

OCD, ONE DISORDER, VARIOUS EXISTENTIAL REALITIES: FROM “MICHAEL KOHLHAAS” TO “LA MIGLIORE OFFERTA”, PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL CHANGES OVER A CENTURY

Immacolata d’Errico

Psychiatrist and constructivist psychotherapist, Bari, Italy

SUMMARY

In the transition from the modern to the postmodern age, there has been a change in the Obsessive-Compulsive - Prone Style of Personality, style that can lead to OCD.

In this paper we analyze, through literature and cinematographic art, some typical aspects of this style of personality and how they changed over time: the impersonality of the set of references on the basis of which to fix the variability of one’s experience by providing it with definite and certain meaning, the issue of one’s responsibility related to a failure in anticipation and a new aspect, called “logical complacency” by the current scientific literature, in which the need of the set of references is contemporary with the relationship with the others which embodies and personifies that reference system.

Key words: OCD - the obsessive-compulsive-prone style of personality – psychopathology – meaning - the sense of self - logical complacency obsessive disorder

* * * * *

In literature and cinematographic art the analysis of the structural characteristics of the protagonists gives us interesting insights on psychopathology.

In “Michael Kohlhaas”, Heinrich Von Kleist (born in Frankfurt; 1777-1811) offers us, through the vicissitudes of the protagonist, an interesting description of the Obsessive-Compulsive - Prone Style of Personality, a style that can lead to OCD.

In this style of personality, the sense of self is determined by a stable anchoring to an external system of coordinates that produce certainty and therefore stability.

This system is constitutive and also the lens through which to see himself, the Other, the World.

“Being oneself, here, corresponds to a form of self-perception generated through the conformity of ongoing experience to an impersonal set of references. Be it law or religion, morals or the scientific method, common sense or mathematics, musical arrangement or bureaucratic structures, philosophical analysis or military hierarchy, social convention or molecular biology, the structural stability of a person’s reference system provides the peculiar alterity - merely a reflection of the actual living other – that the individual must conform to in order to feel stably situated” (Arciero & Bondolfi 2009).

In this making of co-determination of the Self, centred on the constant adherence to a given order, the Other has no value in itself, but only if he is entered into the system. Here, the external reference is not a person but an impersonal otherness. The relationship with the world is always mediated (and unavoidable) by the system.

The functioning of this personality style is guaranteed by adherence to a reference system. It follows that the

alteration in the sense of Self and in the feeling of stability situated is not the result of the experience being disturbing in itself, but the result of new coincidence between experience with the system itself.

We can see it very well in the protagonist of the novel by Heinrich Von Kleist “*On the banks of the Havel, around the middle of the sixteenth Century, there lived a horse dealer by the name of Michael Kohlhaas. The son of a schoolmaster, one of the most honest and most terrible human beings of his time... but his sense of justice turned him into a robber and murderer*” (Von Kleist 2003).

Right from the start, Kleist leads us through the escalation of events that irremediably will transform the quiet existence of this man. An event, a horsetheft committed by a nobleman, is considered by Kohlhaas a despicable abuse of power and causes him to develop a thirst for justice and revenge.

A long journey through all degrees of legal instance begins; law suits and legal proceedings are now his only interest. “*He lost all interest in both horse-breeding as for the house and farm and very nearly for his wife and children*” (Von Kleist 2003).

Since then, everything in his life became of minor importance. As a good citizen he will turn into a violent and reckless man, justifying his actions according to his principle of rightness, while it will be his own violent behaviour to violate that sense of justice in which he believes. His journey will be accompanied by grief and devastation that will end only with his public execution and death. But the death of the Kohlhaas, in a crowded square waiting in vain for the miracle of salvation does not seem an execution, but a triumphant act of a man who wanted the reaffirmation of justice and revenge at the cost of his own life.

The event of the horse theft, in itself manageable and scalable down, becomes dramatic because it brings one of the core themes of this character's life into question: the sense of justice. The whole life of Kohlhaas turns around this set of reference that determines and regulates all his behaviour, his work, his social life.

