

Social violence and migration: the emergence of traumatic traces in a *Photolangage*® group

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Abstract

In a context of social violence and great precariousness, contemporary migratory flows call into question our care devices and in particular the individual setting. The issue regarding potential traumas due to forced migration put us in front of the complexity of the clinical picture in a transcultural context. Through an original device based on the use of image mediation in a group of asylum seekers, we will try to show how the use of group therapy, on the one hand, and photographic mediation, on the other, can give a crucial contribution to foster the associative and representation processes of the affections and the underlying traumatic traces.

Key words: group, trauma, migration, mediation, *Photolangage*®

Introduction

As the contemporary international geopolitical situation demonstrates, in recent years we are witnessing a growing migratory flow of people who flee their country because of misery, war, and political, ethnic or religious persecution. Obviously these migratory flows have very complex social, political and psychological repercussions, both individual and collective. And we need to consider this migratory flow, as well as the system of reception and taking charge of refugees^{iv} in their complexity. Moreover this migration flow is depicted by medias as a real unprecedented crisis in Europe, and its management more relevant, complex and urgent. The issue of assistance, and especially of the psychic care and assistance of these people, is in my opinion a central aspect in this emergency.

Trauma and migration

The literature on this subject (Bean et al., 2007; De Micco, 2014; Baubet & Moro, 2013; Rochel, 2016; Beneduce, 2016) is rich and shows how the effects of a "forced" migration, in a context of social and collective violence, leave potentially traumatic traces in these subjects. Some authors (Grinberg, 1987, Duparc, 2009) consider migration as a real, potentially traumatic "crisis". In this context the word "crisis" is to be understood as a radical and important change in the life of a subject; a *catastrophic* change, quoting Bion's terminology. This clinical picture leads us, on the one hand, to question and

(re)think our care models and, on the other, to experiment new, adequate and effective devices. In this perspective, in recent years we have been working^v on the development of therapeutic devices that can take into account the different levels of complexity we are facing: different language and culture, the effects and transmission of a collective trauma, exile and forced migration.

The traces left by such an experience of change actually require an attentive listening and an appropriate care model. The research I carry out in cooperation with the Lausanne Polyclinic USMi^{vi} proposes to consider these new care models in continuity with the group psychoanalytic models (Bion, 1961; Kaës, 1976, 2007, 2012, 2015) and the ethnopsychanalysis ones (Nathan, 1986, 2014; von Overbeck Ottino, 2001, 2007; Baubet & Moro, 2013). We aim to find a device that could activate the representation of traumatic traces processes, their elaboration, symbolization and transformation (Lo Piccolo, 2018; Sanchis Zozaya, 2016; Katz-Gilbert, 2015, 2017; Katz-Gilbert, Lo Piccolo, Bourguignon & Mariconda, 2017). That's why we resorted to the Photolangage® method and developed a device supporting the image mediation in group therapies. The groups, on a voluntary basis, are addressed to people forced to flee and leave their home country due to the above mentioned social and collective violence.

From a theoretical and methodological point of view, this "mediation work"^{vii} refers to the articulation and interaction of the three psychic spaces distinguished by R. Kaës (1976, 1993, 2007, 2012): the intrapsychic space of the individual subject, the intersubjective space of the bond and the trans-subjective space of the group as such. To these three spaces, the author adds a fourth one (Kaës, 2012, 2015), which we consider very carefully in this particular context: the institutional and social space, the real background, the meta-structure we operate in, that guarantees the correct functioning of life in groups and in society. In this sense, we can distinguish four fundamental guarantors, which the author defines as "metapsychic and metasocial" (Kaës, 2012): the Law, the Religion, the Culture and the Science that protect us respectively and symbolically from Violence, Death, Isolation and Ignorance.

