

Rereading a training experience: verification by means of the clinical report

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Introduction

In this article we are going to propose a mode of verification in the training of clinical psychologists, springing from a training experience that we, authors of the present article, took part in.

We feel that reporting our experience to an external interlocutor will enable us to work out categories that can also make the training process comprehensible and usable for those who did not participate in it. Our hypothesis is that reporting provides a way out of the self-centeredness of private experience and makes the issues that emerged the focus of reflection, discussion and debate.

The experience we are referring to was a training course in “Fundamentals of Analysis of the demand in consultations with organisations and individuals”¹ during which we experienced a methodology based on theory of relationship (Carli & Paniccia, 2003). In this theoretical model the relationship with the trainer is envisaged as a place of exploration and re-narration, insofar as it is the emotional precipitate of the problems faced by the psychologist in relating to his/her clients (Carli & Paniccia, 1991). The aim of the training is to acquire the competence of creating psychological categories, as keys for interpretation and intervention in professional contexts, starting from an understanding of the emotions involved in the relationship.

During training the participants were offered the use of the clinical report as a tool to develop the skill in connecting emotions and thoughts within a relationship (Carli, 2007; Paniccia, 2008). The skill of reporting can therefore be compared to the psychological function in that it seeks and reformulates the sense of an experience. In alternating between the experience of relationship and the reflective function, the psychologist creates connections between the *here and now* of the training and the *there and then* of the profession. The report therefore provides elements for an understanding of the emotional positions taken by the trainees and enables the experience to be re-elaborated and hypotheses on the process to be formed and verified in the relationship with the client.

“It is about knowing one’s own modes of affective symbolisation, and relational theories, so as to be able to construct others better suited to achieving the new goals of living together. New modes of relating that make those used up until now obsolete” (Giovagnoli, Giuliano, & Paniccia, 2008, p. 76). The changed symbolisation of the training context is therefore seen as indicating the verification of the training process. In this article we will use the report as a tool to verify this change. In this sense, verification is seen as an opportunity to give meaning to a learning process and to identify new possible interpretations of that process. The etymology of the word “verification”² refers to an operation of building the ‘truth’, of organising the reality experienced.

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¹ Proposed by Sps - Studio di Psicopsicologia - of Rome, in 2006.

² Verify, from the late Latin *verificare* is made up of *verus* ‘true’ (= containing in itself the truth, reflecting the actual reality) and *-ficare* (= ‘make’, ‘render’, ‘build’).

The subject of verification is dealt with here by starting from the questions we asked ourselves at the end of the training process: what to verify, how to do it and with which tools?

In our case, we are interested in verifying how the training promoted a development in the problem areas of the profession that prompted the participants to enrol in the training course.

Using this aim as the basis, we structured our work starting from a re-reading of the reports written by the participants, treating them as “self-cases” (Quaglino, 2005), i.e. able to show to what extent a participant is willing to reconstruct and analyse his/her own training and professional activity. We went on to identify three criteria that could help us keep track of the threads of this material, and therefore of the training process:

- *Way of writing*, by which we mean the structure of the report: the parts making it up (for example introduction, conclusion) and what sort of elements are taken into consideration in the report.

- *Questions considered*, meaning that we identified in the text the problematic points discussed that were intended as training issues.

- *Relationship indicators*, serving to answer the question: who is it written for? Who is the addressee of the text? Depending on the position adopted in the training relationship, the text is produced in different ways: self-referential (in the form of a diary); aimed at trainers or colleagues or the training group as a whole.

These criteria allowed us to identify a process in the training experience, broken down into three stages: the initial stage where the group forms and acts out its professional fantasies³ in the training relationship, the second stage where the resulting emotional experiences are acknowledged, the third stage where the group tries out possible changes in the training and professional relationship.

We will now give the re-reading of the training process in terms of the criteria identified, which we will use to discuss the participation dynamics underlying the training experience.

A training report: passive hunger and exploration of the extraneous

12 psychologists and 4 trainers took part in the training course. It was organised in 8 group meetings held once a month. It was preceded by 2 or 3 individual information-gathering interviews with the trainers.

