

Broken wings and the shadow of the disconnected root – Transformation of dissociative self states in the analytic group. /

Sagi Berg Sharon

Good morning I'm going to focus today on the transformation of dissociated self-states in a group of difficult patients.

When I think about difficult patients, I have in mind patients who suffer from long-time effect of complex trauma, patients with the life experience of neglect, chronic abuse and damaged relationships. In addition, I always remind myself of Bromberg's remark that the difficulty is not in the patient alone but in the relations.

The arrival of a patient with such a life experience to a dynamic group, sometimes constitutes his first, challenging opportunity to belong to a group for a significant period. So, there he is, in the group - the complex entity in which he is supposed to get better. At times he declares himself as worthless, depressed, unable to keep up any work, he describes his failure in maintaining relationships, his anxiety, suicidal thoughts and so on. At other times this is implicitly implied by his behavior - these are his **known broken wings**.

It's relatively easy for the group to acknowledge them and while it's painful when the group mirrors one's shattered image, at least it feels familiar. While holding in mind Foulkes's idea of a 'curative hall of mirrors', I'd like to argue that the process of mirror reactions between the members in the group could also make things overwhelming and unbearable for the 'difficult patient', since the group mirrors, sometimes without any notice, reflect one's unknown, dissociative self states.

Speaking about dissociative, "not me" self-states requires one to relate to the connection between dissociation and complex trauma. Complex trauma involves repetitive, chronic stressors. It involves harm from caregivers or from peers and it's not a single time event. The child feels that there is no getaway – so the capacity to leave the present, to escape at least in the mind, is through dissociation. Stern (2009) wrote that the dissociative mechanism enforces strict separation between different self-states, when parts of self are exiled and turned into “not me”.

It's not surprising that since dissociated self-states are inaccessible to the conscious self, dissociation also causes parts of the self to be inaccessible to others in the individual's relational world. In the analytic group it means that each member might unexpectedly

need to deal not only with those "not me" parts of himself, but also with those of the other members. That is a challenging and stressful mission, one that for a difficult patient might destabilize the sheer sense of self. While most of the time the group as-a-whole can be curative in helping to acknowledge the "not me" parts of its members, there are times where the collision between the different "not me" parts of the members has such an overwhelming effect that it can be discerned only through an enactment.

I'm going to share with you some meaningful events from my group but first I would like to refer to the metaphor of the **disconnected roots**. When a child suffers from complex trauma, he develops a deep sense of shame. He sees himself as bad, helpless, unlovable. Parts of his personality are impacted and altered, accessibility to self-states that contain happiness, trustfulness, playfulness, anger, self-esteem is blocked. At times we have shades of knowing and can notice the shadow of these feelings, **this is the shadow of the disconnected roots**.

The group consists of:

- Five patients, the age range is between 28-32. Three men and two women.
- I treated all of them during their individual therapy.
- Each patient started therapy while suffering from deep depression; the men were unemployed and were heavy users of weed, one was suicidal, none of them had any significant relationship in the past years.
- I believed that being part of a group will help them work on the intersubjective level and would allow a reparative experience in the peer group.
- Tova, Monique , Enrique and Ami are diagnosed with Narcissistic personality disorder, Gil was diagnosed with Schizoid personality disorder.
- Each one suffered a complex trauma in childhood.
- The group met for two years once a week for ninety minutes

Let's follow the process of transformation of dissociative self states in the group:

וינייטה (בשל חיסיון מטופלים איננה מפורסמת)

We'll soon return to the group but first I would like to analyze the flow of events:

As you probably noticed, for a while the discourse reflected the "known broken wings" and took place in a light atmosphere. Yet, simultaneously, in an undercurrent stream, unbearable emotions that stem from dissociated self-states led to enactment.

What happened when Ami's mirror unintentionally reflected not only Gil's familiar weakness and inability, but also a dissociated self-state, one that was expelled from consciousness due to Gil's childhood trauma? That moment in which the entire group joked at Gil's expense – was a moment in which he felt humiliated, helpless and under an attack that he could not defend against, an attack experienced as attempting to destroy him, that had led to a feeling of total annihilation. It was a moment that had repeated with terrible precision the sudden, terrible laughter of the abusing group of his adolescent past. At that moment, a switch between self states occurred, and the familiar defeated, submissive self state cleared place to a self-state of a terrified, humiliated child.

Gil's experience as a victim repeated itself, this time with Ami as the aggressor. But here, Tova and Monique played an important role as witnesses not only of the repetition of the trauma (Stern, 2009) but also in their willingness to believe and acknowledge the traumatic event. Ferenczi (1932/1988) brings to our attention the importance of the absence with regards to Trauma- the absence of help, of witnessing, of containing. This absence leaves the traumatized person in pain without the trauma being represented in memory as a narrative. Unlike the Traumatic event in his youth, when Gil was alone, and the predators were unseen, hiding behind the computer's screen, now Gil had witnesses and could experience- through their tears and concern- the women's recognition of his suffering. This time, the resemblance between the two situations, as experienced by Gil, was close enough and yet distant enough.

