

Homogeneous female group from the view point of participant observation: critical reassessment of an experience

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Abstract

In this paper I will talk about participant observation in a homogeneous female group and of some considerations that were born from this experience. I shall try to retrace the theoretical arguments that justify the group as a therapeutic instrument, and then pass to the motivations that support my choice to realize an observation experience in a female homogeneous group and the choice of a woman to woman therapy with a particular reference to the group's development and to the questions due to the guiding hypothesis of my entire work, that is: the masochism issue and the supposed female specificity. At last I will analyze my counter-transferential position in an episode taken from some of the group's sessions, finally end with a series of critical reflections.

Key words: group, environment, change, homogeneous female group

Theoretical reference overview: a short excursus

The key words on which I would like to reflect on are group, environment, change. Many authors talk about group therapy underlining the peculiar aspects that point out privation and, at the same time, the conditions that could permit and encourage a change.

Like looking a long running train I can see going by Burrow's "aggregative primary tendency who's goal is solidarity and social integration" (Profita, Venza, 95), in whose internal we can recover a natural and spontaneous dimension; Yalom's (97) social microcosm, that points out the interaction and dynamic aspect between the group members and that gives importance to the environment, place in which everything develops; at last the time dimension that permits an unfurl of fusion and individuation moments that follow a spiral movement (Corbella 93, 94, 95, 96, 98a). I think about internal groupality analyzed by D. Napolitani (87), that points out how one can interiorize a net of relational modalities that contains the entire representation range of the relationships had with significant figures, with one's proper environment, with social and cultural rules, and with the complex tissue between net and matrix (Foulkes 75) that permits the communication between mental processes and the environment.

The matrix, in it's object meaning that gives shape to the net, and as an element that takes shape from, remind me of Bion's (62) thought. The reference to concepts like container and contained is immediate. According to him in this kind of relationships occur transformations in K, that is knowledge acquisition, the brick of learning from experience. This implies knowledge and a major consciousness of one's proper

emotions, images and sensations. Even Bion has a strong tension towards change, expressed through the evolution in O.

A group's vision that approaches fantastic aspects is the one of D. Anzieu (76). He equates the group to dream and sees it animated by phantoms and subjacent desires (for example the desire of healing one's proper narcissistic wounds), besides he identifies the groupal illusion phenomena in the group's functioning. Groupal illusion that, after a first negative meaning, later revalued, is considered as a transition function useful to the group's development process.

Even Corbella (93) talks about illusion in regard to groups. The author asserts that at the beginning of a group experience feelings of love and hate are negated, instead the fantasy of being all alike, in order to nourish the symbiosis illusion, is supported. Neri (97) asserts the importance of the Self-object as a function that founds a base for the Self constitution in the relationship with the mother. This function, that is originally created with the maternal object, re-actualizes itself in a therapeutic group. Particularly, I think that the concept of ideal Self-object -with its possibility to offer itself as an experience of sharing omnipotence (in between Self and ideal Self-object felt as its extension) and the one of a mirror Self-object -that has the potential to provide a mirroring in regard of the subject's progresses- is in continuity with Anzieu's way of intending groupal illusion and with Corbella's re-realizing of the archaic fusion phase.

We can find traces of symbiosis' illusion even in Rouchy's thought (98) that, analyzing the individuation process, observes how, often, this process is realized partially from patients belonging to a group that, in some of its structure areas, stayed still in a position which is close to the dyadic unit Mother-Child.

The study on belonging groups that distinguishes in primary and secondary belonging groups is also very interesting.

In the first ones a passage from external to internal reality, realized through complex transmission processes of cultural inbuilt (habitat, life rhythm, dietary habits, physical contacts at distances, smells, gestures, erogenous zones, tonalities, voice pitching, etc.) is brought about.

Rouchy equalizes cultural inbuilt to Anzieu's groupal illusion. We can point out, in all the authors that deal with group therapy, the need to define an physic-psyche primary indistinct state, common to all human beings, in which we live a symbiotic-fusion experience where important passages occur like for example even the trans-generational unconscious transmission.

Secondary belonging groups instead have an internalization function of rules and values.

As consequence the therapeutic group itself represents a secondary belonging group that, in a certain way, could be "primaryzed" when it permits the re-realization of processes that establish the subject's identity, and proposes itself as an ideal space and place in which it is possible to realize corrective, reparative, and transformative experiences elsewhere failed.

Motivations of a choice

One of the reasons that brought me to reflect on the participant observation experience in a female homogeneous group, has been the desire to compare it with the one of a mixed group. The theoretical premises previously exposed assert the experience in a mixed group, composed by men and women.

But if the group seems to be a universal place to share, work-through, understand, to overtake differences and, at the same time, learn not to fear but appreciate them; then the questions that brought me to get interested to the female group are: why is the group homogeneous by sex gender? Which theories imply and justify it? I will not dwell on the many woman researchers' theoretical contributions on or any peculiar aspects of the topic examined.

In the first place I want to point out the presence of a duality in the female humanity, that on one hand puts in evidence a fertility and creation aspect and on the other a shadowy aspect that is potentially destructive and malicious. These considerations bring me to think that, besides the cultural influence orientated in a masculine sense, that determines a female devalue, there is, at the same time, a female association with the primitive and so with what is the less developed. (as explained in some anthropologic studies and papers of K. Horney, F. Héritier, H. Goldhor Lerner and others). This would explain the dominance of negative elements connected with the female and the aptitude to assign more regressive aspects to the activities conducted by women.

