

Through the addiction experience “together”: when the word rebuilds relations

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Abstract

Addiction situations (drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling...) make the person and their families feel ashamed and guilty, stigmatised and unheard. Already weakened families not only doubt their inner links also break their connection with the outside world, putting themselves in a situation of isolation and loneliness. This paper gets together two research trends: the one of the autobiographic methods and techniques within an existential-phenomenological approach and the one based on rebuilding parental and social relationships within a systemic relational model.

This research is based on a survey carried out on 15 parents (13 mums and 2 dads) who experienced the drug addiction of their own children and that found in support groups concrete help in facing the situation. “Sharing” their feelings about their problem turned out to be the most important step that lead into a slow and tough process of self-consciousness and renaissance. That helped to rebuild their fabric of relationships or simply to open up to others. The parents wrote down on a shared *diary* and autobiographical texts their most significant moments and emotional experiences when living this with their children. The benefit stands in the shared experience and in the possibility of a collective renaissance.

Key-words: addictions – family - writing – self-help – take care

1. Introduction

Relationships are questioned when a member of the family is going through a drug addiction experience. Even the slightest change within the small family microsystem can affect to other connected microsystems, for instance the neighbourhood, friendships, professional and scholar relations and so on. It seems like a wave that reaches everywhere and shakes the whole social system. On one hand, the addiction (as the ever increasing pathological gambling or alcoholism) provokes in victims psychophysical changes, and consequently trigs drug withdrawal until they lose control or become aggressive towards their loved ones. On the other hand, their relatives and especially their parents feel confused and experience different emotions, such as a strong feeling of blame and pervasive distress. Life experiences and complex interactions make hopes and lights search difficult. The most recurring and harmful behaviour of impotence is the defence against social stigma, that leads to isolation: shutting, falling silent, hiding out. The initial silence is fundamental to get to know and to elaborate difficulty; but it becomes gradually a dangerous enemy. This latter hinders the sharing of the fight with an intangible soul’s suffering, that destroys relationships and shocks all existences. Pathologic addiction is never a single person experience, but it compromises and harms whole personal-social relationships (work, free time, etc...). Not rarely people risk to lose work or to commit crimes against things/people to earn illegal money for drugs. A subject suffering from addiction is an element of a system, or of a complex of elements in constant interaction: the modification of a single element transforms a series of related relations (directly/indirectly), as a long wave and the short-range repercussion. The attention on the main

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relations, as family, becomes essential, because it is the first level that needs intervening. The familiar involvement in the therapy is an unavoidable element, both in preventive paths (for the first signals identification of an addiction manifestation) and in therapeutic paths. Firstly, families need to be supported by social services, that can offer tangible answers, avoiding to leave them in helplessness and fear. Then the path continues in the increase and in accompanying of awareness that concern familiar relationships. Families need to understand their own relational model (that in the main cases is implied) to modify it slowly but in a sharp way. The mutual-help group is a precious space because of its relational support, even if it does not replace direct and specialized interventions. Groups become a way to elaborate new relational styles within household, that spring from self-consciousness and from the awareness of the past, of the way to perceive parenthood and relationship. The mutual-help experience becomes essential through a constant help, given by weekly meetings and by some internal rules (anonymity, judge abstention, comprehension and listening). This experience try to voice emotions and feelings, to monitor changes and to support motivation through testimony of families, that have faced for themselves same difficulties. (Steinberg 2002; Silverman, Folgheraiter, 1985).

The carried survey, included in this prospect of studies, wants to explore conditions which allow the openness of a weak person (how is the family of a drug/alcohol addicted); then it continues to control the efficiency of an autobiographical/pedagogic-narrative method, based on the existential-phenomenological approach. In the search path, collected testimonies and their elaboration are fundamental; but also the predisposition of a suitable training setting plays a significant role in disclosing thoughts and emotions (settled in everybody's experiences) and in finding an experiential knowledge of daily lives of each person and in the whole group. In this work of meeting and experience narration, the border between the *private* family dimension and the *public* dimension (given by the contact to other families, local context and services) becomes even thinner.

The original questions of the survey were: "How can families "learn together" from the mutual (and different) experience of family members' addiction? How can narrative practice and autobiographic exercise support the awareness-sharing-involvement work of each person? Under what circumstances can the group experience be the added value in a reconstruction path of their familiar relationships?".

