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Sicily in the therapy room

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Abstract

Cultural factors characterising the places of belonging, together with the family and personal development, constitute the history of people we meet in the therapy room (and that of the therapist as well). Drawing on this long-established idea, the author—a native Sicilian working and teaching in Sicily—identifies and describes two aspects characterising the Sicilian culture that he has encountered in his clinical practice. The first aspect relates to the phylogenetic imago of Sicilians in connection with their relationship to authority—particularly authorities representing the community, or favouring a social advantage. As written by Bufalino (2008), Sicily is in fact a 'plural island'. There are many Sicilies, many cultural groups that do not identify themselves in a single social body. This pluralism is held together by personal interests and duties between individuals, in a dimension that excludes any social and public interest. Such a plurality has been maintained through the use of a code that would, in other social contexts, have to do with confidentiality; yet, it becomes omertà (a sort of act of silence) in Sicily. The author identifies the way this code expresses itself in the therapy room and how it interposes itself in the therapeutic relationship. The second aspect concerns the relationship of Sicilians with the Sicilian landscape and with the Etna volcano in particular. Sicilians—especially the ones living in Eastern Sicily—are connected to Mount Etna by sensory participation. The relationship between them and Etna is so full of affection, symbols and myth that it becomes part of their identity, manifesting itself in the therapy room through dreams.

1 | FOREWORD

The history of people we meet in the therapy room, no matter the setting we use, reveals a lot about their personal and familial development, and about their cultural development (American Psychiatric Association, 2004, 2014). Cultural development shapes both our patients' identity and our own, as well as the relational styles we use in different settings.

We are made up of a set of relationships with people, events and our environment. We can assume that our development occurs through a set of everyday activities from which we 'internalise' and sometimes incorporate a set of values, skills, knowledge and ways of thinking of our social–historical context.

As stated by Ingold (2001), organisms and persons are not the effect of molecular and neural causes, of genes and traits, but, rather, examples of the total field of relationships in which their existence unfolds. Organisms and persons are made of relationships that are made creative through their activity. In the end, organisms and persons are nothing more than a means by which relationships build new relationships.

Ingold's (2001) view aligns with the work of numerous anthropologists, neuroscientists, biologists and philosophers, outlining an environment that is not neutral; rather, so interwoven with people's lives that it forms an inseparable pair with the individual (Augè, 2008; Bachelard, 2006; Bateson, 1972, 1979; Cole, 1996; Damasio, 1994; Maturana, 1984; Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

It follows from the idea that 'cultures' are not entities, rather processual dimensions of practices that are assimilated from participation in the community—used in many ways, modified and passed on over time. Hence, people, the society they live in, and the environment constitute a network of relationships. The individual is a node in this network, in which every element is shaped by and with the others (Bollas, 2010; Hillman, 2004; Lingiardi, 2017).

I begin with a brief historical overview, in which I highlight the profound impact Sicily's plurality of cultures has had on the forging of its people and their sicilianità. I then illustrate the development of the linguistic code of omertà. Such a code of silence is especially noticeable in people connected to the mob, and it permeates the relational dynamics among people on an unconscious level, especially when aspects of power and affection are involved. In other ways, such dynamics also reverberate in the therapeutic relationship, both in individual and group settings. In this respect, I present two examples from my personal experience. The theoretical model I refer to is psychodynamic relational transactional analysis (Hargaden, 2002; Little, 2011, 2020; Novellino, 1984, 2004; Sisalli, 2016). Finally, I examine the significance of eastern Sicily's landscape and the role it plays in creating self-image as a mindscape or evocative object (Bollas, 2010; Lingiardi, 2017). The landscape is no longer something external; it becomes part of the self—and, as such, it can be represented in dreams.

2 | SICILY AND THE CONCEPT OF *SICILIANITÀ*

Sicily is located in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Europe. For centuries, the island has been at the crossroads of cultures that met, fought, and contaminated one another there. During his long Italian journey (1786–1787), Goethe commented on this land of extraordinary beauty, saying 'To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything' (Gohete, 2013, p. 240).

Sicily represents a fundamental piece of the history of Mediterranean populations, which was once believed to be the history of the (known) world (Holm, 1980). Over time, Sicily has been controlled by several rulers, its fate often held in the hands of foreign potentates.

