

## **Bulimic images. Interpersonal rereading of a dynamic of a Photolanguage© group**

*Nicoletta Calenzo, Luciano Gheri*

### **Abstract**

The Photolanguage revealed to be an instrument able to stimulate a dialogue among people closed up in the silence of their own experience. Preceding studies and clinical experiences demonstrated its strength in providing a container for the emotions emerging in group paths. This important feature of it permitted us to use the instrument respecting its own rules, experiencing a “new pair of glasses” to read its dynamics: the psychoanalytic interpersonal pattern. Listening to the world of images means listening to elementary sensations they cause “in the here and now” giving voice to the contents of one’s own experience. The photo images and the following comments are, for us interpersonalists, the metaphor of the relation which works between the therapist (parental figure) and the group participants (children). The therapist plays the role which is attributed to him/her in the participants’ phantasies, but recording what is said about the images in the here and now of the relation, permits to every body to be able to experience a new modality of relation inside which we can have the possibility of starting imagining new types of relation with an internal parental figure.

**Key words:** photolanguage, group, interpersonal pattern, image, bulimic patients

### **1. Where the experience was conducted: C. I. C.**

Our experience took place at the Information and Consulting Centre, State Professional Institute, “F. Dandini”, Prato.

It rose as an operational tool in order to prevent drug-addictions, later integrated with the present reality of our Institute, today, C. I. C. is also a listening point, addressed to boys/girls, teachers, parents, it is a link structure with health operators displayed in the area (N. 4, A. S. L, Prato, Se.R. T., Prato, Ce.I.S, Social Services, Juvenile Court, District) and an organizational support for the different activities proposed by the students inside our school.

This service has made use since 1992 (the year when it was constituted in our institute) of a coordinator (a full time teacher delegated by the Headmaster), of sixteen teachers belonging to the listening service and who offer, voluntarily, their collaboration year after year..

It has also made use since 1995 of the collaboration of a psychiatrist and since 1997 of two psychologists (external collaborators) a dietician (an external collaborator) and four training psychologists belonging to the Analytic Psychotherapeutic School of Specialisation H. S. Sullivan, Firenze , working through a specific agreement.

The collaboration inside the multidisciplinary team has always demonstrated to be necessary in the relation to the complexity of young issues and the different aspects through which they reveal themselves.

## **2 Photolanguage : historical and methodological notes**

The Photolanguage rose in France (Lyon ) in 1965 in a completely intuitive and casual way. A. Baptiste and C. Belisle, the former a psycho-sociologist, and the latter a psychologist, both from Lyon, who were conducting a group of adolescents, whose greatest difficulty was that they weren't able to express or "to tell" about themselves in front of the group.

They wanted to make easier discussion so that they thought of showing the boys white and black photos in such a way photos could become a support to words. Later, prof. Claudine Vacheret , Lumiere 2 University, Lyon, continued this research by studying the effects of the Photolanguage method on the psychiatric field.

The Photolanguage is a new conception of the function of image. Every participant doesn't have to analyse a photo, but reacting in a spontaneous, subjective and affective way to it. Trying to understand why you are interested in a photo and explaining that to others allows you to learn how to communicate.

The session starts by choosing the theme, then the photos are placed on the tables.

The moment when the orders are elaborated is really precious. It is the moment when the group is considered in its groupal structure and every participant in his/her individuality. This time corresponds to the individual capability of motherly rêverie Bion spoke about.

“[The rêverie] reveals how every mother receives her baby's projections and identifications They are imaginary reactions that each mother activates in order to metabolise them.(W.R. Bion,1963. p. 32)

The selected theme is written on the blackboard and the photos are chosen in relation to what the written sentences cause in each member of the group. The orders are different at each different session and psychologists base themselves on the dynamics emerged in the preceding session but respecting both the stage the group has just arrived and the internal opening time reached by each participant.