2. Methods

The research questions have been developed mainly using self-biographical writing tools. This choice has been suggested by the research participants themselves, all of them parents belonging to the mutual help group that expressed the need to leave a legacy of their meetings, based solely on oral narrative. This need has been captured and the methodological choice was oriented to the research aims, as the self-biographical tool is useful in detecting the learning *processes* based on *reciprocity* (Formenti, 1998) and in giving evidence to the acquisition and sharing of a knowledge that is based on experience (Jedlowski, 1994 ; Mortari, 2003); the participants to the self-biography writing training thus have had the chance of "looking inside themselves" and have created a place for their collective memory: reprocessing the meaning of their own experiences has brought to sense making, important both for the individual and the community.

A "free" journal, without specific guidance, had been previously used: the group participants took it on charge at the end of each meeting and kept it for a week, noting down thoughts, questions, poems, autobiographical bits in close connection with what was happening in their families and with their children. The text from the journal has been used in the course of the research in two

ways: as an anchor to the specific stimula in the path (to give a concrete shape to some topics or to elaborate on crucial issues), or as relevant narrative excerpts to highlight episodes and daily life events that are significant in the formative path of their family members.

The research participants were all parents of kids and young persons (aged 18-40) who had dealt or were dealing with drug addiction. The group was formed of 13 mothers and 2 fathers, with regular attendance. In 10 weekly meetings of about 90 minutes various topics were explored: as a deliberate choice, a specific focus was given to each meeting, while fostering crossed interconnections among the topics. For the heterogeneous composition of the group of parents, with regard to age and cultural background, various writing styles have been found, also very different among each other, but no refusal nor explicit resistance arose, as the writing course was freely chosen by the participants. In the whole course 12 autobiographical writing exercises were done, in 5 major areas: the significance of words, the experience and daily relationship of family life, prejudices and stereotypes, building a group and its relationships, the openness to the future.

After each writing suggestions the group was given free writing time, at the end of which the text were read with no individual feedback from the participants; only shared thoughts and insights were collected before the end of the meetings. Together with the facilitator, two observers have attended the meetings, who produced synthetic reports about each meeting, capturing relevant feedbacks on the emotive, relational and process levels.

The final rework was made by the identification of tags and of categories to make comparisons, based on an open codification (Tarozzi, 2008). The whole research and formation path has taken place in an association (Ass. La Ricerca di Piacenza) that has dealt with addiction prevention and rehabilitation for thirty years.

3. Findings

The first significant aspect emerging from the research is that the autobiographical exercise offers the possibility to connect meanings (Bateson, 1992) and to reconstruct an overall picture that is usually broken in the experience of family suffering. Pain, in fact, divides and creates meaningless voids; it disrupts the person and the relational context where he/she lives. Going through the struggles of drug addiction, having effective educational tools at your disposal, means helping the subject to search for meanings and interlace dimensions of life distant from one another. One parent writes:

“When the drug gets inside a family life, it devours everything: affects, passions, work. Not only those who use the substance are linked to it, but the others too: It is like if parents, brothers, friends are paralyzed by this monster and without realizing it, they play the game (...). It is like being decomposed on the inside, creating disorder even outside”.

It happens very often that family members try to oppose to the intimate and relational disorder that addictions bring, either with great firmness and intransigence or with a sort of silent assent, but tinged with despair. Having a space and a time where this fragmentation can be accepted and taken in charge means to counteract the sense of insignificance and surrender that very often a parent of a drug addict feels. The ability to write is considered, not without fears, as a possible path of recreation of the self and reconnection with others. The risk of an outburst and rumors (Heidegger, 1971), which appears also in the written forms, is limited by the orientation given to reflexivity. The re-reading and re-writing of one's own story, as an individual and as a member of a family, offer the possibility to reconnect parts of oneself that were overshadowed or forgotten, and it is precisely in the space of ‘never seen’, ‘never thought’, ‘never granted’ that deep potentials lies for itself and for others.

In the experience of parents joining self-help groups, writing turned to be a paradoxical formative exercise: At the same time it limits emotionality and confusion - but makes sure that this confusion emerges in order to allow creative intuitions - it creates a dwelling for words and meanwhile it goes beyond them allowing us to explore the unknown.

F., a mother, writes:

“The need to see more clearly inside of me has pushed me to take pen and paper, to free that part of me hidden or prisoner, thus giving life to my intimate dialogue. After writing I feel lighter, clearer, I almost feel like I love the world around me”.

