

Group and women's dreams

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Abstract

The paper I present to you refers in a certain way to a traditional work: the process of finding and giving sense to some recurrent dreams in long-term psychoanalytically oriented therapeutic women's groups.

But I propose to you, though not being in the specific setting, to "treat" now these dreams in the mental attitude suggested by Gordon Lawrence in his "Social Dreaming", almost "dreaming them again", giving space to the echo, to our associations. As they come from the shared experience of our cultural context where our fears and desires as males and females take shape.

Moreover, though relating to a "traditional" work of giving sense to dreams, the process through which the sense came to light was due to a long staying in the "negative capacity", to the "attentive passivity" David Armstrong underlines in his contribution to "Social Dreaming". The "attentive passivity" is always necessary in our therapists' life but it has particularly been stimulated, almost imposed by women in order to live and give sense to the new emotional experience offered by gender homogeneous groups.

Keywords: group, dream, women

Here are the dreams: <<*I dreamed of my university... at last I had reached it after many high school years' hard work. I was taking my first university exam... I was no longer anxious.....t almost pleased to show my preparation.. I had been studying with so much pleasure...It was my turn... I sat and started answering to the questions of the professor. There were two examiners, ... mine was the second one. The exam was going on... Then he suddently stopped me saying I was not prepared... my basic preparation was not enough... I had better go back to the first examiner. It was so disappointing. I thought I couldn't stand it... I didn't want to leave... I wanted to stay... but it was useless... He didn't want me there...>>.*

The second dream <<*I was making love with my boy-friend Marco, at last, after so many sexual problems between us... It was the first time we were so relaxed.. I could let myself go completely... And then suddently memories of my previous boy-friend came to my mind, the way we made love., the place we met... I had not thought of it for so long... I couldn't stop my mind from going back and of course Marco realized something wrong was going on in me... I tried to check my thoughts...., but it was useless... It was unavoidable... we had to interrupt... Everything was spoilt>>.*

These two dreams refer to a recurrent psychological theme in women's everyday life. The text of the dreams is not the original one it is a sort of "collage" I made of the infinite variations about a recurrent theme in women's dreams: mysterious forces push them back at the very moment they reach what they have been longing for.

Before telling you one of the answers all female groups have given to the multifaceted theme of the overshadowing of female desire, we have better explore the reason why only the presence of women's group have rendered visible psychological phenomena invisible elsewhere. The reasons why an all female context allows to come to the foreground themes which in mixed-gender groups are shadowed by the prevailing intergender attraction dynamics with their specific relational exchanges and consequent emerging of parts of Self.

Gender homogeneous therapeutic groups came to life in the 70s-80s and mostly developed in the United States. It was a moment when women had started to reflect on woman-woman relationships, on the development of the female self and its relational basis (Cohn, 1996). As a therapeutic setting (which is a social setting as well) they responded to the growing necessities of exploring gender specific resources and values; to revisit the specific male and female developmental processes within our cultural context.

Gender homogeneous groups were in a way the answer of the rising social attention towards gender diversities.

In the case of women's groups they were as well a message of esteem towards their own gender from women therapists.

Women's groups immediately demonstrated that the presence of a group allowed women to "forget" more traditional ways of communicating and let themselves go to some spontaneous specific ways of bonding and mutually relating. They let new group cultures develop). As a consequence the safe and confident atmosphere stimulated the relaxation of defences and boundaries among single identities, it allowed profound exchanges (Cantarella, 1996).

<<Women seemed to share without conflict different opinions. Any position, even if contradictory, seemed suitable and valuable as if women were profoundly connected. The collective group network seemed more important than the content of individual interventions... Women seemed to enjoy a common affective wealth from which anyone could find emotional nourishment according to her need>> (Cantarella, 2002).

This specific group climate had an immediate therapeutic impact in enhancing participants' sense of value through the group affective investment.

In addition to this the supportive, confident and attentive atmosphere let emerge and slowly take shape new specific themes as those described in the above mentioned dreams.

Free associations allowed to see that the presence of the group was symbolised as the presence of a supportive "third" in woman-woman relationships. Its presence created the sense of an open and conducive setting to objectify also memories of a too long-lasting, isolated from the outer world mother-daughter relationship of the past.

Memories of an oppressive female atmosphere also due to the absence of a beloved and unreachable father.

The sense given by women to their dreams

Free associations, fears and resistences towards investing and giving credit to present female peer relationships have allowed to give sense to the dreams. Women, in fact,

though living intense exchanges in the group, apparently wanted to focus their interest and attention only on the male universe, on companions, on lovers. The attention and care given by other women, their support and sharing (so invoked from husbands) seemed unappreciated. Women seemed only pressed by the urgency to escape from female bonds. Even dreams only referred to men (examiners, lovers, ex-companions, etc.). They denounced at the same time that something peculiar was going on as memories of the past rushed into the present spoiling the enjoyment of desires coming true.

In the first dream, just as in ordinary life, women complained to feel rejected by their companions, by “too severe examiners”. But the second dream women revealed that, pressed by mysterious inner forces, memories of ex-lovers burst into the present telling them that not only males blocked or “rejected” them. According to free associations the male figures were connected to female figures of the past which came back witnessing unresolved competitive issues in woman-woman relationships. The defensive character of the emotional investment only on male figures was thus connected with the desire to escape from the female world, the desire for the absent unreachable father of the past, transformed into persecutory rejection feelings.

Dreams revealed that revisiting these scenes (so usual in a certain historical context) meant to “emotionally regress”, to be relegated and leave the “progressive” status reached with male-female relationships. They revealed their inner as well as shared social belief that female relationships belonged to a regressive devalued world.

The sense given to their dreams helped women to become conscious of their collusion with cultural prejudices thus depriving themselves of their sense of value and self esteem.

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