“A mother psychically digests her baby's mental projections and at her turn, she nurtures by giving him/her back this product she had previously pre-assimilated .The baby (group) receives a nurture which is secondary and metaphoric in comparison with the earliest received. He/she doesn't feed on her/his mother's physical breast but on her psychic breast ( transformation of the theme into a order) (ibidem)

The objectives of this method are:

- Easing the making up of a group, the encounter, communication, so enabling every one the possibility of expressing
- Realising one's point of view and communicating it to others.
- Relativizing one's position in front of others, who may not have the same opinion, but notwithstanding this, meet difficulties which are more or less similar to ours.
- Creating a mental space able to contain warnings, hesitations, anxiety of each member of the group :it is easier to speak about a photo which you can touch than a direct speech to others.

### **3. Theoretic model of reference**

Interpersonal psychoanalysis rose in the Thirties in America through the work of H. S. Sullivan, who elaborated a different approach to psychiatry and psychoanalysis pointing out how human growth could be better understood only outside the relational context.

“The personality of an individual [therefore] can never be isolated from the context of interpersonal relationships where a person lives.” ( Sullivan, 1953) and it is just for this reason that we can know the other person just in the moment we have a relationship with him/her.

For Sullivan, the emotional balance in interpersonal relationships is characterised by satisfying the human need of safety or being free from any anguish. In fact “Every one devotes a large part of his/her life and his/her effort to avoid in relationships with others more anxiety than he/ she suffers and if it is possible to free himself/herself even from this”(Conci, 2000).

In the course of his/her life an individual organises his/her relational experience acquiring behaviour models “on the basis of the other individuals' reactions towards us; what we perceive of them” ( Greenberg, Mitchell 1983) we have one purpose only “to avoid this unpleasant experience”

(Sullivan ,1953)

The psychological development of the Sullivanian child is connected with his/her diadic relationship with his/her mother through which he/she can perceive her affective states in order to get the satisfaction of his/her physical and emotional needs.

The satisfaction of emotional needs is mediated between interaction zones which are for Sullivan the oral, anal, genital, retinal, vestibolar, auditory, tactile and kinaesthetic zones. Such zones become the privileged zones of communication between a mother and her baby first of all in the preverbal period.

A more or less emotionally anxious mother is able to lead her baby to the same emotional state and this passage is fulfilled through the empathic link .empathic connection

The nature of this particular connection has been studied later in a deeper way by Stern who stated how co-partnership of affective states between a baby and an agent

of motherly cares or the passage to their attunement happens through an “intermodal” and “amodal” movement of sensorial perceptions. (Stern, 1985)

In the relationship with his/her mother the baby can experience therefore a “good” not anxious mother and a “bad” anxious mother.

Since in the course of his/her cognitive development a baby “learns to know the constant characteristics of a inter-personal behaviour” (Stern, 1985) He/she can anticipate and connect his/her own behaviours with the real affective state of his/her mother. (Greenberg, Mitchell, 1984)

When his/her behaviour meets his/her mother’s approval such experience outlines that area of a personality which Sullivan defines personification of the good me, personification of the good me on the contrary, the behaviour causing an increase of anxiety in one’s own mother and so in a baby concerns with the other area of his/her personality which is The personification of the bad me.

Instead, such interpersonal situations are overburdened by a mother with a very strong anguish which a baby can’t stand and which he/she integrates in that area of his/her personality defined personification of the not me personification of the not me

According to Sullivan, this complex situation gives place to the self system which is a system (having the purpose) to maintain the sensation “of inter-personal safety” and so “avoid or minimise the present or expected anxiety” ( Sullivan, 1983).

For this reason the self system uses a system of processes which are defined “ of safety” “in order to “detach attention from the anxiety point in order to direct it towards other mental contents” (Greenberg, Mitchell, 1983)

So, the baby will introit in the course of his/her development the inter-personal characteristics that this relationship should have in order to be able to maintain a vital connection with his/her mother and other significant factors.

These internalisations will constitute , in the patient’s life , some fantastic constructions (Sullivan, 1954) or “imaginary models of relationship which will be evoked every time the self system anticipates anxiety and threatens self- esteem in the connections with others. Such imaginary patterns will be overexposed in everyday experience (Greenberg, Mitchell, 1983) giving place to that experience defined by Sullivan “parataxic distortion ”.

In other words, the parataxic distortion is a present re-reading of old connections working every time the I system , in the following interpersonal situations, experiences anxiety.

