9. Sexual orientations and identity

by Sara Bouchard

The liberation from the fear of difference disposes to a forgotten form of conflict: that regulated by love for the other, love for the world.
(María Zambrano, cit. in Buttarelli, 2004, p. XIII)

In beginning to write this chapter, I refer to the definition of sexology as a discipline that studies and narrates the relational, bodily, affective, psychological and sociocultural aspects of sexuality. The intertwining of these areas of experience makes sexology a multidisciplinary field of specific expertise that leads us to encounter the particularities and diversities of experience. The sufferings and beauties of both individual and collective experiences are treated transversally as a whole. Sexuality, therefore, is seen in a broad existential field and the resulting complexity leads to a richness, which is the keystone in dealing with the wellbeing and malaise that emerge in the course of people's continuous sexual growth, which is useful in transforming differences into shareable and desirable resources.

I start from the assumption that the aspiration to a serene, accepted, lived and shared with ease sexual-affective relational life is a basic need inherent in human development, which looks at the fertility of personal growth and links it to the overall development of humanity. This is because sexuality recounts the need and the desire for contact in the exchange of differences. Thus, desire, which is nurtured in diversity, lives in the expectation of an encounter with the other, it emerges in the space of a project of sense and it is a tension towards the realization of the self and of us.

I would also point out that in sexual desire it is always inherent a movement which implies a social context within which one can place the actions aimed at realising it: in other words, the development of sexuality allows to be confirmed, it is accepted or governed by the permitted identifications and roles and by approved and often homologated forms.

I now lean on the practice of sharing in the sense which Gestalt taught me ten years ago: there is a continuous connection between all human beings. We need to encounter differences and assimilate experiences in order to grow; we need to learn how to live with the resulting complexity, namely to try to also 'go outside' the permitted places to live spontaneously.

It has to be said, however, that the encounter with diversities may provoke experiences of anxiety or rejection, and we may be tempted to give in to simplifications and homologations that give us security, thus renouncing to the fertility of the encounter and of the conflict.

In the previous pages we have seen how the development of sexuality is central to the growth of each person and their environment. We shall now see how the developments in sexual orientations, i.e. where we turn and direct our sexual-affectionate desire, are consequently central to people's lives.

The way in which we experience sexual desire orients our relational life, opens us – or closes us – to encounters and the relationships that may arise from them, it changes us and makes us grow.

The sexual-affective orientation is an existential dimension that concerns all people, but we are often led to believe that the identity experience it entails is an exclusive to the people who experience something different from the norm. It is thought that being heterosexual is the *norm* and that the *norm* does not require a definition, so what is *normalised* becomes predictable: as such, it is no longer questioned. Consequently, it is the case that no attention is paid to the everyday expression of one's sexual-affective orientation when it is heterosexual, i.e. if it belongs to the experience of the majority group, and we also tend to underestimate the need for a conscious expression of those who, instead, live different experiences. We will discuss the influence of the experiences of the norm on the experiences of the minority groups in more detail further on.

We will explore in these pages the sexual-affective orientations that differ from the norm, which and how many there are. I will focus my attention on lesbian, gay and bisexual experiences. This choice is not meant to be exclusionary but dictated by the need to circumscribe the field based on my professional-personal experiences and my deeper studies.

The sexual-affective orientation narrates the desire to emotionally realise oneself in relationships. It is defined by numerous researchers and therapists as a relational structure of the self that implies a particular quality of desire for the sexual other (Rigliano, Ciliberto and Ferrari, 2012).

The *American Psychiatric Association* defines it as all the sexual, romantic and sentimental urges and desires that an individual has for other people on the basis of their gender and sexual characteristics.

What determines sexual orientation? Which specific elements characterise it? How does it influence people's experience of growing up, building interpersonal and social relationships, the recognition of rights and the exercise of duties? What links does it create in the formation of personal identity?

Before delving into these contents, I will pause for a moment on why it is still so important to talk about identity. In the words of Rosi Braidotti:

> [...] before one can undo, deconstruct, redefine, or relinquish subjectivity, one has to be a subject to begin with [...]. The choice of sexual lifestyle is far less important than the structural shifts entailed by this process in the structures of the desiring subjects (Braidotti, 2003, p. 91).

Often, identities can be vital for dealing with situations of oppression, although I am aware that this can become limiting if they are used to avoid experiencing complexity.

As early as 1990, Teresa De Lauretis coined the term *queer theory* to indicate the transition from *women's studies* to *gender studies* and on to *post-gender studies*. Tracing the history of the feminist movement – from the critique of patriarchy to the subsequent political analysis of gender – proposed a reinterpretation of the relationship between body, experience and desire. She redefined gender identity as a product or effect of cultural narratives, of the practices of visual and verbal representation that engender the woman-subject (De Lauretis, 1996).

Donna Haraway (1995), a biotechnology scientist, introduced us to a world in which sexual identities are fluid, unstable, continually renewed and claimed according to all possible political, economic, technological, biological and other intersections.

According to the philosopher Judith Butler (1996), gender identities can be multiplied and confused, mixed and recombined in a continuous game of re-signification. Her underlying concept is that of *performative practice*, i.e. the power of language to create the things it says, in this case gender.

Leaning on the thought of these beloved philosophers, I like to think that this thematic chapter may no longer be necessary in the near future and I write with the intention of making a contribution towards the full acceptance and appreciation of all ambiguities and diversities, be they about gender or sexual orientation (we will see the important differences later). But, while imagining the expansion of the above-mentioned scenarios, I still consider a specific, situated treatment towards an understanding of different sexual identities to be necessary.

Therefore, before going any further I will take a step back. As mentioned in the opening pages of this book, there has been – and, to a large extent, still is – a social control of sexuality: it follows that many sexual behaviours and some sexual orientations over the years have been stigmatised and defined as pathological.

Since the 19th century, homosexuality has been regarded as a disease by the psychiatric and psychological sciences, which had claimed the right to invent 'curative' techniques, namely behaviourist aversion therapies promising 'cures', i.e. 'reconversions' to heterosexuality.

Then, I think it is important to make a few brief historical notes on the process of the depathologisation of homosexuality.

In 1973, the *American Psychiatric Association* (APA) deleted egosyntonic homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

The APA also began to advocate for the civil rights of gay and lesbian people from the perspective of protecting their mental health.

In 1987, the egodystonic variable of homosexuality was also removed from the DSM as an outcome of the internalisation of social stigma.

