Developing professional identity through group experiential learning: A Group-Analytic experiential training approach for use with postgraduate clinical psychology students

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This article describes a Group-Analytic, experiential and non-directive training approach taken with postgraduate clinical psychology students in training. Based on median/large group settings, it is aimed at promoting the development of psychology students' professional identities. It uses a particular form of experiential learning beyond the rational and cognitive aspects of traditional didactic teaching in order to stimulate students' own involvement in the integration of their thoughts, feelings and attitudes. From a Group-Analytic perspective, the group is conceived of as an organic entity. The convenor takes up a less intrusive and non-directive role in comparison to a traditional seminar leader. The learning outcomes that may be obtained with this group model are outlined in a description of group process below, and through the content analysis of verbalizations of students who participated in the twelve-session experiential group. The results confirm the usefulness of the Group-Analytic experiential training approach, highlighting the construction of professional self-awareness, achieved through students exploring their own relationship modalities in an intersubjective learning space.

Keywords: group experiential learning training approach; group analysis; psychology education; professional identity; self-awareness; content analysis

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In recent years there has been a growing consensus, both in the United States and in Europe, in relation to the importance of using competency-based models for education, training, and assessment in professional psychology, particularly in clinical and counselling psychology (e.g. Kaslow et al., 2004; Lunt, Peiró, Poortinga, & Roe, 2015; Rubin et al., 2007). In educating psychology students, the adoption of competency-based models certainly offers the opportunity to ensure that the student attains a predetermined and clearly articulated level of competence in a given domain, focusing on the acquisition of core competencies through the development of new knowledge. However, almost all existing psychology curricula in universities assume that the way to achieve the required competencies is mainly through providing the student with a cognitive and theoretical view of the disciplines that are the basis of psychological knowledge. Authoritative books on student

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education in psychology (Halpern, 2010; McCarthy, Dickson, Cranney, Trapp, & Karandashev, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2009, 2007) emphasize this rational approach and say little about the need for personal and emotional participation and engagement in the learning process. Most instructional strategies traditionally used, including group projects, role plays, case studies, clinical vignettes, supervised experience and problem-based learning, underline a cultural model in which training in psychology adheres to a conventional method of transferring knowledge. This is teacher-centred and arguably makes learning passive, requiring only modest emotional participation and personal involvement (Kayes, 2002; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). But in psychology, and especially in clinical psychology, the purpose is not simply to develop professionals with encyclopaedic proficiency or cognitive competencies; rather, psychology education training strategies have to introduce and acknowledge the role of emotions. In particular, students need to develop the capability to manage the emotional dimension in clinical and organizational settings, and to develop self-reflective skills at the same time (Di Stefano, Piacentino, & Ruvolo, 2017; Human, 2008, 2012).

It is necessary to go beyond cognitive knowledge and competency-based approaches in the education of psychology students, moving from content transmission towards learning strategies that promote reflectivity through direct experience. Several studies have demonstrated the efficacy of active learning over direct, purely cognition-based approaches in psychology courses (e.g. Butler, Phillmann, & Smart, 2001; Poirier & Feldman, 2007; Yoder & Hochevar, 2005), and noted how traditional methods put psychology students in a more passive role (Richmond & Kindelberger Hagan, 2011).

Experiential learning has a particular role to play in the education of future psychologists. It can enable students to be more actively involved in their learning in a way that contributes to their personal growth and the development of a reflective approach toward their future profession (Corey, 2013; Sheikh, Milne, & Macgregor, 2007). This way of seeing psychologists' education is similar to Lavender (2003)'s concept of 'reflective-scientist-practitioner', which emphasizes the importance of combining one's development of awareness about interpersonal style, including obtaining feedback from others about how we impact on them ('reflection-about-impact-on-others'), with an awareness of a clinician's vulnerabilities, in order to deepen understanding in practice ('reflection-about-self').

In our opinion, the ability to listen to others and empathize with them, and to manage relationships with users and patients, are capacities that involve self-awareness and relationship skills (Falgares, Venza, & Guarnaccia, 2017). From this point of view, the capacity to learn is more effective when the whole individual is engaged – his or her thinking, feeling, *and* behaviour – in an intersubjective, experiential, and group training setting. Generally speaking, experiential learning can be defined as a knowledge process that links one with others' feelings, cognitions, actions, and thinking, favoring an active engagement between the inner world of the subject and his or her environment (Beard & Wilson, 2006). This approach

suggests that a valuable source of learning lies in deeper reflection on the experiences of everyday life (Kolb, 2015).