What happens when these "guarantors" fail in their functions and duties? What happens when the institutions in which we put our faith and hope collapse or, worse, turn against us and against the people they were supposed to protect and defend? What happens when the State, instead of preventing violence, exercises it against its citizens? It seems clear to us that the failure or the dysfunction of these guarantors opens the door to vulnerability and insecurity, to the "work of the negative" (Green, 1993), to violence and to the prevalence of psychic processes "without a subject" (Roussillon, 2014). In other words, the doors are open to a crisis of the individual, as well as the group he/she belongs to.

We know that today the issue of State violence (Puget et al., 1989), its manifestations and its possible comprehension should be articulated with the complexity of the different psychic spaces at stake because the impact of this kind of violence reveals itself, clinically and precisely, in these three levels of psychic functioning: the intra-, inter- and trans-subjective ones. We believe that the articulation between the trauma and its inscription in a pluripsychic space allows us to question the intrinsic relationship between subject and group^{viii}, between the individual and his social, cultural and relational background of reference and belonging. Therefore the issue of trauma is central to the study of the migration path (Baubet & Moro, 2013; Beneduce, 2016; Bourguignon & Katz-Gilbert, in press), especially if it is a forced migration. Actually each stage of migration involves a risk of exposure to different kind of traumas. So the risk factors are multiple and can arise before the departure, during the journey or after the arrival and the settlement in the hosting country, so post-immigration.

These plural expressions of the trauma and this "migration clinic", test our treatment devices, and especially the individual setting. They test our diagnostic criteria too and consequently the understanding of the observed symptoms. Finally, to be approached and understood they require a plural and polyphonic approach. Now, we should consider the notion of "trauma", as well as the meaning and interpretation of the symptoms and therefore the question related to the diagnosis in a transcultural context. The literature in this sense is rich and the debate is too complex to be covered in the available space of this article. However I would like to stress, on the one hand, the inadequacy and the limits of "classic" psychiatric care, on an individual basis, for people who often do not even know what a psychiatrist or a psychotherapist is (please, allow me the caricature); on the other, the complexity of the clinical manifestations that we observe and which often resist, in a certain sense, our habitual or *ad hoc* categorizations (just think of the abuse of psychosis or PTSD and similar diagnosis in the clinical context of migration).

Group and mediation: a model of care

Starting from these reflections, we advance the hypothesis that the individual trauma linked to this particular type of violence echoes and involves a more important and wide crisis affecting the individual as well as the society and the institutions. It is then possible to consider this crisis as a crisis of the group (institutions, the State) and a group crisis (a people, a community...), and that is why it is only through the group that we can imagine to treat and understand it. In this sense, I think that the group model as a therapeutic device - and especially the introduction of a mediation in the group - could be a crucial contribution, not only for the treatment, and therefore the treatment of this suffering, but also for the understanding of this clinic. First of all,

because the group situation is in itself a situation that fosters important regressive movements. This allows us to observe the emergence of more primitive defense mechanisms and primary models of the object relationship. Secondly, we must not forget the cultural aspect of the group dimension, which is, in the transcultural sphere, an aspect that cannot be overlooked. Finally, the introduction into the group of a mediating object - such as photography, in the case of Photolangage® - allows us to activate another form of associativity: a multisensory, non-verbal association that allows to encourage the above mentioned regressive movements, guaranteeing their containment and their transformation (Lo Piccolo, 2015, 2017). For this purpose, we propose the Photolangage® method as a care device paradigm, for the investigation of the processes of containment and transformation of psychic reality; as well as the modalities of inscription, figuration and representation of the traumatic traces left by the migratory experience.

The problem we are facing is how to promote an intersubjective meeting with and between traumatized subjects in a transcultural context. The specific context of forced migration, but also the effects of globalization and (de) colonization, economic constraints, precarious living conditions on the one hand; the collapse of the evoked meta-social and metapsychic guarantors, on the other, constitute a rather complex background. Against this unstable and complex background, we encounter, as clinicians, vulnerable psychic identities and configurations, subjected to a constant risk of exposure to trauma. It is from this perspective that we think that the use of mediation and the introduction of a mediating object in the treatment could enable us to mobilize the traces of the traumatic experiences, to bring out a "frozen" and unrepresentable imaginary and to promote the processes of figurability of affects (Mitsopoulou-Sonta & Vacheret, 2013).

