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### *The war in the nest*

#### Abstract

The article deals with the topic of domestic violence against women by describing the current state of affairs of the Italian social and cultural context as well as the dangerous influence of media and the actions of the welfare system. The need of disclosure and protection of the women victims of violence is also enlightened. A further aim of this contribution is to discuss some principles for the clinical and therapeutic listening and treatment directed to services and shelters since this form of violence is generally underestimated, silenced, and denied. It finally introduces some principles of institutional mediation and re-negotiation of emotional bonds that refer to the Neapolitan Centro per le Famiglie's experience.

*Keywords:* femicide, domestic violence, family law, Italian case-study, social changes.

In Italy, as in many other Western countries, the legislative assets are formally embedded in laic and democratic principles of equality and respect for the rights of women and minors alike. The existence of these principles, which are based upon numerous judicial rules, has driven the welfare system to plan, organize and provide accessible services for women, apart from those already available for children and the family in general.

In particular, 2009 saw the introduction of legislation to combat sexual violence and stalking; these measures provide for the creation and funding of different kinds of initiatives, services and ad hoc-designed structures<sup>1</sup>.

However, this is not to say that all the Italian regions, which are endowed with great autonomy for actualizing the above-mentioned legislation, have fulfilled their commitments on their schedule and brought to bear adequate resources. In order to understand the reasons for the uncertainty, the delays and even the unequal implementation of services by the Italian welfare system to combat sexual violence, it is necessary to briefly outline the cultural and legislative Italian frame.

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<sup>1</sup> Law n. 3823 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2009 "Conversion into law, with modifications, of the legislative decree of the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2009 n. 11, bearing urgent measures upon the matter of public security and contrast to sexual violence as well as persecutory actions".

Of course, since the beginning of the 20th century many things have changed. At that time, the organization of social relationships, even at an institutional level, was still embedded in a principle of authority, and society would find in this principle its reference point. However, it was not until 1975<sup>2</sup> that a law was introduced to ratify the passage of parental authority, previously understood as a prevalence of paternal rights upon offspring over maternal ones, to a shared authority and from marital authority to equality between the spouses.

However, this period of time is too short to allow for a radical transformation understood in terms of implementation of cultural and human rights.

As far as infancy is concerned, a number of recent laws have strengthened and given voice to children's rights from a relational perspective. Cases in point include the law validated in 2006 on the shared custody of minors in case of separation<sup>3</sup>, and the more recent one of 2012<sup>4</sup> that abolishes any difference whatsoever in treatment between children born of de facto unions and those of conjugal ties; this identification, regardless of the relationship between the parents, provides identical effects with regard to kinship and ratifies the child's right to have and maintain ties with both families of origin.

### *Change Vs Permanence*

The family framework, even in the traditional and catholic Italy, is changing. This is happening not only because of the long-term effects brought about by the introduction of divorce<sup>5</sup> but also by the many changes made to family law. The most remarkable element is, in our view, the increase in cohabitation, which has risen from about half a million in 2007 to 972,000 during the two-year period of 2010-2011. The number of children born out of wedlock is also rapidly increasing (about 80,000 every year, almost twice as many as ten years ago)<sup>6</sup>.

The "father law", which took root in the soil of the Roman law, has been uprooted. However, it is still too early to witness a consolidated change in relational culture.

The affirmation of a new awareness of individual rights, albeit one still to be recognized in either a different ethic of relationships or in new principles underlying human ties and affects, nonetheless lays the groundwork for the acknowledgement of women's individuality and their right to decisional and responsible autonomy. This constitutes a thoroughgoing innovative element, although it still needs to be defended and supported.

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<sup>2</sup> Law n. 151 19<sup>th</sup> May 1975 "Family Law Reform".

<sup>3</sup> Law n. 54 8<sup>th</sup> February 2006 "Dispositions in the matter of parental separation and shared custody of the offspring".

<sup>4</sup> Law n. 219 12<sup>nd</sup> December 2012 "Dispositions upon the matter of the recognition of natural children".

<sup>5</sup> Law n. 838 1<sup>st</sup> September 1970, put to an abrogative referendum in 1973 with a negative outcome.

<sup>6</sup> Data provided by ISTAT: "Il matrimonio in Italia: un'istituzione in mutamento" (2012).

