Stories and therapeutic groups of adolescents between dream and reality
Ragazzi Mauro, Antonella Degiorgi, Gianluca Bolchi

Abstract
We are going to present the experience about an open therapeutic group for adolescents, aged from 13 to 17 years, followed by the Community Mental Health in Treviglio (BG). They are affected by personality disorders, conduct disorders, mood disorders, sometimes in comorbidity with mental retardation or previous developmental disorders. The therapeutic groups have been conducted with the therapeutic technique of story-telling and photographic language, using common digital devices as smart-phones or personal computers. In 8 years about 80 adolescents were involved into the project. It is described a clinical exemplification coming from a therapeutic group at work.

Keywords
Services, therapeutic groups, adolescence, story telling, photography

The tale by a group: “The Intouchable Vampires”
“Once upon a time there was a middle school girl who was bitten on the neck by a vampire. Fortunately the girl’s father was a scientist, who managed to create an antidote which, working on the brain, could stop her impulse of feeding herself on human blood. This way the girl was just a half-vampire, as she could still have human feelings, desires and fears, even though another part of her was already turning into a vampire. This transformation did not much regard her body, which still fully maintained its human appearance, but was rather a psychic one: she was losing her faculty of feeling emotions.

The antidote created by her father allowed the girl to go on with her life and be among all the other human beings, who she could mix with without the risk of having her double human-vampire nature discovered.

While in her classroom, the girl sat at her desk alone, isolated from the other students because of her fear that they could find out about her vampire mutation. She kept her face hidden in a hood and wore male clothes. Her red eyes gave somewhat away her half vampire nature, which she was nonetheless able to conceal by avoiding meeting the other people and their inquisitive looks.

The girl was isolated, yet she observed everything that happened around her, she listened to the people’s conversations and the tales of the other teenagers.

In her classroom there were restless kids, who couldn’t just stay seated; boys who were not interested in school but kept wondering about their music idols, like Robin Williams or the Pooh, or fantasised about imaginary meetings with pretty and seductive women, aged 37 with an eighth bra size, or thought of wonderful lavishly decked tables, full of any kind of delicious food they could eat non-stop; but in the end they actually felt lonely. She saw also girls who, being afraid of looking plain and unattractive, refused to talk about themselves, while they privately dreamed of big
romances and love affairs.

In her classroom there was also this handsome, cool and popular guy, who got so curious about her that he wanted to become her friend at any cost. The guy suffered from an incurable illness, which nobody could find a final and effective treatment for. An unknown, unnamed and rare malady, whose causes even doctors weren’t able to understand.

One day, going out from school, the girl found herself in such a violent rainstorm that she got completely soaked and the guy invited her to come round to his place so that she could dry her hair and clothes. While she is having a shower, the guys brings her a towel and, seeing her naked body under the shower, he realises she is a girl, a half-vampire girl.

The guy feels both attracted to and a little scared of the vampire girl: there’s something intriguing about her, but at the same time something which turns him away, so that he’s caught in a tangle of colliding emotions.

The girl too becomes aware of some new strong feelings growing within her heart, an attraction to that guy who had not been afraid of getting closer and talk to her. She finds out that this guy, this extremely handsome, cool and popular guy, is ill. That makes the vampire girl cry; she wishes she could help him but she still doesn’t know how.

The guy and the girl lived with their families in the same street, their houses being one in front of the other. They fall in love and it’s the vampire girl who discovers a possible cure for her beloved: to heal from his illness, the guy has to be bitten by the girl and, thus, become a vampire too.

At the beginning the guy doesn’t agree with the idea of turning into a vampire, because he wants to keep human, but the girl tells him that in order to heal and be accepted in the vampire family, he must transform into a vampire too. But as the guy sticks to his guns, the girl gets mad at him.

The time came when the ill guy ended up in hospital, where doctors told him that the only remedy to heal was to become a vampire. So, when the guy went out from the hospital, he found the vampire girl at the exit waiting for him and together they headed across a wood for a grotto. They kept in the shadow of this cave, shaded from the sunlight, as the sun rays are well known to be sometimes lethal to vampires.

In the cave, the girl and the guy have a long and hard argument; she reminds him that also doctors in the hospital presented the bite on the neck as the only medicine which can cure him. But he can’t get convinced, he strongly resists the idea of turning into a vampire and runs away from the grotto. The girl chases him, she’s able to reach him and bites him on the neck.