In 1991, the *American Psychoanalytic Association* stated that it deplored discrimination against homosexuals and called on psychoanalytic institutes to select candidates on the basis of their professional qualities and not their sexual orientation.

In 1992, the *World Health Organisation* (WHO) deleted homosexuality from the international classification of diseases and reiterated that sexual orientation should not be considered, per se, a psychopathological indicator.

Contemporary and shared views in the scientific community regard homosexuality as a healthy and natural variant of human desire and affectivity (Rigliano, Ciliberto and Ferrari, 2012).

However, it has to be said that, since the 1990s, we have seen the re-emergence of so-called 'conversion therapies'; they re-proposed the outdated attempt of 19th century psychiatric medical science, clearly expressing the prejudice that homosexuality is a disease, i.e. a condition that can be 'cured'. This happened despite the fact that the APA had already been opposing any reparative treatment since 1998. Furthermore, in 2000 APA issued a clear recommendation to refrain from attempting to change an individual's sexual orientation and from providing false representations to patients.

By most professionals, all 'conversion' theories and techniques about homosexuality are considered cruel, useless and harmful. However, even in Italy, they continue to be practised.

While at an international level most psychology associations have long since created guidelines, training and professional development tools for counselling lesbian, gay and bisexual people, in Italy the psychology community has to wait until 2014 to see Vittorio Lingiardi and Nicola Nardelli's *Guidelines* published. The Order of Psychologists of Lazio recognises its quality and Luigi Palma (president of the *National Council of Psychologists Order*) invites members to its dissemination and consultation. The publication aims to fill many gaps in the manuals on the psychology of sexual development on which professionals are still trained. According to the research by Lingiardi and Nardelli (2014), the demand for training on the part of professionals in the field is emerging. In fact, 60% consider themselves to be partially trained and 25% not trained at all on the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation.

1. What does being lesbian, gay or bisexual entail?

Many authors agree that being homo/bisexual means having elaborated emotional and global representations of the I-other bond that do not differ from those developed by heterosexual people, except for the object of sexual-affective investment.

According to Rigliano (2001), heterosexuality and homosexuality are only two distinct aspects of the growth process during which sexual-affective experiences are formed and evolve, through complex interactions, emotions and personal experiences. Difficulties arise when stereotypes, commonplaces and social/family pressures combine to condition the outcomes, imposing patterns of behaviour that lead to feelings of suffering in a reductive and distorted view of what it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual (henceforth LGB).

We cannot talk about sexuality without broadening our gaze to the socio-cultural context in which we are immersed. And when speaking of the development of sexuality in persons with a prevailing sexual-affective orientation that differs from the norm, one cannot fail to take into account the specificity of the historical, social, cultural and therapeutic aspects that influence this growth experience.

We can imagine how and to what extent the history of pathologisation and the persistence of certain therapeutic approaches – as well as educational gaps – have favoured the formation of cultural prejudices and introjections, both personal and collective. And one can already guess how significant the influence of these phenomena is on LGB people who are born, grow up and relate in this culture.

Due to the impact with the outside world and the encounter with often internalised negative representations, people with a sexual orientation which differs from the norm encounter specific problems of growth and self-fulfilment. They experience a complex existential condition which needs to invent ways and forms to live their sexuality spontaneously, to create ways of responding to and protecting themselves from the possible danger of social, family and inner rejection.

Sexual orientation often remains hidden. In some cases, a false sexual identity is constructed, but it is destined to develop without creativity, feeding the fears and suffering of non-love. Most of the time, however, the pathways of self-acceptance lead to a multiple recognition of belonging and the developed resilience becomes a valuable resource of shareable awareness. In this regard, it has already been said in the previous chapters how and to what extent the experience of the self may increase in emergency situations of great intensity.

We have begun to see how experiencing a *sexuality deviant from normality* always interacts with the values and forms of *normal* sexuality, that is predominant on a social, cultural and religious level. Now it is a matter of better exploring the processes that are generated in the space, not always shared, between the inner processing and the relational and social component. I would like to emphasise that we are not talking about a person's 'bedroom', but about interpersonal and social places of representation of the self and of us: these are spaces where the desire, the need and the right to a full and peaceful existence is realized. We are talking about and existence which can fulfil the being there, the living in relationships, the belonging to a community. The existential dimension is at stake, and every sphere of life is involved.

LGB people often need personal work to create a protected space for their own way of feeling and to implement meanings of belonging understood as the need for shared values. I speak of the development of trust in being able to open oneself to life and love in a relational place, of the value of the recognition of differences as personal, conscious and collective nourishment.

As the psychiatrist and psychotherapist Paolo Rigliano writes, emerging from oppression is an achievement of society as a whole, never of an individual or a group (2001, p. 9).

The possibility/impossibility of serenely living one's sexual orientation, whatever it may be, interacts with the psychological processes of bonding and identification, of self-design and self-realization, and it enables or blocks the development of relational, cultural and social processes. These dynamics take place within social norms where we often witness phenomena of interdiction and disqualification, hence that are not capable of stimulating processes of identification and alienation, orientation, valorisation and construction: growth.

In addition to being a bodily desire, sexual orientation is an affective dream, a journey between internal/external images, representations of desire towards an expected and recognised gratification, therefore achievable. It is the expression of an emotional, as well as sexual, need to be with the other. Within this framework, homo and bisexual desire carves out its own forms and meanings, interacting with the dominant models that stigmatise it.

However, like all existential processes, the assumption of one's own homosexuality has an evolution through which the person can acquire awareness, value and existential possibilities, resilience. One does not choose to be lesbian-gay or bisexual, but one can choose how to be so, it is in this *how* that the growth experience takes place.

LGB people often come into contact with the need to define themselves, to *tell themselves*. It seems that this experience does not belong to heterosexual people (whose sexuality is taken for granted), when in fact the sexual-affective orientation – whatever it may be, as a nuclear existential dimension and as part of a social identity – is in fact continually being declared, even though we are not aware of doing so.

If the norm is that mostly tacit set of rules and values (*introjections*) that flows into the dominant thought/culture and decides, in a dualistic logic of opposites (white/black, man/woman, hetero/homo-sexual, who is in and who is out), it happens that in this society the more one deviates from the norm, the fewer 'normal' characteristics one possesses and one is all the more different. Often, difference does not turn out to be a value, and it is therefore easy for an LGB person to be seen and felt *ab-normal* as belonging to a minority.

