

# TRANSGENERATIONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY USING PSYCHODRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

*A multidisciplinary approach*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The authors present an approach to transgenerational psychotherapy using psychodrama techniques with a theoretical background that helps to explain some issues and patterns that they observe in their clinical practice. Using a transdisciplinary framework that crosses from macro to micro level of reality different theories – chaos theory, morphic theory, neurobiology, collective unconscious, co-unconscious, social learning and transgenerational theory. They describe the techniques that they use in transgenerational psychotherapy such as genosociogram, family atom, miniatures sculpting and psychodrama techniques.*

*This article finishes with a case study, which helps to illustrate these patterns, theories and application of techniques to this model of psychotherapy.*

*Future empirical research in the effectiveness of these methods is recommended.*

**Key-words:** *transgenerational, Transdisciplinarity, psychodrama*

## **I. Introduction**

Scientific and clinical evidence is showing that the living or dead ancestors from our family are really affecting us not only as “internal objects” (as the psychoanalysts called them) but also as living forces, fields of information, that are as active as our genetic code.

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As an illustration of the growing interest in the field of transgenerational links, Kellerman wrote that professional literature on transgenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma has grown into a vast body of unique psychological knowledge with more than 400 publications (Kellermann, 2000).

Repetitive patterns in the family and phenomena such as “anniversary syndrome” or “invisible loyalties” are being researched and explained according to different theoretical models.

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

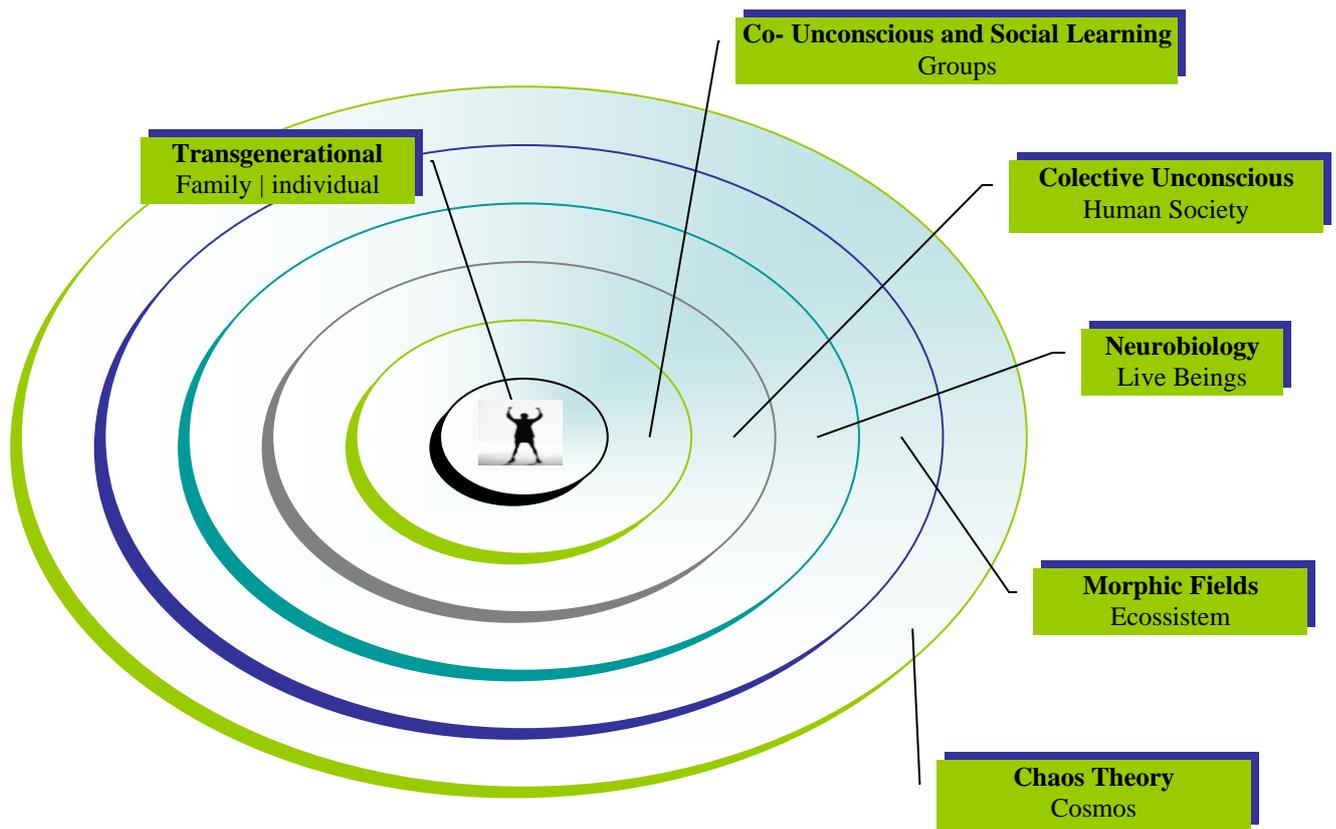
*Transdisciplinarity is globally open. Levels of Reality are inseparable from levels of perception and these last levels found the verticality of degrees of transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity entails both a new vision and a lived experience. It is a way of self-transformation oriented towards the knowledge of the self, the unity of knowledge, and the creation of a new art of living.*