These initial interviews were designed to analyse each participant’s training expectations, starting from the previous resources they may be bringing to the group (previous training experiences, experiences of work, practical training, volunteer work, problems encountered in the profession that were to be dealt with, the specific skills that were to be acquired). The results of these interviews were used by each participant to draw up a training plan concerning his/her aims in participating in the course, then shared with the group in a dedicated online space.

The meetings were supported by reports of the daily training and reports of personal professional experiences.

The first products of the training group are the training projects which proved to be an interesting litmus test of the group’s initial premises. Each training project is the expression of the way each participant presents him/herself in the course and of the attitude adopted towards the training setting.

If we examine these from the point of view of relational indicators, the first information we gather is the reference to the initial interviews: the first relational context of the training experience. The training projects in the main made no reference to them. The training projects were instead a self-

³ By fantasy we mean the way of emotionally representing the external reality (object and context). The group’s professional fantasies are therefore shared ways of affectively symbolising the profession. For the concept of affective symbolisation we refer to Carli & Paniccia (1993): “The unconscious system affectively represents the external reality, through a process of affective symbolisation. This representation is at the same time the result not only of the unconscious mental function, but also of the system of perception that introduces signals creating differences: these differences are affectively symbolised in opposing homogenous classes, which, it is important to stress, are emotional classes” (Carli & Paniccia, 1993, pp. 28-29).

introduction, listing what the writer has done: training and work experiences were used to establish allegiances or state the techniques one intends to follow. They gave descriptions of the work contexts, of the people involved, but they did not deal with the problems presented by clients in their requests for intervention. The only question raised is the feeling of impotence, seen as an error to be eliminated by embracing an idealised psychological model. In other projects the initial interviews were mentioned as a chance to reflect on one's attitude in traineeship and work experiences, although the focus was still on the personal sense of impotence. Essentially those who used the initial interview to organise their training project, identified the fantasies marking the way they related to the trainer, those who described professional experiences, identified critical aspects of such experience, but there is no relation between these two aspects: training and professional work.

There seems to be a *split* between the fantasies about one's training expectations and the problems encountered at work, analogous to the split presented in the university context between theory and clinical praxis (Giovagnoli, Giuliano, & Paniccia, 2008). The training demand focuses on professional failure experienced in the impotence of one's role in crisis. It is self-referential insofar as the request is for training regardless of a relationship, of a possible exchange and reciprocity with trainer, colleagues and intervention client, in a vision that separates professional questions from the training relationship. This self-referentiality reveals the "craving" need for answers, the illusion of acquiring a technique that illustrates what must be done to eliminate the feeling of impotence.

The same mode of listing events, found in the training projects, which we call *chronological-descriptive*, is also to be found in the initial reports of the training process: in this mode a chronicle is given of what has happened in the interventions being reported on or during training meetings. Organisational details are the focus of the texts: times, dates, stages of the day, names and phrases quoted. There is no attempt at analysis and interpretation. For instance we find: "this is what I remember of the first meeting with the group of Analysis of the demand".

The events or facts are the main subject of reporting. The person drafting the report is engaged in a written transposition about the problem/situation to be reported, using the passing of time as the organising principle. When emotions are included in the report, they too are treated as descriptions of states of mind and presented as reactions to the events that aroused them.

This mode is marked by the absence of suggested interpretations of what is written. Relational indicators are also absent: generally there is no introduction where the report writer poses the problem of the relationship with the interlocutor, detailing the aims of the report and the ways it can be read. The reports attempt to be objective in presenting the events and emotions experienced, in the fantasy that it is the reader, not explicitly involved, who has to reconstruct the meaning and evaluate the work reported. The writer is therefore free from involvement in producing hypotheses and constructing meanings in the relationship with the report's interlocutor. The position of each participant is organised around whether he acted rightly or wrongly and problems are approached from the point of view of "what must be done, what mustn't be done". This avoidance of the relationship and of taking a pro-active attitude to training, characterises the search for a "strong technique", as well as the need to standardise a reassuring praxis, concentrating on one's own insecurities rather than those of the client. Reporting is an expression of this technicism that seeks to evade from the relationship, being unconnected to the clients and self-referential (Giovagnoli, 2008).