To become aware of this difference, or diversity, and to inhabit it with ease corresponds to what Bell Hooks (1998), an African-American feminist, calls *being in the margin*, which means belonging to the main body despite being outside. So as to discover and develop one's own 'margin' of freedom, one's own personal lifestyle in its specificity and originality. Just as Basciano states, everyone needs to recognise themselves through their own transformation, but this is part of the experience of identity, of its seeking, of its becoming (Basciano, 2014).

Having arrived at this point, it is less and less important to understand why a person has one sexual orientation rather than another, but it becomes crucial to understand how feelings of hostility towards non-heterosexual people still arise and develop and the impact these prejudices have on all relationships.

It is no coincidence that from the 1970s onwards, research began to focus on homophobia, instead of homosexuality, and its consequences.

In this direction, the contextualisation of homophobia intersects with the phenomenon of *minority stress*.

Minority stress: the set of experiential discomforts due to belonging to a minority subjected to discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices of various kinds. It is not the product of an event but an ongoing experience.

In Gestalt terms, we can call it a process of awareness: what creative adaptations and resources do people with a different sexual orientation from the norm develop? What does it mean to identify with a minority?

2. Sexual identity, gender identity and sexual orientation (how to orientate)

2.1. What is sexual identity? What does identity investment mean?

When I speak of identity, I am referring to the experience of recognising oneself through one's own transformation, a perception of ourselves that persists over time despite going through different experiences. It is the result of an active process of continuous and changing construction, whose deep root is relational. An experience of awareness that answers the question "Who am I?".

We want to look at sexual identity as a bodily, sensory, emotional, perceptual and relational experiential identification ("What do I feel? How do I perceive and experience pleasure? Towards and/or with whom do I feel desire?"), but also as an experience of alienation ("I am not like that, I do not desire like you, etc."). Separation and union, simultaneously; self- expression in relation.

Sexual identity can change over the course of a lifetime, it is neither immutable nor fixed, it can be the result of a process of continuous exploration or indiscriminate acting out. We know how decisive acting out is in the shaping of a life and how the foundational experiences of relationships arise from our being body.

We also know that identity is often experienced to narrate aspects of self-representation, presentation and formalisation of one's experience. It is an image of ourselves that grows in relation to our environment by influencing it and being influenced by it, by making choices. To give a circumscribed example: people with a homosexual orientation face the concrete problem of how to be in a relationship, with what to identify in the movement of openness to encounter, i.e. whether to narrate one's sexual-affective identity investment or whether, on the other hand, to share only one's sexual orientation. To call oneself *gay* or *lesbian* is to act out one's identity, whereas to call oneself *homosexual* narrates a sexual behaviour.

The variants of sexual identity develop in a social space full of cultural meanings. It is not a neutral space but a place inhabited by beliefs and prejudices that can trigger deep and destabilising emotional experiences. When speaking of sexual identities that differ from the norm, on the one hand we see how one identifies with her/his own way of feeling, desiring and creating on the relational level of the encounter. On the other hand, the need emerges for a path towards a public identification of oneself, a representation in which one can recognise her/his own self, being in turn recognised by the outside world. An identity investment linked to one's personal history. A bringing out, in a shareable form, of what is invisible, in order to decline a belonging. We are talking about an inner face and an outer face of experience. Two different but complementary meanings of sexual identity (Rigliano, Ciliberto and Ferrari, 2012).

Thus, collective identities enter the field of exploration, i.e. the declination of plural subjectivities that respond to the need for belonging and spontaneous expression. Every person needs to be able to place himself or herself in a 'political' horizon of belonging, be it temporary or lasting. When we speak of sexual orientations that differ from the norm, we are dealing with the expression of minority experiences, and there is often a need to forge satisfying bonds within a group of like-minded people who recognise and share the same sexual desires, difficulties and the need to bring oneself into the world out of a sense of alienation. The need to belong grows together with the desire to be recognised by the broader collective social gaze.

The ethics of belonging is often necessary to contribute to the creation of an ethics of openness to the 'different', to the 'stranger'. Thus, the valued process of personal growth supports the definition and maturation of collective growth. All of us aspire to be part of an inclusive community that extends and values differences by representing them within it.

2.2. The factors of sexual identity[1]

- ***Sex***: biological identification as male, female or other.
- ***Gender***: the set of meanings of the representations and of psychic, emotional and identity attributes socially ascribed to sex.
- ***Gender identity***: the individual's awareness of being male, female, intersex or other (regardless of biological birth sex).
- ***Gender expression/gender roles***: definition of socially attributed expectations and behaviour based on being a woman, a man or other.
- ***Sexual orientation***: identification of desire for a sexual-affective partner.

2.3. Sexual orientations

- ***Asexuality***: absence of sexual attraction to other people, regardless of gender.
- ***Demisexuality***: attraction only to people with whom one has an affective/emotional bond.
- ***Homosexuality***: sexual/affectional attraction to the 'same' gender.
- ***Heterosexuality***: sexual/affectional attraction to the perceived 'opposite' gender.

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[1] For more on sexual identity factors, I suggest reading Graglia (2019).

- ***Bisexuality***: sexual/affectional attraction to both the male and female genders.
- ***Polysexuality***: sexual/affectional attraction to more than two genders, but not for all.
- ***Pansexuality***: sexual/affectional attraction to all genders.

It is important to be able to recognise the main forms of sexuality/sexual orientation, while knowing that many others continue to emerge. As already mentioned, in these pages we mainly discuss the homo/bisexual orientation. But this decision to circumscribe the field is in no way intended to discriminate against the many other expressions of sexuality.