Primarily, traditional social expectations still see women as the only sex capable of taking care of children. Consequently, the reciprocal expectations imposed upon the couple and the parents-children ties have widened the gap between the expectations of the two sexes and brought about a new form of unsustainability in human relationships. Women, especially youngsters, enjoy equality of rights on one hand as a given gain and, on the other hand, suffer the consequences of a context in which social conditions, such as low rate of female occupation, and social customs are seldom modified. On this matter, one might consider the scarce use, despite the apparent enthusiasm with which they have been accepted, of the recent regulations<sup>7</sup> on “parental leave”, which are meant to foster a more even distribution of the burden of the offspring’s care.

This draws a picture in which men hold fast to the husband/father’s decisional right and are consequently unable to understand and face the changes of which wives and offspring are the bearers.

Likewise, the inter-generational transmission of social conquests obtained so far has yet to be achieved. The secular abusive violence inherent in patriarchal families seems to have been ruled out of the social discourse. Newspapers, however, are keen to bring it to our attention and show the kind of effects still occurring today. Yet, in the great majority of cases, violence is linked with diverse phenomena: migration and marriages between different races, permissive sexual habits, and the so-called “drowning of traditional family values”.

On the other hand, the media withdraw and convey stereotypes of women completely enslaved by the gender discourse. This is why it is worth asking ourselves: “what kind of family do we mean when we talk about “traditional family values”?”

### *Family and Violence*

It is known that violence and rape occur in a privileged scenario, i.e. in people’s private residences. In Italy, 62% of denunciations are made against spouses and partners, although, on average, only 7% of women resort to denunciation.

Likewise, the number of homicides occurring in family and partner relationships amounts to around a quarter or a third of the total figure in Italy. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the so-called “crime of honour”, a motivation according to which it was justifiable to kill a flagrantly adulterous partner and receive only a minimum sentence, was excised from the Italian penal code only in 1981. Thirty years is still a short period for creating a new culture of social relationships, in particular when it comes to the relationship between the sexes.

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<sup>7</sup> Law n. 53 8<sup>th</sup> March 2000 “Dispositions upon maternal and paternal support for the right to care and education as well as the urban coordination times” and further modifications, the last of which, dated 1st January 2013, introduces the possibility of enjoying “hourly paternal leave” along with other measures aimed at fostering participation in the offspring’s care by working fathers who, having an overall higher income than women workers, lose a higher economic quota than the latter as a consequence.

Moreover, at a psychological level, the victim of a no-longer-reciprocated love is often the object of compassion whereas the partner who does not reciprocate the feelings and the requests of the other is seen, paradoxically, as a torturer: the roles played are swapped within a perverted perception of faults and merits. In this scenario, the person who attacks and then kills is recognised as the “victim” of a non-reciprocated love. Women, i.e. the real victims, are instead regarded, in the majority of cases, as guilty for having created the conditions under which the aggressor has acted (Greer 1999).

*Femicide and family conflict in the view of the Italian media: Some news and many stereotypes.*

When talking about women killed in Italy, the risk of focusing on numbers<sup>8</sup>, while overlooking the gravity of the motivations of those who kill, is quite high. The emphasis placed on numbers may indeed be rather misleading. For example, it would be a mistake to underestimate infanticide and consider this not to be a grave and troubling phenomenon simply because it amounts to “only” twenty cases a year.

The term ‘femicide’ and its concept were introduced by Diana Russell in 1992 in order to identify a criminological category, i.e. an extreme act of violence by a man against a woman simply “because she is a woman”; in other words, this is a kind of violence that bears the fruit of misogyny.

The Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagrande used this concept in 1993 in a study on the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez. Lagrande analysed hundreds of cases from which it emerged without any doubt that the great majority of women had been killed by their relatives in the privacy of their homes. From this stems the suggestion that it is necessary to change the stereotypical images of gender and introduce severe laws to combat domestic violence as the most effective way of opposing “the idea according to which violence against women has a ‘natural’ character” and that this is a distinctive feature of humankind. That the theme of femicide must be faced primarily in cultural terms as an expression of misogynist attitudes verging on paroxysm is demonstrated, as if we needed any further confirmation, by the thesis of the Parish of Lericci (Liguria region). In a leaflet handed out during the Christmas period and in a message pinned to the notice board of his church and entitled “Women and femicide, let’s make a self-criticism. How many times do they provoke?” Don Piero Corsi maintains that rape is “caused by women who provoke men by wearing revealing clothing. Women must make a self-critique, how many times do they provoke, end up being arrogant and too independent? If they get raped, they had it coming”<sup>9</sup>. Even worse, this leaflet was none other than an extract from an apostolic letter entitled *Mulieris dignitatem*, written

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<sup>8</sup> In 2012, 124 women were murdered in Italy. This figure is slightly lower than the one reported in 2011, which was 129. Sixty per cent of the murders occurred within on-going or concluded relationships between victim and murderer. In 25% of the cases, these women were either about to put an end to the relationship or had already done so. In 63% of the cases, the murders were committed in private homes. The victims were Italian in 69% of the cases, while 73% of the murderers were Italian. (In: “Rapporto sul femminicidio in Italia” 2012, Casa delle donne di Bologna, Pdf) [http://www.casadonne.it/cms/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=172&Itemid=65](http://www.casadonne.it/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=172&Itemid=65).

<sup>9</sup> Corriere della Sera, 25/12/2012. [http://www.corriere.it/cronache/12\\_dicembre\\_25/femminicidio-lericci-colpa-provocazioni](http://www.corriere.it/cronache/12_dicembre_25/femminicidio-lericci-colpa-provocazioni).

twenty years ago. Indignant women occupied the church and the local bishop asked for the “thesis” to be removed from the notice board. Yet, the parish priest has not been dismissed, but merely admonished. To conclude, we are in no doubt about the role of the media. Sometimes they amplify the requests for intervention and the creation of laws for social control; at other times, such as in 2009 after a request to set up “security patrols” by the Lega Nord political party, the media has sought to make it clear that they do not seek to “control” specifically, but are concerned only about migrants and Romanians.

Judging from the statistics, in fact, if they wish to prevent more murders, patrols ought to be entering Italians’ houses rather than overseeing city streets. Meanwhile, further news is approaching over the media’s horizon on the family. Newspapers often underline that violence is the direct consequence of break-ups involving mixed-race couples, who have obviously broken up because they are “mixed”! This message is conveyed through headlines such as “Clash between cultures” and others of that sort, in a continuous trivialization of events that are seen as threatening and perturbing. Nevertheless, only a few are calling for adjustments to family services, which are places of cure and relief, and of the new realities that they are representing.

#### *Services and Family Violence*

Among the news stories that have most stirred public opinion in recent years is this one: “a foreign father”, already denounced by his “Italian ex-wife”, committed suicide and killed his 9-year-old child inside a Milanese family counselling centre”. This begs the question: How can a public service turn into the scenario of a family tragedy? How can a space dedicated to attention and work with families turn into the scene of a crime? We believe that if a child cannot be deemed safe from the devastating anger of his parent, not even in a family counselling centre and in the presence of professionals, a remedy must be sought through belated recourse to a psychological, social, health welfare system-based form of help.

Moreover, this shows the inadequate integration of this system with the juridical arena, which is the elective place for addressing the problems of conflicting families. Finally, we believe that the attention paid to family pathologies is, on the whole, very superficial and distracted. The sharp language used by juridical enactments does not take on further meaning outside the civil or penal proceedings.

Furthermore, the majority of citizens still think that asking a public service for help is a source of shame, like a loss of family autonomy, rather than a type of support, help or resource.

Thus, the recourse to public services becomes a last resort that marks an unrecoverable predicament, which has long since turned into a thoroughgoing pathology. It would be more appropriate to refer to these institutional scenarios as the places in which the symbolic funeral of the family is celebrated. In clinical psychological terms, this is a deathly monument erected to the construct of “acting out”.

Talking over prevention and cure in this specific arena can appear impractical and of little connection to reality considering the current condition of the family welfare apparatus, partially out of commission and assailed by constant cuts, without the construction of alternative paths.

