# A Bridge Over Troubled Water

Conflicts and Reconciliation in Groups and Society

Edited by Gila Ofer

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CHAPTER FOUR

Conciliation and comfort: group work with Bedouin grandmothers

Smadar Ben-Asher and Wisam Maree

Introduction

Facilitated group work, as opposed to a social discourse that naturally takes place in an encounter between people who share a common background or interest, is accepted and widespread in the West. The ability of a group to contribute to its members has been described in numerous studies (Whitaker, 1985; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) in the context of providing an experience of shared concerns, social support, expressing anger, sorrow, loss, frustration, failure, a shared yearning for solutions, personal growth, acknowledgment of inner strengths, comfort, and conciliation. Constituting, as it does, a branch of Western psychology, group work is virtually unknown in Arab society in general and Bedouin society in particular. Arab society, which is fundamentally collectivist, sees the individual as part of a family (hamoula = clan) without the individual foundations with which the individual comes to the therapy group that is familiar in the West. Consequently, building group work with older women, namely Bedouin grandmothers, most of whom are uneducated, is of particular interest and is the focus of the study described in this chapter.
On the initiative of the social services in the village, a group of grandmothers from the Bedouin sector in Israel met for group work facilitated by an Arab psychologist. In addition to belonging to the same social group and of the same gender, all of the members of the group served as child-minders for the babies and infant children of their sons and daughters-in-law. This task, which is performed with their consent, but not always willingly, raises intergenerational, social, and educational issues, and especially questions concerning their own personal identity. Child-minder grandmothers experience a common fate of intergenerational and intercultural transition in which their past work as “good child-minders” of their own children has lost its potency in the face of a new and alien present and its attendant demands, of which they find it difficult to be a part. While the younger generation leaves the Bedouin village to study or to work in non-traditional workplaces, the grandmothers retain the role they have fulfilled for several decades, but now their experience and sociocultural knowledge, which is grounded in the culture and traditions of the past, is found to be unsuited to the new world that has come knocking on their doors by means of the younger generation—the parents of their grandchildren. Working in a group enables these women to share their personal and family experiences, family tensions, secrets from the past, and especially to jointly examine their personal identity within the collective structure that flattens, restricts, and diminishes this identity.

The formation of the group, how it functioned, how it was facilitated, the content that arose within it, the interpersonal and group dynamics, and the group narrative that was woven from the stories of the participants is presented in this chapter in an attempt to illuminate and expose the deep significance of the group’s work within a traditional society, both on the personal level of the participants and the collective level of the group. The chapter examines these issues from two perspectives: social representation theory and group facilitation theories.

The I is we: collective social representations in Bedouin society

Social identity is defined as the way in which an individual perceives himself in the context of his relationships with others. It is the combination of the “I” and the “we”, expanding the self beyond the individual, and contains within it the other members of the group as well (Smith & Mackie, 1995). An individual’s group identity includes broad information that encompasses numerous aspects of life such as history, culture, beliefs, customs, language, place of residence, and occupation, and forms the basis accepted by him/her and the other members of the group regarding how to act within said group. Moreover, membership of the group enables the individual to feel a sense of security and accords meaning to his/her actions and the events that take place in his/her life, which creates a sense that he/she is part of something bigger (Wagner, 1993).

Social representation theory (Moscovici, 1984, 1993, 1994) is based on the premise that any inner discourse that takes place within the individual is a social discourse. Social representations are simultaneously personal and collective, for they provide an organizing structure for communication and constructing the group’s shared reality with regard to ideas, values, opinions, actions, action scenarios, norms, and behaviors (Wagner, 1995).

