

## Understanding the sense of family, us and the link

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Studying the notion of *sense of the family* can help us to reach dimensions in family psychology which have been neglected until now, and at the same time, contribute to further support its groupal foundations.

My personal preference is towards the *us*, the family members build an us which affects their common identity and becomes rooted in their unconscious. Two original concepts concern this us : their archaic psychical functioning and the ancestral archaism.

But if the family us can be formulated, it is because it acquires a certain autonomy regarding the I of the individuals who make up the family. This us exists inasmuch as they are or were together; it's like a reference point which is within themselves. This us would be then specific, unpredictable and non-deductable considering the psychic particularities of the family members.

To place my subject clearly, I will give my point of view on the connections between the "I", the "us" and the "you". We must differentiate them: the I is in reference to the individual; the link « I-us » and the link « my family », is in reference to trans-subjectivity, and the link « I-you », to intersubjectivity.

### Definition

The word sense is polysemic ; it has 5 groups of different meanings (*Robert*, 1957, vol. 6, p. 205 and sq. for the French definitions and Longman, 1986, p. 797 for the English definitions) of which the most distinctive are (they are synonyms) : I. faculty of perceiving conditions by means of the senses ; II. Discernment; III. Awareness motivating actions or judgement ; IV. A meaning ; V. Direction.

The definition which is of interest for us here is in the group IV, the synonym « meaning », but it is different from the usual manner in which it is used, as when we say we would like to make sense of certain symptoms. In this case the term meaning refers to the questions: « why? », « what's the reason? ».

In the *Robert*, p. 207 we can find a definition of « sense » with a connotation which does match our purpose: « **Sens.** [...] **IV.** [...] **3. By ext.** Intelligible idea to which a thought object can be linked and which is used to explain and justify its existence. *V. Raison (d'être).* » This thought object should be reasonable, in other word, not go against common sense. The word sense here refers to the questions: « What for? »,

« What's the aim? ». Cf. the example: « Why are we together? » It concerns fundamental issues such as the meaning of life, of a project, of our actions.

The sense, the meaning, also implies an intention; it's a tendency or an intention which dominates the mind. Sense projects us into the future; it is linked to our ethics, beliefs and ideals.

If we actually asked the following questions, « What's the sense of my family, my couple? » or « Why I am with these people I consider as my nearest and dearest? », « What is the point? », « What's the aim? », a lot of us would be absolutely incapable of answering these questions. It isn't as though they don't think there is a sense to their family or couple; it's more that they take it for granted. However, the sentence « There doesn't seem to be any sense in living with my partner anymore » is heard more often. We become aware of the sense of an investment when we realise it is weakening.

To give sense to something is to consider that its existence is justified, that there is something to be said for it. This thing becomes precious. In fact, we're proud of it. We give it qualities, make it noble, and put it on the altar of our ideals.

*Reasonable.* The notion of sense is mentioned when a request is made, as in the following example: « Help you with your homework? Is this reasonable? It doesn't make any sense. You big enough to do this alone! » The reasons for helping the child are no more. Verbalising this shows the child that he cannot be *babyied* anymore. The parent underlines the fact that the child has become self-reliant.

*The connection with the ideal.* In clinics, we can hear patients tell us that they've lost their direction, they've seen the often high and mighty reasons they gave themselves to live as a couple or a family disappear, especially when planning a project and bringing it to fruition. They cannot find any sense to their links. This makes them sad. They ask us to help them see things more clearly so that they can take stock and find new ideals, perhaps different from the original ones, which could give back some sense to their family life. This is evidently an agonizing request. Losing sense is like being condemned to live in a void and simply ending up having to deal only with day to day stuff.

*Let's analyse another situation.* A child asks his father: « Why do you get up every morning and go to work? » There are many possible answers. « To earn the money we need so we can eat. » Or in a less curtly manner: « Because it makes me happy to be able to afford things for us. »

It would be different if he said: « Because I love you. » He seems then rather affectionate, but he avoids admitting there is a sense to his behaviour. To slide over the issue further, he may use irony: « Because I don't like staying in bed. »

When answering this question from the child, some sentences would lead to a particular sense. The father: « I like doing what I do. » He acknowledges that work has a *raison d'être* in his life. Even the classic answer « It's my duty as a father, you know? » underlines that his actions are justified by his function, bringing up the anonymous duty of *any* father.

