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Family scenarios and violence: a clinical case story

Abstract

This article describes the acceptance and taking-charge process of a history of incest involving a father and his daughter. This case arrived through an ad hoc telephone line set up by a territorial service aimed at listening, counselling, and treating problems and conflicts inherent in family life. The mother made the first contact with this service, ten years after the event. The case story is geared to outlining the development of the relational events within the parents' relationship and in relation to their daughter as well as the interactions with the family service (CPF). The purpose is also to show the procedure of the intervention and taking-charge process carried out by the psychologists of the service as well as the counter-transference feelings that have accompanied the clinical intervention and the effects they have had on the relationships between the individual members of the whole family.

Keywords: incest, public services, telephone counselling, clinical intervention.

We decided to describe a clinical case¹ relating to incest in order to show how the family often conceals emotional bonds-related violence and perversion, sometimes even under extreme circumstances, by referring to codified, predefined, and deeply introjected statuses of power (Bianchi, 2002; Cirillo, 2005; Arcidiacono, Testoni & Groterath, 2013).

Moreover, this can happen even without calling into question either the roles effectively played by the members of the family or the substantial loss of the care roles related to these (Boszormenyi-Nagi & Spark, 1973; Malacrea & Vassalli, 1990; Furniss, 1990).

First and foremost, we wish to specify that this case was followed in a healthcare service called the Centro per le famiglie (Family Centre) set in the city of Naples (Arcidiacono & Ferrari Bravo, 2009). The CPF acts as a space for reading and providing answers to family crises as well as to the pathologies related to the separation processes working therein. The Centro per le famiglie is not, strictly speaking, a specific service aimed at counteracting domestic violence. However, the case we shall soon describe can be deemed a possible reference model for every service that intends to offer attention and support to women, espe-

¹This case-study was originally presented by G. Ferrari Bravo, L. Farina, and S. Madia at the international conference "Quale psicoanalisi per la coppia e la famiglia?" with the title "Incesto: dalla domanda d'aiuto telefonico alle prime due sedute".

cially in the phase in which this kind of suffering is neither fully recognized nor determined as a spontaneous request for help from specific services. On the contrary the request for help usually bears another nature. It is possible, however, for previously unreported and actively concealed episodes of violence to emerge during periods of crisis between the couple or during a separation. These critical phases represent a chance to shed light on the domestic violence once it has occurred and bring it to the attention of the help network. In that sense, the separation crisis acts as a magnifying glass through which it is possible to observe and recognize the violence perpetrated against women and children (Di Napoli, 2012; Ferrari Bravo & Volpe, 2012).

It is worth noting that we often work, as in the case we shall describe, with couples who are still cohabiting and in whom the very perverse feature of their bond is quite plain. When we are faced with a narration hinting at either a suffered or an inflicted violence, which are often ruled out of the narration or downplayed by the very woman who tells it, it is necessary to wait patiently and vigilantly. Through a rewriting of the couple's story and those of the individual members, we can give people time to prepare, face, highlight, and address the family's problematic hub without letting them abandon the service or, even worse, rejecting every other possible *space for listening* for both the users themselves and their family (Arcidiacono, 2013; Nunziante Cesaro, Stanziano & Riccardi, 2012).

This story, regarding an incestuous relationship between a father and his only daughter, who was eleven years old at the time of the abuse, also involves a mother who explicitly affirms that she did not intervene "in order to safeguard the unity of the family" and "to not bring shame upon the latter". *Ten years later* she approaches the Centro per le famiglie to ask for help. She starts the process anonymously by means of a series of phone calls to the telephone counselling line of our service, but subsequently makes a request for individual psychotherapy and for the 'taking charge' of her family.

This case is a good example of the process necessary to construct a help setting in cases of family violence and abuse. In these cases the codified objectives of the care process are as follows:

- To interrupt the abusive bond both at a material and psychological level;
- To mend the damage to which the victim has been subjected through a psychotherapeutic process;
- To make the abuser assume responsibility even by means of a denunciation;
- To make the parent who did not fulfil his/her task of protecting the offspring ready and willing to assume responsibility;
- To renew the parental functions, inasmuch as it is possible, perhaps with the support of other members of the family and the care system (Arcidiacono & Di Napoli, 2012).

The description of this case story focuses on the acceptance and decoding of a request for help, and ends with the definition of a taking-charge process, as well as a subsequent phase of psychotherapy, upon which both mother and daughter agreed. The decision to

fully describe how this case was accepted by the service, the definition of the setting, and the proposal for help all stem from the difficulty the psychologists faced in dealing with this kind of request. Indeed, in cases of severe violence, careful attention, professional caution, and a sound competence aiming at a successful outcome of the intervention are made paramount by the necessity to overcome the obstacle represented by the “haze” of the family context in which the abuse is present and by the “re-emerging” of painful feelings that tend to arise if they are not dealt with from the beginning with clinical and relational competence.

