

## **Experiential group and dream**

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### **Abstract**

The experiential group has a duration defined, a beginning and an end, known by the participants. A purpose, not therapeutic, but explicitly and programmatically "experiential". A conductor having acquired expertise on the events - the "effects" - the unconscious, is able to perceive what is happening in the group and not only to provide "interpretations", but also to support and facilitate the processes of communication and thought, suggesting images that promote the ability to self-representation of the group. The experiential group is then placed in an institutional framework that traces the boundaries in space and time and determines its goals: knowledge through the experience of how the mind moves in a group that has set itself the task of observing what happens inside. Implicit in this approach, as the authors try to clarify later, the idea that the "experience" is a social construct and the outcome of a process of working that involves elements of intersubjectivity and communication. Little by little, the dreams begin to appear in communications that take place during the sessions. Nothing like the dream puts us concretely to the existence of mental processes that move completely independent of our conscious will. No accident that Freud called dreams the "royal road" to the unconscious not only their contents speak of the unconscious mind in a more direct way of other processes, but their own uncontrollability we revealed the existence in us of instances that move independently and shape, according to their inclinations, the course of our thoughts. No one can dream about what they want, even in a group.

**Key-words:** experiential group, dream, story, mediating element

We propose to provide certain elements of discussion on the type of dynamics set in motion in the experiential groups conducted in the Faculty of Psychology of Rome University and on how the appearance of dreams and their utilisation by the groups themselves fit into this context.

Experiential groups were introduced some years ago and have come to constitute a useful tool for bringing the students in direct contact with the fundamental topics concerning group study according to a psychodynamic approach.

Their conduction has gradually been better defined on the basis of practice, coming to assume a stable form which has made it possible to obtain a considerable quantity of material collected in a setting which by this time enjoys a reliable uniformity.

The experiential groups, organised by the Chair of Theory and Techniques of Group Dynamics, are repeated each year, and last about four months. They are held once a week and each meeting lasts an hour and a half.

Participants in the group, who take part on their own initiative, are about fifteen in number. The meetings are held in the university halls and the students gather round in a circle.

At the beginning of the group the leader proposes a narrative text to be read.

At the end of the meetings the students are requested to re-elaborate their experience in the form of a written report which will be discussed thereafter with other leaders.

In the course of the meetings the group leaders meet up regularly to pool their experiences with the aid of an external supervisor to the team.

Next an open structure is activated with the circulation of thoughts and information leading continuously to a dimension of sharing and "socialisation" of the experience.

The persons taking part in the group have certain points of reference which provide them with a "grid" by means of which to organise the experience lived and which facilitate the task of "ascribing a sense" to everything that happens.

And now let us consider a few of its elements.

The group lasts for a given time, having a beginning and an end which are known to the participants. Its aim is not therapeutical, but explicitly and programmatically "experiential".

A leader, that is a person who, having matured a competence relative to the manifestations - the "effects" - of the unconscious, is capable of perceiving what is happening in the group and not merely of providing "interpretations", but above all of accompanying and facilitating the processes of communication and thought, suggesting images that favour the capacity of self-representation of the group itself.

A narrative text capable of providing a model that orders the experience and in addition, in view of the nature and subject of the works which are chosen, one or more metaphors of group life.

### **The draft of a final written report narrating the experience**

Writing is a moment of shared reflection and elaboration both because, very often, it is the fruit of collaboration with some other member of the group, and because it is explicitly destined for a "reader" belonging to the team of leaders.

It is clarified to participants that the report will be written in the most complete freedom, however privileging what has been observed and leaving the discussion of theoretical models, subject of the lessons which are imparted at the same time, to when it comes to the examination proper they will be taking.

The report may be used as a point of reference in the course of the interrogation, but is not, in itself, the subject of any appraisal and the reading given of it by a member of the team will constitute exclusively a moment of reflection, carried out from an external point of view.

Accordingly the experiential group is placed in an institutional framework which lays down its confines in space and time and determines its purpose; knowledge through

the experience of how the mind moves in a group which has set itself the task of observing what happens within itself.

As we will seek to clarify hereafter, the idea that the "experience" is a construction and the outcome of a process of elaboration which implies elements of intersubjectivity and communicability is implicit in this method.

Furthermore, the final report, as many leaders have observed, is also posed as a moment of elaboration of everything, a way of holding the memory of a path that, now it is ended, contains from the very outset the idea of a foreseen but at the same time imposed and irrevocable interruption.

This type of organisation of the experiential group, as already mentioned, is always accompanied by the utilisation of a narrative text, proposed as a common reading for the participants.

