

Women in groups in Italy today and yesterday. Social change and inner transformations in three decades

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Abstract

Author's reference theory

As group Psychoanalyst the author refers to Ferdinando Vanni's Interactive Group Theory (1988, 1992).

In F. Vanni's theory Interactive groups are characterized by interactional communicative exchanges among participant.

In these exchanges an "interactive" self emerges: the "self-in-others".

This "self-in-others" presents itself as an indifferentiated Self which allows parts of personality to be projected, reflected or induced in others. The leader of an interactive group will then, as a first step, activate feed-backs from participants in order to recognize projections and inductions. He/she will, as a second step, begin the psychoanalytic working through, thus allowing the remodelling of self through group exchanges.

Interactive Group Theory refers to mixed gender groups.

In all women's groups interactional communicative exchanges have revealed specific therapeutic power.

Relaxations of boundaries between individual selves derive from the affective quality of women's interactions in group cultures like Interchangeability (Cantarella, 2002; 2005), illustrated in the following pages.

As shown in this paper attention, respect and appreciation allow interactional experiences which build the sense of self, enhance positive self esteem and foster gender esteem. We can as consequence, say that warm and intimate group exchanges among women are essential to the emerging and remodelling of the female self .

As a psychoanalyst the author's reference theory is Psychoanalytic Theory, in particular Fairbairn's Object- relations theory of the personality (1952).

Key words: group, female group, interactive groups

Technique in conducting women's therapeutic groups in the 80's

The conductor's role is mainly aimed at stimulating the development of the horizontal peer dynamics:

1. taking a step back allowing peer exchanges, dynamics and cultures to develop
2. observing differences from mixed gender groups and specific group resources
3. emphasizing the healthy therapeutic power of spontaneous group processes

Reference to Psychoanalytical Feminism in Anglo-Saxon's culture

Theories and practices Psychoanalytical Feminism in Anglo-Saxon's world

Psychoanalytic feminism in Anglo-Saxons' cultures developed and diffused the consciousness that social values unconsciously influence the individual psychic world both directly and indirectly through caregivers and familiar interchanges.

The inner world was formed in unconscious exchanges with the social whole, the social context where we were born, the undifferentiated self developed (Blejer, 1967) through differentiating progressive introjective and projective processes.

The mature self is thus strictly interconnected with social culture, with social values.

Benjamin, Chodorow, Miller, Parson, Mitchell, the Stone Center Group (Wellesley College) among the many we should cite, theorized on the evidence that political and economic factors determined the style of human interchanges. They denounced that social "values" were based on a dichotomy. Women Psychological talents and relational competences had been collusively devalued and defined as belonging to the infantile world (immaturity, lack of superegoic functions etc. (Baker Miller, 1976). Social collusion had silenced women talents and relational values adopting men values and competences as universal mature values (Gilligan, 1982). Collusive social homologation had suffocated the richness of two genders' psychological competences.

They theorized that not only relational competences and gender social roles were socially determined.

In 1968 Stoller and researchers in their outcome at the Gender Identity Clinic in Los Angeles clinically proved that even gender identity is socially determined.

We owe to feminist movements the diffusion of stimuli and need to identify and emphasize women and men specific ways of knowing, bonding, reciprocal supporting, relating etc.

We owe to psychoanalytic feminism researches on the different psychological competences derived from the different processes of boys and girls in differentiating from mother's body/mind. Specific psychic capacities, psychological competences derived from early defensive processes in differentiating from a same sex or different sex mother.

Different competences have derived to men and women in defending from life uncertainty, events, separations, and losses.

Women's groups in the USA

Women groups in USA started to be formed in the 30's-40's by Dr. Glazer and Dr. Durkin.

The ever increasing number of women looking for therapy and addressing to women therapist have stimulated the birth of all women groups.

They were conflictual accepted by the scientific community.

Supporters believed gender homogeneous group would allow to overcome homologation of women's talents, thus to enrich the whole social community.

Women's groups in Italy from 1982 to 2000

Italian cultural background in 80's: In the 80's Italian cultural context was changing rapidly. Italian women entered the employment market in ever greater numbers. This had a profound effect for the average Italian family on the relationship between women and men. A new family structure emerged but roles within the family didn't change as rapidly. Women continued for a long time to be the only ones in charge for children and aged people care.

The birth of women groups in Italy

The author started to form women groups in the 1982 following the hypothesis that new and specific therapeutic factors could come to the foreground in infra-gender exchanges and dynamics.

In Italy up to 80's therapeutic groups scientifically accredited were only mixed gender groups. Women therapeutic groups started being formed in Italy from the 80's.