(Basarab Nicolescu, 1996)

In one of his most recent published works Blatner (2007) claims that theory, to be useful, must be flexible enough to adapt itself to helping to explain a wide range of phenomena.. It is, of course, desirable that some coordination and coherence be found among the various theories, but the lacking of a clear consensus at this point should not serve as an obstacle to appreciating the usefulness of these component theories.

In this way, from a meta-theoretical understanding and transdisciplinary point of view, we should welcome the presence of many component theories, very often in different levels of analysis and scopes of reality. (see image 1).

### **Image 1 - Transdisciplinary approach to systemic patterns**



Disciplinary research concerns, at most, one and the same level of reality; moreover, in most cases, it only concerns fragments of one level of reality. On the contrary, transdisciplinarity concerns the dynamics engendered by the action of several levels of reality at once . The discovery of these dynamics necessarily passes through disciplinary knowledge. While there is not a new discipline or a new superdiscipline, transdisciplinarity is nourished by disciplinary research; in turn, disciplinary research is clarified by transdisciplinary knowledge in a new, fertile way. In this sense, disciplinary and transdisciplinary research are not antagonistic but complementary (Basarab Nicolescu,1989).

Following this same line of thought, Kellermann (2001) suggested that trauma transmission should be understood within a broader and integrative theoretical framework. Such a view must acknowledge the intricate interplay among different levels of transgenerational influence, suggesting that trauma transmission is caused by a complex of multiple related factors, including biological predisposition, individual developmental history, family influences and social situation.

Therefore we will present some of the main theories that may help to understand the transgenerational links and that may enrich the way we conceive and practice transgenerational therapy.

These theoretical models will be presented here in a order that starts, from an epistemological point of view., from a more abstract and global level of perception to a more concrete and specific scope of study (see image 1)

## **Chaos Theory**

“Chaos Theory looks at the dynamics of patterns—systems and processes—in a more basic way, allowing parallels and generalizability at a deeper level, perhaps offering more universal connections and insights.” (Reimer,R., Guerreiro, J. and Riding-Malon,R., 2007). One of the criticisms that has been raised concerning this type of interdisciplinary approach is that they seem just translations of one theoretical model into another. Remer claims that even if they were “just” a translation, they would still be beneficial in the sense that they challenge the reader to think differently and to “make meaning” in a new way (see Remer, 2001).

The recent developments in chaos theory and the understanding of fractals (Mandelbrot 1975, 1982, 1997) might point to research into endless repetitions of the same family events. Chaos theory has been applied to many domains such as the analysis of system structures and of nature patterns.It can also help us to understand fatal repetitions, as in the replication of cancer cells. This same line of thinking may have the potential to be applied to repetitions of human events through the generations.

Other Chaos Theory concepts such as self affinity, bifurcation, recursivity, unpredictability, resonance, self organization and equilibrium (see footnote for definitions, Remer et al, 2007<sup>1</sup>) might be very useful to account for many phenomena in the family social system

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<sup>1</sup> Self-affinity—denotes the tendency for recursive processes to evidence recurring patterns of various types. Patterns tend to repeat themselves, not exactly but still enough to be recognizable even on different levels and scales.

Bifurcation (and bifurcation cascade)—splitting in two. Bifurcation increases pattern complexity. Cascade is when bifurcations happen at such a rate that no patterns seem discernible.