An explorative and listening-oriented approach to malaise and violence-related domestic pathologies represents a sort of fathom for locating and bringing painful dimensions out of the shadows, which would have been left unsaid, tolerated, and suffered otherwise. During the listening phase, protection mechanisms are often kept on stand-by due to the reticence and resistance of women themselves to change. We should not overlook a parallel resistance among professionals in adjusting to a definition of “normality”, a label which women themselves often apply to their victimization (Ferrari Bravo, Volpe 2012, p. 95-110).

“And, above all, it is necessary to maintain a good distance”

The first contact

This case begins with a telephone request for help regarding a family comprising two cohabiting spouses and their only daughter, aged twenty-one. A serious incestuous issue seems to emerge after the first contact with the service.

This phone call comes from a man, who presents himself as a “health worker”. He enquires about the service and its functions and then expresses his concern about some friends of his, a family that seems to be in crisis. His suspicions centre on an incestuous tie between the father and his daughter. The mother of this family has asked him, as a friend and a professional, for help. This woman seems to be living in a phase of impasse since she has not managed to obtain a clear and straightforward explanation from her husband about her suspects. The event narrated by the mother dates back ten years although she received confirmation of this incest only three years ago. The person speaking on the phone feels helpless and worried, albeit somewhat doubtful. Indeed, he describes the daughter as a “liar”, “seductress” and “actress”, insinuating that she may have made everything up. He also describes the difficulties encountered in talking to the woman on this matter and suggests that the helpline might be a reference point for her. The phone call ends with the practitioner suggesting that the woman phone in person while underlining the seriousness of the service and the professional competence of the psychologists, as well as the paramount necessity of a direct approach in regard to such a matter. According to the standard procedure of the helpline, the psychologist gives her full name while specifying that, should the prospective clients wish to find her again next time, they would need to call during her time shifts. The man says that he will follow this advice, leaving his own details as well.

Remarks

During the supervision meeting, it emerges that this phone call elicited contradictory

emotions in the psychologist who received it. This call has highlighted a very delicate and involving theme, as only incest can be, in a way that has been deemed superficial and characterized by the denigration of the “victim” (Vegetti Finzi, 1998). The psychologist feels intended and so compelled to do something to “rescue” this girl. Eventually she decides, along with the supervision team, to wait for the woman’s phone call, should she decide to make one.

The second contact

A series of circumstances (the psychologist who received the first phone call had to change her shift, the working team was still settling in and could not take note of the phone calls addressed to the service) meant that the Service was unable to establish, whether or not the lady had called the Centre. Having failed to receive any explicit request after two weeks, the group considered that, since the man who called the first time had left a name and address, this constituted an authorization to get in touch. During a brief phone call, we reinstated our availability to listen to his views on the case.

The third contact

After a month, the woman, whom we shall call Mrs Adele, gets in touch: she knows that the service has a basic idea of what has happened, so she immediately goes into details by describing the abuse and confirming that it happened about ten years before this phone call, although she discovered it only three years ago.

She tells about two episodes involving father and daughter, which made her suspicious because of their incongruity. In the first one, she casually overheard an argument in which her daughter addressed her father in a very bad manner (her language was out of character and, even stranger, her father did not seem to resent it). When asked by Mrs Adele, they both denied that there were “something strange” going on. In the second episode, the mess left by the renovation of her house enabled Mrs Adele to read her daughter’s diary. Although no details were expressed, it seemed quite clear to her that her daughter, whom we will call Maria, blamed her father for having “destroyed her childhood”. The mother sought confirmation of this and talked to her daughter, who told her that these abusive episodes dated back to when she was about ten years old. At the time, Mrs Adele was not getting on well with her husband so she used to sleep on her own while her daughter would sleep in the bed with her father.

Mrs Adele did not dare to ask her daughter any further questions. On the other hand, Maria merely said that she wanted to put the past behind her. She even showed disappointment at her mother’s indiscretion in reading her diary. Once, Mrs Adele told her mother about the whole event, but the woman was opposed to a possible separation between Mrs Adele and her husband, suggesting that she should not have to “dig up the past again”.

Mrs Adele spoke to her husband, whom we will call Mr Giovanni, about this matter only after a considerable amount of time had passed. He did not deny what had happened but downplayed the episodes in terms of both frequency and “seriousness”. He said that this thing, which was now buried in the past, had resurfaced in Maria’s mind only because talk-

ing about paedophilia and abuse of minors had become “fashionable” nowadays.

Three years after this disclosure, the life of this family carries on as normal: the “facade” remains intact. The very conformist spurs, which have contributed to underpinning a “shaky marriage” in terms of affective and sexual desire lacking since the “honeymoon”, contribute to holding up an apparent normality. However, this apparent normality works in the husband’s favour – according to whom these past episodes have no impact or influence on “the feelings he proves towards his daughter” – and in his daughter’s as well – which of her parents would ever comprehend her profound suffering? She may as well remain silent. By contrast, this situation no longer meets the mother’s disclosure needs.

