

*NARROWED FAMILY SPACES: INTERLOCKING COUPLES IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

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Summary. *Starting from a presentation of the phenomenon of intimate partner violence and of its various possible forms, this paper presents an overview of the most recent theoretical contributions on the topic, the dynamics of abuse in the couple and the main psychodynamic aspects that explain the possible manifestations and peculiarities of the effects of violence, both from the point of view of the abuser and the victim. Through the analysis of a life story, using two different measures, the authors focus their attention on the particular interlocking relationship of the couple that makes it difficult for the victim to pull himself or herself out of the perverse relationship and on the mechanisms of repairing and redesigning oneself and allow the victim to leave the partner and begin again after being abused.*

Key words: *couple, intimate partner violence, abuse, stalking, narration.*

The proliferation of female victimization in the couple (Adami, Basaglia, & Tola, 2002; Istat, 2007) has complicated socio-cultural roots. At the same time, it always assumes a shape of “relational training” (Hirigoyen, 2006, p. 97) and should be observed, case by case, in its specificities and redundancies. The psychological bonds which, generated or strengthened by

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the dynamics of maltreatment, succeed in keeping the victim in a destructive relationship are manifold.

In American and British scientific literature, the pattern of abusive behavior by one partner against another in a couple is generally indicated as “Intimate Partner Violence” (or IPV) and described as a many-sided behavioral strategy, characterized by more or less serious acts of violence of a sexual, psychological, physical, economical nature, all with the same aim: subdue the other by gaining control of the relationship, whether that relationship is still in existence or has been formally dissolved by separation or divorce. The different forms of intimate violence (physical, psychological, economical, sexual, etc.) insinuate themselves slowly into a couple’s relationship, sometimes following a perverse rhythm, and end up by destroying the victim’s existence by depriving it of the dimensions of space and sense, while time becomes both sterile and repetitive.

In 1979, Walker described the so-called cycle of violence for the first time, proposing a pattern which illustrated the characteristic repetitive rhythm of many cases of domestic violence. The pattern exemplifies the alternation of moments of tension followed by outbursts of aggressiveness, with an apparent interruption of the violence and a request for reconciliation. The latter is characterized by sorrowful pleas for forgiveness and convincing declarations of contrition, with the promise of a renewed idyllic relationship. However, this stage is only temporary and is motivated by the same fear of being abandoned and of losing control of the partner that will soon lead to a new explosion and the beginning of a new violent cycle.

“When the violence is deeply-rooted, the cycles repeat themselves in a spiral that in time quickens with growing intensity” (ibid p. 59), in this way the abuser “dictates the times of peace but also those of renewed fear” (Baldry 2006, p.37) giving rise to a deep distortion of the couple’s bonds through a drastic denial of reciprocity and of the difference personified by the other. Moreover, day by day, the maltreatment isolates and entangles the victim within a relationship that resembles more and more to an implosive nucleus impervious to a generative exchange with the outside world.

A peculiarity of couples in which one partner abuses the other is represented by what we might define as the perversion of intra and extra dyadic borders. We can often observe a dual alteration in interpersonal space directly connected to the dynamics of maltreatment and especially to the psychological conditioning that is used on the victim. On the one hand, we witness the reduction of psychological distance between the members of the couple until individual borders dissolve and psychological entanglement occurs. On the other hand, there is a hardening of the boundaries between the couple and other relational systems (family, social). This two-fold alteration causes the vital space of the victim to be contracted. His or her options, choices, relational, cultural and social fields are reduced. The victim’s world becomes restricted and suffocating until it implodes at its

nucleus: the couple's relationship. From here stems an inability to see alternative solutions to the continuation of the relationship with the abuser (Filippini, 2005), and that sort of "stubborn despair" (ibid p. 70) frequently observed in abused women. Some of them are absorbed by their efforts to save the relationship, in the hope of changing their partner.

