

Notes on the meaning of clothing in the group

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Abstract

I have pointed out how the analytic process can seep also into less visible fields, causing a continuous change of different dimensions and levels. These dimensions, which are simultaneously coexistent and which convey different meanings, make it harder and more complex the grasp all the different elements that take part in the process of healing and in its setting.

Searles said that the face of the analyst during a session is actually the face of the patient (1986). He stated that when the words spoken during a session were not efficient or speakable, a facial expression could visually and scenically show communicable feelings.

We think that clothing can be libidinally invested, and that frequently or occasionally it can carry representations and act as an iconic container of elements. These elements can be less visible but representative of the psychic scene of the cure, particularly in the perceptive and sensory field of the group, connected, at a more underlying level, to the more undifferentiated values of group relations.

Keywords: group setting, clothing-skin, clothing-covering, containment function

The meaning of clothes (worn by the analyst or the participants) and its diffusion in the emotional environment of a group, is not a well developed topic in group psychology. On the contrary, the psychoanalytic literature (especially the one related to early consultations) emphasizes the importance of the way patients cover and display their bodies during sessions. The idea is in fact that a subject in a difficult situation can ask for containment when asking for help. Such containment can be provided by the skin that protects him, or by his second layer of skin: clothing. The patient treats the latter as some sort of protective covering, as well as a means of self-expression (or self-concealment) which has so far been unsuccessful or painful (Anzieu, 1985; Bick, 1986). As communication tools with the outside world, clothes represent the preferences of those who wear them, or their will to deny having any preferences or need to show them. It can be said that clothing, both in its constructive and its passive and refusing form, is arranged in accordance with basic psychic states around which a subject elaborates a call for help. The display of such states can be direct or indirect, and it can be easy or difficult to sense. Clothes become part of the session as an expression of awareness (tastes, preferences, aspirations, reference models, passions and basic concepts), or rather like an unconscious communication of unrecognized elements. These elements concern the field of self-perception,

specifically the body-self, the discrimination between internal and external, and the basic libidinal preferences, especially the ones which are fragmented and not integrated or the ones which have been removed.

Therefore, the trace of the elements in the clothing can be explicit, if there is some awareness of certain aesthetic choices and their expressiveness, but it can also indirectly lead to secretiveness and introversion. In this case, we are dealing with concepts which are connected to preferences originated during childhood from those primary objects which influenced our basic choices. These concepts contain the qualities of those rejected objects as well as their dynamics, their evolution and their role in the creation of the concept of Oedipus. More precisely, in the aesthetics of clothes there are traces of concepts deriving from the partial non-integrated qualities of the original object of love, as well as the possibility that such object contains inanimate aspects. In this case, clothing aesthetics (fashion, elegance, taste, preference for a certain look) could play a containing role. It could be perceived as a protective layer, as a vitalizing energy source that the inanimate part of the object of love (identified with inanimate things such as clothes, walls or material elements of the environment) seeks in order to stay alive. In other cases, the aesthetic investment is based on the symbolization of skin. The libidinal and identificatory transfer is accomplished, and the chosen object, namely the aesthetics of clothes, has animate and animating meaning. Self-expression is aware of using aesthetic construction and involvement in order to represent elaborate elements of itself.

Since Freud, the object of libidinal investment has been described, mainly within the Kleinian conception, as consisting of a genetic and a developmental form: a partial original object, and a whole integrated love object. Those primitive elements, which are partial and not integrated in the primary libidinal object, are likely to be more easily projected or transferred to one or more aspects of the body (the voice, an organ, the skin, facial features or other body parts, posture, etc.). Alternatively, through particularly concrete mechanisms, they could also be transferred to a certain part of the environment (animate or inanimate).

My idea is that this secret projection could also be transferred to the layer covering the body, namely clothing, or to some of its components. This mechanism finds its best expression within the group, where to see and to be seen are both of great importance.

The patients and the analyst's clothing is seen as a concrete expression of the patients' secret intersubjective transference or as a transference within the social field of the group. Clothing can therefore be seen as the expression of three factors:

1. Clothing becomes part of the group's habits and continuity, of its setting. It has a stabilizing value, and it contributes to identify the group, as well as its culture and language.
2. Clothing contains secret expressions, and it is used as a means of discharge of unconscious, unconfessed, unknown aspects, which cannot be verbally communicated and have to be denied. They can be so vibrant and non-

symbolizable, that they are eclipsed by the conscience and by the alpha-bond (see Bion) which could not metabolize and transform them. They are mainly primitive, shapeless, floating elements in search of some kind of aggregation, mixture or discharge.

