

## Spaces of the self in psychotics' drawings

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### Background

Stern's observations of infants (Stern 1985, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, Basic Books, New York) changed the linear model of child development proposed by Mahler (early autism–symbiosis–separation) into a model of development defined as “complementary”. In the complementary model of mental development there is no longer any question when exactly our psyche, which starts out as a continuous structure, becomes discontinuous or separated from the space of the mother-environment. According to this model, symbiosis and separation are two autonomous spaces of development, which integrate one another as they develop, but remain fundamentally different. The self is joined to what is not-self and, at the same time, separated from what is not-self. Alongside a space of the self, which operates separately from the outside world, coexists another space of the self that continues to work, unconsciously, in symbiosis with the outside world.

### Method

From 1986 to 2006 I have analyzed with Gaetano Benedetti around 15,000 drawings produced by 25 psychotic patients during sessions of psychotherapy (average duration of psychotherapy 7.5 years, 2 sessions every week, two drawings every session). In patients' drawings we also noted that there were groups of images

where autistic defences predominated and groups of drawings where the symbiotic container component predominated. In the first 3 years, when the therapist (using a method called “progressive-mirror-drawing”) tried to connect the various groups of split images with another one, the patient destroyed this connection or the destructiveness was direct against the relationship. Later, in the following 4 years, when the therapist performed the same connections the patient accepted them and the split groups of images were integrated into the drawings.

### Results

On the basis of the background theory and of the analysis of the drawings, I inferred that in the structure of psychotic self there is a break up in the integrative relationship between the symbiotic line of development and the separative line. It results into two incompatible nuclei of the self, which are both not-self one with respect to the other, one characterized by excessive symbiotic needs, the other by an excessive need for separation, which takes on autistic connotations. The two nuclei of the self, symbiotic and autistic, fragment one another each time separative needs or symbiotic needs are activated. These needs are both contemporaneously present and so intensely felt because they are not integrated in the representational spaces of the self.

**Keywords** Spaces of the self • Developmental spaces • Separation • Symbiosis