Other limit contact with family and friends, avoiding the temptation to confide in others or make requests for help as soon as the fear that their partner's violence may be used against them, too, should they offer help. Finally, other women become extremely frail and experience a sort of a psychic non-differentiation from their partner, actually losing their own perception of themselves and of their surrounding environment (Ponzio, 2004). After making the abuser's point of view their own, they will attribute the causes of violence to themselves, to contingent factors or to people external to the couple, projecting the sin and evil outside the dyad.

Several studies (Filippini, 2005; Hirigoyen, 2006; Ponzio, 2004) have examined from a psychological-clinical point of view the "reasons for remaining" as specifically correlated to abuse in the couple. According to Filippini "the strongest ties are the direct effects of maltreatment" (2005, p. 72). Indeed, the author believes that it is actually the situation of abuse that keeps the woman alongside the abuser through the coping strategies that the situation makes her adopt in the previously described social isolation. From this point of view, addiction to violence and the distortions of the reality often noticeable in maltreated women can be interpreted as recurrent defensive mechanisms and the recognizable results of the process of victimization. Such phenomena is aimed at psychic survival become at the same time strong psychological bonds that hinder the woman from extricating herself from the bond and impede a real search for alternative solutions to the continuation of the rapport.

One of the strongest bonds is represented by making oneself the cause of the problem, which means being able to hope for a change through a change in one's own behavior. The conferral of responsibility to oneself has a defensive meaning and is certainly preferable, from a psychological point of view, to the awareness of senselessness and absolute unpredictability. Besides coinciding with the abuser's accusations, it protects the abused from the painful awareness of a reality that inflicts a deadly blow to the hopes placed in the relationship. The greater the effort has been to preserve the relationship, the greater the blow. In stories of female victimization, accepting the blame takes on a specific connotation if read in connection with the symbolic action of stereotypes of this kind. One cultural stereotype which is still widespread maintains that a woman can change a man and "save him" with her love and devotion. Many victimized women are driven by the dynamics abuse itself to make use of the behavioral pattern and the information referable to their own experience of socialization, frequently finding there, even today, symbolic elements, anecdotes and well-established

stereotypes that can more or less subtly bind them to tolerance. Other women, on the contrary, may have a family history characterized by maternal rebellion to the stereotypes of the female role and by the breaking up of the parental couple. For this reason, they may sometimes unconsciously attribute the wounds of their childhood to a betrayal of the female role and then try to save their relationship with their partner at all costs, trying, in a counter-dependent way, to succeed in the task in which their mother failed. The sense of guilt and the fantasies of the type “I will save you” feed an illusion of omnipotence which, in fact, by compromising the self-protective abilities of a woman, can prove lethal to her.

Having accepted to be directly involved in the relationship after the initial act of violence moves the limits of what, on an implicit level, is considered legitimate in a couple (Filippini, 2005). This forces the woman to reckon with a new image of herself that may be in absolute contrast with her previous convictions. When the abuser becomes the sole reference point for the victim, a real hetero-centricity is established and it almost completely absorbs the woman’s energies in an attempt to anticipate and adapt herself to her partner’s reactions of pleasure and displeasure. The loss of her own point of view and the acceptance of the abuser’s impressions entail the adoption of his criterion for the evaluation of her. The woman’s self-esteem is thus endangered by continuous attacks on her image and by experiencing again and again the failure of her efforts to avoid repeated abuse, with useless attempts to prevent the explosions or to establish a dialogue with her abuser.

The shame felt with the victim, one of the most paralyzing experiences among those that accompany abuse, may be connected, on the one hand, to the awareness of having chosen a man who later proved himself to be the wrong choice wrong, and/or not having succeeded in changing him. On the other hand, it may be connected to the fear of revealing to the outside world a new image of herself: that of a beaten and punished woman on whom perhaps may hang a further suspicion of inadequacy if the violence has been discussed outside the couple. One of the greatest sources of pain for abused women is the suspicion of guilt that insinuates itself even in cases in which the victim succeeds in maintaining great lucidity and resisting the attacks on her self-esteem. The victims who report their partners, who leave them or request a separation, often make such choices in an extreme attempt to exert pressure on their partners to change. At this stage, the aim is not so much to actually separate from their partner as to introduce an external normative intervention or the threat of one, will sanction the woman’s innocence and cause the partner to acknowledge his faults, removing the suspicion of guilt from the woman (Serra, 1999). It must not be forgotten, then, that in cases where the violence declines in a cyclical form (Hirigoyen, 2006; Walker, 1979), the victim repeatedly comes up against the illusion of having managed to rehabilitate her partner and, as a result, herself, too. In this kind of a relationship the negative aspects of the relationship are easily minimized