This enables us to better understand the recourse to reassuring stereotypes such as the crisis of values, the fragility of human ties and so on. Moreover, it can give voice to decrepit thoughts that were kept apart in a corner of the mind, such as the common saying “choose wives and cattle from your hometown” brushed up by the deputy mayor of Treviso during an interview given to the popular show “Porta a porta”. What struck us about the declarations of the deputy mayor was the extent to which he dwelt on the analogy between wives and cattle. Women are neither ruminants nor four-legged, it could so be said that they are a far cry from cattle. This represents a form of information, in that “information is the news of a difference” as Bateson claims. On the contrary, it seems that today, as well as in the past, the news is another, to wit: foreign wives and cattle are equally different from the local ones. The only possible difference between wives and cattle lies in their geographic location.

The so-called folk wisdom clings on defiantly, which is why we happened to read, on 20th of January 2013, comments by the Lega Nord political party’s deputy mayor of Bernareggio, a town in the Milanese hinterland, about the murder of a forty-five-year-old woman by a man who originated from Morocco and was cohabiting with her and their two children. The deputy mayor expressed his thoughts in these words: “I appeal to Italian women’s intelligence; let’s stop getting involved in relationships of this kind with immigrants!” [...] “I can understand a short-term relationship, but when it comes to such long relationships it’s all too apparent that sooner or later it ends up in this way”<sup>10</sup>.

As far as we are concerned, we can offer no proverb or glib expression that might have an equal media impact to dedicate to all those women killed by their Italian partners except, perhaps, two very southern thoughts, such as: “Whoever knows you, can hurt you” (evil comes from known people, not from strangers) and “You can open up your home door only from the inside.”

The former sentence is obviously not sufficiently taken into account by the shallow analysts of the phenomenon of domestic violence. The meaning of the second sentence, instead, often stands out from stories of male infidelity and expresses an exculpatory idea according to which unfaithful men are always provoked by women who are guilty of inviting them into their own houses. After all, this is exactly what don Piero Corsi claims when he refers to the encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* 25 years after it was written<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Leila Codecasa, Corriere della sera, 20th January 2013.

[http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/13\\_gennaio\\_20/donna-uccisa-ex-marito-bernareggio-vicesindaco-leghista-tornaghi-musulmano](http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/13_gennaio_20/donna-uccisa-ex-marito-bernareggio-vicesindaco-leghista-tornaghi-musulmano)

<sup>11</sup> 15 August 1998, “Apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* upon woman’s dignity and vocation, written by his highest pontiff Giovanni Paolo II on occasion of the Marian year.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_15081988\\_mulieris\\_dignitatem\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_15081988_mulieris_dignitatem_it.html)

There are some statistical data to indicate that the most dangerous place for women and children alike seems to be their own home and that, in Europe, of about one hundred murdered women around half are victims of their partners or ex-partners who are unable to accept the separation; such cases exemplify how these data can melt away in a general process of amnesia while we are more concerned with cultural and more or less tolerant religious differences etc.

However, as a matter of fact, the number of women victims of murder has been decreasing over the last ten years. Had these not been incontrovertible data, one might even have thought they represented a pitiful, comforting lie. On the contrary, given their veracity, these data help us understand how the way in which public opinion spreads perturbing news, such as the aforementioned stories, can be manipulative rather than positive. “The biggest lie is produced by media [...] this is a reactionary operation, which creates monsters where there are changes that are overthrowing old equilibriums (Arlacchi, 2009, p. 14). Thus, it is all the more important to recognize that conflict among couples and families, whatever its matrix and pathological corollaries might be, it is a very dangerous fact.

This kind of conflict, along with other untold forms of ill-treatment, oppression, limitation of individuality and offences against dignity and self-integrity, which range from derision to beatings to femicide, is linked mainly with the difficulty women experience in affirming their right to self-determination and separation from their partners as a consequence.

A further example showing that couple conflict has its roots in the necessity for women to emancipate themselves and “get out of tutelage” is represented by the strong increase in requests for separation coming from the women themselves, despite their low rate of employment and their disadvantaged economic condition.

These data are quite remarkable in demonstrating the contradiction we are faced with when a woman reports the unbearable nature of an emotional bond.

It is of paramount importance to give straightforward and transformative answers to these issues within the service settings and in terms of empowerment.

