

Michele Minolli: Constructivist Psychoanalyst?

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ABSTRACT. – Throughout his professional life Michele Minolli fully embraced the scope of his psychoanalytic background while combining it with current developments in contemporary human and medical sciences. The research project described in his 1990 article, developed throughout his writing, welcomed the vision of man as an autonomous system and placed the Ego-subject and the relationship at the centre of the therapeutic method. Among the cognitivist authors, Vittorio Guidano followed a similar path, embracing the constructivist vision: the author describes how the encounter between the two methods was generative and a stimulus for the further development of a subjectively respectful practice of psychotherapeutic intervention. Intellectually, my encounter with Michele Minolli represented the opportunity to discuss ideas and opinions with a therapist who, in his clinical and research activity, had arrived at similar or even super-imposable theoretical and methodological theories to mine, despite my cognitivist background. Interaction with Michele often led to sessions where we debated which of us was more cognitivist than he thought or more psychoanalytic.

Key words: Psychoanalysis of relation; cognitivism; constructivism; post-rationalist cognitivism.

Introduction

The opportunity to discuss things and being sometimes overwhelmed by his vehemence has been a privilege. The 1990 article (Minolli, 1990, reported in this journal), which inspired these brief reflections, is further confirmation of what I have written and will write. Minolli lays the foundations of his intellectual plan: epistemology, a theoretical hypothesis on the psychic essence of human beings and of their psychopathological expression, and finally, the method (being the coherent combination of techniques that derive from it), retracing the development of psychoanalysis at the root of it.

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Minolli describes the stages in the evolution of the psychoanalytic model in a succession that harks back to the development process of the cognitivist model, from Behaviourism to Standard Cognitivism, up to the Constructivist revolution.

The first phase was characterized by the search for techniques that could calm therapists' deep-rooted feelings of impotence: Freud explores electrotherapy and hypnosis; behaviourism, ruling out the possibility of entering the black box of the mind and respecting current scientific criteria, proposed techniques that could be used by operators following well-defined processes and, for this reason, have a high degree of repeatability, though carried out by different operators. Although leaving large gaps in psychopathological theories, the method (in its working to achieve positive results) is validated.

A second phase coincided with the advent of the cathartic method that involved the emergence of traumatic memory and the abandonment of the use of trans-hypnotics: the birth of the psychoanalytic method. In the same way in the cognitive field in the seventies (at last) even mental processes are approached in a scientific way and thought processes are given a more prominent place than emotions. The psychopathological event is considered the result of a maladaptive idea that generates disturbing emotions.

Where psychoanalysis puts suggestion and trauma at the centre of intervention, in cognitivism, persuasion with Socratic dialogue, and the maladaptive thought for correction is put at the centre of the method.

Thus, psychoanalysis and cognitivism place *telling* in the foreground: the former through free association, the latter in search of strict consistency in levels of thought through the analysis of individual motivation and belief.

The cornerstone of psychoanalytic work is the clinical historical method: human beings as builders of meaning, who through narrative thought tell their story in order to discover the thing repressed that creates the psychopathological event or rather, psychological suffering.

The cornerstone of cognitivist action is the experimental method: human beings are builders of beliefs and motivations which generate thoughts which constitute the basis of emotional modulation and therefore of psychopathology.

The *telling* in therapy involves two very different modalities: the first, that of psychoanalysis, where through the construction of dialogue the patient is invited to let his own internal experience flow, transforming it into words and then into a story; the second, that of cognitivism, acts through the analysis of situations of suffering reconstructing thought flow concerning particular contexts, and the generation of disturbing emotions.

The relationship generated within the psychoanalytic setting and the cognitive behavioral setting is profoundly different.

In psychoanalysis, the interpersonal relationship method taken to its

extreme consequences generates, through the use of free association and the interpretation of dreams, the *psychoanalytic constellation* representing ‘the most characteristic feature of the psychoanalytic method’.

In the cognitive context, the relationship seems to take on a more psychoeducational form, where the therapist explains to the patient how it works.

Minolli (1990), in an article writes how Rapaport emphasizes that there is continuity between free association, dream interpretation and the interpersonal relationship. The creation of the therapist-patient relationship is a space for processing the telling, for the emergence of repressed memories and wishes, and for the taking of shape in a narrative continuity.

In psychoanalysis, the present and past are linked by a thread of continuity, where one is given meaning through the other. In the cognitive field, the emphasis is placed on analysis of the *hic et nunc* and puts the individual story in the background.

A further development is the introduction of the participant observer method in which we can develop and become more aware of the dynamics of the subject.

In Michel Mahoney’s article *Psychotherapy and the Structure of Personal Revolution* (1980), he listed what was needed at that point, to reflect on, to transcend and develop the cognitivist paradigm (Mahoney, 1980). The author listed six points: i) Rationalist cognitive therapy tends to ignore or minimize the relevance of unconscious processes; ii) The tacit world is not considered; iii) Rationalist cognitive therapy, though inserting cognitive processing between stimulus and behaviour, sees cognitive processes as processes in response to the stimulus; iv) Automatic thoughts and beliefs essentially take the form of thought expressed in words and therefore there is a sustained correspondence between thought and language; v) Excessive emphasis on rationality as an adaptation factor; vi) To conclude, inevitable recourse to psycho-pedagogical and normative acts.

In 1983 Vittorio Guidano and Gianni Liotti published their book *Cognitive Process and Emotional Disorders* in the United States (Guidano & Liotti, 1983); the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm that Guidano embraces in its most radical form burst through into cognitivism, especially after coming into contact with Humberto Maturana’s and Francisco Varela’s work. The historical-clinical method replaces the experimental method without abandoning scientific criteria characteristic of the cognitivist approach. No more techniques, but a method for the explication of the constraints of the human model to which we adhere.