The unique characteristics of a society wherein the family, the community, and religion are more important than the individual should be borne in mind when discussing the discourse that takes place in a group of Bedouin women from the perspective of social representations (Al-Krenawi, 1998). While no longer nomadic, the Bedouin community is still organized on the basis of traditional cultural principles. The kinship group, or tribe, is the most binding framework in the individual’s life, and it defines the customs and rules contained within the various domains of social life. The tribe is based on patrilineal descent, and the man is the authoritative figure within it (Halevy, 2002). The adage, “family prestige is expressed in wealth and men”, is widely used by Bedouins (Ben-David, 1982). According to traditional perceptions, women are part of the family’s wealth, their status is inferior, and their closed community is usually strictly governed by the older women. There is a strict separation between men and women, which is based on the traditional “code of honor and shame”. This code ostensibly refers to the honor of the family as a patriarchal unit, but, in fact, refers to the honor of the men in the family. Tradition in Bedouin society preserves the inequality between men and women and perpetuates patriarchal dominance (Karkabi-Sabah, 2009). Maintaining family honor means
male dominance, and the women are expected to be traditional housewives. Subordination of women to the man in the traditional Bedouin family is founded on customs and rules supported by the majority of the population (Shapira & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2009). The separation of women is manifested in the existence of a woman's world: the women preserve its boundaries, prefer to spend time in the company of other women, and change their behavior when in the company of men.

**Psychosocial intervention in Bedouin women**

Pain is a universal, cross-cultural experience. As in general society in Israel, physical pain is treated by means of the country's public health services. Psychological pain in the Bedouin population, however, has been traditionally treated by amulet writers, Quran healers, or fortune-tellers and dervishes, who, according to belief, were ordained by supernatural powers (Al-Krenawi, 2000). Traditional treatments and therapies for women are provided by traditional healers—*fataha, sheikhah, darwishah* or *hajah*—to help them with life's hardships and resolve psychological problems by explaining the supernatural reasons for them or by means of medicinal herbs and amulets (Popper-Givon & Al-Krenawi, 2010). Abu-Rabia-Qeder and Weiner-Levy (2010) describe how the sources of power in the community and tradition, on the one hand, and the Israeli space, on the other, are blocked to Arab women in Israel. For this reason, many of them feel that they are at an impasse and do not have the power to contend with the challenges in their life. A popular Bedouin folk proverb states: "It is preferable for pain to remain in the heart than cause shame in public," for, in Arab society, emotional difficulties are perceived as a threat to the family's honor. And the women view their pain as a private one with which they have to contend on their own by living a double life, inner and outer.

Physicians in the Bedouin towns and villages are highly familiar with the phenomenon of women coming to the clinic to get headache pills. When they return home, after chance meetings with other women in the market or in the clinic's waiting room, they wave their prescription to the men to justify their absence from the home (Abu-Rabia, 2009). This illustrates how the women seek out group encounters with other women beyond the closed area of their family dwellings.

**The grandmothers’ group**

Several empowerment and support centers for Bedouin women have opened in recent years, creating a place to meet, learn to read, write, and sew, and promote personal initiative. This group work has gained considerable impetus due to a special National Insurance Institute of Israel program to empower Bedouin women by means of women's clubs (Munk, 2005). Due to the need of these women to meet one another and discuss their difficulties and the traditional social restrictions they face, a social services department in one of the Bedouin villages in the south of Israel decided to form a women's group as well. In the course of identifying the needs of the women in the community, the distinctive "grandmothers" group emerged—women who are employed without pay as part of their familial obligation to take care of their grandchildren.

The formation of the group in a Bedouin village in the Negev, its functioning, and the content of the meetings were all documented by hand by the psychologist/facilitator.

The meetings were held in the mornings at the pre-school center run by the local social services department, and the participants attended with the children in their care. Activities were organized for the children to allow the grandmothers to attend the group sessions that were held in the adjoining room. From time to time, the grandchildren would come into the room where the grandmothers were meeting, and would then be returned to the other room.

The group worked for about six months, and met sixteen times. Initially, eighteen women attended the meetings, and, over time, this number stabilized at twelve participants. The meetings were held once a week, but, from time to time, a meeting was canceled due to a family wedding, a festival, or adverse weather conditions. The documented proceedings of the meetings described the group dynamic processes and the content of the meetings. At the conclusion of the meetings, the center's social worker conducted a summarizing feedback session on the contributions made by the group to its participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with three participants.
about ten months after the group sessions had ended in order to get an impression of long-term effects. All interaction with the women was conducted in Arabic. Processing and analysis of the documentation of the meetings and the feedback were carried out in Hebrew, employing qualitative research tools.

The review of the meetings addresses both the content and the process. The meanings revealed in this description constitute the basis for the discussion regarding the significance of group work with Bedouin women, the similarities and differences between this unique group and similar groups, and the understandings derived from the described experience.