They are just “ such operations for safety which replace and deform interpersonal situations”(Greenberg, Mitchell, 1983) giving a secondary importance to the satisfaction of other needs “as they constitute a powerful control of the progress of the individual” (Sullivan, 1954)

The task of psychoanalysis is for Sullivan to make the patient aware of his/her relational modalities through the instrument of analytic relation .

This perspective brings out the fact that the interpersonal analyst practices his job through a constant work on himself/herself thus becoming he himself/she herself the main technical instrument of his/ her job itself.

He/she works both at an intra-psychoic level and a relation level and he/she can be defined a participating observer.

The concept used by Sullivan implies that the person who observes is a part of the observed interpersonal field and as a consequence as he/she observes it he/she influences and modifies it, but it is , at the same time, observed, influenced and modified .

In this context, we use the concept of analyst in Hoffman's acceptance (2000). as an analyst is who co-constructs his experience together with the group in this case.

Such common construction of experience recognises the active participation of all the participants and requires a constant participation on the analyst's side and all that is happening in all the parts of the field, including the analyst, to the field itself, and their inter-action with the field itself inside a perspective of dialectic type.

The interpersonal psychoanalyst works through the real aspects of a relation, through the affects connected to it, through the mental schemes and the relational ways connected with his/her own relational conscious and unconscious ways he/she inter-interacts with.

He/she introduces himself/herself into the group not as the person who knows but as the person who promotes and eases communication and interaction by promoting potentiality and possibility.

We believe that all that is even truer for adolescent boys and girls and this is very , very important indeed for them.

In this particular moment, when they are looking for their own identity, to be able to get spaces where to express one self and look for one's own identity.

#### **4 How the group rose**

The increasing request for help at the diet window motivated us to gather our resources to answer for the problem by offering a containment as the Photolangage group offers, permitting girls to start a path whose objective, if we consider the environment where it takes place, that is school, it isn't taking care of symptoms but the possibility of starting and imagining an alternative way of relation and developing an awareness of one issue , deriving it from a different context from school.

The proposal of the Photolangage group rises, therefore from these considerations. The specificity of the method, the severity of its rules and the psychoanalytic culture of the conductor: they constitute the basic elements because they can offer to the bulimic adolescent in the school context a sufficiently stable container where she can elaborate some aspects of her own internal and social world through the images and the relation with the other participants in the group.

The group takes place every two weeks, during the class time table it lasts an hour and half, it is made up of seven girls ,a dietician and a psychologist.

For every session reported in this space we selected the photos and the dynamic elements we considered most significant followed our interpersonal psychoanalytical model.

### **5. e group path : from fear to tenderness**

Sullivan suggested that his/her inter-actions are the only way to know another person. “ We can know another person by observing what he/she does, by observing we ourselves who interact with him/her , by listening to what he/she tells us about his/her interactions and his experiences. In this sense, who collects the data, is never an objective supervisor, but he/she is always a 'participating observer'” (Sullivan, 1940). At the end of a six months' course I reconstructed the story of this group. My memory cast back over the sensations this experience made me revive and I received in myself what I had lived at that moment: I felt as if I were a pregnant mother who had her baby into her bump and I imagined how I would feel when as soon as he/she was born and I could have seen and touched him/her.

I retrace through the sensations of my skin , the nearness and equality of what I had experienced which I bring inside me of my relation with my mother, I find back her way of behaving, of being , her feeling, her way of touching me of feeding me, of speaking to me. I recognise her being in order to find mine.

It arises from me the memory of my experience as a child and particularly the tortuous path I took in order to receive our differences.

I was suddenly a mother, but what sort of mother would I have been?

Each of us, in the group, by stimulating our experiences connected with our fundamental experience

with our respective mothers, had already started a path which has just brought us to imagine ourselves as daughters of a different mother from ours and, in my own case, mother of a son different from me.

The orders of the first session were: “select 1 or 2 photos to introduce yourself to the group”

Giorgia presents the photo of a young naked lady, bent on herself, her face is leaned on her knee and through the glimmer created between her knee and her shoulder ,she is looking at the lens: “I was struck by her look ...I don't know why ...I feel like her, closed and like her I try to protect myself”.

