

Protagonists through drama^{*}

Paola Pellegrino[§], Tiziana Russo[°]

Summary. *The following article deals with an innovative intervention of “empowering psychodrama” specifically addressed to women that have been victims of violence or are still living in situations of domestic violence. In particular, some features of this intervention, named Building Resilience, seem to be well-suited to making the women aware of their personal and social resources; so, they can revise their past experiences and are helped to actively and positively reorganize their own life. Some of these features are: the group dimension, the possibility of experiencing new points of view, the analogical and symbolic dimension that help the “practice of spontaneity”, the setting within the framework of a women association, the net working, some parallel individual psychological sessions, the presence of two psychologists.*

Key words: *Domestic violence, building resilience, empower, psychodrama*

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[§]Psychologist, psychodramatist. Association Donne & Futuro onlus, Via Barbaroux 31, 10121 Turin, Italy. E-mail: pellegrino.paola@gmail.com

[°]Psychologist, psychodramatist. Association Donne & Futuro onlus, Via Barbaroux 31, 10121 Turin, Italy. E-mail: tiziana.erre@gmail.com

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Psychodrama can be immensely powerful and life-changing (Gausseau & Gasca, 1991); specifically, women victims of violence are guided to remember and redefine their past experiences by using wider perspectives they can actually experience first hand.

Psychodramatic techniques can help these women become aware that they play an active role in the maintenance of intimate partner violence as well that they would be able to structure relational patterns alternative to dependent and violent ones.

Building resilience can be defined as an intervention of “empowering psychodrama” addressed to women that have been victims of violence or are still living situations of domestic violence. The main purpose of this intervention is to promote a sense of psychophysical well-being and personal safety; to encourage relationships and sense of belongings; to promote recognition of their own needs and emotions; to develop awareness of personal and social resources; to develop assertiveness, creativity, spontaneity; to encourage development of an internal locus of control; to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence; to encourage trust in future changing. Methodologies used are sociodrama (during the warming-up) and analytic psychodrama (jungian) and their techniques: role reversal, dubbing, mirroring, virtual scenes.

The intervention is addressed to a small number of women already supported by “Donne & Futuro onlus” association (Turin); each of them have already attended some (from 4 to 20) individual psychological sessions. The first cycle of seven meetings enabled the women to become “confident” of both other members and psychodramatic techniques; at the end of first cycle, involved women felt belongings to the group and they have asked us another cycle of meetings.

Obviously, we are completely aware that a single cycle of seven or eight meetings is insufficient to reach our clinical objectives; we believe that more cycles of psychodramatic sessions are necessary not only to support these women for a longer period but also to allow new members to join our empowering psychodrama group.

Additionally, we believe that during the psychodrama cycles some individual psychological sessions are needed as well, in order to fully deal with what they experienced during the group interventions. We would like to point out another critique of Building Resilience’s general plan is fortnightly meetings in order to make women’s participation possible (on the one hand women still involved in violent relationships are very influenced by their partner’s control and moods and, on the other hand, women who are trying to rebuild their life and their independence have to cope with trials, managing childcare, everyday planning and they live up to

social expectations and family connections with a lot of psychological and material efforts¹⁷). As a matter of fact, every meeting has been confirmed via text messages, in order to remind each woman.

What about the strong points of Building resilience? Because of both the characteristic setting (within the framework of an association whose mission is to help women victims of violence and their children leave a violent situation and to promote their psychophysical well-being and their social and professional integration) and the net working with the other association's professionals and volunteers, we can use a global view of women's personal way (social, legal, housing developments) and we can have more instruments to sustain women's emancipation. Indeed, another important positive point is that Building Resilience plan at the same time two psychologists who alternatively conduct and observe group dynamics; participant observer can also take part during psychodrama plays, for example with suggestions to conductor or dubbing.

Although first intervention was short, we have already observed some gradual developments and changes in the women; for example, one young woman decided to leave her husband after eight years of violent relationship. In the first part of intervention, she looked really ambivalent, unhopeful, "paralyzed" and she used to excuse and "protect" her perpetrator (e.g. she hid her husband's behaviour from her parents and from her mother-in-law); afterwards, also because of having the opportunity to compare with others experiences similar to her own, she wasn't affected anymore by her husband's false promises and she was able to leave the cycle of violence at last, by using her own resources (she fled to safety by seeking refuge in one of her friend's house).

After a lot of resistance, another woman (passive-aggressive and deeply identified with the victim role) could play the aggressor role as well, beginning to foresee her responsibility and the complexity of the situation; furthermore she was able to take some small initiatives (e.g. she asked legal counselling about her marriage rights) and, during a sociodrama play, she felt spontaneous «for the first time after a very long time», according to her own words.

Women that already left their perpetrator, like both the other participants, would just like to «leave their past behind rapidly and to begin again everything in a different way»; because of this "magic belief", they are often at risk of ending up again in a violent relationship and, as a

¹⁷ We cannot forget that a lot of victims of violence report PTSD symptoms, as well.

consequence, of becoming more and more depressed and isolated or to become aggressors themselves (for example, towards other men or with their own children). Psychodrama can help them to reframe their own experiences, to remember their past mistakes and to learn from them, by linking them to internalized relational patterns and by underlining their autonomy and their resources and potentialities, at the same times.

According to the literature (Herman, 1992), we think that just through the group support experience, women that are victims of violence can not only overcome isolation, shame and stigma (thanks to meeting with others that have experiences similar to their own) but also rebuild personal power and create new social ties, both previously destroyed by the violence cycle.

Because of the long time women take to come out from the cycle of violence (Walker, 2000) group intervention could be more appropriate to effectively support their emancipation than just individual psychological intervention (that is also less economically sustainable); furthermore, for women who have already left the perpetrator, empowering psychodrama could prevent the establishment of new violent relationships and could improve their parental self-efficacy and competence.

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