

Clinical Training - a contextual approach to the use of experiential groups.

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Introduction

The present contribution will analyze the use of group discussions as a clinical-psychological tool for clinical training.

Several questions guide the study. How can we characterize the concept of group? What is a group interview? How should this psychological device be used for training in psychotherapy and more generally in clinical training?

The proposal advanced below looks at the possibility of reconstructing existing theoretical, clinical and methodological aspects of "the group" within a general epistemological framework. This allows us to change the focus from a specific model of School and move towards a dialogue between theoretical perspectives which recognize a common postulate: the assumption of a dialogic and contextual foundation of the mind, its development and change. The purpose is to develop a dialogic and contextual foundation for clinical action, training and treatment.

Which Group?

"The group is my way of doing things". "I want to work with groups". "It is very important to help people to work in a group." These are some of the things one hears during commencement meetings in group psychotherapy school.

But what exactly is meant by 'group'? The concept is variously defined as an organizational form, a system of values and/or a desirable operating state of relations.

An example of [group]¹ is that which signifies a level of cohesion, interdependence and reciprocity qualifying a system of relations. A professional who takes such a vision of the world as his or her purpose would then imagine an action in order to "make individuals more united, harmonious, cohesive", to "resolve conflict" or "to enhance commonalities." This closely resembles the approach organized around the desire of those who turn to a "group psychologist" before turning to "a psychologist". The idea might be expressed by the sentiment that "you need someone to make this class become a group".

But what are the factors and processes that turn such a group into an arena for growth and enrichment, for managing conflicts, and so on? We ask the question not merely to elicit a reply, but rather to emphasize the importance of regarding the *use* of a [group] as a proper subject of a methodological discourse. Such an approach is close to being absent not only in the common sense but also in the clinical and more generally psychological literature (cf. Salvatore & Guidi, 2007; Carli, Paniccia & Lancia, 1988)².

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1 The sign "[]" (as in [group]) indicates a theoretical construct.

2 Consider Gustave Le Bon (1895) and his studies on the psychology of crowds. We can also find signs of an invariant approach to the group in the majority of group analysis literature. In the model suggested by Anzieu (1976), small group characteristics are: strong interdependence, moral union

We are inclined to think that in this case, absence could be interpreted as presence of a more general theory about the nature of knowledge.

We know that modern epistemology has focused psychological research on the study of permanent structures, fixed and universal, based on two main assumptions: what we perceive is actually motivated by reality, and individuals and groups are the expression of specific, pre-existing features not to be modified by observer interpretation (Gergen, 1985)³. From this perspective it is possible to think that we can identify characteristics of the "group" without specifying contextual conditions.

Some authors (Gergen, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1992) have suggested the difference between modern and postmodern psychology lies in the antirealist/constructivist position and in local approaches to the knowledge of the latter. Contemporary psychological thought has radically questioned the assumption that the researcher/psychologist intervenes or seeks out facts or essences. The objects dealt with by psychology have no regular mode of operation, and do not respond to general laws. Therefore, we cannot grasp the essence "once and for all". We can only grasp it in relation to historical, cultural and social situations in which the object investigated is inscribed. Instead of giving up on the attempt to build a psychological definition of [group], this study, by implication, attempts to build a definition in such a way as to take into account of the infinite number of possible forms, operating parameters and interpretative criteria.

The concept of [group] presented below is explained in theoretical perspectives which speak to each from under the same "fundamental premise": the principle that the form of a relationship organises a cognitive system (Salvatore, Freda, Ligorio & al., 2003).

Beyond school models

In a manner that is autonomous but convergent, group-analytic theory, the variation in the intersubjective key of dynamic psychology, cultural psychology and discursive psychology all independently lead to the idea that cognitive outputs and patterns of actions of individuals are fed from (or, from a complementary point view, tied to) the characteristics of a relationship and from systems of meaning in which individuals are inscribed (McNamee & Gergen, 1992; Rappaport, 1998; Stolorow, Atwood & Brandchaft, 1994; Zittoun, 2007). According to Mitchell (1988), exponent of key interpersonal psychodynamic theory, the affective mind does not pre-exist a relationship but emerges within and in relation to processes of communicative exchange. The discursive conception of the mind helps to

and solidarity feelings. These characteristics persist outside of meetings and common actions. The phenomenological specific of the median group, originally described by De Marè, Piper and Thompson (1991), can be traced in a dialogue born in the form of hostility. It relies on the frustration of being together to see the breakdown of personal boundaries. The median group is crossed by persecution anxiety, rejection of one subgroup by the other subgroup, rejection of the new by the old, reluctance to talk about oneself, and so on.

