Trauma: Terror and Pain. Importance of the Witness in the Analytical Relationship in Individual and Group Psychoanalysis

Cinzia Carnevali

Private practice, Rimini, Italy

In this paper I would like to highlight the relationship between individual and collective trauma through the presentation of clinical material with abused patients who lived highly traumatic situations that damaged their symbolic capacity and pain elaboration. The analytic setting changes to become a container corresponding to the “object of need”. In cases of traumatized patients, it is necessary to build a living space, “a witness space” as the premise of the beginning of a real analytic relationship, often difficult to attain partly due to distressing counter-transference experiences. In my view, the role of a more or less active witness may be established in response to a solicitation from the patient who signals its current inability to tolerate feeling in a relational situation because it is too painful and persecutory. I will consider a case in individual analysis and a case in analytic psychodrama group showing common features relating to the helplessness and dehumanization experienced in relationships with people on whom they depend, that preclude any possibility of healthy emotional attachment and subjective recognition. The function of witness keeps alive the hope of being able to change even when dejection, indecision, discomfort make you feel in a foreign land without confidence but with so many fears.

Keywords: trauma, counter-transference, function of witnessing

In this paper I would like to highlight the relationship between individual and collective trauma through the presentation of clinical material with abused patients who lived highly traumatic situations that damaged their symbolic capacity and pain elaboration.

Psychoanalysis operates in order to foster transformations regarding the unthinkable emotions resulting from serious injuries. The analytic setting changes to become a container corresponding to the “object of need” (Spadoni, 2007). In cases of traumatized patients, it is necessary to build a living space, “a witness space” (Molinari, 1985) as the premise of the beginning of a real analytic relationship, often difficult to attain partly due to distressing counter-transference experiences.

In my view, the role of a more or less active witness may be established in response to a solicitation from the patient who signals its current inability to tolerate feeling in a relational situation because it is too painful and persecutory.

I will consider a case in individual analysis and a case in analytic psychodrama group showing common features relating to the helplessness and dehumanization experienced in relationships with people on whom they depend, that preclude any possibility of healthy emotional attachment and subjective recognition.

The understanding of the individual mind requires not to neglect its ties with reality and with the group it belongs to.

From this group complexity originate trans-generational unresolved bonds, transmitted within the individual mind. The perverse power and destructiveness of the adults suffered by children within their families confuses and takes away their ability to think. Often the traumatized subject seems to take refuge in this negative legacy and in depression.

Ferenczi (1932) and Boschan (2004) highlighted the traumatic effect of early environmental failures where there are at stake destructive pulsional instincts and pathological parental investments. The early quality of the bond with unreliable, abusing parental objects shape and influence subsequent relationships. Pulsional traces and anguish of abuse are experienced in the transference with the analyst and with the group.

Furthermore, we must remember with Racalbutto (1994) that:

“The traumatic nucleus is reactivated in the sessions and hurts the analyst where the patient’s wound is open, disrupting his mental structure and forcing him to intensive counter-transference elaboration”.

Analyst’s Trauma and Suffering

In Italy, as at international level, different theories and viewpoints are drawn together: nowadays we are trying to improve the techniques that allow us to better “listen to” and “transform” severe clinical situations in which transference and counter-transference difficulties reveal mental suffering characterized by intense destructiveness.

This change in the understanding of specific clinical structures (heterogeneous, borderline, psychotic patients) and their analytic accessibility led to reconsider the role of the object in the constitution of the Self and in its dysfunctionality and, after S. Freud’s discoveries, this has naturally led to identify what in the primary links with the object (Winnicott, 1967) may have had a traumatic impact on the subject’s psychic organization and mental functioning. This introduces the immense issue of psychic trauma and what we try to define when we use this term in psychoanalysis.

With such patients, the analyst must take upon himself the role of a participating witness of the horror and pain that confirms the patient’s perceptions (who needs to feel believed). Opening a witness space, safe for the patient’s Self, can give opportunity of narration of the endured events. Together the patient and analyst can receive and capture the various forms of communication, contradictory and primitive, to turn them into something endowed with meaning through the personal-body involvement of the analytic couple, a sort of deep couple contamination.

