

Dreaming and Thinking in the Group

Silvia Corbella

Abstract

If we consider the group and the individual as different points of a continuum, the commonly accepted ontological dichotomy between the individual and the group will become obsolete, from the moment that specifically human individuality will be seen in relational terms, resulting in an encounter not only between different individuals but also an encounter between different forms of groups. When group therapeutic work starts, intrapsychic aspects become communicable through the interactions that transform the unconscious and archaic aspects of communication into socially shared experiences; thus, the experience and the story of the group become individually and internally represented, in a sharing of reciprocal transformation. My principal references in psychoanalysis are the theories on object relations that have largely contributed to psychoanalytical studies thanks to the relational paradigm. This paradigm emphasizes above all the importance of the intersubjectivity and of the object relations in the constitution and development of the Self.

Key words: dream, myth, group, Self, intersubjectivity

Within psychoanalytic thought consequently, attention has been transferred from the discharge of instinct -foundation of the impulse paradigm- to the phenomena of interaction. Today, the unconscious is no longer conceived as a melting pot of passions, but in a dynamic way, as <<... *an organisation that throws light on the first steps we take in this world, including interactive and identity experiences (...) whether we are speaking about the conscious or the unconscious, focalisation on interaction causes the reference to areas or agencies of the mind to take on secondary importance respect to those phenomena being the representational aspects of the Self, of the other, and of the Self in interaction with the other*>>. (Bordi,1998).

Thinking and dreaming in the analytic group process are part of the complex individual-group dialectic: thought and dreaming are seen as specific productions of the whole group (of the group) or of the individual in the group (in the group) and are situated on one end of the continuum that unites the two polarities in a constant potentially developmental and creative interplay. Therefore it is ‘natural’ that a dream told in the analytic group immediately becomes part of group thought. In fact the constituents that construct the plot of the group process are the preconscious and a state of consciousness differentiated from that of daily life, the encounter and interaction of which, produce both the dream and the relative associations by the components of the group, and group thought. As far as the analysis of the process of the dream is concerned, the recent illuminating work of Lopez and Zorzi (1999), “La Sapienza del Sogno” will be a constant source of reference in this paper.

The authors utilize the paradigm of the complementarity, (one of the founding paradigms of group epistemology), that they call et-et, in contraposition to aut-aut.

One of their aims is to dialectically integrate (according to the dialectics of distinctions rather than opposites) Freud's theoretical clinical positions and those of other authors they retain as being valid representatives of the more significant schools of thought in research on dreams. The authors recognise the dream's position par excellence where the 'new' paradigm is worthy of representing the fund of the complexity of psychic reality, which is expressed and is formed precisely in the dream. In their scrupulous analysis of the writings of Freud on dreams, starting from "Traumdeutung", Lopez and Zorzi sustain that even though Freud opened new and fundamental horizons to the comprehension of dreams, he contributed to reducing the dream to a mere instrument, denying its intrinsic value and having a specific characteristic for experience, overvaluing the latent content and describing its manifest content as a mere distortion and mystification. The authors sustain that "the manifest content to the extent that it is expression of the preconscious, contains the whole dream, and is ultimately, the dream itself". From the very origins of group psychotherapy, attention has always focused on what is going on in the 'here and now' of the session, stimulating interaction between the participants. At the present time, interest has swung, as far as the dream is concerned, from the intrapsychic dynamics to the interpersonal significance that is present in the manifest content. In the group, the patients focus 'naturally' on the manifest content and they tend to associate on it, furthermore I retain that the therapist should co-dream with the group stimulated by the manifest content, unless he/she has not already induced the culture of interpretation of the latent content. <<*In group work it is evident that it is useless to search for a latent language hidden behind the manifest language*>> (Gaburri, 2000). Thus the principal task of the therapist, or the other members of the group, is not to be authoritative in the matter of significances, but rather <<*to amplify and elucidate the pattern of meanings transmitted by the images of the dream*>> (Pines, 1999). Nevertheless, the possibility of interpreting the latent content must not be eliminated, but rather considered in the et-*et* logic and contextualized. Interaction and associations of single patients in the group are important because they often lead to the dream being considered like a mirror of the relationship between the dreamer and the group, or even the dreamer and the group situation in that particular moment. Moreover in my opinion, dreaming and thinking in the group result from very similar processes, and in some cases they almost overlap. Therefore it is 'natural' that a dream told in the analytic group immediately becomes a part of group thought. In fact, the constituents that construct the plot of the group process are the preconscious and the conscious differentiated from daily life, from which the meeting and interaction produce both the dream (Lopez and Zorzi, op.cit.) and the relative associations of the components of the group, and the group thought.