This way the guy becomes a vampire, heals from his illness and finally realises that a friendship, maybe even love, was born; he understands that everybody was right when they told him that the only possible remedy for his suffering was turning into a vampire.” (Tale by the kids of the Therapeutic Group)

The therapeutic group
The therapeutic group is an open group: throughout 8 working years about 80
adolescents have temporarily entered it; they were affected by moderate-severe pathologies: conduct disorders, personality disorders and mood disorders, in some cases in comorbidity with mental retardation or previous developmental disorders. Some teenagers just passed quickly through the group, some “came and went” getting alternatively closer or further from it, others (about 50%) formed the hard core of the group, so that it was guaranteed a continuous contribution. The group have been meeting on a weekly basis from September to June.

The above presented tale is the result of the work with twelve teenagers, aged 14 to 17. During the first sessions of the group, K, a 15-year-old girl, started off saying that she was writing a story about a daughter who, after suffering from an illness, maybe to her ear, is turning into a vampire. The group is in its first stages and the kids are still facing conflicting dynamics connected to gender differentiation, first love relations and relative anxiety. K’s story catches a part of the boys’ interest as well as their ambivalence; the group, mostly divided between males full of awkward sexual fantasies and competition, and girls hiding behind an aggressive passivity, begin to add new pieces to the plot as well as new characters. Stories of illness, solitude, death and disappointing parents find their way into the guys’ hearts. The group, in several rounds, bring to life the representation of living experiences among peers, where fears relate to abandonment and non-acceptance among people of the same age, as well as to the anxiety that adults, unable to listen, would not manage to guarantee the continuity and thus the survival of the experience. A confused crowd of grown-up characters as well as the places where these teenagers live appear in the story, together with events of friendship and fraternity: the tale slowly comes alive and finds its living representative in a vampire girl/boy. We reinterpret the kids’ behaviours and passivity as a part of the vampire tale to be told. In our turn, captivated by the materials, we steadily support the work on the story, which seems to help us cope with the frequent feeling of being unable to keep the group unite, the fear of witnessing its expansion and dissolution, also because of the repeated absence of some of the members.

When we deem that the time is come, we wrap up the story: we write it and then we read it together with its adolescent authors. The appealing title is inspired from a film that many of them watched, that is “The Intouchables” by Nakache and Toledano.

Method

The Group

Since its birth the story of our therapeutic group went during the time through developments and transformations and was alternatively characterized by chaotic as well as undifferentiated aspects. As therapists, we set off on a voyage, the storytelling of the group’s experience, always trying to maintain a steady focus on some key issues: the notion of figurability as possible work of staging of the psychic element through concrete images; the use of the metaphor as an anchor and support for shared representations as well as for material from the life of the teenagers: a no longer unknown and dangerous but vital and creative material.

With the words by Carbone Tirelli, “the adolescent recognises in these images
something he is directly concerned with but also elements deriving from the experience of the therapist; it’s this combination that he/she is stimulated and encouraged from” (Carbone Tirelli, 1996).

Discontinuity, difficulty, fragmentation and fractures have been faced through the function of “mediating object” provided for by the group itself, that could both think together and represent, by means of images and scenes too, what could not be thought or represented.

During the group sessions, as relationships spread out through the period of the cure, an uninterrupted narrative web renews itself, a textual rewriting both of the group’s history and of the plots of the stories told by its members. A plot that intermingles phantasmatic imaginary scenarios with the concrete urgency of reality; reality breaks through the group’s tale with traumatic significances, anxieties animated by unstable bodies reflecting a defective thinking apparatus which is unable to form sufficiently coherent images and representations.

The group, which is both the engine of the transformation and the object-mediator (Kaës, 1997), accomplishes the functions of “dream-catcher”, intercepting unthought-thoughts, strange images and scattered memories in order to try and recreate a story also through the use of new images, photos and videos produced by the group and shared within its web of relations.

Visual technologies are naturally identified throughout adolescence as important objects of both inter- and intra-subjective mediation. Both for adults and teenagers, external images reach out to the internal representations and come to constitute a pre-text for a possible verbalisation and a vehicle for metaphors. In force of their sentimental value, photographs have recently known a more and more frequent use, for instance through the technique of the Photolanguage (Vacheret, 2009), a psychotherapeutic group instrument firstly employed in France with difficult patients with severe deficit in the ability of symbolisation. We deem some recent developments of Photolanguage hereby worth mentioning, such as the work by Mariapia Borgnini (Borgnini, Crivelli, 2003) in some Swiss schools, where immigrant students presented her with their stories through the initial use of family pictures as a stimulus to start with and always go back to so as to get to a final narrative.

