

The median group as an transcultural device in treatment and formation Comparison between the Groupanalytical and the Ethnopsychanalytical model

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Abstract

In this article the author compares the Groupanalytical model (in particular the Italian approach) and the Ethnopsychanalytical model (in particular that developed in France by Tobie Nathan and Marie Rose Moro); moreover she compares two therapeutic devices: the median group for Group Analysis and Transcultural Consultation for Ethnopsychanalysis.

Beginning from these comparisons, the author argues that the median group may be an effective device in therapeutic contexts and also in transcultural training contexts, that is, in contexts where many levels of difference are involved: differences of countries of origin, of languages, of cultures, of professional communities, of institutional contexts (workers coming from different services).

Consequently the median group is an effective instrument to work with foreign people, in the transcultural training of cultural mediators and with groups of workers belonging to different institutional and professional contexts.

The author underlines, in particular, that the median group may better allow the manifestation and the expression of “otherness” and its utilisation as a therapeutic tool and an instrument for change by the construction of devices that permit expression and elaboration of the conflict and attainment of a level of dialogue between the different cultures involved. For this purpose, these median group devices have to be realized by building settings in which these differences may be completely expressed and at the same time where the members of the group are safeguarded from an “excessive exposure” to these differences.

Key-words: Ethnopsychanalysis, Group Analysis, median group, devices of transcultural therapy, devices of transcultural training

The median group (1) is a configuration which consists of between 7-8 members (a small group) and more than 30 (a large group).

In it the social cultural context is emphasized. In this, we see the principal difference compared to the small group in which the attention is more on the inter-personal conflicts than on the conflicts between individuals and groups such as we find in the median group; in other words, while the small group evokes experiences known for the first time within a family, the median group recalls social and macro-cultural experiences.

We think that the median group is an innovative device in the field of transcultural treatment and techniques.

In particular, our hypothesis is that the emergence of cultural aspects and of dialogue that characterize a median group is facilitated by the “exposure/display” of

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differences in a group of participants coming from different cultures, theoretical professional differences, and institutional differences (workers coming from different services).

We will take the reader for a walk leading through the arguments about some theoretical bases of this assertion.

We will begin with the comparison between two disciplines/contexts which concern themselves with transcultural aspects of care: the Group Analysis (in particular the Italian approach) and Ethnopsychanalysis (in particular that developed in France by Tobie Nathan and Marie Rose Moro).

We will dwell upon the peculiarities and the usefulness of these two perspectives of the model of the median group to emphasize the potentiality of this group configuration, also in non-therapeutic contexts such as the context of transcultural formation.

1 The Ethnopsychanalytical perspective

The perspective to which we refer originated in France from the theoretical approach and therapeutic practice founded on the principle of Complementarity. It was George Devereux who laid down the theoretical and methodological foundations that are based on the utilization of two disciplines which are compulsory but not simultaneous, although complementary: anthropology and psychoanalysis.

The ethnological approach of Devereux has been developed and applied in the theory and the technique created by Nathan: a specific device of group consultation for the care of migrant patients. Nathan was the first to propose, at the end of the 70's, this device as he was the first to utilize it at the "Avicenne" hospital of Bobigny (2). Following this, he continued to develop his theoretical approach and the use of the "Ethno-psychiatric Device" (3) at the Devereux Centre of the Paris VIII University. At the "Avicenne" in Bobigny this technique was carried forward by Moro in collaboration with the Paris VIII University.

Nathan (1986), tracing the developments in the theoretical picture of ethnopsychiatry, emphasised how it is a step in advance from Freud and from the notion of the "concordance" principally expressed in "Totem and Taboo" in 1912 between the psychic life of savages and of neurotics (4) (with the work in the ethnological field by the psychoanalyst G. Roheim) to consider psychoanalysis more useful for ethnology as an instrument of enquiry than as an explanatory instrument. To psychoanalysts this has become recognised as containing "the germ of a metacultural universal knowledge" (Nathan, *ibid.*). A "germination contained, in our opinion, in all the systems of knowledge, including these defined as "traditional". One of the fundamental contributions of Devereux was that of stating the impossibility of forcing the anthropological approach and the psychoanalytical approach inside each other and of maintaining the necessity of a "double discourse" (dual approach). The "complementary principle" of Devereux (1972) on which is founded the ethnopsychiatric approach foresees in fact the utilisation of the two disciplines - anthropology and psychoanalysis - in a compulsory, but not simultaneous way.

