

*Psychodrama and the elaboration of violence in the feminine world**

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Summary. *Thanks to the use of psychodrama, I have been able to help a woman abused by an alcoholic mother.*

The abuse involved physical violence, which left traces on her body, and also “invisible” violence perpetrated through her mother’s indifference, coldness and unwillingness to give her tenderness and have a loving relationship. All her past experiences made her “see” a man’s love only when expressed in the form of severity, strength and forced obedience. That is why she chose a tough, decided, violent partner who subjected her to physical violence. Her idea of a “real man” did not correspond to that of a gentle, quiet and respectful one. She did not know, nor could understand, any other idea of love but the one she had experienced as a child.

Key words: *Gender violence, Mother-Daughter, Death-Regeneration.*

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The use of psychodrama in dealing with gender violence is justified by the phenomenological horizon in which Moreno's psychodrama is employed. Phenomenology is a valid method to explore subjectivity, to reveal anguish as a sign of subjective reality which results in a cathartic operation for the listener too.

A strong meeting point between psychodrama and Moreno's ideas of encounter, tele, play, spontaneity, creativity (Moreno, 1946), is the lapidary thesis of Merleau-Ponty (1945), which is quoted in an almost obsessive way in his studies on Phenomenological Psychopathology. According to this, phenomenology can be practiced and recognized as a method or a style and exist as a movement even before reaching a full intentional conscience.

According to both phenomenology and Moreno's theory, a therapeutic relationship can be defined as "a continuous opening", a continuous transition, narrated life whose pages always contain something new, never heard of by anyone before.

This novelty cannot be perceived in the moment of diagnosis, or classification, or labeling, which are necessary, yet non-sufficient moments for comprehension.

In the moment of pure knowledge, one risks some slight traces of denial of any actual otherness, that is of the interpersonal dimension.

Phenomena that appear in single meetings cannot be observed and considered in a neutral, ahistorical way, they cannot be reduced to a list of objective data; their full meaning is revealed only to the one who is vividly touched by them, that is to the person that wants to catch the subject in his/her authentic relational mode, by respecting the secret, which sometimes cannot be revealed or else is unutterable.

Yet such behavior does not legitimize "purely subjective knowledge" for it would depend on the individual and almost arbitrary disposition and taste of the clinician: that is "that subject" can only be understood, thanks to the empathy, by "another subject", who gets involved and is able to look beyond the objectifying and classifying moment.

The Case

This is the case of a married woman with two children, aged 8 and 4, who are often looked after by their grandmother. She is able to see a psychotherapist when she presents physical symptoms that make her

psychiatrists decide she needs psychotherapeutic help in addition to taking medication.

From the first meetings it is evident that she needs help in a moment of her life she perceives as particularly critical and difficult.

A's eyes are hidden behind thick spectacles, her half-smile looks a bit stereotyped, partly doubtful and partly timid, her whole face shows her mystery that is also her symptom and seems to me to be an appeal, an event, a direct call.

I hold out my hand, she holds hers out and entrusts me with it as if entrusting me with a lifeless thing.

Here takes place what Moreno calls an encounter (Moreno, 1946) that is the opportunity to look at the other person through his/her own eyes, in order to be able to discard the objectivity of "the case" and take in the experience of a relationship with the person who is in front of you.

Anne has seen a psychiatrist many times before and has visited various emergency wards complaining of pains in her chest, stomach, difficulties in breathing and dreading an unlikely pregnancy.

Her body is bent, her knees floppy, her clothes are neat and clean yet at the same time unkempt and anonymous. She can't take it anymore but she can't say what "this" is.

She doesn't know what to say, but I know that in what she cannot say there is all that for her that is a symbol, a will, a decision, a hope, an act of freedom and courage, the solitude, the silence, the You and the unrepeatable realities and relationships, that is to say the existence with its traits of uniqueness and irreversibility.

Her father has accompanied her and waits outside. Her family consider her unable to come to town by herself from her village which is about 30 km away, even if she has a driving license and a technical high school degree in foreign languages, which she received at the age of 22 for she had to start working when she was 18.

Our first sessions are spent discussing how much pain she has experienced in the past few weeks: «It is inexplicable, she doesn't lack for anything», she keeps on repeating what her family are used to saying.

She too is only capable of talking about "the outside" and can't go any further, she is incapable of talking about herself: it is as if her malaise cannot be explained as a real state or condition but it is imposed on her against her own resistance. She can no longer set goals and account for them.