2.4. Gender identities

Gender identity is the subjective perception of belonging/not belonging to a gender category (the criteria for belonging to genders, e.g. female or male, are mostly defined by cultures). This identification develops from the self-signification of one's own bodily-sexual-relational experiences, but goes through gender socialisation. In the process of gender identity development, personal factors interface with socio-cultural ones, which are often imposed and/or unconscious. The officially recognised gender identity is the outcome of a social and cultural construction. The personal definition of gender identity, on the other hand, is a self-regulated process. In fact, we choose to speak of gender as opposed to the concept of *biological sex*, as the term gender opens up a broader reading of the experience of identification/non-identification contextualised in socialisation.
In *cisgender* people, biological sex and gender identity correspond.
Transgender people cross gender boundaries by not identifying with the gender assigned according to their biological birth sex. This term is 'political', i.e. self-assigned, and does not necessarily imply a medical transition. Although it is often used as a synonym for *transsexual*.
The term *transsexual* has a psychiatric medical origin and refers to people who experience a mismatch between their biological birth sex and the gender with which they identify. Sometimes, but not always, it implies a medical transition (hormone therapy, surgery) aimed at gender reassignment.
Intersex people have hormonal, morphological or genetic characteristics that do not correspond to the medical description of male or female. They cannot, nor they want to, be uniquely defined as male or female.
There is also a multiplicity of identifications that do not conform to the gender binary, which poses a performative critique of stereotypes and gender roles. I mention only the main ones:

- *genderfluid*: people whose identity fluctuates along the gender spectrum and varies over time;
- *agender*: people who do not identify with any gender;
- *gender-queer*: synonym for non-binary identity, open to different identifications.

Those listed are all evolving experiences of identity. It is therefore important to use definitions as conventional and momentary. I am aware of how groupings tend to erase specificities.
It is important to emphasise that in the development and growth of each person, as in collective growth, gender identities are often intertwined with sexual choices, but gender does not have a direct connection with sexuality. Furthermore, even when talking about gender identities, it is necessary to take into account the influence of stereotypes, social and family expectations, i.e. links to gender roles. To give an example in this regard, heterosexuality corresponds to the expectation of sexual orientation of the female gender and the male gender. Sexual orientations that deviate from the dominant gender roles are considered *deviant*.
Transphobia is understood as social hostility towards transgender people. It is based on the view that people are distinguished on the basis of the two sexes, seen as complementary and opposed. This belief seeks to equate biological sex with gender identity and sexual orientation (in fact, some scholars combine homophobia and transphobia by speaking of *homotransphobia*).

3. Homophobia-homonegativity

Homophobia is defined as fear, aversion, intolerance towards homosexuality and homosexual people, as well as towards their culture and lifestyle. Researchers explain it as an intense fear for no apparent reason.
I find the reading of Margherita Graglia (researcher, psychotherapist and trainer) very interesting. She chooses to speak of *homonegativity* in a more general sense, considering the symbolic, verbal and physical actions against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people that are not exclusively dictated by fear. In this sense, the term better expresses the concept of negative representation of homosexuality, which is expressed

on an individual, social and cultural level in various forms and with different motivations (Graglia, 2012). Homonegativity often takes a disguised form that is difficult to identify. It is a cultural climate that we all breathe - the hetero, homo and bi-sexuals. Becoming aware of it helps not to blame people who are unwittingly involved in it – either actively or passively –, but rather to identify practices and ways to unmask it and deal with it.

G. Anzaldúa describes homophobia as:

> Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture […] (2007, pp. 29-30).

In Gestalt terms, we look at homophobia as a cultural *confluence*, often internalised.

Internalised homophobia consists of the uncritical acceptance by gay, lesbian, bisexuals or those close to them, of all prejudices, labels and discriminatory attitudes towards homo/bisexuality. This introjection of prejudice is mostly unconscious and can lead to experiencing one's own sexual orientation with difficulty, to opposing it, denying it or can even lead to discriminatory feelings towards other LGB people. All this often happens in solitude, in silence and without support.

The repetition within oneself of internalised social and cultural patterns leads to believe that the sense of exclusion, which inevitably creeps in, is a 'natural' part of ourselves. Messages denying and excluding one's own being can lead one to feel a kind of hatred towards this part of identity, towards the real self and to attempt to develop a false one. Moreover, internalising social homophobia increases the fear of rejection. For example, it can happen that one feels attracted to 'impossible' people or experiences other forms of self-sabotage and defence against the intimacy of a possible love affair, which is not only appealing but also 'revealing'. Internalised homophobia can manifest itself in different feelings and emotions: fear of being found out, discomfort in the presence of other people of the same sexual orientation, rejection of and negativity towards heterosexual people, a sense of inferiority or superiority towards heterosexual (but also homosexual) people. These experiences can result in an atrophy of the imagination, i.e. the possibility of imagining something else for one's own life.

If the legitimate identity, conveyed by the environment, is heterosexual, a homo/bisexual person grows up acquiring an imaginary that is not her or his own. And, as much as I agree with James Hillman (1997) who told us how imagination can be a generative and liberating personal experience, I believe that the reconstruction of an imaginary present and future-oriented of one's own life requires considerable work.

Institutionalised homophobia, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which public and private institutions (governments, companies, religious and professional organisations, etc.) draw a negative distinction between people on the basis of their sexual-affective orientation. There is a direct normative discrimination and an indirect effect. Non-heterosexual personal relationships and homogenitorial families experience a fragility, in the absence or limitation of rights, which spills over and negatively influences the stability of affective units. This phenomenon would need a more in-depth examination, which I would refer to elsewhere.

4. The emergence of the homosexual self. Personal growth and collective development

The sexual-affectional orientation is a nuclear part of the self. In fact, it concerns certain fundamental encounters and bonds that are experienced and constructed in the course of life. The self, in the Gestalt reading, is not an individual phenomenon, but emerges at the *boundary of contact* and narrates the expression of both individual and situational growth. The contact boundary, a fluctuating place of interconnection in which the spontaneous mode of experience finds space, is defined by the meeting of differences, a movement that only develops in a fertile manner when the solidity and awareness of one's own diversity allows it. In other words, we experience the self when we do not feel discriminated against, when we can allow the opening up of our 'inner' world to the 'outer' world of which we are a part, i.e. when we stop feeling separated from our environment.

When we speak of the *emergence of the sexual self*, we are referring to a process during which one moves, discovers, recognises and meets each other in certain environmental circumstances, in the *organism-environment field*. This experience is supported and proposed by sexual desire, understood precisely as moving towards mutual encounter and exchange. We have seen in the previous chapters how the self needs a fertile void, a place free of prejudices and introjections in order to develop, and how sexuality is a subversive force that orients and influences our choices, an energetic charge that can counteract, deconstruct the environment enough to allow us to bring what we feel inside into contact with the outside, in that continuous interconnection that is the experience of the self.

The development of the homosexual self, like any sexual development, begins with the experience of spontaneity, starts with the body (sexual desire) and can evolve into unconditioned forms of the self, or it can 'get stuck' in prejudices and conditioning. Social factors are an integral part of the field. To be able to be freely lesbian, gay or bisexual corresponds to the experience of opening up and revealing oneself to other people with the spontaneity that makes encounter possible.