The mediation of the photographic image, chosen to facilitate the narration of oneself without feeling directly exposed, is, according to us, a pertinent choice because it allows to accompany the processing of the trauma in subjects for whom the access to the speech is insufficiently available. Just think of the linguistic difficulties encountered by refugees, for whom the access to the language of the hosting country is not always easy. Therefore the introduction of mediation seems to foster the use of different means of expression passing through the body, gestures, different (multi) sensorial associations, to finally return to the speech (Alfano, Lo Piccolo, Audino & Baubet, 2018).

The example of *Photolangage*®

The Photolangage® method (Belisle & Baptiste, 1991) was created in the 1960s by a group of psychologists from Lyon with the (intuitive) idea of using photography as a support to the verbalization within groups of young adolescents with difficulties in the expression of themselves and in the

communication of their emotions. The presence of this material object, the photo, within the group, turned out to be a great sensorial and attractive force for the participants: a real object enabling the metaphorization of the internal reality. The effects of the method have therefore far exceeded the initial expectations and today Photolangage®, thanks to the pioneering work of C. Vacheret (2000, 2002), has also become a therapeutic device, whose reference is the group psychoanalysis, the application field which we refer to.

A Photolangage® session takes place in two stages: the first stage concerns the choice of photographs, to be selected among the various available dossiers related to the "question of the day" (the theme proposed by the therapists to work on during the session); the second stage is characterized by the sharing, in groups, of the chosen photos. The time of the presentation of the photos in a group is given by the time of the session itself. Participants are encouraged to share their choices in groups and with the whole group, through the following task: "Each of us will present his/her photo when he/she wishes to, possibly articulating with what has just been said. We will listen carefully to the person who presents his/her photo and although we won't put forth any interpretation, we are encouraged to express what we see similar or different on the photo presented." The therapists too choose a photo and take part within the group in a participatory way. No interpretation is put forth since the participants' interventions on the presented photos have an interpretative value.

The specificity of the method thus makes possible to establish an area of play (Winnicott, 1971) that accompanies the mobilization of thought through images (Freud, 1922): the image (representation of what) is identified as a perceptive element and it mobilizes an emotional context related to primary processes. The thought through ideas (word representation), organized and secondaryised, is instead mobilized by the "question of the day" proposed at the beginning of each session. Unlike a speech group where the expression is not "mediated", the presence of the "photographic object" will lead and organize interactions and vectorize group exchanges.

With the help of a clinical example, I will try to explain it in the practice. This is a small Photolangage® group (6 participants, therapists included), with young political asylum seekers. The group is homogeneous, for what concerns the language spoken by the participants (the Farsi), in co-conduction between a psychotherapist (myself) and a psychiatrist and in the presence of an interpreter.

In my thesis work, I talked about the possibility of a "double containment" (Lo Piccolo, 2015, 2018) of the affections and the most "negative" parts of the psychic reality^{ix}, guaranteed by this kind of device. On the one hand there is photography, a cultural and material object that allows us to represent

(Botella, 2007) traumatic experiences; on the other hand, there is the group, which, through its own dynamics and psychic processes, fosters the emergence of associative processes, projective movements and identification, the diffraction of the transference (Kaës, 1985). This allows the experience of containing one's non-tolerated or unprocessed parts, which are thus projected as much on the therapists as on the group participants and/or on the mediating object.