Giorgia, through this image, is the mouthpiece of her need to close up in order to protect herself from this particular type of session which causes in each of us: the memory of our past experiences.

The participants in the foetal position, are young girls who through their look ,start discovering what there is in the group- mother .

I am curious but I patiently wait.

Laura intervenes with her photo of the eye and says: “We can know a person through his eyes...but, unfortunately I can't look at nobody's eyes”

Her words fall on the group and me like black veils through which we can see no longer anything. A deep experience of loss replaces the pleasure of discovering our real personalities, I receive it in me and I leave that it slowly takes shape.

The mirror falls, breaks into pieces and the child doesn't know where he/she can look at himself/herself in order to exist.

Silence lives inside the group like a membrane enveloping all of us and through it we share our experience, fear connected with the fact we are again disappointed by a careless mother.

Marina breaks silence showing a photo of a lady with an adolescent while they are looking at each other, at the same time they smile at each other: "It's as I would like to be when I am with my mother..."

Here the phantasy is introduced into the group that of a mother able to establish an empathic connection with her own child thanks to the typical pre-verbal language. Look and touch, the latter is pointed out by Elisa, with the photo of the lady and her baby in the background they embrace and look at each other, "they touch each other, it's happiness"

Disappointment is replaced by desire and now desire replaces illusion let's follow its path.

Vanessa brings with her the photo of the lion, "I like his strength ..He is good, I could caress him .

I recognise in these words a sort of insensibility, the child doesn't recognise danger until he/she doesn't face it. and even if he/she has already experienced it but the fear he/she has experienced is such that he/she denies all that in order to maintain a relation with his/her mother.

I don't know which of these two aspects were at stake, but I am sure of the perplexity I experienced in front of so a great sureness.

My need to square up the group was sudden. I warned them against "the animal" which may be even very wild, giving voice to its wild and aggressive part we are not able to manage and we need to be very careful of, "The lion can be even very aggressive, We need to pay attention!"

My warning probably brought Sussanna to express through the photo of a hand of a man covering a girl's face a real life of protection.

But why should one feel himself/herself protected from someone covering his/her eyes?

Maybe, I succeed in catching the meaning of this real life by carrying out a "combination" about what Susanna and I have Just perceived about this photo.

The sort of protection Susanna could see in that image evoked in me the same experience as the photo of the lion : blindness before danger.

It was for her an adult protecting a girl, for me it was an adult covering a young girl's eyes "to prevent her" from seeing something which might hurt her.

Beyond what a child can see or cannot, I am struck by the adult's choice to "cover her eyes"

Why to protect the young girl the adult chooses to cover her eyes?

I reconstructed the path and perceived the internal real story that Susanna contributed to the group by means of her own experience with her own mother: “ I cover your eyes in order to exclude/to protect you from the world of relations I am so afraid of”.

A mother who doesn't recognise her own aggressive/animal part is a mother who connects herself with her own child by excluding from their relational space those aspects she isn't able either to elaborate or transform because she experiences them as destructive

Anxiety, which through the empathic connection, pervades the child's mind ,is personified by him/her in the not Me and therefore excluded from conscience (5)

So we can think that Susanna felt herself protected from my intervention/warning from danger identifying her real story of protection with the image of a man covering a young girl's face because this is the experience of protection she has just experienced, exclusion.

I presented my photo, the young naked lady leaned on herself : “it happened to me to choose this photo more than once . Today I bring it here to express how afraid I am at this moment. You are new people I don't know you and I can't imagine what will arise from this session . Like the girl in the photo I protect myself but I don't hide myself, I'm cautious...I am struck by her gaze ,it is turned towards outside, she can perceive so many things”.

I recognise and give voice to the fear I experience in that moment, fear connected with the beginning of a new experience , with a new session with another being.

I created a space in my mind for a container where emotion and the real experience could be elaborated and where the other person, feeling recognised his/her experiences, will be able to feel himself/herself “thought” and therefore existing

Human beings must develop connections with other humans to be able to become human but in such processes they often learn to fear the ways through which relations of attachment are created , because they recognise in them the possibility of injuries and loses.

Then, the possibility of connecting and identifying with someone able to give voice to emotions, which emerge in the relational field, enables the other to feel himself/herself protected from fear, because these emotions are shared and not perceived any longer as destructive .