Because Kohlhaas has a total and inflexible adhesion to his impersonal system of sense, this event, coming into collision with them, leads to a major stiffening. When the certainty in his reference system is questioned he will cling to it in a more and more stiffening manner; the consequence is that he will remain blocked by the inability to see other possibilities of action.

He could go back to work, taking his horses again, instead of making more and more reckless choices: he will sell his farm, put at risk the life of his wife who will die, and then he will begin a revenge not more via legal complaints, but via weapons, fire and incredible violence. Many times the circumstances lead him to a crossroad: to stop accepting the "status quo" and continuing life or persevering with struggle. He always makes the second choice, with a sort of complacency. This is the "order" (of course his order) that he has finally established.

In fact, for Kohlhaas, not bringing his reference system into question, but getting back the certainty of that reference system, in order to assure him of control is very important: his behaviour, his access to the world were always done through the anchorage to that system of rules and values. Without his set of rules, he cannot manage the situation, because without that anchorage every life experience becomes stranger: therefore, the Others and the World put him into check. Both the lack of flexibility in the reference system and the incapacity for him to integrate the uncertain and imperfect situations that real life necessarily presents cause a psychological de-compensation in him.

"The structural characteristic of this style of personality is a stable anchoring to an external system of coordinates, on which to fix the variability of one's experience by providing it with definite and certain meaning" (Arciero & Bondolfi 2009).

In this novel we have seen Kohlhaas' presumption to include the variability of human experience in his own ordered and impersonal set of references, without modifying and adapting them to reality. It is thus clear that it is the reference system that guides life and not the opposite.

What gives you the access to the system and coordinates the action?

The thought: through the thought the correspondence between the system and action is ensured. The intellect creates certainty! It is in the cognitive domain (where you go to evaluate the correspondence of experience to a set of meanings) that the emotional domain operates: if the ongoing experience is explained in relation to the system, one can feel a perception of personal stability.

Hence the lack of adherence between one's experience and one's system of meaning engenders a feeling of indecisiveness, insecurity and incompleteness.

Based on these themes, we can now analyse the movie "La miglior offerta" by Giuseppe Tornatore (2013).

Virgil Oldman is an iced, severe, elegant, eccentric and cultured auctioneer, very famous in the collecting world. He always wears gloves and he never crosses the gaze of women. A collector himself, he has collected over the years with the help of his friend Bill, a huge collection of masterpieces, only portraits of women, which are hung on the walls of a vault in his large, lonely house. His existence proceeds in his luxurious retreat until the phone call from a young woman, Claire (who wants an evaluation of the properties inherited from her parents), upsets his precarious balance.

Clair escapes all the appointments, advancing flimsy excuses and false promises. This strange behaviour causes anger and curiosity in Virgil. Even the faithful guardian of her villa seems to have never seen Claire: why does this mysterious girl hide inside herself?

The woman, through a closed door, will gradually reveal herself. She will tell him about her life and agoraphobia, a condition by which she is afflicted. She reveals that she hasn't left the house for twelve years. Oldman begins to entertain the young woman with an ever more intimate relationship that soon will become an obsession.

Each new detail intrigues and fascinates Virgil whose only experience with women is looking at expensive women's portraits. He becomes more flexible, stripping himself of the armour that seems to separate him from the rest of the world.

While the evaluation of the art work is progressing, what continues to torment Virgil is the hidden identity of Claire. After a heated argument between the two, Clair comes out and shows herself to him. Since this moment Virgil is no longer able to manage their relationship coldly as he has done until then and he will confess his love; love that seems reciprocated. The only one aware of this love story is Robert, a young restorer. Robert becomes Virgil's confidant, giving him advice on how to approach Clair. The love story takes off and Oldman begins to neglect his important business to devote himself entirely to the girl. Everything seems to be proceeding as hoped, but on the last way back from London, Oldman will discover that all his personal collection of original paintings, a priceless heritage, is gone. Claire seems to have disappeared with Robert and the guardian. Even his old friend Billy is part of the conspiracy. When he goes to a bar, situated in front of the villa for asking about Claire, there he meets the real Claire, the true owner of the villa, an idiot savant autistic confined to a wheelchair, who reveals to him her identity and tells him that she often rents the villa to those she believes to be filmmakers.