3. Clothing is used to communicate emotional and physical states, tastes, preferences linked with memories, desires, and fantasies. Accessing this kind of communication allows the group to work effectively.

We can now go back to Bleger (1966) and his idea of setting-institution. He emphasizes how, especially in institutional patients, indistinguishable parts of the individual identity are projected to elements of the setting (location, schedules, habits) through concrete mechanisms. Similarly, the group participants' clothes, together with other elements of the same kind, act as a concrete container for the psychically unrecognized or denied elements. This way, such elements are continuously and secretly ritualized and conveyed by the chosen clothing and by its meaning, given to it by mutual sight and reciprocal projection. Projection can either refer to the stability or evolution of the clothes worn by the group participants (style, colour, formal appearance), or to their sudden change, most of all to the match (or the lack of it) between the clothing and the dominant emotions in a given session.

I will make some examples that can better clarify the above mentioned concepts.

Zoe

I remember a session during which the group was expecting to process some very uncomfortable and potentially risky matters about loss that Zoe had introduced during our previous session, unsettling the other participants. It soon became clear that Zoe had no real intention of truly going into what she had told the group about the loss of her brother. She did not think it necessary to identify the effects that had been deposited on the psychic field of the group after she had told her story. The following session, she displayed a quiet behaviour and a "normal" and normalizing style. She was wearing a rather unusually flashy hat which had an extremely evocative style. She did not take it off with her coats, as women usually do in public places, but she kept it on. I told her and the group to pay attention to the particular piece of clothing she was wearing, but she promptly reacted by rejecting the therapist's words and taking the hat off, denying there was anything meaningful to talk about. That episode was actually the first of a series of similar displays from Zoe. This laid the foundations for what Bezoari-Ferro (1991) refers to as 'bastions', beyond which it was impossible to proceed, both for Zoe and for the group. Soon after that, Zoe left the group because she felt she could not really be part of it, nor allow other participants to connect to her. She had poured that story to the group like a stream of uncontainable and unprocessed elements, like an attempt to bury a dead person that still has not been mourned or had a proper burial, which would allow him to rest in peace in the afterlife.

Zoe's story became some sort of historical archive for the group. It was located at the degree of mental activity that in his Grid Bion calls "notation", still waiting to evolve. This notation, which was kept in the group archive, was furthermore given a seal, some kind of signature: a blue velvet hat, big and sagging, like in the sixteenth century fashion, that matches a lady to a page.

Luca

Differently, but in a similar way in which projections and transferences come to life through a piece of clothing, during a session in which somebody had introduced some red stiletto shoes, a therapy group developed a meaningful stream of reactions and thoughts which started an important process.

For a long time, the group had been trying to contain a very clever and antisocial patient, Luca. He used to float around without being able to settle down, while displaying an aggressive behaviour that caused a state of turbulence and disanchoring.

The session about "the red shoes" lit up the production of fantasies that opened a new path, which allowed to anchor and express ideas and passions that had never been said before. This new path allowed Luca to rapidly find his own space within the group. He told his own stories and played a very useful social role, stimulating others to tell similar stories and aggregating them around a centre that was being shaped by stories about chaotic passions, norm violation, freedom from prohibition and from punishment, and so on.

The analyst had to keep the spontaneous stream on track in order to avoid the establishment of an oppressive leadership, and the contagious spreading of impulsive tendencies and foul language. The group explored and evaluated the possibility to contact and recognize indistinct and physical objects.

That unexpected step, which gave early shape to unstructured elements, generated some psychic situations that I would define pre-verbal. They are connected to that psychic "scenality" (or "obscenality", like Duez (2000) calls the lack of it). Kaës (1999), in a special edition of this journal dedicated to psychodrama, describes it as a deep psychic tendency to connect original phantoms in an inner action which is disconnected from words, and which only obeys its own laws that have no access to discursive thought. This scenality, according to both authors, could be better staged in the psychodrama setting and help develop symbolizing abilities.