At the beginning of a group the therapist must be able to mediate between sleeping states and waking states (of the dreaming subject), to help the single members (who up until then believed in a rational Aristotelian logic dominated by the aut-aut principle) comprehend new creative and transformable links, that in time will go to form the foundation of the specific group culture and thought. At the same time the therapist must be the group's voice in order to express the awareness of the superior

preconscious, in other words: <<the highest and most complex form of the conscious that synthesizes the irrational with the rational, the emotive libido with the conscious, and the external reality with the internal reality at a superior level>> (Lopez, Zorzi, 1999). My hypothesis is, that specific group thought is constructed through alternating, and interaction between, the roles of the dreaming ego, the superior preconscious and the conscious. These roles are created in the time and in the transitional group space alternatively by the therapist, the single participants and the group as a whole. In fact, the therapist having a more articulated and complex knowledge pays particular attention to the single participants' conscious (that at the beginning is particularly vigil owing to fears and expectations), keeping in mind that the conscious is a fragile and defenceless structure and appears when the constitution of the Self is completed. This happens because from the very first session, (we must remember that participating to a group renders the boundaries of the ego extremely fragile thus modifying the conscious of the single members), the affirmation of the dreaming self reminds us of analogous characteristics of that particular conscious state that every participant potentially possesses. <<The dream is responsible for the transformation of the ego of the waking state into factual reality, in the relationship of the dreaming self with implicit reality, whose essence is predominantly symbolic>> (Lopez, Zorzi). The reality faced in a group is a sort of implicit reality, similar to a laboratory, where the subject feels disorientated at the beginning. This disorientation not only is unavoidable, but is a positive sign because it helps the subject to get rid of rationalizing stereotypical aspects belonging to the conscious. The capacity of the dreaming self to mediate between preconscious and conscious is a potentiality of the human mind, that in my opinion all the participants to a therapeutic group achieve in different moments. During the progress of the group every participant, just like the dreaming self, will gradually achieve qualities deriving from awareness and responsibility. The culture that is shared in the group, should be characterized by a 'nomadic' and unsaturated thought, capable of putting 'in brackets' the pre-judices of the conscious, the therapist has to be aware of making this situation come about, but in time his/ her conduct will automatically actuate it. He/she will need to be the primary voice of the dreaming subject's conscious, capable of being astounded or moved without saturating, rational pre-judices; this will stimulate a specific culture and thought deriving from being in a therapeutic group. The group leader if necessary, must be capable of withdrawing from the dominant atmosphere of thinking of the group to think 'alone' in the group, when he/she thinks it is fitting, in order to activate a movement towards individuation. Indeed in the life of the individual as in the life of the group, the free-flowing play, between the preconscious on one hand, and the conscious of the dreaming and waking state on the other, (expressed also in the associative chain) makes space for creative and transformable potentiality. In my opinion, (Corbella, 2002) the group field often appears like a complex mental state in which the superior preconscious, the conscious and the dreaming ego interact. And, according to the situation, a member of the group, or the therapist, or the group as a whole become the voice of the preconscious and the dreaming ego in order to construct a thought that mediates with the needs and the

limits of the conscious, that in turn, other members are expression of. In the group the members can moderate their way of participating thanks to a culture that respects the time each participant takes. For instance there are sessions that allow members to be in vigil silence, drawing gradually from the session according to the level of experience that his/her conscious is able to tolerate. Whereas in other moments the group field acts as a ‘neutral’ and stable container to create a thought of the group and/or in the group; the leader must recognize and sustain those thought processes each time the situation requires in order to further the developmental process. The mind of the therapist must emancipate itself from the criterion of causality and the logic of intentionality in favour of the concept of emotive contextualization, (Gaburri, 2000) developing the potentiality of empathy and trust in the preconscious to the greatest possible extent. The preconscious does not have in the formation of the dream, (and I would add,) in thinking of the group, only a censorial function but one of subtle irony (Lopez, Zorzi, ib.). Irony often becomes an important integrated part of the group’s culture weighed down as it is by seriousness, the group quickly learns the value of light-heartedness, the force of the metaphor and highly imaginative language.