After a particularly difficult session, in which feelings of helplessness, loneliness and sadness emerged, we suggest to the group "to evoke a good memory" with the help of a photo. The participants seem initially surprised by the question, but then they play along and evoke pleasant moments of their past but also of their present. The associative chain is quite fluid, the three participants share their photos one by one, the therapists are the last ones to present their photos. One of the participants chose a photo of a group of friends sitting and watching a sunset: he talks about the pleasure of being surrounded by nature, with friends, " exchanging ideas, as we are doing right now within the group, even if everyday life sometimes is hard ". Another guy, through the photo of a sowing scene, evokes a childhood memory, when, he was passing through a village he did not know, and some peasants offered him a sack of wheat: "it was a real pleasure to receive that unexpected gift". Or, again, a photo of a stream, chosen by the third participant, that evokes the memory of a distant party, with schoolmates, on the mountains of his native village, to celebrate the end of compulsory schooling. The images and speech associative chain is as fluid as the flow of the water on the photo; exchanges are rich, the atmosphere is very pleasant, light, almost dreamlike; we laugh together thinking about the past. The session goes on and the therapists present their photos to share their "good memories": I chose a photo of a beach, with small boats in the background (fig.1); my colleague that of a canoe at sunset (fig.2).



fig.1



fig.2

I recall a childhood memory, or rather the temporality of this period of life: the days spent at the seaside, when I was a child, not counting the hours, or the days of the week... as if I were "out of time". After my presentation there is a long silence. One of the participants breaks the silence and says, surprised, that when he was picking a photo he didn't notice that one on the table. Then he associates on the photo and says, in a more serious tone, that it reminds him of the crossing from Turkey to Italy: "it was dark, there was nothing around, the landscape was a bit ugly and there was only water around". He had never seen the sea before and when he finally saw the water, he got close to it to drink and the water was salty. He was scared. There is silence again, after sharing this memory. My colleague breaks it presenting his photo that evokes a memory of youth: the collection of shells on the beach, with the low tide. The participants do not know what are the shells and the seafood, evoked in association with the story. This leads to a discussion on cultural differences in the kitchen, and participants get a certain pleasure from it. But after this discursive "escape", we start again to associate on the photo. Another participant recalled the moment he was in Morocco and he was boarding, to cross the Mediterranean Sea, and go once again, to Italy. In this case too at night, and for him too it was the first time he saw the sea.

He believed that they would cross the Mediterranean Sea with a big boat and that everyone would have had its own place. When he saw that it was a small raft, he was overwhelmed with fear and thought: "we're fucked up." There were a hundred people with him, the boat did not even get close to the shore and he had to swim to reach it. Several people remained on the ground. The emotional climate of the session is now full of sadness and anguish. The associations following these memories underline the importance of sharing them. Perhaps they are no longer the "good" memories of the first question, but are "important" memories, as expressed by the words of the participants. Moreover the fact of being able to tell them, shows that they are still alive and it is not a trivial matter. At the end, I share with the group the idea that perhaps it was not an accident if they didn't see these specific photos when they were picking their photos. We found and discovered them in the group: their vision generated a great silence, then the associations we just presented. After all, we asked them to evoke a good memory, so perhaps it is not a coincidence, this "missed visual act".

Through this example, we can see how images, thanks to their ability to contain, form an "individual psychic envelope" (Anzieu, 1985) reinforcing the sense of identity (it is "my" photo: each presents his own chosen photo) and

the ability to think thoughts (Bion, 1959); but images are also a group psychic envelope that weaves collective thoughts, through group exchanges, giving them a shape in which everyone can recognize each other and where everyone can contribute to their creation. Through the "photographic representation" of a scene, of a portrait, of a landscape, an affective atmosphere is called, mobilized by internal images. The images are, in this dynamic, a sort of "psychic skin" that we use both individually and collectively. The intermediation of photography allows the weaving, in groups, of a common imaginary that allows the articulation between the psychic reality of the singular subject and the group associative dynamics.

