child relationship, further addressing the influence of the environment surrounding this dyad. Family as an emotional unit seems to strongly shape and direct attachment patterns (Donley, 1993). Central to this idea, is the notion of the secure family base which proposes that attachment flourishes when support and care is provided to all members of a family system regardless of age so that all can go on to explore relationships and the external world in a free and safe way (Byng-Hall, 1995). Thus, successful attachment practices assume that affect regulation, interpersonal understanding, information processing, and the provision of comfort are the most essential protective ingredients (Hill *et al.*, 2003).

During the course of therapy clients' attachment style is expected to be activated, especially under conditions that reflect novelty, fear, and stress. In like manner, the strategies that they have developed over the years to cope with those feelings will also be triggered (Byng-Hall, 2008). Under such threatening circumstances, the therapist needs to create a secure therapeutic base where painful issues can be addressed (Byng-Hall, 1995). Allowing time for those to be expressed and being ready to help clients confront them, seems to aid the process (Byng-Hall, 2008). Finally, helping clients create a coherent story about their experiences forms the basis for creating a more secure and functional attachment behavior (Byng-Hall, 1995).

The aforementioned theoretical background was used as a framework in order to develop some thoughts regarding the present case. From the beginning of the

therapeutic process, emphasis was placed on how Anastasia's attachment with her parents has influenced the way she relates to others, resolves her issues and regulates her emotions. Focus was also given on identifying and putting into reality testing new ways of understanding herself. The underlying assumption was that Anastasia had developed an insecure avoidant attachment pattern to her parents. According to Bowlby (1988), this attachment style is the result of unavailable and/or unresponsive care giving characterized by disregard of a child's needs and encouragement of premature independence. Under such circumstances, the child learns to have no confidence that he or she will be taken care of, expecting instead to be rejected. When this occurs while the child tries to achieve some comfort, then it is possible for him or her to go on and develop behaviors that will minimize the need for bonding (Dallos, 2004). In adulthood, individuals with the avoidant type end up being detached from and distrustful of others, relying on no-one but themselves for emotional support (Bowlby, 1988).

### **Reference to client's history, assessment of her problems, difficulties and strengths**

#### Client's brief history

Anastasia, the younger daughter of her family, is raised in a system where the father represents the dominant figure. He is a very successful, self-made businessman, who holds the traditional role of the family's main provider. As so, he has the command over family decision making and agenda setting and holds strict, rigid beliefs and expectations regarding how the family should operate. She remembers him working a lot and the time spent at home mainly shared between eating and relaxing. As a character, he appears controlling and power-assertive. When things are not run

as he wishes, he enforces hardline discipline often becoming physically abusive both towards her and her sister. His authority is seldom questioned. From time to time though, she remembers him being attentive and affectionate and while she is growing older, he becomes more willing to provide her with guidance, especially concerning her professional prospects.

Her mother is portrayed on the one hand as a good, attentive mother but on the other as a passive and unhappy woman, who sacrificed herself in order to serve her family. She values formal ways of conduct and has moralistic attitudes towards how they should behave as a family. When it comes to Anastasia, these attitudes are under the guise of being for her own good. She is ready to gratify her daughter's material needs but has a difficulty keeping close with her emotional ones. Anastasia has frequently complained about the emotional distance between them and her reluctance to turn to her mother for help and guidance when in distress. There are times where her mother encourages her to overcome her fears and follow her dreams but mainly because she is afraid that she will otherwise end up like her. Most of the times, especially until late adolescence, she is critical towards her daughter.

Anastasia reports that her parents had an unsatisfying marriage based more on social norms and standards than real, substantial affection.

Her sister is a person very different from her that she, however, admires for her accomplishments. She depicts her as a very bold person that always goes after her dreams even if that means getting in conflict with their parents. They were not always that close nor did Anastasia think always so highly of her. They started strengthening their ties during early adulthood and since then they have become very caring to each other. Still, she sometimes thinks that her sister is overcritical of her. Several times

during therapy, she has pointed that if they were not related she would not choose her as a companion.

Regarding her love life, Anastasia remembers from a very young age being attracted to girls whereas she considers boys good-enough only as playmates. Her first love is her junior high school teacher whom she describes as a very emotional, warm and fragile woman that she deeply respects and wants to protect. As an adult she makes three steady relationships. Her first one is with a man six years older than her. She is attracted by his strong mind and excellent educational status but after some years she becomes tired of his arrogant and shallow behavior and eventually leaves him. Her second relationship is with a female colleague that lives abroad. She is the main reason for deciding to move to another country, at the age of twenty three. This woman opens new horizons for her both personally and sexually but the relationship ends up resembling a roller-coaster that leaves her wounded and depressed. Eventually, they split up and shortly after she meets her last boyfriend with whom she stays for two years. Throughout that time, everything is peaceful and safe but boring and bland as well. It is during the end of this period that Anastasia decides to enter therapy.