The second mode of report writing that we find alongside the first chronological-descriptive kind, is that in which the report is used *to narrate a story*. The initial premise is not made clear. At times an artistic/literary device is used (metaphor, fable, cartoon) and the aim of reporting is the story itself. We call this the *narrative* mode, and it mainly appears starting from the 4th training session, in a later stage than the beginning, and especially in reports dealing with professional experiences. In this mode the report writer addresses the training group, mentioning possible interpretations of what is written. These hypotheses are visibly detached from the text (written in italics, in parentheses, or in footnotes), as if to underline, graphically too, how hard it is to integrate and use them. The reports often finish with questions, as if to delegate to the group the task of giving shape and continuity to the questions raised by the report. Projects presented in the course of

professional work appear as files attached to the reports, implicitly delegating for a possible use. This request continues to reveal a passive attitude to acquiring competences and to formulating hypotheses of intervention, which in fact are found difficult to integrate and use in the reports. Following the narration of facts and the identification of problems comes the request for a solution to the writer's feeling of impotence, by means of supervision. The request is addressed to the trainers, indicated by the group as leaders: those who know where to go and who must therefore be listened to and followed.

In contrast, the reports on daily training sessions are different in structure: they more commonly make the premises explicit and illustrate elements of the context, aims and issues that will be dealt with in the report. This structure makes them easier to read and understand, supporting the view that the person reporting is starting to deal with the relationship with the group, which does not know *a priori* what is being written. In this phase, there is the shift from a total self-centeredness to the beginning of individuation of the addressees.

While there emerge elements of the relationship with the group as a function of the training, there still seems to be no awareness of the group as a resource for the analysis and development of the profession. Each person confines him/herself to being in the training with and for his/her own experience, revealing the difficulty of engaging in dialog with the various professional experiences present and with the extraneous⁴ that they evoke. There is difficulty in sharing collective aims regarding the psychology profession.

This difference between the two reporting contexts again reflects the split between the training area and the professional area already seen in the training projects.

Training seems called on to rethink the issues emerging in the sessions. This competence is also favored by the work of analysis carried out during the training days with the trainers. On the other hand, the profession in this phase incarnates the self-centered attitude of the person reporting and asking to be seen and evaluated, although there is some initial acknowledgment of the solipsistic attitude adopted up to now towards the usefulness of a position willing to deal with questions concerning the relationship with the clients.

This stage of the training was characterised by the participants' difficulty in writing reports related to their own professional experiences; in the rare cases where they are dealt with, we find the urgency and haste with which the trainees would like to examine the situation perceived as a "crisis that has reached its showdown". Urgency and haste are at the same time a mechanism driving the dynamics of avoidance that seek an immediate, pre-packaged solution, reiterating the non acceptance of the problems of the relationship, and also the postponing of the report writing.

The search for an idealised professional context to embrace, leads one to imagine that the fatigue one undergoes in relating to a client's demand can be dissolved. In the training setting the trainee takes a position of dependence on the trainer, seen as the one with power, from whom approval is obtained, also through reports that are revealed as pretexts for the confirmation of theories and allegiances. In this kind of emotional stance, the idea of participating in acquiring competence is wiped out. Instead it is imagined that the trainer leads the game (it is no coincidence that the trainer is referred to as the leader).

These reporting modes are the outcome of a stage of the training process in which the emotional aspects characterising the relationship with one's clients are starting to be recognised, even though one is not yet willing to deal with them. From a certain distance, there begin to be seen the isomorphisms between the training relationship and the professional relationship.

In the final stage of the training process, a new mode of writing is added, which we have called *exploratory*. As the subject of the report it takes the emotional aspects, which can be used in the reconstruction of a possible meaning of what is reported, by making hypotheses. The relationship with the interlocutor becomes the organising principle of the report. The shared aim suggested in

⁴ For the construct of the extraneous we refer to Carli & Paniccia (2002, p.77) who define the relation with the extraneous as "a mode of relating between inner world and external world. The extraneous is a useless construct if used outside such a relationship. It is what is explored of oneself and of the other, in a relationship that organises and monitors the contrast between the collusive system underlying and granting membership and the demand for reality. The relation with the extraneous is, in short, the experience one has when approaching the unknown other and accepting him as a friend. [...] Relating to the extraneous involves obtaining and exchanging information, which facilitate mutual development and cultural enrichment".

reading the report becomes the premise for the actual use of the report. In this way the report is offered as a stimulus, as a springboard towards the possibility of a shared task. The writer and the reader are not separate entities, but are involved in the elaboration of a collective text, through what is offered by the report writer. Details of the context are given to help the reader understand what is being reported.