Phoenician and Greek populations came to Sicily from the east, settling with the first peoples (Bérard, 1963) while Carthaginians came from Africa, introducing international commerce. Ancient Greeks introduced their model of civilisation (Siculo, 2016) and these civilisations were then followed by the Romans as Sicily became an important part of their Empire (Bejor, 1983; Livio, 2007). Christianity developed, beginning Sicily's longstanding tradition of martyrs and saints, some of which are known throughout Europe. The most popular Sicilian saints include Saint Rosalia, patron saint of Palermo; Saint Lucy of Syracuse; Saint Agatha and Saint Euplius of Catania; and Saint Vitus, a martyr also revered in Bohemia, Saxony and Prague (Gregorio, 2018). After the fall of the Roman Empire, in 400 AD, barbarian invaders tore down the island, which was then conquered by the Byzantines a century later. During the ninth century, Sicily fell under Arab rule, which influenced the island's architecture and culture so profoundly that this is considered the age in which the Sicilians developed an identity as a people (Amari, 2002; Maurici, 2010). The Normans—people of Danish and Norwegian origin who had previously settled in the northern region of France they called Normandy (Martin, 2018)—arrived in Sicily in the year 1000. Swabian (German) kings replaced the Norman dynasty in 1194, and the 13th century is remembered for the reign of Frederick II, known as 'stupor mundi' (the wonder of the world) (Marrone, 2014; Renda, 2012). This short domination was followed by Angevin (French) and Aragonese (Spanish) rule, until the Kingdom of Spain established a long domination in the 16th century, ruling Sicily for 200 years (Mack Smith, 2009, Benigno, 2017, Piazza , 2016). As Sciascia (1996) wrote, 'if Spain is, as some have said, more than a nation, a way of being, Sicily is also a way of being; and the closest that one can imagine to the Spanish way of being' (p. 13). The island went through another difficult period in the 18th century. It was ruled by the house of Savoy (from Piedmont), then by the Austrians, and finally the Spanish Bourbon dynasty (De Lorenzo, 2013). Sicily became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, after Garibaldi's March (Riall, 2007). The Piedmontese government impoverished the island with aggressive taxes that were then spent in Northern Italy (Correnti, 2002; Mack Smith, 2009). This is the era when the practice of banditry (*Brigantaggio*) began and the first Mafia groups were formed, developing a system of organised crime which is, unfortunately, still exported all over the world (Norwich, 2018).

This quick historical overview demonstrates how Sicily has always been coveted by peoples seeking to possess the island and its resources—and why landscapes, traditions and monuments recall Italy, Greece, Spain and the East, with all of these elements intertwining into a unique composition.

Like all peoples who have long been oppressed, Sicilians have learned to cope with their many invaders, developing a mistrusting attitude and a verbal and nonverbal code to hide their thoughts—conveying it through impenetrable turns of phrase and making fun of both powerful people and strangers. Some attribute the origin of this language to the first tyrants of Syracuse, who prohibited conversations. Although this seems to be a legend, it does not seem completely meaningless (Tuzet, 1988).

> We Sicilians have become accustomed, by a long, a very long hegemony of rulers who were not of our religion and did not speak our language, to split hairs. If we had not done so we'd never have coped with Byzantine tax gatherers, with Berber Emirs, with Spanish Viceroys. [...] For over twenty-five centuries we've been bearing the weight of superb and heterogeneous civilisations, all from outside, none made by ourselves, none that we could call our own. We're as white as you are, Chevalley, and as the Queen of England; and yet for two thousand five hundred years we've been a colony. (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 2013, pp. 135–136)

These multiple identities existing in Sicilian people create ambivalence between the sense of 'belonging' and 'not belonging', which expresses itself in two ways: on the one hand, Sicilians are aware of the legacy of their glorious past (so much so that even the poorest consider themselves noble, as in Tomasi di Lampedusa's (2013) words, 'Having been trampled on by a dozen different peoples, they think they have an imperial past, which gives them a right to a grand funeral' (p. 141)), and they fiercely defend their belonging to 'the land of Sicily'.

On the other hand, their defencive individualism holds in it the absence of a sense of 'We' (Fiore, 1997a, 1997b).