During the following sessions, some of Luca's artistic aspects connected to the red shoes stigma came out. They were chaotic and turbulent, but the group slowly managed to give them a certain order through chains of associations and active elaboration that turned jumbled feelings and passions into shared, evolved meanings. Later on, they would have helped establish the basis of Luca's future job.

The analyst's red sweater

This therapy group of doctors and nurses focused on cancer death, and the difficulty of therapeutic relationships. The first session, the analyst chose to wear a peculiar piece of clothing: a red low-cut sweater. She had emotionally invested that sweater with meaningful concepts she had developed and linked to the group, while preparing for its sessions. She had done this through a complex associative chain, with the difficulties and the risks that went along with her future experience at the hospital. The feelings and thoughts displayed by the clothing the analyst would have worn on that first session, contained the depth of all the time that was taken to decide whether or not to accept that position and become involved in such a difficult psychic field.

It was a particularly shielded emotional and ideational field. The patients would have certainly split in two powerful subgroups, connected in two different ways to sickness and death (physical everyday care of the nurses, and speculative and relational activity of the doctors), by means of the externalizing and practical action of care. Those two groups would have been the following: 1) the group who was afraid to fall ill and die (and of their own patients' illness and death), and 2) the group who dealt with the difficulty of caring for their patients (as well as for themselves). The two subgroups, which would have competed for the shared social field, did indeed come into being. One of them represented job related objects as external, while the other as subjective and internal. The two groups had their natural leaders. The leader of the first group was a female oncologist who strongly identified with her profession as a doctor. In the past, she had herself recovered from an illness that had enhanced her sensitivity. She represented the sensitive faction and the tendency towards a great deal of emotional mental activity.

The leaders of the second group were a male oncologist, who had a naturally cheerful and lively disposition, and an anaesthesiologist, who practised pain relief therapy for terminally ill patients. The latter usually kept a certain emotional distance and was actively involved in the hospital politics and organization. These two doctors, represented the most tonic faction, reassuring and rational, and also more shielded.

During those three months of therapy, the analyst followed the development of group processes through the analysis of the elements she could, or could not, connect to the image she had internally created. She always linked those elements to the clothes she had worn on the first and the following sessions. She chose her clothing to match events and representations of the group, while connecting them to the image that her own dressed body would have given when displayed to the group. This would have happened in a direct way (life and the power of eroticism) or in an indirect way (sickness and mourning for female organs). It would have happened anyway, through the aesthetic realization of the concrete connection between body and representation, which is part of the illness and of the medical relationship. The non-verbal explicitation of the thoughts in the analyst's mind of the analyst, helped the group, stimulating it to understand the difference between what was apparent and what hid within more internal elements. The group could create a protective and containing layer for their most disorganized and urgent matters, and it was able to feel confident enough to do so, even within a therapy experience of such short duration. It was an

intense and productive experience, which led to several changes to the formative structure (see Marinelli, 2008, Chapter III and IV for more details on this experience).

The analyst's clothing had been chosen and displayed to the group so that its participants could invest it with representations, also in light of the transference that those doctors and nurses had developed towards the young psychiatrist in charge of the sessions. She had organized the whole experience and she had asked my participation as an external observer, who could be idealized or rejected. The image of clothing, together with the analyst's internal feelings, contributed to create an underlying iconic and emotional weft, made of feelings, images and affections. Such elements were used by the group to create and contain a link between psychic and somatic.

This weft, which was related to the aesthetic image of the analyst, was put aside at the end of the phase of the first dramatic approach, connected to the oversized (idealizing) and illusory idea of a group that would have cured and healed the carers. This idea remained historical just in the mind of the analyst. She supported the doctors and the nurses, also through a physical icon containing and radiating thoughts, so that they could support the weight of the death of their patients, as well as the weight of that part of the self they might have lost in their identity of carers. Maybe it had been lost in their white coats or in their stethoscopes, which were only worn during the first few sessions. They were then dismissed, just like a piece of clothing whose professional (both defensive and productive) value has been recognized.

Apart from the white coats and their dismissal, the group had tried to understand and share, which led to the establishment of an important formative series of meetings (recurrent short-term groups). These meetings would have used the ideas that had laid the foundations of the group as an information storage to go back to in future developments. The original ideas, contained in the the first skin and in the first internal organs of the group, would have generated a tradition connected to the founding identity, namely a stabilizing certainty and a transforming thrust.

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