Primitive, now: the clinical use of a word

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Abstract

Clinicians and researchers often use the term "primitive" in reference to emotions and mental states. The widespread use of this term in literature, not only from psychoanalytic tradition, and in professional practice, forces it to explain its meaning. From a cultural psychological background, sensitive to psychoanalytical literature, six possible meanings of the term will therefore be proposed. The aim is to mobilize the self-reflection capacity of the clinician and the educator, so that the relationship does not freeze in the polarity of nature-culture. Finally, it is hypothesized that this term, when referring to the basic needs of some categories of patients, makes space for the ethics and the responsibility, both entirely human, of psychological intervention.

Keywords: primitive, mind, regression, instinct, need, cultural psychology.

Introduction

In the United States and in the anglophone world, over the last twenty years, but particularly recently (Barratt, 2020; Rizzolo, 2016), a debate has emerged around a construct "central but controversial" (Barratt, 2020) in the history of therapies following Freud's thought:

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regression. That is due not only to the particular interest historically present in the anglophone world concerning this construct – British scholars speak of therapeutic regression, while Americans refer to "regression in the service of the ego", a term coined by Ernst Kris (Aron & Bushra, 1998) – but also to the role that this term has played in clinical intervention. A wave of therapeutic approaches coming from overseas, built around the therapeutic role of regression, emerged during the 1970s counterculture: among them, Janov's primal therapy, holotropic breathing, and therapeutic groups. Some clinicians (Boadella, 1987; Lowen, 1982) have examined these experiences in professional practice, like transference and countertransference violence (Boadella, 1987), and the patient's fear and despair in re-experiencing the past (Lowen, 1993).

However, the novelty of the recent debate lies in the new perspective on this term: for the first time, its epistemological value is questioned. What exactly does it mean? Is it a term we can renounce, or is it the essence of psychodynamic therapies, if not all psychotherapeutic interventions? The debate (Aron & Bushra, 1998; Dowling, 2004; Rizzolo, 2016) concerns the history of this concept, its derivation from 19th-century psychiatry, and Freud's use of it. It probably involves (1) a theory of mind and (2) a theory of time (Dowling, 2004). This concept is definitely a foundation of the entire psychoanalytic technique: Gill (1954) expressly mentioned the induction of a *regressive* transference neurosis in the first definition of psychoanalysis, a definition which he later withdrew.

Not the last word

This debate gives the opportunity to analyze traditions and uses of this term in the specificity of each author, as well as the connection between the theoretical framework and the clinical practice. Similarly, this debate can be approached through a tangential path. That is involuntarily suggested by Rizzolo (2017), who just a year after his critique of regression committed to the critique of an adjacent theme: the spectre of the "primitive" haunting the history of psychoanalysis. The conceptualization of the primitive implies not only the context of psychotherapy. While in therapy, due to the regressive state it involves, it may

be easier to conceptualize an emotion or a mental state as "primitive", this is a conceptualization that closely involves all psychological interventions. Indeed, literature often designates a set of defenses, a mental state, or an emotion as "primitive". Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the qualities of a psychological event that make it describable as primitive. The goal is to provide a series of meanings available to clinicians in their professional practice. Thus, contextual competence (Fruggeri, 2014) is associated with self-reflection competence, making it easier to understand what is happening and how it can be interpreted.

When the clinician conceptualizes a mental event as primitive, it becomes necessary to find *different* words, so that the intervention process does not stall in a label or an event perceived as threatening, disintegrating, or potentially destructive. The term "primitive" has a particular resonance in the history of psychoanalysis, due to the studies of Melanie Klein, in which it has often been associated with love, hate, destructiveness, and aggressiveness (Rizzolo, 2017). In this article, we will situate aggressiveness, together with aggressive love, within a "neutral" model of the psyche, that is, within the dialectic mind-instinct. Consequently, we can observe behavior within evolutionary dynamics. Aggressiveness itself, from this perspective, is the symptom, the epiphenomenon, of the personal attempt to re-adjust psychodynamic forces. The main difference between this model and the Kleinian one (Rizzolo, 2016) is that development is here not organized in stages, but is itself a psychic event, and the result of "contingency", i. e., of psychic occurrences.