In what follows, we discuss a Group-Analytic experiential training approach for psychology students, devised to support awareness of the professional role of the clinical psychologist, through an experiential approach to group dynamics and an emphasis on personal emotional disclosure. Within a Group-Analytic or group relations approach (Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2004), the concept of experiential learning emphasizes how individuals form and sustain relational links with each other, and suggests that learning about such interconnections should be understood rather differently from learning about things. There is a focus on elements such as the conscious and unconscious content of individuals' minds and the centrality of individuals' relationships with others (Stein, 2004).

A theoretical background for Group-Analytic experiential training groups

The theoretical framework that guides our experience of working with experiential training groups starts from the insights of Foulkes (1975, Foulkes & Anthony, 1990) and of the English Group-Analytic School (Brown & Zinkin, 1994; Dalal, 1998; Pines, 1998). These emphasize a constitutively social conception of human beings. Emphasis is also placed upon the centrality of the concepts of '*internal group-ness*' (namely, the attractiveness of the group for its members, determining the need to find, in other members and in the group as a whole, a sense of achievement and the fulfilment of primary affective necessities – Napolitani, 1987; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) and of the '*group matrix*' (i.e. the common shared ground within the group from which the meaning of all events and communications derives – Foulkes, 1975). These structure personality and intersubjective relationships. There is also the importance of the institutional context in underlining a non-individualistic, less reductive understanding of psychic phenomena.

The contributions of ethno-psychiatry and anthropology (Nathan, 2001) suggest that we think about the development of subjective identities within groups as situated in places of high cultural density. Culture shapes the structure and quality of relational bonds in groups, organizing codes of meaning in which each person gets into a relationship with others, building and organizing the ways in which everyone succeeds, or fails, to traverse and live in different anthropological, social and mental places (Profita, Ruvolo, & Lo Mauro, 2007).

An experiential training group presents all the difficulties and possible conflicts of secondary groups but, unlike real social groups, aims, explicitly or implicitly, at the analysis of the cultural (symbolic) models that the individual uses, consciously and unconsciously. The experiential training group can usefully be defined, especially in its large and median configurations, as a chance to experience more deeply one's own relationship bonds and different ways of conceptualizing our relations with others and emotions that they evoke (Ringer, 2002).

The large group settings are the place of choice for the observation of cultural dimensions that shape the identity of the subject in ways he or she may not have conscious knowledge of, unless the setting is highly heterogeneous, in which case, the identifications that usually constitute the feeling of belonging are disarticulated. Processes that occur in a large group can include phenomena such as detachment, the loss of self, the experience of alienation and frustration at the difficulty and lack of communication with others, These processes can be a means of accessing and reflecting on feelings of anger, envy and aggression, and, conversely, the sense of belonging, akin to ecstasy, that being part of a large group can create (De Marè, Piper, & Thompson, 1991; Kreeger, 1975; Schneider & Weinberg, 2003).

The sheer numbers of participants in a larger group can constitute the element of heterogeneity and the gradient of otherness that can trigger a process of diffusion and confusion of identity. One transformative potential of the large group is in this possibility of going through the experience of disorientation and incomprehensibility, in a context constructed to be empty of the usual institutional meanings that create tasks and roles. The ability to withstand the frustration and tolerate the chaotic situation leads, through time, to the possibility of developing more complex and contextualized forms of thought.

A Group-Analytic experiential training approach for psychology students

Most studies of experiential learning programmes have shown mixed results. This is to be expected due to the tremendous diversity of programme style, format, theoretical basis and leader influences. Further complicating the issue is the fact that most studies are poorly constructed and lack long-term follow-up measures. There is, however, sufficient evidence in the research base to suppose that an experiential learning programme can produce positive outcomes for participants if the programme is well designed and executed (Safigan, 2009).

Experiential learning groups are characterized by an experiential approach to group dynamics, an emphasis on emotional disclosure, and heterogeneous membership (Ringer, 2002). Groups emphasize the ways in which individual members are alike, enhancing bonding and acceptance, and members are repeatedly reminded that they share common feelings and experiences. The setting is characterized by the suspension of all actions; work sessions do not have any specific goal to be followed, except the participation itself. The known emotional and cognitive parameters are not readily available to the participant who is confronted with a potentially anxiety-inducing situation, dictated by a sense of loss of control of context variables. Through such group membership, students can experience, on an emotional or personal level, resistance, fear, anger, and confrontation, all ways of relating they may learn about theoretically as modes of presentation of their potential clients. They can hopefully develop a deeper knowledge of states of mind, in a way that they can later call upon when leading their own professional lives.

The main aim of our Group-Analytic experiential training approach is to allow the participants to experience themselves in the encounter with others, being aware of their feelings, as well as those of others, and learning more about when it is appropriate to give expression to these feelings, when to work on them and when to contain them.