I got the idea that the traumatic events that have prevented Self cohesion, the lack of integration and symbolization, at the limit between the body and the representative, in the plot of psychic life, can be crossed and experienced in the analytic relationship, listening to the analyst’s sensorial-bodily counter-transference perception.

For a process of signification of the unspeakable, in the most severe cases, it was necessary for me to endure physical and mental suffering at the risk of getting sick for the feelings of burning, annihilating intrusiveness or paralysing extreme distance. It is invasive incorporation of an object that forcibly invades the mind of the child (and the analyst), determined by a sadistic-paranoid parasitic need to occupy and control the subject. An “incorporated state” that is not available to the elaboration and may have to do with “premature identifications” (McDougall, 1978, 2003; Williams, 2010) that prevent the formation of a coherent sense of psycho-body Self.

This type of traumatic experience, due to the inappropriate responses of a defaulting object that abdicated its parental functions with sadistic actions, invades the child's arising psychism, undermining its formation, mutilating his Self and keeping him in a primary anxiety state that can be reactivated throughout life.

I tried to focus my attention on protomental, preverbal levels and the sensorial body communication quality: somatized pain, specific voice tones, acoustic and olfactory reverie (I smell, can you smell it?), visual reverie (I cannot see, can you see me?) that often accompany severe mental states of loneliness and despair.

Exclamations like: "I do not understand anything! I'm afraid of talking nonsense" filled me with great sadness.

I am going to talk about some specific sessions which made me understand the way in which patients prevented themselves from feeling their involvement in the relationship with internal and external objects. During the course of analysis, they met a suffering never experienced before. Nevertheless, the pain of abandonment, recognized, has initiated a change that these patients called: "my rebirth" or "my return to life". They reported that "a shapeless, borderless desire emerges, with the fear of not being able to contain it", "it is a struggle in order to start to grow again". They did not suffer alone but with me as the witness of this difficult journey.

Through my counter-transference I was always alert, distressed by the danger of being destroyed by their fear, revengeful anger, jealousy and envy.

I think that now the majority of analysts agree with the idea that psychic reality has to do with "being alive" and the perception of existing. The analyst's presence, listening to the patient fosters the opening to desire and to a new psychic life. The emergence of the ability to dream also testifies to the transformative process from the corporeal to the psychic, from proto-emotions to alpha elements and pictograms, often "images of the transference" (Carnevali & Maestro, 2006) which are to become symbols and words. Letting the body speak and reaching the early affective states reactivated in the analytic relationship allows patients to experience a new "psychological birth".

Reliability and freedom allow regression and the expression of primitive scenes annihilating for the self, both in pulsional-emotional and relational-objectual terms.

Only starting to live your life again you can get free from revengeful hatred.

Figure 1. The case of Casper (the friendly ghost).

Casper is a 40-year-old man (see Figure 1), short and slim, his gait is unsteady. Because of his job, he moved close to the city of the analyst from the south of Italy. He starts analysis (four sessions a week) due to panic attacks and depression, fear to lose his sight, to fall and "break up". He cannot live, constantly pervaded by fragmentation anguish. For a long period of analysis, by communicating his bellyache and an impelling urge to pee, Casper manages to give voice to his urgent, constant need to evacuate unspeakable suffering.

He repeatedly asks to go to the toilet, towards the end of the session; the analyst leaves him alone, puts up with the helplessness of not understanding, but feels drowsy and irritated and sometimes a bellyache.

At each session, Casper arrives panting, and with a fleeting glance.

One day, just before the second summer break in analysis, he seems to notice his behavior and says:

I always go to the toilet, I wonder why I am always anxious to soil myself on the train; you see... when I'm here, I hold my belly and count 1, 2, 3.

The analyst feels a sharp pain in her stomach, like a pang or a stab, which leaves her breathless.

She understands the importance of living the violent emotion brought by Casper, to accept his pain. Contact has been established in the unconscious fluid area which allows the shift from evacuative action to meaningful action, from action to dream.

Re-emerging from the pain, the analyst hints to a possible meaning: "What suffering would you like to get rid of? Perhaps you are looking for an 'affective bathroom' where they can be carried and contained".

C: ... Help me, sometimes I feel I'm dead, dead, dead, I'm afraid of dying and I think about suicide, I am not going to die, am I right?