Have we ever been modern? A Transcultural Psychology of the Primitive

Bruno Latour (2018) argues that we have never been modern. Consequently, it would follow that we have never been primitive. Research in the intersection between post-colonial studies and psychoanalysis has dealt with the role "primitive" has played within a certain epistemology, historically and geographically determined, that partially coincided with a colonial *weltanschauung* (Frosh, 2013). Cultural anthropology, which developed as a field of study precisely in this context, highlighted the opposition between savages and civilized

people. It is possible that primitivity is precisely the ground of intersection between psychoanalysis and cultural anthropology, that is the point where psychoanalysis *is* a cultural anthropology, and therefore a vision of the human that has started from certain, maybe at the time inevitable, premises. The proposal here is to investigate the so-called biological level of the psyche, the level where cultural differences thin out, but to do so through the lenses of cultural psychology, and not through that historical-epistemological point where psychoanalysis is a cultural anthropology. What is the perspective of cultural psychology? It is a perspective sensitive to psychic and material *tools*. Words themselves, for cultural psychologists, can be psychic tools. From this point, we differentiate between the meaning of the term "primitive" and its use. This self-reflexivity is the hallmark of cultural psychology, which distinguishes between epistemology and culture: but epistemology and culture often coincide, to the point where psychic violence and colonial violence – the other as the "savage" (Frosh, 2013; Moore, 2023) – are superimposed. In this regard, two passages from the Appendix of *The Invasion of Compulsory Sexual Morality* (Reich, 1971) are presented. In these two passages, Wilhelm Reich harshly attacks the ethnographic account and the psychoanalytic interpretation that Roheim, a contemporary psychoanalyst and ethnologist, gives of the natives of Loboda:

> "Roheim correctly discerns that he, himself, is identified with the clergyman, also that the primitive feels aggression toward him; but since he does not know the social situation, he overlooks the fact that this aggression is immensely significant, that, for the primitive, he represents the whole of white culture, which the primitive hates and at the same time fears. Roheim is only interested in the fact that the primitive "directs his aggression against himself". "He tells me that he has kept some magic remedies for me". No, the primitive consciously hates the clergyman; he is afraid of Roheim (hence, no associations with the dreams) and tries to cheat him by appeasing him, by making a confession to him. He knows only too well that the whites are keenly interested in magic remedies, but he does not want to be robbed of them. Deep down, his behavior must presumably be traced back to fear of punishment for sexual activity. We do not wish to make the same mistakes Roheim made, however, and so will stop here" (p. 180).

Reich also highlights the "gap between metaphysical and scientific psychoanalysis":

"Fundamentally, the conflict still centers around the question whether an ax is merely a symbol of the penis and nothing but that, or, at most, secondarily a tool" (p. 183).

The attention to the tool, and to the use of the tool – whether material or psychic – is the hallmark of cultural psychology (as an example, consider the success of studies on affordances (Jorba & López-Silva, 2024). The "neutral" positioning of cultural psychology, between anthropology and cognitive sciences (Fryberg, 2012), makes it easier to examine a controversial topic like primitivity. Mind and instinct can then enter into the debate as two constructs, culturally more "neutral", if not, perhaps, transcultural.