while the positive ones are maximized. The memory of violence is inhibited and/or relegated inside provisional parenthesis. All that feeds a steady quest for elements that can testify to the intrinsic goodness of her partner; it follows that a divided representation of the abuser and the relationship, where instead of the integration of positive and negative elements, we find the denial of negativity and a sort of magical belief in the periodical change/cancellation of the dark side of the abuser's personality.

Finally, among the reasons that explain the resistance of the victim to dissolve the relationship, must be mentioned the dread of the loss of all that the bond represents from a psychological point of view. Separation from one's partner is an significant emotional loss that implies a deep disappointment and the abandonment of a lifetime plan on which a lot is often invested and which implies many other losses (economical, social, routine and "tested" though dysfunctional home environments, etc.). Remaining, therefore, even in the case of violent relationships, can sometimes assume the psychological meaning of protection from an even more intolerable experience. There may also be real post-traumatic symptoms. The stress connected to protracted abuse and to the unpredictability of the attacks can indeed become chronic in a psycho-physiological state of constant alert, characterized by very considerable significant psychosomatic symptoms which can become extremely invalidating and even further endanger the woman's abilities to actively look for ways to escape the violence.

The choice to ask for help and extricate oneself once and for all from a destructive relationship is necessarily the result of an often very long path of elaboration during which awareness is built up. At the same time, it is necessary to identify and often create resources. Escaping from violence means mending torn lives and rebuilding sustainable areas of life where the wounded identity can be recovered.

The story of the violence: the symbolic-narrative reconstruction of a life history

The story that we have chosen to tell presents an example of victimization, and at the same time, of healing and redesigning oneself after the abuse one was subjected to in the couple. The narrative reconstruction has been worked out with the integrated use of two qualitative measures: an in-depth narrative interview, concerning the personal story of the woman, and the Family Life Space – FLS – (Gilli, Greco, Regalia, & Banzatti, 1992; Gozzoli & Tamanza, 1998), a graphic-symbolic test which offers the possibility to obtain a spatial representation of family relationships and those outside the family and of their reciprocal rapport.

The use of this specific tool within this study is justified by the hypothesis that FLS offers the chance to visualize the changes (restrictions, coercions, expansions, etc.) in the relational space of life perceived in stories scarred by abuse, and the specific characteristics of that relational space of life in correspondence with three temporal dimensions: the past - meant as the lapse of time in which the relationship with the abuser was in existence - the present and the imagined future. In this specific case, we hypothesize that the tool offers a graphic-symbolic visualization of the implosions of life space in stories of domestic violence and then of changes in that space in the present and imagined future in relation to the interruption in the experience of abuse.

First, we would like to thank Marta for her generosity, her courage and the chance that she offered us to tell the story of her life. Through the narrative threads of Marta's story some of the psychodynamic elements and the developmental tasks typical in cases of domestic violence against women will be underscored and discussed, focusing the point of view of the victim.

The story of Marta

Marta is a vital young woman. She is enterprising and full of dreams and plans. She studies acting with great passion and at the same time, she runs one of her family's clothing shops. At the age of 26, she meets Carlo, a thirty-year-old police officer, during a night out among friends. She is attracted by his elegance and his charm. Marta and Carlo begin to see each other regularly and Marta perceives that Carlo is not only attracted to her but that he also appreciates her independence, her interests, and her first roles in the theatre. After two months, Carlo spends all his free evenings with her and on the day when they first kiss, he confesses that he isn't really a police officer but a security guard. Today, Marta thinks that revelation was a small alarm bell but she underestimates its importance and decides to suspend her judgment. Their relationship becomes more and more intimate while a real crisis explodes in Marta's family. Marta's mother is having an extramarital affair and her husband has more and more misgivings. Moreover, the mother-daughter relationship, which has always been problematic and marked by coldness and emotional distance, has become openly hostile. Marta feels betrayed by her mother just as her father does. The idea of continuing to live in that house becomes intolerable. In a few months Carlo has become her confidant and her fiancé. She feels he understands her, he listens to her and she finds in him the support and empathy that she has never found in her former, short-lived relationships. Marta would like to go and find a place of her own, but although she can afford it, she knows that it would upset her father. She feels very fragile because of what her family is going through. So, one night Carlo proposes a solution: marriage.