Recursivity—self-reflexiveness, the feeding of information from one’s patterns back into the process of producing them. Mathematically, non-linearity and non-independence.

Unpredictability--the inability to say with certainty the next state or the previous state of a system given knowledge of its present state. The type most associated with ChT is sensitivity to initial conditions. This type--and others consistent with ChT--indicates

Violent, unanticipated and un-anticipatable external impacts, such as loss and death and other traumatic events in the family, can cause severe disruptions in system patterns. These pattern dissolutions should not be termed chaotic. However, the chaotic properties of dynamical systems are required to address the above.

Although those addressing dynamical systems disagree about how to approach chaos, they do concur that without it change cannot occur. Thus, dynamical systems must be sensitive--in a ready state far-from-equilibrium. The readiness and homeostasis seems to rely on the constant tuning.

### **Theory of Morphic Fields and Morphic Resonance**

“Telepathy is normal not paranormal, natural not supernatural, and is also common between people, especially people who know each other well”. (Sheldrake, February 2005).

The research of Sheldrake, British PhD Biologist, is very relevant for the information that affects transgenerational transmission since he has proved the concept of “morphic fields” that he defines as a “kind of learned habits within a group, where information patterns tend to be transmitted unconsciously and in a sort of telepathic way”. This phenomenon had been proven to occur within people that are emotionally affiliated and also with animals. The morphic fields of social groups connect together members of the group even when they are many miles apart, and provide channels of communication through which organisms can stay in touch at a distance. They help provide an explanation for telepathy – a communication between groups of people who might not be in the same space. Sheldrake (2005) has collected much evidence that many species of animals are telepathic, and telepathy seems to be a normal means of animal communication .

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that everything about a system cannot be known to absolute certainty and any attempt to assess a situation will affect it, conveying the humbling-daunting-realistic perspective of how little control we actually have.

Equilibrium--the tendency or inertia of system not to change its patterns by staying near or returning to points of attraction (homeostasis). Patterns change significantly and most unpredictably in far-from-equilibrium (chaotic) systems, those whose sensitivity (tuning constant) has exceeded a threshold of stability.

Self-organization--the inherent tendency for systems in a chaotic state to form new coherent patterns, to reorganize, based only on the interactions of their components.

Resonance--the synchronicity of constituent components of a system, leading to reciprocal influence and the production of patterns--chaos, reorganization, stagnation

Telepathy means literally, "distance feeling." The term is a shortened version of *mental telepathy* and refers to mind-reading or mind-to-mind communication through .The term was coined by psychical investigator Frederick W. H. Myers (1882) who was a classical scholar and one of the founders of modern psychology

Morphic resonance is another concept brought by Sheldrake (1981) and that he defines as "the basis of memory in nature....the idea of telepathy-type interconnections between organisms and of collective memories within species. The morphic resonance information is transmitted without limitations of space and time, without loss of energy, and presumably without loss or change of content through something like mutation in DNA replication. Thus, room is made for psychical as well as physical transmission of information.

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### **Neurobiology**

There is a neurobiological basis of interconnectedness. Language, imitative learning and empathy are linked, and rooted in “mirror neurons” whose function is “action representation”, within the brain, of observed behaviors of others.

“Distributed patterns of neural activation occur when individuals exchange (through encounter) their action representations. This produces shared meanings of objects, actions and social situations, as part of our shared evolution as social mammals. These shared representations as well as Amygdala-based appraisal (which are largely unconscious) have a functional role in interpersonal awareness, including Tele “ (Ed Hug, 2007)

Tassin (2005), neurobiologist, has observed that certain types of data - e.g. memory of a traumatic event - may be stored in the memory not by the slow, conscious, ‘cognitive’ mode, but instead through an ‘analogical’ mode that occurs within milliseconds, beyond conscious awareness.. Thus we begin to see the neurobiological basis for the notion of ‘unconscious transmission,’ where information is conveyed without either person even being conscious of the facts or aware that traumas or ‘forbidden topics’ may be embedded in the communication.

Even though these memories may be beyond conscious awareness, they may still act on us, without our knowledge. To the extent that we are constrained by these unconscious memories, we may, alas, be no more than marionettes - puppets controlled by strings that are out of view of the ‘public,’ beyond and above our heads and our awareness.