In fact, she has recently tried, without success, to convince Maria to consult a psychologist since she is concerned about her difficulty in studying and forming emotional relationships. The latter are, in fact, characterized by inconstancy, promiscuity, and they also often end in failure. Mrs Adele confided in a family friend (she does not say so explicitly, but it is easy to imagine that it is the man who first got in touch with the service through the helpline) in whom she found comprehension, sustenance, and affection. She also vaguely touches upon the emotional bond formed between them.

This kind of help allowed her eventually, after so much time, to “narrate” the abuse and also to imagine a possible separation from her husband, although she still has many doubts and much guilt about her own family (am I going to further hurt Maria who is already so disgraced?), not to mention the social and working environments, which she perceives as judgemental. Eventually, Mrs Adele leaves her phone number after being invited to an interview at the Centre. A few days later, she cancels the appointment, mentioning a problem at work.

Remarks

During the first telephone conversation with Mrs Adele, certain elements had struck the helpline psychologist: the long period of silence between the moment when the mother finds out about the incest and the moment when she talks about this with the psychologist; the attempt to “pathologize” her daughter, as though she were the only one in need of psychotherapy; the focus on the separation (Mrs Adele’s main dilemma is not “how could it have happened” but rather “now that I am in a new relationship, should I separate from my husband or not?”). The psychologist is frankly bewildered.

During the supervision meeting it is possible to clarify what appears to be a visible maternal inadequacy with regard to the care and protection she is supposed to provide for her daughter; this has left the psychologist facing contradictory emotions of sympathy, indignation, and anger during the long phone conversation with Mrs Adele.

If sympathy favoured a welcoming and comprehensible conversation, anger and bewilderment were decanted and turned into a feeling of urgency and gravity. These are returned to the interlocutor in order to prevent family relationships becoming bogged down in a further phase of silence. The “urgency” felt by the psychologist parallels the mother’s “block”, as she feels petrified and helpless in facing the incest.

Afterwards the elements determining the development of this case are evaluated: it is

quite clear now that inviting Mrs Adele for an interview has been hasty since this did not respect the times and needs of the user, who intended, for the time being, to address the helpline for counselling, putting a certain distance between her and the psychologist. The time required for the mother to “see” the incest is traced back, at a symbolic level, along with the time of consultation. The fantasy characterizing the phase of consultation is that this woman is not yet ready yet to face the psychologist’s insights and *vice versa*.

Besides, the open secret, which in this case is being kept by the grandmother apparently without provoking any particular reaction, is confirmed once more as one of the most recurring features of intra-family abuse.

On the basis of the comments that led us to deem the hasty proposal for an appointment an error, we decide, after three weeks, to call Mrs Adele again and attempt to redefine the listening setting, driving it to a sustainable and adequate relational field. Mrs Adele states that “her job will never allow her to respect the planned appointments”, implicitly confirming, in doing so, our feeling that we have overestimated her readiness to pursue the issue further by inviting her for an appointment. However, Mrs Adele asks to continue the phone interviews with the psychologist, who reinstates her availability.

We wish to highlight how useful it can be, in order to create a trust-based tie between users and personnel, to accept what the counselee is bringing in, without trying to modify the request even when this appears inadequate to resolve a problem that has been explicated since the first communication or contact. At any rate, the emphasis placed by Mrs Adele on the separation from her husband and, in a subordinate manner, on the necessity of protecting her daughter from “further traumas” can be considered an initial indication of the centrality of the conjugal crisis as an element that has given rise to acting-out-like abuse. In the urgency to separate from her husband, this woman sees the perverse relationship with him as the grounds on which the abuse of her daughter by the father has taken root.

The fourth contact

After a month and a half, Mrs Adele telephones again. This time she is greatly shaken because of “news that is messing my life up...” Many contents of this conversation, which allude to problems between the couple, will be clarified in the course of the following sessions.

Mrs Adele is extremely angry with her husband, who appears to have recently placed her new relationship in the public domain while she was away. Her husband denied this, so she held his psychosexual problem against him in response. Until that moment, Mrs Adele had not spoken a word about this matter both because she was disinterested and because she would do anything for a quiet life. But now she could stand it no longer and asked her husband to go and see a specialist; he eventually admitted that there had been some episodes of touching his daughter. Surprisingly, Mrs Adele did not want to pursue the matter further this time.

Meanwhile, Maria knows nothing about this conjugal crisis. Both her parents decide not to tell her anything because she is committed to her studies.

However, Maria has become very aggressive to her mother lately. On every possible oc-

casation, she blames her mother for not taking care of her and being more interested in her job than her family. A new holiday period is approaching and that seems to unveil new scenarios. (Is everybody going to spend time on their own, that is, the wife somewhere, and father and daughter elsewhere?) We suggest to Mrs Adele that she tells her husband that she has talked about their situation with us: if he wishes to do so, he, too, can call us for a counselling session.