Virgil, upset by all these events, falls into a catatonic state for several weeks, lying on a bed of the Institute of Neurology where his assistants hospitalize him. His attention is completely absorbed into images that would never abandon him. However, the strong desire to see Claire again is slowly able to raise the auctioneer from that sort of petrification of consciousness. When he is discharged from the hospital, he tries to go towards the police station, but he does not enter it, he does not step forward and leaves. After spending many days at home repeatedly calling the woman he loves, he makes a decision. Betting on the possible reality of his own typical statement "in every false there is an element of truth", and of Clair's statement "no matter what happens, my love is true", and therefore on a certain relationship between Clair and a coffee-shop in Prague, Virgil leaves for Prague, where he rents an apartment in the "clock" square described by her.

Despite everything, Virgil has known true love and he will be waiting for it at the Night and Day, the place which she had mentioned as somewhere special perhaps the only true fragment in this fiction.

To understand this movie I think you have to start from the notion that the main characteristic of obsessive-compulsive style of personality is to be centered on the action. And this explains a way of feeling, being, de-compensating.

Behind the action (behaviour etc.), as already said, a whole system of reference that determines that action and the correctness of that action exists. An action is correct only if it perfectly responds to those given criteria, to which the individual must conform to in order to feel stably situated.

Hence, the alteration (to the point of complete disruption) of this correspondence engenders a feeling of indecisiveness, insecurity and incompleteness. That can lead to a psychopathological illness. The action has two characteristics: it must be anticipable and explainable. Neither being able to anticipate a sequence of actions nor being able to explain the events, trigger a self evaluation of the system's Self.

Not being able to match one's experience with one's system of meaning, releases evaluative emotions: guilt, shame, failure, inadequacy, unreliability, with a total accountability of the act.

Hence the psychopathological output leads to Major Depression as in Virgil.

Depression not only related to loss of the "object of love" (Claire), but especially related to the entire assumption of responsibility for what happened. Virgil wasn't able to see, to foresee and anticipate the sequence of acts that led to the theft of the paintings and therefore he took all the responsibility. Infact he didn't enter the police station. It would not have made sense to get in, because the loss of the portraits themselves had not upset him, but by the feeling of total personal unreliability had.

As we said before in the case of Michael Kohlhaas, the event itself was not impactful, but the sense of uncertainty, which, in this case, the failure of its system of prediction/anticipation of the action and this extended to all the possibilities.

Therefore, we have put emphasis on two typical aspects of this style of personality:

- the impersonality of the set of references on the basis of which to fix the variability of one's experience by providing it with definite and certain meaning;
- the issue of one's responsibility related to a failure in anticipation.

At this point, we are going to discover through the analysis of another literary text, written in 1919 by Franz Kafka, a new aspect, called "logical complacency" by the current scientific literature, in which the need of the set of references is contemporary with the relationship with the others which embodies and personifies that reference system.

To begin with, since the end of XIX century, there has been a series of technological changes (railway, telegraphy, phone, cinema and at the end TV to end with) that have had strong impact on being oneself, marking the difference between modernity and post-modernity.

The impact of technology on the speed of perceptual experience has generated the acceleration in the change of the self.

"For instance, the use of telephone obliges the user to develop a new capacity to focalize attention that was undoubtedly unknown to those who were used to communicating via letters. A historian of the period noted that the use of the telephone has given rise to a new mental habit. Our previous lazy and sluggish attitude has undergone a change...life has become more tense, vigilant and vivacious. The brain has been relieved from the anxiety of waiting for a reply...it receives that reply instantaneously, and is thus free to consider other matters" (Kern 1983).