Even Bion is sensible to integration phenomena, underlined by American woman researchers (Jordan 98, Surrey 98) in the mother/daughter relationship, because he asserts that introducing developed aspects in the primitive takes this away from isolation and permits a real development of the group and of the individual. It is easy to sense how work modalities orientated towards the reconstruction of a trusting integration and connecting experience, can help to recover appreciable aspects of female identity.

Emphasizing the environment and the reference culture is, in my opinion, a very important aspect that has been studied particularly by woman researchers that were interested by female psychology. I think that this happened as a revaluation attempt of those elements that were considered by the most ortodox theories as constitutional of the female psyche.

In the second place we can remark, especially in some researchers' theorizations (Surrey 98, Jordan 98, Goldhor Lerner 88, Chasseguet-Smirgel 70, Cotugno 99) the fact that a daughter, in order to separate herself, has to go "against" her mother, that she has to differentiate from the parent of her same sex, on the opposite of a son. This is the most complex passage, in fact for the daughter the mother is in continuity with the constitution of her own identity, for the son instead the mother represents the different gender from which he can distinguish himself that is already as a fact.

In the third place I would like to signal the father's role analyzed particularly by J. Benjamin (95) for the development of gender identity. For the author the

relationship with the father in of basic importance in the separation/individuation process, both for the male and the female. Benjamin asserts that the individual, from when he is small, has a deep necessity to be recognized as "subject of desire" and not only as "subject to a need" and that, along the development pathway parents tend to become two opposite poles of the children's needs respectively of the separation fear (mother) and the desire of independence (father). In the pre-oedipal development phase the father is invested by an identificatory love, both the daughter and son want to be like him, look like him because they are searching a "different object in which recognizing their independence". The father has to do his part: he has to be available in order to make this process reciprocal and identify himself in his son or daughter. Without his recognition, this disenchanted love will become an unreachable desire that will mark with unhappiness these subjects' existence. A. Cotugno (99) points out the co-presence of two aspects in the relationship mother/child: conflict and bond. I agree with this thought and I think that, besides the fact of being mother and child implies a "natural" bond that is introduced from conception, their being bonded goes beyond their own gender existence that "ties" any woman to another. I believe that the conflict comes to light from the necessity to "tie" and "untie" this ontogenetic link. Untie because the daughter, in respect to the mother is in any case another woman and, like the male son, she has to separate and differentiate from her; "retie" because through differentiation, the daughter discovers, besides herself, what she has in common with her mother.

Reflecting on the mother/daughter situation brings us to say that there are universal aspects that belong to the human gender in its entirety and that if on one hand that are pointed out in a "female relationship" they can also be used as elements for a major comprehension of the male.

A choice from woman to woman

H.Goldhor Lerner (88) is one of the authors that mostly pointed out aspects and factors that lead a woman to choose another woman as a guide in the therapeutic process of Self change.

For example she asserts the necessity of not devaluing the weight that culture factors can have, determining interference in the women's realization and growth process. She also observes how it's not easy for therapists of both sex being conscious of their own unconscious prejudices and how much and how they can influence and limit the possibilities that the therapeutic experience can offer to women that request it.

The author argues that the dyad woman-patient/therapist-man is a repetition of patriarchal models and identifies some situations in which his condition can be source of resistance and stale (for example if a therapeutic relationship too erotized sets in) rather than a development.

The same author points out as useful and favourable factors in a therapeutic relationship woman/woman: a more honest and deep exploration of personal problematic areas, avoiding bringing forth stereotyped female roles, a bigger difficulty to erotize the therapeutic relationship, the offer of an identification model in

continuity with one's proper gender identity, the analysis of myths that concern female experience with a person that can share a research pathway and an interior growth. Besides, the reassessment of the mother/daughter relationship is easier with a re-realizing of the complex links and of the ambivalent issue (love-hate) of this relationship, the acceptance and recognition from a significant female figure that will cooperate to increase a sense of value and self-esteem (mostly in those women that present narcissistic problematic areas and that think of men as more seducibile and cheatable by appearances.) Lerner also points out that the relationship woman-woman gives more identification opportunities and permits a decrease and dilution of unconscious fears and threats, due to an alleged incoherence a non full integration, connected to a lack of self-esteem and to an instability of the identification process. These women have the flair to disguise their unconscious fears devaluing the professional abilities of a woman therapist.

Spector (93, in Cotugno, 99) confirms what has already been expressed by Lerner and resumes the motivations indicated by women in the choice of a female sex therapist, more briefly in four classes (1).

The homogeneous female group

So what happens in a female group? Does what has been observed in regard to an individual experience proposes itself even in a group's level? If yes how? How much do the phenomena described empower, change or vanish?

In this part of my paper I propose myself to find answers to these questions and to connect all this to my experience of observer in a female homogeneous group. This need is born from the necessity, gradually grew in me to give sense to personal experiences that heap up in myself and in my practical-theoretical knowledge and also an attempt to go beyond a female devalue suffered on my own skin. The environment from which I come, my history and the choices that I made during these years, including my personal experience, deeply influenced me and pushed me to reflect on the choice's reason of a homogeneous female group. Analyzing my pathway precisely I have to say that, not by chance, I mostly found myself in female groups (at home, in school, at work) and so, in this context, fulfilling the task of participant observer in this kind of group, has not been insignificant. I must also admit that the way in which, sometimes, I have been accepted bothered me and I often had the feeling that it was considered a second class choice.

I'm not a fierce supporter of female groups or rather, sometimes even I have some doubts and qualifications. After life and formative experiences in homogeneous female groups, I matured the consciousness that context and situations aimed towards an integration between men and women are definitively desirable.