Elisabetta, the dietician returns to the photo with the lion, to express her fear.

Here Vanessa brings back the memory of the tiger in a circus cage biting its master's head off.

This story reveals the unconscious image of a tiger/mother perceived as aggressive and explains the experience I had lived after my first statement about the photo with the lion.

How can a child face the fear that his/her mother's real experiences cause in him?

“The hidden threat , interfering with a simple life, and with a positive integration of situations , is anxiety . The power that (this) exercises on our lives (...) derives from

the circumstances characterising its appearance during the experience of childhood, for a child anxiety means fear “ (Sullivan quoted from Greenberg and Mitchell, 1986, p. 102)

When the child’s primary needs are satisfied by an anxious mother communicating an excessive anxiety , the child will feel insecure and will integrate them in that area of personality defined Not Me.

In order to avoid anxiety which can come just from here, , the child, in the attempt of finding relief to such emotions , denies fear not “ to go off his/her head”

Using Sullivan’ s words we could say that to defend from anxiety the child concentrates all his attention only on these actions which can provoke the approval on the part of adults , while all that is a reason for anxiety is dissociated and examined as if it didn’t exist: so doing he/she develops that operation of safety which Sullivan defined selective inattention.

Slowly the group , through the photos, starts imagining a dialogue with the mother of each of them. The orders of the second session were: “let’s select two photos to express what is pleasant and what is unpleasant in being on diet” This introduces introduced the possibility of elaborating the ambivalent aspects of the relation to his/her own mother.

Diet or the management of food, is the metaphor through which every participant can give voice to the natural ambivalence of her real stories connected with the primary experience of “relational nourishment”

Using once again Sullivan’s thought “in the interpersonal situation of feeding (lactation) the baby can be exposed to different types of motherly breast , the good but satisfying breast, the good but unsatisfactory breast , the inefficient breast, - or what doesn’t give any more milk, or an anxious mother’s breast. (Conci, 2000, p.446)

Vanessa, to express the pleasant aspect of a diet ,presents her first photo (selected by four participants out of seven, including me). the one of a young slim woman running joyful along the beach: “She is how I would like to be, free. She is happy because she feels at ease with her own body...she has achieved what she wanted”

Such an image introduces both the objective desire of girls to be like her and the desire to identify themselves with a good mother.

Vanessa wants to express the unpleasant aspect of a diet, through the photo of the young girl in pyjamas holding tight a soft toy she says “When we are on diet we feel excluded and isolated”.

The child’s primary needs, like hunger, are the vehicles through which he/she can get a relation to the primary object.

“The representations of a good or bad mother are created in the baby in the measure in which the interpersonal situation “breast between his/her lips” representing the prototype of all the interpersonal situations –gives place to a positive situation with his/her positive integration with his/her mother, with a mother, with a following satisfaction of the baby, or, on the contrary .such a situation causes, because of the anxiety of his/her mother what Sullivan calls “disintegration” (Conci, 2000, p.446).

The group expresses through the image of the young girl with a soft toy, the exclusion/ isolation deriving from the incapacity of managing food regarded as an incapacity of managing this relation on her mother's side.

The following photo of the pregnant woman crouched on the floor with her hands on her bump and her eyes shut gives voice and body to the desire of thinking of one self near a mother able to be "in touch with herself", to listen to herself and so to listen to others.

Giorgia comments on it like this: "I chose this pregnant woman...I don't know why may be to say she is in touch with herself"

In the group imagination, advances and takes shape of the image of a mother, able to create the necessary space to live and elaborate the emotions emerging from her touch with her own baby. So a mother the mental space exists in where the baby can feel himself/herself necessary, existing, welcome and therefore loved.

"She can look at herself now.. at last in peace" with these words, Vanessa expresses the pleasure to see herself recognised in the mirror of the other (photo of a girl who is making up in the mirror).

The cycle of sessions was over with the sixth session, the orders were: Let's choose the photo we like most to speak about this experience.

I remember in a very clear way the atmosphere of this last session. How in order not to disturb that creation, in absolute silence, each of us looked for the other's eyes.

I received inside me that pleasant silence as if I wanted to treasure it, without worrying about anything.