We can trace one of the effects of this sense of 'We-ness' within the family in the discretion that characterises the people of Sicily, who find it inappropriate to show their feelings publicly. Besides, commitment to the family (the 'united family' and the 'family honour') sets the familiar 'We' against a 'non-We'. We can therefore assume that Sicilians' identity is built on the distance and mistrust they hold towards what they do not consider part of the concept of 'We': the 'non-We' (Fiore, 1997a, 1997b).

As Bufalino (2008) wrote about Sicily as a 'plural island', the Sicilian reality cannot be seen as a whole. There are many Sicilies, many cultural groups that do not identify themselves as a single social body.

> There are many Sicilies and we may never be able to count them all. There is the green Sicily of the carob trees, the white one of the salt mines, the yellow one of the sulfur, the blond one of the honey and the purple one of the lava […]. Each Sicilian is indeed a unique psychological and moral ambiguity] (Bufalino, 2008, p. 5).

This pluralism is held together by individual interests and duties between individuals with no social or public interest (Fiore, 1997a, 1997b). Such a dimension of plurality has been maintained through the use of a code that would, in other social contexts, have to do with confidentiality, yet it becomes *omertà* (a sort of act of silence) in Sicily.

Besides such pluralist attitudes cross-cutting Sicily's sociocultural fabric, there is a fatalistic dimension generated by some kind of overwhelming fate related to natural disasters (such as eruptions, earthquakes, floods and droughts) and to immobilism. This is why we often hear people say that 'it is pointless to try to change things because nothing will ever change'. Change, in fact, does not belong to the people, but rather to the current ruler imposing their rules. Therefore, change presents nothing but another ruler to deal with, and does not correspond with an internal change.

> Anyway, I've explained myself badly; I said Sicilians, I should have added Sicily, the atmosphere, the climate, the landscape of Sicily. Those are the forces which have formed our minds together with and perhaps more than alien pressure and varied invasions: this landscape which knows no mean between sensuous sag and hellish drought; which is never petty, never ordinary, never relaxed, as should be a country made for rational beings to live in; this country of ours in which the inferno round Randazzo is a few miles from the beauty of Taormina Bay; this climate which inflicts us with six feverish months at a temperature of 104. Count them, Chevalley, count them; May, June, July, August, September, October; six times 30 days of sun sheer down on our heads; this summer of ours which is as long and glum as a Russian winter and against which we struggle with less success. […] This violence of landscape, this cruelty of climate, this continual tension in everything, and even these monuments of the past, magnificent yet incomprehensible because not built by us and yet standing round us like lovely mute ghosts; all those rulers who landed by main force from all directions, who were at once obeyed, soon detested and always misunderstood; their sole means of expression works of art we found enigmatic and taxes we found only too intelligible, and which they spent elsewhere. All these things have formed our character, which is thus conditioned by events outside our control as well as by a terrifying insularity of mind (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 2013, p. 179).

The two elements of *omertà* and fatalism, typical of the Sicilian cultural model have an impact on the therapeutic relationship. The therapist can be experienced as the new ruler, one whose rules the client must

'unfortunately' observe, and has to adapt in a compliant but superficial way, or that can be fought through silence while surrendering to a painful destiny.

3 | MALE AND FEMALE *OMERTÀ*

According to Pitrè (1889), Sicilian founder of the study of 'folk psychology', the word *omertà*, which has no equivalent in any other language, signifies '*omineità*': the sense of 'manliness' or being a man. Someone who is serious, tough, strong—from the Latin word *virtus*, meaning upright and self-disciplined. According to other sources, it comes from the Latin word *umiltas* (humbleness), and therefore *omertà* is seen as a desirable quality.

Pitrè (1889) defineds *omertà* as a very personal feeling that:

> consists in pursuing the complete independence from social rules ... in resolving conflicts with violence or, at most, with the help of powerful local representatives of *omertà* as arbitrators ... Silence represents the very foundations of *omertà*. If there's no silence, a man can't be a man (*omu*) (pp. 294–295).

Whoever fails to respect silence and to keep the secret loses his reputation as a real man becoming nothing more than *un ominicchio*, *un mezzo uomo*, *un quaquaraquà* (a half man, a tiny man and a braggart) in the eyes of people.