In particular, the objectives of the Group-Analytic experiential training are:

1. Encouraging the elaboration of feelings and emotions related to personal experience in the learning setting, and encouraging students to think about their transition from studying to professional responsibility;

2. Providing a non-directive communication environment in which the experience of the group can be elaborated;

3. Addressing and helping participants develop emotional dimensions experience related to being in relationship with others;

4. Supporting the development and the elaboration of understanding of group dynamics and processes;

5. In a more general way, (a) perceiving emotions, (b) using emotions to facilitate thought, (c) understanding emotions, and (d) managing emotions.

Attention is paid in assigning meaning to events. It is a meaning that 'becomes' in context and is therefore not 'objective' but symptomatic of the relationship, or rather the construction that is done within the context of the relationship. From this point of view, learning in an experiential group will involve valuing diversity. The main teaching objectives are to promote the learning of social skills likely to involve the participants' own personal resources, including their communication, listening, and empathetic attitude skills. One of the aims of the group is to increase the participants' ability to interact with other participants in expressing their thoughts and opinions. This includes the ability to listen, find their own time and their own space in the group, leave space for the expression of others, understand other's difficulties and develop a cooperative and helping attitude.

An example of a group experience

The training approach is briefly exemplified through the presentation of processes in one experiential group lasting for 12 sessions, with 30 students (21 women and 9 men, aged between 22 and 30 years old) attending a master's degree course in clinical psychology at an Italian university. The experiential groups were led by one experienced group psychotherapist with the presence of two silent observers. Participants attended one 90 minute session a week, and all participants were selected on the basis of curricular requirements and a motivational interview.

The processes within this group are presented through two sources of information: a narrative description of group process by the convenor, and a content analysis of verbalizations of students during group sessions.

The group process as observed by the convenor

At the opening of the first session, the convenor announced that the main task of
the group would concern thinking about training in psychology and the figure of   210
the clinical psychologist. Students were encouraged to express their opinions and
feelings, by allowing a free exchange of ideas, agreements or disagreements.

Many participants did not want to offer their contribution in the group and
were thus confronted with their resistance to participating. 'Effort' was the
subject of the group's initial discussions, with the group experiencing   215
a difficulty in listening and getting organized according to self-generated rules.
A self-centered tendency prevailed, where the first proposals made by indivi-
duals were to change the group space into an ordinary lecture context, in order to
allow the 'accomplishment'of the task.

The convenor's invitation to view processes then allowed the group to shift   220
attention from facts to relational dynamics. The aim was to try to connect
participants with the emotions they were experiencing. Students then began to
face the emotions evoked by the group state: the difficult oscillation between
feeling like autonomous individuals, each with their own thoughts and common
point of view, and 'getting lost in the group' by listening to what the group was   225
saying and experiencing a 'free-floating attention'. The group moved away from
a more individualistic and self-referential drive. Step by step the participants
built up a group learning space, starting by reflecting on their original member-
ships, and then creating belonging through a common project – a clinical train-
ing – and a shared way of looking at the psychology profession.   230

However, the pathways that characterized the processes of the group were
neither simple nor linear, but rather full of twists and turns. In fact, in inter-
mediate work sessions, the group experienced a fluctuation between two differ-
ent modalities, namely *homogenizing* and *integrating*. On the one hand, the need
to adopt a common thought occurred periodically, in particular when difficulties   235
in sharing feelings emerged; on the other, homogeneity was feared as a deadly
threat to thinking, since it implies no tolerance for difference. The integration of
different parts of the group was possible when differences and limitations were
visible and used as resources; but diversity among participants sometimes
became a boundary that created conflict, and prevented development for the   240
whole group. The convenor pointed out how this oscillation belonged to every-
body and every group and how the confusion the participants lived in could be
a breeding ground for the work they had to do.

In the last sessions, thanks to an increased willingness to listen to each other,
it was more possible to empathize with other people and to take care of relation-   245
ships in the group, thus developing a greater sense of responsibility for one's
own and others' thinking, feelings and emotions. To 'stay and feel' in the group
allowed it to live, in the here-and-now of the process. The group represented
a useful observatory from which to re-think one's own learning experience.
Without listening to, and interpreting, one's own emotions, there couldn't be   250
a sure foundation for the work of clinical psychology.

The group process evaluated through content analysis

For the analysis of the group's main outcomes, we focused on an analysis of the content of participants' verbalizations during group sessions. In order to achieve this goal, the software T-LAB (Lancia, 2004) was used. T-LAB is a software package that includes a combination of linguistic and statistical tools to be applied in text analysis. It carries out different types of analyses, including quantitative analyses (in terms of occurrence, co-occurrence, and association of words in different sets of text) as well as categorization of specified units of analysis in the texts. In particular, the analysis of lexical units allows the classification of words inside a text through the use of keywords. In this way, T- LAB provides researchers with useful information such as associations between words, comparisons between pairs of keywords, correspondence analysis and clusterings of words. We conducted a cluster analysis, a method that allows for the grouping of keywords into clusters.