There may be further biological (or bio-electric) factors involved in transgenerational transmission. As medical science and research progresses to discover more about the electrical and biological composition of the cell, we will learn more about the widely various mechanisms by which transgenerational and intergenerational patterns and memory may be passed down (Tassin, personal communication 2005-2006; Panksepp et al 2002; Shedrake 1995; Suomi and Levine 1998; Vincent 2003; Yehuda et al 1998). For example, we may learn more about how some parts of the cell may store emotion, or how trauma may affect reproductive cells and even our DNA. From an evolutionary perspective, one may hypothesise - and further research may bear out - that natural selection may favor not just the retention of the fittest genes but also the retention of transgenerational information about threat and danger, necessary to survival.(Schutzenberger,2007).

## **Collective Unconscious**

Collective unconscious is a term of analytical psychology originally coined by Carl Jung. While Freud did not distinguish between an "individual psychology" and a "collective psychology", Jung distinguished the collective unconscious from the personal unconscious particular to each human being. The collective unconscious is also known as "a reservoir of the experiences of our species."<sup>1</sup>

The collective unconscious is a part of the unconscious mind common to all humans. According to Carl Jung, the collective unconscious contains archetypes, universal mental predispositions not grounded in experience.

Like Plato's Forms (*eidōs*), the archetypes do not originate in the world of the senses, but exist independently of that world and are known directly by the mind.

Unlike Plato, however, Jung believed that the archetypes arise spontaneously in the mind, especially in times of crisis.

Synchronicity, another concept relevant to transgenerational analysis, refers to meaningful coincidences, such as the beetle and the scarab dream described in Jung's writings, which open the door to transcendent truths, so too a crisis opens the door of the collective unconscious and lets out an archetype to reveal some deep truth hidden from ordinary consciousness.

## **Co-Unconscious and Tele**

‘A co-conscious or co-unconscious state can not be the property of one individual only. It is always a common property’ (J.L. Moreno 1946/1980: VII)

Anne Schutzenberger points out that Moreno’s concept of the co-unconscious is not the same as Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious: it is about team and family links and not generalized to the whole society. It is important not to confuse these differing terminologies. (Our own family’s story is not the same as our culture’s folklore, even if sometimes there is a contagion, or an overlap, between an individual family and the wider society and culture.)

Moreno had this idea of the co-conscious and co-unconscious of family and groups of close friends or team workers or pals, and felt that was an important idea and key to the world and to therapy and to psychodrama. (Anne Schutzenberger)

Tele is Moreno’s term for what is measured by Sociometry, those patterns of reciprocated interpersonal preference. There can be neutral, indifferent, and negative forms of tele, as well as mildly and strongly positive connections. When tele is strongly positive even more telepathic like phenomena have been observed (Blatner, 1994)

### **Cognitive-Behavioural and Social learning**

As we belong to a cultural and social context we learn throughout our lives a serie of behaviours, values and solutions displayed by others that lived before or around us. One of the most powerfull mechanisms of socializations is vicarious learning, by observation of others. This concept was initially coined by Albert Bandura (Gleitman, 1993) after doing many experiences where he understood that imitation occurs even without reinforcement. Therefore a child observing the behaviour values and cognitions of someone wich is considered a model (e.g. father, mother, idol), will reproduce that same patterns when exposed to situations with similar characteristics. In this way in the teraphetic context progressive awareness of learned patterns (through positive and negative reinforcement, or punishment) may allow a clear understanding of the cognitive-behavioural patterns repeated in the family.

### **Psychogenealogy and Transgenerational Theories**

This field of “collective work” or “invisible links” has also been studied by authors such as

Freud, who was the first one to speak about the “collective soul”, not to speak about the Shamans from whom actually Hellinger learned and adapted his method of family constellations to his catholic mission in Africa.

Important concepts in this field are also what Schutzenberger calls “psychogenealogy” or Boszorményie Nagy calls “hidden family loyalties”. The invisible loyalties are psychological loyalties to people of the previous generations with whom there was some “unfinished business” or traumatic event. What happens is that the following generations will tend to repeat the “script of life” of this original person or relation, repeating unconsciously the same pattern, without even being aware of the original trauma (very often a “family secret”).

Other relevant concepts are the ones of “anniversary syndrome” (Hildgard, J. 1989) and of “replacement child” (Schutzenberger) All these concepts relate to phenomena which appear with repetitive patterns that derive from “unfinished business” (Zeigarnick,1927), such as trauma or death and from the “simetry of love”(Hellinger,1998), invisible loyalties, following the rule of “unfinished tasks” which are looking for a closure that can only happen when the actual meaning of these patterns is clarified.