We notice that sense gives energy and joy. If it has a bearing on projects, it is independently of their being carried out concretely and effectively. Sense drives the hope of seeing these projects come to fruition and urges the family members forward. It's like the home fire, as Gaston Bachelard (1957) might have said.

### **The link is the first concerned**

Despite finding these considerations rather self-evident, the place of sense brings up several issues. Firstly, and my examples seem to uphold this trend, sense appears more clearly when seen individually and we can't imagine a group where every single member is in total accord with one another and all have the same understanding of what is sense. We could more easily conceive that one member elects himself spokesperson and encourages the others to achieve what the ideal demands.

Looking into these issues shows a real clinic and therapeutic value. It is tempting to check at this stage a concept which has been reasonably fruitful in research on groups: the idea of intersubjective links. This concept allows us to verify that it is not individual wishes which have an influence on the group, but the reciprocity established between them. The reasons justifying the existence of a collective functioning have to be gathered by the others, who will then put them to work while going through them with the fine toothcomb of their own subjectivity. When answering, they can actually develop these reasons. Gradually, through these interactive transitions, the sense will probably be reshaped, full of collective ideals and family representations including trans-generational myths.

In our couples, in our families, collective sense gives meaning to our lives, to everybody's lives. And this gets crystallized in the prospects we intend to achieve together. To feel encouraged and to strengthen their links, some partners need to tell themselves that there are barriers stopping them to reach their goals. The group, the links are able to better define an internal belonging and an identity if the subjects consider their aims as being totally original: here phallic challenge is the driving force.

In this case the couple ties seems to be mobilized by the challenge to be better than the other, the parent, father in law, mother in law : keep the rival away from the game; remove him/her from the partner's head. The result is that to give some sense to

a specific conjugal relationship, and this happens very often, we should first win a privileged position in our partner's mind.

**The sense of being a family appears as soon as there is a commitment in love. Its link with projects.**

Generally, each member of the link tries to contribute to the shaping of projects and can take on a precise task. This happens very early on; when they become a couple, the partners will build a joint ego ideal; it is a very strong vehicle which contributes to their union. If they are together, it's largely because each has found the means of building projects with this person. The sense finds here one of its basis.

I have said in the past that some spouses base their union on the pleasure to be had from a harmonious sexual life. This can be enough of a reason to be part of a couple. Or it is a starting point, but one which just as worthy as any other. (A. Eiguer, 1998).

I would like to mention here the most common projects couples tend to have, while acknowledging that sometimes these projects can be unconscious or hidden by other projects. These projects are all about life together: a bond which is satisfying, pleasant, containing, knowing, where each one helps the other, and which enables the partners to blossom. But, by the same token, the partners wish that their freedom and heterogeneity remain intact and that this mutual investment shouldn't tie them down.

They wish to have children and to transmit to these children their values, to give them a promising future, a happy life and a fulfilling job. But often their reference points are from their own desires rather than those of their future children. A person will choose somebody, thinking they will make a good father, a good mother, because they appreciate their original family, and its values and abilities. Other couples will decide not to have children. These perspectives are already there when the partners commit to a loving relationship.

Each relationship includes the notion of profit, this may not be terribly romantic to say, but it makes sense. In starting a couple, each person would rather gain something for themselves or/and their future children. Some abilities and qualities in the other would help waken some aspects of oneself hitherto dormant and incapable of being expressed.

This isn't mean. The notion of material inheritance can also be one of the elements considered when pledging your love. Following the current view of love in a couple, we feel reluctant to admit this, because we think that love and material things don't go together; love just doesn't plan ahead. But we can love someone partly because they will bring us a comfortable future, or even if they're not that well-off, they seem enterprising enough for us to count on their ability to react when encountering financial

difficulties. The notions of alliances and unconscious pacts highlight this idea of contractual transaction; it is taken out of the slightly silly grievances spouses throw at each other when arguing: « You promised me ages ago that... » It's a promise which must have been heard as a firm commitment like a work contract... when it could simply have been a wish.