Marta recalls the great intimacy that she shared with Carlo during the wedding preparations: they made plans and worked out all the details for the event. Eight months after their first meeting, they get married. But on her wedding day, Marta begins to have second thoughts. She wakes up with a sensation of general uneasiness and of extraneity and alienation. She realizes that getting married is an attempt to run away from the collapse of her family, but she doesn't have the courage to call everything off and so the wedding is celebrated.

Shortly thereafter, Marta finds out she's pregnant and shares her enthusiasm with Carlo, who is very caring. And yet during the second month of pregnancy, something dramatic happens: Marta and Carlo are having dinner. He drinks a little more wine than usual and starts talking about his mother-in-law. At a certain point, he begins to use extremely coarse language. Marta has always shared with him her negative feelings for her mother but hearing him talk this way hurts her and she becomes deeply irritated. Carlo uses an arrogant tone that Marta has never heard before. Among other things, he seems insinuate that Marta may behave like her mother and betray him. When she reacts and asks him to stop talking that way, he tips over the table and begins to beat her violently.

Marta is upset and bewildered; Carlo goes out to work as if nothing has happened. When he comes back in the morning, Marta says that she not want to stay with him anymore, he apologizes and asks for forgiveness on his knees. He starts to cry and blames his behavior on the stress at work and the recent, sudden changes in their lives. Marta thinks about her pregnancy, about the shame that she would feel if she admitted to her parents and friends that she has made the wrong choice. They had all told her not to get married in such a hurry. She decides then to stay with Carlo and try to make her marriage work. The memory of her first son Giulio's birth is in contrast with the previously-narrated episode. Carlo is present at the birth and encourages his wife. He is the one who holds the baby as soon as it is born. But the darkness returns after a short time: Giulio is a new-born who, like many babies, often cries all night, but Carlo accuses Marta of not being able to calm the baby down.

And so, those bitter attacks on her role and competence as a mother begin in Marta's life, too. They mirror her own doubts about her abilities. She has the fragility of someone who has just begun to build her parental identity and the attacks strike a blow to her self-esteem, precisely in the process of identification which is pivotal in the stage of the cycle life in which she finds herself. One night, only two weeks after childbirth, Carlo comes drunk into the bedroom where Marta is nursing Giulio. He takes hold of the child and he throws him into the cradle. That night Marta is subjected to the first of innumerable marital rapes. When Marta tries to fight back, it is worse. She learns then to be as passive as a mannequin every time it happens. After only a few months, she is pregnant again. She says that Mara, her daughter is

born after being raped. Despite everything, Marta is ashamed and is careful not to let anyone suspect the violence she's being subjected to and she succeeds for a long time:

"I hid everything very well... namely, I never left home looking disheveled. I always looked perfect. The evening before I had got slapped and I was full of bruises. I covered the bruises, put on make up. My hair was always in place (...). I took pains with my personal appearance because I was afraid someone would notice (...)"

When little Mara is 3 months old, Marta enrolls both children at a day-care center. She wants them to find a serene environment in which to grow up for most of the day. Marta blames alcohol for her husband's violence and she thinks she can convince him to give up drinking by engaging in a continuous dialogue every time that he is sober. And yet, even in the moments in which he is sober, Carlo refuses the idea that drinking is a problem nor does he admit that he is an alcoholic. Moreover, in those moments he claims that the cause of his sexual violence is Marta's frigidity. So a sense of guilt is added to the shame and chaos created by the alternation of moments of peace and intimacy, on the one hand, and episodes of extreme violence on the other.

