

GLASS SOULS – THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OTHER’S VIEW IN THE PROCESS OF SELF-RECOGNITION

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This paper is grounded on the hermeneutic constructivist approach. We focused on the path of uncompleted recognition in the form of negligence (Chiari, 2015), reporting the psychotherapeutic process of a female theatre actress. Her issues take shape within the dialectic between her feeling transparent to the others’ view and her being too visible due to the very same diversity. Initially, the therapy focuses on the personal meaning of the mask. An important space is dedicated to the process of forgiveness in psychotherapy and to Kelly’s techniques, favouring the aggressive elaboration of role constructs.

Keywords: *hermeneutic constructivism, path of dependency, self-recognition, forgiveness*

INTRODUCTION

This article presents the story of a young woman, based upon our clinical experience.

This narrative is reinterpreted on the basis of the elaboration of Kelly’s theory referring to the forms of uncompleted recognition, that Chiari (2015) and the hermeneutic constructivist group of the School of specialization in constructivist psychotherapy of CESIPc, Florence, are carrying out.

In particular, we will treat the path of uncompleted recognition in the form of negligence.

In addition, starting from the suggestions of some philosophers, in particular Ricoeur (2000) about the meaning of the practice of ‘gift’, we will share some reflections on the role of the therapist in relation to the issues of recognition and forgiveness in psychotherapy.

Before presenting our thoughts, we first outline the most salient developments concerning ‘uncompleted intersubjective recognition’.

What is the “Uncompleted Intersubjective Recognition”?

The reading of Kelly’s theory in light of a hermeneutic and phenomenological perspective (Chiari & Nuzzo, 2010; Armezzani & Chiari,

2015) highlights the relational and intersubjective nature of personal identity.

According to Ricoeur’s (2005) notion of ‘recognition’, the hypothesis is that the development of identity begins within the family in the dialectic mother-child through the mutuality of intersubjective recognition.

Specifically, Chiari (2015) suggests that people presenting a disorder, defined in terms of a nonvalidational choice (Walker, 2002), had experienced an imbalance of mutuality in their relationship with their parents, with prejudice to the completion of the process of recognition.

Chiari (2015) proposes four paths of recognition that would take place along a *continuum* ranging from recognition to misrecognition.

Furthermore, in accordance with Honneth (1995) and Ricoeur (2005), Chiari (2015) hypothesises that the possibility of reciprocal recognition takes place in the intersubjective balance between the two poles of fusion on one hand, and self-affirmation in solitude on the other.

We can see an intersubjective balance in the *path of recognition in the form of acceptance*, demonstrated as the mother participates in the relationship showing acceptance of her children, and thus relating with them on the basis of an extensive construction of their construction processes.

The *path of uncompleted recognition in the form of fusion* is the expression of an imbalance between the two poles emotional fusion and self-affirmation in solitude, with a tendency towards the emotional fusion pole. A basic tension between constraint and freedom dominates the social lives of the people following this path; indeed, they are threatened both by separateness and closeness.

The *path of uncompleted recognition in the form of contempt* is characterised by an imbalance between the two poles emotional fusion and self-affirmation in solitude, with a bias towards the self-affirmation pole. People strive to maintain a recognition, though uncompleted, dependent upon their meeting others' expectations, but this requires the sacrifice of self-affirmation.

In the *path of uncompleted recognition in the form of negligence* the imbalance between the two poles assumes particular connotations. Such path of uncompleted recognition assumes the impossibility of having access to validating data for children in their relationship with their mother. As a protection from anxiety, children will loosen their core constructions and will tend to elaborate a core role structure which will imply dimensions of diversity, deviance, originality and oddity in the attempt to receive consideration.

GLASS SOULS

Ways to set ourselves free from transparency and solitude

The title 'Glass Souls' has two reasons. The term 'soul' in ancient Greek is *Psyché* (ψυχή), the root of psychotherapy. Further, the experience of being viewed may recall the transparency of glass in different situations: when we feel unnoticed, non-existent; when we feel penetrated right down to our most shameful secrets; when we attempt to hide behind a mask; when we feel as though we have been locked inside a bubble of glass which keeps us separate from others; when we comply with what we believe others want from us, as in Woody Allen's popular film *Zelig* in which the protagonist, like a 'human chameleon', transforms himself – even physically – to resemble his interlocutors.

We consider it very interesting to reflect on the dynamics of feeling not considered and on the ways that people elaborate to feel they exist.

