

Clinical references to the group work with children and adolescents: body language

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“I turn to the ‘suspicion’ that as well as there can be thoughts without thinkers, there can be ‘actions’ without an agent.”
(Bion,1975)

Abstract

In this paper we explore the body dimension of group dynamics, the body language that expresses and signifies the affects. Some clinical vignettes involving a group of children and a group of adolescents are presented to exemplify the relationships as they unfold through action capable of giving a communicable form to thought. In this exploration of a field of collective forces, where both the known and the unknown are met, we observe the *movements* generated by the group. In this paper we acknowledge the value of action that can condensate and outline pain as far as constructing its meaning.

Key words: group, body expression, action, children, adolescents

I thought I would organise this paper by using some clinical vignettes from analytically-oriented groups with children and adolescents so as to share the group dynamics, the practice of living in group: a space crossed by thoughts, affects, collective forces, and body languages. A set that is foreign to everyday experience, a repository of known feelings in tension with something unknown, powerful and evolving. It is therefore a psychic and relational experience that, in working with children and adolescents, triggers off a transformative work of thoughts-actions, or actions-thoughts, towards a resignification of the emotional experience, towards awareness and the discovery of thinking.

Children

I present a vignette about the final part of a session with a group of children in latency in their fourth year of therapy, to approach the description of their ‘feeling’ the group through their bodies, their playing and the use of words.

Lino, the child referred to me because of problems of attention and concentration, prey to paralysing anxieties, soon becomes the victim of cruel attacks, mostly by Enrico, a child with a perennially restless self.

Lino is terrified of separations, darkness and fire. He can turn into a stick, shaken by tremors of inconsolable anguish when he saw some flames licking brushwood in a

neighbouring field through the office window. Or he can freeze, frightened by the sudden dusk, when the clocks go back one hour, transforming lights and shadows into something unfamiliar and conveying the image of darkness as a horrifying quintessence of monstrous fantasies.

The aggregate of horror takes place in the theatre of the body: I remember well a wide-eyed Lino, his *agonic gaze*.

In the initial part of the treatment, children often switch off the light suddenly to see their companion close to collapsing for good, struggling with irreversible suffering: a traumatic wreckage that has been precociously encountered.

The group scene I am referring to, merging the primordial fear of darkness and fire, dates back to the end of the group which was, as mentioned, almost four years into therapy.

Enrico suggests the recap of one of the founding movements of the history of the group and shows its transformative outcome. He lights a candle and rushes to switch off the light. The exhilaration of the rest of the group is counteracted by Lino's terror. His reaction astonishes everybody, as it has been a long time since he stopped wandering in the midst of his emotions and anxieties. The disruptive quality of his actions is back. Enrico is wielding the candle in threat, he starts to run after his companion who runs away from him, shouting, laughing and tipping pieces of furniture over. Each child, in the darkness, tries to stop Lino who is running like an animal preyed on.

This time it is Enrico who freezes and, as though electricity has run through him, he desperately cries out: "Don't you understand? The group makes the fears stop!"

Lino slows down, is brave enough to turn round, stops and looks at the rest of the group. The little flame flickers in front of his eyes and lightens up the two sweaty faces. Relieved to seeing some confidence, Enrico, at first as though he were possessed and then like an artist, projects darts of light on to the dark screen of the wall. Ever-changing effects of light are produced on the wall, and the children, in turn, pushing and astonished, claim they have made them. "The group makes the fears stop!". I recall the touching stance of the group about care, becoming a field that is not imbued with terrifying anxieties but is open to take in and promote the "shaping" of the creative emergence of thinking.

The dominating violent and chaotic emotional streams have gradually made way for experiences of authenticity and mutuality, and trust. A scene follows that sums up the history of the group and at the same time the history of each member, dealing with the discovery of something that leads to the end of the fear of living.

It takes time for the group leader herself, "the doctor of sorrow", as Giovanni once called me, learns the powerful therapeutic factor of the group from experience. At the beginning she is puzzled, just like the members of the group.

Not giving chaos order, tolerating the lack of meaning and the encounter-clash of moving bodies gradually paves the way to the use of words, making self-account possible. The therapist needs to make her own body available as well, since body

communication in a group of children is the mother tongue and the privileged way of communicating affects and their potential representation.