Mind and Instinct: an epistemological review

In 1983, Ilse Gubrich-Simitis found in Freud's archives the draft of an unpublished article hypothesizing the correspondence between his diagnostic classification and the critical moments of species development. The premise was a theory known in his time, the theory of recapitulation, disproved by biological research (Orbecchi, 2015). Some of Freud's hypotheses, such as "the return of the repressed" and parts of his description of regression (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2003), are based on a developmental theory in which one phase recapitulates the previous one. Additionally, Freud's article shows the difficulty of deepening a research line, that of paleo-ethnology. Some authors consider theories in *Totem and Taboo*, for example, as a myth (Orbecchi, 2015; Reich, 1972). However, Freud's paleo-ethnological interests force us, a hundred years later, to confront research in the field of our species' history: how many of the clinical hypotheses developed over a century of research respond to the history and society of the last century, and how many to the actual, millenary, human history? It is not a case that last Freud's speculations, in *Constructions in Analysis*, involved the possibility of reconstructing the past truthfully. According to Edgar Morin, moreover, human science finds itself more or less at Year Zero (Morin, 2020).

Psychological intervention, having to do with human nature, brings us face to face with cultural differences, the relativity of language, and

the biological uniqueness of each human being. So, what is primitive? Primitive is a term commonly referred to (1) chronologically, the societies that preceded us (2) geographically, the people who live in isolated geographic niches nowadays, living a hunter-gatherer or nomadic agricultural life (Goldsmith, 1999). In order to ground a transcultural definition of primitive, it may be useful to rely on Ferro's reflections (2013b). Mind and instinct are plausibly involved.

Concepts like mind and instinct allow us to consider the free play of psychodynamic forces, the clash and the dialectic between nature and culture, and to overcome at the same time the risks of appropriating two terms – nature and culture – strongly ideologically connoted. Mind and instinct are terms and forces perpetually evolving and ultimately referable to the experience of being human.

A proposal: Six meanings

Six possible meanings of the term primitive are therefore proposed to the clinician and the researcher. These meanings, referring to the dialectic of mind and instinct, mobilize the field of psychological intervention, preventing the intervention from stalling in a rigid term, which literature currently does not clearly define. They are mainly based on Ferro's reflection (2013b), as this author seems to consider the mind both as a psychodynamic force and as a cultural and biological tool. The first definition has been selected by Will Davis' work on the schizoid character: it has been highlighted because of its resonance with Freudian early physiological research.

1. Davis (1997) uses the term primitive in reference to the defenses available to humans: specifically, the term is associated with the schizoid defense, which Davis conceptualizes as a defense that humans share with unicellular organisms such as the amoeba. This maneuver should be the withdrawal of the plasmatic tissue from the body's periphery (Davis, 1997). Freud himself proposed imagining libido as the movement of the amoeba's pseudopods, which extend towards pleasure and move away from displeasure. Davis's use of the term primitive allows us to observe that the term is closely linked to the nature-culture and mind-instinct bond. As previously examined, Freud himself was not only passionate about paleo-

ethnology but also about biology. In this sense, the term primitive refers to a set of defenses that humans share with other evolutionary lines. Referring to an evolutionary line, we can avoid the risk of considering the amoeba studied in the laboratory as the "ancestor" of the organisms from which evolution started: the laboratory amoeba is clearly not the same organism from which multicellular complexity developed.

2. Ferro, who follows the Bionian "container-contained" approach (2013b), hypothesizes that the tools humans have are only partially capable of transforming protoemotions – which is a term coined by this author – into dreams, thoughts, emotions. Primitive can then be understood as a protoemotion for which we do not yet have adequate elaboration tools in our genotypic and phenotypic heritage.
3. Ferro further suggests that only instinctual functioning can process a protoemotion. Primitive can then be understood as a protoemotion that can be processed solely by instinctual functioning, when, as Ferro implies, this is actually effective. Mind, in this sense, is not involved.
4. Some authors (Alhanati & Van Buren, 2013) hypothesize that rudimentary forms of mental life may exist from a few moments after conception. In this sense, primitive means *mental-preverbal*.
5. Primitive can be understood not in reference to a contrast between nature and culture or mind and instinct, but to a contrast between instinct and apparent rationality. It can be imagined that in the setting there is a level of collusive and apparent rationality, and that when clinicians use the term primitive, they implicitly refer to an event that threatens a collusive setting.
6. The mental apparatus humans have is already rudimentary, even if it may be very easy to believe otherwise (Ferro, 2013b). Primitive, in this sense, could be an event showing how rudimentary our mental apparatus is.