When the crisis is full on, these goals are reduced, and some even disappear. The sense of living together may then be confined to bringing the children up or owning a nice home. This is a very common situation with complicated consequences for the children. For those children being successful becomes a weighty responsibility, because they have to conform to the sense given to family life by the parents.

There are lots of various situations ; married people who keep the sense of their couple such as it was before children came along and then mesh it in with the sense of the family or some parents who put their life as a couple above everything else. The couple puts the link bonding them at the centre of their lives and highlights the prevalence of fun, pleasure and well-being in being "us".

The loss of the sense of things, of one's family or couple, is moreover a major sign of pathology, of *depression*. I think the precision is important, because a couple or family crisis has certain signs such as depression, disappointment, dis-idealisation, imaginary nostalgia of times gone by and loss of prospects for the future. It is because the crisis has a depressive dimension even if the latter is not one of the main components.

But the loss of sense comes often by the very fact that the members of the family may have relied a bit too much on concrete achievement; they built their ideals on an illness of the ideal without feeding their intersubjective intimacy. But life together can be a fertile field of thing immaterial such as knowledge, experience, meetings with friends, a way of saying things, of living, of moving and feeling; these products are very satisfying and nourishing too.

Beyond these clinical precisions, there are still some doubts about the impact of intersubjectivity. We all have our own subjectivity and desires, etc. so how can each person contribute to the common work?

### **Me-you, me-us and sense**

This question leads us to try and find an answer in the area of mutual acknowledgment (A. Honneth, 1992, 2002, 2005). We have seen up to now that the link mirrors the interfunctioning between two people and between their intersubjectivity. Each one of us is attached to another; the fantasies, affects, representations of each member of the link echo each other, move around each other, encourage each other and create

common and shared representations. This allows them to be together, creating a more or less enduring relationship and at the same time to live their lives separately while acknowledging their differences.

But this reciprocity is spontaneous, happens in a very low key. It is barely noticeable. Reciprocity feeds on the acknowledgement of oneself and the other, leading to mutual acknowledgment. To acknowledge the difference of the other implies feeling close to this person, wanting to help when facing difficulties, sharing the joys, feeling happy with the other's achievements and success. Let's have a closer look at this process.

J.-J. Rousseau (1762) examines acknowledgment through the means of *pity*, although this is not expressly mentioned. Pity, to him, seems to be one of the bases of a link to others; and he adds: "the suffering we feel when seeing someone unhappy shouldn't be as strong as the person's own suffering, otherwise, it would be impossible to muster the will to help." Mass identification renders it invalid. Of course, empathy for the other has limits, but it is thanks to it that solidarity is a source of efficient acts.

Following this thought, mutual dependency and mutual acknowledgement show themselves to be very close to one another. In Hegel's work, acknowledgement appears as the nodal point of the link between master and slave (1807). In his system, acknowledgement, awareness of oneself and of the others and subjectivity work together in a very illuminating fashion. Hegel is interested by self-awareness. When reading his work, I had the feeling that it evokes what we call these days *autoscopy*, what is going to become the threshold of the self.

Initially, said the philosopher, we are aware of ourselves, but not aware of the other or the other's awareness; we ignore it. But as soon as we start observing, and asking *who* are we, we introduce a differentiation between the one who looks and the one who is looked at and we defend ourselves with a negation, because we act as if the one we are looking at is not us. We split ourselves and become two people. I found a similar reasoning when Laplanche (2004) writes about the "afterwards": I have to confess now that the adult who is me today has fantasies about the child I was then, as if I was another person. Without this, we remain as if we were stuck on the reality of the adult being, thus denying ourselves a representation of our evolution, of the feeling that time flows by.

Subjectivity shows itself as being a question of dialogue between two subjects inside oneself, if not more. So, what the philosophers call self-awareness looks a lot like what we call subjectivity, subjectivation, the subjectivating process of which the afterwards is an important link ! I shall come back to this.