The experience of the self consists in forming the alternation of *figures and grounds*. It is a function and/or response system that changes by following, or interrupting, the cycle of satisfaction of emerging needs (the figures emerging from the background) in the organism/environment field. The *intentionality of contact* (tending towards) is essential for the orientation of needs and desires, in this case the sexual ones. Need and intentionality develop together. If we look at sexuality as the initial characteristic of the self, it also reveals itself as a force that can destroy conditioning that does not belong to us, it can support and guide us in the realisation of new figures suited to us. It becomes the drive towards a choice, a tension to be ourselves in relationship. Discovering and living our own sexuality, through a process of awareness and recovery of spontaneity, is thus structured in a complex path, as a field phenomenon, not only as an individual and relational experience.

If one's prevailing sexual orientation is different from the norm, the paths to this experience of openness, to serene encounters and relationships, are the most diverse and often meandering. In particular, the process of identifying/alienating, accepting and integrating one's homosexuality is linked to and discriminated against by those environmental, relational, cultural, historical and social circumstances that we saw at the beginning of the chapter. The awareness that is acquired in this process allows the recovery of a great energetic potential that supports a change, meant as hospitality and acceptance of oneself and of other people.

The affective and sexual processes are the product of the elaboration that the individual develops by interacting with significant persons within the social and cultural structures in which she or he grows up and lives. It is the relational emotions that establish the order of importance of the figures capable of realising the promise of a change of self, and first of all an emotional realisation (Rigliano, 2001).

In this direction, I believe that the experience of the homosexual self can develop collectively in the discovery and construction of new shared meanings that enable the assimilation of novelties and growth in a plural and inclusive form, supporting dialogue and change: nurturing the ground to create figures in which differences can emerge, have a voice and find visibility.

Linking up with Marianella Sclavi's thought (2003), I think that the complex knowledge of sexuality, together with the ability to multiply possible and desirable options, can accompany and support the emergence of a plural intelligence. The practice of inclusiveness and transparency, even with the fear of contradictions, can take on complexities through the co-creation of a fertile field in encounter and conflict.

As Mariano Pizzimenti maintains, sexuality is the basic bodily experience of creative desire and encounter and it is also a powerful social organizer (Pizzimenti, 2015).

5. Gestalt approach. Towards specific support

5.1. How are we called upon as psychotherapists and counsellors?

The Gestalt approach maintains that the smallest and most indivisible cell is the organism and its environment. That is, each person cannot be separated from the environment of which she or he is a part, with which she or he is continually in relationship through cycles of experience, cycles of contact. What do we mean by environment? Everything that lives together and around us, with us.

We spoke of the organism-environment field: this is where we establish our boundaries and build our identities. This is where the encounter of diversity takes place. The heart of the Gestalt model is the support of the spontaneity of *being-with*.

As Gestaltists we support the development of ways of talking, thinking and relating to the experiences of bodies, sexualities and gender identities, ways that can accommodate the richness of differences and support the encounter. Therefore, rather than proposing a logic of possible renouncements of parts of oneself – or of the world – in conflict, Gestalt work chooses and supports the experience of being in the *process of contact*, allowing new solutions to emerge from this situation with which one can identify and/or alienate oneself. It is a challenging proposal, a sometimes difficult and painful position, but it is also the possibility to experience a sense of self that is whole, unique and open to relationship.

One of the aims of Gestalt practice is for people to grow up learning to self-regulate, i.e. to take responsibility for their own differences, discoveries, emotions, difficulties, suffering, regrets and joys. But for an individual to self-regulate and find their own equilibrium in a perceived 'unbalanced' environment crowded with imposed rules is not easy. When a person's prevailing sexual-affectional orientation differs from the norm, she or he often needs specific support, a relationship experienced in a protected place, in order to go through and overcome the consequences of the effects of conditioning and exposure to prejudice, before coming to feel part of a complex and varied whole.

We have seen how sexual desire expresses a need for contact in the exchange of differences. So, as psychotherapists and counsellors, we need to ask ourselves which differences we are able to recognise in ourselves and in others, and which ones we tend not to see. In the therapeutic process, we promote the emergence of desires and needs, in other words, we support the orientation of contact intentions. In order to ensure this 'cleanliness' in working with LGB people, a process of awareness about sexual orientations and gender identities is necessary also for us.

The Gestalt approach supports the psychotherapist and counsellor in accepting their own experiences by putting themselves at stake in the relationship with the client. In this specific context, it is a matter of crossing together the inevitable, but often unconscious, cultural introjections and prejudices that emerge in the setting. Therapeutic work can thus become a fundamental experience of self-regulation, i.e. of the process of *creative adjustment*: in the therapeutic relationship, a person can experience how, in adapting to the environment, she or he changes it and how, at the same time, the environment, in adapting to her/him, changes in turn, in a process of continuous circularity. Creative listening, in my view, is expressed precisely in taking on the complexity brought to light in the here-and-now of the relationship.

It has already been mentioned that, with regard to sexual attraction, most people unconsciously expect everyone to be heterosexual. Margherita Graglia's research shows that a large number of homosexual and bisexual people do not even reveal their sexual orientation to the therapist. Only a setting that is inclusive of different sexual orientations can offer LGB people the opportunity to live experiences of support, experiences that 'heal' other experiences. Graglia is convinced that the therapist's action, away from the modes of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, not only contributes to building a more inclusive social climate, but inherently builds a new social context, i.e. a context of full citizenship for gays and lesbians (Graglia, 2009).

In this regard, I support the *affirmative approach* proposed in the *Linee guida* by Lingiardi and Nardelli (2014). In order to provide the user with a therapeutic space that fosters growth and learning in the least conflicting possible way, the following elements need to be present:

a. *a conception of homosexuality as a non-pathological variant of human sexuality as much as heterosexuality is;*
b. *a clinician ready to support the client's identity investment;*
c. *a way of relating that does not take the client's sexual orientation for granted, nor does it communicate this assumption through improper use of language.*

Underlying the affirmative approach is also the recognition of the importance of having adequate knowledge of the specific issues affecting gay, lesbian and bisexual people, and of the ways in which personal and social dynamics related to heteronormativity and *minority stress* can affect the well-being of LGB people.

