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Working with the nursing staff on an acute psychiatric admission ward

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The Problem: Psychiatric nurses working in an acute psychiatric admission ward, in a Central London teaching hospital, appeared to be under an enormous amount of psychological stress, with no support, and very little training. They seemed to be part of a more general institutional failure to take care of them.

Intervention suggestion: The high burn out risk to which the nursing staff seemed to be exposed, indicated that the help of an external consultant as a group leader, could probably help and support them through regular weekly staff groups. This paper is a clinical description of the main themes, challenges and issues, which emerged and were worked through in such a group, which lasted for about 7 years, uninterruptedly, and took place about 20 years ago. The group was run along psychoanalytically oriented lines, and within a group-analytic approach and framework. A central role in this work was played by the elaboration of the countertransference. This allowed the conductor to survive a very difficult situation. The projections which were being thrown onto him, allowed him to understand better how the nursing staff had been feeling, reflecting on his own emotional resonance. At the beginning of the group, the atmosphere was characterised by chaos, confusion, and negative transference on the conductor.

Conclusions: Through time, the general climate began to shift into something radically different. The transference on the conductor became much more positive, and even staff who had never appeared before to our meetings, began to active participate in all the sessions, including the consultant psychiatrists, the pharmacist and the social worker. The atmosphere became much closer to a therapeutic community, and a much more integrated multi-disciplinary team, than it had ever been before. People were now much more able to take risks with one another, and to disclose very personal feelings.

Biography

Antonio L S Fazio, after his M.A. in Sociology at Trento's University (Italy, 1969), was trained as psychoanalyst in London, at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, (1978). Back to Italy, he became Full Member of the Italian Psychoanalytical Society, and later child and adolescent psychoanalyst. He is also an Italian registered psychologist, on its psychotherapy section list. He also studied in London at the Institute of Group Analysis, in the seventies. He has worked extensively in the UK at Shenley Psychiatric Hospital, Claybury Hospital, University College Hospital London, Sutton Child Guidance Clinic. He has chaired the British Association of Group Psychotherapist first, and later a group psychotherapy Italian association "Il Cerchio", part of the Italian confederation of psychoanalytical group research associations "COIRAG". At UCH he was clinical associate in charge of the group dept. of the outpatient psychiatric and psychotherapy ward. Supervision, institutional work, groups and family work have been his main clinical interests. He now works in Roma, Italy.

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