The ever increasing number of women looking for therapy and addressing women therapist stimulated the birth of gender homogeneous groups conducted by women. But their birth and acceptance of women groups was a conflictual process due to the opposition of the scientific community. Opposition mainly motivated by the belief that group-differentiating processes were granted only by the both sexes presence. As if same gender didn't comprehend differences among women

Specific themes and dynamics emerged in Italian women groups in the 80's

- Narcissistic sensitiveness. The body language of women in groups: tears, sense of suffocating, necessity to stand up and run away from the room etc. as a signal of being hurt by the analyst verbal intervention when it mirrored unknown parts of women's self.
- Lament of social and familiar invisibility: sufferance and explicit request and need to be "seen" *here and now* by figures authoritative on the vertical line, *there and then* by too distant fathers in the past, from husbands and companions present times.
- Immediate, spontaneous reciprocal peer consolation and support on the horizontal line.
- Refusal to acknowledge the *here and now* women group dynamics.
- Preferred conversation theme: men's life, men's privileges, men's easier life etc.
- Attempt to give for granted the specific way of reciprocal supporting of women.
- Resistance to acknowledge the group therapeutic power mirrored by the analyst.
- Fear of competition, confrontation and differentiation issues in the *here and now* as possible trigger of unhappiness.
- Verbal idealization of the analyst.
- At the same time unacceptance of her psychoanalytical interventions when referring unconscious meanings of group dynamics.

- Devaluation of the “inquiry methodology”, of the research of hidden unconscious sense of acts both in *here and now* and *there and then*.

“Interchangeability”

A new specific women group's dynamics comes to the foreground, it has been named “interchangeability”. Slowly in the years a very unusual way of being connected takes shape, form, visibility in the analyst eyes. I took time before having a clear picture of the specific therapeutic factors developing in it both on the group level and the individual level.

The Description of the “Interchangeability group area”

Interchangeability refers to a group culture spontaneously developing in women's groups, not seen in mixed gender groups. It takes its name from psychological phenomena developing at the horizontal peer level.

The name refers to the fact that women, as a consequence of the specific group atmosphere and interactions, seem to be interchangeable. They share unconflictually different opinions. Any position, even if contradictory, seems suitable and valuable, as if women were profoundly connected. The collective group network seems more important than the content of individual interventions. Group participants communicate beyond the verbal contents.

The type of emotional exchanges that take place reveals the presence of a common affective richness from which anyone can find emotional nourishment according to her need. Women seem to be interchangeable not in the negative sense of being undistinguishable but in the positive sense of sharing unconflictually a common richness, a common affective group wealth.

Boundaries among single identities seem to fade away allowing profound exchanges. The confident, attentive, supportive group atmosphere gives every participant the sense of being of value, of finally being seen and important to others (Cantarella, 2002).

Interchangeability emerges earlier in groups formed by relations or family oriented women, not necessarily housewives. These members form groups which fit the description reported by Schubert Walker that “*value emotional support more than personal change or personal problem-solving*” (in Brody, 1989, p. 6).

Interchangeability can appear in very early group processes, or at any stage of therapy, according to group or life events. Instead, career-oriented women mostly follow a more traditional way of communicating and bonding.

Interchangeability is mostly stimulated by a group member's deep suffering and need for help. As a consequence, interchangeability arises. The group, though speaking of external problems, seems to forget the world outside. Time doesn't seem to be a problem, as if the session could go on indefinitely. The group doesn't superimpose reality demands such as finding solutions to problems. It concentrates on its psychological exchanges. Problems and words seem to be used in order to create emotional contact. Women forget the more traditional ways of communicating, like contrast or confrontation (Cramer Azima, 1996) thus confirming that in women's

groups “multiple discourses and therefore new aspects of subjectivity may emerge via conversation and ‘play’ in the Winnicottian sense. Just as Winnicott (1971, p.47-51) wrote that the content of play may be less important and therapeutic than ‘playing’ itself, the content of women’s dialogue may be less important than that they speak” (Grunebaum, Smith in de Chant, 1986, p. 84).

It is in this climate that women can let themselves go to regress and enjoy the emotional common group wealth. Women can feel safe.

The interchangeability group area has an immediate impact on a woman’s psychology. As a demonstration of its therapeutic effect, the person who in one session has received most attention and care reports, in the following sessions, that she has felt able to face the problem which previously seemed insurmountable to her. The group work has brought out her psychological resources, lost due to her self-depreciative feelings. It has allowed her, through the attention and care of the others, to focus on the self and to nourish self-esteem.

The self slowly emerges from interchangeability exchanges. Session after session it slowly takes on a shape, visibility and value in a long group process. The female self’s foundations are slowly laid in a female supportive context

(Description taken from G. Cantarella G., 2002, Developmental processes in women's groups in Italy in *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, vol 52, number 2).