While growing up and as college student, she does not have many close friends with whom she can share her thoughts and feelings. Today, she takes pride in having built a strong affiliation network that she feels she can rely on.

## Client's current problems, difficulties and strengths

Anastasia is profoundly confused about how others see her in comparison to how she feels about herself, something that often makes her react in a strict and self-critical fashion. She likes being on top of her game, fearing at the same time that others are intimidated by this quality, especially in the workplace. Her behavior often reminds her that of her father's and this makes her feel even more tangled. On the one hand she admires his forcefulness but on the other hand she dismisses his ruling, controlling traits that she also identifies in her. She has an intense need to feel admired and accepted by others that is why she finds it extremely threatening to relate to anyone who appears more dynamic than her. If she finds herself under such circumstances, she feels soft, irresponsible and unambitious. Her emotions and behaviors are often puzzling and seem to move in extremes. She tends to interpret her feelings and actions in an "if-then" fashion where statements like "I am weak if people do not end up always agreeing with me" prevail. She describes feeling trapped by her need to find someone who would be worthwhile to love and at the same time she worries that she will never meet the "one" nor she will manage to make her own family. She is bewildered about her sexual preferences (although at the beginning of therapy, she identified herself as a heterosexual). She reports feeling sad and empty when she does not meet with what is expected of her or when she feels downgraded by others. Sometimes she finds it very difficult to defend herself when someone she considers stronger makes an unjust or impolite remark about her. Quite often, she minimizes difficult themes by engaging in excessive and undue humoring.

The following quote is from a text Anastasia had sent me via e-mail during our first sessions together, that captures the essence of the issues she wants to work out: "Anastasia longs for passion in her life...the one that provides her with affection,

love protection, care regardless of [the] sex and country of origin [of the partner]. Anastasia wants to give and take love and care. To create a family, go on trips and evolve as an individual. But mostly, she wants to know herself and work out those insecurities that hold her back...”

Besides her difficulties, Anastasia is a very vigorous and energetic person, with a genuine curiosity about life. She has a good social network where she addresses to both for pleasure and support. She has a strong and perceptive mind and is open and trustful of the therapist and the therapeutic process. She is punctual and very willing to work with herself so as to deal with her issues. Despite her difficulties, she tries to keep a hopeful stance towards life and to remain functional both professionally and socially wise.

### **Formulation and treatment plan**

Anastasia’s difficulties can be traced back to maladaptive family behaviors, interactions and expectations. Both parents exerted great influence upon her in a way that was often apprehensive and conflicting, leaving her feeling alone, confused and unprotected. They sent puzzling, inconsistent signals of their affection, moving from being loving to critical in a bat of an eye. Her father was the cornerstone of the house but at the same time the punisher, relying on power and physical abuse in order to control her daughter’s behavior and ensure obedience. His love was secured only if his rules were followed whereas signs of weakness were treated with depreciation. Her mother valued social recognition and sought for personal validation through her daughter’s successes. She had high expectations regarding achievements, especially academic ones. She used to heavily criticize Anastasia when not performing well at school, making her feel worthless and incompetent. Maternal love was therefore

secured only if she met the expected social and education standards. Over the years, her parents' voices were internalized into one dominant, judgmental voice that was telling her that in order to be loved, respected and approved she would always have to be strong and excellent. Her role was to live up to their standards and make them proud. It is possible to assume that this parental "if-then" rule laid to her polarized way of thinking and to her inability to make sense of herself, comprehend her needs and allow her softer side to reach out the surface. Her difficulties seem be the result of her resistance to support the image of the strong and successful woman that she was dictated to be. In order to cope with all this confusion and the related negative feelings, Anastasia raised protective walls, engaging in an even stricter self-evaluation process that allowed only the strong and invulnerable part of her to come to the surface.

The goal of therapy was to help Anastasia differentiate from her parents, replacing restricting and disturbing roles and strict internalized voices with more adaptive, protective and empathetic ones. By enhancing security, the aim was to help her create a clearer and more coherent self-image, increase her sense of self-worth, and accept a wider range of feelings including her sexual orientation.

### **Course of therapy**

Basic exploratory questions were initially used to inquire about her difficulties and get a sense of how she had confronted them that far. The expectations she had from me as a therapist were also examined.