Many times, reality, action, breaks into the nascent symbolic with sudden rifts: it is a non-linear course that, if accepted, can make new languages and new narratives possible.

The following vignette aims to explain the movements I have just described.

Leo suddenly leaving the group – a child whose mother undermines all bonding attempts – cannot be conceived by the group. Half-way through the session, after the child has left and come back “only to say bye-bye”, I get a sudden, violent kick on my leg that leads to heightened physical and mental pain. The thought, just like the limb, is anaesthetised, becoming lifeless and at the same time painful. For the group I am responsible for Leo’s abandonment, for the anxiety about the threatened group identity. Anger brings me back to life, as I tap on Leo’s shoulder and force him surprisingly to drop down into the chair behind him, I bend down and, looking first at him and then at the others, I state forcefully, “All the anger for Leo’s departure can be blamed on Barbara, but without hurting!” It is a verbal-bodily intervention that takes in the group’s suggestion to turn my body into a place of punitive raids, where I add the regulation of a fictional agreement.

Setting a limit to the mixture of anger and making sense of the *blow*, that the group has both received and given, creates a dance of excited bodies. We access the representation of a dismembered group-body that regains a form.

The children simulate a savage fight. I need to “pretend” to succumb under their blows, until I *hold* them triumphantly sitting on my body crouched on the floor. The excitement turns into laughing relaxed bodies. Giovanni, the child with encopresis, stands up from the indistinct heap and puts his foot on my side, as if I were an animal that had been captured, posing for the photo-op. Exhausted and content, the children look for some tranquillity lying on a makeshift bed with blankets and pillows: “without leaving any gaps!”, Isa urges.

As a belonging place, the large bed provides the image of a shared sensory and emotional area that enables the children to come into contact with a sense of their histories and the group history. The unexpected sharing of painful experiences leads Livio to talk, for the first time, about the separation of his parents, some hints of a narrative that is almost without painful content as yet.

In the group a ceaseless turmoil of ever-changing scenarios takes place. Actions, bodies, play, and emotions can generate a chain of events already contained by the field but that are gradually discovered, known and communicated by the group.

The split or the interruption becomes approachable through the experience of group pain – a pain that is even physical for the group conductor – that echoes breakdowns that have taken place and separations that are feared by the children. Together with the therapist who is no longer crippled by abandonment, it becomes possible for the children to cast their look at the void and the sensations it arouses.

Livio will represent the image on behalf of the group: for the following three sessions he is going to spend the initial ten minutes by the window waiting for Leo who might come. A touching scene that, as I say to the children, “it reminds the group about the desire and nostalgia to find those who have left us again. We will think about him and he will think about us on Thursdays!” Livio would often wait for his mother by the window, the last child to find her where he had been waiting for her for a long time.

Adolescents

The moving body dimension also makes imprinted in a group of adolescents that can be recognized along the trajectory of a thought, leaving traces of powerful emotional forces that pass through the group field, bodies in motion that translate experiences and narratives-actions of the self. To grasp their meaning, to accept joining them, always in balance between the physical and the psychic, contributes to perceiving new connections to which the group – being an activator of multiple and simultaneous experiences – gives a new meaning in sharing.

The following clinical scenarios try to make the contribution of body language to translation and transformation explicit, to generating a new version, or a new meaning, for one’s own existence as a group and as an individual.

The physical version of mental nourishment that a group receives from the analytic experience follows: a clinical vignette that identifies the teenagers dealing with the greed of eating, with the *hunger* for an emotional contact. It is Valerio who acts out portions of the history of each of them: through his body he socializes the unspoken group request to make experiences about rifts and splits edible, though they are still far from the possibility of being shared.

In one of the first sessions, Valerio is intrigued by a dried sunflower that has always lain on a shelf of the bookcase.

Adolescence undermines the different levels. The boy starts to nibble on its seeds and to eat them with satisfaction, leaving an alopecic gap in the corolla, as a witness of repeated deprivations. Valerio communicates, on behalf of the group, the need for food.

It is a startling unexpected trajectory, an embodied communication of affects, an acted-out aspect of the identity. A group of adolescents display continuous and swift changes of arrangement at the encounter: acts are articulated with words and inhabit the sessions.