³ Such an approach to psychology, in the past, justified and nourished a logic of deficit correction which is also present today in much clinical practice. The fixed nature ascribed to the characteristics of psychic reality justify the marginal importance given to the dialogic and relational context within which symptoms are "told" and made. In short, it is legitimate to investigate the psychological components of the mind through what the client says or manifests, but without considering the problem to give a meaning to the fact that he says what he says or does what he does because of the specific context.

deepen this approach and suggest that individuals enact different versions of the mind depending on the context of the discourse in which they are located (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991; Harre & Gillett, 1994; Barcinski, 2008).

Such a view supports a semiotic concept of the mind with which psychology deals. The mind is a dynamic and contextual universe; it is the idea, always in motion, that we have of ourselves. It is an idea that does not arise in a contextual vacuum but, as is also confirmed by the group-transpersonal construct, is a function of our position in a world of meaning that, on one side, generates us, and, on the other, we help to generate.

Within these coordinates, our theoretical and methodological proposal is to define the [group-mind]⁴ as a process. It is an affective and symbolic field mutually built by those who share a system of activities through speaking and acting over the meaning of their being together.

In other words, the proposal is to think about the [group] as an intersubjective construction generated by – and, at the same time, generative of – actions and dialogue exchanges.

In this context, training in group psychotherapy means primarily being trained to understand a contextual and contingent reality.

But what are its functions and aims? The answer clearly involves an understanding of clinical psychology, the role it plays, the carriers through which unfolds, the processes through which it is articulated.

Notes on the function of clinical psychology

The psychodynamic perspective has offered a genetic and motivational explanation, not only of the nature of *sensemaking*, on which we base what we can call "mind", but also of a conservative and assimilative value. The construction of a sense of ourselves and our experiences *with* and *of* others is not exclusively, or primarily, a semantic negotiating process about over-arching meanings. On the contrary, it reflects the importance of dynamic affective symbolization of reality (Matte Blanco, 1975; Fornari, 1981), which is the product of the way the mind is unconscious and symmetrical⁵.

This logical mode of thinking, while capable of simplifying the categorization of the context of action⁶, is, on the other hand, incapable, for the same reason, of perceiving differences, news and changes. Based on the establishment of identity relations, it can only include objects in relation to their symbolic world (Di Maria, 2000), which is a process not

⁴ The juxtaposition of group and mind must be understood in light of the fact that mind is not confined or identified with an "individual head", nor even with other phenomenology (such as family, group, organization) which are seen and treated as acontextual units provided with their own operational autonomy. It is rather substantiated by intersubjective processes of meaning constructions. In this process, individual units (as nodal points) contribute to build the symbolic context which we call mind. We can here recall the Foulkes concept of the dynamic matrix: a communication and symbolic network built by an individual's personal matrix, but not reducible to that. It is an over-personal dimension which on one side shapes the meaning given to the event, and on the other is affected by them. Again, we can explain the concept through the idea that there is no person without a context and no context without a person (Carli, Paniccia & Lancia, 1988).

⁵ We accept Matte Blanco's (1975) systematization proposal of the unconscious conception as a way of being of the mind governed by generalization (everything is treated as a member of a wider functional class) and by symmetry principles (asymmetric relations are treated as symmetrical ones).

⁶ Even Matte Blanco (1975) suggests that unconscious thought sets up found sociality and stability in relationships, and allows the agreement to be based on a wide meaning class within which no distinction exists between objects (and therefore not even between oneself and the other).

recognized by one a person symbolizes. He will treat his own world of meanings as reality, and therefore a shared and predictable reality.

In the proposal by Renzo Carli (1987), the disappearance of this symbolic sharing determines the request for a clinical intervention. What happens is that a violation of a shared world of habits and meanings provides a warning that this world view is not the only one (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2002). The so-called psychopathology can then be described in terms of a placement on a set of organised assumptions that, if learned beforehand and/or elsewhere, do not help to deal with the present and are not adaptive in relation to the future. In this regard, a saturated thought prevents events being thought about, as well as new meanings, new ways to address novelty, otherness or changes.

The ability to think our own symbolizations, rather than act them out, implies a way of symbolizing that constructs representations of reality, leaving room for the recognition of a plurality of worlds of meaning. This mode of symbolization - that we can define as secondary - is embodied in a function of discrimination/extraction of difference between one's world/psychological value and that of others (Venuleo & Salvatore, 2008). The possibility of doing this must not, on the other hand, be understood as a function of an individual mind. In the perspective that we share, it is the context (a context constructed intersubjectively) which gives the mind the way to work, to define degrees of freedom of its transformative and generative values.