And me, what was my part in the enactment? For many previous meetings I ignored the group endless naggings directed at Gil. It seems that my own "not me" self-states, those who has to do with shame and helplessness, interpreted the ongoing teasing as subtle abuse and left me dissociated. In fact, the dissociation was so strong that it completely obliterated all that I knew from the individual therapy about Gil's trauma. It was only when I saw Gil's wounded gaze and felt the sudden, painful contraction in my stomach, that I managed to re-access my exiled 'not me' self-states and decipher what was enacted in the group.

When Gil isolated himself in the waiting room, and I, the "care taker", did not ignore his suffering but opened the door and "entered" the room in which he was sitting, crying, I unconsciously repaired an event in which, his mother stood outside the door of his room without offering help or calming him down. I think it would be correct to argue that the message I communicated to Gil – that he did nothing wrong and it was not his fault that he became a victim – was also a message to those shamed, humiliated, helpless dissociative self states of the other members.

The enactment brought to the room emotional materials that until then were inaccessible. Now, the members could reflect on their own internal movement between vulnerability and aggression, between fear of being humiliated to the urge to humiliate the other. Reflection through the lens of abusive relationships and their recurrence in the group helped us acknowledge that there is a connection between the bullying that Gil was facing as the group kept telling him that he should change his looks, to the repeated degrading speech regarding the "ugliness of the female body". Tova understood how early in life she learned to "disappear" in order to escape the harassment of her peers. Monique acknowledged how the Doll was her only refuge from her intrusive, unstable mother. All members could now relate to the function of the "Doll with no inside" – both as a hiding place from the world and as a mechanism that enables detachment from unbearable feelings.

Ami could see himself reflected in Gil. He understood how threatening it was for him to hear Gil talking about his feeling of being unattractive and rejected and how it elicited his own pain. Ami shared his long-lasting shame resulting from his childhood trauma as a fat boy. He spoke with pain about the years that he spent in his room- lonely and helpless. With a certain surprise he could acknowledge and take responsibility for his abusive, aggressive 'not me' part that enjoyed mocking and shaming Gil. Enrique shared how as a young boy he learned to let his "beasty part" cover as a mask over his 'helpless part'. He said that he hates the young humiliated child in him.

Together we could understand why was it so important for the members that Gil dated. For Monique who repeatedly experienced unsuccessful dates, it was a way to be in contact with her fear of staying single. Ami said that Gil's defeatism reinforced his sense that he too, is doomed, and that it was unbearable.

Recovery from trauma involves a reversal of the experience and of the dynamics that were part of the trauma. It involves the ability to tolerate torturing memories, to tell about the trauma, to cry about it, to experience the feelings in the presence of witnesses within a safe space. The process of transformation of dissociative self states is prolonged. Time after time, the patient finds himself attacked by the same "not-me" self-states that he already believed that he owns. Again, and again, emotional, somatic, and cognitive memories that had not yet been processed evoke powerful pain. Fortunately, in the safe space of the group the patient is not alone. The other members who already met those dissociated self-states and heard their stories, can help with the delicate mission of creating the needed links and building bridges between states.

In the safety of my group, members could gradually try and leave their hiding place behind the mask or the doll. Feelings and thoughts like: 'I don't have a personality I can present to others', 'I'm ashamed of myself and want to hide,' were replaced by the will to explore and dare. Daring to show the pain of 'not being known', ability to stay with the vulnerable feeling of 'not being significant', daring to admit one's aggressiveness. In the discourse, where "not me" self-states could be integrated and acknowledged by their owners, there was less needing to inflict pain on others as a way of defense. Instead, members could get in touch with their vulnerability, fear, aggression, humiliation and shame. The slow transformation of the dissociated self states re-opened an inner space that for many years has been shut. In this space, each member could re-connect to his disconnected roots, could reveal his needs while giving recognition to the other's need to feel connected, significant, safe and loved.

The group space, with its complex interpersonal relationships, summons the emergence of dissociative self-states that sometimes do not come into play in individual therapy. I believe that attending a therapy group is a crucial step in the treatment of difficult patients, provided that the therapist is aware of the strong dissociative forces and is willing to cope with them. For me, in a magical way, it felt that now, as my patients' roots are better connected, their wings might be able to carry them higher.

- Berger, M. the Dynamics of *Mirror* Reactions and their Impact on the Analytic Group. In J. L. Kleinberg, *The Wiley, Blackwell Handbook of Group Psychotherapy (1st Ed.)*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. DOI: 10.1002/9781119950882.ch10
- Bromberg, P. M (2011). *Awakening the Dreamer*. Routledge. New York.
- Dupont, J. (Ed). (1988). *The Clinical Dairy of Sandor Ferenczi*. Harvard University Press.
- Gans, J.S & Alonso, A. (1998) Difficult Patients: Their Construction in Group Therapy *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 48(3), 311-326
- Grossmark, R. Wright, F. (2013). *The One and the Many, Relational Approaches to Group Psychotherapy, Repairing the Irreparable*. Ch. 5. Häftad
- Sagi Berg, Sharon. (2019). "Hall of Broken Mirrors"—Enactment in an Analytic Group of "Difficult Patients". *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, Vol 69, Issue 1
- Stern, D.B . (2009). Shall the Twain Meet? Metaphor, Dissociation, and Cooccurrence. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 29:79-90

Sagiberg1@gmail.com