Description of the meetings

Building a group by means of familiar and new social arrangements

Yalom and Leszcz (2005) describe the importance of the first meeting that begins by receiving and welcoming the participants outside the room. The group of Bedouin women that gathered was welcomed by social workers who waited for the young children in the adjoining room, where they were to keep them occupied during the grandmothers' group meeting. The floor of the room in which the group meetings were held was covered with mattresses arranged around a low table located in the center of the room, thus resembling a traditional seating arrangement. Light refreshments brought by the participants were served at every meeting. The tea was poured and served by the oldest participant, strictly maintaining the hierarchy of respect: First, she served the facilitator, and then each of the participants according to descending age.

Although all the women were from the same family (hamousa), they did not all know one another. Initial contact within the group signaled the desire for a different kind of meeting alongside the strong message of strictly observing tradition. This would later emerge as a central leitmotif in the group's activities on conscious and unconscious levels alike.

In the first meeting, the participants became acquainted with one another. Each participant told the group about herself and her grand-

children. At this stage, the facilitator was not yet familiar with the intricate relationships between the women. Polygamy, widowhood, and other types of relationships associated with familial obligations emerged in later meetings and included feelings such as anger, conciliation, and comfort. In this meeting, the participants' expectations regarding the content and functioning of the meetings were discussed and unified.

As early as in the first meeting, it clearly emerged that the way this group functioned would be different to the way such groups usually function in Western society, since the "social order" had to be preserved in each and every group activity. Thus, for example, a request to toss a ball of wool from one participant to another to create a "cobweb" was met with refusal from the group members: "How can I pass over my neighbor and throw the ball to someone on the other side of the circle. If I pass over my neighbor I'll offend her . . ." they said, and passed the ball from one to another in order around the circle out of a desire to avoid creating a "different order".

In the first meeting, it also transpired that some of the group members did not know how to read and write. The facilitator decided, with the group's agreement, to avoid writing on the board so as not to create gaps of inferiority and superiority within the group based on differences in education.

As with any group operating in accordance with principles of professional facilitation, the facilitator presented the group members with the basic rules of privilege and confidentiality concerning the content emerging in the group's meetings. Understanding the concept of privilege and confidentiality was also achieved by employing a culturally unique concept that is common in Arab society, namely amana. The concept of amana, which means "custody", originates from an ancient custom whereby if a Bedouin leaves any of his belongings with another Bedouin during his wanderings, the latter is obliged to look after them until the former returns to reclaim them. A secret, too, is essentially amana, and the rules of custody apply to it. This concept also has a religious meaning. In Bedouin tradition, it is customary when endeavoring to keep a secret to say that one is "More loyal than Samuel" and "follow in Prophet Muhammad's footsteps", and the meaning of loyalty is the obligation to keep a secret. Thus, the joint agreement to keep secret anything that was said in the group meetings was based on sources of religious tradition and social culture, and, without a doubt,
the fact that the facilitator came from the same culture as the women and was conversant with it helped to make the group’s ground rules, which were unfamiliar to the women, more accessible by employing concepts that were familiar to them. On the other hand, building a group also mandated building tools that are inconsistent with accepted tradition and culture. Thus, for example, the facilitator had to contend with the need to set boundaries for the meetings. Unlike the rigid perception of time in modern society, Bedouin society views time as unrestricted and undefined. Traditionally, the boundaries of a Bedouin’s tent are open to random visitors at any hour of the day. How can the boundaries of the meeting room and meeting times be delimited? Thus, for example, ten minutes before the end of the first meeting, the call of the muezzin from the mosque was heard. The women stood up, stating it was time for prayer. In their culture and tradition, the time for prayer is the determining time, and not the time on the clock. The facilitator intervened and explained that in the group “other rules” apply, and prayer could wait. The participants accepted the new boundaries and behaved accordingly in the following meetings.

The unique cultural conduct of the group was a condition for its activities. The participants were not addressed by their first names, but in accordance with the family attribution each woman acquired when she gave birth to her eldest son; for example, Umm Ibrahim (mother of Ibrahim). In the course of the meetings, the women in the group preferred to address one another with the honorific “mother of”, and only one relatively young woman asked to be addressed by her first name. The women expected, and accorded great importance to, the facilitator remembering their traditional name, and viewed it as an expression of honor and respect. Similarly, they also addressed her by the name of her eldest son, which in their perception accorded her status above and beyond her education or belonging to her husband’s family.