Public services and those of the third sector, through the knowledge of those who work in them and those who are committed to research and training on these themes, are calling for a redefinition of the whole system of protection aimed at those sections of the population at risk. The need for a systemic intervention aimed at family contexts has now been acknowledged. However, it is less clear and a matter of debate which modality of clinical intervention should be used when the health treatment is carried out at the edge where social, health and judicial arenas meet (Ferrari Bravo, 1997; Arcidiacono, Ferrari Bravo 2009; Ferrari Bravo & Volpe 2012). The work carried out by the team from the “Centro per le famiglie” (Family centre) (Arcidiacono, 2008), which was founded in 1996 by a group of enlightened psychologists<sup>12</sup> with many years’ institutional experience in judicial and primary services, constitutes one of those rare Italian initiatives that has not only located the clinical intervention within primary services in the foreground but has also attempted to propose an action guideline for the services and for the personnel that work there (Arcidiacono, & Ferrari Bravo 2009). This is useful for taking charge of those situations in which violence, although explicit, is but hinted at, almost as if it were an ineluctable component of daily life (Arcidiacono, & Di Napoli 2012; Arcidiacono et al., 2012; Arcidiacono & Esposito, 2012).

*The strategies of taking charge and intervention at the Centro per le famiglie of Naples*

The main strategy of intervention and taking charge at the Centro per le famiglie of Naples lies basically in deeming the family to be both a collective subject, i.e. as a user with full rights to access specific services, and an observational unity even when the request for help concerns personal problems or problems regarding more than one of the family members. This helps to inscribe personal feelings in a wider frame including the power relationships upon which family ties are built. It also includes justice as well as inequality between the different members of the family.

This strategy of intervention has led to the outlining of a work practice centred around a service-focused policy of taking charge, which can be understood on the one hand as a need for predefined inter-institutional intervention procedures, and on the other as the capacity to provide every user with a unique as well as uniform service, in that it is shared by the entire working team (see Arcidiacono, & Ferrari Bravo, 2009).

Cigoli (2009) describes its peculiarity in terms of three factors: 1) the capacity for networking; 2) high clinical competence; 3) low-threshold access.

This methodological setting is very simple and yet very difficult to ignore, especially if we consider that each situation of which this centre takes charge is always a prototype; therefore, a “mass-production” approach to this kind of work is seen as unacceptable and damaging.

The guideline foregrounds shared competencies and rules between users, personnel and institutional referents. This sharing will be even more necessary considering the complex and variable cases the professionals will have to face and, as such, it represents

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning the collaboration of: Angela D’Addio, Giuseppina Fioretti, Francesca Laccetti, Sergio Maresca, Gaetano Morrone, †Macario Principe, Annibale Vitiello.



a thoroughgoing precondition for good networking. To this, we must add the necessity of paying selective attention to reconstructing power relationships, hence hierarchy, and prioritizing instances between the different members of the family, as well as reconstructing the feelings of every single individual and the entire relational context.

### *Competences/Organization*

It is hard to give an organizational shape to the set of competences necessary for working with families in conflict, especially if these are accompanied by violent behaviours. In the case of separations and divorces, the interventions aimed at mending the damage brought about by conflicts or even forced cohabitations characterized by episodes and habits of violence are akin to those bad restorations in which, to the signs of old and recent scars, one must add the traces of bad reparations. Sometimes, then, this kind of work must also take into account the necessity to “undo and do it again”, especially in those situations in which urgency is expressed by a severe malaise or imminent danger.

The previous attempts seem to show, in many cases, how much they served the purpose of mainly representing and containing conflicts; therefore, they are themselves part of the problem so as Romito and Melato remark (2012).

From a welfare perspective, and especially in the socio-assistance field, this means that we are facing the task of turning an enormous “invalidation apparatus” based on the criteria of deficiency, need, and void to be filled, into an empowerment-based validation-oriented system.

From a Community Psychology standpoint, according to which psychosocial well-being is linked with the personal perception of “mastery” of one’s own desires and needs, this means valuing potentialities and the capacity to be an active subject as well as protagonist of one’s own life and of the life of the whole community.