Through her silent witness and suffered sharing felt in her body, which turns into receptive organ, the analyst recovers a movement of thought and, affectively putting herself in Casper shoes, she can experience his destructive drives and turn them into transformational experience.

A: Sometimes you mentioned your fear of dying, especially when you feel left alone, as if you expected attacks that can disintegrate...

C: I felt non-existent, a light and nonexistent feather, like a ghost, a little ghost. I was Casper, I had to put up with my mother's bad words and physical violence... it is horrible... I think of my father, who was never interested in me... when I went out to play with my friends, he would lose his head and beat me (also kicking me), I was knocked out and puzzled, I felt dirty. He would tell me I could have fallen into a ravine, but there was no ravine... I felt, inside, as if I was crumpled in my belly, unworthy of receiving love, with a strong urge to cry.

Today, as I was coming here, I felt the anguish of a black out, as they say now, when there is a murder. I was walking in the square, feeling dizzy, I thought that this is the last week before the break. I am afraid of feeling the need, I am afraid of separation. I'd rather not be dependent on or in debt with other people.

The analyst thinks with tenderness to a baby who needs love, hurt by the adult's indifference, by violence and guilt that penetrated so deeply that he feels dirty, monstrous, unworthy.

The dehumanizing experience of trauma is lived again with the analyst who is drawn into a depressive-destructive vortex.

The analyst, attacked by hatred, feels crumbling, but she thinks tenderly to a baby who needs love, hurt by hatred and adult violence. The guilt has penetrated so deeply that he feels dirty, monstrous, unworthy.

It was necessary that the phantom of violent intrusion and death passed viscerally into the analyst's body, so that she could convey the emotional component and let it speak. The analyst could embody Casper's affection only "playing the phantom" (Racalbuto, 1994), removing her own subjectivity and living the void. In the area of non representability, the analyst had to experience death, like Casper, with Casper.

He attempts to keep away the analyst with various defenses, is never fully inside the analytic experience. He tries to defend himself from that bond, sometimes attacking and despising, covering me in poop, or dreaming of having a poop at the entrance of the consulting room.

In a session, surprisingly, the image of the mother's "pissed off" face suddenly appears. He was a child who would not eat, thin, fragile. Gradually he will remember that he was sick, crying not to go to school after being beaten and locked up in the closet for hours. He reports:

I did not feel my mind, also here with you, my mind was gone... now that you are listening to me and you are a witness of my terror, I feel like a small thing, as if I started to feel myself a little. These changes make me feel confused, I'm afraid... then guilt comes.

After several years of analysis, the still little elaborated guilt is put, through projective identification, into the analyst who is hated and identified with the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1932). In a session before summer break, talking about his fear of losing control and opening up, he says:

If I open the tap I will no longer hold my tears, I was just surrounded by emptiness and darkness, if I spoke and I was lively my mother would beat me and say that I was talking too much, but I was asking for help not to die... do not you think?

A: Yes, I think that, locked up in the dark, you thought to be dead, but as in the book "I'm not scared" by Ammaniti, you felt that a small part of yourself, a split and preserved child, hoped to help the other self, the ghost, to be found in order to be saved, fed and helped to distinguish himself from parental figures.

Trauma and Psychodrama Group Analysis

When the one who carries out violent actions and abuse is the mother, sometimes accomplice of the perverse father, we observe the colonization and distortion of the child's true Self and the seizure of parts of his emotional life at the risk of the destruction of symbolic space, dreams and desires. As Zerbi Schwartz wrote (1998),

The inner psychic space, which is the one in which we dream, we imagine, we think, is not seen by the victims of incest as a good container that can transform life experience into nutrient psychic material; instead, there is a deep paralysis of the container, unable of experiencing the reverie needed to transform the experience of reality into reflective potential.

The group can become a reliable container where, in the glance of the other, the participants can see the reflection of some inner desiring object which constitutes our being and nourishes our breath.

In the psychodrama group, the exchange of glances satisfies the basic need of the Other to constitute psychic space and time and recreates the basic bond of common belonging.

The glance reflects the investment, the parent's desire that meets the vital need to be seen by a living person, to feel that I exist (if you see me I exist).