So I questioned myself in regard of: what can the working-through of a development and existential pathway of being a woman represent in a homogeneous female group? What do the therapists that propose this particular setting expect? What can a gender homogeneous group give that's different from a mixed group?

The attempt to find answers to these questions permits me to introduce a guiding hypothesis with which I would like to cross again my observation experience in the group, and then go on forward to the treatment of some clinical aspects (2).

In order to understand the therapeutic work inside a female homogeneous group I wish reconnect myself to the notion of masochistic syndrome described by K.Horney (67) that I shall here report in full:

"Being loved is a particular way of assurance used by the masochist. Since he has a freely fluctuating anxiety he needs constant love demonstrations and since he never relies on these attentions, if not temporally, he has an excessive need of cures and affect. That's why, in general he is very emotional in his relationships, he easily grows fond of people because he expects from them the necessary reassurance. He is easily subject to disillusion because he never gains and can never gain what he wants. Often the expectation, the illusion of "the big love" has an important role. Since sex is one of the most common ways of obtaining the other's affect he tends to overvalue it and he deceives himself that this is the solution of all problems. How much of this is unconscious and how easily he really has a sexual intercourse depends on his inhibitions. When he had or tried to have sexual intercourse his love story is dotted of "unhappy love stories". He has been abandoned, disappointed, humiliated and mistreated. In his sexual intercourse the same tendency in all its shades appears, from being or feeling unable to sacrifice oneself and being submissive to playing the martyr's part and feeling or really being humiliated, betrayed and sweated. Although he really feels to be an unable person or that life is brutal, in the psychoanalytical situation we can see that it doesn't concern real facts but it's a stubborn aptitude that pushes him to see or prearrange things this way. On the other hand this aptitude reveals itself in the psychoanalytical situation like an unconscious inclination that stimulates him to provoke attacks, feel wrecked, damaged, mistreated and humiliated without a real reason.

Since the other's love and sympathy are for him of vital importance, he easily depends excessively from others and this hyper-dependence shows up clearly even in the relationship with the analyst.

The fact then that he never believes in love demonstrations of which he is object (instead of receiving them as way of reassurance) depends from the low esteem he has of himself: he feels inferior, unpleasant and unworthy to be loved. On the other hand because of this lack of faith in his self he thinks that the only way to obtain the love he needs is to appeal himself to pity, showing inferiority feeling his weakness and his sufferings. We can see that the self-esteem weakening depends from an unsuccessful development of what can be defined an 'adequate aggression'. With this expression I mean a work capability, take initiative and work on it, complete tasks, defend his rights, defend oneself when attacked, express own opinions, individuate one's own goals and being able to organize one's own life according to these aims. In masochistic people we can often find these kind of inhibitions, that are entirely responsible of the insecurity feeling, or even of the lack of initiative in the struggle

for life, and they explain the subsequent dependence from others and the inclination to look for support or help.

Psychoanalysis explains their tendency to withdraw from any kind of competition, like another reason of their inability to make one's name. Their inhibitions are the consequence of their efforts to restrain themselves, with the purpose to avoid a competition risk.

Hostile sentiments that inevitably rise from these defeatist tendencies can't express themselves freely because they endanger the reassurance expectancy of being loved, that is the principle defence against anxiety. Sufferings and weakness, that already have other functions, indirectly act as a vehicle of hostility.

Horney individualizes several cultural factors that have an affect on the outbreak of masochism in women (3). I'm interested in understanding the interaction that realizes between the individual and culture, between intra-psychic factors and trans-personal ones. The author asserts the importance of the cultural sphere on the female development process and she thinks that a certain environment aimed towards devaluation that emphasizes women's dependence towards men, penalizes women and favours a spread of masochist aptitudes and behaviours.

In my opinion, not by chance, in a homogeneous female group we can find women with marked masochistic problematic areas, in the sense previously described. These kind of people, because of the environment in which they grew and of the imprinting given by their primary group (Rouchy 00) tend to perpetuate hate for their proper belonging gender. This thesis is partially strengthened by the observations contained in Cantarella's contraindications for a female group. The author expresses clearly how women that don't accept the social taboo, in regard of hate and aggression expressions from other women, (condemned to an eternal exhibition of goodness and altruism) are expelled from "natural" female groups. In my opinion women with a masochist syndrome hide feelings of hate and inexpressible rage, if they aren't directed to themselves.

For these women the female group seems to be, at least initially a qualified context, placing itself as a secondary belonging group that permits the creation of an alternative culture, able to revalue one's own female identity. Besides it can offer a new space for discovering and understanding the constitutional and relational components (so also the approach modalities considered aggressive) of the single members. This possibility permits to work-through the meaning of one's own value and stimulates to measure oneself with similar difficulties met by men, impressed and questioned, like women, by change and by the breakdown of old reference values. Corbella (96) asserts that "for most of the people that address themselves to us as therapists for a help, the modified social trim is a source of confusion and anxiety both in regard of their own gender identity and in regard to modalities of having a relationship with the opposite sex.

The experience: the encounter and the choice

The material presented refers to a gender identity homogeneous group. Its members are very competitive women orientated towards their career and profession, and they developed typical male defences. The sessions take place in the therapist's private study.

In my opinion what puts the members together is identifiable in the fact that we can find masochistic features (intended in the sense previously said) mostly in regard of female deep aspects: particularly I refer to the modality of feeling themselves women and to accept themselves as such. Cantarella (96) asserts that it's not easy for women realizing how much the devaluation of affective needs acts unconsciously in them, aspect that, as she says, characterizes the female: on all dominates the need to feel recognized in their being "active" professionally, like if this would value the person in its entirety, need that in a first moment doesn't seem analyzable.

