Reflections on technique 'Raising one's hand' in a multi-family group

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The Multi-family Group als tool in our quest of re-linking different generations.

In the work of Badaracco, we find a theoretical framework that caters to our intuitions about working with a ‘group’ of families, with the aim of the intergeneration dialogue.

The clinical setup is clear in its simplicity: bring together different families, with different generations, and let them speak together.

Badaracco suggests to frame the task of the group at the start of the meeting: to explain in general terms why we come together, at what frequency, that the group is open or closed, who are the conductors. He invites everyone to be as spontaneous as possible, but also to respect everyones need to talk or to keep silent. Hereto he explicates two rules: when you are speaking, you speak from within yourself. You can take the time you need. If someone else wants to speak meanwhile, just raise your hand. The conductors keep the order, so that everyone can speak and will have time to speak.

In our MFG we find that the invitation to raise the and before speaking triggers a lot, in both participants as conductors: people speak without raising their hand, the rule is questioned, the hand gesture becomes a careless act to accompany speaking. Silent thoughts and reactions were provoked: How can I speak? Should I wait my turn? Will I remember what I was going to say? We're not in kindergarten anymore. I want to speak now and not later. I now wish to respond to what has been said. The rule provokes a lot of resistance. In what follows we make some reflections on this technique.

1. *Contradiction between to speak spontaneous and free, but to have to wait your turn*

Buntly said, in an individual psychoanalysis the only burdens to a spontaneous and free speech are the impact of the own unconscious defenses, and the objective, external limit of time. This gives the analysand a lot of freedom to speak for himself. As psychoanalyst you are present on two levels: as a guard of the external frame, and in internal revery in resonance with the unconscious of the patient.

How to guarantee this free speech in a group? How to create a safe place to think and speak spontaneous in a group? Can the conductor just put the rule to speak freely forward, and be abstinent? If one speaks freely, where begins the freedom of the other? Where lies the limit of the responsibility of the conductor in ‘organizing’ the interactions? We know well these questions from working with therapeutic groups. We know how free speech in groups is influenced by unconscious group dynamics. The therapist has as role to reveal these hidden patterns and repetitions, and to invite every participant to relate it to him-/herself.

The MFG has a lot in common with the therapeutic group, although there are some fundamental differences. The first difference is that there is no equality in relations between the members: in a random group all members are equal in not knowing each other from the external world. In a MFG there are members from within the same family, while they don’t know the others. Furthermore, in our case, patients know each other also from the ward, and have ‘experience’ in group therapy, whereas the parents don’t know the others and often never spoke in group before. The fact that 2 generations are present at the same time also implies that rather than ‘talked about family members’, family interactions are present and acted out. Another difference is the size of the group: in theory a MFG surpasses easily the common 8 - 10 persons of a therapeutic group. Thirdly, as an open group, the composition varies every time.

All these aspects together make every meeting an unpredictable and new experience. Unlike a therapeutic group, where patterns can be seen and named across sessions, in the MFG there is something of an ‘acuteness’ in every meeting: it happens here and now. On the side of the therapist, this requires great alertness, attention to all non-verbal signals and interactions, and an 'active' presence.

Given this context, the rule of raise your hand and speak in turns seems a very natural and logical way ‘to organize the speech’. Speaking in turns - which is fundamentally different from spontaneous dialogue - seems to provide an ‘external’ boundary to the free speech in a group environment: my free thought and speech has its right to exist, but is surrounded by other spoken thoughts, that can be very different from what I was saying. It is an external boundary that the conductor doesn’t need to incarnate: as time, it structures the session from outside, as a third, independently from the conductor: ’Here, we speak in terms.’

When we say: it is a very natural way to ‘organize’ speech in a large group, we must confess that we do not find it very easy to apply in real life. As said before, in our MFG we encounter may defenses from the participants to respect this rule. In reflecting on this difficulty, we formulate different potential reasons:

* This way of talking together in turns introduces a whole new experience. An awkward, potentially alienating experience at first. One’s personal speech can be answered by a long silence of the group. One’s very emotional sharing can be followed by a reaction on a topic-of-45-minutes-earlier. You must support that you don’t have a direct feedback on what you said. Haven spoken, without direct feedback, may cause many new questions: What did I just said? How people will think about me? Am I understood?
* People are challenged to “hold back”. The normal flow of conversation, action – reaction, becomes impossible. One has to hold on to one's thoughts and one is confronted with the possibility of "thinking about" one's thought.

Being alone with all this questions and thinking is not always easy to bear. A way out of this uneasy feeling is questioning the rule and the role of the conductors: should they not be more active, comforting, offer more explanations and support? The group tends to organise a dependency mode of the conductors.

For us as conductors, it meant a challenge to translate these attacks into a concern for a safe environment to accommodate speaking. Because different from therapeutic groups, the conductors of a MFG are invited to participate at the group as family member themselves. Badaracco suggests that a conductor needs to include himself in the group, and also speak from within himself.

In our own experience, we adapted the position of a ‘host’ of the group: as host we want to ensure the conditions that people can have a meaningful experience. This means that we as conductor are present at three levels at the same time: as a professional, with tools and expertise, as a guard of the frame; as a person with an own lived experience that you can share, or not; and as someone who simultaneously and together with the group discovers things that have never been thought or been spoken about before.

In the role as a host, we feel comfortable to introduce and refer to the necessity of the rule. It makes us dream about one day someone from the group will explain these rules to the newcomers, as if it were obvious, the wallpaper of the group.