The attempt to be seen 'better', to show one's own unique, unrepeatable and non-replaceable individuality becomes the only way to set ourselves free from transparency, from the most radical solitude of being unnoticed. Even at very high costs: standing out from the crowd, breaking the rules up to the point of deviance, madness or oddity which can isolate us even more in the relationship with the others.

The complaint brought by the client can be construed as an oxymoron – the figure of speech that juxtaposes elements that appear to be contradictory; as in a tale of two opposing faces that coexist, there is both the pain of going unnoticed in the eyes of the others and the desire to gain their consideration.

Shame makes our cheeks and neck blush, giving us the appearance of lit bulbs when, conversely, our only desire is to disappear, to be inconspicuous.

The phenomenology of shame is perhaps the most striking non-clinical example of this expression of opposite elements that is apparent on the body.

The coexistence of the absolute transparency and extreme appearance in the choice of symptoms, which often favours diversity and peculiarity in order to achieve recognition, can also be found in two other clinical examples. The first example is the body of the anorexic girl. It is an apparent, emaciated and skeletal body wandering in suffering through the world. It is a body that is often exhibited in its skinniness and cannot go unnoticed. Perhaps because it tells a story of invisibility and impossibility to distinguish itself from the conforming background of the family; because of features, ideas, opinions, personal desires. The second example concerns the weight of the body in obesity: moving out of the periphery in order to occupy more space, becoming more visible and thus drawing the gaze of others with apparent exuberance, whilst creating a safe distance that is protective from a threatening intimacy.

THE STORY OF CATERINA

We shall analyse, through general traits, a symbolic story concerning the topic of the mask in relation to the gaze of the Other: the story of Caterina, a patient of Maria Cristina Ortu.

Caterina is 32 years old. The features of her face remind those of Egyptian funerary masks, with huge dark eyes that black eyeliner makes look even more tragic. The lower corners of her eyes show a composite sadness. She is olive-skinned, Mediterranean. Her facial expression is still, so as to suggest that there are two opposing forces making war that painfully balance each other out in the dramatic, hieratic fixity of that face. Her voice is low, trained to control her diction. She speaks slowly, soft, almost articulated.

It will be no surprise when we will find out that Caterina is an actress in a theatre company.

The following words of Caterina are the result of a narrative patchwork from various moments throughout the therapy.

The words of Caterina at the beginning of the therapy

“I am here today because I am getting lost and I am afraid to end up like my mother; a desperately beautiful and sorrowful soul who is going through all the kinds of emotions a human being can experience, and at the same time at such an extreme intensity it is dehumanising.

My mother committed suicide after being diagnosed with schizophrenia. I was 12 and she was 33 years old. What she left me were her heart wrenching poems, her love for art, her fear of others, and a mistrustful fear of myself.

It didn’t start out that way though. It was after I began acting. The first time I got on a stage was when I was five at the Christmas recital at school. I was performing an unlikely Virgin Mary with braids and I had the sensation I was finally in the right role, knowing whom I should be. What a wonderful sense of peace not to struggle among the thousands of questions devouring your soul when you don’t know who and what you are, when you don’t understand whom you should be, who and how others want you to be. Holding a script in your hands and

wearing a mask was so restful and comfortable that I extended this possibility to the real world.

I soon learned how to hide my thoughts, how to pretend not to feel happiness, sorrow, love, or hate; how to avoid problems owed to simply existing, until I did not know what I was feeling for real. All my memories have this sense of uncertainty. They lack emotional, authentic colours. Sort of a reminiscence, not in black and white, rather in sepia, like old photographs faded by time.

Inside I feel I am wearing a Greek theatre-like neutral mask, like a blank sheet, a blank slate, something on which any kind of script could be written.

On the theatre’s stage I come alive through the roles the director gives me. On the stage of my life, the others decide what masks I wear. It’s easy for me to get into the part. The mask protects me, supports me, makes me believable, reassures me. For it is not a way to hide myself, on the contrary, it is the only way I have to display myself, to be seen. To be able to represent a behaviour, a character, has become an existential condition to me. I need to take a glimpse at who I am through the eyes of others. The others’ eyes are my stage directions; it is the confirmation of the excellence of my theatrical interpretation. It is my way of existing.

