

# Body and images of the body in a group of adolescents in an educational context

Melania Ametrano

## Abstract

The author aims to demonstrate how adolescent corporeity manifests itself within group discussion in school contexts.

To be precise, the groups were formed of female members only and presented intense relationships between equals and the peculiarity of the evolutionary phase of the those taking part in the group activate complex and articulate transference and counter-transference feelings. The emphasis is placed precisely on the transformative potential in the adolescent body and psyche, amplified by the group setting that , at the same time, facilitates, the passage from a place impregnated with “physicality”, to a symbolic space of “thinkability”.

**Keywords:** adolescent, feminine, class-groups, transference-counter-transference.

This contribution stems from observations gathered during various years of sessions with first and second grade secondary school class-groups (1).

The psychodynamic orientation model followed, requires the presence of two psychologists, one conducting and the other observing, in order to supervise the protocol of the meeting within a Group setting (2).

This setting is delegated both to the clinic, as to the care of interinstitutional relationships, insofar as the groupthink adopts a central role in defining possible method adjustments related to the school context, as well as sustaining the identity of the work group and the role of the operators.

The meetings with the classes consisted in *circle-time*, suggesting a “stimulus” topic at the beginning of each session, in order to then allow ample time for discussions amongst the youths.

The role of communication facilitator assumed by the psychologists while managing the group tended however to favour a position of deep listening of the experiences that gradually emerged in the group , gathered from verbal and non verbal interaction , considering as the body language in adolescents represents an important element that cannot be neglected.

As a matter of fact , a very significant level, regularly arising during the supervision, is that inherent to the importance of corporeity expressed by the adolescents during the meetings, which in many occasions also influenced the relationship that developed between the youths and the monitors.

The “physical ” closeness sought by the youths, and subsequently the dosage of “just distance” that the psychologists had to restore to the Group in order for it to be. and maintain. the space as “thinkability”, as well as “physicality”, activated intense

transference and counter transference emotions.

During these years I have had the chance to meet with many types of group-classes, the adolescents' bodies always spoke to me about development, anger, sexuality and emerging aggressiveness, desire to escape, need of solitude, expressed through silence, individual abandonment (also in pairs) of the circle, or even the classroom, but also through hugs, slaps, pushes, food eaten or offered, heads laid on the shoulder or lap of a friend, in search of comfort and contact.

In many cases giving "voice" to the body's "flesh" created the condition to avoid being overwhelmed by emotions that could be too intense. This did not happen in other cases because the psychologists' thinking role (function) could not impose itself as the containment space of the complex needs expressed by the girls.

I will examine one situation in particular where the adolescent group's corporeality emerges in an explicit and significant manner; it is the case of interventions carried out in a Vocational college attended mainly by females considering the major is "fashion and design", in which the attention and care of the body at an aesthetic level, is obviously of great importance. The display of the body, on which the entire world of fashion and advertising is based on, is accordingly "taught" to the students and perceived by the girls as a privileged modality of presentation of themselves to the outside world.

In the overview, I will proceed by alternating quotes pronounced by the girls and personal findings, stemming from the elaborations originating within the supervisory space with my colleagues, starting from this clinical information.

In addition I chose to circumscribe my observations to a particular age, 14-15 years, therefore to the stage defined as "middle adolescence" which represents an evolutionary phase in which one still witnesses the effects of the violent physical mutations (3).

If adolescence is the stage of renegotiation of one's lifestyle and identity, reawakening powerful emotional stages in this re-elaboration of childhood experiences and objectual, the term puberty on the other hand configures an "archetypal time" of intersection between the "dying" childhood and the "budding" adult life which finds its deepest quality in the explosion of transformative motions, which invest the corporeal above all, its deepest quality.

Copley (1993) maintains that "adolescence is the emotional answer to puberty", and Kiepenheuer considers puberty to be a "useful model to apply to the detailed study of the processes of development and transformation. It would seem that it represents a prototype for every stage of: birth, marriage, middle age, death, and for those transformative experiences such as loss, bereavement and depression.