Because once the rule does his work, it introduces a whole new dimension to the group work. There is the external speech, the words that are said by someone and are heard by everyone, but there is also a very secure space to have an internal speech. A space is created in everyone's mind, a space where you can think without the pressure that you have to speak. In this way, even more than free speech, free thought is exercised.

The rule demands that one can be alone with one's thoughts for a while. The rule sets high expectations for the participants, it challenges the capacity to be alone, to be alone with one’s own thoughts. At the same time, the technique also shows the believe in one’s potential to be alone, and to have a mental space. The rule pushes the participants to another way of speaking and thinking.

Once participants have experienced that they can be secure in this non-conformist, special attitude, the group work can go to a next level.

By speaking in terms, something happens with the temporality of the group speech. A particular form of free association takes places. Not one coming form one’s unconscious, but coming from many different unconsciouses, that are interwoven on another level. Of course this level of connectedness is not visible at first sight, nor can it be intended. It happens. That is the magic of the MFG: the extended mind.

Sometimes this magic is ‘visible’: the different speeches comes together in a central idea of theme, that connect the participants on another level. But more often, in our experience, this magic is felt without the possibility to point or formulate it in words. Like a knit, it knits everyone together, respecting everyone's own individuality in the group. This is a important paradox: by being in strong connection with your own inner world (your own sadness, anger, …), you can relate in a stronger way to the group, and lose yourself a little bit in the group.

We believe this is a very important experience for both the youngsters who suffered from a intense, psychotic experience, and the family members who often felt disconnected with their child. By having a shared experience, not based on projective (‘he is like this’) or cognitive (‘I know that he is like that’) principles, but based on an affective attunement, the relationship between parents and child can find a new vital force.

1. *The act of ‘raising you hand’*

Raising you hand to ask for your turn seems logical and natural, but at the same time: it is a hole something. Especially ‘in verbal therapy’.

In verbal therapy it is rare that the act of speech is accompanied by an active, corporal deed. We could consider it as the contrary of the passive, regressive position on the couch in the analyst cabinet. By raising their hands, participants are invited to use their body on an active way, to demand and to introduce their speech.

How does that works? The processes of being in a state of whit drawl, connected at the same time with the outer and inner world, and then beginning to feel something very important, very personal, let this rooting and wringing, maybe beginning to consider: will I speak about it or not, and then, intentionally or by something stronger then yourself: your hand raises. How is the connection between your head that is thinking, your unconscious that is working, and your body that raises your hand? Raising your hand is not a reflex, nor a tic, probably well-thought, but often also impulsive: it reacts to an inner, affective, not fully conscious impuls.

Again: being able to to let go of control over your body to the extent that you can rely on your hand, is not obvious. Resulting in may questions about the need and the function of this raising-hand-thing.

It is true that raising hands is a gesture which has a number of possible meanings, depending on the context of the gesture. We refer to the wikipedia page about this topic. To name a few: the hands up to wave or do a high five, the hands lifted up as a demonstration of adoration in the context of religious worship (or a good concert), the raised hand of the Statue of Liberty as welcoming gesture to the immigrants who arrived by boat to the USA, or as a part of the legal gesture when taking an oath or to vote. And of course: in school. We want to cite from wikipedia, because it sounds somewhat familiar:

*Hand-raising is hugely important in enabling* [interaction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interaction) *in group contexts, as it enforces order and turn-allocation.*[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:1-18)[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:2-19) *The gesture also demonstrates* [respect](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Respect) *for others, as one is not obligating the teacher to pause whilst giving instruction or teaching, or interrupting other students.*[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:3-20) *However, it may be unnecessary in some teaching settings, such as during an informal conversation, a classroom party or in the playground.*[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:2-19) *The times at which students choose to raise their hands reflects their teacher’s expectations in different situations.*[[21]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:4-21) *Students are highly capable of shifting between answering questions spontaneously and raising their hand while waiting to be chosen by the teacher to speak. Hand-raising reflects the “organised dependency” of students, seeking permission from their teacher, so they can each be given a fair chance to contribute.*

*Students have identified raising their hands as a key discussion skill which is partly responsible for creating a ‘Safe Space’ in their classroom, alongside a teacher who is encouraging of class participation and peers who are respectful and exhibit good discussion skills.*[[21]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raising_hands%2523cite_note-:4-21)

It reveals an important task that has to been taken in a MFG, the role of keeping track and distributing turns. And as this task may be culturally be associated with a teacher, this is: a hierarchic figure, it can be interesting/necessarily that this turn-keeper does not intervene in a therapeutic way during the session. To keep things separated and clear.

In any case, the link with education offers us a possible insight into the resistance to raising hands, namely from the authority dynamics associated with it. Participants may feel infantilized and humiliated by this demand to raise their hand before they speak. As they may feel also by the fact that they need to obey to a rule, and wait their turn.

In supervision we talked about this uncomfortable situation as therapists, not teachers. The supervisor helped us to see that raising your hand is more than just a pupil’s action, by pointing at the importance of the time between having raised your hand and waiting for your turn. In this time, everything is different in the inner world. You know you will have your turn to speak, that people will listen to your words. Often, your body gets more tension, maybe you got nerveus, maybe all your thoughts got more clear, or less clear. Maybe you don’t hear anything more from the person who is talking and you collapse into your own world. When your name is called, you speak from a different place within yourself.