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## **GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH THE LENS OF GROUP ANALYSIS**

While discussion of gender identity has recently been popularized in modern media, transgender and gender-nonconforming identities have been long overlooked and oppressed, both in psychotherapeutic settings and in the culture at large (LeFay, 2020). Situation is not really getting better, despite evolution being in its peak in many fields, but with the fact that democracy becomes very conflicting term, it seems that society and social awareness somehow regressed. Complex already itself in many European states, gender identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina is complex even more while being shaped by a complex blend of cultural, religious, and historical factors. The country's diverse ethnic and religious landscape—comprising Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs—affects societal attitudes toward gender and LGBTQ issues.

Traditional gender roles are still prominent in Bosna and Hercegovina, where patriarchal structures often define expectations. There is still strong social pressure around marriage and family on women as they are typically expected to take on domestic roles.

But, in urban areas, more progressive perception on gender roles and gender identities can be noticed.

Significant portion of the population holding conservative and stigmatizing perception on gender and sexuality of LGBTQ takes tool on their rights which remain underdeveloped. While same-sex sexual activity is legal, there is no recognition of same-sex marriage or civil unions. Although law offers some rights, social acceptance remains low. Many transgender individuals face discrimination, especially in rural areas, and experience difficulties accessing healthcare and employment.

Pride manifestation is held once a year in B&H from 2019, followed by not so mass demonstration of conservative groups. Still the attitudes of society may be considered as ignorant, sounding like “if we pretend we do not see it does not exist”, although public awareness and advocacy for gender equality are increasing.

So, Bosnia and Herzegovina still faces significant cultural and societal challenges regarding gender identity, with much work needed to achieve full inclusion and equality. In such context persons with gender identity diversities are reluctant to seek for support, which also leads to poor experience and experiential knowledge of professionals.

Following examples illustrate how polarized group heavily impacted by sociocultural context becomes depolarized during the group process.

## Group

The group counts seven members who are in group analysis education, five women and two men. The group members talk about love. One of male member (M) states that love does not have to be conventional. It can be different, not only between two but between three people, between people and things and people and phenomena. This intrigues one of the female group members who continues to question him about it and in the end he confides to the group that he is bisexual.

Although I had suspected it, this confession surprised me, and the anxiety about it is increased by the fact that one of the female members has a very aggressive reaction afterwards. She starts crying, saying that he really upset her. She doesn't know what to do now, that she would actually rather leave the group. Situation is close to acting out. "It must be very hard for you now"- is all I remembered to say. After while, she opens up about a situation related to her sister that she thought she would never tell anyone. The younger sister married the Muslim priest's son, with whom she had been in a relationship since elementary school. However, that man didn't want to be intimate with her sister during the marriage. He kept accusing her that it was because she wasn't good enough. Later it turned out that he was actually homosexual. He was hypocrite, dishonest; because of that situation her sister was depressed and lost. She had to get a divorce. And the divorce marked her, and it wasn't her fault. That's why she now feels bad in the group. She shakes in her chair, crying. She thinks that these people are not normal, something is wrong with them. Are they male or female, what are they? The other members are silent; they don't get involved, looking in the ceiling or on the floor. Since this was a completely unexpected situation for me, the only thing that came to my mind was to ask: "I believe that many of us sometimes recognize both feminine and masculine traits in ourselves; maybe we can explore that part a little bit." Since none of the group member replies, I said "or maybe we can explore also how you perceive the conductor?" Some of the members say that they perceive the conductor as a typical woman, perhaps a little strict, and one of the members states that she perceives me as a nonbinary person. This situation occurs at the very end of the session and leaves no room for further exploration.

Since I am a little taken aback by the situation, I am not sure whether being a nonbinary person actually means a compliment, or a criticism. In any case, I remember the situation.

In one of the following group sessions, the M said that he realized that in addition to the group, he also needs individual treatment. The other members of the group look at each other, and another male member asks him a question: "Is it because you need special treatment or can't you open up about some things in the group? What are you telling us?"

The member of the group who reacted aggressively to his confession says that she feels the need to apologize to him, perhaps she blocked him from getting more involved and analyzing things in the group. She is sorry for that, but it just exploded out of her. She has never met anyone (besides

ex her brother in law) who is bisexual or homosexual. She just had this situation as a reference point. But she is glad that she met him, and that she allowed herself to see him as a person. She is sorry if she hurt him. The other members state that they actually think he is not bisexual, but homosexual, and that it is easier for him to tell them. They wonder what he wants to say by wanting to go to individual treatment.

“Perhaps we could explore how much the group, or the conductor, has enabled members the space to explore their sexual orientation, and perhaps gender identity”- I said.

After a short silence, M with a slight smile of satisfaction on his face states... “in fact, many who know me call me a diva”--- “and as if you like that”, I continued. And he nods his head.

In the next session, M is not present in the group, he already apologized for absence. The others talk about problems with sexual functioning. The group members note that they miss M. He is present on the following session and the group members introduce him to the content of the previous sessions. M is impressed by the level of openness of the other group members. “And”?... some of the members comment. M continues that he has already shared his part about sexuality with the group. One of the members reminds him of the last group and his statement that many people call him a diva, and the conductor’s statement that she thinks he likes it. ...maybe he can share something about that part. M states that maybe that could be his cup of tea. He is far from thinking about transitioning or having sex reassignment surgery, he feels good in his body, but must admit that he feels quite feminine and likes that. He also likes macho men, protective ones. M smiles slightly while saying this, and so do the other members of the group.