The T-LAB software generated three interpretable clusters that accounted for 82.03% of content in the transcripts of group session. Cluster 1, which accounted for 28.35%, included keywords such as 'Family', 'Home', 'Discomfort', 'Difference', 'Story', and was subsequently interpreted as 'the search for a common matrix' cluster. Cluster 2, which accounted for 28.02%, included words such as 'To Dive', 'Anger', 'Absence', 'Obstacle', 'To get bored', 'To self-expose', and was therefore interpreted as 'the difficulties in sharing experience' cluster. Cluster 3, which accounted for 25.66%, included words such as 'Responsibility', 'Training', 'Interpretation', 'To take care', 'To listen', and was interpreted as 'The core competencies of psychologists' cluster. Table 1 summarizes the results of this analysis.

Results of the cluster analysis on the elementary contexts of the verbalizations in the group sessions were reflected in a qualitative analysis of the full transcripts. In fact, as outlined by the first cluster, it emerged that the main theme of the group (in particular, the first work sessions), was establishing a common matrix. This was mirrored by a difficulty in using the group as a space for sharing personal experiences, as reflected in the second cluster: comparisons with peers generated resistance, but also the desire to know others, and the responsibilities that the relation implies.

Finally, the third cluster show how relational and listening skills become the conceptual focus of the group, allowing participants to look both at the possibility of 'meeting' in the group ('to listen', 'to tell') and at their future professional identity ('training'; 'graduation').

Discussion

We argue that the central topic in the work of the experiential training group was *relational bonds*, their consolidation and how they dealt with other previous kinds of relationship models (i.e. family, friends, team-mates). The topic of 'relational bonds' was closely connected with exploration of the groups to which each student belonged (university, family, friends, or the training group in which she or he

Table 1. Results of the cluster analysis on the words used by participants during the experiential group training sessions.

	Total Occurrences in Transcripts	Occurrences within the Cluster	Chi-Square
Cluster 1: 'The search for a common matrix'			
Family	310	192	16.98**
Home	305	203	5.21*
Discomfort	200	142	17.04**
Story	165	131	21.98**
Shield	162	114	12.63**
Large Group	158	57	6.02**
Difference	143	86	6.78**
Prejudice	116	67	14.71**
Diversity	61	55	8.59*
Cluster 2: 'The difficulties in sharing experience'			
To Dive	462	71	4.06*
Anger	163	102	9.18**
Absence	155	134	25.44***
Obstacle	132	75	4.06**
To get bore	121	107	22.67***
To self-expose	90	69	10.69**
Anxiety	88	70	14.95**
Other	60	35	8.42**
Cluster 3: 'The core competencies of psychologist'	310	110	10.99**
Responsibility	252	181	5.87*
Training	211	79	7.63**
Interpretation	141	61	5.32*
To take care	124	99	26.99**
To listen	118	85	7.97**
To tell	67	51	10.04**
Graduation	55	48	6.28*
Empathy	55	48	6.28*

Note: Statistical significance of the word within the cluster: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

participated) and of the ways in which these groups communicate, or coexist, or conflict. These issues commit participants in the emotional task of viewing and understanding their own membership. 295

The awareness is at the base of maturation and independence, determining steps towards the construction of more complex forms of identity. These emerge through the development of the appropriate interpersonal skills needed to deal with the emotional tasks set by encountering difference, heterogeneity, otherness 300 and the dialectic in the group. The possibility of elaborating what one's experience was in the large group required both the cognitive and emotional

competence to move from private and family codes of cultural signification to social and community ones.

The attempt was made to understand how the group experience was usefully connected to constructing a professional role. This involved personal exposition, different from the usual ways of learning typical of the university context. Students experienced moments of crisis and loss of orientation, but gradually it emerged that the students managed to make connections with each other that were clearer over time, less confused, less self-centered, and less generalized. There was the construction of a space for thinking about the emotions felt in the relationships experienced in the experiential training group.

This article has aimed to present a Group-Analytic, experiential and non-directive training approach based on median/large group settings. The main goal of the approach is to provide a deeper knowledge base for psychology post-graduate students, through their experiential involvement in the integration of their thoughts, feelings and attitudes about group identity and professionalism. Our theoretical considerations were followed by a discussion of the processes present in a 12-session large group experience on a postgraduate psychology masters degree programme in Italy.

The students increased their awareness of the relational models that guide their experience of meeting and relating to others. Self-awareness is the first step towards the transition from theoretical knowledge to the ability to act consciously in professional contexts; the emotions experienced in the group analytic context become a source of learning as, shared in a controlled environment, they focus the participants on their own and others' relational patterns.

Disclosure statement

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