Since it is very difficult to carry out a thorough examination only by using symbolic and verbal instruments, I suggest we should proceed in the therapy by using psychodrama in its "just you and me" version, as a

monodrama (Wieser, 2012) without the presence of the group, so that we can act freely without being embarrassed.

Technically this means making use of spontaneous playing to act out a precise situation the person experienced in the past.

This technique brings out in the present, interactions and emotions that took place previously and drops all the resistance in order to face the situation which is being acted out (Leutz, 1985). What emerges in Anne's case is mainly the interaction with her mother first, and, later, her knowledge about her.

To quote Zoja (2010): «In a woman the play repeats the being. In a man the being repeats the play» (p.92).

On the stage, I invite her to take a chair and make her "mother" sit on it. Then I ask her to take up her mother's role, that is to become her mother. Which sounds impossible at first.

Monodrama allows Anne to get to know who is inhabiting her inner world. She gets to know a mother that has sent her mixed messages of hate and love, which have made her become a chained slave.

She meets her father who seems to be very tender and loving towards her, but also very strict and authoritative. He doesn't allow his daughter to have needs, tastes and values that differ from his own. She has also chosen a similar partner, strong, violent and aggressive with whom she has established a relationship characterized by severity, strength, and forced obedience. Her idea of "real man" does not even take into consideration a kind, respectful one. She is thus abused by her husband too.

She also meets her real needs: to be fed and feed, to be loved and love. What characterizes the development of a person never appears; an adaptable and unaffected personality seems to be miles away (Moreno, 1940).

The only thing she was allowed to do herself was to give birth but the care of her children has been taken up by her mother who doesn't consider her capable of looking after them.

Anne is not able to transform herself from a neglected daughter into a giving mother.

Through monodrama, Anne weaves her tapestry and reveals, on the fabric of her adulthood, the picture of her childhood. She sees herself as a lost child she has to find, a distant stranger who grows up in a toxic environment while she learns that life repeats itself, that pain can be endured and forgotten, that you cannot and mustn't do anything different.

The empathetic climate, the informal setting, the availability of her body, allows her to talk about herself easily enough and to reveal herself: an abused woman. Her mother, incapable of existing outside her husband's

rules, incapable of possessing the man, becomes self- alienated, and finds consolation in alcohol. Her daughter becomes her love and hate, esteem and fear bond. Anne can only exist as her mother's double.

Due to her mother's alcohol abuse, Anne has been subject to severe beating and constraints since a very young age. Her mother exerts physical violence which leaves traces on her body, but what hurts her the most is the subtle and invisible violence, the lack of affection, the sense of non- belonging, the solitude she experiences «the straitjacket of non- relationship» (Ravasi Bellocchio, 2012, p.38), her incapability of having a physical and psychological perception of herself different from the way her mother sees her, her obstinate affection for her mother, a desperate search for love, the impossible love that forced her to give in to her mother's will.

In the course of a session, Anne appears to be particularly suffering and silent, due to the fact that her mother had reproached her just before she left for the meeting, so I decide to invite her to join a group session.

In a psychodrama group, Anne will be enabled to bring out the whole history of the symptom.

All that can happen thanks to the presence of a group, whose members are defined by Moreno "Io ausiliari" («auxiliary egos»), that is the patient's extensions that represent people who really exist or she has imagined in her existential drama (Moreno, 1946, p.31).

Moreover, the Unutterable gains dignity inside the group: all that a person is cannot be translated into words and what cannot be said tends to be "delegated" to body-language. The body-language becomes the alter-ego (literally "another self". In this context it means that the body becomes able to communicate and show what words cannot express).

That is the language of the experienced body, the look, the tone of voice, the silence, the gestures, the mimicry, the way of moving, are often the reference point from where the staging can start. The experienced body clears the way for the embodied conscience, that is the awareness, the insight.

In the group, Anne plays various roles, sometimes suffering, yet this allows her to get a larger view of reality, that enables her to see a possible change. Due to new experiences through the other, that is through the exchanging of roles, she encounters her original infamy that made it's way into the little girl's mind and still takes up room in the woman's heart, that is the idea that her unforgivable guilt is "her being born", her being or what she is.

When she encounters the innermost part of her suffering, she can admit having a friend in her childhood and she starts re-living her friendship with

Death, which she has perceived as a safe harbor, a listening place, a pact made in favor of life.

