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The F factor: Modifications in the Course of Group Psycho-therapy Training *

There are many reasons that bring a person to training in group therapy, or to add this training to that of being physicians, psychologists, social workers or nurses. It may be for economic, social, ethical or personal reasons but it is very often an additional reason that is more difficult to define. It can be recognized through the following features: a) the desire to help those who are suffering or help a specific category of people: psychiatric patients, the elderly or children, b) the feeling that the chosen profession will make it possible to change the world and make it a better place, c) the conviction tainted with hope that by choosing that profession, a meaning will be given to life and to our presence on earth, d) the idea that theory and practice of psychotherapy have the extraordinary capacity of bringing about a positive change and those who master both this theory and this practice have special powers.

I felt like that at the beginning of my training, and probably many people shared or share this feeling at the beginning of their training.

This motivation is underpinned with humanitarian urges and the desire to repair. It is filled with fantasies which are typical of adolescence and childhood, it is also grandiose in its nature and it shows important existential problems.

Anyone entering into contact with someone with this type of motivation as a teacher, psychotherapist or trainer must be aware of the problems it can go back to, but he or she should also realize that it contains driving forces that are open to very important changes and transformations. It is quite right to consider that this motivation is a form of idealisation but this interpretation does not, however, fully explain the force of propulsion but only considers it as a form of defense. Furthermore, this interpretation does not sufficiently highlight the fact that this motivation can orientate towards the acquisition of important qualities for a psychotherapist, that is the capacity to appreciate and to give value to life and all that life can offer, to be confident and to trust others and know how to transmit such confidence.

I think it would be appropriate to consider this motivation as the expression of the F factor. A factor that has to be taken into account in training, a factor that training will deeply change but should not cause it to disappear.

The F Factor

The F concept, the faith concept was brought into psychoanalysis by Bion who spoke

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about it in "Attention and Interpretation" (1970) and in "Cogitations" (1992, pp. 298-299). Bion considered F as an essential component of any scientific approach. The act of faith, is the capacity of having faith in certain hypotheses and intuitions that surface during work and which correspond to facts, the existence of which are ignored by the more ordinary theories.

In 1970 (pp. 57-59) Bion wrote: « Through F [Act of Faith] one can 'see', 'hear', and 'feel' the mental phenomena of whose reality no practicing psycho-analyst has any doubt though he cannot, with any accuracy, represent them by existing formulations. »

An Act of Faith, corresponds to the gap between theory and certain aspects of reality, the Act of Faith is required not only by psychoanalysis but also by other disciplines such as physics and astronomy. The observation of subatomic particles, for instance, is necessarily very limited and indirect.

It would seem useful to me to extend the field of the application of F beyond the scientific observation: F is necessary, not only to see and feel mental phenomena, which differ from common sense and existing theories, but it equally enables the psychotherapist to support a patient who is desperate and has no resources while awaiting for the desire to live to resurface.

I'm going to extend the field of application of F to training as well. F is in fact necessary to fill the gap that the trainee inevitably sees at the beginning of his training between the idealized image of the psychotherapist and the fact that his knowledge and capacities are very weak. F is essential to enable the trainee to give a central role to his therapeutic action gradually; that is to have complete faith in the clinic, in him or herself and in the patient rather than applying the reference theory or theories in a dogmatic and rigid way, that is, to have blind faith in theories.

I would also like to say why, rather than using Bion's expression F and Act of Faith, I will talk about the F factor. F (faith) taken by itself is of no interest to me, it interests me to the extent that it can be associated to a great number of psychological, social and institutional functions; for instance F could be a factor of the interpretation function. I think that interpretation and the didactic function change according to the quantity of F factor they contain.

F (F Minus)

The picture that I have just given is too simplistic if one does not also take on board what Bion would most probably have called F minus. I'm talking about dogmatism, fanaticism and different forms of the perversion of faith. I'm also talking about the damage that faith and priests may cause to the freedom of thought and the freedom of feeling. Conformism is an example of this kind of damage. In this regard, it is very noticeable that trainees tend to idolize mainly the more austere and stricter teaching members in the school, those who draw a very clear line between knowledge and daily life, those teachers who are least sensitive to the difficulties a student may encounter, those teachers who are less endowed with this pragmatism, which undoubtedly is a mere feeling of benevolence towards life. Precisely, those teachers are they who students consider to be the authentic representatives of purity and value of psychoanalysis and of

Bion's or Foulke's group therapy, to mention but a few.