As confirmation, Pitrè (1889) quoted 12 Sicilian proverbs, many of which are still in use today. They include "l'omu chi parra assai, nun dici nenti L'omu chi parra picca è sapienti" [The man who talks a lot says nothing; The man who talks little is wise]; 'Parrari picca e vistiri di pannu mai nun ha fattu dannu' [To speak little and wear modest woolcloth has never damaged anyone]; 'Vucca si e parola no' [having a mouth is fine; using it to talk is not]. Pitrè also tells a tale in which 'talking' and 'eating' went to King Solomon to ask which of them could get full use of the mouth. King Solomon answered that the poor should only be able to enjoy 'Eating', since the less the poor talk, the better (Pitrè, 1889).

Because the word omertà has no equivalent in other European languages, more than one word is needed to translate it. Therefore, it becomes *code of silence or rule of silence* in English; while in French it is *loi du silence*; then we have *ley del silencio* in Spanish; and *Gesetz des Schweigens* in German. In the remaining Indo-European languages, *omertà* recalls a 'code' or 'rule' involving silence that seems to symbolise a lack, an absence—a silence that has to be feared and interpreted, a silence that reflects a cultural reality (Augè, 2000) and the defence of a truth against the power of words. In Sicily, 'silence is golden' or 'sacred', underlining that feelings must be kept secret and not disclosed to others. Alternatively, it is a sort of suggestion not to get involved in other people's business.

A rule of silence represents 'una forma esasperata di individualismo in cui agiscono, in duplice e inverso movimento, le componenti dell'esaltazione virile e della sofistica disgregazione' [An exasperated form of individualism in which a double, reverse movement of manly exaltation and sophistical disintegration is exerted] (Sciascia, 1996, pp. 20–21). The silence of *omertà* can be overcome with metaphors, a language that is very familiar to Sicilian people. Similarly to silence, metaphors abound with allusions and ambiguities, leaving room for different interpretations and consequent actions (Guastella, 1977; Satriani, 1979). We can consider such silence as the symbolic actualisation of oppression, and of the things that should be left unsaid. In general, such things involve submissions and traumatic memories (Beneduce, 2010).

The collective memory of the Sicilians has been riven over and over again by the many foreign invaders that conquered the island over the course of history. It is a memory of traumas that have been incorporated in the Sicilian culture (Augè, 2000), a culture that could not determine itself because of the continuous fragmentation perpetrated by foreign potentates (Foucault et al., 2005; Sironi, 2018). Echoing Foucault, Judith Butler said that we are used to power as something that is imposed from outside, but power shapes the

individual, outlining the conditions of their existence and desire. She inferred that what we fight is also what we depend on in order to exist, and what we protect by subjugating ourselves to it. We 'subjectivise' ourselves through subjugation. 'Where social categories guarantee a recognisable and enduring social existence, the embrace of such categories, even as they work in the service of subjection, is often preferred to no social existence at all' (Butler, 1997, p. 20).

In Sicily, the family tends to satisfy the need for protection and care, developing models of dependence. Those satisfied desires for protection and care prescribe identification in the codes of the family. Not only the social group gives meaning to the world: it is represented by the family, and this becomes an obstacle to our possibility of considering ourselves in terms of diversity. The family as a psychological field tends to make its members correspond to the family itself (Dondoni, 2006).

It is likely that the cultural code of silence represents the assimilated cultural way that was passed on to survive the many traumatic memories of foreign oppressors. At the same time, it may have represented a way to survive constant cultural changes. Such a code becomes a Trojan horse in the hands of the Mafia, which exasperates its meaning for its advantage, becoming the new oppressor (Craparo and Ferraro, 2017). Going back to King Solomon's tale, it is as though 'Eating' conquered 'Talking', who now has nothing left but a useless mouth.

The examples that follow show how the code of silence can emerge in therapeutic relationships in both individual and group settings. The code can be recognised and used as a transformative tool, overcoming the Sicilian cultural defences (according to which a change can only be made by a king). This way, we allow ourselves to consider a social 'We' that includes everything that was considered to be 'non-We' so far.

The methodology used in the two examples is psychodynamic relational transactional analysis (Little, 2011, 2020; Moiso, 1990; Novellino, 2004; Sisalli, 2016). This approach uses empathic listening and countertransference to spot differences and similarities, using them as a model to overcome the mistrust that underlies the Sicilian cultural identity as stated by Fiore (1997a, 1997b).