Among the indicators concerning relationship, the feelings of fellowship experienced in the production of shared texts seem to have improved relations with the group: colleagues and trainers are quoted, and connections are made between the emotional aspects of the training sessions and the experiences being reported. Questions are identified to be put to the group and some issues that have emerged are re-examined, starting from the initial interviews, such as the fear of being in the relationship. Links are activated between the feeling of *urgency to intervene*, the search for a *strong technique*, experienced in one's professional work, and the *training hunger* expressed in the training projects. Urgency and training hunger, found in work and in training, are re-thought as emotions acted out to fill the sense of emptiness of one's feeling of failure in the perspective of self-centered needs. The awareness of representations acted out in the group seems to prompt a bigger role for interpretation in the reports.

This last stage sees an integration of daily training reports and reports of professional experiences; these are integrated on the level of the questions dealt with: the reports talk about the same issues, but in reference to different contexts. More cases are presented, an attempt is made to bring into play what one has done, and practice is available in a possible rethinking of it. This gives the chance to discuss shared issues concerning the psychology profession, no longer seen as individual failures. The end of the course seems to trigger a greater focus on the working of the group, which also seems to prepare for coping with its break-up.

Fantasies become visible and can be explored. This is the stage when one takes responsibility for the experiences related to training and to the profession and starts to think that training itself is a useful area for dealing with problems, and is no longer idealised, denigrated or seen as threatening.

This new situation in the training experience, and similarly in the psychological function, opens the way, starting from the reconstruction of this training process, to the individualisation of questions about training processes. Crucial, in our view, for those dealing with this matter is *facing up to the limited, fixed resources*, as a competence to gain: the time and space foreseen, the tools available, the skills of participants and trainers. In our experience, the failure to plan how to organise and use training resources (colleagues, trainers, dedicated online space...), and the failure to take into account the organisational limits, shows that the group was organised mainly around a dynamic of passive consumption in a dimension of urgency, which sees the other person being violently negated in his fantasy of being empowered to take possession of his competence. Urgency and haste convey the difficulty of being in a reflective position both in training and in the profession.

So it is precisely in the breaking up of the group, in the closing stage of the training process, when the limit on resources becomes clearest, that the anchorage to the professional situation (presentation of cases and work experiences to discuss) becomes the method for verifying learning.

We could sum up the training pathway as the shift from a situation where training and profession are split, where relationship is not explored (training projects) and emotional aspects are acted out, to one in which one accepts one's fantasies and experiences and starts to use the training as a resource area to deal with questions and problems encountered in one's work. In this reconstructed process, the change that has taken place thanks to the training does not lie so much in solving problems, as in a new way of being in the training relationship.

The criteria identified signal this development: from a solipsistic, self-referential position to one that takes the other person into account, whether it be the client of the intervention, the trainer or the colleagues in the group.

The way of writing for instance develops from a mere description of the facts expressed, in which there is no trace of a suggestion of how they could be used or dealt with in the relationship, to a mode that attempts a construction of sense by reflecting on the lived experiences. In this new

mode, the other person is directly involved and becomes the interlocutor with whom the report is organised.

The issues raised range from the experience of personal failure and the sense of one's own impotence to problems concerning the context where one works.

The report therefore becomes the tool that can verify the position occupied in the relationship.

For the present authors, the training pathway ends with the work produced for this article, in which the need to verify learning involved us in the creative re-reading of the experience using criteria that led us to re-think and re-organise. This work of reconstruction enabled us to consciously identify the resources helping competences to grow, and the limits on which to work. The use of the criteria reorganised the reading, which we feel is accessible even for those who did not take part in that process, with the intent of making the shift from a private dimension of the training process to a social dimension which can be shared, communicated and discussed.

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