From the beginning of the marriage the space of Marta's family life of Marta resembles more and more a maelstrom which cancels out any attempt to reestablish a healthy life balance and hinders every generative bond with the outside. This state of things is figuratively represented in the FLS that regards this stage of life (figure n.1).

Marta is at the centre of the circle close to Carlo and their two children. The family nucleus coincides with the psychological center of Marta's life. The rest of space is completely saturated by numerous events, for the most part, particularly ferocious episodes of violence, which surround the nucleus and give the impression of coming between it and the external borders of the circle. In the verbalization, Marta tells us that next to the few positive events (for instance, the birth of her children and her work experiences) she could put + and - signs in order to make visible the impression that every positive event was punctually ruined and annulled by violence. All the people external to the nuclear family are marked outside the circle, forming a sort of an external half-moon. Each person orbits around the life space of Marta at the same distance and it is as if they were projected like "rays" of bonds which have become weak or even conflicting. On the subject, Marta says that her relationships have become like that because of the underlying secret about the violence she has been subjected to and the strain to hide it. It is surprising then that Marta claims that communication is paradoxically good with Carlo, as is confirmed also in the verbalization:

"Apart from the periods of conflict, there was often great complicity: we made plans together, we got along well with each other. despite the violence, we always talked a lot, it is paradoxical... the problem was alcohol and

even when there was violence, we communicated because I always tried to make him understand what he had done or was doing”.

As for many other women subjected to abuse, for Marta, too, at this stage. Her husband is also the only conversation partner, the only “other” with whom she tries to reason and discuss what happens at home. It is surprising how Marta draws herself and the husband with an identical symbol. After having represented herself with a small circle that contains the number 1 inside, she draws another number 1 near it and then outlines another small circle containing the number 1 again, identical to hers, side by side, this time with the number 2, pointing out that the symbol she has just drawn represents her husband. The result is a mirror image where the two members of the couple appear graphically identical, reflecting the mutual absorption within the implosive nucleus in which the violence takes place.

When Marta thinks of herself inside that maelstrom graphically represented in the FLS of her past, she again sees a woman involved in a real struggle to defend herself from continuous attacks on her very identity.

Carlo’s violence and jealousy become worse when Marta receives a contract as actress for a private television station. Every night Marta comes back home, finds Carlo drunk and the children left to fend for themselves. Invariably, he accuses her of having lovers at the workplace and then starts beating her violently in front of the children. He even threatens her repeatedly with a gun. One night, during a violent explosion he kills the family dog that was barking at his shouting.

Marta starts to be afraid to leave the children alone with Carlo. She goes to the family shop less and less often and she feels obliged to leave her job as an actress. It is actually a colleague at work to whom she communicates her decision, and above all, the reason for this, who suggests she should ask a domestic violence program in Milan for help. When Marta goes there after 8 years of marriage, she realizes that she cannot accept Carlo’s violence any longer. The program helps her to recognize the extreme gravity of the situation and the fact that she and her children are risking their lives. She knows they must get out of the situation as soon as possible. They suggest that she and the children move to the shelter at once, but she refuses this solution. However, she stays in contact with the center and rents a small house outside town where she moves with her children soon after her husband assaults her again. Nonetheless, her choice still has not a definitive and decisive value; her goal is to put herself and her children in a safe place, but at the same time she would like to force Carlo to get treatment, expressing her willingness to “reunite the family” if he decides to do it. The request for a consensual separation that Marta’s lawyer sends Carlo has a double significance in this phase: on the one hand, one of auto-protection and on the other hand, one of pressure on her partner.