4 | FROM A MEMORY

We can try to understand Sicily's culture of silence, and how it has been passed down from one generation to the next, by analysing a memory brought into the therapy room by a patient of mine.

The patient was born and raised in Sicily, where his family has been living for generations. He used to suddenly drop his voice every time he happened to mention public figures, or important moments of his life involving his relatives, often interrupting his narrative as if someone could hear him. But this would not happen when he mentioned people he considered peers or 'inferior' on a social level (according to his frame of reference), such as colleagues, school mates, friends, or his wife and son. If by any chance, I would ask questions or underline the event, Antonio (not his real name) would speak over me, interrupting his narrative and quickly bringing it to a close. In his personal code of silence, he seemed to put 'public' figures (politicians, affirmed professionals, renowned academics) on the same footing of 'affective authorities' (his parents, and some influential relatives, since he was from a well-known family of the town).

Since he did not show any paranoid traits, I often wondered if this was about our relationship. I also found it weird that I did not feel annoyed by his behaviour (Little, 2011; Novellino, 1984, 2004; Woods, 1995) although it was in breach of the fundamental rule of setting (Novellino, 2010). I noticed that this was a very different countertransference reaction to those I had towards other patients interrupting their verbalisations or withdrawing from stimuli during therapy sessions, so I felt the urge to explore this event with my patient. On one occasion, I asked him if there was anything in our relationship that prevented him from talking about the relevant figures of his past or present. He seemed relieved by my question, and the empathic understanding of his problem (Hargaden, 2002; Tudor, 2011) and shared a memory:

> One of my childhood memories involves my grandmother, mother of my dad, who used to tell me now and again not to share with others what she would tell me, nor what we would have been doing together, even what I ate, if I wanted to be a "big boy".

Episodes like this happened frequently in Antonio's childhood, but he could not understand them because he felt there was nothing wrong in the recommendations of his grandmother. He had internalised her as kind, good, loving, and friendly, a woman who taught him to read, cooked his favourite dessert, and allowed him to eat some extra cookies to satisfy his desires. 'Being able to hide from my mother that my grandma had given me an extra cookie made me feel strong, like a grown-up', he added. 'But just like all the other children, I often could not keep those little secrets for me. I was greatly surprised on a couple of occasions when I got the same recommendation from my kind, generous aunt'.

Such a 'disclosure' (which was something I felt I had also experienced in my own childhood) had pulled down the wall of silence in our therapeutic relationship. It helped us understand that 'not telling' had nothing to do with the content in itself, but rather it was part of a greater rule, stating 'it is not good to talk to others about what we do in the family, if you want to be a man you have to learn not to talk about what you do'. 'Don't tell' involves more than just keeping secrets. A secret links to a specific object, something that is better left unsaid in order not to upset the other, or something one came to know but cannot reveal—like an abuse, an act of violence suffered, a trauma. Either way, it links to an unfolded truth. In this case, 'don't tell' has a cultural meaning (Augè, 2000), a phylogenetic dimension with no specific connection (Medubi, 2010). It implies a general silence with no triggering event; it is silence for the sake of silence, a constitutive rule of the self which is linked to the promise of the development of a quality: namely, becoming a man.

By reactualising his memory, and with the help of our shared personal experience, in our therapy the patient retrieved the discomfort he felt as a child trying to understand if there were things that could be said and, if so, how he could recognise them, or if there were criteria he could adopt to avoid mistakes. Since he could not find a solution, he concluded that 'in order to become a man, it is not good to tell strangers what you do'. Over time, the word 'strangers' applied to anyone who was not part of the family—the family had become the internalised social imago (Burrow, 2011).

In the episode described above, the rule of silence in the therapeutic setting acquired the dimension of transference in which I was representing the stranger, the power from which he had to defend himself. At the same time, I was witnessing his transformation into a man. In the relational dynamic, it is just as if when Antonio is about to 'tell' he is committing a transgression, he is giving himself away. He is betraying his familial code and his belief whereby the cultural parent (Drego, 1996) steps in as a guard, watching the early memory of his family's code of silence in order to reactualise the defencive behaviour in the therapeutic relationship.