**From our clinical experience and research the most common trauma that seem to affect the trajectory of the family are:**

- Early deaths (including abortions, born-dead, etc)
- Tragic events (wars, nature catastrophes, etc)
- Homicides
- Suicides
- Excluding people from the family
- Missing people
- “Unfair” (injustice) situations in the family (such as betrayals or unfair division of goods or affection)
- Conflictuous divorces
- Serious diseases, handicaps
- Change of country, nationality, political or religious system

Only bringing consciousness to the importance of this trauma for the history of the family and of the existing “invisible loyalties” brings freedom from a compulsive repetition of patterns, that we could call “fate” or “destiny” or even “transgenerational karma”.

It should be clear that the family life events described above don't necessarily become traumatic events and there is a high degree of unpredictability of how they will affect the transgenerational transmission.

### **Methods in Transgenerational Therapy**

We may use several methods for transgenerational work both in the one-to-one context of psychotherapy as well as in group therapy. The main methods are

- **Genosociogram** (see an example in page 13), a paper pencil method developed by Schutzenberger, which is a genogram that emphasizes the sociometric phenomena and the invisible loyalties within the family (it may include up to 7 generations). The genosociogram is a quick and very useful, deep and encompassing investigation into unsolved family problems and unresolved mourning. It allows the client and the therapist to trace - like a red thread running through - the similarities and links between traumas, sicknesses, illnesses, and accidents occurring through generations. This can include occurrences of the ‘anniversary syndrome’ and hidden family loyalties.

This work is also the elaboration of a family story - a kind of legend or novel - encompassing three to eight generations, tracing and analysing the paths, through the events marking them. To look back at their specific family history allows each client to see how their own individual past is influenced by the paths of other significant persons in their family history. The genosociogram shows to what extent the individual is the product of a family history, out of which he seeks to become autonomous.

- **Family Atom and rearranging the family atom**

This “family atom” (J L Moreno,1946) or “family constellation” (Hellinger,1998) can be represented with real people or with miniature objects chosen by the client and that will be concretizing and representing the main complementary roles and the most significant elements of the family related to the client, in his/her perception.

Also the therapy comes from finding new and ideal “shapes” (surplus reality, Moreno) for the family atom that seek systemic and harmonious solutions for the ancestors and for the client. These new atoms create new information paths, new morphogenic fields that may eventually evoke a different reality, a new equilibrium

#### **- Miniatures or small puppets**

Objects can be very useful for the client to represent the “family atom” as he perceives it and also as he idealizes it (surplus reality). This is particularly useful in an individual therapeutic context but also in a group setting.. Casson (2007) says about miniature psychodrama “The playfulness of the method attracts, energises, frees the person to explore difficulties, solve problems and find new solutions, discovering resources and points of view of which they were not aware. Symbolisation through miniatures promotes disclosure and thinking”.

#### **- Psychodrama techniques**

After the understanding /diagnosis of the repetitive patterns we use several techniques of psychodrama, whether in group or in “psychodrama a deux”.. The clarification and cathartic liberation of frozen patterns in the body-emotion-mind comes from doing psychodrama sessions with role-play, role-reversal, mirroring, doubling, soliloquy, etc. Very often the repair from invisible loyalties that are being unhealthy for the individual comes from a dialogue and a symbolic ritual that “gives back” the weight to whom and where it really belongs. Psychodrama allows closure for “unfinished situations”, like for instance saying goodbye or mourning an ancestor’s loss and training of new and more healthy social roles.

## **Clinical case C. –Example of Short Transgenerational Therapy**

### **1st session:**

C., was a thin 19 years old young woman who just finished high school. When she described her situation she reported symptoms such as: mild depression, long-time difficulty and blockage in taking decisions (for instance deciding which University studies to choose), moderate obsessive-compulsive traits (perfectionism and compulsive rituals), difficulty in establish any loving relationship with men, fusional relationship with an anxious, depressive mother, deep sadness and disappointment related with not being in contact with her father ( more than one year since the last contact between them and she didn't receive any financial support from him)..