As such, the strategy of taking charge and tackling violence against women should have its own specificity and peculiarity. Here, the emphasis is placed on the necessity to denounce violence and on the consequent judicial intervention. Likewise, the emphasis is focused on supporting the woman in the construction of her own personal life’s pathway. In that sense, the seasoned professional acts not as a substitutive Ego but rather as an escort of the relational and psychical process in the making. This perspective, while offering relational support, presents itself as a catalyst of a new form of relationship with the violent partner and the children, who are voiceless victims (Arcidiacono, 2013).

We wish to report here some preliminary theoretical and methodological considerations, which have been our starting point in planning an integrated service in the marginal and intersectional land of psychological and social competences and the judicial field, along with the conjunction of different know-how and competences. These are the underlying elements for taking charge of a family in a predicament, especially when its members are facing the prospect of violent behaviours (even witnessed violence), which is detrimental to women and children alike.

#### *1) Services able to welcome*

Usually, the access to specifically problem-focused services follows a rigid linear system (request/need-answer/service) within which the family as a user receives only a confirmation of its malaise. In other words, it obtains ratification through a diagnosis. This does not bring about any change; on the contrary, it usually pegs the malaise by labelling it with a diagnosis that is consistent with functional and internal parameters inherent in the organizational logic of the healthcare system and, hence, extraneous to the family system. To put it bluntly, the family “exports” its conflict into the service but it receives in return neither any indication nor any valid help for modifying its functioning. The service-centred, assistentialist, curative model puts a predefined rigid system before the flexibility of the family. The more rigid this is, the more it weakens the family system and risks bringing on further traumas instead of changes. The rigid assistentialist system shows all its fragility in its interactive inadequacy, which shows itself through scant efficacy, low social relevance, and high wastage of human as well as economic energy. Conversely, the more we make the help offer flexible by projecting systemic-oriented services targeted to the family at risk, the more the interaction between the latter and the help offer is able to create a “help network” that is resistant and effective.

Indeed, the social and psychological work is primarily a reconstructive work and an act of meaning, of giving sense to family history and its narrative, a search for different meanings in which to find and support thriving and changing perspectives (Testoni, Pogliani, Guglielmin et al., 2012).

The word “risk” is generally used in a negative manner to connote dangerous situations. Here, instead, it indicates the positive potentiality of the sentence “to take up the risk”, i.e. to take the chance to do something new and different. This is the reason why we chose the phrase “families in crisis or in becoming?” as a slogan for our project “Psychosocial risk for families”. In this case, the word ‘crisis’ implicitly conveys the possibility of a choice, an option and it is used to highlight the moment in which decisions regarding a dysfunctional equilibrium are made.

Dwelling on a dysfunctional equilibrium leads, in fact, to the stabilising of pathological elements and the paralysing of family functions. In fact, violence is the daughter of a paralysed affectivity.

Therefore, when we talk about help interventions for women and families at risk or in crisis, we talk about decisional processes that are at an impasse, i.e. a block, in which competences are kept in check.

We believe that the work carried out by services could be a process of help if, and only if, it is geared to strengthening, raising, and networking the competences of the individual subjects and the entire family system alike, leaving the conflict understood as a representation of the relational family system in a given moment and context.

## *2) Services able to contain conflicts and pain*

A specific problem faced by psychologists in regard to family crises is precisely the fact that the family is always on the move (Scabini, & Cigoli, 2012). This is often felt as a sense of uncertainty and blurriness. It stems from those emergency-based answers that have no bearing on care-focused work, thereby colluding with the family emergency.

It is, instead, necessary to regard the instable equilibrium of the family situation upon which the intervention is built as the most important of its constitutive variables. This forces us to depart from the rails drawn by diagnosis, shedding the labels that are thoroughgoing individual and relational ghetto-like ideas, to change points of view and take up the changeable and multiform ones of those with whom we interact. To use a simple metaphor, we can say that the professional must swap chairs.

This does not necessarily mean that a chair that is not ours, belonging rather to the family, the woman or man here in front of us, is much more comfortable; quite the contrary, we usually perceive it to be much more unstable. However, if we agree to sit on this lurching chair, we can set up collaboration with the family system and manage, in doing so, to achieve the first objective of good care work, i.e. a reciprocal recognition. This is the first step towards the mutual assumption of responsibility, which means recognizing the basic rights of all the members of the family from a relational perspective.