To illustrate the complementary principle, Devereux recalls the Physics model of Bohr (Castellani, 2003, Bohr, 1936) which constitute a generalization of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. This model refers to the properties of light, which is at the same time wave-form and body-form, but it is impossible to measure the two dimensions simultaneously.

Devereux, inspired by Bohr and the Physics School of Copenhagen, “transforms complementarity from an interpretative idea to a methodological principle according to which the propositions expounded inside each discipline are not in contradiction but contribute (together) to complete the information that is possible to gain from a determined phenomenon... in doing this, Devereux assumed with full force the paradigm of multi-disciplinarity” (Castellani, 2003).

The compulsory but non-simultaneous utilization of the two disciplines thus brings about, at the level of ethno-psychoanalytical technique, an important consequence: that of not being able to interpret cultural material in a psychoanalytical manner. For example, in this sense it is necessary to resist the temptation to interpret witchcraft in terms of projection or manifestation of being possessed (possession) in terms of hysterical symptoms, etc., because in these cases “the scene” is not the subject, rather the culture. An interpretation of this type would hinder the therapeutic process in so far as it would put a check upon the unique point of orientation which the subject has to live and express his/her suffering.

The dynamic between the universal and the particular constitutes the base of the psychoanalytical approach to cultural differences. Moro (1998) raises the necessity of a “passage through culture”, that is going through the particular in order to reach the universality of Mankind. “Western psychology, sometimes giving way to the temptations of abstraction and ethnocentricity, pretends to reach directly the universal without examining (passing through) the particular... The complexity of human nature, characterised by a necessary interaction with cultural contexts, forces researchers to define models which are multiple complex and specific” (Moro, *ibid.*). Moro (2002) nevertheless is on guard against the dangers of an “excess of culturalism”, that is, the risk of considering culture as the sole determinant of a manner of being or of thinking.

To make his point in the setting of an Ethnopsychanalytical device, Nathan has chosen the group.

This choice was dictated by various motives: the group helps the patient to expose the cultural material in a curative situation nearer to those of traditional societies; moreover, the group has become known to ethno-psychoanalysis as a necessary instrument for the analysis of cultural Countertransference (Nathan, 1993; Moro, 1994, 1998, 2002) as well as for the emergence and elaboration of cultural material (Nathan, 2003). By “cultural material” we mean the cultural theories of the patient or the conceptions and belief concerning: 1) *firstly* the nature and origin of man (ontological theory); 2) *secondly* the origin of illness (etiological theory); 3) *and thirdly*, the methods of cure (therapeutic theory) (5).

In a group, each therapist proposes an interpretation of terms brought along by the patient, always explaining their references (the culture from which such

interpretations originally derive). We refer to the following example from Nathan (from an essay by Nathan) (Nathan, *ibid.*):

The female patient describes the way in which her sister-in-law was teasing/mockng her in an indirect way: “She was singing songs, but I knew that their content was about me)...”. The Algerian co-therapist remarked: “Strange! When the Kabyle women reveal the truth, they always do it with songs...”. The Congolese co-therapist (male) said: “With us, it’s called “Giving out the news”. The Senegalese co-therapist (female) said: “With us, we say: “Chasing away the hen with words”, because apparently we are speaking to a hen, but everyone knows that it refers to someone precise – a woman”.

In this way, the group contributes to a sort of “semantic bombardment of great emotional value”. Finally, it is the principal therapist who has the responsibility of forming a possible structuring for all the elements immersed in the group, and of proposing a new re-ordering of the same to the patient (Nathan, *ibid.*).

As an Ethnopschoanalytical device, the group materialises the “otherness” and transforms it to a therapeutic tool such as “how Devereux [1972] thought, that is as a support to psychic elaboration” (Moro, 2002).