There seems to be a splitting between the professional- identified with the masculine- and the woman- identified with the female. In this way they find themselves in a condition where there is the creation of a pseudo-identity in which as a professional the woman feels an uneasiness sensation, of which she doesn't understand the origin that is due to specific female's issue's negation and devaluation. This kind of woman feels a deep psychological suffering that is born from the non recognition of her female part that founds her being a person and from the impossibility of integrating her bisexual components. This leads her to perpetuate the same kind of violence towards herself that she ascribes to her entourage: her male part attacks with envy the female one with the attempt of nullifying it.

The experience of participant observer places itself in the formative process planned by the C.O.I.R.A.G. specialization school's training and particularly by the Association of Group Psychotherapy (APG where I had my specific formation). The observation in a therapeutic group, conducted by an association's perceptor, has to last two years.

Initially I chose the female group because I was attracted the therapist's personality, that had been my teacher in some theoretical lessons. My project was to see the functioning of a therapeutic female group, I still ignored the real motivations that brought me to this choice I recalled before of which I will talk afterwards.

The group

At the moment in which the observation experience took place in the group there were eight women (4), their age was from 28 till 45 years old, three of them belonged to the first generation, two were in the intermediate one and there were three new entrances occurred in the last year. The older ones were on the point of ending their therapeutic pathway, they were considered the group leaders, even if one of the intermediate ones was standing out.

I would particularly like to remember one of the group's members that decided to interrupt the therapy halfway trough my last year of observation. This woman, significant presence inside the group, in the other participants' conversations was often remembered and she supplied me some reflection hints.

In the two years that were available for me I revealed a deep change in the group. The first year seemed connoted by a major effort, not only from the group's members but also from me, there were major impasse moments and periods of deep regressions. The group had gone through a long block, in which the therapist herself pointed out a hardening on defensive positions and a lack of analytical work, like if all that was experienced and understood was immediately lost and not available.

According to the analyst, the outbreak of a static group condition is a defence from the presentification of archaic parts, linked to the relationship mother/infant. In effect the group's members used a lot of time negating the lack of analysis and of the group in the suspension periods and doubting the treatment's efficacy.

Afterwards an archaic fusional phase that got more steady structured and that seemed to produce symbiosis' characteristics. The group, like a mother hen, seemed to need a period of "hatch" for curing its eggs under cover from external intrusions. At this regard Corbella (98) reminds that "in the several group potentialities there is also the one to make its members regress towards those primitive level experiences where fundamental problems were born. People regress just to that archaic fusional phase (that Balint defines "of basic fault") without any distinction between subject and object that characterizes the primitive fusional group moment, in which omnipotence fantasies arise."

The second year, instead, after the new entrances I attended to significant gradual and fast changes and movements towards individuation. It's like if in the group finally the symbiosis that began to point out its choking and mortal components broke. It's been a fertile crisis moment that aroused a notable step forward. The group gradually worked on deficiency first of all trying to act it out through an alternation of presence and absences to the meetings, then through the verbal expression of contents that in the mean time became thinkable and verbalizable (express one's need, reveal the absences and express feelings connected to them, etc.). The session's contents were enriched and we began talking about jealousy, oedipal problems, differences.

In order to point out the passage from a fusional archaic phase to a movement towards individuation I will report a dream made by Vittoria that, in my opinion, clarifies well these route changes.

"I find myself in my mother's town and going around with a foulard on my head. I meet many people and find out that they are non EU. I wear the foulard as if it was a chador, in order to signal my availability towards an inter racial encounter and towards integration. Then suddenly the foulard becomes a cure object and I feel a bestower of these cures towards one of my work-mate. I bandage his head and then an arm behind his back."

The foulard, and its multiple use in the dream, made me think of a sort of transitional object and to the reparation possibility and of a new integration thanks to the emergence of a deep regression phase. It's the prelude towards the passage to the area -crossed by female groups- that Cantarella calls of interchangeability. The entrance of

this area in the group signals a psychological sensitivity exchange and the possibility to recognize through the therapists interventions the results gained through the groupal work and so to pass, as desirable point, from the self devaluation to the self valuation. Victoria's dream falls in the dreams of this area, since she has the foulard, a garment that her mother used to wear. Becoming interchangeable (her mother wore it and now she can also wear it) it becomes the symbol of psychological features that become available and usable "changeable" between all the group's women.

The constant observation of these women, recognizing myself in their problems and in their feelings addressed me to support the hypothesis, previously exposed, due to the presence, in female nowadays groups, of women with masochistic features that suffer for an unsuccessful recognition both from males and females, that are able to re-enforce their gender identity. Besides they are penalized by an environment and by a culture of primary belonging groups (Rouchy, 98) that is mostly aimed towards the preservation of ancient patriarchal values and towards a subtle female devaluation.

In the light of these examinations I will try to point out how the structuring of a therapeutic group, as a belonging secondary group (Rouchy, 98) and as space and place for the creation of an unsaturated matrix, (Menarini, Amaro and Papa 95) can offer to these women the possibility of building for them and rebuilding for the others, a culture which is more respectful of differences.

What specificity in a homogeneous female group?

If we analyze the potentialities offered by the female homogeneous group with the ones of a mixed group, it soon appears clearly how they don't differ very much one from the other, as demonstrated in the literature (5).

It is spontaneous wondering what can the experience in a homogeneous female group give in comparison to one in a mixed group, what women look for specifically and what they find in this kind of context.