Unlike other minorities, LGB people often cannot count on the acceptance of their families. On the contrary, they live and grow – more or less unconsciously – in homonegative dynamics which are a source of continuous and destabilising stress and discomfort. Precipitous exposure to homonegativity generates experiences and feelings of shame, inadequacy (which affects many areas of a person's life) and existential discomfort, but also expectations, hopes and desires. It is the relevance of these experiences and its transversality that nearly always makes an LGB existence appear problematic, when in fact what makes the development of a sexuality other than the norm difficult is the lack of support for the healthy development of a person's prevailing sexual-affective orientation. The presumed naturalness of the dominant model of gender and sexual orientation, still transmitted by most families and the social environment, is so persuasive that it often becomes a single whole with the person growing and interacting within it.

It has already been discussed in the previous pages, how the ground defines the contours of the figures, sustaining their slow emergence. The figure/ground process proposes an inclusive alternation rather than an exclusionary polarity or binarism, thus opening up the complexity of experience. The figures emerge, taking energy from the internal drives of the persons, and the needs invest the environment, nourishing the experience of the here-and-now. The awareness of the resources present in the field of which one is a part, and the identity processes underway, contribute in the development of the capacity for choice which is necessary to move in the environment towards the satisfaction of one's needs and desires.

But when the figures do not have, or have not had, a supportive ground to emerge, the importance of psychotherapy or counselling work during which the practitioner represents and proposes the experience of a fertile ground from which the figures can freely emerge is highlighted. In other words, the therapeutic relationship is a protected and shared place where one can tell one's story, experience the pain of her/his diversity and fear of non-acceptance: a place where one can unveil oneself to meet that part that has been sacrificed and give dignity to the beauty of one's life. An opportunity to discover the experience of being supported by the environment and, at the same time, to support it by living the relationship. A place to experience together the 'true' texture of things, often hidden in words and behaviour, but not in being a body.

As sociologist Chiara Saraceno recounts in her research *Diversi da chi: gay, lesbiche, transessuali in un'area metropolitana* (2003), recognising oneself as gay or lesbian is not a simple process, but often a long and painful one, experienced as a profound break from a life perspective in which heterosexuality was taken for granted. One has to redefine her/his sexual identity. The acceptance and integration of the homosexual identity is a complex process, during which one encounters her/his own diversity, which often takes the form of an inner voice, a discordant thought, an apparently senseless dream or a psychophysical symptom. Through the encounter with what one sometimes experiences as other than oneself, as strange or difficult to accept or to reject outright, one facilitates the flow of contact with her/his feelings, emotions and desires. One thus modifies her/his own boundaries, within which she/he discovers a feeling of familiarity and 'rightness', no longer of strangeness or, worse, error.

> The functioning of the ego [...] can be described as a setting of boundaries of the self's interest, power, etc.; identifying and alienating are the two sides of the boundary (PHG, 1997, p. 242).

This journey *inside and outside the self* (precisely by considering the self as a system of contacts at the border that are continuously recreated in the here-and-now) entails a burden of suffering, pain and loss of meaning for what one had built up to that moment, and also for what one had imagined and still imagines, more or less freely, for her/his life. This is an aspect that also involves and concerns the family members of LGB people.

The need to separate from homophobic introjections, often linked to parental figures, also causes a certain amount of suffering, almost a sense of abandonment. This experience does not necessarily lead, as it is easy to believe, to a purely private dimension, it does not confine us to loneliness. On the contrary, it helps us find strength in our history and allows the restoration of those connections necessary for the creative flow of our existence.

In the Gestalt approach, we speak of autonomy as the ability to handle responsibility for one's dependencies. As the philosopher Judith Butler writes: "What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us" (Butler, 2004, p. 23).

By *thrall*, Butler means a fundamental bond with people, a form of ethical responsibility. The dual nature of grief, which is deprivation and renewal. She adds, in fact, that in the course of life the possibility of establishing new bonds can arise precisely from the experience of fragility and loss.

The stories of LGB people often recount painful paths, but also bright moments experienced in the discovery of beauty and personal empowerment.

We, as counsellors and psychotherapists, can testify how pain can be transformed into beauty.

During the therapeutic process, support in looking at past sufferings related to sexual orientation can be crucial in facing a moment of transition to the... future! Being able to look together at wounds, which are often hidden or unconscious, offers the possibility of making experiences assimilable, opens up to subsequent experiences, in practice it makes growth possible. It frees the gaze of the imagination, allows relationships to be created with freedom of expression and planning. The future is formed as we move: by moving in the present, we create our future.

In this regard, we have already seen how sexuality can be a powerful guiding force, developing its own intentionality of contact and influencing our choices and environment.

5.2. The coming out process (coming out of the closet)

Since belonging to the sexual norm is an experience that does not require definition, a scenario that opens up for sexual minorities is the possibility or necessity of 'defining oneself' and it becomes 'declaring oneself', emerging from the ground as a figure. As people manage to integrate their homoerotic attractions and related feelings on an identity level, i.e. as they become more and more comfortable with the prevailing sexual-affective orientation, they become willing to share it.

Coming-outs have a performative meaning, that of revealing to other people one's own way of experiencing sexuality and affectivity. In LGB people's lives, they accompany the process of personal growth when the need emerges to come out of silence, to make oneself visible, to live a complete experience in which body and speech can be recognised in their entirety.

The practice of visibility is based on the need to serenely perceive oneself as different from the norm. It is based on relationships and is not an individual path, but a growth experience that takes place in one's everyday family, work and social contexts. Coming-out is the activation of a regenerative process: naming one's experience and communicating it through a relational language.

Sharing is, in fact, a fundamental aspect of the disclosure process: just like heterosexual people, lesbians, gays and bisexuals also benefit from openly sharing their emotional lives and receiving support from relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances.

This practice can also be collective, when it takes place in meaningful contexts of recognition and self-recognition, shared places where one can have a protected experience, feel immediately welcomed for who she/he is. Places where a relational network is active that welcomes and recognises personal experiences, filling any emotional and supportive 'void' left by families or life contexts.

Coming-out is a foundational experience of empowerment, arising from the need to give space to one's personal stories and for these to give voice to and meet other experiences in the absence of interpretations.

Re-visiting the painful paths is practicable even so.

As a consequence, visibility is not only the result of a personal choice based on one's own needs and desires, but also the outcome of the validation of the count. And, importantly, the valorisation of differences is based on the possibility of social visibility.