The process of therapy will be presented in connection to the relevant stages mentioned in SANE. During the first phase of our work together, emphasis was placed in creating a safe therapeutic alliance where Anastasia could feel secure

enough to reveal important information regarding her story and her feelings. My role was threefold. I tried to understand her emotions and motives, assist her in naming and differentiating them, and finally show her that I was unconditionally acceptant of her.

The second phase involved helping Anastasia to identify the ‘ghosts’ of her past. This meant digging in hard, painful and often unknown territories. The way she was attached to each parent and how this had affected her sense of self-worth and the ways she connected to others, were thoroughly examined. A lot of stories were narrated and related to present life themes and expectations. It was during this stage that Anastasia understood how strongly she identified with her father and how isolated felt from her mother. As for her father, she admired him, wanting to look like him but at the same time she was intimidated by his harsh and rigid behavior. Incidents of her father imposing violent discipline upon her even for minor issues were often recounted. Her bond to her father could explain why she was always drawn by people of power and authority and why she valued so much these qualities in her. As for her mother, she longed for her care and tenderness but felt detached due to the former’s frequently inconsistent and judgmental stance. Anastasia had several times reported painful early recollections of her mother implying she was soft-witted and school underachiever. No wonder why later in life she continually strove for recognition and accomplishments both in school and in the workplace. Helping Anastasia pay a close attention to all these issues, allowed her to see how in times of stress and pressure these negative evaluations surfaced, leading her to react in an overwhelming way and eventually living her feeling sad, disappointed and empty.

The next phase involved learning how to fight these ‘ghosts’. My goal was to provide to Anastasia with an environment where she would feel safe enough to deal



with all the unsaid emotions and thoughts she had. I wanted to be seen as a corrective figure to which she could confide all those things that felt impossible to share with her parents and other significant persons in her life. Speaking about the unspoken would hopefully allow her to recognize her feelings and differentiate them from that of others. Slowly then she would attain a better grasp of herself and her choices.

For the period examined, it was obvious that Anastasia was very angry with her parents, especially with her mother whom she felt responsible for not protecting her from her father's irascible temper. Still, she found it extremely hard expressing this anger and when she did, she would out of guilt quickly excuse them and refer to their positive attributes instead. In order to help her surpass these feelings of guilt, I was constantly reminding her that our sessions were an excellent opportunity for her to speak about these forbidden emotions without being afraid that I would judge or reject her. By exhibiting such openness, the aim was to encourage her to slowly shift from self-blame and accept her negative emotions, in this case anger, without fearing that it would worsen or damage the relationship with either parent. Expectantly, this would reflect to the rest of her relationships as well.

For Anastasia a big concern was her sexual preferences. Quite often in therapy, parental beliefs regarding traditional masculine and feminine roles and what constitutes a normal relationship were coming at odds with what she felt and thought. Recognizing the anxiety that rose from these discrepancies, attention was given to helping her accept her sexuality as a normal part of her identity. A few months after our first session she decided to break up with the man she was dating at the time and start exploring her options in a more carefree way.

In order to better understand Anastasia's attachment style and the internalized voices related to it, I borrowed some tools from the narrative approach. The rationale behind my decision was that narrative tools can unfold someone's perceptions regarding roles and relationships and reveal the person's struggle to be in touch with his or her emotions (Vetere & Dallos, 2008). Anastasia was requested to write down a self-characterization (Kelly, 1955/1991) exercise with the hope to document how she regarded herself and how she perceived herself in relation to others. It was expected that through this exercise dominant internalized voices and emotionally loaded issues, otherwise silenced, would surface (Androutsopoulou, 2001, 2015).

Her self-characterization in the present was limited in a small paragraph and did not involve much demographic data as I would have expected based on her fastidious and methodical way of thinking. The narrative was more about her needs, fears, and hopes; and if Kelly's assumption (1955, 1991) that the opening and closing sentences of the exercise are a projection of how ones view his or her present and future respectively, then this would be the case for Anastasia too. She started her description by saying that she felt trapped in a situation that made it very difficult for her to find true love and that she would like to meet someone that would make her feel worthwhile. She closed her description making reference to the advent of a bright future, overbidding using an optimistic quote from the book "The Small Prince", by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. Indeed, with these statements, two voices emerge (Androutsopoulou, 2015). The first voice was the critical one that doubted her value and whether she deserved being loved. It was the dominant voice she had used so far to define her circumstances and maintain her internalized monologue. The second voice although more silent, appeared to emerge as a consequence of Anastasia's gradual change and sounded much more positive, hopeful and secure. There was also

another voice in the middle that indicated her agony about the therapeutic process and where it would lead her. It was the one that spoke about her concerns regarding the changes that were taking place and about what would the future behold for her.