Giving to the world a new speed, the coming on the scene of the technological changes, have modified the speed and quality of people's internal states as a result of their influence.

The need to speedily adapt themselves to a new on going stimuli coming from external sources, forcing the post-modern man to turn his gaze outward. Being on the same wavelength as the external source, as a means of creating and maintaining one's own identity, is the distinctive feature of the new "mode of conformity".

David Riesman, analysing this new form of "mode of conformity", labelled it "other-directed", at the beginning of the 1950's.

This new "social character", in order to feel situated, seeks to tune into significant signals coming from the others and the World: *<<The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it*

is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life>> (Riesman 1961).

This inclination toward people becomes the individual's main resource and in many cases it is the fundamental resource through which to construct his personal identity.

The men have always been immersed in relationships but before technology, the external contest of reference was more fixed and anchored to historically intertwined solid relationship. Riesman labels it as "inner- type directed.

For the inner-directed man a large part of the world coincided with the local community to which he belonged. In such type of traditional society the construction and maintenance of personal identity, aims essentially at maintaining stability and this reflects the solidity in the relationship with others; solidity given by the accordance with the social rules laid down by that society.

Therefore, in this constant context the individual could count on a consolidated set of rules and models and on the emotions connected to these rules and models in order to guarantee the constancy of their personal identity and, concurrently the stability of their inter-relationships.

Only within this social framework could we understand Kafka's work and the "logical complacency obsessive disorder".

"Letter to his father" tells the story of an unbalanced relationship between a too strong and tyrannous father and his weak son.

The father embodies the absolute authority whereas the son embodies the absolute psychological dependence, in which the sense of quiet, shame uncertainty and inadequacy become a stable traits of his style of personality.

A way offeeling in which the individual (the son) does not get rid of the Other (his father), who stably embodies a value system by which the individual/son is co-determined.

In the logical complacency obsessive personality (and related disorder) <<*The other albeit seen as a centre from which to demarcate oneself and correspond to, is also perceived as something that embodies the value system one must conform to. The significance of the other thus derives from the fact that it represents a stable embodiment of the value system through which the subject co-defines himself*>> (Arciero & Bondolfi 2009).

"You asked me recently why I claim to be afraid of you. As usual, I was unable to think of any answer to your question, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, and partly because an explanation of my fear would require more details than I could even approximately keep in mind while talking. And if I now try to give you an answer in writing, it will still be very

incomplete, because, even in writing, my fear and its consequences raise a barrier between us and because the vastness of material far exceeds my memory and understanding." ...

... "At that time, and throughout all time, what I really needed was encouragement. I was, after all, weighed down by your sheer bodily presence. I remember, for example, how we often undressed in the same bathing hut. I skinny, frail, fragile; you strong, tall, broad. Even inside the hut I felt a miserable specimen, and what's more, not only in your eyes but in the eyes of the whole world, because for me you were the measure of all things. But when we stepped out of the bathing hut before the people, I with my hand in yours, a little skeleton, unsteady and barefoot on the planks, afraid of the water, unable to copy your swimming strokes, which you, with the best of intentions, but actually to my profound humiliation, kept on demonstrating, then I would lose myself in despair and at such moments all my past failures come back to haunt me. I felt happiest when you sometimes undressed first and I could stay behind in the hut alone and delay the shame of showing myself in public until you finally came to see what I was doing and force me to leave the bathing hut. I was grateful to you for not seeming to sense my despair and besides, I was proud of my father's body. Incidentally, this difference between us remains much the same to this day." (Kafka 2011).

Whenever Franz is excited by something and he tries to share it, his father's reaction is always the same:

Condenscending air ("I've seen better"), sarcasm (if your thoughts are all here), annoyance (I've got other things on my minds), and "all these thoughts, seemingly independent of you, were from the beginning burdened with your belittling judgments" (Kafka 2011).