During the course of therapeutic work, facing separation and individuation movements allows the group as a whole, and the single members to reactivate interrupted, or only partially achieved integrative movements thus modifying the modality of thinking and the relationships with others, resulting in the acceptance of the ambivalence, and sometimes even the valorisation of it. This is a fundamental element for overcoming the dichotomy logic of the aut-aut in favour of the complementarity of the et-et in order to pass from intolerance to tolerance in the sense of a dialogical opening to dissimilitude. In this context a repetition of the Oedipal conflict will help to experiment in different moments and at different levels of intensity what Lopez and Zorzi define as, <<...*a friendly solution to the Oedipal drama. Courtesy in the parental relationship reigns where once there was only conflict. The solution implies that intrapsychic conflict between violently opposed roles is overcome, to let harmony, solidarity, and the re-composition of the triadic Oedipal relationship to emerge. The roles that compose the triad become three people>>. The group allows the single participants to play the different roles of child, mother or father at different moments, facilitating insight into the person behind the guise. This entails an individuation process that leads to group thought and to thinking in the group. Assuming the responsibility of thought passes through two distinctly different phases: firstly, it is necessary that a certain distance is created between the individual and the group leading to acceptance of one’s solitude, secondly, a return to a sense of belonging to the group occurs, that not only acknowledges, but encourages the sharing of what was thought on an individual basis.* (Neri, 1995). In some cases during these individuation processes, discussion continues to centre on roles, authoritarianism, authoritativeness, rights and duties, transgression and guilt. This all comes about in a tolerant atmosphere. Comprehension of the parents’ limits thus consenting the acceptance of one’s own limits comes about with difficulty; and the responsibility of guilt is often made

reference to, in order to recoup an omnipotent illusion and total freedom without limitations. The logic of responsibility can substitute the logic of guilt, only when limitations can be accepted, when the awareness that we live a life of limited freedom comes about. The communication between different aspects of the self becomes more fluid undermining the more rigid structure of the Self that is often the consequence of a trauma that caused discontinuity in the developmental process. In this way a space is created for the memory enabling a continuation of one's existential story. It becomes clear how cancelling a memory results in a discontinuity of the sense of the Self, and how memories that weren't able to become part of the life experience obstructed the developmental course creating a vicious circle. Once the memory is recovered, *<<not only the emotive-libidinal strength of the past is regained, but also the preconscious knowledge of the dream, leading to the present being transformed into a regenerated present>>* (Lopez, Zorzi, ib.), and only then, paradoxically access to oblivion comes about. To illustrate the above-mentioned I want to recount some dreams that were able to offer solutions to crises the group was going through and consequently became a mythical reference point for the group. More often than not these dreams-myths are told by members who are finishing the therapy and once they are shared become milestones in the history of the group, to be shared by new generations for the 'know-how' they convey.

Antonio was unable to say goodbye to his mother on her death-bed for reasons that were beyond his will. He dreams of assisting her in her last moments and receiving a loving and grateful caress on his head. When he awakes he feels an agreeable and cherished sense of serenity accompanied by melancholy. This dream shows the group that it is possible to reconcile with one's own past. The relationship that Antonio had with his mother allowed the whole group to understand that *<<if the internal persecuting object is not modified, the subject is immobilized in a past experience that can only be relived in an identical way and is destined to be repeated>>* (Meotti 1998). In my opinion the possibility of adjustment can only come about through the termination of omnipotence and the acquisition of a sense of limitation. This is the only way of passing from attributing a sense of guilt to one another to assuming a sense of responsibility. Group work permitted Antonio to see his past in the light of new and revitalising experiences and consequently was given the opportunity to adjust the internal object, opening a space for creative capacity. Thus he was able, not only to organise his future as he desired, but also to modify constructively his memory. At that point his memory was no longer 'fossilized' but was able to select worthwhile memories and ultimately leave space for oblivion. This dream became a symbol for the group in that it showed that change was possible and the past could be transformed positively freeing the future from the repetition compulsion. "Antonio's mother's caress" became a symbol for the group, an aspiration, in other words, a myth.