Such materialisation looks at not only the visual element (the co-therapist and the patient can have different somatic traits) but also the auditory element with the possibility of being able to use an interpreter, thanks to whom, the patient can speak in their own native language (the concept of a “linguistic bath” of which Moro speaks – *ibid.*).

Moreover, all ethnopschoanalytical discourse has a starting-point an issue for which this device was born, that is: the impact that the “migratory event” can have on the psyche.

The “migratory event” represents a “psychic act”:

because of the break from the original environment, migration behaves indirectly also as a fracture at the level of a cultural context internalized within the patient since there is a correspondence between the cultural structure (structuring) and the psychic structure of the individual”. (Moro, 1998)

At the same time, migration constitutes also a “social event” fixed in a historical and political context. There are various reasons for deciding to leave one’s own country of origin: political motives, wish to find a better life, economic motives, and the desire for freedom or adventure.

In each case, migration is an act of courage which brings with it profound changes in the family history of the individual. Moreover, from the accounts of migrants emerge always an attitude of ambivalence; even in cases of free choice: there are present the wish to depart, the fear of leaving one’s dear ones, the attempt to find solutions to resolve family conflicts and the existence of unpleasant conditions in one’s own

country. Migration is a complex act – ambiguous, profoundly human, and its value is in the same action of migrating. (Moro, 1998)

The “migratory event”, from this point of view, can be observed as a representation or “typification” of the process of personal growth/individuation.

So, the Ethnopsyoanalytical device is proposed as an instrument and an opportunity each time the “migratory event” characterises itself as an unresolved fracture between different cultural universes; what is in play in these cases is a “feeling of otherness” (Moro, *ibid.*). The possibility of looking at oneself in a group with aspects of one’s own culture of origin (the possibility of expressing oneself in one’s own language, the presence of therapists from the same cultural area) and with different aspects (the language of the country of immigration, the presence of the therapists from different cultural areas – not only from the country of immigration) constitutes a first step in the work of elaboration of the “otherness” and in the construction of links and bridges between the different cultural identities.

Description of the device of Transcultural Consultatio

The Ethnopsyoanalytical device operates in France at the Devereux Centre of the University of Paris VIII directed by Toby Nathan, and, with the name of “Transcultural Consultation”, at the Department of Psychopathology of Childhood and Family at the “Avicenne” Hospital of Bobigny directed by Marie Rose Moro. At these services, they receive patients originating from different countries: Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, South-East Asia, the Antilles, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Central Europe.

At a session of Transcultural Consultation, those who come face to face in a circle, consist of 15-20 persons participating: the patient (of course) but often also members of his/her family and professional figures who have eventually accompanied him/her to the service (social workers, nurses, school workers etc.).

Also, an interpreter participates in the session. The determining process isn’t perceived as (in this context) the simple utilization of a mother tongue, rather as the process of a passage from one language to another: it is the link between languages that is to be researched and not an artificial recall of a more or less “fossilized” mother tongue.

Translation, according to this approach, is not considered as a simple intermediary, but rather as an integral part of the interactive process of psychotherapy in a transcultural context.

Moreover, the importance for the therapists of the associations linked to the linguistic material enunciated by the patient is patently evident also when such announcements, expressed in a foreign language, are not understood.

Therefore, workers from different service and therapist of diverse cultural origin (in general a dozen) participate at the sessions. Among the therapists, the figure of “*principal therapist*” stands out. He has the task of co-ordinating the session. He is the “regulator” of the exchanges; for example, only the principal therapist speaks directly to the patient; the other *co-therapists* speak directly to the principal therapist

who then relays to the patient what he said. In this case the reference of a co-therapist to a patient will never be: “Do you believe that...” – rather – turning to the principal therapist: “May I ask if the gentleman/lady believes that...”. The principal therapist consequently will convey this to the interpreter, asking him to translate the question of the co-therapist for the patient.

This relative organisation “by the star” (only really typical of the initial phases of group analytical treatment) (6) remains a constant characteristic of “Transcultural Consultation” which however is classified (characterised) as a brief therapy of less than six months, with the frequency of one session a month or around every two months (Moro, 1994).