But Carlo once again behaves ambiguously. He seems to accept the consensual separation willingly. He communicates through a lawyer that he

understands Marta's choice and he admits his guilt. Then he asks to see his children occasionally. Marta is perplexed; she does not know if it is a good idea to tell Carlo her new address. In the end, however, she agrees. But one night Carlo appears outside Marta's gate. He says he wants to come in and see the children. When Marta refuses, he becomes even more aggressive and heaps insults on her until she is forced to call the police. When the police arrive, Carlo tells them he is their colleague. He claims that Marta doesn't ever let see him his children. But he agrees to follow them back to the police station. However, no crime has been committed, so they can not detain him. That night Carlo goes back to Marta's house and he fires his gun fourteen times, all aimed at her family who have come to help her in the meantime. Fortunately, no one is hurt. Carlo runs away but after two days he turns himself in. He receives a 12-year prison term for multiple counts of attempted murder. Today Marta recalls the moment in which he fired the gun as "a paradoxical release". She says that during the FLS (figure n.1), where that narrowly avoided massacre represents the final event (n.32) that closes the maelstrom. Today Marta rereads the dramatic episode and attributes to it a double meaning: it represents the height of violence and end of illusions, on the one hand, and the matrix of her rebirth, on the other hand. Later, Marta is advised by the shelter to the Milan area. Leaving everything behind and moving to another region means giving up everything she has built in years of work, but this time Marta does not hesitate. In Sicily she begins working as a maid and after a few months, she decides to set up her own cleaning company. She looks for financing and possible subsidies for female entrepreneurial activity. She succeeds in forming a small company which grows fast. In that period she meets a man with whom begins a relationship where she finds support and protection. From that rapport, Stella is born when Marta is 44 years old. The new pregnancy marks the beginning of a new course even more clearly, though the relationship with the new partner begins to deteriorate after a few years. Today Marta continues living with this man, but their relationship is characterized by a strong emotional distance. She feels his presence as something negative in the space of her family life and she verbalizes it during the FLS of the present (figure n.2) where she places him outside it... Marta locates the psychological center of her present in the bond with her three children: Giulio and Mara, little more than teenagers, and Stella, who today is 5 years old. The FLS of the present confirms this centrality.

The space of family life is now filled up with new elements: job satisfaction, a good relationship with her children, the birth of Stella, felt as an event in the present, the choice to begin to study acting again and the new bond with the theater (to underline the current relevance of parental and professional-cultural areas as the main sources of identify in Marta's present). Alongside these, she indicates her desire to break the bond with her current partner and the dissatisfaction in her difficult relationship with her

mother. She also mentions her dream of a new love - a hope that gives life to the present and counters the sense of loneliness that Marta talks about while drawing some friends outside the circle. Her mother and partner again form, as they did in the drawing of the past, a half-circle outside the boundaries of the space of life. It is precisely on the boundary that Marta places the memory of what Carlo subjected her to. but she defines it as a memory of pain rather than resentment, saying that the fact her ex-husband in prison makes her feel safe. Immediately afterwards, Marta expressed her desire to draw graphically Carlo (as a person and so using a small circle as a symbol) inside the circle: she places his symbol above herself and her children without tracing any kind of communication, but commenting as follows:

“Carlo must be placed there because otherwise everything in the present loses sense, everything in my life today is a consequence of Carlo... leading me to positive developments, making me understand many things.”

This particular graphic choice seems to indicate the accomplishment of a process of elaboration that today allows to Marta to integrate the representation of her traumatic past into her present, rebuilding the continuity of herself in the symbolic narration created through the drawing (notice how Marta, disregarding the instructions freely chose to draw a person, Carlo, even though the task requires her to trace significant events, groups and institutions). Today Marta does not need to hide the past; on the contrary, the representation of herself is strengthened in the present by her awareness of having overcome numerous difficulties and of having managed to build a new present on the rubble of ten years of abuse.

Marta believes that what saved her was her fighting spirit and finds in her desire to “continue to struggle” her strong point. In the drawing of the future (figure n. 3) she represents her desire that her children acquire greater psychological autonomy, placing them outside the circle and graphically representing her wish not to be at the center of responsibilities anymore, while continuing to be a reference point for them.