It scares me because it’s putting me further and further from myself. Unknown to myself. Isn’t this madness? Getting lost, not coinciding to one own self anymore, losing the edges of the self, feeling like nothing, a huge void without even pain in it. Still, I am scared, really scared.

Sometimes I have a feeling of being so far from the centre of life, from my centre, which perhaps I have never known, because I am scared, I am scared of the abyss.”

THE THERAPY

The meaning of the mask

The encounter with Caterina wasn’t an easy one. It required a fair amount of mutual patience, respect for Caterina’s fear mixed with her desire to be seen, and awareness the therapist had to have of the concern of getting lost among her client’s masks.

Talking about theatre let Caterina and her therapist converse about the meaning of the masks, starting generally and then more and more about those of Caterina.

The questions raised were: How do you choose a mask? What does a mask mean? How was your mask born? Why is it preferable to wear it? What should you expect if you don't wear it? More radically: Is it possible not to wear any? And lastly, the million dollar question: Who does choose the mask for me?

Caterina has the feeling of having lost – or even of having never experienced – a sense of self-continuity. She uses the metaphor of the fragments of a broken mirror which reflects endlessly her non-existing units, a multiplication of images of her that make her feel “unknown to herself”, the nothingness inside.

In order to maintain the relationships with others she needs to personify who the Other wants her to be, in a confusing and disorientating plurality of interpretations. Watching herself in the other's gaze in the way the Other wants her to be is the only way for her to exist, but it leaves unanswered the excruciating question “who am I?”

A first important step was to trace back the meaning of the choice of wearing masks in the personal history of Caterina, for example, with regard to her experience of absolute unpredictability of her mom.

This allowed to move from the perspective of the Others as the ones dictating what role to play, to that one of us making the choice to be the authors of our character(s). As Caterina succeeded in viewing her role, or the mask she wears, as a personal choice, we discovered through the therapeutic journey new ways to understand how these choices were the best that she could have made in order to maintain relationships with the important people in her life. Her mother had never been clearly and firmly predictable in Caterina's eyes, as she was prone to changing her mind. Caterina's ability to adjust to her mother's expectations – the way she was able to construe them – was highly precocious. She could not be herself, express her emotions or needs, and especially cause distress or problems for the others; all these elements of herself were excluded from the field of her most important relationships. The most consistent and superior

role she could play might be encapsulated in the words: "as you want me."

The process of recognition and the therapist's view

Recognising herself as the author and director of her role on the world's stage allows Caterina to reconstruct a thread of continuity in her past personal choices. The possibilities to be a certain person are not as infinite as she may believe, but rather they are finite, because they depend both on our construction of the looks of others, and on how much this construction is possible within the boundaries of our system of meanings. Inside the therapy room Caterina is free to experiment with how it feels like to be the only director of her own life; the therapist is the editor. Thanks to a very different experience of the gaze of the Others, Caterina is finally able to integrate in her story that path of non-recognition she lacked, and this will enable her to perceive a more reassuring sense of self-continuity.

The therapist formulated a professional hypothesis of a path of uncompleted recognition characterised by anxiety (the awareness of a relative lack of structure in the relational domain), in which negligence – namely, the scarce availability of coherent and predictable validation data – on the part of the parental figures is central. This increases the sense of confusion in the child about his or her self-construction, as well as that of the others (Chiari, 2015).

In this type of path, the most elaborative choice to avoid further invalidations, which would jeopardise a system of personal constructions already loose and poorly articulated, is to loosen the constructions further and further. Loosening, despite its many benefits in preserving the system, becomes a way to avoid verifying her own anticipations and to halt the cycle of experience. Many authors redefine the notion of disorder in terms of non-validational strategies (Chiari, 2015, 2016; Walker, 2002; Winter, 2003). In the case of Caterina, the cycle of experience was stuck in the anticipation phase, as it has always been very difficult for Caterina to verify her anticipations, above all in her relationship with the mother.

The loosening of her core constructions could also be seen in the many masks that were contradictory even amongst themselves, in the peculiarity of some of her behaviours, and in her style of speech, which was very abstract, provocative and, at times, incomprehensible to her interlocutors. Her social relationships suffered significantly as a result of these modalities, as people around her often felt confused and uneasy in her company, even to the extent of avoiding her. Loneliness became an additional obstacle in her attempts to verify her system of constructions through social experiences. The only glasses which are coherent and stable enough (we could use 'tight' in Kelly's words) are represented by being mad. As mad as the mother. In this case, a psychiatric diagnosis could attest to it. Having fixed points, whichever they are, becomes crucial to be able to make predictions. Madness for Caterina is a very clear criterion of predictability to inhabit in her world and to understand her past relationships. It is like that also when imagining the future.