The stages of life cycle that include a transition are usually accompanied by great perils. Puberty, in particular, represents a delicate moment in which adolescents find themselves fluctuating freely in a sort of emptiness, as they have left behind the familiar safety of childhood, without having stably reached a new condition. In this sense too, puberty prepares and announces all types of transitions".

We can, therefore, assume that puberty is like a starting point because the psychological changes of adolescence can be understood only in relation to the biology of puberty. The changes in the body that accompany sexual development and the reproductive maturity force a change in the image of the body with long term psychological consequences.

*“Even neuroscience seems to validate this biological and psychological transformation, through the research on the neuroplasticity of the adolescent brain. It has been demonstrated, for example, that from the age of 11 the number of synapses suddenly increase, particularly in the cortex. It is this way that the adolescent brain prepares itself for the development of the new relationships and the building of a new self image.*

*The differentiation from the primary object and the capability of adolescents to transit from one emotional stage to another is rather sudden, and is due to the disorganisation and organisation that the adolescent brain undergoes from puberty to the age of 20 (4).*

*At that stage, kids live in the condition of marginality between past and present, experiencing the paradox of finding themselves between the subconscious search of new identifications and the projection into childhood past. The regressive forces, typical of this crisis may constitute the definitive moment that lead the child to the transformation and the construction of the personal identity”.*

The body, then gains a distinctive value and it is possible to state that, specially in the first and middle adolescence, becomes the instrument that leads to the symbolic.

The communication explicated through the body becomes predominant and vicariant in relation to the functions pertaining more to thought. This way, body and psyche, manifest their strong link insofar as the body is the “sacred” space of our personality, “it is that real space present here and now, that refers back to the interiority, but the latter at the same time reflects itself on the corporeal image in a circular movement, expression of significant connections” (quote by B. Garufi in the article by A.M. Sassone).

The topic proposed to these transit classes was the meaning of these changes in such a delicate time of their lives (general changes inherent to biological and psychological changes, therefore their experiences related and affiliated to the stage of first adolescence, the detachment from primary to secondary school).

The class-groups I met with were nearly always formed exclusively by girls who tended to eliminate distance by positioning themselves very closely to the psychologists, they too, to be specific, of female gender, almost touching with their legs in order to keep reducing the circle space but also the symbolic space, through the assumption of the “you”. This particular need of closeness is well represented by the episode in which, although the circle was already quite tight, there was still a space between myself and one of the girls, who said to me *“let’s move closer, I’m uncomfortable with this emptiness”*, while moving her chair closer and for a long while, kept her leg intertwined with that of her friend sitting next to her.

We know that the experience of emptiness during childhood development, intended

as a lack of the external object, also constitutes the identity as it facilitates the gradual internalisation of the reference figures , and the capability of “being alone in the presence of the other”.

I am thinking of the potential space mentioned by Winnicott, that third space, which is neither inside nor outside of the individual, but in the shared space.

This “cultural” space may exist if in time, the maternal reliability is put to the test and thus, acquire the sense of confidence.

The experience of emptiness, as that of silence, can also be intolerable because it set up as a place “without sense”, as an abyss where the relationship is no longer felt. It is fair to think that precisely because of this feeling, the girls could not tolerate leaving space between them, connecting through the body.

One would often witness a frequent and gradual increase of requests to share very intimate experiences regarding sexuality, trying to draw out the psychologists’ “confessions”, almost as if the meeting were to become a moment of “female” conversation ,where the male was often portrayed as something external with threatening and abusive connotations, but very desirable at the same time.

The girls described their experience of being part of a couple as relationships that flourished at a very precocious age: many of them mentioned being in “official” relationships from the age of 14 and aspired to marry by 20 at the latest, just like the majority of their relatives.

The roles within these couples are defined. The role of the female is to manage the home and children, but is often subject to restrictions on behalf of fathers and boyfriends.

One could intensely perceive the subconscious tentative to use our presence in an ambivalent manner: as friends and confidants with whom they could erase all distance, but also as big sisters, with a maternal role, from whom they could expect a “safe base” to lay doubts and dilemmas on , typical of that age.