There are cultural worlds based on primary relationships oriented solely on the goal of reproducing their own system of meaning and identity, and where, therefore, there are not separate people with their own characteristics, but only friends and enemies, united in the respective function of being or not being faithful to me, to my fantasy of a relationship. There are cultural worlds properly of relations of alterity, unsaturated matrix as put it by Foulkes (1964), which don't take for granted the psychic reality of the other, and in this sense offer space to the modulation function of thought, to that creative ability that allows reconceiving in relation to a world that has conceived us.

Clinical practice is inscribed in the intersubjective world of otherness, understood as the limit of the identification/objectification of a person's world of meanings (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2009).

If, in a symbolic self-reference space, the who, what and why of the relational exchange is taken for granted in the clinical relationship, these assumptions are the object of analysis. Thinking about your own thinking does not necessarily mean changing its system of meaning, but submitting to examination before the reality of other worlds where other roles, rules, patterns of relationship can be proposed and played out.

How to train for this clinic?

The *cliné* to which we referred earlier, which does not relate to specifics of therapy but to a summit observation which also establishes itself as a mode of intervention⁷, also evidently suggests a theory of psychotherapy training that we will here try to summarize in terms of a *competence to start exchange relations with the otherness* (Montesarchio & Crotti, 1993). For the purposes of our discussion, we want to highlight how such competence cannot be achieved on a purely notional transmission of knowledge.

In the first place, knowledge tends to operate in an encapsulated way (Guidi & Salvatore, 2006). It is therefore blind towards otherness. Knowledge also focuses on selecting the correct answer in relation to the recognized environmental state. (This operates according to the pattern: if ... then; for example, "If member X is silent or sits in the same chair, that

⁷ In this sense the "interview is either clinic or not" (Di Maria & Lavanco, 1998).

means he is defending himself, or is afraid of change" etc.) In consequence, this is a pattern that does not include any enquiry in the context of objectives, expectations, questions, that obviously are variable, which feed/motivate a behavioral or conversational act.

Secondly, because – as an extensive clinic and psychodynamic literature has shown - no knowledge and cognitive process exists that is not organized by expectations, values, desires, emotional and symbolic dimensions. Furthermore, from this point of view, the belief in objectivity, the attempt to control a part of the system to which we belong, the quest for universal truths and/or linear causality ...all this can be understood as solutions which the symbolic mind chooses to decline for itself and cannot be resolved on a purely cognitive level.

A third point is this. If it is not semantic content but the context of symbolic significance that feeds it, the object of clinical intervention - the observer - is part of this context. The cognitive process is imbued with its epistemological, theoretical and symbolic-affective categories which call for a specific location and a specific construction of the object of discussion, as well as questions that arise in order to understand it. (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2006a).

Let us imagine a psychologist who says to his client: "I think we have to meet for five sessions in order to determine whether your mood can be defined as depression." This structure of speech implies:

- a) a representation of what the object of exchange will be (the mood, the feeling),
- b) a representation of what point of view should be taken to talk about it (eg the reference to nosological criteria),
- c) a connected representation of what is important to the client (eg becoming conscious of the name to give to his "mood").

From this point of view, any narrative proposal by the client to review clues/signs of his depression, (rather than, say, projects or development goals), cannot be understood without taking into account the contribution of the other person – the psychologist – to defining the narrative form which the polysemy of the story became in his speech.

From this perspective, clinical training cannot fail to include training to recognize this constructive role while being aware of the subjectivity of the learning process.

Such a perspective does not imply, of course, rejection of an explanatory and technical training in psychology. But it makes relevant the point that knowledge and techniques by themselves do not have targets or criteria that can be organized or defined by themselves. Rather, they take their shape and meaning in relation to the symbolic models of those who use them as they speak. This representational level, which influences the perception of objects, is also at the origin of the played out action (...) that can be analyzed if, to close the circle, we mutually build a *set(ting)* fit for the purpose (Grasso & Cordella, 2007).

We can thus explain the idea that training models based on learning from experience constitute the privileged setting for this purpose. More specifically, we identify in the experiential group an excellent device for clinical training at the clinic. It is important to point out here the term "group" is obviously used here in a different meaning from the one on which we focused earlier: if the [group-mind] is a frame of meaning emerging from the intersubjective interpretation of an activity system, then "experiential group" is a specific activity system.

Let us then try to explain the point of view and conditions under which we can identify this as a device to learn through experience. Our objective here is to govern the following paradox. One cannot understand the contextual and contingent reality of the [group-mind] when it is treated as something different from oneself (from our own subjectivity, interpretive criteria and relationship expectations). Yet if we do not take a reflexive position

on these dimensions and fantasies, we end up denying the "otherness" from which the [group-mind] is constituted and nourished.