Content of the group discourse

A reading of the documented meeting proceedings reveals a variety of subjects that were discussed in the group. The subjects can be divided into three areas:

1. The repressed trauma of entering married life and relocating to the husband’s family.

2. The women’s role in terms of parenting and family.

3. Threat and hope in their perception of the future, contending with crises, and changes in traditional society.

Entering married life was described by the group members as a vivid and painful memory of their “wedding night.” Cautiously, and with profound sadness, the women described their first unprotected night in a strange house (usually their mother-in-law’s home) without any mental preparation of any kind. They underwent an experience that was seared into their body like a life-changing trauma. Although this experience took place a generation ago, it was the first subject to be raised in the group. It was their “initiation” into motherhood and the rest of their life. The women’s stories can constitute a source for anthropological, sociological, and literary studies, and a different narrative point of departure for viewing women in Bedouin society; however, we have chosen not to expand on them here. We would like to note, however, that from the moment these stories were articulated in the group and received with empathy, support, and containment (at times indistinguishable from identification), they were the subject of most of the first meetings and the foundation on which additional understanding between the group members was built.

Bion (1961) argues that one of the assumptions shared by all members of a group when they gather is that they share a common objective as it was defined by the facilitator before they began, and that this initial assumption is meticulously examined in the first meeting. In the present group, the impression was that there was an innocent, unsophisticated expectation that they would receive pedagogical guidance or counseling from a psychologist about taking care of their grandchildren and their relationships with their sons and daughters-in-law.

The group facilitator, who is knowledgeable and experienced in facilitating groups of educators, describes her apprehensions with regard to the group’s unique characteristics. The question arose of whether older women with a social status that is partly expressed in society by describing achievements (primarily in terms of family size) in a language that at times resembles boastfulness, would be able to talk about their difficulties. The initial stages were structured with the aid of exercises, but it quickly became apparent that their need to express themselves, share, and receive comfort, and the respect they
gave to each woman as she told her personal story, made it impossible to work according to predefined content or by means of exercises commonly used in facilitated groups. The personal experience was central. The group facilitator flowed with the group to a variety of places, yet, at the same time, felt she was in control of building the group setting, and described the meetings as a fascinating journey the like of which neither the group members nor the facilitator had ever experienced.

The first meeting was unpredictable due to the meaningful content of self-disclosure that was raised in the context of intimate relationships. The disclosure and sharing resembled the eruption of a volcano. A first meeting is usually highly charged with the anxiety and apprehensions of the participants, who endeavor to understand the nature of the meeting beyond its declared title, and consequently tend to protect themselves from over-disclosure (Neri, 1998). Self-disclosure in itself is highly important, since it forms the basis for the group process, the sense of intimacy experienced by its members, and the relationships that develop between them as the process progresses. Rybkó (2005) studied self-disclosure in a group's first meeting and its ability to predict the participants' later functioning. In her study, Rybkó (2005) shows how self-disclosure in a first meeting constitutes a significant indicator for the group members' level of disclosure later in the process. She found that the group members' ability to overcome the anxiety phase and disclose personal information from the past or present is associated with the experience of security the participants bring with them from the past as part of their individual personality beyond the type of group, the facilitator, and the dynamic that develops within the group. Tscheschke and Dies (1994) argue that self-disclosure leads to further disclosure while creating a positive circle of trust and empathy within the group. The self-disclosure of some group members also constitutes modeling for the opportunity afforded by a group to receive sympathy for what, until then, has been considered non-legitimate pain. Whitaker (1997) claims that a group as a medium for self-help develops unique moods and atmospheres that emerge from the group members and affect the atmosphere and events within it, which, at times, develop gradually and, at other times, occur in the form of an unexpected outburst. We will never know how the group would have developed if not for the profound disclosure of one of the group members who described the grueling experience of her wedding night, thus allowing the dark, difficult secret to emerge from the private domain and be contained by a group offering partnership and sisterhood.