For Hegel (*op. cit.*, p. 150-153), the first contact with the essence of the others can cause a lot of ambivalence. He suggests that discovering the essence of the other arouses our interest, then we try to quell it « to reach by this very fact the certainty of oneself as being the essence [...] » When she studied Hegel, Jessica Benjamin (1988) noticed: «The ego needs the other, but it tries to establish itself as absolute, as an independent entity while it must acknowledge that the other is a being just like it is, so that it *can be* acknowledged by it. It must be able to find itself in the other. The ego can be acknowledged only through its actions, and it is only if its actions are signifying for the other that they become signifying for it. However, every time there is action, the ego “denies” the other, meaning that if the other is affected, he is not the same as before. It is to preserve his identity that the other resists, instead of taking into account the actions of the subject. [...] » (p. 38). Thus a strong uneasiness is created, and this was noticed by Hegel (*op. cit.*), uneasiness which leads the subject to cling onto the feeling of being the one and only, and later, when he ends up admitting that the other is unavoidable, it will lead to the desire to dominate him. He will be then tempted to use the other to gain the precious certainty that he is himself.

J. Benjamin adds: « To establish an I [...] means earning the acknowledgment of the other and this in turn, implies that I have, in the end, to admit that the other exists for himself and not just for me. The process we call differentiation works through the movement of acknowledgement, its going from subject to subject, from the self to the other and back to the self. The nature of this movement is by necessity contradictory and paradoxical » says J. Benjamin (*op. cit.* p. 42) as a conclusion.

*Autoscopy* can only be expressed within a link, establishing a relationship for two; at the beginning, the subject lives as if he was two people. He knows he is the same person, but to see himself he has to forget it and become two. The most direct way to know ourselves, to acquire self-awareness is to introduce another in our fantasmatic field: if we can be in the skin of somebody who's looking at us, we in a position to look at ourselves. And the awareness that somebody has of himself leads us to acknowledge he has his own subjectivity.

We know how important this dimension is in Ricœur (1990)'s work. And this leads him to establish that the identity gets richer and more complete if the subject thinks himself as he thinks others.

These multiples acknowledgements have already been identified by Hegel. The master is not the master unless the slave acknowledges that he is, then that he confirms it by the way he acts his servitude. Without this, the master cannot manage to put himself in a master's skin. When all is said and done, it's the slave who makes the

master, says Hegel. To be acknowledged by others seems to be the nerve centre of identity.

Hegel, as a conclusion mentions that one, the subject, needs an other's acknowledgement to *know* who and *what* he is. But Hegel thinks, and this makes his work fascinating, that here is always a *dispute, a friction, a conflict*. To start with, the subject doesn't want to know about the other's essence as Benjamin (*op. cit.*) says, and becomes hostile towards him, but when he understands he needs the other in order to be acknowledged, he thinks claiming this acknowledgement is justified and if the other is still reluctant, then he undertakes to *fight for his acknowledgement*.

It is almost as if Hegel had said : as soon as the subject realises the he needs the other's acknowledgement, he clings to it and can't do without anymore to the point that he can't bear the slightest lapse: he will goad people into an argument until he gets it and is satisfied.

Here is one of the most familiar acknowledgement acts: when establishing the symbolic place of the family members, it's the mother who names the father as the child's genitor. She says: "I've created you with this man". A large panorama then gets opened up. She declares that the father is the father, she is the mother, and the child is their child. This *act of acknowledgement* will be followed by others: the differentiation of functions and genders, the outline of the family, then that of the lineage and genealogy; because he was born from two parents, the child concludes that his parents also had two parents each.

Many acknowledgement gestures follow from this point on: of people, their actions, their affects, thoughts and material objects. The parents can do this according to two or more methods:

*On one hand*, the parents give a *name* to each of them; they integrate them in the language (*cf.* the notion of *checking off*, D. Marcelli, 2010).

*On the other hand*, they interpret emotions, thoughts and acts, or, in other words, they give them a *signification*. The first method contributes to building the symbolic in the child; the second, to the development of deductive thinking.

