

## **Adult therapist in the adolescents group**

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### **Abstract**

The therapist's function in a group of adolescents can't be kept out of consideration from one's own mental disposition, experience, cultural references and from one's own adolescence. The teen-agers themselves are able to recognize the leader's psychological profile and to challenge the adult-therapist attacking his or her vulnerability. Before discussing the subject, it is important for me to specify that I work as a therapist in a public psychiatric structure in Rome. In this context, I hold positions in the institution as an administrator and as a therapist.

The patients expect many things from me: they would like a comfortable room, with nice furniture, while at the same time maintaining total availability. Often patients who use public services are guided by some fantasies: the ambulatory is seen like a big good mother that can offer many things, not particularly punitive and that is ready to receive everybody, a structure that functions like a large-meshed net. The operators are often trusted to by the fantasy to be omnipotent and to be very good in their work because they have many years of experience and because they have seen many patients. All this, unavoidably, brings the risk of running into frequent disappointments, devaluations or idealization of the therapist.

In this congress it is important for me to investigate which functions are brought up by the group of teen-agers on the therapist.

**Keywords:** adult therapist, group, children, adolescents

### **Therapist's characteristics that facilitate the group's forming**

Privat and Chapelier say that the group can become alive and develop a working dynamic, only if the therapist plays in it an active part, but, it is also necessary that in other moments he develops his function by staying apart from the group life. (Privat, Chapelier, 1987). Claudio Neri affirms that the therapist has to understand when the group is maturing in the stage of "community of brothers" and has to accept to take a step backward, and put himself in a lateral position. He also has to try a way to be present which is respectful of the group's functioning as a whole. In this stage each participant can feel, admiration, protection, jealousy, envy and competition, sentiments in which everyone feels to be part of the group.

It is necessary that the therapist is able to pass from a discreet position (in the community of brothers) to an active one in the "hot moments." In these moments the therapist has to: hold the fragmentary anxieties, act as a "bypass" - which means helping to overrun and face the transformation of the *assunti di base*. He also has to prevent the group from getting bogged down, by the choking sense that expresses itself by a contagious psychic process described by deep depressive experiences.

The therapist can then suspend the interpretation and make use of the metaphor like a breath of fresh air, that, through the self-representation of the group's emotion, permits to lower the level of anxiety.

The therapist's empathy comes into play in a teen's group, especially when there is frequent acting-out.

The acting-out is not to be read only like a defence from anxiety but also like a channel of communication. It is not an attack but a possible request to share.

For the development of the group's process it is necessary for the therapist to become a "co-thinker".

Not only using the interpretation and avoiding super-egoic attitudes, the therapist must facilitate the groups thought. In this way it is possible to pass from chaos to significant representations, from concrete to symbolic.

In order to make this happen it is necessary that the therapist tolerates the frustration of renouncing the idea of an ideal group compared with the real one (the persistence of the fantasy in comparison with reality that generates the phenomenon of the group's illusion). It is also necessary that he reduces the asymmetry between the single patient and the group, and maintains the lowest level of emotional tension.

For example, using open formulations avoids the exasperation of problems, and the affective flattening through defences like intellectualization and negation.

Now I will try to synthesize a few functions that the adult-leader can develop in a group.

#### 1. The adult-leader can have a double function

Protective/threatening (the double, the perturbant, the adult-vampire that can devour ideas or feed the mind by stimulating the production of thoughts).

#### 2. The adult-leader can provide parental functions generating:

- \* Love and hate
- \* Hope-hopelessness
- \* Contain depressive anxieties
- \* Stimulate persecutive anxieties

In a group requests of insolvent parental functions are often projected on the leader. I remember a particularly difficult session in which the group stayed silent for approximately thirty minutes.

The paranoid atmosphere changed the emotions and thoughts into stone. To get out from that impasse I told the group the tale : <<*The soup of stone.*>> This tale talks about a wayfarer that knocks the door of a very poor, unhappy and afflicted family and asks the reasons of their sorrow. The family answers that they don't own anything but the wayfarer asks for some water, fire and a pot. The family gives him everything and the wayfarer takes a stone out of his pocket and puts it in the pot; he waits for the water to boil and then he serves the "soup of stone". While saying good-bye he takes the stone with him but one of them asks him to leave the stone, he replies: <<*Now you can also continue without me*>>.

For me this had been an enlightening, generative and transformative experience because the group, trying to redefine the metaphor's sense, had the opportunity to express the anxiety of feeling their own thoughts like foolish, useless, and depreciated in an atmosphere which was persecutive.

The tale allowed the group to find a new confidence expressing fears, anxieties, thoughts and the hope to rise from the depressive fear of rejection.

Some sentences after the tale have been: <<*Even stones may have nourishing substances, for example like minerals ...people always said I was stupid... we were always worried to fall short of our parents' expectations.....>>*

### **Construction of the adolescent's identity in group**

The adolescent's need to be part of a group comes out from the unavoidable intrapsychic changes linked to this age. In fact, the group in adolescence plays a very important role in, the ego-ideal formation and like a narcissistic support, and in the delicate process of one's own identity construction and transformation.