On the stage she, now a child, begs death not to listen to her mum when she asks to be taken away for she is tired of a life she sees as deeply wrong.

The daughter hears her mum's prayer and she can but beg Death in silence and with eyes full of tears as when one implores somebody that is powerful but can also be good.

Without her mum, her suffering would become intolerable; she secretly prays Death will not to listen to her mum, and let her stay a while longer. Death appears to the little girl somewhat milder than mum and this relationship will be one of the most difficult things to change.

According to Ravasi Bellocchio (2012) «Mothers are not simply mothers. But the unconscious depth of “the maternal” which we are made of transforms mothers into “something mysterious and terrible, when the cleft opens up, at the bottom of our personal abyss» (pp. 37-38).

By building her resistance against the visible and invisible violence coming from her mother first and then from her husband, in an attempt to rebel in her role of passive victim, in her almost eager avidity of life, Anne happens to use the same methods as the aggressor. She lives scenes where she becomes strong, incredibly strong, she becomes generous, but of a generosity that borders on control of the other, she becomes cooperative but her cooperation sounds like servility.

The presence of the group members, auxiliary egos, gives the possibility to act out physical actions made by an auxiliary ego against the other, using the body. Anne often chooses to fight against male members and, by doing so, she becomes aware of her own physical strength.

She stands out against something and realizes that nothing irretrievable happens and that one does not necessarily have to put up with everything.

She slowly starts taking in her own needs and realizes that they belong to her and are different from what her father liked and wanted her to do.

By gaining confidence with spontaneity-creativity she destroys all her childhood beliefs that one can only accept reality, that one has to forget and above all, that life cannot be changed.

The changing process begins, she starts setting targets, setting up possible goals that are free and not automatically denied. Her strength becomes determination.

The children have now become hers and receive her affection. They now appear to her as a beacons of love, care, warmth, energy, work and effort.

As soon as her “original fracture” (Testoni, 2008) starts to unravel it becomes pressing for her to take full charge of herself, including her affective state and sexuality. Her past experiences want to regain meaning.

All that would not have been accessible to spoken words, but it becomes possible through affection and emotions.

«What are emotions?» That’s what the woman asks when, having to cope with all that, she finally bursts into tears.

She still has to discover her emotionality in its full range of implications, she still has to get to know and handle it.

The almost cosmic experience that in psychodrama stands for the theoretical basis of the double, brings out her strict relationship with her mother, her being like her and her desire to be like her. Later this discovery makes her realize that she runs the risk of becoming like her.

The evolution due to her group, her being seen as a helpless and vulnerable little girl has enabled her to define herself as a human being who can always be vulnerable but only sometimes and helpless, with different grades of intensity that vary according to the different misfortunes she experiences.

Anne gradually builds up a certain power to “see” the world through her own eyes: death must be accepted, it mustn’t be begged for, it does come at the end but it is not the aim of life.

By setting herself free from dependence, from her expecting someone or something outside to grant her life, the choice for autonomy that is gradually building up inside her rouses a series of fears because it is associated with the idea of abandon. Her desire to break free makes her conscious of her wish to be loved, but the lack of her mother’s love makes her assume a masculine attitude in her relationships. She now tries to change her husband and create a new relationship, rather than confront him with it, but after some struggling she ends up losing him.

Conclusion

People are not and need not become all the same, however every person is entitled to have a subjective right which is the same for everyone. That is to say a right that respects and values the differences, especially those related to sexes .We therefore have to understand and modify the socio cultural paradigm that regulates our subjective rights.

However, we cannot achieve social justice which is capable of taking into due consideration all the possible differences, above all the sexual

ones, without changing our idea of the truth and values that administer social order.

We do not simply need to eat, drink, dress and have somewhere to stay; we need more.

I realize that Anne's mind is void of what it means to be a woman. Food, love, sexuality and play are also needs that go together and that need attention.

As for me a woman and a psycho-dramatist, it is in the transparent uniqueness of my clinical procedural experience that such a regeneration can find the only criterion for clearing the questionable or debatable (referred to women and genre violence) in order to reach the essential.

The essential thing for any human being, and in particular for a woman, is to set herself free from the duality of victim/perpetrator to become a complete human being who is even capable of helping other human beings, in particular other women in similar situations.

There is no hope of salvation,
If other evils present themselves,
Before the old ones are removed

(Euripides Medea, p.110)

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