

## An experience in multi-couple group mediation

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### Abstract

In recent years there has been a growing spread of psychosocial interventions characterized by the use of multi-family extended groups, whose application is useful in many clinical fields.

The adoption of multi-family settings seems to be dictated by the evidence that this working method combines a low cost with high efficiency.

In this case, the identification of problematic areas connected with the phenomenology of separation and divorce and the solicitation of possible resources becomes a practice but also an experimental methodology for network support forms.

In particular, the configuration of the multi-couple group, specific operational declination of the extended group, is characterized as an optimized version of the clinical application. Hence, the hypothesis of being able to place within it, a plurality of couples, returning from the emotional and relational experience of a marital crisis, but focused on the inevitable task of being able to keep faith in the parental mandate.

On the basis of these considerations, we have tried to hypothesize the possibility of starting a multi-family operative programme including separated couples but united with the intention to maintain the parental function, however harshly proven by the dissolution of the conjugal bond.

### Introduction

In recent years there has been an increasing spread of psychosocial interventions in the mental health field, characterized by the use of multi-family (Asen, 2002) and multi-couple (Spitz, 1979, Bennun, 2007, Cochè, 2010), extended groups, whose application shows benefits in various clinical fields

The frequent adoption of these extended group settings seems to be stimulated by the evidence that this way of helping family and couples combines a low cost with high effectiveness.

Moreover, the identification of clinical problems related to the separation and divorce processes and the need for intervention options becomes not only a therapeutic setting but also an experimental methodology for implementing new options for network support (Kagan et al., 1972).

On the other hand, the group has, in its epistemological status, the traits of a refined tool for working with the family and couple members. The quality of the group setting amplifies, in fact, the emotional-cognitive potentiality of each of its

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members, building links of new meaning to their own biography.

Notably, the peculiar configuration of the multi-couple group, a specific operative declination of the extended group, is considered as an optimal version of its clinical applications. Hence, the hypothesis to form a group of a plurality of couples, coming from the emotional and relational experience of a conjugal crisis, focused on the essential task of being confident with the parental mandate.

There are significant experiences in the literature on this topic, often addressed to couples in crisis characterized by the presence of a very strong conflict (De Barbaro et al., 2008). From this point of view, the features that ensure the affective bond in the couple is identified with the implementation of the parents' tasks. The experience of an active parenting generates useful interactions based on mutual support and cooperation.

Moving from these considerations, we planned a multi-couple group treatment, including couples selected under the criterion of having critical relational problems, but guided by the aim to maintain the parental role seriously afflicted by a marital conflict. This treatment consists of some specific strategies, which we will describe in the following paragraphs (Feld, 2003).

A brief review of the "Extended Group" construct.

The effective programmes that use the group's relational setting as a therapeutic tool, include many clinical alternatives related to form, space, time, and ways of thinking. They are linked to a composite relational construct, activated by the presence of the cognitive and affective processes which modulate the human interactions.

The therapeutic target of the group setting, in its many operational versions, is linked to the change processes triggered by the amplification of the expressive dimension in the group setting, within which the affective-cognitive potential of the word increases.

The group mental processes reset configurations of meaning, mediate relational confrontations, elicit the personal themes reconsidered in the light of a multifaceted perspective. There is a predominance of representations activated by the comparison with the themes and versions of each family member evoked during the session.

In fact, "the group culture is also the culture of the subjectivity and of the relational processes between different subjectivities" (Di Maria, 1984). Group thinking arises as a capacity to hold and elaborate the plurality of relational events. Therefore, the group is a natural relational context.

In our opinion, the methodological link that connects the group to the systemic-relational model is identified by the use of intersubjectivity as a psychological construct on which is based the discourse. In the group, the focus on the so-called "unconscious alliances" prevails as patterns of the psychic apparatus of the subjects of an intersubjective whole, namely the couple, the group, the family, the institution, here considered the pattern that connects the individuals to the psychic space of the interpersonal system.

With these premises, it is possible to understand the relevance of a multi-couple group as a special version of an extended group.

On one hand, the large and complex dimension of the multi-couple group allows, through the powerful function of the setting, the understanding of the

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"multiplicity of characters from which patients seem inhabited... often incompatible with each other and which prevented the development of their" true self", (Badaracco, 2004). At another level, the multi-couple group's setting restores the right distance, both emotional and temporal, from the different experiences, introjected by early relational patterns of the family context, that have frozen the possibility to structure and remodel the Self. "In a multi-family context, everything has its own place and there is a moment for each thing" (Badaracco, 2004).

In the multi-couple group, the associative-communicative functions are amplified by the dialogue among the participants, which improves sensitivity and develops skills.