The Stories

Another function of mediation is the one taken on by group story-telling. We identified the conceptualisations from the fairy-tales as a good starting point, as they unite the notions of narration and group, given their own inner nature of being collective and rural, as groups often are (“Red Hood”, “The Town Musicians from Bremen” together with many other possible examples to be found, for instance, in the fairy tales by the Grimm brothers).

Fairy tales are often compared to clinical material too; as they partake to the formation of common imagination within a social group, they are born under the “project to establish or re-establish the conditions for the overcoming of a psychic irregularity or discontinuity” (Kaës, 1997). Hence a re-evaluation of story-telling also in its therapeutic function and the stress on its character of psychic mediator: both in
a group or a pair, the telling of a story comes to play the role of mediator between narrator and auditor.

In relation to the psychotherapeutic value of the shared narrative, Vallino points out the dual nature of the tales, somewhat impossible narrations, like the fairy tales, until they come to be told. Under the further influence of his work, we tried during the last 3 years to crystallise the turbulent events of the therapeutic group in some “tales of the group”, which often started out from the single stories by the kids. Vallino in his work “Tell Me a Story” shows us the “imaginary place” where suffering children transfer their emotions, a somewhere else spot far from the common sense and common contacts which yet allows those emotions to “start being thought” thanks to their concrete visualisation in the form of a tale. ““Tell Me a Story” is about a method, that is a set of rules which can be used by a person to show another one what was invisible before”; moreover, “the characters in the tales, through the power of speech, can give a shape to feelings which are otherwise unspeakable” (Vallino, 1999)

These notions about the creation of a tale together with the patients as well as the concept of the story as a container or mediator gradually convinced us of the idea of writing a story of the group while working within the therapeutic path.

*A Song for Life.* (by D., a girl from the group; the song was read during the work with pictures)

“In those moments when I’m scared I feel there’s no words, certainty or help. Though I must do that for myself, I won’t do that, and if you try and convince me I’ll be silent you can bet. And that day I’ll be like you. But I don’t want to be a vampire, he bites everyone. And all the people that will be, will be those suffering not to let go and they’ll be free. Vampires don’t live against the light, but with night, with moonlight, and golden starlight

Oh dear, I’d rather die, I know that you will never take it. And you mate, one day you’re gonna be bitten. Doctors think it’s alright, that your blood is in mine. The day has finally come, I will cry and you with my bite won’t die. And for the glory I will cry. Glory to me is a beautiful thing, I will have yet to survive the night, never mind, with you I’ll have my life. Along the path, my dear, I got the real life, not death. Between the two of us, life is a loving one. Love among men is wonderful, married and priceless. You that I hate, now you know that. My dear mate, I’m happy to have you on my side. You lead me and happy I’ll be. I’m gonna love you, even if I never told you. You, my dear one, you know many things together will be done. Our dreams will be forever, ours and together.”
The story goes on: the photos
Like in the scenes of a film which has to be edited, in the script of the narrated tale we asked the group to interpret-personify the story of the vampires. In the following sessions kids work on the materials, the make-up and the acting; they create posters and take pictures of the staged narrative.

The new digital technologies make it easy to work with pictures, which are used in each session so as to transfer the carried out activities into image files, that the kids can watch. There’s no fixed character, as everyone always plays a different role: the kids in the several following sessions, some of them also taking place without the story, role play the narrative that they created and we edited. We read out the song by D as a reverie of the group introducing the dramatic plot of the tale about the girl’s mutation into a vampire. To us it looks as if, thanks to the pictures of the narrative, the group could start to wonder how it’s possible to “edit” those emotions which earlier seemed to be vanished in their minds and be replaced by the transformed body. The group begins to talk about friendship, pleasure and even adolescent love. The song and the tale, containers of the images of the mutating group, melt within the photographic language and, thanks to the external contribution of a colleague, images are edited in a video which tells the story of the group exactly as it is.