Are you still thinking about individual treatment?-one of the members asked. No, not really, M answered.

## **REFLECTIONS**

These are examples of how a group cannot be seen as a dynamic entity of its own, but functions within a sociocultural context that influences its processes. But, also tell us about the power of a group despite an unfavorable social context.

Stainar Lorensen (2010) said “I know that many therapists feel energized and rejuvenated after group sessions. This always makes me wonder what they may be doing during sessions. Personally I often feel that listening and trying to understand, being disciplined in verbal and emotional expression, offering myself as a transference object etc., may be very taxing and lead to less energy.” This is exactly how I felt during these sessions.

As I already mentioned this group mirrors sociocultural context. It also demonstrated how powerful therapeutical/curative factors such as self disclosure and interpersonal learning are. Concerning conductor, it stresses out continuous need of group analyst to work on herself/himself. I spent many hours thinking about myself as nonbinary, trying to figure out

where I went wrong. At first I was not aware, but I must admit although I have read and wrote before about gender identity, that my association with “nonbinary” was primarily negative. It also shows the power of the impact of sociocultural context, not only on the group, but conductor also. In order to understand how these may manifest in the therapeutic setting conductors should carefully seek and examine their own gender-related biases (LeFay, 2020). Barbara Elliott (1986) suggests not only that the gender of the group therapist influences the group process, but that the particular way the therapist deals with their masculine and feminine identifications also affects the degree of gender flexibility in the group.

Actually what I did not recognize was that members of the group were complimenting me for something that Isobel Conlon (1991) was describing as “being feminine/mother figure (understanding, sensitive, empathetic), as well as masculine/father figure (holding authority, setting boundaries, and making challenging interventions).”

It took me a while to understand this, of course later, and to realize that I intervened from pure intuition which sometimes is also something that group analyst has to rely on..

The issue of gender identity is not simple at all. Psychotherapists today face a completely different sexual environment than they did only ten or twenty years ago. This is a special challenge for group psychotherapy. Group culture naturally inclines to diversity. Most psychotherapy groups are made up of heterogeneous populations and value diversity as a condition for growth and change. The group symbolizes a family group in which unresolved aspects of the original family sexual configuration can be expressed, but in which there are new possibilities for sexual discovery and development (Nitsun, 2006). Group analysis forms a matrix where gender stereotypes and rigidity through intrapersonal and interpersonal processes can be transformed into a richer and more flexible complex of identifications, representations, and behaviors (Ofer, 2016). This can lead to bridging differences within and between members. The group provides ample opportunities for feminine and masculine identifications through the exploration and elaboration of behaviors that reveal activity and passivity, autonomy and intimacy, individuality and interdependence, independence and dependence. In fact, it is our bisexuality that is important to our thinking, ability to symbolize, and creativity (Winnicott, 1971). For this to happen (Ofer, 2016) discusses that psychotherapist must be at peace with his/her bisexuality, with the various forms of femininity and masculinity, with the aggressive part in himself/herself as well as with the gentle, thus making room for multiple forms of gender. In analytical groups, group members can find resonances with each other and thus enrich their identifications, behaviors, and relationships with others. By expanding and deepening their inner world with different patterns of identification, members overcome narcissistic vulnerabilities and strengthen their unique gender / sexual identity. However, the absence of sexual discourse prevents us from adequately addressing this topic (Nitsun, 2006).

Therefore, group therapists need a multidimensional understanding of gender, just as it is necessary with any of the fundamental dynamics of human existence (Schermer, 2008). Another

important issue regarding gender identity is the issue of conductor's countertransference, so Alonso (2008) points out that therapists like patients have their own defenses and that analysis of countertransference is important in addressing gender issues in psychotherapy groups.

The PDM (2017) also discuss about the therapist's subjective experience in this matter. It is noted that the subjective experience of the cisgender clinician may include anxiety, worry, revulsion, or voyeuristic curiosity. A clinician's attachment to his cisgender identity can sometimes make it difficult to enter the clinical subjectivity of those who wish to transition socially or anatomically from one gender to another. And this is an important question that I'm not sure we know how to handle very well.

So, at the end I would like to say that with this lecture we have only started with an important and broad topic.

While reading and writing this paper, I found few important questions actually that I asked myself first and I dare to ask the audience today:

How much we do know about gender, and how many of us are really into this important matter?

How ready are we to deal with our own gender identity issues and offer ourselves as transference objects to our clients?

Are we maturing as professionals, and do we manage to avoid pathologizing everything different?

Have we really gotten rid of prejudices, stereotyping, and critical, discriminatory attitudes related to gender issues, in order to avoid the trap of negative countertransference and harming the client?

If we are, then why is this still an important question needed to be discussed?

Bearing in mind all of the above, we can only once again agree with Grotjahn (1977), who said:” .....psychotherapist must be a man for all times. He must be a unique person, but open-minded, ready to anticipate and accept changes “.