That is collusion, students protect themselves from the risk of being directly confronted by emotions and by fears that they feel when starting the training school. Teachers spare themselves from the emotional effort of imagining where their thoughts, their ideals and their self-image (that they give the students) lead. Collusion comes about through dissociation between, on the one hand, thought, knowledge and theory and from the other, the effect that thought, knowledge and theory can bring about. A splitting between these and concern for others and the fact that their very existence and proximity is felt. When you teach, you must not only be a teacher but also very sensitive in the way that you teach each individual student.

Thomas Mann touches upon this issue in the great tragic setting of the Nazi uprising, of course it cannot be compared to the setting of a training school, as well, teachers and psychotherapists cannot be compared to Friedrich Nietzsche as described by Thomas Mann (1953). However, I do feel that his text deserves to be quoted because it presents the essential elements of the discourse presented in a very clear and limpid way.

«On a personal level, Nietzsche had a very delicate and complicated nature that was capable of great suffering, hostile to all forms of brutality, but in a heroic contradiction with himself, he gave birth to a harshly anti-human doctrine of which the main concepts are: power, instinct, dynamism, superman, naïf cruelty, the blonde beast, the animal and triumphant vital force.

Nobody doubts that Nietzsche would turn in his grave if he knew what use had been made of his drive for power, but his doctrine was a poem imbibed with romantic drunkenness. When writing, he never asked himself about the effects that his thoughts might have had as far as political achievements are concerned, his highly tragic work unfortunately contributed to the decline of German freedom.

That was not his intention. That is not my intention! Here is the ever occurring complaint, when one thinks of the way how certain ideas were implemented and carried out. However, the alteration and a certain amount of corruption that an idea inevitably undergoes when it goes from concept to human reality, differ greatly from the eccentric arrogance of a mind that refuses to consider reality of human beings. »

Additional comments

I would like to add a few additional comments that I had the opportunity of making as a psychotherapist to people who were at the beginning of their training. What struck me was their very great vulnerability, their burning desire to receive approval and recognition was very intense, the fact was that any critical observation triggered strong reactions that threatened their self esteem. A second point that I noticed was their total incapability of recognizing pressures that both the school and the group of people sharing their situations brought to bare on them. The group of people was the other students. It is as if they totally obliterated these pressures from their consciousness to the extent that they tended, at least at the very first stages of their training, to consider the difficulties that they encountered were due exclusively to themselves and to their personal problems. The similarity I can suggest to this kind of obliteration is that to the

sense of gravity which is exerted upon us without us being aware of its very presence.

Delegation

The hypothesis that I suggest is that the emergence of this phenomenon is due, amongst other things, to the transformation in an institutional form of the idealistic motivations which lead these students to taking on such a training, and more generally, the transformation into an institutional shape of the F factor that I mentioned earlier on at the beginning of my presentation.

This transformation has both positive and negative aspects which imply, in the long term, convergence of the students towards the ideals of the training school. The first appearance of this is represented by the strong, idealized feeling that they feel towards the strictest teachers. The second sign is the fact that they unconsciously delegate the management of the F factor to the school and other students. I have spoken about this when I was referring to the pressures that were exerted upon them by the context and how they perceive themselves.

What I'm trying to say is that they hand over part of themselves, the parts relating to the F factor, so that it is managed by the school. In other words I am speaking about an institutional management of the F factor.

The global result of the training will depend on the capacity of teachers, students and the school in general to cope with this task of managing the delegated F factor and then to promote the personal new appropriation in given time.

Tradition and Originality

To conclude with, I will quote a passage from Jerome Bruner (2003), which is a perfect summary of the problems I have tried to touch upon.

«Those are the very focal issues. How can a culture - created by individual minds and upheld by customs and traditions - influence in a determining way, those who live under its cloud? How is it that culture creates by its very nature, individuals, who whilst being immersed in and formed by culture are however, still capable of innovation and originality? In other words, how are we forged by cultural forms that we adopt, and how, if such forging does exist, can we ensure that our original individual talents can intervene?»

It's impossible to explain Nijinsky through formal ballet rules only. However, Nijinsky is not conceivable if he has not been proceeded by the very invention and practice of this form of ballet.

We individually adopt a vision of the world of our group and we assimilate it as a uniform, so to speak, left or right wing, centre or environmentalist, Catholic or agnostic, initiated or laymen, good parents or etc... but we must also highly consider our needs to create possible worlds, worlds that are possible, that real people and real minds create to find a path towards the future.»

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