If the lenses are those ones, unique, applicable to the story with her mother (keep in mind that the mother committed suicide at the age of 33), it will be easier to understand why Caterina was asking for help at 32. The radical, extreme and urgent question is if it is possible to elude one's own fate, if it is possible to look at our past in a different way in order to give ourselves the possibility of a different future.

The therapist's gaze gains a special value in the very stories of people who had never been able to feel visible or recognized in their attempts to get in relation with the Other.

Through the therapeutic relationship it is possible to promote a new way of experiencing the construction of themselves in their relationships with the Other. The personal construct psychotherapists have a special approach towards their clients. The credulous approach and acceptance are ways to understand the client using their own words, thus respecting their views on the world. Many of our clients exhibiting forms of uncompleted recognition feel taken into consideration and understood unlike their experience with their significant others. Feeling understood and temporarily validated in the most superordinate and core dimensions can become a form of recognition upon which to construe a viable alternative of change of our own anticipations. As thera-

pists, we often use the metaphor of two pianists, sitting next to one another and playing the same piano together with four hands, to describe our work with clients. Being able to re-write together the story of the client is like creating a new interpretation of these notes. Reviewing the evolution of this melody, a collaborative product of the two, is one of the most interesting, and often moving, challenges of the encounter with the Other inside the therapy room.

Kelly's philosophical assumption of constructive alternativism opens the possibility to reconsider our positions, our view of the world, without being chained or dependent on our biography.

Preferring the construction of oneself as insane rather than, for instance, being nothing, or not existing at all, gives the chance to linger on a perspective of Kelly's constructivism that breaks with common sense and expands the sense of recognition that a therapist can provide to its clients.

In PCP, anticipation is the only motivational principle for human beings living in the world. One will choose the alternatives which are more meaningful and make one's own meaning system more predictive. Once again, Kelly transcends what is obvious and regards the symptom or the problem as the most elaborated choice a person can make. In doing so, the perspective of what is validating or non-validating for that person is reconfigured. If we base our identity on the dimension of not being loved and then we construe ourselves and behave as bad and unworthy of love, we would face a great invalidation if someone construed a relationship with us as if she or he would do with Saint Teresa of Calcutta, considering her as an example of goodness and amiability. It would make more sense, as a confirmation of our anticipations, to encounter a suspicious, frightened, rejecting look at us. This is to say that recognition expands its semantic area in terms that result in validation for the person who experiences it. A confirmation could also be seen, if we relate in terms of putting ourselves in someone else's shoes through a deep understanding of the Other's personal dimensions, as a rejection, if it takes into account and validates the anticipations of the Other.

Being recognized in one's own terms by the other is very similar to Kelly's professional con-

struct of acceptance: the availability of a person to construe the other's point of view, to understand his or her intentions starting from his or her premises. Through the eyes of the Other.

The process of forgiveness in psychotherapy

Forgiveness as a gift

The word "gift" unfolds interesting reflections, which could be closely connected with the therapeutic relationship and the role of the therapist.

Ricoeur (2000) writes of the practices of the anthropological gift, in which the classical process of equivalence gift – receiving – gift in return is subverted by gratitude.

The value of the gift as a mutual recognition cannot be measured, it is 'priceless', and does not require to be reciprocal. The sense for the person giving and the person receiving the gift lies in the process of mutual recognition: gratuity of the logic of giving, which does not cancel otherness but preserves it at a fair distance.

Forgiveness is the gift par excellence, and the therapeutic process often unfolds on this delicate subject.

People like Caterina who experienced negligence in the relationship with their parents – which in her case resulted in various forms of mistreatment and abuse – do frequently come across with the dimension of forgiveness. It is a possibility allowing the person to elaborate a new perspective on him or herself and to make peace with his or her personal story and family members.

Forgiveness may assume the reflexive mode of forgiving oneself through the possibility of forgiving the Other. It is also because of this process that the relational and intersubjective structure of the person is confirmed (Ricoeur, 1990).