The experiential group

"Learning through experience" is the process and perspective that allows a clinical psychologist to use the experiential group to pursue a category of targets that can be called "methodological". These are related to the possibility of thinking about what is said and done. From a psychological point of view, *thinking* means to turn assumptions on themselves and on others acted out/contained in our own and others' discursive positions into an object of dialogue. The objective is that they may thereby be represented and thus (with appropriate mediations) be further developed, depending on the ability to engage in productive exchanges with otherness.

Inside the experiential group, trainees are encouraged to consider the content of experience, "clinical fact" that can be developed on the affective and cognitive level and their own representations. This refers to their vision of what is useful to discuss, the expectations of their relationship to colleagues and leader, their representation of the role to be taken in respect of what stated by others, and related cultural assumptions on what it means to train in psychotherapy and to be trained in a specific school.

What is the "rule" for choosing what to say in the group? Is it whatever comes to mind? Those that concern us as children or as professionals? The things that bother us, or those we like? Our "good side" or bad ones? All our dreams or only those in which some members of the school appear? At the same time, why should I say something about myself? Why should I expose myself if I "only" asked to be trained? What is the product of this experience?

The leader leaves the educational function strictly defined as the transmission of given truths, which exist prior to the relationship. The leader delegates the training function analysis of the meanings participants share and build together (Fornari, 1966). In doing so, working to generate thinking or training, the task of the leader is to produce a didactic meaning whenever he or she proposes, suggests or activates a way of thinking and conducting the interview. This constitutes "doing" didactic work in the experiential group context as much as would be the production of referential knowledge within the context of a lesson.

The listening and stimulation of a point of view in the trainees becomes therefore the methodological proposal to conduct the clinical interview. In this situation, the client narrative cannot be understood by obliterating the relationship and the cultural, symbolic, organizational context that motivates it⁸.

Here, the leader will commit the participants, rather than merely verifying the meaning of what is told, to what is subjective, cultural and therefore contingent. Attention is paid in assigning meaning to events. It is a meaning that "becomes" in context and is therefore not "objective" but symptomatic of the relationship, or rather the construction that is done. On one side, such construction is based on the symbolopoietic function of the individual. On the other, it is constructed from signs (also discursive) available within the context of the relationship. These levels are variously interrelated and this makes it difficult to automatically decode one without referring to another, as in a "Moebius strip" (see fig. 1)

⁸ Such an assumption is clearly inscribed within a specific theory of the meaning. It explains that it is neither in the form nor the phenomenology of things said that one searches for their psychological value (in the diversity of expressed contents, the signifiers may refer back to the same meaning as well as meanings expressed by thousands of signifiers). However, in reality dialogic context is given by the inevitable and incessant redefining process.

where it is impossible to distinguish what is internal from what is external (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2009).



Fig. 1: Moebius strip

From this point of view, learning to navigate the space of an experiential group will involve learning from experience the practice of an interpretational summit which, by valuing diversity and autonomy of interpretation of participants, allows us to avoid falling within a radically relativist position that reduces the cognitive process of identification of the "infinite uniqueness" that cannot be compared or organized.

What we will learn from experience is the ability to give meaning to a context and to do so within a multidimensional reality of meanings and relationships (Di Maria, 1994).

In this respect, thinking (and training to think in the "group" mode) has a very different meaning from that assumed in ordinary language. It does not mean to think in a homogeneous and uniform way using a logic which gives the other a chance of peaceful coexistence and allows it to become "equal to", (thereby losing any connotation of "diversity" and denying his own origins (Di Maria & Lavanco, 1998)). Rather, it means thinking by comparison with the other, defining dependency as a problem and valuing diversity. Thus understood, "group thought" is therefore a thought that does not separate, isolate, rank, reveal nor impose. Rather, it connects, transforms and generates third thoughts (Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2009), which did not previously exist but are built through the relationship (so justifying the experience as encounter). The competence needed to acquire this skill is therefore the competence needed to connect and contextualize.

A semiotic approach to the use of large, median and small groups for clinical training in the clinic psychology

Within the general theoretical and methodological coordinates explained above is now framed our proposal for a semiotic reading of the use of different types of experiential group ("large", "median" and "small") in clinical training. For ease of exposition we will refer to the structure and articulation of experiential devices within the training school of psychotherapy (See Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2006b).

The school, which has to be attended three days per month, includes - in addition to theoretical study days and days of monitoring (from attention groups to collusive dynamics) - days of "learning through experience" to which one day per month are committed, and an additional week at the end of each training year.

Participants pass, in succession, thorough four types of experiential groups - large, small, median and 'surprise' (see fig. 2) - each one lasting 90 minutes, with half-hour breaks or an hour break for lunch⁹.