Trying to answer these questions I will concentrate on the discontinuity elements that are able to point out some apprehensions that a groupal female culture creates in regard of the woman's devaluation, of the possibility of recovering Self aspects, and of the precocious reparation of masochistic choices. In this sense the group of peers has a notable importance and supplies a "visibility" to a Self otherwise experienced as imperceptible, promoting it as an "active subject of desire" (Cantarella, 96). There would be many aspects that we could talk about but I will point out the ones that best demonstrate my first point (6).

The masochism issue

Going back to the female choice, the homogeneous group and of constitutional masochistic features, I think that in group where I have been a participant observer, in the women's history and development something happened that prevented alternative choices against masochistic ones. This something has to do with the family context and the social environment in which they were born and so with the primary belonging group (Rouchy, 98), with the family relationships that were pre-existent

and consequent to their birth (Zucconi, 99), also with the differentiation level gained in their own family. At this regard Lerner (88), asserts that the differentiation level proposed in the relationship with one's own partner is the same one realized with parental figures and with one's own belonging context. Particularly we are dealing with a partial realization of the separation and individuation processes during the development pathway of these women; like if the development from mother to daughter incurred in a sharp interruption: an non successful integration that doesn't permit a continuity with one's own gender belonging (Surrey, Jordan 98; Cantarella 00) and that prevents, those women that experienced it, from accepting and valuing the woman that they will become, pushing them towards masochistic choices. At the same time we know that also men aren't immune to masochistic choices and even their history can be influenced by the maternal relationship, by the context and by their belonging groups. Besides we could remember the father's need of the daughter's identificatory love in the pre-oedipal phase (Benjamin, 95) that tries to define her identity differentiating from her mother.

We could say that the masochistic aspects mentioned above are in common either for men that for women in suffering histories and attempts that developed a little or not at all.

The question of the female specificity?

I think that in the encounter with another person that belongs to the same identity gender the woman tries to be compensated of this non successful development moment. It's an illusion of fusional primary omnipotence, from which it isn't easy to surrender. It's like if one would try to repeat an old project with someone that could, this time guarantee its success and this someone necessarily has to be a woman, that represents what Zucconi (99) defines the mother of transition. It seems that for these kind of women, but not for all of them, its from their mother that they have to be "compensated" in some way. It seems that for them loving the father (the man) without refusing the mother and "make their entrance in the oedipal triangle without a disappointing and crushing experience" (Zucconi 99) hasn't been possible. They didn't receive their mother's approval, or at least this is what they feel like and in some way it's like if they don't feel able to go without betraying the mother, renewing the sacrificial bond that, in order to be woman and female, she has to, as Lerner asserts (88) "function on a lower level". With this assertion the author intends that women, from when they were children can be induced to inhibit their tendencies towards a more autonomous functioning in order to protect the family system or to solve some problem in their parents' relationship. In this way they learn a passive-dependent behavior, instead of autonomous choices that is done, they are in any case felt, in this context, like an "offensive and aggressive act: a disloyalty and a betrayal." When the group was approaching central themes like: the relationship mother/daughter, jealousy, the female identity's birth and structuring all themes from which we could see a change, at this point unavoidable, Marta became the spokeswoman of an increased malaise. After some sessions in which there was an

alternation of intense painful outbursts, deep hate towards herself and rigid rationalizations that try to contain an overwhelming emotion, she announces the decision of interrupting the therapy. It seems that Marta, at the moment, is not able to develop towards a major integration of her female components, precociously withdrawn and refused because inserted in a primary environment greatly overflowing, where for a woman it was not considered important to feel or try new interests and the desire of experimenting in non usual pathways for the family culture.

The dependent behaviour becomes, in this way, a sacrifice towards who is loved there is a renouncement of one's own Self so that the others can gain advantage.

Observing the events from a groupal view point, besides evidencing a major difficulty to tolerate tension issue, reason for which a big percent of female group members withdraw in a crucial moment of the work, in comparison with the mixed groups (Wolman, 76 in Walker, 89) it appears as a movement that illustrates a typical masochistic dynamic. Being able to grow and accept that the person near us is glad of these progresses and enjoys the progressive self-government gained seems impossible; they are led to think that this is a destiny reserved to others which are more lucky. One's own intelligence and capabilities are cancelled and one "sacrifices" himself the others can obtain what for the subject in the matter becomes unavailable. Going away from the dependence of an excessively narcissistic and castrating mother, with which, in a paradoxical way, the subject identifies in the component one was subjected to, that is the persecution complex blackmail: "With all the sacrifices that I made for you..." seems impossible realizing in this way the classical collusion narcissism-masochism (Lopez 76).

Marta has been the spokeswoman of the masochistic and sacrificial part that has been functional to the groupal well-being. Feelings of hate and self sacrifice -Marta despised herself, she didn't like herself and she became withdrawn and she thought of annoying other people- in the sessions after her exit have been substituted by a betrayal feeling that I felt either in myself that in the group's members conversations.

At this regard I ought to add a personal specification.

Right after Marta's exit from the group I felt betrayal emotion that concerned me directly. In that occasion in fact the reason for which I didn't manage to write anything yet appeared clear, even if I had already chosen the argument of my specialization thesis. I thought that because I hadn't asked to the group conductor to be my supervisor I was "betraying" her, so I wasn't able to write anything. I was acting out a saturated family model in which making autonomous choices, individuate oneself and grow is blamed and not stimulated. The impulses towards change, in a similar context, are thought as non useful and dangerous because the context itself is able to absorb each necessity or need of new issues (Menarini, Amaro, Papa, 95). So, in my opinion, this betrayal feeling re-enforces furthermore the collusion narcissism-masochism (Lopez, 76).