The fact that the participants use the photographs of the therapists to evoke traumatic memories and deposit in them their distress seems to us a particularly important aspect. Through this use of the mediating object, we can observe the process of "double containment" – by the photo and by the therapists - of the emerging traumatic trace. Once transferentially deposited on the image, this trace can be evoked without feeling exposed in the first person, it can be shared with the other(s). The polyphony of the story, thanks to the associative chain, allows the activation of the identification processes, which in turn allow the reappropriation of the discourse and the affective experience that accompanies it. The play area offered by Photolangage® therefore fosters connections and links between primary processes and secondary processes, on the one hand; and it facilitates the articulation between the intrapsychic and intersubjective space, on the other. In this sense, the image becomes a real malleable medium (Milner, 1952; Roussillon, 2013), indefinitely deformable and resistant, which supports attack movements against thought and ties (Bion, 1959). However, the possibility of restarting the processes of symbolization and thought also depends, above all, on the therapists' ability to identify, contain, process and transform these specific psychic movements and processes (Lo Piccolo, 2015, 2017, 2018).

Conclusions

In the clinical example, we asked a question to the positive pole of the transference: to evoke a good memory. The participants decided to play along, demonstrating that they have integrated the setting and make theirs the device, as well as showing significant psychic resources (perhaps what we call capacity for resilience). What is interesting to note, in our example, is that the participants use the photos of the therapists to deposit a traumatic memory and evoke the underlying anxiety. This seems to allow them to talk about it without collapsing (Winnicott, 1974), without seeing their deformed memories or their associations distorted by the words of the other, thus tolerating ambivalence and diversity, taking the right distance from the traumatic event and finally take back such undigested contents, now rendered

a little less indigestible, detoxified by the group association chain, by the containment of images and the resistance of the therapists. The main task of the therapists, in this context, is indeed to resist in front of these violent and traumatic contents. Resist, as the photo resists. I would say that we can resist precisely because the photo resists, because the mediating object contains. This allows us to contain and tolerate violence without collapsing, trying to transform it, sometimes relying on the photo, sometimes offering a different pole of identification, through our associations or through the sharing of our imagination. Imagine for a moment to listen to these same stories, often told in repetition (as a real compulsion to repeat), alone in your study, in front of each of these young people, without the group and its emotional resonance, without the mediator object which can rely on to restart our thinking, our imagination, our emotions, our words.

We understand, then, how the Photolangage® method is proposed as a support to the processes of subjectivation and transformations of the affections and helps the participants to access to a metaphorization and a symbolization of the psychic reality, thanks to the work of linking between the primary processes and the secondary processes. ; thanks to the intrinsic bond that is woven among images, the imaginary and the affections, and which allows the passage from thought through images to a secondaryized thought, put into speech: a first form of depiction that finally allows the expression of an affection "Frozen" and until now inaccessible. The group psychic work thus ensures an effect of polyphony (Kaës, 2009) and of psychic transmission through the construction of the group association chain: a narration with several voices that allows the emergence of a plurality of imaginaries and to produce diversified modes of representation of a trauma that is both singular and plural.

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^{iv} We chose to use the expression "refugees" to denote all the people forced to migrate. Actually, we can debate about this choice for the complexity of this phenomenon and its causes.

^v The team formed by Muriel Katz, Manon Bourguignon and me, founded the international research network "Groups, transmission and mass violence" and has been cooperating for several years with international colleagues (France, Italy, Belgium, Brezil, Chile, Israele...) on the subject of group and subjective consequences of social and State violence, in reference with the work of René Kaës.

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^{vii} To develop the concept of "therapeutic mediation" see the group psychoanalysis Lyon School's works (Brun, Chouvier, Kaës, Roussillon, Vacheret...).

^{viii} We refer to Piera Aulagner theory (1975) on the "narcissistic contract" and to René Kaës's contribution to the development of this concept.

^{ix} We refer to the clinic of the negative theorized in excellent way by the psychoanalysis French School (Green, Guillaumin, Kaës, Roussillon...).