And finally, the parents convey to the child, through words or gestures the sense – with the meaning explained above – they give to their actions, words, thoughts, affects, and to those of others. This means that the parents transmit their feelings on the reasons they had to get together and start a family while giving precisions in a conscious and/or unconscious way on the aims and ideals of this particular family. It is quite common to observe that other close relatives will work in this way alongside the parents: they will confirm this sense, expand on it, and bring nuance to it. Mutual

acknowledgement brings us to admit the need for others, then the need to belong to a group. Being the crossroad injecting dynamism into intersubjectivity, acknowledgement seems to be a prerequisite to any sense.

### **The need to define the other's psychic field**

We need others to build our subjectivity. But on the way, we become dependant of each other and inseparable. The *us* has thus been defined. Me and you, both of us have build a together; this together is more than me and you, it s unavoidable, even autonomous. It leads its own life, like a grown up. We haven't actually done anything for this to happen, and we must admit this: the *us* is stronger than me and you combined. Without noticing, me and you have entered into a pact: we have consulted and agreed to hide that we need each other in order to define our own I. So the others will carry on believing that we are individuals. This is a pact of denial.

On top of that the trans-subjective dimension comes into it. It is the *us* which puts it forward, as an independent entity, when we on the contrary are dependent on the other's mirror image. This feeds out jealousy and envy against the *us*, as well as our hatred of the *us*.

The trans-subjective introduces a nuance (« the *us* and all mine »). It is not exactly the intersubjective («me » and « you »), but rather it conveys collective representations, affects, fantasies, myths, ideals and values, but it is as if it left the notion of individuals hanging. And once more, here we meet again the issue of sense of the family. Because if the family is that strong, it is because it builds a collective where imaginary and symbolic lines are many, are full of histories and heaving with people. When we give ourselves a sense, a lot of representations and beings come up. Sense summons those who made us and those who in turn, made them.

We also call it trans-subjectivity because these contents are mingled with the content of close relatives. They are about what I acknowledge as being my original family, our family for generations. An "us", that of the two of us, you and me, puts forward the family *us*. We don't realize that behind the most banal of words, there dozens, hundreds of *us* until we see the human race.

Imagine, from birth, the child already has to carry all these *us* on its shoulders, as well as the sense they gave to their families. And as well as having to deal with our nature, its follies and wildness, we have to carry the other's too!

As for the ego ideal, it goes with this movement; and even more, it will have a value in making up some sense. Sometimes it is absolutely incomprehensible for us why some people do what they do and with so much passion, when we think it is useless, or

even crazy. When analyzing the reasons, we find that they come from elsewhere, they've been transmitted, deposited there by relatives; these people find the energy to achieve these projects because they come from people whose judgement they trust, they are justified by the attachment they have towards these relatives. We could be tempted to conclude that family ideal doesn't necessary have particularly noble projects. The notion of family influences and regenerates these behaviours and gives them a meaning in themselves.

### **Smuggling sense**

This is what a couple of parents who had adopted two boys teach us. They insisted on telling the boys their past life, right down to the smallest detail. The children became with time quite familiar with this past. Therapy started at the beginning of their puberty, 12 and 13 years old, with the aim of overcoming the difficulties the boys met in their schooling. The father and the mother came from a country run by a dictatorial regime. The father had a clandestine activity, he was a smuggler. He helped immigrants to cross the border illegally. He also smuggled goods. These activities got him in trouble with the police and he went to jail. He liked to talk about these illegal activities and entertained his audience by describing the tricks he had to use. Delighted with this, the children were always asking for more of their father's exploits. The tales of the father's escape, told by himself, held a choice position among the stories. The children loved it and were never tired of hearing it again and again. They knew it had been dangerous, but the elation this tales brought them also induced a strange denial.

During a session, one of the children explained that he had boasted of this in front of his mates and sometimes in front of adults. He said he was proud that his father had been a smuggler, that he ridiculed the police and customs officers more than once and was "dangerous" for his country's government. It was: "My dad's a hero!" But when the mother heard this during a session she was livid. She explained that she had felt various contradictory feelings. While she was happy that the children were close to the father and showed it, she was also afraid that their situation should become public knowledge and that their troubles would start again. She said it was possible that the children learnt more about their history. They seemed to be able to understand the parents and agree with their choice of a living. But at the same time, it was as if there was a stark identification with what the father was saying, when the parents actually had done this only because they had to. The mother added that she didn't think it was something to be proud of. She would have rather they'd were sensitive to the suffering it had brought on.