Is changing really so dangerous?

Some sessions after Marta's exit from the group, Olga talks in a mournful way of her life style and of her malaise. She is mad with the group because she thinks that it behaves in an infantile way and also with herself because the other night she went to the cinema instead of coming the session. These words make me think about betrayal towards others, maybe what the group felt from Marta's behaviour.

Serena remembers her ex-boyfriend and regrets for remaining more than she ought to in "a relationship that was ten percent love and ninety percent suffering". She feels sad because she hurt herself and because she didn't do anything to avoid it.

Again I think about betrayal this time towards one self. It's like if Marta pointed out a common difficulty: managing not to hate one self and not hurting oneself. I begin seeing, both in myself and in the group, a progressive increase of consciousness about self and hetero destructiveness present in these relational modalities.

In the need of recognition we can also individualize a "realistic" theme of social ransom that beside the blackmail and omnipotent tendency to put in frequent claims pushes one's way toward a sane request of female's value recognition to the therapist, intended as value that could be accompanied by an adequate power that is socially identified. Beside the infantile need that concerns a claim to be "the preferred" daughter of the mother/therapist there is also the perspective request of a female figure that accepts the other's person specific difference supplying also a valid identification model that is alternative to the one of the introjected mother. I think that the need of being seen and recognized concretely turns in a deep need, besides of uniqueness, in their own specificity, also to give value to their own belonging gender. Even this need seems to be unconscious, old and deep, so hardly expressible.

In the female group and in the mixed one the possibility of sharing and experimenting multiple and more developed fuional phases, little by little permits to go back towards particularly painful issues with a major equipment to face them (metaphor of time as a spiral Corbella, 98a) and also permits to work -trough fear aroused by feelings like envy, competition and jealousy.

Cantarella asserts that often these sentiments express themselves in the fantasy of "the other woman", the enemy. The internal female image is split, with a defensive operation, in a positive image (the friend) and in a persecutory alter ego. Often this splitting reflects itself in the woman/man relationship repeating a fantasmic connected to the original and archaic maternal imago.

So here in the necessity to operate an integration through the hic et nunc group relationships of the split areas widening one's own range of relational choices: from the opening towards the other to individuation and exchange movements till the possibility of loneliness, without feeling oneself prey of persecution.

Did change now become possible?

To close these considerations I will try to transmit the meaning and quality of change that apprehensions and experience realized in the homogeneous female group produced in its members.

Particularly I would like to point out the opportunity build and rebuild female identity in two different and complementary ways either through aspects that it's possible to take from others (quality, abilities observed and admired in the others) that starting from the exploration of one's own internal world in order to find what it contains and then being able to compare it with others in a free exchange game that permits new and more articulated identifications.

Sonia says to feel a deep well-being sensation, she feels in perfect harmony with her body: She wants to end her old marriage even if her husband is unavailable: he doesn't answer the phone and it's impossible finding him at home.

Maira expresses her appreciation for Sonia's good points but at the same time she says to feel irritated towards her because it seems that she is the only one that is "able to have a good time", when all the others are immersed in the daily difficulties. She thinks of herself as a great worker but if she compares herself with Sonia she finds out to not being able to take some time for herself: "One of us saves and the other one wastes" she observes. She adds that she thought that her irritation is born from the fact of perceiving herself stiff, unable to let herself go and have a good time.

Vittoria disagrees with Maira and she says how there isn't anything wrong in saving. Obtaining Sonia's consent she talks of how now that he is almost ending her analysis, she is able to be more in contact with her needs and that she experiences a pleasant sensation in being able to talk about what goes wrong.

The observer's counter-transference

The emotions that I lived inside the group have been very strong and sometimes even very difficult, with an alternation of a wide range of sentiments: unhappiness, joy, anxiety, disorientation, commotion, rage, boredom, curiosity. It's difficult describing until the end the strength of this experience that pushed me to question myself as a person besides representing an apprehension experience.

I would like to suggest a particular situation (7) in which I found myself in a difficult position during my experience of participant observation.

The episode refers to a period in which Marta didn't already go away from the group and there was an upcoming interruption of two weeks for a therapist's engagement. More or less three weeks before I couldn't have been present to a session and in that occasion the group expressed the intention that during the therapist's absence I would of conducted the group continuing regularly the sessions. Nevertheless, at my return they didn't tell me the group's proposal. I was unaware of this project revealed to me by the therapist only subsequently, that found me unprepared and that evoked in me a lot of discordant emotions.

Straightaway I felt flattered. In that period I was going through difficulties; I didn't have a job, I felt disheartened and I thought that the professional efforts made till then had not been useful at all. I ardently desired to try myself as a professional and as a therapist, but I couldn't see anything on the horizon. The proposal suited my requests of confirmation.

Nevertheless on the other hand the offer left me doubtful for two reasons. The first one because like this as I strongly desired that something would change and would finally permit me to demonstrate what I was able to do, at the same time facing a concrete opportunity I was assailed by the anxiety of not being able to support it. The second reason concerned the phase that the group was crossing at that time and the fact that, the year before the same suspension didn't produce any particular request.

The group was working on issues connected to the sense of identity, to the female omnipotent and persecutory imagery, to power issues connected with sex belonging, with fear evoked by sentiments felt as negative like envy, competition, jealousy. As I previously exposed, being in touch with one-self's most archaic areas that produce devaluation and hate is not an easy pathway and not at all painless. Even a minimum initial consciousness sparks the desperate necessity to defend old bastions; the group, in contact with such themes, seemed to react in such way. In this kind of context it's intuitable that the dynamics that could be created are functional to a massive resistance towards change. Naturally I didn't intend to instigate these dynamics more than necessary and I was afraid to face them by myself.