The Groupanalytical Perspective

The focal point of Groupanalytical thinking is the concept of the individual in terms of relationships. In this perspective, Group Analysis is not only a therapeutic technique that utilizes the group as an instrument, but rather:

A theory of the mind, a theory of personality, a theory of intersubjectivity, a theory of psychic organisation of the social environment... At the base of everything is placed a strong assumption: “The genesis of a individual psychic life and its *complexification* is understood only in the context of a net of intersubjectivity, a net that can be represented as a hierarchical stratification of multiple fields of significance, from the biological to the social, from the cross- generational to the cross-personal. (Pontalti, 1998)

“The group as an idea and as an instrument, is profoundly connected to the epistemology of complexity” (Di Maria, Lo Verso, 1995).

Corbella (2003) enriches the picture of the paradigm of complexity with the concepts of boundaries and of bonds (“supplementation”) and with the notion of complementarity underlining how complexity does not signify eclecticism or a loss of any boundary. In facts, it is strictly associated with and tied to the comparison with the restraints in reference to the concept of “supplementation” that the authors takes again from the writings of Puget. “Supplementation” refers to “that which is more than the irreducibly unknowable (Corbella, *ibid.*) and to that “component of strangeness not reducible to the same bond” (Puget, cited by Corbella, *ibid.*). The “being bound” of every person, or his/her belonging to diverse links or bonds create some boundaries that at the same time open the person to the unknowable. The risk, if anything, is in the attempt to reduce this component of unknowability.

It is interesting to note that the author, in treating of the paradigm of complexity refers, like Devereux, to the ideas of Bohr, thus recalling the principle of complementarity back inside the group-analytical epistemological paradigm: the complementarity of the singular and of the particular compared to the universal, and the complementarity in the construction of the Person “that instead of the obsolete *aut...aut* (either...or) substitutes a more constructive *et...et* (both... and) that holds together and contains unresolved paradoxes that manifest themselves as

contradictions, with the prospect of new solutions” (Lopez, Zorzi Meneguzzo, cited by Corbella, *ibid.*).

We will briefly touch upon two cardinal concepts of the group-analytical approach: the “*transpersonal*” and the “*mirror reaction*”. They are strictly tied to the epistemological reflections already explained and they are at the base of our comparison between the Ethno-psychoanalytical approach and the group-analytical approach.

The concept of “*transpersonal*” is put forward as a specific hypothesis which characterises the group-analytical approach. It can be defined “*both as the here and now of group situations (but also of couples and families) and as the whole of the relationships that the subject internalizes and that he represents to himself from his/her birth, and that became a constituent part of the totality of his internal world*” (Lo Verso, Papa, 1995).

In this second meaning, different levels can be distinguished:

Biological-genetic.

This concerns everything that is about you and species-specific in groups and in communications, and that is transmitted by and seated in the biological memory in the course of evolutionary process of Man. It is at this level that there is the greatest affinity between individuals of whatever race or origin...

Ethno-anthropological.

This is the level relative to the great cultural and macro-institutional areas. It is connected to the diversifications between cultures, nationalities etc...

Trans-generational.

This is the sphere of the family world, of its culture and of the way in which things are handed down and transformed from generation to generation...

Institutional.

This concerns the level more closely tied to the actual relationships in the life of the subject, to the experiences connected with the learning of techniques, roles, organisational functions, hierarchies models – but above all to taking part, together with others in a structure ...

Socio-communicative.

This last level refers to the contemporary macro-social dimension and to the degree which this seems to be superimposed on the family and on cultural traditions – above all in advanced societies... (Lo Verso, Papa, *ibid.*)

The concept of *Mirror reaction* was defined by Foulkes (1964) as a specific phenomenon of the group:

Mirror reactions are characteristically brought out when a number of persons meet and interact. A person sees himself, or part of himself – often a repressed part of himself – reflected in the interactions of other group members. He sees them reacting in the way he does himself, or in contrast to his own behaviour. He also gets to know

himself – and this is a fundamental process in ego development – by the effect he has upon others and the picture they form of him.

Corbella shares with Pines the distinction between a mirror-image and *Mirror reaction* underlining a fundamental aspect (in our opinion) both for the groupanalytical devices and for the ethnopsyoanalytical devices: the rôle of the confrontation with the *Difference* inside a group context.