However, we must not ignore the risks associated with the use of such extended group as a therapeutic tool.

As Schiff and Glassmann (1969) point out that, in the extended group, it is possible to find:

- 1) An increased aptitude to configure subgroups, with more rigid hierarchies.
- 2) A lowered opportunity for individual interventions.
- 3) A softening of the emotional ties.
- 4) A decline in the mutual intimacy, and, therefore, the tendency to stereotypes.
- 5) An asymmetry of participation, the therapists being more active and the group members less active and silent.
- 6) A threatening mood for each group member.

They recommend that the therapist's activity should be guided by the following purposes:

- 1) The selection of a theme.
- 2) The creation and maintenance of a healthy group climate.
- 3) A surveillance function, in the sense that the therapists should appropriately influence the flow and direction of communication.
- 4) The modeling of the group on the therapist.

On the other hand, the advantages of a multi-couple group must be underlined.

Firstly, Springmann (1970), suggested the psychotherapeutic potentiality of the extended group. In the beginning, this setting was described as showing an atmosphere controlled by reciprocal feedback techniques as well as by the highest degree of transference softening.

#### The process of mediation within the multi-couple context

Multi-couple sessions generate a psychological climate that facilitates the sharing of the experiences and the introspective thinking, the conflict resolution, and the mutual learning.

The multi-couple group is a model of coexistence and support that can be useful for the conflict resolution. It enables the chance of re-establishing an effective communication in a real human environment. It can activate the basic energies that bind the individual to his family and to the social context, stimulating his competence to solve conflicts. In a multi-couple group, the

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presence of others provides more freedom in the individual behavior. Therefore, it is essential that the group therapist gradually promotes the climate useful for the emergence of a renewed emotional and cultural attitude that lets the expression of emotions. This aim fits well with the methodological aspects of the practice of mediation. The cardinal principle of mediation is the concept of competence, which is identified with the individual attitude to be the protagonist of his/her existential events in order to manage not only the current relational problems but also what is always inherent to the complexity of living.

Even in the context of extended groups, the intervention is oriented to the definition of intrasystemic and intersystemic boundaries, which often can be ambiguous, confused, entangled. The therapeutic strategies solicit the possibility of reformulating the agreements within an equitable redistribution of responsibilities and tasks. Therefore, the therapist's interventions are oriented to transform the boundaries' entanglement into permeability: this change also stimulates the activation of negotiation sequences useful for the enhancement of differences within the interpersonal links. The mediation techniques also promote cooperative communication styles in order to create conditions for an inclusive participation. The experience of reciprocity becomes a fundamental aspect of the mediation project with the families. This version of mediation does not impede the access to personal meanings related to the emotional dimension. However, the pursuit of concrete objectives and the activation of personal resources must never lose sight of. The relational bond is placed at the center: in this sense, we privilege the study of what rely on interactive-relational methodologies with the aim of taking care of the reorganization of family relationships following the conjugal schism. Therefore, it is recommended to consider how much you have to spend to engage the couples in their intergenerational organization. In this way, the therapist's role should be sensitive to some modulations. It should be noted, in fact, that since the "multiversality" of the group is a source of symbolic and experiential productivity, its feature of "complex relational device" forces the therapist to a cautious use of it.

#### The report of an experience

Our format provides for the participation of a group of couples (min. 8-max. 12) requiring an intervention on their problems as parents of teenagers of separated couples (whose separation goes back to 1 to the maximum of 5 years). The team consists of a couple of psychotherapists, group analysts and systemic trainers, whose skills are grounded in a solid theoretical-methodological framework as well as many years of intense clinical work in the field of family, couple and group psychotherapy. The therapeutic process lasts six months with a fortnightly frequency. In this paper, we report the guidelines of this intervention while referring to another contribution to the description of its clinical applications.

Our first experience in this area involved the management of a multi-family group consisting of married couples but characterized by the presence of a highly corrosive conflict and by a competitive tension between the spouses that make very troublesome the parental tasks but also the marital relation. This experience took place some time ago in the city of Naples in a clinical Center, based on voluntary practices, which provides help and support to users with a certain

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degree of social disadvantage. In this Center, the interventions cover a wide range of services, not only psychological but also educational and nursing. Therefore, the personnel involved in these activities, offering their skills in a totally free way, is multi-professional. In this multifaceted clinical context, a series of meetings took place every two weeks, with a number of about 20 couples (mean age: 45) for three months. This experience, on the basis of its results, was then replicated a second time. The initiative had an unexpected success and effective results. Hence, we were asked to plan a training group with the volunteers of the Center. The focus of the multi-couples group was intended to construct a space for discussion about finding solutions on marital and parenting difficulties. The couples' expectations were huge and powerfully emphasized by the context of the intervention.