When all this presented itself to me I didn't have a clear vision of what was really happening, I took some time to work through and try and understand it. In the *hic et nunc* I simply felt an instinct impulse that restrained me from letting myself go to an easy enthusiasm and that, at the end, brought me to say no: this decision certainly made me feel more untroubled. The events then followed their normal course: the group stopped for two weeks and when it restarted we faced the emergent issues in regard to the specific group's development phase.

After this episode I thought very much about how I felt and how I placed myself in the group. I think to have felt an intense exclusion and devaluation experience when I proposed a thought connected to the reality area and not to the omnipotent one. In fact with my refusal to substitute the therapist I didn't accept "rush", the unconscious proposal to negate the necessary time for growth done by the group. Instead I introduced a different valuation of apprehension times, demonstrating that one doesn't already know every thing when he is born, but that the development pathway is the result of slow maturation processes and of inevitable frustration moments linked with the connection to reality, through which "learning from experience" (Bion, 62) is realized and when we learn to tolerate anxiety and uncertainty. (Jaques 70).

At this time a groupal moment that tends to negate anxiety and the fear to change is possible through the identification with an omnipotent observer.

Refusing myself to accept the requested role "I individuated myself" respecting my own time of growth and apprehension. After this decision I felt the group's aggression towards me. Differently that with the therapist the rage against me could be expressed.

In this kind of situation an ancient outline is proposed: from omnipotence we pass to the request of omnipotence made to the observer. Here we can situate the perverse passage that transforms the victim in the aggressor and we can imagine that the group's women have been themselves the family's scapegoat. In this case Pichòn-

Rivière (in Marzotto, 94) asserts that: "The subject falls ill of insecurity (for love or hate) because the group from which he comes doesn't permit him to have an identity". Being able to say no, for me, represented an authentic important moment of apprehension and of great change, of which I wasn't immediately conscious. Even for me arrived the truth moment: I had to reckon with my part of masochism and with the inheritance that came from the previous generations.

As G.H. Lerner (88) asserts: "Deep anxiety and guilt is the inheritance of women that try to obtain what previous generations of women couldn't have." In my big family context I have been the first person that has a degree. Besides as "trans-generation guilt" I brought with me the inability to say no, lived as a dangerous signal of differentiation and individuation. I'm conscious of the fact that probably I could of realized this apprehension even in a mixed group, because "the original sin" as Corbella (95) defines it concerns men and women. My attempt is not to favour one group in comparison to another one, but the one of communicating the value and the meaning that this experience had for me.

During this experience in the group similar themes, to the ones that I was facing in my personal analysis, emerged and interlaced each other.

In the first period, coincident with the beginning of my observation experience, I suffered very much for the conjunction of these emotional situations: everything appeared to me extremely fatiguing. I felt the weight and the frustration more than the joy of beginning the path that I chose. This contributed to create barriers between me and the experience we are talking about. I felt the necessity to differentiate myself from the group, I was bothered by the thought of being on their same level, even if in different contexts. I thought that to be a good observer, therapist in the future, at least I had to be "ahead of the group", mostly in my personal pathway.

I experimented extremely ambivalent sensations. On one hand I was inside the experience because during the sessions I felt concerned and I was involved with what happened but, on the other hand I tried to be outside from what I was living. Slowly my spirit changed and I as the experience increased. In time I learned to recognize and think aspects that paralysed my thought, forbidding me to deeply understand the events. The group, in this sense, has been a training ground, where I learned to share suffering and to tolerate uncertainty.

A short synthesis

At the light of what exposed on the group in general and particularly on the female one I shall try a synthesis of the pathway proposed in the previous pages.

I tried to set the experience in a therapeutic group homogeneous for gender identity inside a global perspective. I imagined the female therapeutic group inserted in a series of concentric circles: the bigger external circle is constituted by the group itself, meant as an instrument, the setting, space-time place; in it is contained the mixed group. Personally I consider the homogeneous groups like a smaller subset, the more internal ring. Particularly, gender homogeneous groups, in the dialectical groupal movement between fusion and individuation, prefer the fusional aspect but,

at the same time, present a tension towards individuation and differentiation issues that in heterogeneous groups have major difficulties and shorter times, even if the dialectical movement is always present in any kind of group.

The female group, as a homogeneous group favours a fast development cohesion, one of the factors indicated by Yalom (97) like the "fundamental principle to follow in the therapeutic group's composition." The same author argues that "homogeneous groups 'coagulate' faster and -besides developing a major cohesion- they offer a major immediate support, show a more assiduous frequency to the meetings, have less conflicts and offer a faster freedom from symptoms." Costantini and Sparvoli (00) add that quickening the advancement of the group's initial stages permits to prolong the central stage time in which occurs the real work on shared problems.

Corbella points out that realizing a re-realization of very primitive experience levels, common issue in every group, allows to return towards a very archaic fusion phase in which there isn't any distinction between subject and object because

All differences are cancelled.

In the paper: "Female and males in the therapeutic group: from stereotypes to the personal relationship" (96) the same author reminds how "from the symbolic re-realization in the relationship with an omnipotent and fusional mother origins the necessity of a different individualization between women and men and so the need of a differentiation. The female's identity formation takes place in the context of a relationship without fractures in which the affective attachment experience melts with the identity's process formation, on the other hand males identifying themselves as belonging to the male sex, have to distinguish the mother from themselves, renouncing in part to the primary love object. The female's identification processes are relational and they place themselves in the area of being, whereas the one's of the male identification are oppositive and place themselves in the area of doing, how Winnicott well described" (71).