While the literature provides ample descriptions of the content of the first stage as stereotypical and relatively limited to neutral discussion (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), from the outset the first meeting of the grandmothers' group revealed the profound need of the group members to articulate the suffering in their lives and gain support and empathy within the group. It can be assumed that the need to explore past traumas is linked to the perception of the group being a "different group", protected and safe. It should be borne in mind that the women's whole lives take place within a group of which they are an integral part, without any discrete personal identity, and, at times, the family is experienced as hostile and harsh. Most of the women's stories described the difficult years following their marriage as years of being part of a group in which they were obliged to accept harsh and inferior conditions. Immediately after the wedding, the young bride moves into the home of her husband's family; her mother-in-law runs the extended household with an iron fist, exploits her for hard labor, and emphasizes her inferior status in the family. The women painfully remember those years as a period of loss of freedom, security, and independence. They were required for hard work inside the house and also for shepherding. Their first pregnancies were attended by shame, since their swollen bellies disclosed their sexuality to all and sundry, which was bound up in shame and guilt: the pregnancy attested to the existence of sexual relations, which are considered a sin to which all moral proscriptions apply. They remember their first births as an experience of loneliness and the absence of social support and guidance on the roles of a mother. The rule of the mother-in-law also included the manner of raising children and permitted beatings, discrimination in terms of food and care, and favoring the mother-in-law's children over those of the daughter-in-law: in many cases, the daughter-in-law gave birth at the same time as the mother-in-law, who was still of childbearing age, and the mother-in-law, who controlled the household budget, openly gave preference to her own baby when they had to share the babies' food between them (e.g., infant formula). The young women did not have time to spend with their children, since they were required to look after the herds, bake, and contribute to the household. Means were usually meager, there was no electricity or gas, and water
had to be fetched from a considerable distance. Contact with their children was reduced to feeding and protection. It was only when the husband was relatively established in his job, after three or four children had been born, that the woman moved into a home of her own and was able to begin developing intimate relationships within her nuclear family and enjoy parenting the children who were born in her own home. However, financial security also bore a potential for crisis, since it enabled the husband to bring another wife into the home. The decision regarding such changes rests exclusively on the husband, the man of the family.

In the course of the meetings, the women underwent complex processes of anger and jealousy, but also of everyday partnership in maintaining the household and raising their children. The group meetings enabled them, for the first time, to reveal to one another their pain alongside acceptance, conciliation, and comfort.

Stories also emerged about the loss of children who had died, and the grief that was not accorded a legitimate place, making it impossible to process the painful emotions attending it. The grief and anxiety could only be addressed by going to spell-casting sheikhs. Receiving help in traditional ways brought about a need to contend with a new kind of tension due to the expense entailed in purchasing the spells, and the husband's dissatisfaction over these expenses.

The content of the intergenerational encounter in the context of their role as grandmothers taking care of their grandchildren only emerged in the last few meetings. The point of departure for defining personal identity was the number of children each participant had and the number of grandchildren in her care. Difficulties arose due to the situation whereby they were simultaneously grandmothers and mothers raising young children of their own, and jealousy between the two generations. The participants described their multiple roles as women, mothers, grandmothers, and daughters-in-law who were still obligated to their mothers-in-law. Another issue that arose was the desire to give up in the face of difficulties such as diminished strength and health.

The women's request to discuss concrete and practical child-rearing methods in the context of their relationships with their children only arose after extensive room was afforded to their personal stories. They expressed a desire to acquire tools for coping with their grandchildren's difficulties, old vs. new child-rearing methods, and ways to set boundaries that are not self-evident in the traditional family. The children's parents were presented as demanding child-rearing approaches that were appropriate to the children's ages and needs, which called into question the women's knowledge—something that had been self-evident in the past. The issue of the father's role in the children's education and upbringing, which in the past was perceived to be the exclusive domain and responsibility of the women, was raised as an embarrassing question, and the participants asked the facilitator to help them examine it in accordance with "the new winds and modern times".

The group members shared with one another their concerns about getting old, their fears about the future, and the lack of solutions available for the elderly within their community. One participant summarized the experience of the meetings thus:

"All day we only work. When we come to the group we forget all about our problems. When we share our stories it eases the burden. I've learnt a lot from the group members. When I first came here I felt as though I was deep down in a well, and today I feel that the group has brought me out of the well ..."