However, the sense and effect of a shared action are not immediately visible, precisely because of its characteristics of circularity and complexity. On the other hand, within a situation of grave family disorganization, even a protective intervention, if it takes away a possible resource, can turn out to be collusive with the family situation and even bring about perverse effects, as it may stabilize and perpetuate the inadequacy of the woman seeking protection from the context in which the damage has been determined.

From the point of view of Community Psychology, working on the relationship by recognizing and assuming mutual responsibility for family and institution alike as well as listening and valuing the need, even when this is itself an expression of the conflict and pathology, means working on a healthy part of the family functioning. In contrast, from a service-based and diagnosis-focused perspective, working on the emergency and deficits means taking account of those sick and incompetent parts of family functioning.

### *3) Services able to promote interactions*

Promoting interaction may appear to be an arduous and even erroneous objective in the presence of grave relational conflicts and pathologies that are characterized by violence and mistreatment of women and children. However, it is necessary to understand that when a couple or a family agrees to meet at the service, they bring with them more than just the conflict, i.e. the incompetent part: otherwise, they would never have turned up.

Apparently, there must still be a “resistant bond” in terms of its double meaning: they (the members of the family) are still resourceful/strong but are also, at the same time, resistant in that they block the necessary changes to recuperate personal and family well-being. This is a hard knot to untangle.

If we accept that there is always an aspect of “competence” in every request for help, even in the most conflicting cases, it is necessary to wonder “what the person I am facing right now, through the specific request characterizing his/her position, is considering in order to do good for him/herself, his/her children or family.” It is thus possible to trace the need, starting from the request, which is apparently merely an expression of the conflict.

This requires a dynamic and active attitude towards the users. Conversely, lingering on the conflict and considering it as an expression of incompetence leads to the consultant playing the role of substitute in family functions that are stuck in the conflict. In a way, this would be like ruling out the diagnosis that the patient is expressing through the symptom and the way in which this contributes to constructing the pathology itself.

In cases of difficult separations and badly managed divorces, to escape the conflict arena and enter that of agreement means assuming a relationally-oriented circular logic and a flexible attitude, which is typical of a family system, rather than reinstating the linear logic of contrast.

The solutions tried by dysfunctional families usually seem to serve the purpose almost of maintaining a state of conflict as a way of giving the family bond a final chance of representation. In taking charge of the family, it is irrelevant whether the solution/problem comes from an internal choice made by the family itself or from an institutional request. Professionals must, in both cases, face disorganization and confusion, or in other words, face the twisting needs and solutions elaborated by the family.

Therefore, what are the best tools to use in order to mend the damage? Our proposal is based on the “fine-drawing” model, which will be explained in the following paragraphs through the brief description of a case-study.

#### *4) Services able to shield and protect*

A consultation session with a non-cohabiting separated couple, who had been fighting for seven years and whose level of conflict was so high that it was hindering even the possibility of reaching an agreement about a possible divorce, had left the psychologist discouraged (by no means unusual in this kind of job) about carrying out a burdensome intervention that was likely to founder, with a consequent price to be paid in terms of further disorganization and malaise for the family in general and the children in particular.

This feeling had been expressed, during a supervision meeting, through the metaphor of “gluing potsherds” that seemed to be moved by the will to be shattered again into smaller and smaller fragments. This metaphor brought to mind the Walt Disney cartoon episode “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, in which the broom’s splinters incessantly multiply themselves and become an element of disorder instead of being useful. Another practitioner, evidently an expert in therapeutic mending techniques, introduced the concepts of patching, darning, and mending into the discussion, describing these

techniques at length, which is interesting to report here. Incidentally, the word “mending” was completely ignored by the male professionals present, thus necessitating a lengthy explanation from their female colleagues on the matter. This is further confirmation that sewing is a “women’s business”!

Among the above-mentioned techniques, “fine-drawing” is acknowledged as the best form of remedy for rips and holes. It is, indeed, resistant, made by using the same fabric as the clothes, and links warp and frame again while respecting the original pattern of the clothing. It is practically invisible and only an expert eye could recognize it (usually to extol it). “Fine-drawing” is particularly suitable for large holes and requires some preliminary finishing work around the frayed edges to make them even; it also requires neat cuts. Mending is itself a noble art that stems from embroidery and it takes from this the same technique and precision; however, although it retains the same fabric of the clothing it does not retain its warp and frame. Moreover, it is rarely invisible, and it does not offer much resistance to further rips. Patchwork is the roughest form of remedy since it involves overlapping, generally visibly, a different fabric with the original one; the patch is its golden example.