⁹ On the sidelines of the meeting (at the opening and at the end of the day), two group meetings are called "staff meeting". Here, leaders and trainees from the previous year meet. Trainees have the function of participant observer in one of the activated groups. At the beginning of the day, this observer reflects on the socio-symbolic dynamic, keeps or reports on the previous weekend in order to highlight the expectations of the day. At the end of the day, they reflect on frame aspects and issues raised as well as symbolic dimensions activated by the observing experiences. Unfortunately,

- First comes a "large group" meeting that involves all the leaders (four) and all the trainees (about 80) belonging to all of the four year courses in the school;
- Second is the activation of four "small groups", where all participants of the large group are proportionally distributed, and each group is led by one of the four leaders;
- The two "median groups" are made up of the participants of two small groups and their leaders;
- The sequence ends with four small "surprise teams". These are small group meetings whose members - both in terms of participants and leaders - are decided by drawing lots shortly beforehand.

The composition of the first three types of group is "stable", meaning their internal participants and leaders are the same for the first year of training, but open to new members later. In the following year, graduates who have finished the fourth year no longer take part and their places are taken by trainees of the new first year.

In this way the same articulation of setting suggests the contemplation of contextuality and contingency. The culture of an experiential group takes shape thanks to a large number of meetings over time, and thereby "survives" the phenomenology of the individual participants who contributed to generate this culture. The group is not defined once and for all, and cannot be repeated endlessly with the same membership. It will not therefore stay in precisely the same form permanently.

Deliberately, we do not focus on the specific dynamics attributed by literature to different "types" of group. In the point of view we aim to share, the themes, processes and emotions found in a clinical setting must originate and be primarily constructed from users' hermeneutical options, from their intentions which situated and therefore capable of continuous transformation. Intentions that actors give to the group's contractual dimensions proposed to them.

In other words, although we recognize that the small group is a privileged place in which one can observe movements of solidarity (Anzieu, 1976), we do not believe it is useful to guide the practice. More useful, we believe is to explore (and train to explore) the collusive dynamic underlying such solidarity movements and to propose ideas about their capabilities in relation to shared targets.

"Within the large and middle group I could not find my own space to share with others. Most of the times I felt the group to be formal, fictitious, devoid of empathy and containment. In the words of Bion, I experienced it as an enemy from which I had to "defend myself" (from a report by a first year student)

"The only entities I could distinguish were the different groups called 'those of the first, of the second, and third years' with which, for a long time, we recognized and identified each other. The presence of sub-groups was very reassuring because it gave me the confidence to rely on 'my little group' living my own way, in an atmosphere perceived as anxious, judgmental and full of unknowns." (from a report produced by a first year student).

What may seem like a good exchange of gifts can be revealed, for example, in a wider framework, to be, an obstacle to visualization of differences and potential conflict. A strategy of "good manners" through which participants are ensured "in advance" of the trust of a "good family" (Carli & Paniccia, 2003) is designed primarily to avoid problems that may arise. But it can also lead to a denial of otherness, and a lack of interest in knowing and working together.

despite the subject's importance, there is no space here to further discuss the function of staff meetings, or participant observation. For further discussion, see Montesarchio & Venuleo, 2006.

Similarly, we agree that "the processuality of large group is absolutely unique, hardly comparable to other human experiences, as it is quite unnatural that 30, 60 or more individuals would agree to meet together, in concentric circles, to explore what emerges in this abnormal gathering" (Ancona, 2002, p. 246). We are not sure, however, that the emotions characteristic of this are quite those indicated by Anzieu. Anxiety is intrinsic to a situation in which "I do not know who 'they' are and 'they' do not know who I am".

If the leader is the first to maintain a dimension without certainties, memory or desire, following Bion (1961), where he first encourages the invention, rather than coherence (understood as fidelity to the idea of "group", a story), then the large group will also appear as his big, confused, intimacy. The small group has its conflictual and fusional dimensions. The middle group has its ability to integrate and divide (highlighted by de Marè, Piper and Thompson (1991)). In that case it will function less as content, law or rule from which to learn by experience, and be more a possibility to generate a continuous movement of de-categorization and recategorization.

In this process, a narrative/telling such as "small containing group / large fragmenting group" (the first act of the training film, the stimulus of the story), will hopefully reveal in its nature not "given facts" but semiotic constructions to be analyzed, texts which speak of the quality of relations between involved belonging systems as they are lived, told and produced. We therefore distance ourselves from a literature that allots dynamic characterizations to different types of group according to their numerical composition. We propose instead to recognize the common emotional essence in the affective context through which participants interpret and thus build the experiential reality in which they are immersed.