... the important distinction is that between a “self” that comes to be actively reflected by another “self” who responds to him/her (Mirroring). It is the contrast between sameness and difference. It is the difference which conveys information and the difference is only comprehensible in a context. Without differences, there is neither change nor development. (Pines, cited by Corbella, 2003)

The median group

After having outlined the supposed epistemological principles of Groupanalysis, we would like to dwell upon the characteristics of a particular group structure, that of the median group. In terms of the number of participants, a group can, in fact, be characterised as: small (7-12 members), median (12-30 members), or large (more than 30 participants) (Pisani, 2000). The median group (7), by analogy with the small group, is characterised by regular meetings: one or two meetings a week of about an hour and a half. The group is arranged in a circle, face to face and the discussion is free. Moreover, its nature appears very different to that of the small group.

According to Patrick de Maré (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, 1991) the passage from a small group to a median group and to a large group brings about a number of changes in the nature of the device used. The fundamental aspects are the following:

While in the small group, the emphasis is on psychotherapy, in the median group “the emphasis is upon the socio-cultural” – the accent is placed more on the individual/group conflict than on the intra-psychic conflict.

While in the small groups, the text is constituted by group association, in the median group it takes the form of dialogue. Here dialogue is understood as “something that has to be learnt like a language. The avowed and only purpose of the larger group is to enable people to learn how to talk to each other, to learn a dialogue” (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*). To learn to have a dialogue in a median group means to develop a *KOINONIA*: “an impersonal fellowship in the group” (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*), a participation, a sharing, a friendly association, that brings about the constitution of a mini-culture in the heart of the same group. The change, in a median group can therefore assume the function of a transformation of the cultural contexts and “it offers us the opportunity to humanize both individual and society concurrently” (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*).

In this context of a median group, dialogue is considered as a “transformational process” that is to say: “it transforms mindlessness into understanding [*verstehen*] and meaning [*meinen*]” (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*). De Maré adds in this

case, next to the pressures of the reality principle and the gratification of the pleasure principle, a third principle: that of its meaning "...as we learn to understand ourselves in terms of community and not merely as organisms" (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*).

While the small group evokes inter-personal experiences tied to the experiences of life started for the first time inside the family, "... the large group includes social and macrocultural aspects that are part of the human situation – illness, death, class, race, politics, economics, philosophy, current affairs, religion and art..." (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*). De Maré moreover affirms that if the small group is above all interested in pre-Oedipal and Oedipal dynamics, in the bigger group the primacy is genital. "The larger group, in manoeuvring a cultural transformation from hate to friendliness, plays a major role in nurturing genital primacy. Genitality not only expresses an instinct involving a relationship, but a total social learning situation, the outcome of the latency period at puberty" (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, *Ibid.*).

For De Maré, culture represent the mind of the larger/median group; from this point of view "the larger group can therefore serve as a situation for exploring and discovering its own projected sub- and micro-cultures -‘anthropology in the making’" and again, "we postulate that the median group enables us to view our macrocultural assumptions more effectively than other settings can do, since it is capable of evolving its own microculture from which to look at other cultural assumptions, including its own subcultures".

Comparison between the Groupanalytical perspective and the Ethnopsyoanalytical perspective

Inside the actual debate about the comparison between the Groupanalytical perspective and the Ethnopsyoanalytical perspective, we would like to outline some common features between the two approaches, always respecting the uniqueness of each discipline which means that you cannot superimpose one upon the other (Lo Coco, Lo Verso, 2006).

The group vision of Man

The element which seems most similar in the two approaches consists of the "multipersonal" and "group" vision of Man, that is as someone taking part in a series of complex networks of interpersonal relationships (internal and external) that thus constitute an identity base (Pontalti, 1998) (Lo Coco, Lo Verso, 2006). From this viewpoint, Groupanalysis and Ethnopsyoanalysis could be seen as a rediscovery and re-evaluation of ethological aspects of human existence present both in so-called "traditional" societies and in so-called "modern" societies.