The technique used in this session was an interview with construction of Genosociogram. (See Image 2). As results, the therapist and the patient became more aware of the following:

- C. at 9 years old became daughter of divorced parents and the mother felt rejection and abandonment from father of C.;
- C. and mother established a growing fusional relationship;
- The same fusional pattern existed between her mother and her grandmother and also a very conflictual relationship between grandparents. In similar ways her mother perceived her own father as distant and persecutory to her;
- This grandmother lost her own mother very young and short after also her father but C. doesn't know initially when neither the causes of death (she shows some non-verbal tension when speaking about these early deaths);
- The families of her father and mother have clear different values and vocations and she shows identifications with both sides. Invisible loyalties seem to occur both toward the father (e.g. the same compulsive rituals) and to the above grandmother (e.g. similar psychological and physical traits).

### **2nd Session**

C. came with mother and the therapist invited the mother to join the session with C. and asked about her perception of C. and the family history. Mother complained about her ex-husband distance and neglectful behavior towards C., showing much emotional involvement and feelings of rejection from him after 10 years of separation. She says she will be having heart surgery soon and shows clear evidence of depression.

About the family history mother reveals a family secret, that never told C: the great grandmother of C. - mother of grandmother- had committed suicide at 37 years old when she was pregnant from her third child and found out that her husband had another woman (love “heart break”). It was with similar age, 38 years old, that the that mother of C. divorced and became depressed (“heartbroken”).

The mother also revealed that her own mother had to fight with her father when pregnant from herself because he wanted her to interrupt pregnancy of the third child, just the same that had happened to her grandmother.

Mother always felt her own father as distant and even persecutory (rejection) towards her and developed a fusional but tense relationship with her own mother.

The techniques used in this session were: genosociogram completion and family atom with miniature objects, for both mother and daughter.

As results, both mother and daughter became much more aware of the repetitive family pattern of rejection and distrust from woman towards men and of the love wounds involved, associated with depression.

It was also revealed the pattern that the mother became fusional with daughter in a sort of an alliance against the father (pattern repeated in the 3 generations studied).

It became clear that C. and mother have invisible loyalties toward both families of their mother and father and that they also became aware that conflict and perceived differences created internal conflict that eventually lead to difficulty in decision making.

### **3rd Session**

C. came with her Father, who reveals that he also feels very sad from being away from C. and wants to become closer. He argues extensively why he felt pushed away by ex-wife and daughter.

The techniques used in this session were dialogue and family atom by father. Has result of this encounter between father and daughter, they decide to meet more and also father compromised to help with C. financial support.

### **4th Session**

C. felt much better from all symptoms related in first session. She even had decided her University Studies, and appeared very happy to be closer to her father and to her new half sister. The mother is no longer going to heart surgery (!) and was feeling much better. This makes C. feels less worried and less fusional with mother.