The adolescent has to re-express his own identity through the disidentification of the primary objects, parts of the Ego, whose functions and attributes could be reinvested afterwards in the ego-ideal. The sense of belonging in a group is possible only if in the teen-ager has distanced himself from the adult-parent, pushed by the search for autonomy, in the individuation-separation process. Important psychic movements that the group makes possible for the individual are:

- 1) psychosexual development;
- 2) displacement on peers of infantile dependence unsolved conflicts;
- 3) psychical working out homosexual and heterosexual object-relationships related both with the relationships due to actual experiences and with unsolved conflicts with parental figures.
- 4) psychical re-working out of the group's identity, individual, of the ego, of the we.

I will never forget a group session "centered on the therapist" in which many therapist's faces came out.

The group imagined me like a married woman with two children, a professional engaged woman without children a mother with autonomous sons, a mother with rebellious sons, a woman of character who knew seducing strategies. The therapeutic group with adolescents represents an intermediate locus between the interior world of instincts and the external one of reality's perceptions. This space permits to dream with eyes wide open: the teen-ager imagines happiness, omnipotence, money, love, good grades, overcoming of difficult tasks (the driver's license, the military compulsory service) and like he often says he can "make himself films". In this sense the group produces a function of "reverie's" anxieties. In this context, illusory imaginaries and depressive persecutive anxieties develop and permit a temporary

suspension of the action, and of the judgement, necessary for the psychological working out of the psychological experience.

In adolescents acting-out, like quitting to study, committing suicide, run away from home are frequent and make sense in the illusion of solving problems with a real departure. The stimulus to act is often directed from the urgency to find a way out from anxiety that takes hold of them with vehemence, overbearance, and without control. All this scares young people very much. They continuously ask the therapist concrete solutions, suggestions, and advice. In these situations it is very important for the group's therapist be touched by this emotional urgency, but also to mentally support the importance of thought before action.

I would like to bring the clinical example of Bruna, a seventeen year old girl, that had begun group therapy with me, after trying to commit suicide. I remember a session in which Bruna tells the group, in a very worried way, that she fears to be pregnant. This communication creates panic in the group, and I don't hide that I felt worried myself, because Bruna had an easy inclination to act. I was struck dumb when the group began to imagine the developmental changes related to an eventual motherhood, like the illusion of feeling free from their family, from the adults, being totally autonomous with a responsibility too big to handle.

In this tense atmosphere debate, Roberta's philosophy diffused the situation, << *but, isn't it possible to dream even if for only one day?*>>.

The group's atmosphere became lighter even because the possibility of dreaming created the "suspension of judgement and the possibility to think about real solutions as well".

### **Irony and sense of humor**

For adolescents, entering the adult's world is a serious thing and very often filled with tragedy and sometimes comedy. When it is possible to observe comic aspects of life, even through course jokes, it helps us to dilute the teen's anxiety of derision. There isn't one adolescent that I have known which didn't feel derided in a group, because he was awarded "ridiculous", clumsy or timid. They have all felt so shy as to avoid actually staying in the natural groups (class, group of friends) because the derision of peers and adults (parents and teachers) was unbearable.

Sentences like << *your face is all red because you are Embarrassed*>> are said ignoring what a deep sense of inadequacy they can leave.

Sense of humor is not only a fine intelligent way of revealing the comic face of life, but is much more because it points out a deep human inclination toward aggregation, as is revealed through laughter, which is a fusional element.

When we produce humour on human life's condition we laugh with others. When there is (teasing) irony we laugh at others.

Both provide an outlet for aggression.

It's fundamental for a therapist to be ironical about himself and also accept the group's teasing of him:

<< *I can see you, doctor, showing off*>> (with the motorcycle).

## Conclusions

It's been possible for me, in this paper, to point out some functions developed by the therapist in the group; and, at the same time, in this kind of context, I think it is important to consider that even the group can provide a function for the therapist. Many times I have asked myself if, for the therapist, the therapeutic group of adolescents doesn't represent a space, a place where he can deposit and psychically work out his own aggressiveness towards the institution. So, as for the adolescent who uses the group to guarantee himself a separate identity from the family's pressures, for the therapist the group could produce the function to facilitate and promote an individuation-separation process from the institution. The Institution can represent a threat of the professional identity, because often the institution's predominant culture intends to strengthen the acting-out rather than helping to reflect and think.

The not doing is often interpreted like loss of time, like deficit of ability, inadequacy, or incompetence.

These last considerations start from the hypothesis that the first developmental crisis or break-down during adolescence can be exceeded only if the family system is not structured stiffly. In fact, to facilitate the construction of a solid identity, unique and individualized, it is necessary that the young person doesn't feel entrapped into stereotyped schemes.

The group, in this sense, helps the adolescent to free himself from these rigid roles (typical of gangs) and also helps to develop a multifaceted and multidimensional vision of reality because it offers steady interior references that can also be replaced in time. All this sweetens the adolescent's typical harshness and dichotomies and gives a "secure base" which is extremely useful, from which it is possible to fly up towards adult life.

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