Remarks

The telephone interview leaves the psychologist with a sense of apprehension, having witnessed this woman's concern with her new love and the possibility of a separation from her husband while overlooking the "key fact", i.e. the incest. It appears that she now no longer wishes to even talk about it with her husband, although she bitterly blames him for never having discussed the incest before or, at least, never plainly. The psychologist's desire is clearly to take up the matter with the daughter whom she imagines to be traumatized and at severe risk, surely in more danger than the other members of the family. By examining this counter-transference feelings and the emotion linked to it, we saw once again the necessity to "*get a move on*" along with the unease caused by waiting for the call from whoever made the request, along with the desire to intervene on the contents of the request itself in order to fit it into the psychologist's expectations and awareness.

The fifth contact

Mr Giovanni telephones the Centre and immediately asks to tell his own version of the event that happened with his daughter, as though he wanted to get it off his chest and then move on to the question that lies at the heart of the whole matter: how to convince his wife not to leave him. What follows is his narration:

According to Mr Giovanni, it was Maria who "made the first move"; these intimate contacts found her "participating and lustful". Afterwards, four or five times overall (on another occasion he said two or three times) his daughter was subjected to his advances while being in an almost hypnotic state "as though she were asleep" or as though she were not completely aware of what was going on.

In the years that followed, the severe parental attitude would drive his daughter to rebel and blackmail her father, according to him (if you don't let me out, I will tell everything).

When asked to describe his current relationship with his daughter, Mr Giovanni replies that it is good: "I apologized to her... after all, my daughter knows that I am like a friend for her, I am always there for her if she is ever in trouble".

Mr Giovanni confided in only one other person, who is unrelated to the family-and-friends context. He has also sought some support regarding the conjugal crisis: he says that, for more than three years (that is, since his wife discovered the incest), she has moved away from him more and more, although he does not link this discovery to her detachment from him. According to him, nothing would ever have happened had Mrs Adele not become involved in an extramarital affair. He seems very anxious and dejected and, when asked to meet his wife at the Centre, he replies that he would rather have an individual interview.

Therefore, we set up an appointment.

Remarks

The psychologist is bewildered by the mundane way in which the incest is described. It seems as though this event has left no emotional mark on the father, who is more concerned about the separation from his wife. The psychologist doubts that Mr Giovanni will turn up for the appointment. It is quite easy to interpret this doubt as the desire to avoid a face-to-face contact with “the monster”, i.e. the perturbing.

The two counselling sessions with Mr Giovanni

The man arrives very punctually for the interview: he is garish, bearing a sad expression; physically and behaviourally, he looks older than his age. The conjugal crisis is his dominant concern. He constantly asks for advice on how he should act with his wife.

During the interview, it is possible to retrace, at least in part, the history of this couple. It started with a meeting between two people who had just been through relationships that ended in failure. She fell in love with him, as he was a “mature and more reliable” man, while he did not love her (he had already lived through the “passion” and had now given up on it); he was attracted by her appearance “small, almost puerile” and, at the same time, the fact that she was “a good housewife”. They both come from good families: he is the son of parents who were always out at work (Mr Giovanni describes his parents as a couple tied “by a strong emotional bond from which he has always felt left out”).

His childhood had been lightened by the presence of a distant relative, who acted as his “real mother” as she was always present and affectionate to him. He recalls the separation from this woman, who left his home to get married, as a great trauma in his life. Afterwards, he was entrusted to the care of strangers. Only as an adult would he come to know that his “aunt” was an “unmarried mother”. This particular is referred to as the main hub around which the family climate turned, being this characterized by secrets and subterfuge. He claims to have been in love only twice: the first time with a woman who ridiculed and repeatedly cheated on him, the second time “a real reciprocated love”. However, his family opposed this union because the girl with whom he was in love came from a lower walk of life, so he eventually broke off the engagement.

By the time he meets his future wife he is disenchanted. This relationship limps along for a while, until circumstances drive them to get married. Since the beginning of the marriage, there has been an underlying incomprehension on the sexual level: she would stimulate him, he would let her down, she would give up, and he would think that, after all, her initiative was not truly felt...

He blames his wife for thinking only about her job while never accepting domestic help, putting a strain on and causing dissatisfaction in their relationship as a consequence. Indeed, according to him, his wife thinks that she has to take care of her husband and daughter as well as working because of a misunderstood sense of duty.

Mr Giovanni outlines a family state of affairs in which his wife is a sort of “bionic woman” in her efficiency who, nevertheless, neglects both him and her daughter who are

united in complaining about her absence.

Mr Giovanni seems to downplay some of his behaviours that had been previously alluded to by his wife as determinants of the failure of his marriage. One of these was his sexual coolness, which led him to prefer watching porno videos to the company of his wife, even during the first month of their marriage when they were living with his parents: “It was the time when private television started to broadcast these kind of films... it was the only way I had to share something with my father”.