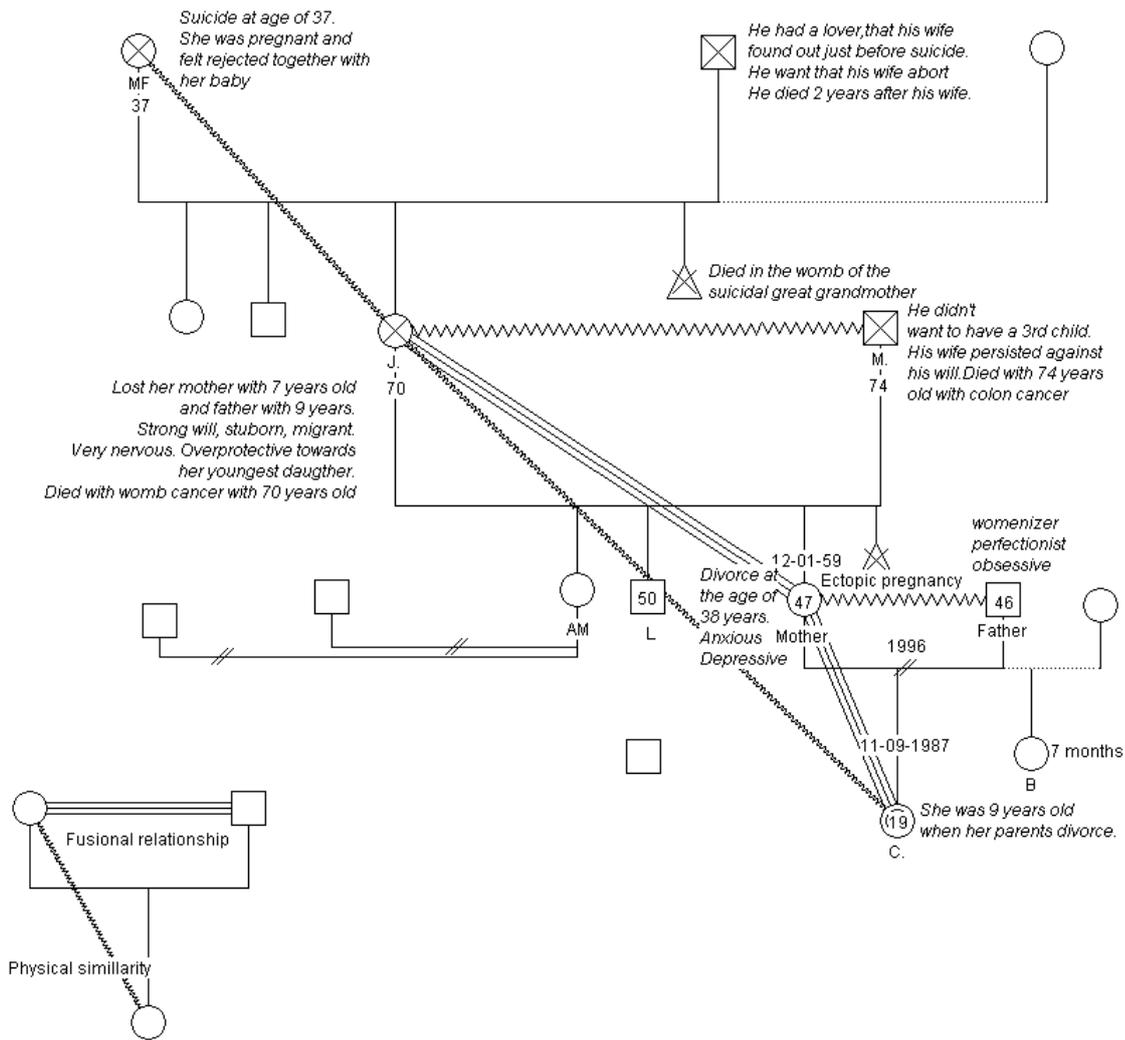
As technical resources we used bipersonal Psychodrama between C. and her grandmother and C. and her father to release the evidence of dysfunctional invisible loyalties.

The results were that C. became more aware of these Invisible Loyalties and was able to release some unwanted patterns like the compulsive rituals (from father) and the distrust about men/father (from grandmother)..

### **Follow-Up Session**

Two months after, C. came more positive about a new boyfriend. She talked about her studies in college on graphic design, reported that she sees her father often and that her parents are in a relationship with more harmony. Mother is no longer depressed and has a boyfriend. She also revealed that mother acknowledged finally that her own father did show her signs of affection but she didn't want to accept them and that she herself pushed away her own husband, in fact just like her sister (divorced twice), both being influenced by the same pattern and traumatic incident with their grandmother.

### **Image 2 - Relevant extract of the Genosociogram**



## Conclusions

The results illustrated above by the clinical case presented are just one representative example of the author's 20 years of clinical results using transgenerational therapy. The results of transgenerational psychotherapy are quite often very impressive because the people become aware of these patterns that have been repeated in the family, one generation after the other, and understand that they no longer have to repeat them to honor and to be loyal to their beloved traumatized ancestors. It looks like a PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) that is transmitted in both phylogenic and ontogenic ways, with multiple factors accounted by the theories mentioned in this article, that tend to reinforce the acquired habits from the family system.

It need not to be a fate cast upon us that we must be haunted and controlled by the “ghosts” of previous generations. When ‘invisible loyalty’ is constraining our freedom and chaining us, it is important to make it visible and stop unwanted, unhappy, unhealthy - deadly even - repetitions of the trauma, death or sickness.

“Recovering family history through talking with relatives and doing research to find the open and the hidden story can help a person to mature, to become free, to be, to think, to evaluate or re-evaluate, to choose and become their own person - remembering the past, but free to choose their personal future.(Schutzenberger,2007)

Through psychodrama, family atom and genosociogram we have powerful tools to decipher and transform this once invisible web of hidden phenomena, to release some entanglements and to reinforce the strengths of our patients.

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