After these general considerations I shall particularly see what the female group supplies in the therapeutic process's structuring.

One of the aspects we can surely point out is the groupal's processes establishment, that values and recovers the female component that has been penalized or nullified during the growth, that favours a more solid identity constitution in the group's members.

Besides the female group increases personal esteem and stimulates the identification with one's own belonging sex. Women re-discover the pleasure of sharing and exchanging female models that aren't only prerogative of "other" different and far women, but become common learning to freely use without the need of being envy or feel guilty. The experience in a homogeneous female group, mostly for women with masochistic features permits to recover confidence in one's own sex and to develop one's own female feeling, accompanied by the consciousness of one's own rights and sense of responsibility one's own obligations. At last the sense of belonging and continuity towards one's own mother and towards the female is re-established (Surrey, Jordan, 98).

Cantarella (96) asserts that an important element in this kind of group is in the fact that: "this model of group conduction contributes to point out the therapeutic power of a peer group and its capability of providing consistency, corporeity and voice to a female Self otherwise experienced as invisible".

The experience in a homogeneous sex group seemed very interesting also for another reason: that is to permit the flourishing of a specific culture, in this case the female one. Cantarella (96) expresses this concept like this: "male and female gender homogeneous groups have a double value. On one hand they permit the realization of personal resources and potentialities and on the other that at the same time gender specific relational and cultural modalities are pointed out."

I think that the female group offers the possibility to use moments of sane fusionality but also access to individuation movements that permit to discover and take possession of the real differences between mother and daughter, breaking the illusion chain of primary omnipotence that reacts to a deep impotence and obliteration anxiety. In this way the umbilical chord that perpetuates repetition compulsion is symbolically cut and the elaboration of an individuation process is permitted.

Some critical considerations

Together with the positive aspects previously considered, there are a series of critical observations that I would like to add:

As I have said before the group's homogeneity element permits a fast development of the cohesion (Yalom, 97) but a longer transit in the central phases of the group's development. (Costantini Sparvoli, 00).

Costantini and Sparvoli indicate the cohesion's criteria as the essential ingredient group's the constitution in a short or time limited therapy. As we have seen in the female groups times are very slow and long that's why I think that it would be useful to propose it as a time limited group, especially for those women that need to re-enforce gender identity, through a comparison with their own belonging sex.

In this way the benefits offered from the homogeneous group's process could be optimized and utilized at the most and the long stasis times, subsequent to the first evolution could be avoided. This could also reduce the risk of therapy abandonment in its intermediate phase (L.S.Walker, 89) that in these groups is more stressed making the struggle and heaviness feeling that floats during the stasis more supportable.

At last it could induce a major success perception, in regard of the aims that, in a limited time therapy are necessarily reviewed. I think that this opinion can be supported even by the fact that in the group of which I talked, for Serena and Victoria the last analysis date had been concerted and defined in advance, differently from the other members. This permitted them to exit from their stale situation that was going on from a while and to work-through more rapidly some of their peculiar issues.

Another alternative could be the passage in a mixed group, like a successive moment to a term experience, if this one has been insufficient for their life quality, or if the patient has the desire to investigate further her pathway of Self knowledge.

(1) The first class points out the fear to be situated by men according to some criteria and sexist values, because recalling classical psychoanalytical theories, that use the concepts of penis-envy, can stiffen defences and spark off big resistances to change. The second one refers to the possibility of manipulating and mislead with extreme ease the man therapist for avoiding the bringing into question of problematic areas. There can be this eventuality because of the desire to please the man, to not wound him on the base of his supposed fragility and to protect him from the female destructiveness. This provokes the acting of compulsory altruistic behaviours, to the renouncement and to the impossibility of expressing the real sentiments felt, judged as unworthy and evil (Cotugno 99).

The third one is due to the possibility to avoid an erotic transference and counter-transference. Some women fear to demonstrate what their real abilities are and what their power is and they are opened to everything for not verify this. They fear that in the therapeutic relationship with a man it is possible to confirm what they are most afraid of. In this sense, the eventual seducing success would confirm in narcissistically an omnipotent self opinion, in which the other is not seen as a person but as an instrument to realize a proper infantile need, realizing, in this way, what Lopez defined (76) as "collusion narcissism-masochism".

The fourth class includes the attempt of being able to establish a positive identification with realized and competent woman in the therapeutic relationship. In the assignation of the mother's role to the therapist "what is looked for is her authorization - implicit or explicit- to compete, have success, have a good time, win and even if for gaining it one has to go through an intense transference of a refusing mother." (A. Cotugno, 99).

(2) The reader can see the specific reference for what concerns the aspects due to the peculiarities of the female group and the indications and counter-indications of this kind of group.

(3) For space reasons and for not to load the exposition the reader is sent to the original text, indicated in the references.

(4) The participants' names have been changed for privacy and secrecy reasons

(5) L.J.S.Walker (89) shows how many of the female group's aims are similar to the ones of the mixed ones: the first like the second ones are able to permit the exchange of interpersonal experiences between its members, to solve personal problems, to improve the interpersonal relationships, to increase autonomy, respect and faith in oneself, to favour honesty, frankness and an open kind of communication, to stimulate changes in the psychological functioning.

(6) As we can see most of the elements that are going to be analyzed could be considered, in regard to the view point, specific or in common with the female or the mixed groups.

(7) The situation is referred to session of half February during the second year of observation. For space reasons the session's contents are not exposed

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