It is sufficient that Franz expresses kindness, admiration or simple interest for someone and that the father goes insulting that person without any respect for the judgement of the son.

"All these thoughts that seemed independent of you, were from the beginning burdened with your belittling judgments; for me to endure this and still to achieve the complete and lasting development of any thought was virtually impossible. I am not talking here of any sublime thoughts, rather of every little childhood undertaking. I had only to be happy about something or other, be inspired by it, come home and mention it, and your answer was an ironic sigh, a shaking of the head, a finger rapping the table: "Is that all you're so worked up about?" or "I wish I had your worries!" or "what a waste of time!" or "that's nothing!" ... Of course, one could not expect you to be enthusiastic about every childish triviality when you were in a state of worries. But that was not the point. The point was rather that, thanks to your antagonistic nature, you disappointed the child with such determination and principle, and further, your antagonism, accumulating material, was constantly intensified, until it become a permanent habit

even when your opinion was, for once, the same as mine; finally, these disappointments of the child were not the ordinary disappointments of life but, since they concerned you, the measure of all things, they struck me to the very heart. Courage, resolution, confidence or delight in this and that, could not last when you were against it or even if your opposition was merely to be assumed; and it was to be assumed in almost everything I did.”(Kafka 2011).

Crushed by his father personality, Kafka ends up becoming insecure: “I would probably become an unsociable and anxious man but from here to the point where I’m arrived, the path is much longer and darker... I had lost faith in replacing the same with an immense sense of guilt” (Kafka 2011).

Marriage becomes for Franz the only tool through which he attempts to gain independence from his father.

“Marriage certainly is the pledge of the most acute form of self liberation and independence.” ... “I would have a family, in my opinion the highest one can achieve, and so too the highest you have achieved; I would be your equal; all old and even new shame and tyranny would be mere history” (Kafka 2011).

A marriage that will never happen!

As we can see, Kafka is incapable of freeing himself from the supreme paternal judgement and his sense of guilt, shame and uncertainly will become a fixed trait of a way of being. This is the core theme of this type of personality here represented by Kafka.

The Other is seen as a source of authority that on the one hand embodies a value system through which to co-define itself and to which correspond, while on the other hand, at the same time, it represents the centre from which to demarcate itself in order not to feel crushed. In this Kafkaesque condition, both the autonomy and the proximity from the father/other become impossible.

And here the demarcation for too much invasiveness of the Other occurs by contrast, and this induces feelings of guilt or shame (related to the moral evaluation of self), worthlessness (related to oppositeness) because the Other is also a consensus system to which adhere to. And any condition that does not conform with these principles, engenders a sense of uncertainty that might take the form of doubt or self-blame. The immobility deriving from this can lead the subject to refocus on his body, leading to an eating disorder, but also hypochondria, dismorphia, trichotillomania and other self-injurious habits (e.g. skin-picking, skin-scratching, nail-biting, self-harm, etc.): but of all this will be not discussed here!

Acknowledgements: None.

Conflict of interest: None to declare.

References

1. Arciero G & Bondolfi G: *Selfhood, Identity and Personality Styles*. WILEY-BLACKWELL, 2009; 133-155.
2. Arciero G & Bondolfi G: *Sé, Identità e Stili di Personalità*. Bollati Boringhieri, 2012.
3. Kafka F: *Lettera al padre*. Einaudi, 2011: Translated by the author of the paper.
4. Kern S: *The culture of Time and Space*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983.
5. Riesman D: *The Lonely Crowd*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1961.
6. Riesman David: *La folla solitaria*. Società Editrice Il Mulino, 2009.
7. Von Kleist H: *Michael Kohlhaas (bilingual edition)*, MarsilioEditori, 2003.

Correspondence:

Immacolata d'Errico
psychiatrist and constructivist psychotherapist
Via Prospero Petroni 30, 70121 Bari, Italy
E-mail: immalibera@gmail.com; immaderrico@icloud.com