This is the time when turmoil, confusion and disruptions occur, where the adolescent finds himself *‘halved’* in a personality that, as Bion (1974) said, is still enough of a child to recall how it feels to be a child and is enough of an adult to imagine how it feels to be an adult. Setting a limit or nearing weaning and incorporation? How to make room for the lapse of time that interposes thought between impulse and action? The group asks how tasty the seeds are. Of the potential interpretations, each of which feels close to being trivial, I ‘choose’ to play with the act and use the announcement format: “Ding...dong... Please, do not eat the whole of the

sunflower.” The group laughs and Valerio, as if he has just woken up, leaves the sunflower lone and sits down.

A few sessions later, I hint at a journey and the necessary provision of food and water which is regularly asked for by Angelo, the boy who – at the beginning of the first session – informs us that he was unable to sleep the previous night “because of the group!”

Two months later after the ‘meal’, Valerio tries to talk about the theft of a cake, that happened in the middle of the night in the orphanage.

In a very intense emotional atmosphere, we share the pain of a hungry child who had been caught stealing a cake that had been put aside for the staff from the fridge. As he had been grabbed from behind and thrown against the wall several times, he remembers “...just the pattern of the majolica tiles stained with the blood splattered from my forehead. Then I woke up in hospital!”

Rino comments: “Like a child in a concentration camp!”, conveying in that image all the pain the group had come into contact with. In Valerio’s acting out, in his greedy and destructive ingestion, can we see the only possible way to approach his story of an abandoned child who has been adopted and again has no family? It is a two-act narrative and the group is immediately attuned to it. The youngsters produce associative threads interwoven in a fabric of a rich experience they all share about a strong group feeling unknown until then: “...a space of transition for individual and collective thoughts, a relational and psychic space that is wider than individual spaces” (Neri, 2017).

In the sunflower, the gap was left to contain the core of pain, the repository of a pre-verbal story. The original deprivation, expressed in an exhibited action, becomes an intense pain that resonates in the group field. The teenagers’ stories about what they have lacked and the attacks they have experienced transforms the individual act into narratives circulating in the group. A flow of images and memories describes the sudden aggressive gesture of a father, the violent slap by a mother, the kick with a shoe heel that injures the son’s face.

A reciprocal interest in the vicissitudes of each member is vivid and can lead to recognizing oneself in the story of the other and in the story of this group, which was unknown to all of us. Valerio offers the perception of an intense emotional contact that comes from the group and which we take from the group, outside the session. At the beginning of a session he gives the group a *drawing*. “...I have brought it here because, while I was doing it, I thought about the group...”, he says, letting the Bristol card with an Eastern warrior drawn on it be passed around, from hand to hand, and arouses comments and impressions. I comment, “...the drawing has the colours of the group room: white, burgundy and dark brown. I wonder what the challenges are that this warrior looking at us is dealing with! He is part of our story. I’ll put it here, on the desk!”

At one of the following meetings, the teenagers talk again about thefts, hopes for repossession, compensation for injustices suffered, and develop a fast associative

chain of objects that have been stolen (technological games, CDs, etc.) that end with the revelation of a videogame that has just been stolen, "...that is why I was late for the group!" Rino says.

This time it is the loot that is passed around the teenagers, along with the reality of having "ripped off" the adult in a way that prevents them from feeling guilty, as they have won back objects denied to them, as a search for something one are entitled to, as Winnicott (1956) says. To recognize the value of action and getting rid of the negative meaning of the action is not an easy path: the group does not meet the regulatory function of adults but of the group, through self-interpreting movements: "You are crazy!", states a boy who has never dared, whereas another member wonders on how to fill a gap.

The swift motions of the group enables me to see ongoing transitions between action and communication, movements of bodies that give thoughts a form that can be communicated.

Turning to action in a group of adolescents – like playing for children – becomes a significant part of the analysis itself.

For example, I can think of the quest for one's own place in the world and in the group that teenagers enact in moving from chair to chair in the first months into their group experience. Only Giorgia's armchair is spared from alternating occupants. She is the quiet girl who experiences tilting floors and suffers from vertigo that triggers suffocating anxiety spiralling up and countless races to the Accident % Emergency wards

Silvia's chair is her own during one single session, the first one. Withdrawn from the world of her peers for the last two years, she manages to cross the place of socialisation just for one session, wrapped up in her down jacket, with her cross body bag that enables her anxiety to exist.