Talking means breaking the rule of *omertà*, violating the code of silence that expects men to be strong and masculine, and women to be submissive, and to conform to a fundamental familial rule that is necessary to maintain the family unit.

In the therapeutic relationship, Antonio's Child needs to be listened to, but on the other side he is afraid to make mistakes and betray his family. When he understands the origin of this unconscious behaviour, he can question his belief and reorient the therapeutic relationship towards an alliance, rather than defend his internal family. He can eventually look at the therapist not as a ruler, but as a travel companion. I found it important for me to notice in the therapeutic relationship, and in my countertransference, the presence of a common cultural and educational model for me and my patient. It helped me to better understand Antonio's difficulties to accept the rules of the setting, as well as the difficulties of other patients, who used to fight change by starting a power struggle.

This and other episodes made me consider these events as a sort of unconscious, transgenerational training: a cultural inheritance, an actual cultural script (Miglionico, 2009) that enslaves Sicilian patients and therapists, who

then develop their subjectivities by mistrusting strangers, *omertà*, and the perception of the family as the only social group of belonging. I now acknowledge all those aspects in working with Sicilian patients.

5 | IN THE THERAPY GROUP

In a stage of the therapy group in which its members seemed reluctant to face personal issues, Giuseppe (pseudonym), who had previously shared his discomfort at work mentioning his desire for transgression and justice, concluded by saying he had found his solution to the problem of silence. His words were echoed by two other group members, who smiled, loudly pronouncing the word 'omertà'. The group reacted to the word with a smile of agreement.

This event seems to represent an internalised dimension that is shared with the group in a transpersonal dimension, whose phenomenological manifestation is expressed by the smiles. Everybody knows what we are talking about; there is no need for words. It was as if a linguistic paradox became real when the group member talked about what is not supposed to be told. In talking about his decision to use silence as a means to rebel against power, he is breaking the code of silence he referred to, and which he automatically identified as a solution to fight the feeling of submission he had then shared with the group. But what is the power he is talking about? What are the injustices he refers to? What is it that is oppressing him (Deaconu, 2013)? If we look at this as an unconscious communication (Novellino, 2004), we can suppose that he is talking about himself outside the group, but also about his relationships with the other group members and with the therapist, describing a way of acting that characterises the whole group (Sisalli, 2016) in dealing with power management.

Rather than using silence to exert his power, he talks about the way he is going to fight the therapist's power and rules, or anything that his frame of reference classifies as unfair. The complicit attitude by other group members suggests that they could be using the same code. The therapist's rules can represent the current ruler's new imposed laws, and his silence can be seen as part of the code of *omertà*—a way to display his power.

In considering the impact of Giuseppe's storytelling, we can see that there is a risk that the group will reperpetrate the dynamics of the external world in the relationships between members, and between the members and the therapist. That is to say, a game of submission and subjectivation with the solution rooted in not speaking or only pretending to speak. Just as in *The Leopard*, Tancredi Falconeri says 'If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change' (Tomasi di Lampedusa, Il Gattopardo, 2013, p. 19), the patient is performing his cultural and familial script to maintain it as it is.

In this therapeutic context it was useful to point out that Giuseppe's words were about the group and each member's personal story, including the therapist, rather than focussing on the individual and working on the strategies adopted by the patient to face the problem. The group made it possible to activate a process of sharing. In this exchange of views, the group members could think about their ways of managing power in and out of the group, and about the familial and social modellings to which they were subjected.

As we have seen in the previous example, speaking breaks the rule of silence, and sharing the phylogenetic imago provides an alternative to cultural subjugation. The recovery of the cultural dimension behind the group member's decision—that is, telling him he should autonomously find a solution to the problem of justice, and take it into his own hands to prove himself a man—provides a way out of the cultural constraint (according to which there is honour to defend) and lets him contact a pain he must take care of (Pitrè, 1889).

The dichotomy between family and society can be overcome within the group, where it can be shared emotionally in the here and now. Everybody can share their own story, facing the relational dynamics of belonging and freeing themselves from the need for mistrust as a constitutive part of their identity.

The awareness of having given up on ourselves in order to belong, and the belief that we can be recognised by not being ourselves, opens the door to disappointment and pain. However, at the same time it becomes possible to find a solution. In order to be ourselves, we have to give up on being ourselves.