The different forms of visibility are supportive for the growth of a composite, unique and multiple self, which opens up new scenarios and discovers the ability to live with pain as an integral part of experience, as much as rejoicing, loving and conflicting.

Love that chooses, the possibility of creating a satisfying emotional life for oneself, of channelling one's energies, drives, desires and needs into an emotional core of choice, can finally find space in this direction.

The gained realisation of a sexual-affective relational life participates deeply in the more general individual self-realisation.

This growth experience often occurs when one has achieved a spontaneous quietude in sharing and communicating her/his sexual-affective orientation, although not necessarily. Many LGB people choose alternative paths, where personal existence remains separate from social existence, implementing more complex existential strategies and managing the minority stress with creative adaptations appropriate to their sensitivities.

5.3. A difficult path of construction. The process of unveiling/not-unveiling

To come out/not to come out is a complex and continuous decision-making process which requires a daily challenge and develops together with expectations of accepting and/or discriminating reactions. The internal dialogue that is triggered in the person with a homosexual orientation who wants to open up/not open up in each new encounter involves an expenditure of energy and emotion which includes different spheres of experience: relational, work, social and family. Whether private or public, these dimensions of experience are intertwined. The impact of this process on sexual-affective relationships would require another in-depth discussion.

The actions, ideas, values, emotions, needs, desires and images of each person express the intention to relate to the outside world and their inner resonances. The episode of contact is thus the unfolding of this intentionality. Each person orients her or his spontaneous feeling in such a way to achieve the best possible contact with her/his environment, including through creative adaptations. In fact, the encounter with the *outside* is not always sustainable, so we orient our energy in a creative direction by moving to reach the encounter or to avoid it, to be seen or to be invisible, assimilating or rejecting the environment depending on how we perceive it (inclusive or dangerous). These movements are defined in Gestalt as the process of self-regulation at the boundary of contact between the organism and its environment. What can happen is that we interrupt or modulate the contact process to avoid experiencing and/or reliving painful emotions. The defences we put in place in this process are creative forces whose function is to manage a difficult world. It also happens that we unknowingly repeat some defences that are no longer appropriate to the present situation.

This aspect has particular relevance when it comes to people with a different sexual orientation from the norm who choose not to reveal themselves. The need to protect the intimacy of the bond from homonegativity may, in fact, lead in this direction. Often, but not always, the background to this choice is the fear of full recognition, internalised homophobia or the fear of abandonment by the partner who does not wish to be visible. These experiences may prevent from a deep letting go and, unconsciously, push towards disappointing experiences or irremediable conflicts, but not necessarily.

Here, too, a more in-depth study would be appropriate, which I refer to elsewhere.

The relevance of environmental support (represented here in the setting) is based on the need for the development of personal growth. The person – through the knowledge of oneself and one's relational experiences, resistances, emotions, desires and needs – finds in the relationship with the professional the possibility of identifying the evolutionary drive to carry out interrupted contact intentions, learning to self-support by nourishing one's own choices. The defences built up in surviving adversity are often repeated in alienating processes. In order to counteract and/or deconstruct such processes, a path of awareness aimed at the development of responsibility and courage of *creativity* in breaking the subordination to something learnt as taken for granted is necessary. By *responsibility*, I mean the ability to act and respond to events, to give others and oneself appropriate responses to the present experience. Taking responsibility for how I act out my need to go out into the world and deconstruct it to make it assimilable to me is a fundamental confrontation in the therapeutic process, be it counselling or psychotherapy, with a Gestalt approach.

In each LGB person, these modes, times and rhythms take different forms, but in the moments of revealing one's sexual orientation, the need for a global awareness of one's life inevitably emerges. The importance of becoming aware of one's choices and, in particular, of the risk involved in attempting to 'master' the environment becomes tangible. The 'real' topic is often the 'off- topic', a hidden script that has been working inside for years. At stake is the possibility of experimenting with forms of identity and amorous realisation more in line with one's innermost feelings and desires.

In any case, the great goal is the realisation of a condition of centrality in which the individual, feeling rooted in mother earth, stops being subjected to the decisions of others, takes the risk of inventing life, being creative and stepping outside the norm to live in a manner more in keeping with her or his inner state, interacting in reality with originality (Biavati, 2006).

A path of self-assertion first, of transformation later.

Whether one chooses to make oneself *visible* or to conceal one's sexual orientation by locating it in a protected, or in some cases denied, private sphere, the energy involved in this process (from dealing with social stigma to the consequent impact on oneself) becomes, in the course of one's life, an integral part of one's experience. Global awareness fosters the integration of the present experience and makes LGB people aware of the continuous modulations and/or contact interruptions that they experience every time they pause to think about how to act in a given situation of discomfort or conflict. That is, every time they experience a kind of 'pause' and ask themselves: *To say or not to say? How important is it for me to say? What risks do I run? In what creative adaptation can I find my well- being?*

The specific importance of identity investments, whatever they may be, is co-determined by the (exclusive/inclusive) characteristics of the life context and the integration of personal experience with it. In this sense, the Gestalt reading according to which there cannot be an organism isolated from the environment is pertinent. The organism/environment field creates the ground from which the figures emerge, i.e. the elements of significant need which, if satisfied, return to the ground to make room for other emerging figures.

To summarise: in the pathway/process that leads LGB people to recognise themselves as such and to experience meaningful relationships, a variety of different factors intervene. While taking into account the uniqueness of each pathway, one can consider certain stages that tend to be common:

- *the emergence of one's sexual-affective needs and desires;*

- *the influence of social stigma;*
- *contact with devaluing internalised images of homo/bisexuality;*
- *the internal-external conflict between organismic needs and environmental demands/expectations;*
- *coping with the environment by means of possible conscious 'solutions' and no – creative adaptations;*
- *naming one's experience, communicating it or not;*
- *the search for collective identities in order to come into contact with previously forbidden images;*
- *participation in the creation of an inclusive, shared and generative imaginary.*

5.4. The emergence of homo/bisexual experiences in adolescence and beyond

In discussing the topic of *inclusive settings* in more detail, it must be said that most people come into contact with their sexual-affective orientation during adolescence. However, in the family, school and educational system environments there is a widespread silence about sexual orientation-related issues, even and precisely at this age.

What happens, then?