During the second interview, Mr Giovanni says that the relationship with his wife is less tense. Nonetheless, she is still evasive regarding her holidays, which she will not enjoy with her husband and her daughter: it would be the first time in many years that this has happened. In fact, they always holidayed together in the past, with or without their friends.

In this interview, the discourse revolves around the daughter: her father defines her as “tough, brusque, rough, apparently not very affectionate, but deeply tender”. He nonetheless admits that she was more expansive before the abuse. He says that Maria is closer to her mum, even though she is temperamentally more akin to him. Yet, when all three are together, Maria tends to be tougher to her father, whereas when she is alone with him she is more affectionate. His wife says they are “accomplices and allies against her”.

The father claims to be concerned about the promiscuity of his daughter: according to him, Maria throws herself into relationships that are based only on physical attraction, and the absence of emotional involvement with these partners is the very cause of her relational failures.

Remarks

During the supervision meeting, when asked about her reactions during the first session with Mr Giovanni, the psychologist replies: “I was afraid that he might read my emotional reactions to his words on my face, I was concerned about having to force myself to keep an expression as neutral as possible”. The unbearable sight, the vicinity, marks the difficulty of passing from the “protected” relationship expressed via the telephone line to the presence. The psychologist also hints, as it may be easy to sense, at the difficulty of looking at the scene of the incest while repressing the twofold desire to look both at and away. The incest, in a way, fascinates and digs up repressed and unconscious contents, which emerge without any mediation or defence except the imperturbability that the psychologist displayed on her face with such difficulty.

The psychologist considers the desire of the husband to talk to her twice without the presence of his wife as a step towards a possible meeting with the couple. This can now take place both because the individual interview represented a place/room for representing many contents too disturbing to be expressed in the presence of the other (see the emotional opacity of the narration) and because, at least as far as we can tell, Mr Giovanni has had the chance to test his ability to “face” the meeting with the psychologist, as he wanted, in a way, to test the waters.

Further contacts and sessions

Family scenarios and violence: a clinical case story

The sixth and seventh telephone contacts

During the period of time between the first telephone call made by her husband and the interview with him, Mrs Adele has kept in touch with the psychologist of the CPF (Centro per le famiglie). She mainly used her phone calls to determine her husband's intentions and his commitment to change, while complaining about the lack of clarity between them and his evasive attitude in leaving her without answers. We decide to apply leverage on this feeling and on the fact that "as a matter of fact, she is there even when she is not physically present" to propose a meeting with the couple geared to help them overcome this moment of crisis. She accepts, but re-asserts that she has now decided to separate and, in her view, the problem revolves mainly around her husband: thus we arrange a meeting with both spouses, making clear to them that this will be attended by a couple of psychotherapists (the psychologist and her supervisor).

During the interview, we have the feeling that Mrs Adele is trying to keep herself "out" of her husband's narration for a number of reasons, the most important of which seems to us to be a strong resistance to speaking plainly about the abuse of Maria, for which she probably feels jointly responsible. It is also worth noting the apparent strangeness of the fact that Mr Giovanni had accessed the service twice before we came to know Mrs Adele in person, even though she was the first to break the silence. We believe we recognize in this behaviour a very traditional behavioural trait, i.e. an adhesion to a patriarchal relational model according to which a woman is not allowed to speak about "facts regarding her husband" unless he does so first. As a matter of fact, only after the interviews with Mr Giovanni, she accepts our appointment. At the same time, it seems as though the will to blame her husband does not stem from a real awareness of the traumatic implications of the abuse to which her daughter has been subjected. It seems, instead, almost a defensive distortion of meaning, which, in fact, downplays the abuse itself.

The session with the couple

Mr Giovanni and Mrs Adele arrive at the meeting together. Mrs Adele begins by saying that she has come because she thinks that the whole family (she, her husband, and indirectly her daughter as well) needs help. She would have asked for help had she not become involved in a new relationship, which she points out has developed only because her marriage was extremely deficient. Mrs Adele says that she has dug up some episodes from the past regarding the excessive familiarity between her husband and her daughter, which she now sees in a different light. She then speaks about the porno films that were the main interest of her husband while their sexual life was really poor. Mr Giovanni rarely intervenes and does so mainly to downplay what his wife is saying. Mrs Adele describes her progressive detachment from the conjugal relationship. She prioritizes her job and her social life, which keep her out of the house a lot, as a sort of compensation.

When asked whether she thinks that this capacity to detach herself from her husband can now be used to keep her daughter away from her father, Mrs Adele appears puzzled. She thinks it is unseemly to keep a daughter away from her father. Only upon careful reflection she admits that "the closeness between them is excessive".

After this plain allusion to the incest, we ask them whether it would be possible to discuss it here, and with much more clarity.