In a plural space of reflections, associations and differentiations, the narration of each participant in the group allows the explosive emergence of hidden parts, otherwise mute or walled. This is the moment in which the subject "begins" or re-begins to exist: not simply living the traumatic past again, dormant and hidden, but reliving and re-meaning, or meaning for the first time, in *après/coup*, the present sense of past non-sense (Carnevali et al., 2014-2016).

The group has the function of revealing instincts, assumptions, pulsions of collective nature. "In this way the individual, who has progressively become subject, is given back the idea that he is never an isolated individual, but always included in a group". If the emotional relationships intra and inter group reach such a level to ensure that psychodynamic development in which the terrifying projections can be received and transformed, the identifications change and the participants do not identify anymore with a sadistic

contemptuous superego that controls and inhibits impulses, but they can identify with alter-egos capable of enriching ties for all members of the psychodrama group.

The Dull Face

Carlo, a 39-year-old man, tall, thin, with blue melancholic eyes, starts the session of analytic psychodrama. He feels unable to relate to others, afraid of public speaking, and since he had to leave work he feels depressed and lacking energy. When he looks at himself in the mirror he sees a dull, lifeless face, he does not know how to dream and desire. He still lives with his parents and suffers because rejected by the only girl he was interested in.

The mother, a very anxious, unrelenting woman, dominated him with her aggressive actions. He felt annihilated in his will as he had to be as his mother wanted to the point of undergoing a strong colonization. What he thinks is thwarted by his mother since childhood, he cannot feed on a food other than that prepared by the mother and over time he will develop real phobia of contamination and food intolerance.

A young participant in the group, Anna, reports feeling dead: Her heart broke due to the sudden separation from her boyfriend. What made her suffer and hate more was her mother's absence. She never felt looked upon and at the age of two she had a strange behavior: She did not look her mother in the eye. In previous sessions she had hinted at her uncle's abuse, who lived with her family. Her parents had not protected her, as they knew but pretended they didn't. She had always thought of being unworthy, full of dirty and evil things. She feels attracted to this perverse game, that's why all her emotional relationships fail.

Carlo recollects that he also felt bad, rejected by his mother who used to beat him up. The father, weak ally of the mother, never defended him. He was often left alone in the house until the evening when his parents returned from work.

Another participant, Luca, reports that, humiliated by his very authoritarian and violent father, in the throes of a very strong anger had thrown his dog from the balcony, so feel terribly guilty. He remembers when he got sick, and says: "They thought I was an imaginary invalid". He was left alone at home during the summer, while his friends went on holiday.

There were only the strawberries left by his mother, that he would bring to his mouth, traces of hope, of something to give meaning and flavor to life.

Returning from a trip to visit her father in another country, Sara recalls that in her childhood he had often tried to abuse her. It is a terrible shame, she had not had the courage to tell it before. She was forced to go to the swimming pool by her father, she would quiver, feeling cold, but her mother would never help her.

Everyone in the group becomes a witness of the horror and pain of the other: the group provides a space of belonging and witnessing. It helps to understand oneself and the others, it helps mirroring and to find the courage to denounce abuse.

During a session of psychodrama, Sara, a very slim, 8-year-old girl is played: She is in the pool and comes out of the water with a strong headache, she sits on the edge trembling because she is cold, and sees her mother far away, distant, not looking at her. She chooses Carlo to play the swim teacher who was present but did not say anything, while in the play (and out of the script) he takes pity to her, invites her to cover up and hands her a towel to protect from the cold.

After the various comments on the cold and lack of assisting mother Carlo says he felt like his mother, in-different and distressed, in the role of Sarah, agony of anguish like abandoned children. Sara nods, saying it

was a complete abandonment and she was also afraid of disappointing his father's expectations.

The group then plays Carlo's memory when, as a little child in first grade he was awakened by his unrelenting mother. As soon as she opened the door she harshly exclaimed: "This bundle... of... heavy air". He had to have breakfast alone and to go to school even in the rain, he felt dejected and humiliated. Everything had to go according to his mother's program.