Therapeutic Power and Group Transformations of Interchangeability

On the group horizontal line:

- Shift from self-depreciation to self valuation themes
- Active problem solving attitudes coming to the foreground
- Disappearance of the “lament for invisibility”
- Disappearance of passivity and impotence feelings
- Disappearance of problem solving expectations from husbands and companions
- Appreciation *here and now* of female group dynamics: women's bonds interchanges, advice and comments become relevant. Rising trust and capacity in associating to group dreams.

On the group vertical line:

- Appreciation and trust towards analyst psychoanalytic work
- *Working through* of transfert and countertransference phenomena: ambivalence and conflictuality in *here and now* and *there and then*
- Appreciation of analyst interpretation referring to unconscious contents, acknowledgment of the therapeutic power of interchangeability witnessed by the analyst

“Interchangeability” therapeutic power in individual development

The person who was more in need and asked group help, who has received most attention and care,

in next session refers how helpful “interchangeability” was:

- She explicates that the group's focusing on her has built or re-built lost self-esteem and brought out feelings of trust on her psychological resources.
- She has recovered her capacity to face problems.

Interchangeability atmosphere allows starting the psychoanalytical working through of women's dreams on differentiating processes difficulties

- **The second examining teacher.** Associated by the group to the fear of feeling of being refused by a second examiner. Free associations link the dreams to the projection (on second examiner, on second caregiver: the father in the past, the male figure today) of women's ambivalence and fear to lose the protection of the first caregiver (the mother) of ambivalent feelings towards progressing and investing in new objects.
- **The ex-lover.** Associated to an intrusive inner obsessive reappearance of the ex lover image when making love with the new lover. Group associations link the figure of the ex lover to mother figure. Psychoanalytical *working through* allows to associate it to the lack of past elaboration of ambivalent and conflictual feelings in mother-daughter exchanges. It allows to associate dreams to the fear of hurting mother revealing new desires and attachments to father's figure, to new figures in adolescence, in present affective investments.
- **The dress swap.** The possibility of reciprocal mirroring and exchanging psychological dresses. The possibility to "wear and try" others attitude when mirrored.
- **The new common house.** Associated to the sense of affective richness in the common gender belonging and identity.

"Interchangeability" as a defense against progressive dynamics

The group climate and atmosphere seem apparently to be the same as the one experimented in Interchangeability but dreams "tell" a different story. They "speak" of:

- Desire of progressing
- Desire to express assertiveness, to pursue one's own aims
- Desire and fear to reveal ambivalent and conflictual feelings towards the analyst
- Desires to abandon women's "safe" interchanges, to progress towards new investments
- Fear to abandon women's "safe" peers' and analyst's support
- Resistance to address women's competition and ambivalence in the here and now.

Interchangeability has become a defensive group state concealing the desire and the fear to progress and face differentiation issues.

Dreams related "Interchangeability" as a resistance

- The fantasy of the other woman. Dreams “speak” of the fear that another woman can take one's place. Associated to the fear of not been able to abandon the safe unfluctuating, uncompetitive exchanges of interchangeability in the *here and now* of the group, in women's bonds in the outer world. Associated to the rise of jealousy, envy towards other women often projected on other women.
- The dreams of the ladder. Sense of precarity, of feeling unsafe when leaving the safe clutch to mother and adventures into a new unknown territory (father's territory in the past, disorientation and bewilderment in relying on one own' forces). Sense of void, fear of being left alone, unsafe and disorientated on a vacillating ladder
- The dreams of farewell to Interchangeability:
 - dreams of possessing one's own home,
 - painful dreams of excluding others women “*But this home is my home ... how can I tell you it is not yours?*”
- The discovery of new undiscovered rooms in the home: individual richness.

Women's groups in Italy from 2000 to present days. Transformations and changes of women groups

Main changes in Italian social background

- Unemployment, social precariousness, economic crisis
- Cut of social services and aid to citizens
- Necessity to migrate searching work, consequent lack of parents and grandparents help
- Increase of multiple tasks working time for women inside family and at work
- Still not reached parity in wages and additional difficulties for women and divorced couples

Changes in women groups themes from 2000 to present days

- Disappearance of the body language
- Disappearance of the lament of social and familiar invisibility
- Increasing capacity to verbally define emotions and feelings
- Rising frustration, incomprehension, conflicts due to social precariousness inside family and society
- Rising preoccupation of women on companions and husbands disorientation, frustration, difficulties at work
- Bewilderment for the sense of lack of future

“Interchangeability” from 2000 to present days changes in group dynamic

- Ever increasing appreciation and group research for unconscious meanings
- Ever increasing appreciation of *here and now* psychoanalytical elaboration of unconscious group dynamics
- Acknowledgement and capacity of elaborating resistance towards progressive dynamics
- Acquired competence in being assertive and competitive