The opportunity to look inside oneself is a precious chance in the healing paths of family context touched by addictions, since heavy projections unfold in them and there is a subtle game of search for the whipping boy. Moving the center of gravity from the outside to the inside, we can stop blaming others and reality for our personal discomforts and each member of the family can personally respond for his/her own limits.

The power of the word (Freire, 2002) is experimented: the possibility of giving a name to things brings with it the opportunity to re-establish meanings by removing some labels and superstructures from what is taken for granted and what is connoted with prejudice and stigma. The experience of the self-help group has allowed us to search together the right words; those that restore dignity to the personal story and that allow us to face reality in a more authentic, more real and therefore more incisive way: To name situations with greater accuracy, it allows us to act more punctually and effectively.

A second aspect that emerged in this experience of education and research is the recovery of *widespread parenting* and the *strengthening of active citizenship*. The 72% of parents who took part to self-help paths are committed to an internal or external voluntary activity, more or less linked to the phenomenon of addictions. The factual passage that takes place is the transformation of shame into modesty: If shame is that state that springs from the feeling of being subject to others' judgment, to be inferior or not corresponding to the model, then decency arises from the desire to protect something precious, even in the disintegration and suffering. Writing in a community context means breaking a sterile silence, although preserving the secret and the mystery that accompany human dynamics. In this sense, parents have developed a greater “benevolence” towards themselves and have lightened the sense of guilt that inevitably becomes embedded in their own history because of their children's drug addiction.

The autobiographical approach returns the uniqueness of each person and each family, bringing out the variety of paths and this testifies the personal way in which everyone can get out of the problem or, otherwise, find the way home. The re-discovery of the uniqueness of their own family life gives to the parents the opportunity to re-attach themselves to it, even in the suffering it provokes and to strengthen the trust networks that have been strained hard.

When a person writes within a community context and delivers words and feelings to another person, s/he not only frees himself from something heavy (letting off the steam), but starts a new story and experiences the co-construction of a unique social history. Who writes carries out an initiative, and ‘who says initiative says responsibility’ (Ricoeur, 1989). The common narrative promotes fiduciary relationships because the other is not purely passive, but relies on part of one's own experience to accept the different gaze on reality, of which the other is the bearer. E., a mother, writes:

“Writing helps me truly a lot to look inside me, to overcome my fear of being alone for the rest of my life. Re-reading what I write gives me the awareness that something, even if slowly, is changing in me. The despair of a week or a month before is reduced, the contours gets faded. I learned to have more trust in myself and in my actions. Writing helps me to think differently”.

The opening of the experiential field (Bertolini, Caronia, 1993) and the widening of possibilities is a third dimension that has been highlighted in the educational and research path: *writing* and *writing together* about one's own history of difficulty and suffering has implicitly created greater

trust in life and a concrete hope for the future. The testimony of others and the knowledge of not being alone in crossing a significant ford offers parents a fruitful 'phase shift', putting them in a position to regain energy to fight against addiction and, at the same time, unconditionally welcome their children.

Conclusions

One of the biggest benefits of this process of education and research can be identified in the experience of *generativity*. Regarding the relationship between parents and drug addicted children, we can highlight how the parental exercise took place in a renewed way, giving life to them again and giving to themselves and to their children the possibility to re-born. If it is true that we born more than once (Zambrano 2004, Arendt 2000), in the parents' experience to re-start / re-give birth has first of all meant taking distance, namely accepting the partiality of one's responsibility and the limit of one's commitment.

Parents who take care of themselves in the experience of their child's use of substance learn to distinguish error from failure, others' mistake from being wrong, and their child from their group of friends. In this sense, autobiographical writing is a 'discriminatory' practice since it asks to separate, to discern, to pass through the thoughts and in doing this it makes a paradox: The more it distinguishes, the more it mixes and approaches. It is exactly in tracing the perimeter between one's own existence and that of others that family intimacy and social conviviality are re-designed. In delimiting a territory of meaning, the act of writing allows the subject and the family to position themselves, to be there, to *stay in the situation*, which are essential prerequisites for planning in authenticity. *Generativity*, as a category of a new welfare, (Fondazione Zancan, 1994) develops when a subject modifies the perspective of his/her questions: not only "What can others do for me?" but mainly "What can I do for others?"

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