The paradigm of Complexity and Complementarity

The paradigm of Complexity joins the theoretical approaches of Groupanalysis and Ethnopsyoanalysis forming, in our opinion, a common epistemological substratum. Moreover, both refer to a theoretical pluralism, to concepts of philosophical threads/currents of hermeneutics and to the principle of "complementarity" between

the particular and the universal, between contradictory aspects present in the same reality and between different disciplines like Anthropology and Psychoanalysis (Di Maria, Lo Verso, 1995; Ceruti, Lo Verso, 1998; Pontalti, 1998; Corbella, 2003) (Devereux, 1972; Nathan, 1986; Moro, 1998, 2002).

The trans-personal

The concept of the “transpersonal” developed by groupanalysis (Pontalti, 1998) seems strictly tied to the *biological* and *anthropological* levels of the ethnopsychanalytical notions of universality and particularity in Man; and to the *transgenerational* level of the process of transmission and transformation of the same culture from generation to generation (Lo Verso, Papa, 1995) (Moro, 1998; Nathan, 1986).

Finally, the *institutional* and *socio-communicative* levels (Lo Verso, Papa, *Ibid.*) recall the whole ethnopsychanalytical theme regarding the impact of the migratory event on individual identity: the meeting between the transpersonal of one’s own origins and that of the country of immigration (Devereux, 1972; Nathan, 1986).

Mirror reaction

Looking again at this groupanalytical notion (Foulkes, 1964) we remember that really “mirror reaction” plays a determining role in Transcultural Consultation by virtue of the actual composition of the group: co-therapists of different cultural origins, workers from different services, the bilingualism of the consultation and puts into operation different cultural theories. The “otherness” seems “made extreme” by this device, except that it’s right to depart from the synaesthetic materialisation of such “otherness”, so that it is possible to re-establish things from new roots, and to discover also resemblances between profoundly different cultures. Again, we go from the particular to the universal, in a continual movement of going back and forth.

In all this dynamic of “mirror reactions”, the bodily dimension assumes a very important rôle in the group (as also shown by Corbella, 2003) in that the device of Transcultural Consultation is interested both in the visual element (the different somatic traits) and in the auditory element: the “linguistic bath” of which Moro speaks:

I listen to the discourse of the patients in their own language. In general, I know some important words that I progressively learn with the interpreters; but, what is more, I am also more sensitive to the sounds of the words, the rhythm of the sentences, the pauses in the discussions, to the repetitions of words... to the qualities (the materialisation of the language).

At times, in the course of the meetings the language interests me in itself (as a linguist), as well as an expression of conflicts and as an aid to interpretations (as a clinical analyst). I let this language, concrete and coming from the patient, permeate me. I immerge myself in a linguistic bath which invokes in me some images and associations tied to the same materialisation of the words, of the rhythms, of the sounds... (Moro, De Pury Toumi, 1994)

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The peculiarity of the median group

In this article, we hypothesise that the emphasis on ethnopsychanalysis in the importance of the group for the working out of cultural material finds a particular support in the thesis of De Maré (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, 1991), according to which the median group, the device of the Transcultural Consultation, has in itself the greater potentialities to make evident empirically the social and socio-cultural dimension compared to the small group. The evident common features shared by the two approaches to the median group (groupanalytical and ethnopsychanalytical) do not, however, make them identical; there are in fact differences which distinguish these two approaches in distinct ways.

From the perspective of De Maré, we can object, for example, that in a median group “conducting should be confined to one or two convenors [those that we have called co-therapists, *editor’s note, Vide par. 1.1 in this article*], certainly not several: this is because the use of multiple convenors leads inevitably, by the very nature of the structure it creates, to unevenness in the flow of dialogue and to the likelihood of the formation of splinter groups within the larger whole” (De Maré, Piper, Thompson, 1991).

We agree with De Maré regarding the type of setting to which he refers: a median group with free discussion.

We have seen how in the device of Transcultural Consultation the conducting of a group is relaxed but it is not a completely free discussion; there are rules, for example concerning the different ways of interacting with the patient by the co-therapist compared to the principal therapist. We hypothesize that there should be “safety measures” which safeguard the patient from an “excessive exposure” to the differences.