The father outlines two or three episodes, and claimed that “by the second episode”, his daughter “could not be traumatized because she was like half-asleep”. When asked directly, he denies having had other episodes of this kind with other children, as his wife claimed more than once. Mr Giovanni instead continuously steers the conversation towards Mrs Adele’s extramarital affairs, which “have upended the family tranquillity”.

Towards the end of the session, we offer our availability to carry on with the counselling and also our possible availability to undertake a further process of help. When Mrs Adele asks whether or not her daughter ought to come along next time, we reply that the space for the meeting is open to the whole family, no matter how they decide to use it, apart from the subsequent evaluations that we will take into account in considering a possible therapeutic taking-charge process.

The eighth telephone contact

The mother calls to let us know that both her husband and her daughter have turned down the proposal to carry on with the meetings. She is discouraged, unsure, and sees her husband and her daughter teaming up against her. On the one hand, Maria shows herself to be indifferent to the development of the conjugal crisis and, on the other, the husband let every request for separation to drop. Since this phase is characterized by an underlying indecision with regard to the conjugal separation, we restate what we said to the woman at the end of the previous meeting, i.e. this family has at its disposal a space for meeting up, in the way they prefer, including individual consultations. As Mrs Adele is going through a phase of indecision with regard to the conjugal separation, she decides to schedule an appointment.

Remarks

Both the psychotherapeutic session with the couple and the subsequent phone conversation with Mrs Adele are worrying in that we see a reluctance to focus on the gravest family events and on the psychological damage that these might have inflicted on Maria. Mrs Adele’s attempt to “explore” her husband’s alleged attraction to his grandchildren, which he indignantly denied, seems to cast a shadow on the attempt to label this man as a perverted paedophile, and shifts the attention to the central hub, i.e. the abuse of his daughter. This element must have a crucial importance for Mrs Adele in that she can make up a role in which her maternal responsibility to take care of her daughter has met the obstacle not of her “inattention” but, rather, of the alleged inescapability of her husband’s pathological tendencies.

The fact that she could say to herself “he did it with his grandchildren as well” must have, in the reconstruction of her story, an almost reassuring virtue in that it would make her less responsible for her behaviours. We agree in thinking it rather improbable that a second meeting with the couple will come about. “These two people seem to have nothing to say each other about the incestuous relationship between father and daughter” we bitterly

note.

The second session, with mother and daughter

Mrs Adele and her daughter turn up to the next appointment. The mother is happy that the girl has come and she immediately affirms that Maria is not “guilty” and must not feel “responsible” for the disagreements between her and her husband. She will show, many times during the meeting, the fear that her daughter cannot overcome the trauma brought about by the separation of her parents, which is mainly understood as the fact that her mum will leave the family home.

All possible alternative hypotheses to the separation geared to a family reorganization are marked by Mrs Adele as impracticable both for “practical” reasons, which are in fact inconsistent, and because she affirms that “she wants to separate” so she must be the one to leave. However, she thinks that her husband would be completely incapable of fending for himself and become prone to depression and discomfort if she were to leave the house. Mrs Adele never seems to ponder the idea that her husband could move over. She is more concerned about the possibility of leaving her daughter to “take care” of her old father and take up a “housewife” role.

Maria is physically like her father. She conveys the impression that she is only here to accompany and humour her mother and not because she is interested in the argument that, as she already knows, has been already discussed with her father. Maria seems to show good self-confidence but also a certain annoyance – slightly exhibited, almost as though she wanted to highlight it – in speaking about herself and her life. When asked directly, she says she envisages three separate houses for each of them. When we point out the strange situation in which her daughter ends up giving advice and approval to her mother, instead of *vice versa*, as is normally the case, Mrs Adele confirms that she often consults her daughter in search of suggestions, as Maria is a wise and level-headed girl. The latter repeats to her mother that, if it is true that her parents’ marriage never worked out, as is quite plainly the case, and if her mother “woke up and smelled the coffee” at last, she cannot understand why she is still hesitating to declare it: “Do you want to wait other twenty years” she says in conclusion. This spontaneously introduces the metaphor of the Sleeping Beauty who, once she wakes up, finds out that the whole castle has shared her bewitched dream. Maria replies that, in her case, her mother is the only one who “slept” whereas she had carried on with her life and no longer wishes to go along with the family inertia.

In summary, the daughter catches the metaphor and adjusts it to the family state of affairs while her mother appears puzzled and talks about the price she has had to pay in terms of strain in bringing out the family crisis and the events that caused it.

Both of them agreed that the cohabitation is becoming increasingly unpleasant and filled with arguments and heavy silences. It is her daughter herself who tells Mrs Adele that she can no longer stand her parents’ uncertainty and their behaviours, which tend to involve her in their discussion and decisions. “If you have to make up your mind” she says “just do it and think about your own relationship; what I might think about that is not your business.