In psychotherapy forgiving does not mean to forget; on the contrary, it often requires to give voice to the pain and hence to live again, with blood and tears, the experience of violence, misrecognition, trauma, or invalidation, through narrative approximations which can be reviewed and extended. As in slow motion, in the therapy room it is possible to rewind the thread of the story and start again to unwind your life, to tell the same experience by changing the point of

view, multiplying the perspectives through new lenses of sense.

This process means much more than remembering, since it includes the active catalytic presence of the therapist, who listens, comprehends, and shares. He or she invites the person to observe how the storytelling changes if the story is told from a different perspective.

Further, being there in two, 'to be with' rather than alone, re-experiencing the pain, is in itself a chance to change something: until you are able to find the right distance, in time and space, from which to look at the past, with new eyes.

The words of Caterina at the end of the therapy

"I realized that the most difficult thing for me was to forgive myself. I wasn't able to do it, because in my mind, to enact justice there had to be a culprit; someone responsible for every unfair action. For many years I preferred thinking I deserved anything bad that happened to me, as well as all the good things I missed. In my own courthouse I was both the judge and the accused, and the final verdict would invariably be: guilty. It's been very hard to understand that I was blaming myself to save those who weren't able to love me, who could not love. I have never looked at my self with indulgent eyes, not even myself as a child. I thought I was ugly, both inside and outside; dirty, mean, unworthy, and a danger to others since I was very able to hide these aspects. Sooner or later someone would have discovered my bluff and unmasked me.

When I was tired of hiding, of wearing my mask, of playing my double life, I daydreamed. I dreamed that somebody would come to tear my mask away. In my dreams, not in my nightmares, it was Death with his sickle that came to take it away and look inside me. What a relief! It was harder for me to give a meaning to how I was feeling into the therapy room. I was being observed deep inside but, incredibly, there was no fear, repulsion, or contempt in that look, although I tried any provocation to show what I really was inside. It was hard to fit this experience into the story I had told myself. If I changed my mind about myself, I would have to change my mind also about my mother and my step-father. I resisted so hard, it was a Herculean

task. The funny and unexpected thing was that it was easier to change my mind about the others than about myself.

I found out that I had as much anger inside as the sense of justice betrayed, mocked by the events in my life. My anger was deaf and dumb, as the scars of cuts on my legs, until someone listened to my voice and dried my tears. I had to travel through my story again, to put my experience as an actress to the service of psychotherapy. I was no longer a child locked in a dark cellar without knowing why, I had to understand the character of my mother with her fears and her ideas about magic. I was no longer the mean child killing her mother. I was her, a woman who chose to die to keep a glimmer of herself, alive, uncontaminated. The only act that was paradoxically sane during a psychotic life. To go through the pain that my mother felt, even if just partially since I will never be able to experience fully the edges and abysses of it, allowed me to find some sense in her death, to her behaviour, putting her, and not me as guilty, abandoned, unworthy of love, at the centre of my search for meaning.

Some unasked questions emerged that were no longer about me, but concerning her. Curiosities about her that I tried to answer with people who had met her; reconstructing her story since when I was not yet a part of it. This was the real, big revolution: being able to look at my mother without placing me in that frame. To see her for whom she was, careless of me. And one day, without any effort or voluntary act, I forgave her. Anger had already faded away some time before. Forgiving her, and in part also my stepfather, I was able to look at myself under a new light. I don't remember who said that "to forgive means to open the door to set somebody free and to realize that you were the one who was captive". Maybe I really was just a child. The children I know have no guilt, they are neither kind nor mean. They are children, just children."

CONCLUSIONS

The therapeutic conversation becomes a discursive event which has the potential to redraw our experience of relationship, through new eyes showing a most viable understanding of the world, opening to new possibilities. The opening

of the possible, when all the ways would appear closed to us, is how our patients often describe the implications of feeling understood, recognised, maybe seen for the first time in their lives.

The opening of the possible is also the definition that Galimberti, an Italian philosopher and phenomenologist, uses to describe hope:

To hope, in fact, is not just looking at the future with optimism, but it is above all to look back to check how is it possible to configure the past which inhabits us in order to use it with a view to a possibility to come (Galimberti, 2012, p. 146, transl. ours).

Kelly, talking about psychotherapy, writes: "Psychotherapy should make one feel that he has come alive." (Kelly, 1980, p. 29).

We can not finish but with some verse, since nobody is better than poets when speaking. "Everyone has a story inside, which cannot be read alone. We need someone who, with the wonder and the magic in his eyes, reads it for us" (Pablo Neruda).

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