- Competence in elaborating fears of losing positive bonds and women's support
- Capacity to keep the "winner position"
- Competence in being winner and at the same time identify and express solidarity to losers
- Dreams of new acquisitions:
 - Dreams on new acquired auto-reflective capacity due to the long psychoanalytical working through "*I discovered a super elevated railway train from there I could see what at street level you can not see*"
 - Dreams related to art treasures offered to public eyes "*Chicago is a wonderful open air art museum, nobody is afraid art treasures can be robbed*"
 - Dreams of inviting others women to own home "*I was so glad to had all my women friends in my new beautiful apartment*"
- Social and psychological "crisis" in men:
 - losing up to now given for granted social reference points and roles,
 - social and psychological research for inner and outer reference points in family and society,
 - recrudescence and increase of violence against women also inside families

The treatment and the elaboration of Incestual mentality in groups

Groups have revealed in the years to be the therapeutic context of choice for healing sexual abuse victims in families (Cantarella, 2005):

In the latest years they have proved, in author's experience a context of choice for letting unconsciously come to the foreground clues, revealing the introjection of family incestual mentality.

Incestual mentality

In 1995 P.C. Racamier defined "Incestual" families where the prohibition of incestual acts was established. But boundaries between tenderness and sexual attractions are not defined.

The prohibition of incestual act is in the air but leaves space for ambiguous fantasies. Sexual fantasies continue to sexualize acts and feelings inside the family between family members. Relationships are pervaded by an ambiguous sexual atmosphere. Sons and daughters continue to act as in infancy (sleep together, to go around naked, etc.). Sons and daughters entering adolescence are not helped to differentiate sexual attractions from affective attachments. New needs of intimacy are not respected. Fathers and mothers do not establish and respect boundaries and rules. For ex: fathers asking daughters to massage his body.

Collusive family acceptance of incestual mentality.

Incestual culture

The incestual culture has an additional characteristic. It conveys the idea that rules, boundaries are useless restrictions and the delegitimization of acknowledging ethics dimensions in human relationship.

In author's experience The groups have proved to be powerful settings for treating incestual mentality victims.

- Grasping the clues revealing incestual mentality
- Connecting the *here and now* role played by the victim to past familiar collusive confusion of boundaries
- Offering testing hypothesis related to possible past familiar peculiarities
- To turn into a problem the present *here and now* victim's refusal of acknowledgment of intergenerational differences
- Involving the group to reflect about excess of familiarity of victims toward analyst
- Stimulating an elaboration of "there and Then" family lack of boundaries, rules, restriction, gender and generation differences. On behaviors modulated care and cures respecting new born tensions, desires, need of intimacy and privacy when growing, "learning" and introjecting differentiation between generation, genders, between affection and sex involvement.

Victim problematic acknowledgements of being the "designated victim"

Owing to unconscious introjections of collusive incestual mentality it is difficult for analyst and group to grasp the clues revealing it. Often it is by chance that victims reveal confusion and lack of boundaries during the group processes:

- Intermittent acknowledging of clues revealing past familiar ambiguity
- Victim's intermittent acknowledging of her collusion. Emerging consciousness of fear of not being able to "live" outside the familiar context
- Fear to face victim psychological weakness
- Intermittent consciousness of the violent characteristics of the familiar psychological context
- Emerging terrific fear of abandoning the idea that immediate sexual gratification confused with affection has damaged victims capacity to invest outside the family

New needs and new tendencies in Italian men and women therapy demand

A new wave of men asking for a women analyst. A new men explicit appreciation of women's ways of living the therapeutic process

While in the 80's we witnessed the ever increasing number of women looking for women therapist as new models of authoritative figures.

Today we witness a new phenomenon: an ever increasing number of men trust not only male analysts as it happened in the past but also women therapists.

They seem to acknowledge that women analysts represent new authoritative figures.

Having a long experience in joining career satisfaction and interpersonal emotional competence.

Men's main transformations in therapeutic mixed gender groups

- Increasing capacity of men to express affective needs, need of attention and care
- Increasing explicit appreciation of women's ways of exchanging and reciprocal supporting
- Increasing valuing of group exchanges and processes as a value in itself, as women do
- Increasing valuing the group process not only as an instrument for improving power relationship outside the group

Women's main transformations in therapeutic mixed gender groups

- Increasing appreciation of men's capacity to criticize, compete, being aggressive
- Increasing capacity to acknowledge the long lasting history of lack of women social power and consequent possible envy, jealousy and social competition
- Increasing capacity to occupy the mixed gender group's space and time, giving up the past tendency to take a step back and let men emerge

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She conduct mixed gender therapeutic groups since 1976 and women's therapeutic groups since 1982.

All therapeutic groups are psychoanalytically oriented, open-ended, long-term (up to 8 people), and meet for ten months a year, twice weekly, for sessions lasting one hour.

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