Conclusions

The journey between techniques and different theoretical models which we have traced comes to be understood as a narrative to be sustained, in the sense of supporting and re-inforcing the hypothesis which we had started from, that is, that the emergence of cultural aspects and of dialogue that characterize a median group is facilitated by an “exposure to the differences” in a group of participants bringing with them cultural, institutional and theoretical/professional differences.

The “materialisation of otherness” in a group is the fruit (of action) of sensory aspects: kinaesthetic, visual, auditory (“the linguistic bath”) and synaesthetic (Fasolo, 2006) which join together in the perception of the “other” as different, but also of the phenomenon of “mirror reaction”: the image sent back to me by the other person is different and at the same time similar to mine.

We should value, in the sense of using to the maximum, the potentialities inherent in “group quality” that in these ways brings into relief both the resemblances and also the differences necessary “in order to be *there with*” (*mit-sein*). These are differences understood as limits to explore and “to manoeuvre” like levers of change in a precise

and delicate work of engraving to be done within certain limits – and not beyond – that is, to go beyond the limit of the irreducibility of the differences to something known.

Regarding this, Corbella underlines:

... as often in the attempt to metabolize the excess of information that is brought to us by the other, we risk confusing the similar with the dissimilar and the similar with the equal or, I would add, defensively and dangerously, the different comes to be assimilated to something ontologically inferior...

... as the real experience of work with a group has allowed the inescapable awareness of the presence of categories like the strange, the diverse, the different, not assimilable towards mechanisms of identification, and precisely how the “being bound” obliges us to take account of the so-called categories not only on a theoretical level but also of clinical and existential praxis. (Corbella, 2003)

In respect of the differences between the theoretical approaches and techniques described, we would like to make clear how the hypothesis described above can trace some lines of development inside groupanalytical research and also of its applications in contexts which are not therapeutic.

Such hypotheses could work together to strengthen and give a new stimulus to the development and utilization of group contexts which are not strictly “therapeutic”, but also capable of favouring a process of catalysis (“catalyzation”) through that operation which we have previously called the “materialisation of differences”. In this regard, we refer to the example of formative contexts and in particular to the transcultural formation of cultural mediators and of workers belonging to different institutional contexts who work with persons both Italian and foreign.

In these contexts, the median group can constitute a resource because there it is possible to see the reciprocal “mirror reaction” of the social and cultural dimensions of each person: the resemblances and the differences – and, at the same time, the expression of the uniqueness and particularity of each subject or subjectivity.

It is in this type of experience that the participants in a median group can compare with each other and can construct a transcultural dialogue which nevertheless should not be taken for granted but should be learned. The “*Koinonia*”, the culture of the group (which De Maré talks about in the context of this type of group configuration) should be constructed also when facing phases of conflict.

There are multiple levels of differences involved – differences of culture, of professional communities, of countries of origin, of working problems concerning users of different nationalities, which can thus find a “guided” format in which a gradual process of creative modification can be expressed and developed, leading to the constitution of a new group culture, of that specific formative group, from which we can derive complex instruments for reading the working realities of everyone.

Notes

- 1) This article derives from a task conducted by an inter-service team and from much deliberation and from successive modifications/working out (Caselli, 2004).
- 2) This service was then directed by Serge Lebovici.
- 3) Sometimes an ethnopsychiatric term comes to be used in place of an etnopsicoanalytical term. According to M. R. Moro, this ambiguity about nomenclature derives in part from the fact that from the very beginning Devereux sometimes uses the “ethnopsychiatric” term, sometimes the “ethnopsicoanalytic” term (Moro, 1998).
- 4) The idea of “concordance” is indicated directly by Freud in the sub-title of his work: “Totem e taboo – concordance between the psychic life of savage and of neurotics” (Freud, 19113).
- 5) Naturally, cultural theories concern both the patients and the therapists. For a comparison between the traditional therapeutic theories and the therapeutic theories that constitute the bases of Western psychotherapeutic approaches, vide Nathan (1993, 1995).
- 6) F. Fasolo (personal communication, April 2006)

- 7) As Franco Fasolo, we chose the term *median* in the place of intermedian, to underlined the autonomy and the peculiarity of its features.

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