Everybody in Naples knows the negative meaning of the common saying, “apply a quick-to-use coloured patch”, which conveys the sense of trying to put things right in any way, sometimes even worsening the state of affairs. For, if the patch is showy it will always be there to remind us of the underlying hole. Sometimes, if one wishes to save the clothing it is necessary to take off a previous patch and carry out more accurate work by means of one of the aforementioned techniques. At any rate, each of the interventions described serves some noble purpose, such as saving an item of clothing that would otherwise be useless and making it last a little bit longer, partially reinstating it, and economizing by making do with what one has.

Afterwards, the authors of this paper began to devise new metaphors such as knitting, as an example of the systemic work of interconnecting and networking aimed at “retying dropped stitches”, Penelope’s web, referring to the physical web made of threads and the symbolic one linked to strategic thoughts, and so on.

The metaphorical use of the techniques described here helps us to understand that the intervention within services is basically aimed at reinstating relational functions that are still vital, albeit gravely compromised by rips, holes and wear. The destructive image of potsherds was completely abandoned after that supervision meeting in favour of the (re)constructive mending one.

The metaphor of weave and network conveys the image of connection aimed at retying and redefining frayed life pathways and can help picture the intervention, which employs and centres on the competence of the subjects, who are seen as capable of weaving their own existence. The metaphor of “fine-drawing” conveys the action of retying the threads of one’s existence, the “knots” of one’s own life. Furthermore, this metaphor allows us to distinguish between an adaptive activity, i.e. a “patchwork”, and the more complex activity of “fine-drawing”.

Likewise, the “fine-drawing” is so finely that the join is scarcely noticeable, not even by the person wearing the clothing, thereby erasing the immediate memory of the rip; on the contrary, it reinstates the memory of the fabric as a whole. Is it an advantage to erase the memory of the rip or might this bring about a loss of meaning, as an arbitrary interruption of the family narration, a more or less extended hollow that gives up not so much the ghost of the narration but, rather, the possibility of itself having a narration? We have attempted to provide an answer to this far-from-secondary issue.

In our view, reconstructing the family memory by means of “fine-drawing” without highlighting the trauma, the rip, is possible provided that we transfer the memory of the trauma and entrust it to a specific alliance between professionals and users. This alliance helps to re-edit rather than rewrite the family story in order to conclude it and drive it towards a new project. Eventually this “new memory”, which has been constructed through shared work, serves the purpose of restoring the family weave by shifting the focus from conflict and violence to different possibilities: renegotiation of emotional and affective bond or oblivion.

In this kind of repositioning, violence is by no means negated; however, it assumes a different image since it loses its catastrophic traits, its negative halo, and its perverse bond strength. This is recognized as an absolute negation of a more important alliance that is grounded on the peculiar relationships of the emotional bond, i.e. on the protection and vitality of the family system’s alliance, which can endure beyond the separation of the couple.

Therefore, a good intervention to restore the family weave is particularly necessary, even for the most conflict-centred and destructive cases in which the conflict between the parents seems to be stronger than the impulse to care for and protect their own children.

In this regard, it is worth adding that the restoration of the family weave can be the start of a positive process of oblivion, which stands against amnesia, i.e. the traumatic, unrepaired break. The latter, by contrast, produces a hollow tie and an absence of certain and safe boundaries as a consequence.

Our proposal is, thus, neither reparative nor substitutive. Indeed, the peculiarity of the intervention lies not in a pitiful, welcoming sympathy but, rather, in the support and offer of protection geared towards ending violent and abusive family ties and reconstructing the meaning of the client’s own existence. The main aim of the intervention is to restore to women their full ownership of the organization and management of their emotional bonds and relational assets. From an operative standpoint, the action of the service is aimed at supporting the denunciation of inflicted violence; at the same time, it seeks to safeguard women or other members of the family from any possible collusion with violence by offering a context-focused possibility of retying the relational weave based on a reciprocal recognition.

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