To explain with an example:

Our current Prime Minister, formulating the number of participants in G8 meetings (as recommended, of course, by experts) indicated the maximum useful number of participants in a working group should be 14. This process identified the "round table" as the only way in which diplomacy was known to make balanced decisions. Naturally, we do not focus on the number itself, but on the meanings of what is being said that could, if already delivered, not be rhetorically repeated by another country with the fateful words 'I agree with what my colleague said'. The phrase 'I agree with that previously said' could be allowed at the time of counting votes. But it has a different meaning when said during a discussion of the development of a topic, when the symbolic emotional aspect builds meanings and follows paths not connected to the "round table" (for example, declaring to agree with what has been said could be like saying "I do not care to invest in developing this building, or in this round table, etc.

It has been suggested that a reference to a semiotic concept of the unconscious allows us to understand the shared symbolic-affective dimension as the product of a metonymic combination of speech acts introduced by speakers (see Salvatore, 2004; Salvatore, Tebaldi, & Poti, 2009)¹⁰, a process which is contributed by individual semiotic instances but it is not reduced to them.

Thus, in a small group, Luigi crying from the pain of not having known his father, stimulates Cristiana, who tells that she only recently realized how much she and her parents have never really been interested in knowing each other. This helps her redefine absence in emotional terms and, in turn, opens the way for Giulia to say she can think about what it

¹⁰ Here we take Fornari's proposal (1976), that assigns to language a fundamental role in groups foundation, or that of Salvatore and coll who for some years have pushed forward a theoretical and methodological proposal to consider the unconscious as a speech dialogue.

means to be present for each other in the here and now. Each of these contributions is a shift which gives new framing to speech and would not have occurred without the previous discursive statements. A statement such as "with parenting we are talking about ourselves", on one hand re-invents the meaning of previous narratives and, on the other, builds and creates new narratives, allowing Tiziana, through her to Mary, through Mary and Tiziana to Elena, to tell the different chromatic colors (dependency, autonomy, reciprocity) and yet led by the leader.

In this perspective, the different speech acts of the participants function as musical notes, contributing to the building of a symbolic framework of the experiential group as a whole: the meaning of the note is in the music it helps produce and can therefore only be understood by looking at how it is used during the exchange process.

On another level (focusing on the sequence of different types of group (see fig. 2), we may understand each active work unit within the same day as a framework of local articulation of the culture expressed by the large group (the first in the sequence, in which everyone takes part). This culture is something on which the small groups will express their own position, and this will be renegotiated in the median group, and redefined once again in the *surprise* group.

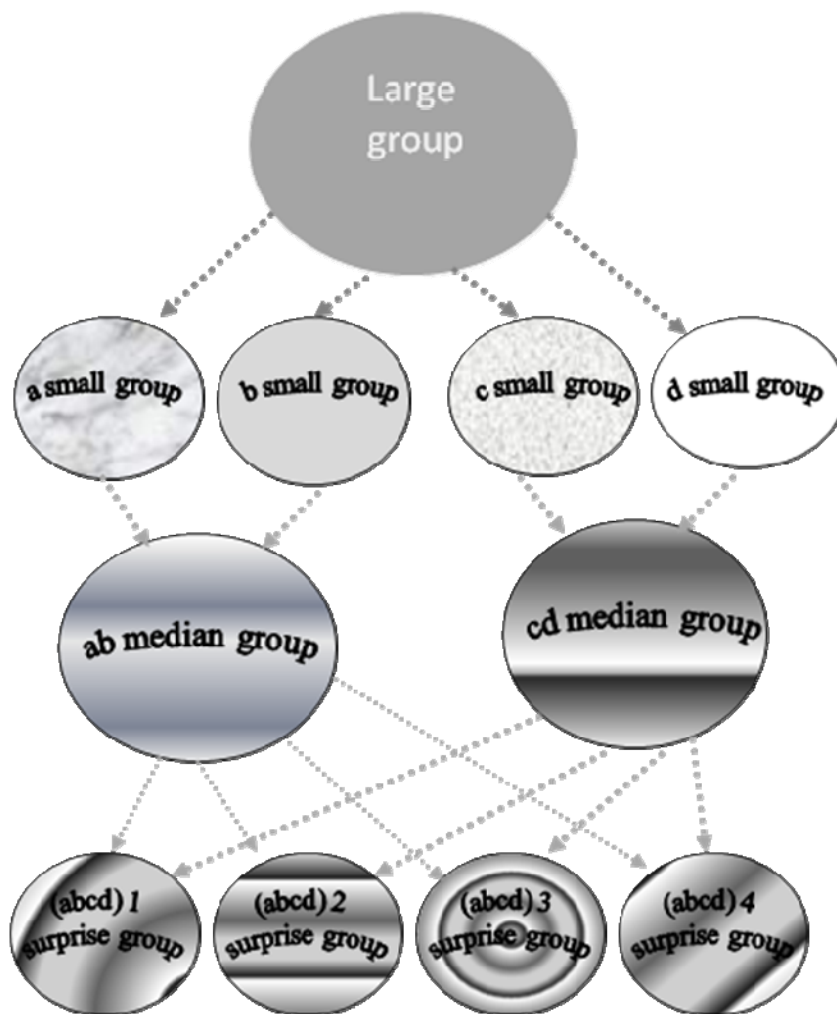


Fig.2 The sequence of experiential groups within the training day of *Learning Through Experience*