The traditional analytical approach that places a taboo on the therapist's or facilitator's self-disclosure is countered nowadays by new approaches (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Ziv-Beiman, 2010). Therapists or facilitators working under these new paradigms that utilize their personality and are prepared to bring themselves into the interaction in the therapy setting consequently increase the therapeutic power of the group and its joint work. The therapist's self-disclosure, if and when effected in accordance with the needs of the group, is experienced as personal modeling that supports openness and authenticity, and encourages the group members to build a relationship based on trust.

The women in the group, who scrutinized the facilitator, saw a young, educated woman dressed in Western clothes, but wearing the customary, traditional headscarf. From the family perspective as the reference point for examining reality, they sought intimacy with her, expressed interest in her children, and urged her: "When are you going to have another child, another sister for your daughter?" In their status as mature, distinguished women who are well established
in their families, their role was to tell the young woman, even though she was the group facilitator, how she should conduct herself and live her life according to their view. The intrusion of the older women into the affairs of the younger ones, their daughters and daughters-in-law, is widely accepted in Bedouin society. These remarks, which were occasionally directed at the group facilitator in social contexts, were experienced as a non-legitimate violation of her privacy. However, as a result of the relationship forged between the facilitator and the women, and their respect for her professionalism, these remarks were received gracefully, as expressions of genuine affection and concern, while maintaining her status as the facilitator.

Laor (2007) describes the reciprocity in the therapy setting as comprising mutual influence, mutual recognition, and mutual regulation between therapist and client. She posits that the setting is constructed and maintained by the two parties to the process: therapist and client. The intersubjective approach holds that reciprocity between therapist and client is legitimate. The facilitator cannot function without becoming involved. The women's painful stories about their wedding night, were jarring and harsh. The empathy she felt toward them when they shared these stories with the group members, as well as stories of loss and grief over children who had died, brought tears to the facilitator's eyes on more than one occasion, which did not pass unnoticed by the women in the group. At times, when one of the women began telling her story, the facilitator stood up, went to sit next to her, and held her hand. At the end of the story, she thanked her for her trust in the group and for sharing her closely guarded secret, her “treasure”. The changed setting when the facilitator moved to sit next to the speaker and her intimacy with the women in the group added to the sense of fraternity, unity, and trust without violating the clear boundaries between the facilitator and the group.

In this context, Ziv-Beiman (2010) presents a description of empathetic concern as an emotional component of interpersonal communication that involves the ability to be influenced by the emotional states of the other, as well as the ability to conceptualize and name the experienced effect. The facilitator also attests that she could not remain neutral when the women described how they obtained help by means of amulets and spells because she did not question the truth and sincerity of the women's beliefs in their endeavors to remedy the catastrophes that afflicted them. Processes of transference and countertransference, both latent and overt, between the facilitator and the group were clearly evident as a significant element in constructing a meaningful therapy process, which the participants described in their picturesque and metaphorical language as "coming out of the well".

Discussion

Bedouin society in Israel's Negev region is rapidly encountering the social representations of Western culture and modernization, which clash with the social representations of the local culture, and threatens their society as a whole, both as individuals and as a group. Bedouin society is attempting to preserve its extant state and protect its belief system, culture, and religion, yet it cannot stop the forces permeating it. The changes originating in accelerated globalization have an impact on, inter alia, the status of women, who, in the past, played an important role in contributing to the family's upkeep (Al-Krenawi, 2001). Public social services operate under considerably difficult conditions due to a lack of suitable personnel, shortage of posts, and lack of infrastructures. Given this situation, additional frameworks are developed in coordination with the public services, in which services are provided by volunteer organizations or NPOs.