And, most of all, it is important to keep a distance”. Over this last sentence, which is accompanied by what we thought was a significant symmetric gesture of spreading her arms, we conclude the session while returning to the daughter the meaning of this gesture, which aims for an autonomous position away from her parents’ couple.

We offer, nonetheless, the possibility for Maria to undertake, when and if she thinks it opportune, individual psychotherapy with a professional unrelated to the service or, perhaps, a chance to use the psychotherapeutic service of the Local Health Care System.

Although the topic has not been touched on during this session, we decide nonetheless to ask Maria if she would like us to denounce her father for the abuse that he himself confirmed. We remind her that we can do so as her abuse happened when she was still a child. As we were expecting, Maria does not seem surprised at all by the fact that her parents talked to us about the abuse. However, she states that she is absolutely opposed to us denouncing her father as she is now an adult and does not believe that this decision can be taken by anyone but her. She also has no intention of dragging her father and herself to court, saying, “What would be the good in it? It would be like killing him. And nobody would profit from that. This is a business between my father and me. Actually, I don’t care about my father, this is something I must deal with, in my own mind”.

Remarks

During the whole session, the mother addresses her daughter many times, looking at her and asking her questions or seeking her opinions. They remained in an up-and-down position until the girl made an attempt at release through the idea of having three different houses, one for each other, which conveys the desire to escape the entangled, suffocating family bond and, implicitly, the untimeliness of the entire family undertaking psychotherapy. The next phrase she used, about keeping a distance, is strongly symbolic at both a physical and a spatial level.

We had the feeling that the girl came to explicate and ratify the position in which she would like to place herself with regard to the family crisis. After all, the plea she makes to her mum seems very straightforward: “I do not want stay with you anymore”. She also makes clear, as though we still had any doubt, in which relational twist the incest had taken root, and it stemmed, or was at least favoured, from the parental request “to involve her between the couple”. The same Mrs Adele reminded us, during her third telephone interview, that she swapped places with her daughter in her bed to avoid sharing this with her husband.

Conclusions

The taking-charge process of the family continues but, after several weeks and a last telephone interview, the father departs the scene by letting us know that he has found a private psychotherapist who inspires trust.

The daughter appears released by her parents’ separation, which has finally taken place and *did her justice*. The separation also drove Maria closer to her mother, with a renovated if cautious trust, as she still perceived her as dangerously collusive with regard to the episodes of abuse to which Maria has been subjected.

We remind Maria about some services that could take up a possible request for individual therapy, always if and when she needs it. Then, Maria, after another two sessions, departs the scene.

Her mother, instead, continues the individual clinical pathway, until the conclusion of her separation and the definitive choice of her daughter to live with her in a new home. Two years later, the penultimate session is characterized by a meeting with Mrs Adele's new partner: he has come to the CPF to pick her up. A few minutes before the end of the session, he knocks on the door asking to enter and meet the psychologist. Some years after the end of the therapeutic path we receive a call from Mrs Adele. From her we come to know that Maria did not see her father again after going to live with her mother. She underwent lengthy private psychotherapy and now she lives with her partner. Mr Giovanni has recently died. Maria went to see him only once, during the last days of his illness.

Some comments on this case with regard to the taking-charge process at the Centro per le famiglie

The evolution of this case leads us to consider the difficulty of turning a secret, which has been efficaciously enshrined within the family homeostasis, into a narration, that is, a story that has been soothed thanks to the peculiarity of communication by telephone, which was chosen first by the mother and then by the father to get in touch with the service. This kind of means of listening and welcoming allowed deeply internal contents, which were enshrined as a secret, to gain access to a conceivable mental space.

The anonymity, protection and distance/proximity provided by the telephone contact represent a sort of flexible diaphragm that separates while allowing a connection to be created, and also permitting intrusions, and retreats within a sort of weaving of the narration that increasingly takes shape. This modality of contact, which represents a specific working setting, seems particularly suitable in this case as it resonates with the more urgent issue of the distortion and annulment of distances, as expressed by the daughter during the counseling session.

It is our firm conviction that allowing the access to a space of care to all the narrating voices, including the abusive father, which in this case had already been listened to, welcomed, and contained in the space of the telephone help, has made possible and facilitated the taking-charge process of this family. We still need to bear in mind that the theme of incest, which represents the extreme and most pathological example of concealed domestic violence, is also deeply concealed within the secret of the emotional bond itself.

In the light of our study, we believe that the Centro per le famiglie's guideline is extremely worthy. In other words, the work carried out by health services constitutes a help process if, and only if, it strengthens, raises, and networks the competence of the individuals and those of the whole family system. To this end, it is necessary to leverage the conflict, understood as a representation of the family relational layout.

The very category named "family risk", which is often used to define a specific as much as a complex area of care work, assumes a different meaning when the taking-charge strategy is defined by directly addressing the family both as a collective entity and as a user with full rights to specific services. These can be used even when the requests for interven-

tion concern one or more of the family members, and even when they involve severe personal and relational problems.