It must be said, however, that if what we are describing is the current sequence of different group types within training, it could very well happen that the large group comes at the *end* of the day, the *surprise* group is numerically a middle group and/or takes place at the beginning of the day, etc. This is to reiterate that the meaning and symbolic value of different types of experiential group lies not in the exact form of the sequence described, but in the very possibility of crossing different (and different levels) of activity and belonging systems.

Further, on another level, every encounter (and thus any combination of items in parallel and in sequence of the 10 experiential groups active within the whole) is a story (a "there and then") which is revised in the next meeting, and will therefore be included - semeiotically - through the recognition of the circularity among the symbolic forms existing (what has been and already is) and situated processes of these forms (in the here and now). In this perspective, the large group which opens the day is therefore both a polysemic text that generates a narrative establishing the possibility of other narratives,

and a text created and reconceived through the contingency of exchanges told and reinterpreted in "previous months" (see fig. 3).

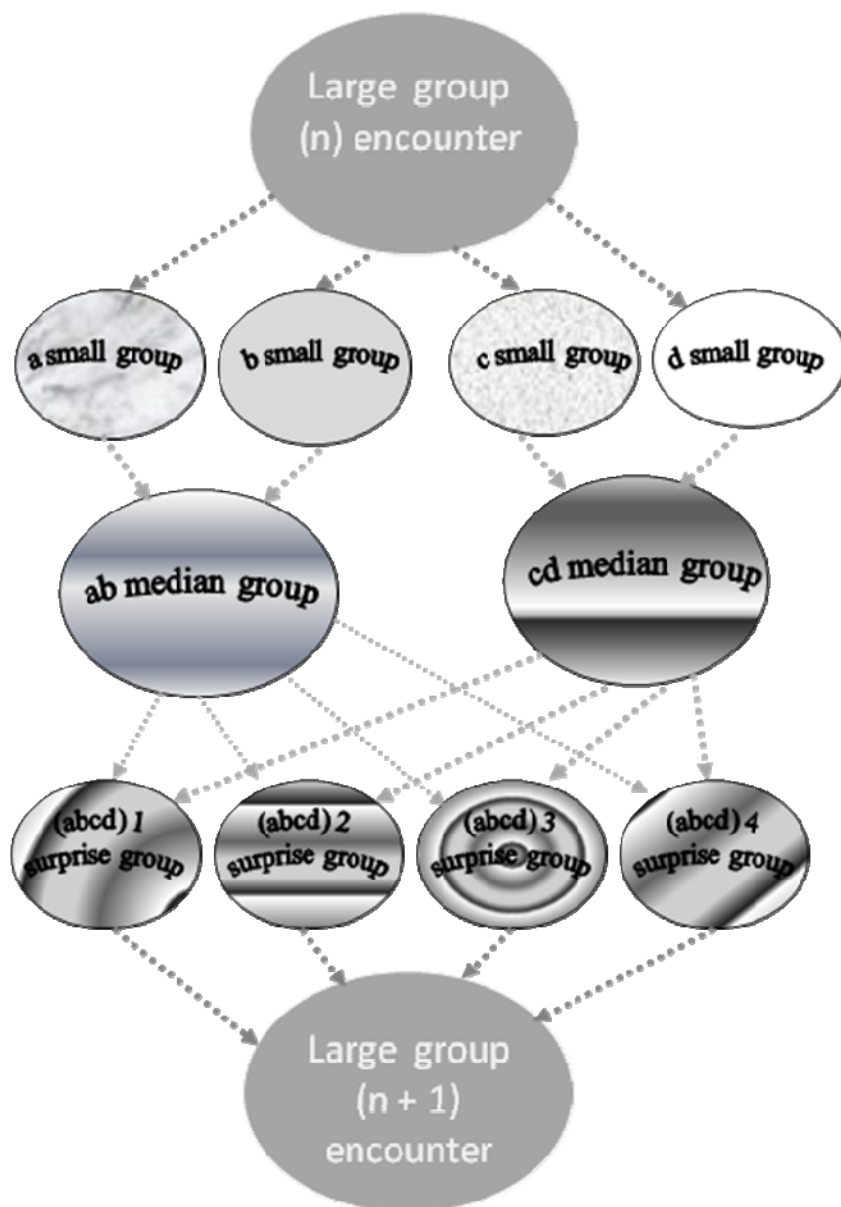


Fig.3 The sequence of experiential group in the training day of *Learning Through Experience and circularity from one encounter (n) to the next (n+1)*