The counter–transfer feelings mainly revolved around three dimensions: the teenagers subconscious defiance of the adult world, the activation of reparative maternal functions towards the harm inflicted by the adult figures of reference, the risk that the corporeity expressed by the group could strongly undermine the potential of thought. The fear of being overwhelmed by so much energy *in fieri* , often made us feel like those parents who fear the explosiveness of their own children, excessively limiting its transformative power through judgemental and controlling attitudes. Even our “adult” bodies and minds sometimes defensively resisted the anguish of time that passes and produces change. What’s more, with our ages not being so distant from theirs, our evolutionary stages interweaved in the confusion caused by the feeling that something was “lost forever”, but also the curiosity of something that was coming to life. In our case, the detachment from the adolescent era coincided with the beginning of our professional formation and those hopes linked to the discovery of adult autonomy. To the girls, the departure from childhood brought about the first sexual explorations, full of fear and attraction, respect of

their bodies and those of others.

We too at times felt overwhelmed by the energy stemming from the fantasies and desires typical of adolescence, and sometimes felt *con-fused* with them and like them. Being supported by the group supervisors allowed to untangle and clarify the complex counter-transference feelings, thinking together contained the danger of falling into collusive modes, one of the main risks of working with adolescents in institutional contexts.

During the meetings the girls fluctuated between memories of childhood and stories of current experiences, their embarrassed laughs accompanied these anecdotes in a dance between past and present, between old and new images of themselves: "I saw the photo of when I was little, I was horrible! *My mother used to tie my hair in ponytails and I was very pale ...I can't even think of going out now without a little makeup*",... "I was ridiculous too, I used to dress with colours that didn't make any sense, yellow and red, how could they dress me like that?!". One of them was saying how she now liked to drink milk, and then she immediately expressed her desire to go out with her boyfriend and friends, to stay out late and break rules.

Within these conversations, one could grasp the girls' painful experiences of loss, loss of friendships, but probably even more, the loss of childhood and the objectual relationship with parental figures felt as protective, "in the past, my friend and I were always together, , *we barely say hello to each other now, she got pregnant at 11. Parents should pay more attention to their children, if one is too permissive and leaves everything up to their children there is nothing left to wish for. It's like skipping stages, instead it's nice that all things come at the right time*".

I think this level of communication was generated subconsciously by the strong resonance with the body's experience, noticeable in girls between 11-12 onwards.

We know that with the arrival of the menarche and the corporeal changes of puberty, the image of the body becomes richer, it acquires new fantasies body. The menarche is an important frame of reference in the first adolescence because it has all the characteristics of a normal development crisis. From this point on, one's own generative power is perceived with a new frightening force, but also one's own potential destructiveness.

From a Freudian perspective, S. Ritvo maintains that the adolescent crisis can constitute both a reinforcing stimulus, or an obstacle towards development, precisely because it is simultaneously a time of progress and regression. That means that aptitudes may become more useful to personality can become more, and at the same time may enhance the level of vulnerability.

In particular, the girl can experience, in a regressive manner, the menarche as a phenomena that reactivates primordial anal and castration conflicts based on the model of other excretory functions. This can intersect with the girl's particular predisposition to develop premature conflict neurotic relationship related to the experience of genital damage such as mutilation and castration, leading to character

traits such as impotence and indifference. The confirmation of a girls' biological femininity can disrupt her so much as to lead to serious disorders of the corporeal image .

On the other hand, for some girls menarche can represent a moment positive change regarding her relationship with her body, distinguished by the acquired self-confidence and pride in her womanhood.