Carlo chooses Anna to play the shaken aggressive mother who could not see her child's needs. The mother wakes him talking all the time. "What a torture!", Carlo exclaims, "I have a lot of emptiness, in that period I used to pee in bed, I remember a strange procedure, every morning she checked me and put the mattress against the wall, to underline my fault: I was very ashamed".

In the play Carlo has wet eyes, he is going to cry, he could not stand her...

Luca says, "What about the bundle?"

Carlo:

Ha ha ha fascism? There was an intimidating aspect, I felt scared, I assume that my grandfather was so anxious and aggressive. My mother inherited this feature of my grandfather. My mother went through difficult years with her grandfather who was back home from the war, he was bad to my mother, he used to control her, to humiliate her. When I see such active, exuberant women I get daunted (the perverse bundle-phallus?).

We talk about the cold daunting relationships leading the child to sag.

Carlo says:

If the problem is not denied, but recognized together, you can fix it, but if severe judgment comes the guilt hinders the ability to take initiative and to evolve.

The feelings of helplessness, pain and death anguish experienced as the session goes on slowly turn into tenderness for the participants of the group and I, too, savor hope.

The session directs towards the glance and the listening, meant not only as a glance into the inner self and internal listening, but also towards the other.

The story of a group member provides the possibility of mirroring, of this apathy and slightly dull sadness, of feelings of pain, fear, shame, and avoidance, which are perceived in the other, but also belong to each of us. The group provides a place, a space to get in touch with deeper parts of the self, traumatized, fragile and shameful, in order not to flee them.

Conclusions

Letting yourself be used by the patient helps build a psychic space that develops a containing and participating witness function, it allows to give oxygen to the fragile, frightened aspects of the self that fail to enjoy the experience of a relationship with the reassuring object. I tried to show how collective experiences have an impact in the individual traumatic experience both in the case of Casper (violence against the political diversity) and in the case of Carlo (the war). The abuses of the father and mother have created a sort of de-humanization, a denial of their recognition as children and as individuals to be respected. In war abuses the persecutor must dehumanize their victims to perpetrate the abuse and not to feel remorse. The person is denied his identity and becomes a number (Akhtar, 2006). Torture is incommunicable and silence becomes its accomplice, as the complicit parents who knew but did not intervene. The analyst becomes the only witness able to give voice to the pain and horror of trauma. The interactions between patient and analyst, and between

members of the group in the hic et nunc of the session, the insights, derive from the progressive acquisition of the transgenerational dimension of patient stories. The emotions that circulate may represent elements of understanding and revelation of transference and the analysis of the analyst's counter-transference becomes a fundamental tool. Individual and group are closely interconnected, this is why we must not forget the complexity of trans-generational transmission and influence of forces that recur in the analytic field. Along with Bion's theories of containment and reverie, the field model (Neri, 2011) can help you make relational and interpersonal perspectives more understandable. Moreover, with the help of the play in the encounter between the group's psychisms the "unusual detail" (Lemoine, 1972), the ghost, can be made visible and integrate it into the subject. These concepts could correspond to Bion's function of reverie and Corrao's group analyst's gamma function, transformative elements within the group field, related to inter-subjectivity.

In storm with a witness, painful and traumatic feelings of death, war, persecution expressed in the narratives can take on a transformative meaning. By agreeing to be involved in that risk analyst lives and helps to live emotions and to elaborate unspeakable experiences that can find representation through the listening and the play. The function of witness keeps alive the hope of being able to change even when dejection, indecision, discomfort make you feel in a foreign land without confidence but with so many fears.