While completing the drawing, Marta describes the meaning of this graphic choice:

The border of her personal life space is, in this drawing, a more permeable limit, through which positive exchanges take place with all external persons except for her mother, with whom Marta would like to interrupt all communication in the future, as she feels deeply betrayed by her. Inside the circle Marta puts herself at the centre and a new hypothetical partner “the prince charming I’ve dreamed of”. Then there is the fear of growing old but also her plans which she calls her “engines” and imagines they will be carried out in the future. The inner space of the circle now appears to be a generative heart, open to the outside and, at the same time, independent. The people represented outside the circle form, once again, an external semicircle. The implosive and barricaded interior of the past and the defensive interior of the present change in the future drawing into a more

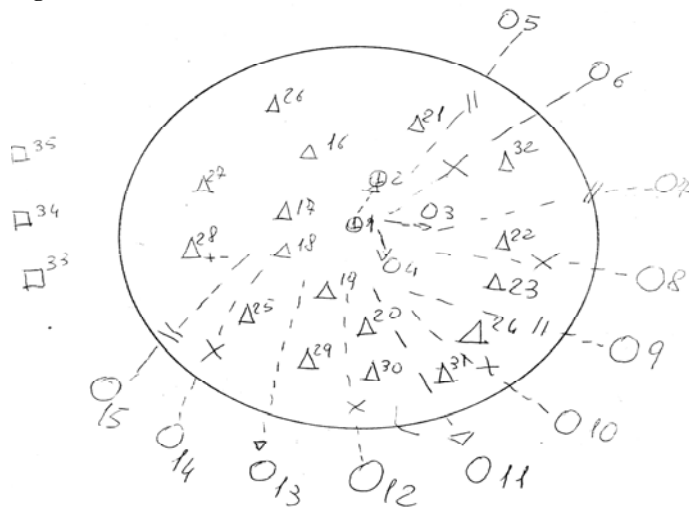
and more vital space, capable of expanding to the outside, through explorative experiences (journeys, new working experiences, participation in new groups, etc) and through the “rays” of positive relationships, able to nourish and enrich the interior in a dimension of reciprocity. The external semicircle formed by graphic elements traced outside the circle no longer appear as a parallel orbit, separated and far from Marta’s life space. On the contrary, it is a space that communicates continuously with the inside. Outside the circle Marta also places her fear that Carlo, once he is released from prison, may come back to threaten her life and those of her children. However, Marta defines this fear as “something to face and cope with serenely” and represents it as a problem that will not succeed in invading and penetrating the space of her family life.

Conclusions

To talk about oneself means to create sense and to generate connections among numerous events in one’s life and different images of oneself (Formenti, 1998). The autobiographic structure can be defined as “a story whose language is one of continuity and discontinuity of a certain life course” (Formenti, 1998, p. 104). For Bruner the very creation of oneself is “a narrative art bound to memories” (2002, p. 73). A task that appears to us completely similar to the challenges of redesigning of oneself that women subjected to the trauma of domestic violence must face. In this sense, reading their stories offer us the chance to see the paths of re-building one’s life: the gestures and narrative strategies through which women who are victims of domestic violence re-launch their lives in the present, starting from a re-reading of their past and by the elaboration of the sense of their personal story.

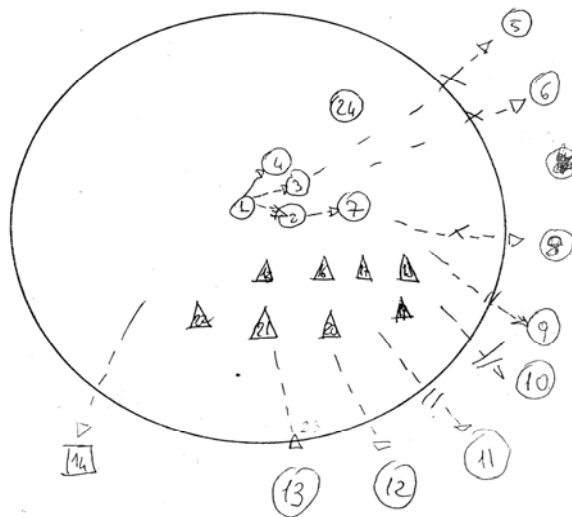
In the symbolic-narrative reconstruction of Marta’s story it is possible to see the lines of personal empowerment. Marta has been capable of building a generative power, an alternative to the paralysis of impotence which she experienced in the relationship with her partner for years and to the uncertainty of omnipotence, the dangerous illusion of being able to save the other from his violence. A life space coerced and colonized by violence was thus able to open up and become filled with positive elements and new connections, underlining how the “post-traumatic rehabilitation” after abuse can be imagined, first of all, as the reinvention and re-appropriation of a sustainable, productive life space, from which it is possible to launch the narrative structure of the future.