As mentioned, the particular type of school taken into consideration is attended mainly by females with the presence in some classes of an only representative of the male gender member ,mainly presenting obvious feminine features. On one side, this allowed the group to maintain a certain homogeneity, but on the other hand it represented an element of disturbance related to the gender confusion and the specific sexual non-discrimination often observed in pre- adolescents. It is often said that adolescents are « neither fish nor fowl », they too sometimes define themselves in this way, signalling the crisis experienced stemming precisely from the corporeal transformation. Teenagers are captured between these two dimensions: they are no longer children , but not yet men or women: they belong half to their family, and half to a vaster community. When writing about adolescents, Kiepenheuer states “they are still attached to the *mother*, while they turn towards the world of the *father*; they need the protective love of the mother and nevertheless can experience this love as dangerously devouring. They seek the, while at the same time fearing and rebelling against him. The experience of feeling uprooted repeats itself along with the ambivalence between opposing realities and contradictory inner conflicts”.

As a matter of fact, in our groups, the image of the male and of the father appeared to be particularly problematic , most of the times very partial :cynical man and non affective, seducer, possessive and above all, completely unreliable. During a meeting N. said that boys from 12 upwards are only attracted to the beauty of a girl, the personality doesn't count much for, and even if they marry and form a family they remain the same, immature and fixated with sex ... “my mother says to be careful, if someone puts a hand on your leg it means he wants something and you shouldn't appear to be, *you should tell him that if he's looking for one of those, then he got the wrong person!! That's how the mistake is made ...*”.

From Neumann's perspective, who investigates the development of womanhood availing of the precious contribution of mythology and the study of the archetypes, it emerges that the primordial relationship of identity between mother and daughter always manifests the arrival of the male as the cause of separation. The reference to the abduction of Ade on behalf of Kore sends back to the intra-psychic experience of the wedding “mystery of death”, because to the male, marriage is above all an appropriation characterised by violence, aggression and victory, whereas from the perspective of the female psyche it is rather “destiny, transformation and profound mystery of life ” (1971). This means that the girl must gradually distance herself from the maternal world(sphere) where the subconscious is the dominant quality, in order to enter the world of consciousness through comparison, but also through the distress that accompanies the painful fracture of the primordial bond between

mother and daughter.

A large part of the girls describe difficult relationships with their fathers : those, with parents separated for sometime already, with parents who separated a long time ago, living in families formed anew, those who lived with a mother and a brother while maintaining a conflictive relationship with the father, those who hadn't seen their father for over two years and reacted to this absence by adopting *atough* attitude. The father appeared as a distant and unapproachable figure, someone to squeeze money put of and with whom to entertain a relationship based on convenience.

The girls fluctuated between the experience of impotent acceptance expressed in the sentence "a father is always a father", and *sentiments of violent anger* "he can die for all I care ,*we'll see when he's old and doesn't have anyone around! I don't care if he's alone, he deserves it!!*".

On the other hand, the relationship with the maternal image did not appear to be less problematic, often characterised by seduction, intrusiveness and difficulty to establish and maintain appropriate limits. In the specific of our groups , relating as mentioned to the field of fashion, the same uncomfortable emotions were experienced in relation to their teachers , where certain educational practices were part of the curricula (measuring hips and breasts for the designs), made them perceive the corporeal contact with the teacher too erotised and violent. Besides , from what the group said , the teachers did not always appear to be capable of understanding and manage these delicate issues, probably witnessing the imbalance of the "just distance " that we too, as group monitors, had had an inkling of.

It is possible that considering such a specific the specific school context, it opened itself up more to activating incestuous fantasies that, considering Jung's thought, surface in a more forceful manner, *expressing a regressive nostalgia ,the need to go back to the origins, every time the individual psyche is in the doldrums because of the clash with alterity.*

The fallback towards the internal would imply, that is , *omnipotent fantasies of self-assurance and total gratification guaranteed by lasting state of fusionalità* (Russo 2007), *in contrast with the necessity to seek distance from what is known and familiar, to create an opening toward the exterior*, that describes relationships oriented mainly towards differentiation and personal development.

In fact, what emerged was the fragile boundary of the space between they the girls and the adults of reference, it didn't seem clear who were the adolescents and who the adults . The lack of a good and reassuring object , capable of containing and transferring sense to the chaotic excitement of the girls' preadolescence brings to mind the fragility of the new identifications and disidentifications with the maternal image, felt as abandonment, invasive and non protective of their sexuality and their evolving bodies.