These definitions impact the setting: from a well-defined and rational set, it reveals itself as an imperfect apparatus by nature, and as continuously evolving. A place that is not detached from time and history, but part of social, historical, and geographical processes.

If setting is no longer just the result of a well-defined rationality, motivated by the adherence to a theory or to an epistemology, it becomes the place where the evolution of the person can occur, starting

precisely from its condition of imperfection. In this ambiguity and imperfection, the clash between mind and instinct, emotion and reason can rediscover an evolutionary, dialectical movement. And this evolution occurs within the individual and the species.

The immediacy of need: The Clinician's Dilemma

From the use and abuse of the regressive experience in therapy, up to the sensational situation of primal scream therapy, the term "regressive" had often been associated with a presumed primitiveness that would have constituted a final word: as a primeval state of purity and untaintedness (Lowen, 1982) or as an ultimate liberation from suffering. Now, the term "primitive", reconceptualized in six possible definitions, shows itself as an evolutionary term. It is not only tied to the past but also to the future. Indeed, Lacan wrote that the repressed does not come from the past, but from the future (2010); in any case, it is clear that the use of the term "primitive" in psychological intervention involves the evolution of the person, and the six definitions which have been proposed highlight the dialectical interplay between instinct and mind.

What should the clinician's response be to those states of mind and those shadows of the client and the therapeutic relationship definable as primitive? The argument here favors a positive and evolutionary view of those states, rather than their stigmatization. Little (1981) defines in this regard as primitive those basic needs of the client that cannot be delegated to transference, which according to Little is fundamentally a substitutive investment. Those needs must find satisfaction in reality and sometimes be discovered even for the first time. As an example, he refers the need for physical intimacy and for exploration of space and boundaries. This need, for Little, is a primitive need. According to Little, the clinician is faced with the challenge of responding to those needs and accepting that such a response is part of the therapeutic role.

The conceptualization of the primitive affects the psychological intervention. For example, the psychological intervention can be seen as moving on two fronts, because it has to balance between abstinence, in the Freudian sense, as the ability to wait patiently and distance

oneself, and the necessity, in care, to provide an immediate response to the person's distress. This immediacy lies on the side of the need. The risk of confusing what Ferro defines as "the urgency and uncontrollability of proto-emotional states" (2013b), which is plausibly what many clinicians claim to consider the "primitive", with the urgency inherent to the need, poses the risk of a *therapeutic error*. From this perspective, following Little's reflections, we can imagine that sublimation, elaboration, and substitutive investment can sometimes be better understood as emergency measures, and not modes of functioning of the thought, as Rizzolo (2017), for example, seems to consider them. Psychoanalytic literature has sometimes normalized some thought processes as universal mental states and defenses, as if they were available to every single human (primitive as phylogenetically "universal") but it has lacked an adequate cross-cultural, qualitative, comparison (imagine, for example, how the concept of sublimation can be an expression of, and adapts to, a culture of "sacrifice" (Recalcati, 2017). At the same time, further research on the actual past of the species, ideologically neutral, is needed (Morin, 2020).

Conclusion: Nature and Culture in a New Ethics

At this point in the dynamics between mind and instinct, culture and nature, the person's need finds space as the dialectical element in the conflict and as an evolutionary force. In need, the biological, natural level of the person, and the cultural, mental, and societal level of norms and settings, are both questioned and reunited in the task of accomplishing the single, human uniqueness, as in the effort of building an ethics being contextual and universal at the same time, imperfect and evolving.

That can happen because needs, by proposing the issue of immediacy and waiting, force us to revisit, shape, and adapt different epistemologies, and thus expectations and assumptions about what humans need in order to grow.

Culture and nature, so, shape each other around the person's uniqueness.

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