Changing perspective, the model proposed by Michele Minolli has three strengths: i) assertion that the Ego-subject is one; ii) the resulting method: observing the relationship; iii) importance of the relationship.

Assertion that the Ego-subject is one

The meeting with Michele Minolli was an encounter with an analytical model that puts subjectivity in its purest form in the foreground. ‘The Ego-subject is one’, writes Minolli in his book *Psychoanalysis of the Relationship* (Minolli, 2009) and adds: ‘to state then that the Ego-subject is one is not a reflexive deduction, even if the reflexive in some ways reflects reality, it is not even a point of view of the observer, even if the observer’s characteristics certainly have an influence; we should rather consider it as an ‘objective’ characteristic of the Ego-subject susceptible to continuous interactive checks.’ (p. 77).

Sentiments of unity and continuity are at the center of the human experience, while remaining extremely dynamic:

“In the temporal metaphor of the psyche [...] Subjective organization is built as we move through time, doing things, experiencing sensations and ideas, including self-reflective ideas and feelings. The Self changes and is transformed continuously over time” (Minolli 2009, p. 79).

Michele Minolli also cites Mitchel: ‘They are not ideas in the mind nor are they aspects of a person, feelings, impulses, or values. They are dynamic versions of the person itself; they embody active models of experience and behaviour, organized around a particular point of view, a sense of self, a way of being and are the basis of the common phenomenic sense we have of ourselves as whole’ (Mitchel 1993 in Minolli, 2009, p. 128).

In the constructivist cognitive model, in the post-rationalist declination, the Self is understood as the process through which humans come to perceive themselves in a qualitatively specific way, continually harking back between the flow of immediate experience, its acknowledgement and the construction of a story in which a specific feeling of self, characterized by unity and historical continuity, is expressed. The Self is unique by virtue of the emotional and cognitive core at the basis of an identity, which is called *personal meaning*. This meaning takes shape through relationships with significant figures in the first two years of life (Guidano, 1992, 1988; see also Tronik 2001 who from studying infants of a few months old, has furthered the research into the processes of experience signification in preverbal children).

The two perspectives appear very close. Both of the models tend to define the processes which underlie a personality that can produce consistent feelings of uniqueness and individual continuity, and make the clinical-historical method coherent; the aim is to bring to a level of awareness the continuum between experience and one’s sense of the present moment, and experiences pertaining to past events.

The resulting method: ‘*observing the relationship*’

The analytical relationship is a possibility: that of experiencing a relationship where we can be and express ourselves as we are, without having to hide behind a role, a task. It may be that we can be helped and help each other to understand that life is openness, despite the effort and fatigue that this entails: The characteristic of a relationship in the therapeutic sphere is its interactive aim. The therapist is totally immersed in the interaction therefore it is not *a uni-directional interactive aim*. This was the thorniest point that often led to discussion.

Minolli often said to me: ‘You are clearly a cognitivist: you *cognitivise* emotions too much, let them flow.’

This was an invitation to reflect on the therapeutic method: the act of listening, which enables the Ego-subject to bring out basic core nuclei, without the therapist defining the Ego-subject’s internal world from the outside.

Importance of the relationship

Therapy, taking into account the constraints imposed by the autonomy of the human being, builds a relationship that is respectful of subjectivity, and inevitably complex.

We therapists are *strategically oriented disruptors* Vittorio Guidano told me. I prefer to say *procedurally oriented disruptor*. Our only chance is to try to generate a relationship to enable those who ask us for help to catalyse a process of exploration of one’s self, bringing out personal resilience by analysing the individual’s story and the memories underlying individual personological order. Guidano and Minolli, or rather, Vittorio and Michele, tried to teach me: to be respectful of subjectivity in compliance with individual coherence.

My passion for therapy for couples or as Francesco Dettori (personal communication) suggests: ‘therapy *in couples*’ stems from a deep attention to relational processes, a fundamental characteristic of the post-rationalist constructivist cognitive model. I studied the theme of the couple in Minolli’s writing, both the book written with Romina Coin (Minolli & Coin, 2007), and his last book with its mocking, provocative title that was so like him: *What are you waiting for to leave?* (Minolli, 2016). I was invited to the Rome office for the presentation of this latest work and we fell to discussing points as we often did: Michele argued that when a meaningful relationship ends it means losing an individual evolutionary possibility, while I argued that, on the contrary, it represents an evolutionary opportunity. Over the next few days I came to realize that in actual fact we affirmed the same attention to evolutionary processes in crisis situations, but that he was once more further

ahead, expressing incisively the generativity of the processes of mutual emotionality that exist in loving relationships.

Michele Minolli spanned his era favouring new developments in psychoanalysis, taking the themes of subjectivity and relationship to their extreme consequences, the maximum expression of inevitable organizational closure of the human being, a path taking place in other fields and, at the same time, in the cognitive world. Michele developed the project that he outlined in his 1990 article (see the opening pages of this issue) with great incisiveness and scientific sensitivity, as only those who combine great study skills with significant clinical experience are able.

To conclude, I want to mention our last meeting at SIPRe in Milan in November 2019. That day, Michele delivered an exceptionally interesting, in-depth report. Afterwards, we had time for a quick chat and on leaving, he once more surprised me by uttering some phrase, in a way only he knew how, managing to overturn my perception of one of my black moments.

Ciao Michele.

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