The text permits a transposition of the events that take place in the group in the "model plot" of the narration and makes it possible to represent, by means of the elements that this provides - whether ascertained or stubbornly refused - the real experience of the participants without having necessarily to say "I am", "I think", "I feel", etc. The leader has a delicate task in appealing to those more impersonal elements, even if pregnant with affective valencies, to those invariables which may be singled out in the living experience of everyone that, arranging themselves according to a narrative modality, may give rise to the constitution of a "formative experience". In this way the experiential group may avoid being transformed into a therapeutical group.

The presence of a narrative text as an element "facilitating" communication and above all the starting up of interactive processes and the affective and cognitive processes accompanying them, leads to this type of group being included in the category which the present panel is dealing with, namely groups with intermediate purposes.

As Claudine Vacheret observes, these purposes enjoy a particular status which may be singled out according to the parameters of metapsychology and which makes them suitable for exercising a function of mediation between parts of the mind and between processes separate from defensive strategies.

Vacheret writes: "The object at the origin of the mediation is an object with two sides to it: the side of materiality and the side of symbolic analogy" (Vacheret, 1995, p.5).

"It is insofar as the objects (photos, games, toys, pictures - in this case we could also add narrative texts - are devices that set off the imaginary, that facilitate access to the intermediate and transitional zones, propitious to psychic exchanges, to the passing of phantasms to representations and multiple identifications." (Vacheret, 1995, p.10).

And, further: "It is because it facilitates access to the imaginary that the intermediate object favours the game of identifications.

The object in its mediative function, sets the imaginary in motion, gives impulsion to creativity, to mythopoetic productions, favouring access to the unconscious zones by means of the myth and, very simply, the phantasm." (Vacheret, 1995, p.16).

These considerations correspond fully to what is observed in work with the experiential groups and immediately shows a connection with the processes leading to an expression through oneiric activity.

Claudine Vacheret thereafter refers explicitly to the function of cultural objects as mediators in collective dynamics. "These cultural objects more or less involved give rise to a feeling of exultancy, when they enable the different members of a group to acquire a sudden awareness of their likenesses. The stories, legends and narrations have first and foremost this function of a bond, insofar as they prompt the individual imaginary and the group imaginary. [...] Narrations are not limited to binding the subject to the group to which he belongs for a given duration (training course, session, seminar), they connect him to all the great myths of Mankind and to the imaginary that these channel. [...] This notion is important because it permits us to understand that the individual dimension cannot be considered as the opposite to the social or collective dimension, but that the phantasmatic life of a subject and his psychic functioning have something to do with his belonging to a group." (Vacheret, 1995, p.19).

It's precisely this lived and experienced assertion that the experiential group tries to foster in the students participating in it. The utilisation of "narrations" is proposed in this connection and carries out its mediating function precisely in that direction.

The function of the narrative text is not to be always effectively used by the group, as much as belonging to the "foundation myths" on its origin, of defining a common object on which it is possible - but not necessary or obligatory - to relay as a means of expression and mediation between personal anxieties and the group, of building a common heritage of fantasies and a reassuring point of reference.

In this way the vicissitudes related in the text and the characters moving in them constitute the common space in which in which the fantasies and anxieties of the others may be found, the intermediate area bringing individual and group together, in which the relationship with all the participants, facilitated by the analogic and symbolic function of the story, gives rise to the feeling of belonging to a collectivity.

Whereas the final written report is seen as the development, constructed by the group, of the narrative model provided by the text and is constituted as a story, a narration, in which the participants recognise this feeling of continuity between the individual and the collective outlook.

We had occasion to note that the final reports almost always take the form of a sort of story of the group, of its process of integration, of the progressive constitution of a style of its own of communication and regulation of the interactions within it.

So that the group is engaged in the utilisation and construction of narrations. The characteristics that Bruner singles out in narrations are, for our purpose, extremely meaningful.

Bruner highlights four:

- (a) Narrative diachronicity: the elements of the narration are laid out and arranged according to a succession in time.
- (b) Intentional states: the characters acting operate on the basis of values, beliefs, desires, their behaviour may be traced back to "reasons" and not to "causes".
- (c) Hermeneutic compatibility: a profound interdependency continues to exist between the parts and the whole, reproducing in the narration, what is one of the peculiar characteristics of the group itself.
- (d) Narrative accumulation: each narration is included in a wealth of traditions and of "stories" leading to the complex interweaving of a culture (Bruner, 1991, p.22).

All the elements that Bruner indicated are present both in the narrative text and in the work as an object of mediation both in the modalities by means of which the group tells its story and cooperates in the carrying out of that process of self-representation which makes it possible to grasp the sense of the group experience.

It is interesting to consider that the belonging of all participants to a single institution - the University and the Degree Course - provides the group with an inexhaustible source of images, traditions, group languages, of "metropolitan legends" on the teachers, the examinations and their colleagues, which come to constitute a veritable mythology in which the very image of psychology as a discipline ends up by being involved.