Figure n. 1. The Past



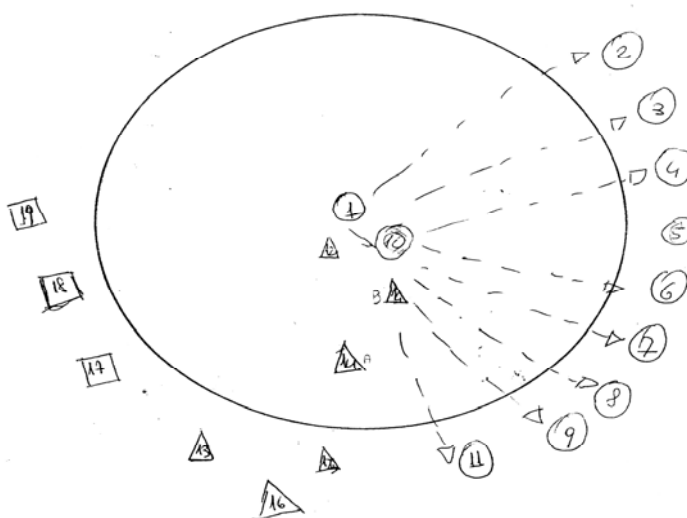
- 1) Marta; 2) Carlo; 3) Son (Giulio); 4) Daughter (Mara); 5) Father; 6) Mother; 7) Cousin; 8) Friend; 9) Friend; 10) Brother; 11) Mother-in-law; 12) Brother-in-law; 13) Brother-in-law; 14) Sister-in-law; 15) Nephews; 16) First episode of violence during pregnancy; 17) Psychological violence; 18) Physical violence; 19) Threats with weapons; 20) Killing of the dog; 21) Carlo takes the baby Giulio and throws him into the cradle; 22) Attempts to kill Carlo; 23) Suicide attempt; 24) Desire to die; 25) Carlo's blackmail, 26) Births of children; 27) Carlo's decision to stop drinking and go to the center for alcoholics but then he changes his mind ; 28) Contracts with television station; 29) Abortion of third pregnancy; 30) Brother-in-law's suicide; 31) Discovery of Carlo's family history; 32) Carlo shooting spree; 33) Theater Troupe; 34) Shelter for battered women; 35) Colleagues at television station.

Figure n.2 The Present



1) Marta; 2) Son (Giulio); 3) Daughter (Mara); 4) Daughter (Stella); 5) Mother; 6) Current Partner; 7) Father; 8) Friend; 9) New mother-in-law; 10) New father-in-law; 11) Brother; 12) Friend; 13) Friend; 14) Theater Troupe; 15) Negative relationship with her mother; 16) Good relationship with her children; 17) Stella's birth; 18) Satisfying work at cleaning company; 19) Beginning to act in theater again ; 20) Desire to leave current partner; 21) Desire to meet "Prince Charming"; 22) Relationship good again with Mara; 23) Memories of Carlo's violence 24) Carlo.

Figure n. 3. The Future



1) Marta; 2) Son (Giulio); 3) Daughter (Mara); 4) Daughter (Stella); 5) Mother; 6) Father; 7) Current Partner; 8) Friend; 9) Friend; 10) New partenr; 11) A good friend (desire to meet one); 12) Fear of aging; 13) Fear that Carlo will return; 14 a.) Plans for the future; 14 b.) A new house in the countryside; 15) Good relationship with the children; 16) Starring role in a movie; 17) Theater Troupe; 18) Actor's agency for extras for the cinema; 19) Women's Aid Group for Battered Women.

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