Often an attitude of low consideration, indirect devaluation, emerges with regard to specific manifestations or declarations of homo/bisexuality: they are considered confusing and superficial, or in any case too 'precocious' to be taken seriously. This is not the case, however, in the face of the implicit (we have seen why implicit) declaration of heterosexuality by most adolescents.

Non-heterosexual adolescents are faced with an additional evolutionary task: that of having to manage a set of affects, desires and thoughts that do not correspond to social expectations. The frailties, vulnerabilities and ambiguities that they experience in their adolescent world build a complexity of bodily experiences. These latter threaten to make them lose their perception of boundaries when their own body – which is opening up to sexual life – becomes the *body of others*, i.e. if in order to grow they have to mirror themselves in the images that other people refer to them as licit and 'permissible'.

The experience of not being understood or believed undermines the perception of one's own value and the ability to self-determine desire and need. At the same time, the mockery of homosexual behaviour (especially among boys) is very frequent in peer relationships: the impact of this phenomenon (called homophobic bullying, which includes much more serious actions and behaviour) causes adolescents to experience shame, diversity, loneliness and alienation. All this drastically affects their level of self-esteem and encourages traumatic, painful or tragic events, including – increasingly – suicide.

Furthermore, it has been found that parents often react negatively when they learn that they have a gay son or lesbian daughter (I recommend watching the documentaries *Due volte genitori* and *Nessuno è uguale* by Associazione Genitori di Omosessuali – Parents of Homosexuals Association). The discomfort caused by rejection and the resulting psychosocial needs are not always recognised and accepted by teachers and other adults with educational and/or training roles. As a result, the marginalisation of visible homosexual adolescents is quite frequent and the social stigma that accompanies their lives may predispose them to choose invisibility, or lead to the denial – even within themselves – of their sexual-affectional orientation and the resulting desire to meet.

The confusion, or relational instability, experienced by adults with sexual orientation other than the norm is often the consequence of a difficulty in self-acceptance that began in adolescence. When homosexuality is defined with a negative value, they may find that even in adulthood they choose avoidance strategies to deny their drives that they have experienced as inadequate, abnormal, and continue to perceive as such. The process of awareness about one's sexual orientation can also be disturbed by the *deflection*: it is through it that one reduces the impact of the environment on oneself and, consequently, tends towards desensitisation of her/his desires and needs.

In working with both adolescents and adults, counselling and psychotherapy can be an important helping and supporting relationship in the process of self-realisation not only from an expressed discomfort, but also as an intervention of prevention and health promotion, understood as the overall well-being of the person inserted in a given social context. An affective-sexual minority may be more vulnerable precisely because they are more exposed to social stress, depression, anxiety and all that goes with it. Social anxiety refers to the perception of the social environment as intimidating and the fear of contact with other people. Researchers interpret these phenomena of psychophysical malaise as the result of the social devaluation of homosexuality and homonegative experiences. The health promotion involved in psychotherapy and/or counselling work is thus the process that supports people in increasing their awareness and responsibility for their own health, identifying their needs in order to nurture their desires and realise their aspirations, modifying the surrounding environment by being part of it.

In order for LGB people to become comfortable with themselves and with the environment they perceive or have perceived as hostile to their identity, they need to refound their self-esteem.

6. Conclusions

At any age, homonegativity can be invasive for the individual development process, as a tension between the individual and the social. For this not to be invasive also in the relationship between client and therapist, it must be known, named, taken seriously and its pervasiveness must be deconstructed.

The relationship with the professional can become a privileged place, where emotions and thoughts can be expressed freely, only if it feels safe.

In other words, offering support to an LGB persons in bringing to light what is already inherent in them – accompanying them in the process of awareness, supporting and understanding them in their experiences – cannot disregard the social stigma with which these people inevitably have to deal with on a daily basis outside and inside themselves. As Petrūska Clarkson suggests us, the initial fears and expectations in the counselling relationship probably reflect the initial fears and expectations of a person's life (Clarkson, 1992).

Empathising and/or sympathising with this type of homo/bisexual personal experience can be complex for a heterosexually oriented professional, but we know how taking on the perspective of the storyteller invites one to enter other worlds. To do this, it is important to make oneself aware of one's own experience, however indirect, with homonegativity. What does this mean?

Most people, including therapists, have developed ideas about homosexuality that are not based on direct knowledge of homosexual/bisexual people or experiences; it is therefore crucial that these tacit assumptions (introjections) are worked on in the setting, because whatever they are, they become part of the field. It may also happen that direct knowledge is there but is based on particular experiences, whether personal or professional. In any case, it opens up a two-way street. Consciously bringing one's own experience of homosexuality into the therapeutic relationship can offer the client the possibility of *experiences that heal other experiences* from the perspective of an encounter in which both persons are risking themselves in the process of dialogue. This experience of encountering differences enriches both client and therapist: this is precisely because sexual-affective orientation is not a phenomenon that can be experienced in a linear manner, but rather as a personal map in which each dimension of lived experience is composed in unique forms.

In a climate of cultural confluence (homonegativity), it is of fundamental importance that the therapeutic attitude results in a work on the concern of the self, on the exploration of each person's territory, on the awareness of one's own specificity of experience, on environmental limits and resources, on the fluidity/non-fluidity of relationships, on experiences characterised by alternating contacts and ruptures.

Creating a climate of transparency, inclusiveness and conscious visibility in the setting, in this specific sense, facilitates the individual process of unveiling/not-unveiling sexual orientation in the client and the assumption of personal responsibility for one's own particular choices.

The therapeutic relationship is a safe place where it is possible to carry on and recognise one's own effort to become, in the sense of carrying on a process of transformation, of change at the roots, of profound metamorphosis.

7. Acknowledgements

The richness, complexity and also the difficulties that I have experienced over so many years relating to many different people have been the fertile ground for my writing today. I am grateful for every single encounter and exchange, both professional and personal. I would particularly like to thank Barbara Bellini and Mariano Pizzimenti who have involved me in this wonderful and shared adventure of the book. Roberta Buora for her careful reading and sharing of the creative process and Federico Castelli for the time he dedicated to me with the in-depth editing work. Liliana Filia for the warm feedbacks, Margherita Montalbano for the speed of her interest and the first proofreading and Jacopo Mottironi for the valuable initial brainstorming. I thank Alessandra Quaglia for the closeness expressed with the first printing on paper of the text and Valeria Zaffalon for the observations aimed at the overall view.