The Bedouin women's group was adapted to the traditional social codes of separation, but, at the same time, it was also revolutionary, since it created a protected and professionally facilitated space that enabled the development of a discourse of empowerment that arose out of support and an experience of sharing: Young motherhood that often lacked support, followed by a more mature motherhood, relationships with adult children, grandmothers, with sons and daughters-in-law, and the desire to provide their adult children with a better child-rearing experience than they themselves had experienced. Unlike work with multicultural groups that are usually organized around a conflict with the majority group, the work of the grandmothers' group did not center on a struggle or conflict with others. In the literature, group processes are described as the individual's narcissistic need to be unique and gain the attention of the group and facilitator, as a power struggle with the facilitator, inciting jealousy, hatred, rivalry, and tension that all originate in unconscious processes within
the group. None of these was observed in the grandmothers’ group. Clearly evident, by contrast, was the anticipation for creating shared experiences that softened the experience of loneliness and pain they had experienced in the past. The grandmothers’ group fits the description presented by Foulkes (1964), who views the group as an entity of positive attachment with the potential for a corrective experience (e.g., Hamenchern & Halevy-Bar-Tendler, 2002).

The level of the group members’ self-disclosure was surprising considering the risk this entailed, given that they all belonged to the same family. The expectation that disclosure would cause anxiety among the group members did not materialize, and it seemed that there was a profound need for women, who were encouraged by the safe atmosphere of the group, to raise intimate issues that had weighed on them for many years. The women’s discourse in the grandmothers’ group reveals both the personal and the collective story. The personal life stories recounted in the group enabled the group members to build their identity, and for the listeners to validate their presence as part of the group. Emerging from the documentation of the group meetings are subjects associated with the personal history of the participants, which, to a large extent, is the collective story of the women in the group. Each of them experienced the traumatic wedding night and the first years of loneliness and humiliation in their husband’s family home, the poverty, the hardships of raising children, and the slow process of finding sources of strength and satisfaction in their life.

Classic theories that analyze dynamic processes in a facilitated group depart from the premise of the individual’s perception of his personal existence as a member of the group. This perception is challenged when we examine the development of the process that took place in the Bedouin grandmothers’ group, and it is doubtful if what took place in the group described in this chapter can be examined by means of the perspective it suggests. We found that social representations theory that engages in the construction of reality by means of social communication is more suited to observing group processes, since this no longer involves the psychology of the individual, but, rather, of the group members as partners. Unlike the social approaches to social identity (e.g., Turner, 1987) that view social components as the self, the social representations approach assumes that the individual has a personal version of the shared representations, and, consequently, the individual’s perception of his/her self will always take place in a social context. The accepted norms and social representations of keeping highly violent events secret, which until then regulated the women’s behavior outside the group, changed in this encounter when the women in the group created new norms and belief systems. The dynamic of changing social representations is described as a situation wherein emancipated representations that previously existed as personal knowledge become shared social knowledge that the members of the group share with one another (Ben-Asher, 2003; Paryente & Orr, 2010). The nature of emancipated representations is such that when they gain expression and recognition of their legitimacy in a social group, they clash with the conservative hegemonic representations that are accepted in the society. In the Bedouin grandmothers’ group the first meeting was the “opening shot” for raising conflictual representations with the traditional male world that had caused them so much suffering and had seemed self-evident to them until then. This was not a shattering or rebellion, but the ability to give expression to harsh feelings and the gradual realization that, despite the process of modernization taking place around them, the patriarchal structures of Arab society remain firm, and they are not part of the change in terms of bettering their lives. In this respect, Karkabi-Sabah (2009) argues that, despite the changes taking place externally in Bedouin society, the situation of women in that society continues to be harsh. Although Arab society is adopting material aspects and external patterns of behavior from the modern world, behind these patterns the rigid patriarchal structure still stands and modernization is merely another way of controlling and supervising women. Thus, for example, cell phones, far from improving or enhancing their life, serve instead as an instrument of male supervision over women, enabling the men to keep track of the women’s whereabouts and activities. The discourse that developed in the Bedouin grandmothers’ group attested to the women’s self-perception, which, even today, is that they are inferior, and their subordination to the man and his family still continues. The representation of inferiority of the woman is a familiar hegemonic one. The hegemonic representations imprinted social proscriptions whose violation brings shame to the family and to the man who has failed to supervise his wife in a manner that preserves the traditional code of family honor. So long as the women were not exposed to the outside world and their activities were restricted to the family dwellings or nearby fields, they did not
know any other representations, termed “emancipated representations”. However, when the younger women, their daughters or daughters-in-law, continued to study and went out to work (in the main as teachers), and adopted independence strengthening behaviors (e.g., obtaining a driver’s license and freely leaving the boundaries of the Bedouin village), emancipated representations that had previously only been in the form of new knowledge began clashing with prior representations.