For Sicilians, the shift from upholding one's familial honour to take care of pain probably comes after the recovery of their ancestors' history of oppression and its integration into their collective self. Such a recovery sets them free from their need to defend themselves through isolation in their own individualism, supported by the rule of silence. This is a transformative process that can happen in the group if we activate relational instances that integrate the subjectivated Self (a Self that sets the 'We' of family against the 'non-We' of society) with the 'We' of social belonging (Tudor, 2016).

6 | MOUNT ETNA: A PLACE OF THE MIND

The relationship that Sicilians develop with their landscape is far beyond contemplation. The landscape amazed us as children. It is the places we experienced with our parents, the piece of land told in our grandparents' tales. It involves smells, sounds, the body and its senses. It is so rich in memories and affections that it becomes a part of the Self (Lingiardi, 2017).

'*Paesaggire*' is a term used by the Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto to signify staying in the landscape with our history, our body, and our memory. He sees the landscape as the eros of Earth. The landscape represents the world to children and, as the world, the boundaries within which they identify themselves. This humanly cocreated dimension is nature's display of its eros to human beings, and every cultural achievement depends on the unceasing dialogue between nature and human beings (Zanzotto, 2013).

Just as New Zealand's Māori population considers the river a member of the community, Sicilians living at the bottom of the slopes of Mount Etna experience it as a living entity which is part of their lives. Its majesty is reflected in their eyes—the Mount is visible from the Aeolian Islands, from Calabria, from the inland towns in Sicily—it lives in their senses with its rumbling, it fuels their fear of earthquakes in its attempts to readjust. There has never been a generation of Sicilians not witnessing an eruption or at least feeling the Earth shake. Mount Etna combines opposites. Its sight from the outside is heavenly, but it is hell inside. It is covered with snow, but it produces lava, fire. It is a mountain, but it rises from the sea (in 1669 the flow of lava reached the sea). It is life and death.

Mount Etna and its imago are also connected to myths about fire, to the eternal flame kept in Vulcan's temple. It was Diogenes Laërtius who recounted Empedocles (a pre-Socratic philosopher from Sicily, revered as a prophet by the Siceliots) leaping into the crater of Mount Etna, which immediately erupted one of his renowned bronze sandals (probably because the offer was not received well). In the Christian era, popular belief identified the fire of Etna with hell, so that when in 252 AD, just one year after Saint Agatha's death, a major eruption struck the city of Catania, the faithful went to the Cathedral to take the Saint's sacred veil and carry it in a procession by the mounds of flowing lava which, as tradition has it, stopped after a short time. It was 5 February, the day the virgin from Catania was martyred. The faithful kept carrying the sacred veil in processions at every eruption until 1886.

This helps us understand the visceral connection between Mount Etna and the inhabitants of the surrounding villages, Catania included. Bachelard (2010) talked about the 'Empedocles complex', in which love, death, and fire are brought together in the same instant:

> Empedocles chooses a death which fuses him into the pure element of the Volcano. [...] Empedocles [...] consecrates his strength and does not confess his weakness; he is "the man of ripe experience, the mythical hero of antiquity, wise and sure of himself, for whom voluntary death is an act of faith proving the force of his wisdom." [...] Death in the flame [...] is truly a cosmic death (Rolland , 2015 p. 19).

Such a vision of the volcanic landscape recalls an intense, ambiguous beauty that carries in itself anguish and turmoil.

Mount Etna, as a mindscape (Lingiardi, 2017) or as an evocative object (Bollas, 2010), becomes a part of the Sicilians' identity. It gets into their dreams and sometimes their nightmares with an impact more powerful than reality.

> Great mountains, large rivers, the sea, the prairie, the jungle and remarkable edifices are etched in our mind like psychic structures; each seems to possess its own small universe of emotion and meaning (Bollas, 2011, p. 211).

The relationship between the individual and the landscape, which has become an internal landscape, finds in dreams its artistic representation. It gets into the clinical dialogue, displaying a maze of real places, ways of expression of social representations, imaginary places, and mental patterns that characterise both the individual and their culture of belonging. It becomes a reverie (Bachelard, 2010) shared in the therapy room.