Anna Rosa, at the end of her therapy, dreams she has to write an essay on "Life and the things we lose" in order to win a competition. After a moment of bewilderment a group of people help her with designs and images but not with words. In its synthetic simplicity, this dream illustrates the path followed by Anna Maria and her difficulty

in accepting the limitations to omnipotence and the pleasure it brought to her. It underlines the laboriousness to acquiring awareness of not being able ‘to have everything’, and how problems can be faced and resolved with the other participants by using the highly-imaginative language of dreams and of ‘thinking in the group’, and how the constructive importance of limitations is also comprehended.

On observing these examples we can see that the dream is not a perfected statement as we thought, but conversely is situated at the centre of a transformation process. Thus we can sustain that dreams even in the small group can be considered as symbolically-creative icons, capable of generating new meanings and values, favouring the development of the creative-symbolic process (Giovannini, Menarini, 1999). Creativity becomes possible also thanks to oblivion, to accepting that one needs “to lose some things” in order to liberate space and open up towards innovation.

Thanks to the complexity and complementarity paradigms that are sustained by the conjunction logic, at the end of a complex therapeutic work it is possible to reach the “awareness and wisdom of the person” (Lopez, Zorzi) and to keep on maintaining this ideal (that is never reached all at once) as a constant reference.

The pleasure-pain principle must always be kept in consideration, by neither disdaining it or carrying it to extremes, but integrating and transforming it to the advantage of the construction of a superior life. Here the individual is not in contraposition with the development of an advanced society but coincides with it, because an individual conceived as such, is a perfect synthesis between universality and individuality” (Lopez, Zorzi).

The wisdom of the dream will always help to maintain interest and attention on this ideal of the Person, whether individually or socially, but only as long as it is sustained by the superior preconscious. As far as the narration of the dream in the group is concerned, on concluding I would like to underline a paradoxical aspect, that while the dream appears to be a particularly ‘solitary’ activity deriving from the internal world of the individual, on the other hand it allows us to acquire awareness of our relational make-up and the complexity present in every one of us. Besides, wasn’t it Pines (1999) that reminds us that the history of dreams is ancient and mysterious, the multiple practices of which include, prophesies, divination, access to the world’s spirit and amplifying our vision beyond diurnal limits. From our very origins dreams have been potentially functional to the collectivity. For instance, once the group is established the dream becomes a testimony and guarantor of its existence as a very particular microcosm, and is *<<the effective protector of the group’s resources disposing them in a free and original way and also, dreaming activity encourages new meaning for the group and its capacity of being constant or to modify the reality>>* (Marinelli, 1999).

I attended with great interest Gordon Lawrence’s lecture on ‘Social Dreaming’ in Milan and I found some aspects that could be compared to Lopez and Zorzi’s research and to my reflections on dreaming and thinking of the group, and in the group.

Gordon Lawrence uses the group matrix to construct thought from shared dreams and he retains that constructing means maintaining an open space to receive unexpected meanings, thus favouring through the telling of dreams a development of thought that encourages free associations for the benefit of all the participants; Similarly, I retain that the dream and ‘thinking of the group’ derive from the same type of modality that the function of the superior preconscious has when it arises.

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Silvia Corbella. Psychoanalyst (SPI-IPA), Group-analyst (IAPG). Pastpresident of the A.P.G. Socio Fondatore ARGO. Teacher at C.O.I.R.A.G. (Milan and Padoa Institut), author of many researches, in particular of: *Storie e luoghi del gruppo*, (Stories and places of the group) Cortina, Milano

Viale Romagna 5820133-Milano Tel-fax ++39-022664216
E-mail : silviricor@uninetcom.it- silviricor @fastwebnet.it