The women’s discourse in the group, which, from the outset, was designed to develop educational and intergenerational skills in a protected space, enabled them to open their personal “Pandora’s box” for the first time, they could challenge the absolute control of men, especially concerning the physical experiences of their wedding nights. Even the period of suffering they experienced in the beginning of their marriages, which had been perceived as an unchallengable decree in the past, emerged in the group for the first time by questioning its legitimacy. Working in a group enabled the women to jointly examine what was familiar to them and share their personal histories from the perspective of the comforting peer group. The participants perceived themselves as good and experienced childminders, and it was evident that they could not be approached from a “knowledgeable” position, but, rather, one that enabled their knowledge and life wisdom to adapt to the new world. In the group work, their shared social representations were manifested, and the group’s role was to adapt them to the changing reality. The grandmothers’ group built a group identity that enabled acknowledgment of the hardships and pain by alleviating their loneliness. The sense of partnership enabled the group members to observe their lives in the past with appreciation, despite the difficulties, and helped them to change their perception of their role in the family in the present.

Numerous researchers have stressed the importance of empathy in the forgiveness process (Batson et al., 1988), not only toward group members, but also to the wrongdoer himself. The power of forgiveness stems from the inner growth and personal empowerment that occurs in group work; the group members were able to reconstruct their sense of self-worth, the dignity they lost as a result of harsh life events at the start of their married lives, and their parenthood, through group mirroring. Thus, they were able to approach the wrongdoer, who is outside the group and wholly unaware of the process, and return to the painful experience from a place of new strength. Although conciliation begins within the group, it is not confined to the group setting, and continues in the world outside it. Conciliation does not turn back the clock, but it does enable harsh feelings that were associated with a sense of self-blame and diminished self-worth to be softened, and opens a window to acceptance and trust towards the world around them as well as their wounded selves.

In his description of a group, Foulkes (1964) employs the concept of the matrix, which is derived from the Latin word “mater”, meaning “mother”, “womb”. New channels of mental communication can be constructed in a group that go beyond the personal to the group space, wherein past events and harsh thoughts and feelings are re-examined, and which are influenced by human communication, shared experiences, acceptance, and containment (Ezra, 2012; Foulkes, 1990). The vulnerable, wounded individual encounters empathy, and mutual responsibility and the ability to share profound inner pain with members of the group facilitate acceptance and comfort. This is not forgetting, but an experience of forgiveness and conciliation that alleviates painful past events and accords them significance and new meaning.

To a large extent, the subjects raised in the group that touched upon raising children resemble those that arise in other parent groups all over the country: early childhood development, the role of the mother at each stage, setting boundaries, and struggles with adolescent children. However, the existence of the grandmothers’ group in the Bedouin sector mandated building group work adapted to the culture and tradition: working in a professionally facilitated group in Arabic, and observing the components of traditional identity within the gathering ritual reduced the dissonance that occurs in the encounter with the new and unfamiliar world, and by grounding in the familiar world and the social support of the women's group, the power for conciliation and comfort emerged and, with it, the sense of empowerment and the ability to jointly cope with the changes to which the participants were exposed.

References


CHAPTER FIVE

Dealing with conflicts, rage, anger, and aggression in group analysis

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Introduction

Rage, anger, and aggression are ubiquitous phenomena in human beings. Rage is one of the three biologically promoted forms of aggression. The others are predatory aggression and social dominance. They are somehow neurobiologically distinctive among them (Damasio, 1994, 1999; Panksepp, 1998; Siegel, 2005; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). Rage is the only one that seems to rely on a distinct emotional system that is dedicated to a primary-process form of aggression, being a primary-process capacity (Panksepp & Biven, 2012, p. 17). Rage systems exist in all mammalian brains. "Aggression is not always accompanied by anger, and anger does not necessarily lead to aggression, especially in mature humans who can control such base impulses. Aggression is a broader phenomenon than anger itself" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 187).

"Anger and aggression are secondary processes; they are some of the faces of rage" (Panksepp & Biven, 2012, p. 148).

Jim Averill's (2010) definition status that anger refers to an emotional state that involves both an attribution of blame for some perceived