Anastasia was also encouraged to send me e-mails with her thoughts and feelings, to reinforce her ability for self-observation and perceptiveness (Penn and Frankfurt, 1994). For the present purposes, four samples were assessed, showing her line of thinking and the progress she had made from the first one to the last. The first sample was sent to me approximately five months after our first session. The issue that was troubling her at that time was a practical one regarding one of her work subordinates. Her effectiveness as a manager and concerns regarding power dominance arose making her feel irritated and disappointed. This was most obvious in the last paragraph of the text, where she stated how important it was for her to build a (strong) business profile where she would have balance with the people she worked with. Anastasia at that point of therapy was not aware of the inner forces that guided her behavior and emotions. She was not able to see that feeling threatened by someone she thought less capable allowed her father's internalized strict voice to come out and tell her that she was not good enough and that she needed to stay on top of her game. The following dialogue is an indicative sample of the discussion we had in our session following her e-mail:

Anastasia: "Lisa once more told me that I have problems with her macro-management. Listening to her saying this made me feel really angry.

Therapist: "What was so upsetting Anastasia?"

Anastasia: "Well...I know that sometimes I am too demanding and I ask a lot from her but this is how the business works. She ought to listen to me and respect me as her

manager. When she criticizes me for poor management it is like engaging with her in a power game where I clearly need to prevail.”

Therapist: “And how will it make you feel if you don’t prevail;”

Anastasia: “Well...I don’t know. Probably weak and useless. I will feel undermined and that I have no control over my subordinates.”

Therapist: “It seems that Lisa’s critical voice triggers your critical voice that says that you are good enough only if you are on top of your game. Could this be the case?”

Anastasia: “I haven’t really thought about it, but it kind of makes sense now that I hear you saying it. Still, I have no clue why I think this way but it comes really naturally to me.”

The second passage came almost a month later. Again, practical job issues were mentioned but this time her thought was a bit more psychological. She talked about aspects of her that she had not considered so far and that had made her feel peculiar. The important thing however was that for the first time she was not so harsh on herself, trying instead to justify her behavior in a supporting manner. Moreover, it was the first time she expressed thoughts and feelings regarding the motives behind her love choices. She realized that she went out for men that were successful and smart but less decisive than her. Although her observations puzzled her, they put her into thoughts regarding her boyfriend at that time and why she felt so afraid to live him. She concluded that he reminded her of how she was with her first relationship, having no friends and feeling confined in her insecurities:

Anastasia: “For quite some time now, I don’t feel attracted to Robert and the thought of living him comes into my mind very often. But it is really difficult for me to make this decision.”

Therapist: “Can you think any reason why this is so difficult for you?”

Anastasia: “Well, I have thought about it and I think it is because it reminds me of myself when I was younger, dependent to my boyfriend at that time, without friends and full of insecurities. Robert is a very private person, I am actually the only close one he has, and I am afraid that if I leave him he will feel like I did back then. He won’t be able to handle our break-up.”

Therapist: “So what you say is that you want to protect him from the same suffering you went through in the past, right?”

Anastasia: “Yes. I know it is foolish of me to think like that but still...”

Therapist: “It is like you have two voices inside you, the one telling you that you need to protect Robert from unwanted suffering and the other that you need to protect yourself. It sounds like you are in a battle and you cannot decide which side to take.”

Anastasia: “Exactly, it feels like a battle but I think that slowly my need to protect myself becomes stronger...I am just not there yet.”

Therapist: “I think it is really important that you recognize these different voices inside you and how they make you feel. Allowing this battle to take place it is like allowing yourself to act on your best interest.”

That was very important step for Anastasia because a sensitive and compassionate voice came to the surface without making her fear that she would lose control or sound weak.

The trigger for the third text that was sent four months later was a confession she had made during our last session that made her feel guilty. It was about a person she had inappropriate thoughts, the name of whom she did not wish to reveal. She initially mentioned that she was going through an adjustment period where her feelings and sexual preferences were confusing her and that she needed to feel cared and supported. This need has driven all of her love choices and, as she confessed, what made it so strong was that she never had it from her parents. Not surprisingly, it was hindered when she felt strong. This text was also important for one more thing. It said a lot about our therapeutic alliance. By admitting to me her weaknesses it was like giving up some of her control and allowing me to take care of her in a profound way. During our session we discussed about the connection she made between her parents and the ways she chose her companions:

Anastasia: “I come to realize that all my relationships have started in times I felt the need to be cared and secure. It is like I never took the time to figure out whether the person I chose was suited for me. My only criterion was to feel cared. Contemplating that makes me feel really sad.”