In adolescents, internal mobility and staticity become massively dynamic in the bodily dimension of acts, 'a drive to act' that continuously discloses senses and meanings of manifesting oneself to the world. It is in this ceaseless motion of bodies, changing languages, fantasies, unthought emotions and nascent thoughts that the group conductor moves.

Collectively we explore a common field in which we meet the known and unknown of each teenager and of the group. Dealing with great disorientation, the adolescent feels in the group the perception of a light de-individualisation, less centred on one's own contents in favour of socialisation and relationships. It is a shift of the centre of gravity, the components of which the adolescent has already started to reach in peer groups, in the outer world.

During the outward journey, towards the separation for the summer, the group carries out the greeting ritual. At the beginning of the session, hands in fists glance off or hit each other in a fast exchange of syntonic gestures, looking for the other, and leaving in the adult the image of a sensory mesh *enacted* before the absence: is it a configuration of tactile reciprocity functioning as a bond and a hold?

I soon see the representation of the emotional experiences linked to the life of the group. Its traces imprint form in the motion or in the image of the body. Valerio, for example, comes to the second meeting with his hair almost shaven, far from how it used to touch his shoulder, as it had been for years.

What does action leave in the group? How does it circulate its effects in each member?

The teenagers often gather around the violated boundary or the limit to be challenged. Ceaseless boasting about broken rules and broken boundaries animate the stories of their endeavours that highlight tests of resistance, not only of their own life: “The train arrived without me realizing it, but I found the spray can crushed on the rail!” Rino, the writer, says. What kind of derailment are they talking about? Unaware of the risk, they are incredulous when, after enthusiastic comments, I introduce the actual possibility of an accident by referring calmly to a derailed train because of some bolts placed on a rail. One gradually learns that “off-the-rails” needs to be met by a flexible container more than a regulator in a group of adolescents.

It is difficult to avoid the transformative currents that a group field generates, i.e. it is difficult that the block of thinking does not meet potential malleability.

A painful stiff neck dominates a session where a new participant, Adrio, conceals that his grandmother had died the previous day. The group becomes an interpreter and translator, approaches the mute and frozen pain in the body with a free circular motion of images and strong emotional experiences that ‘pulls in’ the new member. This relentless forward motion makes Adrio let go of the hold on his neck and hint at this “stiffening” experience. He is drawn into the narrative flow inhabited by experiences of mourning that the youngsters share freely in their exchange. “Barbara, what group have you put me in!” is his comment almost at the end of the session. And at the door, being the last to leave the room, he adds, “By the way, the story of my grandma is like a cold shower for me!” I smile, as if I dare express the benefit of the doubt.

The fading out of the group and the recovery of the freezing block of affects that were encountered in his first session occur simultaneously in a feverish emotional climate.

The acting out, or the *soma*, become the carriers of a contact with compressed emotions that the group tries to take in and give back driving towards the transformation of the unbearable into the tolerable, from the unspeakable into the narrable.

To show the group members his scars – the remains of Alex’s accident-proneness that reveals his repeated and difficult adjustments to life – might have the same meaning as Valerio’s primal meal, that is, actions where the body dimension condenses and traces the mental pain of which one can finally see the possibility of being acknowledged and shared.

Then, verbal communication will allow for its expression and transformation, and the pain will become *collective*, in the group, through “transpersonal participative sharing” (Corrao,1986).

It is a pain that concerns each member dealing with the turmoil he or she is going through and it can be described, at one of its vertices, through a scene from Rino’s dream: “...I am kneeling by the edge of the pool and, suddenly, from behind, I am hurled into the water!”

Without the chance to choose, adolescents find themselves violently pushed into another state, which is turbulent and tumultuous, and have to go through the storm which can end in their being wrecked or their growth.

Action, which goes through the pre-verb body, expresses, communicates, makes sense, wears out and excites in working with groups of adolescents on a journey, in which it is not easy to say whether their state of mind is collapsing into ruin or is reaching maturity, as Bion said in one of his Brazilian seminars. That is what makes a time like adolescence so difficult both for the adolescent and for the observer (the analyst). Making this crossing together with the group allows us to become prepared to make it, to explore thinkability and to become oriented towards growth. To be the conductor implies – to pick up on a playful idea of this paper – to participate in the *game* with fire, darkness and traceable experiences.

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