Moreover, and despite our concerns, the implementation of the initiative had a series of positive effects, especially in breaking the sense of isolation of couples in relation to issues concerning the steps of the family life cycle and the growth and emancipation of the children. In fact, it should not be underestimated how much the postmodern era has changed the distribution of tasks and functions concerning parenting. In recent decades, the transition to parenting has acquired peculiar characteristics that have substantially changed its nature if compared to the past. In a cultural climate of strong changes, in a context of social complexity that redefines the economy, befogs ethical values and exacerbates the social differentiation, the traditional tasks of the family are differently articulated. The management of daily life, of its rhythms and its needs, is resized, but also constantly redefined in a continuous change.

Parents constantly have to face the difficult task of reshaping forms, methods, and meanings of the educational relationship with their children. With respect to this task, it is very useful to involve parents in clinical contexts, that enhance their experiences and their identity, hold their educational practices, build a parental ethics that give meaning to family life.

In the multi-group experience, the comparison and discussion of values, choices, attitudes, and behaviors towards children offer a significant help to the redefinition of family and social relationships. Thus, the multi-group shares the logic of "network work": an integrated and coordinated work that is enriched with the contribution of each one, with the interweaving of experiences. In this "educational" framework (e-ducere = to draw out) and in a reassuring climate that weakens feelings of guilt, parents are urged to question themselves about their own experiences, contacting their own inner and interpersonal resources. Meetings with other couples create a space for discerning, confronting and understand their experiences. The experience of these multi-couple groups was based on these considerations, The therapeutic record took notes that, since the first meeting, the climate was very positive and characterized by the easy acceptance of the presence of a couple of therapists of different sexes. The initial and crucial issue was that to place a bulwark to a massive and undifferentiated demand amplified by the extended group setting. In spite of this, the relational thinking provided many chances for the intervention. Moreover, the multi-couple group therapy took place within a systemic and structural-oriented framework focused on the generational subsystems.

It must be noted that the couples' choice of the multi-couple group was determined by the information previously provided by a privileged key figure,



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often a priest, an intermediary of the relationship between the couple of therapists and the group members. The referral often reported info related to a previous group experience, conducted by others, with behavioral and prescriptive techniques aimed at improving the communication style in the couple. We, therefore, recruited a group made up of couples characterized by a different timeline of attendance of the group. This established a subgroup differentiation: an original nucleus, made up of those couples who had participated in the experience from the beginning; a second subgroup made up of couples with a history of subsequent attendance of the meetings, and a third subgroup made up of recently included couples. Nevertheless, it was possible to reconstruct the history of the group through the narrative segments that each of the subgroups outlined.

The therapeutic process was articulated within this framework with the persistent attention of the therapists to the clarification of goals focused on problem resolution (Zimmerman et al., 1997).

The funding criteria of the therapeutic process boosted up the empowerment of the couples' "functional competence", strategically using their conflictual dynamics as well as the horizontal axis of conjugality at the service of parenting. In our experience, the multi-couple group facilitates achieving those results (Brooks et al., 2002, Ginsberg, 2006).

This pilot, empirical study led us to develop an intervention protocol with separated or divorced couples whose conflicts, mainly centered on the sharing of the parent function, can be managed and elaborated within a multi-couple setting. In our opinion, the effectiveness of this format is based on a double operating register: the group setting, as a tool to neutralize the conflict concerning the conjugal dimension, and the mediation techniques as a tool for decoding and solving the straining tasks connected with the evolution of the family life cycle.

### Comment

Thus, the multi-couple group enhances the basic requirements of genitoriality, such as reciprocity and solidarity among the group members.

In the multi-couple context, the anxiety is reduced and the moments of communicative chaos are more easily mentalized. Psychic processes take place in a relational field in which the mental functions of each group member depend on the others. In the multi-couple groups, the therapeutic interventions are aimed to dismantle the pathogenic interdependencies and promote the therapeutic resources. Couples discover of "not being alone in front of their problems" and this feeling is, itself, generative of hope. In the multi-couple group, the conflicting interdependencies provoked by the constant dilemma of the symmetrical dispute are weakened and the resource of dialogue increases.

The progressive change in the emotional atmosphere leads the multi-couple group to a level of intimacy that allows to frankly express the personal opinions, concerns, and feelings.

The dimension of relational validation plays a role in re-signifying the states of mind through a sort of a holding function assigned to the mirroring of the multi-couple context.

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