References

- Aktar, S. (2006). *Disumanizzazione: origini, manifestazioni e rimedi* (in V. Sverre, & D. V. Vanick (Eds.)). Borla: Violenza o dialogo.
- Anzieu, L. (1972). *Kaes e altri autori: Il lavoro psicoanalitico nei gruppi*. Armando.
- Anzieu, L. (1983). *Kaes L'apparato pluripsichico: Costruzioni nel gruppo 1976*. Armando.
- Berlincioni, V., Carnevali, C., Cusin, A., Fiorentino, R., Maestro, S., ... Zanchi, M. (2014). *Il processo di soggettivazione e l'arte della manutenzione dell'analista*. Atti del Congresso Nazionale di Psicoanalisi.
- Berlincioni, V., Carnevali, C., Cusin, A., Fiorentino, R., Maestro, S., ... Zanchi, M. (2016). *Il dolore "del" e "nell'analista": riflessioni di un gruppo per la "manutenzione" della capacità di sentire e trasformare*. Atti del Congresso Nazionale di Psicoanalisi.
- Bion, W. (1971). *Esperienze nei gruppi*. Roma: Armando.
- Bolognini, S. (2016). *Elementi di tecnica tra Sé e Non-Sé*. Centro psicoanalitico di Bologna.
- Boschan, P. J. (2004). *Il bambino mal accolto e i suoi sogni in Ferenczi oggi*. Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.
- Carnevali, C., & Maestro, S. (2006). *Immagini di Transfertin "I Transfert. Cambiamenti nella pratica clinica" a cura di A. Ferruta, Rivista di Psicoanalisi* (pp. 169-185). Roma.
- Carnevali, C., Bruno, F., & Errani, S. (2009). Groups in time of conflict". *XVII Congress of International Association Psychotherapy and Group Processes*, Roma.
- Carnevali, C. (2010). *Al lavoro con lo psicodramma analitico. Dalla pratica del "gioco" alla formazione nel gruppo a cura di Pani*. Carnevali CLUEB Bologna.
- Carnevali, C., Berlincioni, V., Cusin, A., Fiorentino, R., Maestro, S., Masoni, P., Medici, T., Vandi, G., & Zanchi, M. (2014). *Il processo di soggettivazione e l'artedellamanutenzionedell'analista*. Atti del CongrsoNazionale di Psicoanalisi, Milano, 2014.
- Carnevali, C., Vandi, G. (2015). Traumatic confusion and anxiety from controtransference in the analytic treatment of two cases of sexual impotence. *International Sándor Ferenczi Conference*, Maggio 7/10, Toronto, Canada.
- Carnevali, C., Berlincioni, V., Cusin, A., Fiorentino, R., Maestro, S., Masoni, P., Medici, T., Vandi, G., & Zanchi, M. (2016) *Il dolore "del" e "nell'analista": riflessioni di un gruppo per la "manutenzione" dellacapacità di sentire e trasformare*. Atti del CongressoNazionale di Psicoanalisi, Roma, 2016.
- Ferenczi, S. (1932). Confusione delle lingue tra adulti e bambini. *Fondamenti di Psicoanalisi*, 3.
- Ferenczi, S. (1934). Riflessioni sul trauma. *Opere*, 4.
- Freud, S. (1921). Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'Io. *OSF*, 9.
- Freud, S. (1929). Il disagio della civiltà. *OSF*, X.

- Kaes, R. (2006). La matrice gruppale della soggettivazione: le alleanze inconsce . In *La Soggettivazione*. Roma: Borla.
- Kaes, R. (2012). *Il Malessere*. Roma: Borla.
- Lemoine, G. P. (1972). *Lo Psicodramma Feltrinelli*. Milano.
- McDougall, J. (1978). Primitive communication and the use of countertransference-reflectionson early psychic trauma and its transference effects. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 14(2), 173-209.
- McDougall, J. (2003). L'economia psichica della dipendenza: una soluzione psicosomatica al dolore psichico. In Rinaldi L. *Stati caotici della mente: Picosi, borderline, disturbi psicosomatici, dipendenze*. Milano, Cortina.
- Molinari, N. S. (1985). Funzione di testimonianza e interpretazioni di transfert. *RivPsicoanal*, 3, 357- 371.
- Neri, C. (2011). Soggettivazione e teoria del campo. *Congresso Nazionale di Psicoanalisi*, Roma.
- Racalbuto, A. (1994). *Tra il fare e il dire. L'esperienza dell'inconscio e del non verbale in psicoanalisi* (C. Raffaello (Ed.)). Milano.
- Spadoni, A. (2007). *L'oscuro oggetto del bisogno in E l'analisi va*. Guaraldi Rimini.
- Williams, P. (2010). Incorporazione di un oggetto invasive. In J. Van Buren, S. S. Alhanati (Eds.), *Primitivi della mente Astrolabio*. Roma.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1967). *La funzione di specchio della madre e della famiglia nello sviluppo infantile*. Roma: Armando.