This perspective allows us to develop strategies and interventions aimed at reconciliation. Yet, the recognition of the damage geared to a possible intervention of reconciliation and the activation of intra-family policies of reparation of the damage inflicted on a woman can develop only after he who has abused her explicitly accepts his own responsibility. This is an area of intervention that also needs the professional to take responsibility for intervening, which, in our view, can take place only within the work of a supportive team and service. Regarding the tools to use, these must be chosen in accordance with the women and children who are the victims of violence and, afterwards, with their abuser and the entire family network, provided that this is available and ready to collaborate to elaborate and overcome their trauma. This area of intervention necessitates a solid preparation along with experience that is just as solid. This is nonetheless a difficult practice that requires coherence, i.e. no indulgent pietisms and not even hasty actions based on rigid and schematic guidelines that, if not accepted, often lead women's narration to sink back unsaid into the "haze area" of the family.

As we have already explained elsewhere (Ferrari Bravo, & Volpe, 2012), violence frequently emerges through "contradictory signals", in a narration in which it does not represent the main topic and to which no particular value is attributed, either by the victim or by the abuser (the latter are mainly husbands or partners), who have no awareness of the gravity and the pathology of violence. In the cases of requests for help made by couples only after a certain period of time, it is possible to access a more private area and hence the possibility, almost always for women, to express their suffering.

It could be interesting to carefully describe the protocol used by the Centro per le famiglie in counselling conflict-based separations:

- In cases of couple counselling, at the first hint of violence we encourage the client to narrate what happened, even in the presence of the partner.
- This policy, i.e. trying not to postpone the chance to listen to the individual to a future occasion, represents a form of protection in itself: we enter the story as actors as soon as we become witnesses to the narration.
- The presence of a third party, i.e. a witness – a person who will remember what has been said, who will share the burden of the choice that will be made and who will give his/her point of view – represents a promise of attention, regard, and help in itself; and
- Only after listening, and hence establishing a significant personal relationship, can the service offer the possibility of a legal appeal and/or psychological and social help from specialized services, without necessarily interrupting the pathway undertaken with the service.

We should also acknowledge the strong resistance of the personnel themselves to adopting a guideline, which, in view of the ambiguity, evasiveness, and probable incompleteness of certain narrations, can seem like a hazard. In this regard, we should remember that, as in the case described above, we may be dealing with a couple who are still cohabiting, and between whom it is quite plain that the emotional bond has retained all its strength.

This is particularly important when the narration is about traumatic events that are downplayed by the woman herself as inherent characteristics of an emotional bond considered undeniable, both for herself and for her children.

In that sense, we believe it is useful and productive to support the process of reconciliation with its own traumatic experience that includes a face-to-face meeting with the very author of the violence. In doing so, we can allow the woman to recover her dignity as a subject endowed with autonomy and value. It is, thus, necessary to explicate mechanisms that have caused the couple and family bond to endure even under sufferance. These mechanisms can be reconstructed and “purified” only if the person who perpetrated the violence accepts his or her responsibility. This is particularly important in the event of prosecutions since, even when these have a good outcome in terms of justice for the victim, they do not represent psychic reparation in itself.

Since this area of intervention still needs to be widely explored and developed, the possible reconciliation strategies constitute a necessary turning point for the treatment of domestic violence. The recognition of the specific role and responsibility within the victim-aggressor relationship is a key-point. Separations often disclose situations of violence that have been endorsed for years though never reported and sometimes made object of squalid relational negotiations or manipulated by lawyers as a revenge to win their trials. We ought to make the point that if many cases of violence are raised during a separation these are not only “manufactured” denunciation aimed at gaining possible benefits, but also a contextual data stemming from an increased self-awareness of women. These, indeed, spurs women to take up protective decision for their children and themselves (Testoni, Pogliani, Guglielmin, Armenti, Alessandra, Verdi, Moita, & Wieser 2012).

Recently, some authors have described the effects of an absence of denunciation and taking charge (Romito, & Melato 2012). In our view, the debate on the modality of treatment should be wider and more circumstantial. In that sense, our contribution is intended as an accurate description of a treatment that is allowed to profoundly enter different relational and institutional dynamics. Indeed, simply by explicating different modalities of intervention with regard to different professionals (physicians, psychologists, judges, social workers, and police officers) and to the different moments (flagrancy, first aid, emergency, protection, recovery and clinical treatment), it is possible to take charge and support people both immediately and in the long run, and to allow public services and associations to meet the needs of women (Arcidiacono, Di Napoli, Tuccillo, & Coronella, 2012). To conclude, today it is necessary to strengthen the Italian public service network through inserting more personnel – given the impoverishment of social services after personnel retirement and the cuts to the health system – and giving the latter training (Arcidiacono, & Esposito, 2012)

and updates with regard to femicide, domestic violence, and institutional family mediation.

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