The younger child said that it didn't see anything wrong with him being a smuggler in later life if the opportunity presented itself. His brother teased him: « You like to resell your rotten DVD's at a high price. You like to cheat even those you call best friends. »

For my part, I was thinking that, in their eyes the father was a proper bad boy. That he carried the job of smuggler in his blood. This logic can remind us of adoption. Sterile parents usually adopt through necessity, in the same way this father became a smuggler, because he didn't have any other choice. We can add an ideological dimension to the transport of illegal immigrants, but not for the smuggling of goods. And to adopt can be seen as stealing a child (Freud, 1909). It is as if the boys were saying: « If you don't want to consider you became a smuggler because you liked it, you can't tell us that being adopted or a biological child is the same thing. »

In other words for the boys, adoptive filiations was to biological filiations what smuggling is to « honest » business.

It appeared that the adoptive filiation was taking a turn the parents hadn't expected. They had decided to go on exile to change everything and to leave behind their marginal life. The father didn't think a was a born delinquent, the proof being that he didn't go back to smuggling and even cut all links with people he knew in this milieu. In France, he managed to study and become a physiotherapist and was happy. But the children were kind of fixated on this aspect of the narration. We should mention there that this story involved people they knew and members of the family and thus presented various ramifications. In reality, the event of a smuggler's life punctuated the history of the original families and of their members. You could find there their stories, know their identity, and personality.

From the way the father talked about this clandestine life, the two boys had intuited that he found a certain pleasure in it and that this choice of lifestyle corresponded to a hidden vocation. To be able to prove this was for them more important than revealing a secret: it was the deduction that the father considered them as his "natural" children. This partly came up during a session.

In any case, when you're adopted, you are supposed to integrate your parent's past with their light and dark sides, their ancestors, habits and, ethics. This example shows that children and parents adapt to each other, the *us* is build as much by intersubjectivity (« me and you ») than by trans-subjectivity (« us and all mine ») ; the narrative acquire a capital importance for the other's identification and once he is better acknowledged, in his own identification. When something is not possible or authorised, we can allow ourselves to transgress the rules and also to confess we enjoyed it. The

narrative doesn't always appear to be the truth, but it reveals a deeper truth about the subjects. Being amazingly observant and sensitive to the discovery of secrets, adopted children can help with finding anew each person's authenticity.

For the members of this family, *the sense of their union was to adapt*; having children went in that direction, but adoption revealed to them another sense which was to give themselves some respectability by hiding the wrongdoings which happened in their youth. They had to finally accept that the real sense of their family was to make of their transgressive functioning a more authentic model because it was closer to their desires and their true selves. To adopt was to create an alternative, marginal filiations' link.

### Conclusion

To place the dimension of sense of a family, I have tried to give a precise definition. From a language point of view, from all the meanings of the word « sense » the one I chose is that of the idea which finds the existence of an object justifiable and reasonable, in our case, the object being the family. This is why we believe in our family and that it helps us to achieve our ideals and satisfy our principles. But this sense is intertwined with each of us 'sense. If sense becomes a collective thing, it is because the family members are in an intersubjective relationship; they weave a psychological net and mutual acknowledgement is one of this net's knots. But before getting to this point, we have to admit that we need the gaze of others to mould our identity.

Sense then can be:

a. A representation, concept implicit in the definition: an *idea* which refers to a *psychical object*, and thus it can

b. Create, with the meaning of branching out , linking itself to other representations, playing or innovating.

The family gives itself sense; that is its strength and its weakness. Its strength, because thanks to sense, it is well defined and can project into the future; its weakness because it wavers when in doubt. « Building » sense needs time and effort. It is difficult to undo; it helps ride out crisis and bounce back, but can become a hazard if we cannot manage to modify it if the need arises.

One thing is certain, though: sense is one of the pillars of the *us*. If the *I* is still interested by our vision of humanity, it is inasmuch as the *I* can't do without the *us*, that indeed it is made of a multitude *us* and this gives it a new impetus and a singular sense.

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