It appears now quite clear that the work developed as in a laboratory where the group’s representations firstly lean on verbalisations as well as actual experiences, drawings, music pieces, well before becoming words. Starting from these materials, the group and its leaders begin to imagine a shared narrative and, when they believe it’s time, those leaders give back to the group the tale, whose plot is animated by the characters chosen by the kids. Once the story is told, it becomes on its turn the starting point for a photographic representation through scenes, reinterpretations by means of drawings and songs. Thus, the same material of the story is re-shaped in different forms: words, actions, pictures and music.

The work results in a constant back and forth between kids and leaders, where the group first brings emotions and tales which find afterwards their visual representation in a story told through images.

Some remarks about the theme of the vampire-teenagers
In the adolescent collective imagination, the vampire represents the eternal transition, the dimension of passage, the transit from life to death, a state of death-in-life and life-in-death; it is closely related to the underworld as well as with the living world.

The vampire theme entails the element of seduction: vampires seduce their victims through motions of attractions connected with eroticism, sexuality, libido and aggressive drives.

The vampire identity is the emblem of promiscuity, or identity confusion of opposites: male-female, life-death, human-inhuman; even when it comes to the dimension of time, vampires actually live in bodies which they don’t belong to, their immortality is framed into mortal bodies and appearances.
It’s the disturbing dimension of anxiety, of what is apparently believed to be known and familiar but unveils the elements of non-belonging and bewilderment. From this point of view the shared imagination of the vampire draws the attention of teenagers and definitely seduces them.

The TV series “Twilight” staged the stories of vampire teenagers, a group of adolescents who go to school, meet up and fall in love; the meaning of twilight recalls the notions of transition, passage from light to darkness. In the same way, adolescence represents a borderland, an area of transition and passage at the end of childhood, a sudden awakening of highly uncontrollable drives. The invention by the adolescent, his/her creativity that comes along with the urgency of the impulse, must find a suitable adult interlocutor who is able to identify it and give it the right value.

The new contemporary vampire-adolescent, in contrast with the traditional representation of the vampire as a lonesome outcast, is multiple: he/she is a community and family member; he/she not only lives and interacts with the other vampires, but his/her life experiences also develop within the society of humans.

Our story of the adolescent vampires, as Twilight or older traditional fairy tales do (e.g. Bluebeard or Red Hood) “involves an initiation or the disclosure of a secret” (Reumaux, 1997): being devoured or die is the price to pay. In fact, opening up the door of the secret room, or looking the wolf into the eyes can come to mean death, in the same way as the discovery of the adolescent illness must first bring to the bite and then to the transformation. As a matter of fact, neither the father of the girl nor the doctors of the guy can find a cure to their malady: this is unnamed and unknown. From that point the struggle for survival begins, which is eventually leading to the bite by the vampire girl on the neck of the ill boy.

In other words, it’s the breaking up of a limit: both initiation and secret have do with the body (male/female), with sexuality/mating and with the blood (clash/fraternity). The vampire girl, her friendship with the cool guy, the struggle to enter the group, sexual identity and the fight with the parents all come to constitute even too thick a representation of the adolescent tasks. Nonetheless, we spotted in the story a certain idea of a possible regeneration for the teenager, the search for a necessary twin-brotherhood, leading to salvation and maybe love too, with someone and not against someone or something, as in the lyrics of the song:

“Vampires don’t live against the light, but with night, with moonlight, and golden starlight/
Oh dear, I’d rather die, I know that you will never take it”.

A tale of a contagion, of metamorphosis, but also of transformation. The reverie of the song waters down the sense of persecution hiding behind the vampire metamorphosis, which can come to mean a useful transformation, provided that the violent scene of the girl’s bite opens up to a chance for fraternity and love:

“I’m gonna love you, even if I never told you/
You, my dear one, you know many things together will be done/
Our dreams will be forever, ours and together.”
References

Notes on the authors

**Gianluca Bolchi:** child neuropsychiatry, IEFCoS psychotherapist
**Mauro Ragazzi:** psychologist, psychodynamic psychotherapist
**Antonella Degiorgi:** professional educator

Mail: Gianluca Bolchi, UONPIA Azienda Sanitaria Territoriale Bergamo Ovest, via San Francesco 4, 24050 Romano di Lombardia-Bergamo. Tel 0363990440 – email: gianluca_bolchi@asst-bgovest.it

Translated from Italian by Luca Taverna