Therapist: “What makes it so sad?”

Anastasia: “It is sad because if I had learned otherwise I would have made better choices for myself. If my parents had properly cared for me when I was young, I wouldn’t be so messed up now. I mean, yes, they were there for me in practical ways but emotionally speaking they were distant;

Therapist: “And how does this relate to your love relationships?”

Anastasia: “Hmmm...well I learned to be distant too, coming close to others only when feeling this need for warmth. I think this is a weakness that I want to change because clearly, I can no longer go on this way.

The fourth e-mail I received from Anastasia was again five months later. So far various changes had occurred in her life. She had broken up with her boyfriend, she was more open to the idea that she preferred women more than men and she was already dating one. The text was to inform me that she had terminated the relationship. She expressed how confusing the situation was between them but how clear she felt about the things she wanted from a relationship. This was an important text because it showed that Anastasia was able to recognize and name her feelings, was aware of the things that made her prone to manipulative behaviors and was ready to take steps to protect herself:

Therapist: “Anastasia, reading your text made think that this past week you had a very difficult time but somehow you managed to test new behaviors that at the end feel good about yourself.”

Anastasia: “Filia, that is so true! I feel sad and glad at the same time. I am sad that things turned out this way but glad because I finally said in clear way what I had in my mind... without fear and confusion.”

Therapist: “That is indeed a very important step for you Anastasia. What made you decide to become so forward?”

Anastasia: Well, I guess I can no longer feel so insecure and invincible; (silence) I want to be able to express my feelings and my vulnerable side without fearing I will be judged or rejected.

Additionally, her story despite her struggles and the related negative emotions was more coherent and clear.

### **Supervision and personal reflection**

Throughout the therapeutic interplay there were some issues about my relationship with Anastasia that required careful management from my part. In the beginning of our cooperation, she frequently requested to change the day and hour of our meetings with the excuse that she had other important obligations that could not be skipped or changed. In the first few times, I showed flexibility and went along with her demands, thinking that this would reinforce our bond. However as time passed, I caught myself being distressed about these changes, their origins and how to handle them. Supervision helped me understand the motives behind Anastasia's behavior, mainly her possible fear of losing control, and place more firm boundaries. It also helped me recognize the roots of my own distress, primarily my impression that she was underestimating my role.

Issues of disclosure were also assessed. On several occasions, Anastasia expressed that she was disturbed by the fact that I was the recipient of very private information related to her whereas she knew almost nothing about me. Supervision helped me listen beneath Anastasia's complain and realize that maybe her need to know about me was not a matter of indiscreetness but an issue of how much of her predicaments and agonies I could understand and accept.



Finally, another very important issue that I needed to handle through supervision was Anastasia's sexual attraction to me, mentioned at the time she decided to openly seek her sexuality options. Whereas a bit awkward at the beginning, I approached this issue as her own way to test new ground in the safe environment of the therapy room. I explained to her the meaning of transference in therapy, and encouraged her to approach women that were responsive to her interest, and who could form with her a relationship of equality.

### **Concluding evaluation of the process and outcome of therapy**

Undoubtedly, Anastasia has worked very hard and has accomplished a lot since our first session, one and a half years ago. Throughout this time, she has managed to recognize the influence her parents have had on her and how their rigid expectations have shaped her current way of being. She has realized that her emotions, behaviors and choices have been largely shaped and guided by family codes and orders that she felt obliged to follow.

She further seems to have achieved a better understanding of herself, of her needs and how she can satisfy them. She has embraced her softer, more empathetic side without fearing so much that she will seem weak and impotent to others. She has learned to evaluate herself in less strict ways and be open to whatever might make her life better. Negative emotions, although still difficult to handle, have been recognized and accepted as normal and often adaptive. New ones have also entered her vocabulary giving another meaning to her experiences.

Regarding her sexual preferences, she has allowed herself to experiment without labeling herself or her experiences. She has gained a clearer view of what she

likes and desires and has moved according to that. Work difficulties have been reduced and tackled in a way that is not perceived as diminutive.

Anastasia still fights with the 'ghosts' of the past and has a long way ahead before she reconciles with them. However, she has gained a new, more coherent self-awareness that can definitely get her there.

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