I felt a high heat deprived from words and rich in communication.

We were there sitting on our chairs, lulled by that muffled and warm silence.

We listened and looked at one another up to the moment the image of an embrace appeared in my mind.

At this point I decided to make the group participant of the stream of my thoughts and with a pleasant astonishment we perceived that four people out of seven had chosen the same photo: a mother while she is feeding her baby in a field.

Stefania says "I feel very tenderly a mother who is embracing her own baby" and Irene continues "I chose it too...I have one at home with my mother and me which is the same, identical to this...even the angle the photo was taken from is the same...I have just remembered of me".

Since the child cannot satisfy by himself/herself his/her needs, another person has to think about him/her. Sullivan elaborated what he himself called "tenderness theorem" to explain how the expression of the child's needs leads to the integration of an interaction with his/her mother bringing to the satisfaction of those needs.

"The activity we observe in the child and arising from the tension produced by need, brings tension to the agent of motherly cares...(tension)experienced as tenderness and as a drive towards activities addressed to the satisfaction of a young child's needs"(Sullivan, 1962. p. 39).

This path permitted the girls to begin and imagine an alternative way of relating with a group/mother open to dialogue.

This experience permitted the recovery of a positive image of a primary relation with a mother, in which the group found tenderness through the memory of the experience of each member.

## Notes

I am really grateful to Luciano Gheri, for his readiness to be on hand every time I needed his precious experience. (Nicoletta Calenzo)

1 Photolangage© : meaning literarily “ Photo – language or “ photographic language”. The noun is used in the original language because it is used as a proper noun designating at the same time the method and the dossiers of photos issued and sold in book-shops The word Photolangage is in copyright.

2 Nicoletta Calenzo, a psychologist a training psycho –therapist at Analytic Psychotherapeutic Institute (I. P. A.) H. S. Sullivan, Firenze. She spent the academic year 1998/99at Lumiere 2 University, Lyon specialising in the use of Photolangage method with Prof. Claudine Vacheret.

3 Luciano Ghieri, a psychotherapist, a consultant of C. I. C. at State Professional Institute “F. Dandini”,Prato, a teacher at the Analytic Psychotherapeutic school of Specialisation H. S. Sullivan, Firenze.

4 We send the reader back for a wider analysis of this method to the paper written by Claudine Vacheret ,the Photolangage, a group method with a therapeutic or formative method, Funzione Gamma, Journal,n. 9 june 2002.

Each person tries to understand the other neither to judge him/her nor to put him/her a label but to answer his/her listening request.

(5) H. S. Sullivan, “ from the type of communication working between a mother and her child, between parents and their child, and in accordance if the child’s urges and actions cause or don’t anxiety in his/her parents , the child personifies the concept of himself/herself as “good Me” “bad Me” or “not Me. With the term “personification” Sullivan indicates the concept one has about himself/herself or others. When the type of communication is serene and anxiety is present in little degree, the child personifies the concept of the good Me and organises a Self in which the dissociative experience is minimal. On the contrary, he will personify his/her bad Me when in the family anxiety is very diffuse and is present in any moment of life. in the extreme case in which the parents show a complete disapproval towards the child’s actions or even towards his/her own existence, the child experiences so an unbearable anxiety so that the lines of the Self are eliminated and the state of not Me occurs when the child denies any type of anxiety or fear”.1953, Interpersonal theory of psychiatry , New York, Norton. Trad It By Feltrinelli Press.

Traslator's Note:

The Passages By Bion, Sullivan, Greenberg and Mithchell are traslated from the Italian version quoted by the authors.

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**Nicoletta Calenzo**, Psicologist and Candidate at the Istituto di Psicoterapia Analitica (I.P.A.) H. S. Sullivan in Florence. Specialised in the use of the *Photolangage*© method at the Université Lumière 2 di Lione (Professor Claudine Vacheret).

**Luciano Gheri**, Doctor Psychiatrist, Consulting for the C.I.C. at the Istituto Professionale di Stato “F. Datini” di Prato. Teacher with Training function at the Scuola di Specializzazione in Psicoterapia Analitica H. S. Sullivan in Florence.

**Translated by Francesca N.Vasta**