The *succession* of groups, from this perspective, is the device that makes visualizable and thinkable not only the role played by each individual and every conversational act in the contingency of a specific exchange (eg. small group a, b, c, d or, or *surprise* group e, f, g, h), but also the matrix/culture that conceives them and which helps to reproduce or

redesign. It does this by adding signs that underline the symbolic frame or otherwise produces signs suggesting new ways of symbolization.

In this light, the crossing of different types of experiential groups is a device of clinical training designed to do two things. It promotes the ability to recognize the role of subjectivity (one's own and others') in the construction of the symbolic conditions of our own development. It also makes ostensible and thinkable the contextuality of the human mind, or "the matrix of mental life of the individual (person)", what Foulkes calls | group |: "a series of events that move and progress all the time" (Foulkes, 1975) and fits the logic of the repeatable, of comparison, of the expectable, of the already seen.

Within the framework of this last statement, we would like to frame the sense given to the institution of the "*surprise* group" as meaning a device to remove the setting to the order of the "unthinkable".

The *surprise* group is the last of a day of "learning through experience". Before it, students have already "interviewed" each other in large, small, and median groups.

The *surprise* group has the size of a small group, but its composition is alien to all until the drawing of lots which affects everyone, including the leaders. In the Iter school it was introduced in place of a small "standard" group at the end of the day.

In order to highlight just one of many field factors that contributed to this change, it is possible to say how the "double" small group often results in building a double wall compared to the larger group in which was placed, impeding integration and comparison with those people who were placed outside the borders of the established membership (to a specific small group, led by a specific leader).

It is like an attempt to process the established membership once and for all. The product of the |group| in this perspective is the learning of a discovered membership, built from time to time, and the here and now the level it prefers, even if the proper conceivability of its institution is the result of a story.

Concluding remarks

Here are some conclusions to clarify the meaning and the value we give to *learning from experience* within the process of the experiential/training group.

When seen in its learning function, closed in itself and to some extent isolated (ie non-contextual) then discursive plots which develop in the context of a meeting may create a space in which a trainee - in the role of participant or observer - can start to watch to learn how to be a leader though he will not learn the conduction in itself, at most observing how someone else leads a session. However, in the perspective we are sharing, it would be useless not considering the fact that he is in the here and now of

the dynamic matrix of the experiential group, which is being developed on the grounds that he is dealing with that particular position.

When viewed in this light, the experiential group is a place where the student can, instead, learn from experience. He learns:

- that the |mind-group| with which he is confronted is not a static phenomenology with invariant features, but rather a process that is configured and acquires a specific mode of operation because of the organizational and symbolic context within which (and because of which) it unfolds. Within the experiential group, the stranger is a "permanent guest" who continually renews the idea that the values have no absolute grounds. Conduct varies considerably in relation to the values of the players, and their interpretations and reactions.
- that the actions of the leader are not intended as examples of "how to lead", but as choices closely anchored to the here and now of dialogue exchange and to the con-transferential field of the moment. In this field, which is invented and generated by the

leader himself, he takes part by suggesting, encouraging, nurturing, validating, assumptions and criteria adequate for the role.

- that the competence to acquire is the competence to contextualize. He understands that the communicative value of the stories shared and exchanged within the experiential group requires him to "put the pieces together" not only of what is told but also how, to whom, where and at what time;

- that facts are not given entities ("true") but symbolic constructions to be understood, and that every story is created, intersubjectively maintained or reconsidered (Billow, 2003)

- that the knowledge project of the other goes through its subjective involvement and while taking a reflexive position, which is the main regulator of the meeting and the cognitive process, which can cross the paradox that can not be owned (can not be seen / can not be understood) the | group | if you think the | group | would exactly be (or if you think it is the birth of a single maker), but if you think the | group | wouldn't exactly be (however it is considered something else from his own subjectivity) you does not have the | group | (Di Maria & Lavanco, 1998). The interpretative competence requires in this sense to learn a "know-how on the edge," which covers both technical and mental functions "of being in and being for the group" (Lo Verso, 1994).

- to "create" new thoughts and new meanings that are not required in advance (or given), nor imposed, but are the result of the discursive exchange, of the common narrative - a shared story, though not always agreed - that the relationship has enabled to deploy; a new position - generative - within the training.

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