The internalised objects are also revised, and in this very delicate intrapsychic operation of the adolescent the role of the group of equals gains vital importance because in its ambivalent connotations of location it imprisons the individuality, but also offers refuge, a place that protects from the internal attacks , supports the

adolescents' auto realisation, , firstly through fusional behaviour, and only later through separative and differentiating movements .

Helene Deutsch (1944) notes that "Attachment to the mother in girls' prepuberty represents a greater threat than the attachment to the father. The mother is a more serious obstacle than the girls' desire to grow up, and we know that the condition of "psychic infantilism " noticed in many adult women is the result of unresolved attachment to the mother during puberty".

The girls comments are very significant in relation to this issue "...for example, I tell my mother everything now, I used to speak to her a lot less in the past" ... "no, for me it's not like that, my mum and I barely speak at all!!" ... "I had more freedom when I was smaller, now that I am 14 and have a boyfriend my parents are more restrictive, I think it's ridiculous because if you want to do something, you'll do it in the day or at night, in a car or somewhere else!", ... "I find that the more they tell me not to do something, the more I want to ...for example, if they forbid me to go out I really insist that I want to go out, even if I don't really want to go out at all".

The girls asked why this happens, they spoke to us in a vivaciously interactive manner which we felt was not invasive or depreciative, but rather as a need to receive guidance from women who were ahead of them, if not for anything else but age.

The adolescent girl has the task to shift from the primordial, the mother, to the man. An initial version of this shift occurs in the oedipal period . How the father responds to the love of the girl will be significant in relation to the adolescents' attempts to address the male. In any case, the regression to the pregenital phase in puberty in puberty reactivates the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother. The serious eating disorders that often arise during puberty , represent this regression featuring intense aggressive impulses towards the mother. Ritvo maintains that this shift from the mother, or the woman, with a persistence of the mother in the male, is a very frequent event, if not regular. It is the effort to try to find and supply a feeling of confidence and intimacy based upon the model of old experiences and fantasies with the mother during the phase of detachment , uncertainty and distress which constitutes a great part of adolescence.

The considerations gathered from the experience with the groups of adolescents seem to well confirm the discontinuous progress of this phase of development, where the high level of conflict, forever assigned to adolescence shows as a positive and fertile process insofar as it is a necessary condition of the transformations.

It is the transformative valence assigned to the archetype of the *puer*, according to Jungian authors, which in my view renders the most profound sense of what it means to work with adolescents.

As Hillman well expresses , we receive the sense of destiny and mission from the archetype of the *puer*: "every beginning is always full of meaning and overflowing with the exaltation of eros ...the *puer* aspect of the meaning lays within the *search – the dynamis* of the infinite "whys" of the child, the *quest*, or the challenges, the

attempts, the venture— that grasps the I from behind and thrusts it forward” (1964). In this acceptation the “child motive” denotes a potential universal future and a psychic “puberty” always ready to emerge at crucial moments

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## Notes

- 1) These meetings are part of my volunteering activity from 2002 to 2007, at the U.O. Developmental and Clinical Psychology, ASL NA 1 Centre dis. 31 (Head of Service: Prof. Maurizio Ricciardi), as part of the actions promoted to support the development and prevention of distress in adolescence.
- 2) Professors in charge of the organization for interventions in schools and supervision group: Paola Giusti and Rita Tamajo Contarini, from 2002 to 2007.
- 3) I refer to the classification used by G. Nagliero quoted in the book cited in the bibliography. The author explains the importance of paying attention to the quantitative levels characterizing the development: body *especially* in the first phase of adolescence and thought *especially* in the third phase. So the "average adolescence", as the second phase, is presented as a developmental phase in which the primacy of bodily changes gradually beginning to give way to mental development.
- 4) In this regard, see the overview of the main research on the book by Monniello-Quadrana cited in the bibliography.

**The Author:**

**Melania Ametrano**, specialised in AIPA.

Via Alfredo Rocco 13, 80128 Naples

[ametrano3@inwind.it](mailto:ametrano3@inwind.it)

Translated by Celestino Orlandi