Mount Etna appears in dreams as a massive mountain to climb, or as an erupting volcano. It may manifest itself through the image of scorching lapilli falling everywhere; lava trails devastating houses, woods, and people; or flows of lava passing by the dreamer, who can feel their heat and vividly see the colour of fire, without being hit by them. It appears as earthquakes and sudden crevices that rip the mountain from which magma bubbles out—sometimes thick, sometimes liquid, other times in the form of fire.

But Mount Etna dominates the sea, rising above the clouds with its height. It is the place where grapes are cultivated to produce fine wine and, at the same time, a barren moonscape where one can lose their sense of direction.

A patient of mine was experiencing issues getting in touch with her emotions. During the first year of therapy, she told about some dreams she had, in which she saw Mount Etna from far away (e.g., from a window of her house or in a painting). Once, she told me of a dream in which she was hiking on Mount Etna and she reached the astronomical observatory. Suddenly, she hears a rumble and then sees a massive amount of lava flowing out of the volcano. Terrified, she runs away, heading home. While fleeing, she notices that the lava glides around her, almost touching her. She can feel the heat and see the surrounding buildings being swamped while she keeps running without being touched by the lava. In her dream, Mount Etna becomes the image of the things she is recovering with effort in the therapy. It is no longer something she observes from a distance; rather, an element that is part of her life experience, her primitive instincts. Lava does not overwhelm her nor kill her, but she is there and she can feel the heat. Such heat is life and death at the same time. She can permit herself to acknowledge parts of her Self that she had previously excluded from her conscience and life.

I would like to conclude with a passage from George Sand, as quoted by Bachelard (2010) in *Psychoanalysis of Fire*:

> Here I am! Envelop me in rivers of burning lava, clasp me in your arms of fire as a lover clasps his bride. I have donned the red mantle. I have adorned myself in your colors. Put on, too, your burning gown of purple. Cover your sides with its dazzling folds. Etna, come, Etna! Break open your gates of basalt, spew forth your pitch and sulphur. Vomit forth the stone, the metal and the fire! (G. Sand, Histoire du rever, Aubier, Paris, p. 50, quoted by Bachelard, 2010, p. 18)

7 | CONCLUSION

This work describes two cultural aspects of Sicily that I have experienced in my practice. One concerns a linguistic code that comes into play in the therapeutic relationship, both in an individual and in a group setting; the other relates to how a specific element of the surrounding environment plays a role in forging our identity.

Although *omertà* and its code of silence are part of the Sicilian culture, often involved in the relational dynamic between patient and therapist, it is necessary to specify that in working with Sicilian patients we cannot interpret every silence as connected to this code.

As the examples provided show, the defence mechanism underlying such a code can be lessened through the therapeutic relationship and empathic listening, getting to recognise its results through gestures, words, metaphors, and stories told in the therapy room.

By listening to our countertransference (which in my view can go from feeling powerless to desiring to save the patient), and having a healthy curiosity towards the other person and the differences between the two of us, it is sometimes possible to notice the cultural aspects that we both are subjected to when developing our own subjectivity and building our identities.

In order to recognise the features of the code of silence in an individual setting, it is necessary to acknowledge the patient's difficulties in expressing thoughts and feelings. It is also crucial to verify that the rules of the setting do not replace the relationship and to be careful to avoid defining the patient's change from a dominant (omnipotent) position. However, when we are in a group setting, it is useful to foster transpersonal sharing rather than individual work.

Understanding that the code of silence underlies some internal beliefs and forges relational patterns with the 'Authority' can help us develop new codes in the therapeutic relationship, overcoming the need for a hypertrophic ego in which the only possibility of a 'We-ness' is a familiar 'We'. This understanding can instead lead our mind to open to a social 'We', and to the concept of belonging. This way, the 'We' of the family becomes a fundamental element of transition towards a social 'We'.

As stated in the foreword, 'cultures' are not entities but processual dimensions of practices learnt in social participation, used in many ways, modified and transmitted over time. In my practice as a therapist, I found it useful to notice how the typical features of every culture get into our psychological world and enter the therapy room, transforming us into explorers of unknown worlds, or worlds that were once known but are now forgotten or unformulated (Stern, 2006).

During this exploration we can encounter dreams, and dreams will help us observe that we are part of a natural dimension, and that nature is embodied in our minds and memories.

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