The theme of life in the Faculty, which we cannot of course consider in depth here, is a source yet to be studied for an understanding of the basic institutional dynamics that accompany the students' formative processes.

In this sense the experiential group may be considered as a privileged observatory of the interpersonal dynamics and strategies regulating the meetings with the different areas of the disciplines.

To quote Bruner once more: "The greater part of what we call cultural learning consists precisely of mastering the normative narrations by means of which a culture is held together" (Bruner, 1992, p. 118).

What Bruner refers to as a culture in the broad sense may, after making all due transformations, be traced back to the "culture" of a specific institution.

Now, returning to the more properly psychoanalytical viewpoint, the narrative "category" has always been an integral element in its methodology.

As Corrao, for example, observes: "In the general acceptation of the term, Narrative comprises all discursive productions (both oral and written), whether dialogic, monologic or polylogic, which order and explain the sense of the events affecting a subject and his world, or many subjects and their world.

In order to legitimate these assertions from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, it is necessary to make certain combinations.

Referring to Freud once more (1899b), it is easy to ascribe to the Interpretation of dreams the quality and characteristics of a great narrative text which indefinitely updates itself by means of its multiple construction simultaneously with the unfolding of its structural rules and the unveiling of the procedures of its method. While it would appear even more interesting to assign the status of purely narrative texts to the two most powerfully conjectural and inventive Freudian texts: Totem and taboo (1912-13) and The man Moses and the monotheistic religion (1934-38).

Today Totem and taboo is proposed as the fictional (fantastic) construction of a great anthropological myth, that is to say, of an original stratified story, strangely coherent with the productions of the collective imaginary, observable when it is possible to set in motion the "spontaneous thought" of a small analysis group (Corrao, 1987, p. 180). Turning now to the theme of the function of narration according to another approach, contemporary psychoanalytical reflection has attributed to the capacity of ordering in a narration the sum-total of our own experiences and the constituent interactions of our history, a primary element in the construction of the feeling of self and of personal identity.

In this connection the position assumed by Stern is significant: "When we speak of the narration of Self of an adult, we take at least two things for granted: that a whole range of past and present direct experiences exist that the person can combine into a coherent narration, and that something exists like a narrative form, a way of thinking an experience and speaking of it to another person. Narrations are reports of things that have happened. Generally (but not always) they involve acting subjects who present emotional states, motivations and objectives, who carry out actions aimed at a specific goal and that in their turn imply particular consequences. Normally these narrations unwind in causal and temporal sequences and are ordered according to particular perspectives.

In adults we take for granted the existence of a narrative form; whereas in an evolutive perspective, it is not possible to do this." (Stern, 1998, p. 313).

And further:

"Children appear capable of producing narrations that include acting subjects, intentions, objectives, consequences and sequences possessing a beginning, a central development and an end, from about three or four years of age onwards. Most theories on this subject suggest that narrative capacity - narrative form - may in fact be an emerging property of the mind, like language itself. It may be a universal characteristic of the organisation of human experience and as such may powerfully influence the way in which human beings perceive and understand the experience of Self once they have acquired the capacity of thinking in a narrative way." (Stern, 1998, p. 320).

Similarly to what happens for an individual, a group's capacity of ordering in narrative sequences the memory of what happens inside itself is a central moment in the acquisition of awareness that has occurred in its components.

In this sense the narration that the participants in the experiential group build and share, and which as we will soon see includes dreams, becomes an all-important element in the process of "learning from experience" that the group carries out.

Accordingly, as for the individual, organising one's own story in a narration is a decisive element of one's own identity, understood in this context as a collective identity consisting of common elements.

In the discovery and sharing of the awareness of the existence of this identity, we are helped by another narrative modality which accompanies the interactions carried out in the group.

This modality may belong to any participant and, like the intermediate object, serves the function of connecting direct experiences, emotions, fantasies and processes of thought contributing to create the "common group space". We refer to what Claudio Neri called "effective narration".

"Certain members of the group - he writes - are capable of reporting for example a dream or an episode of their life in such a way that the other members are led almost spontaneously to associate their fantasies, dreams and thoughts. In other words, the whole group makes use of the effective story for its collective work." (Neri, 1995, p. 154). And he goes on: "The possibility for the effective story to be translated into field elements is based on the capacity of the speaker to identify himself with the story and accordingly to communicate with extraordinary intensity of words, in an authentic and animated way, his own emotions and his own thoughts." (Neri, 1995, p.155).

Within this frame that we have attempted to describe, dreaming takes its place as a fundamental moment in the creation of a common space, in the discovery that this shared area has been created and as from now acts on the mental processes of the participants in the group, quite apart from the awareness that they still have of this.

Little by little dreams begin to appear in the communications taking place in the course of the sessions.

Nothing like dreams puts us concretely face to face with the existence of psychic processes moving in a completely autonomous way compared to our conscious will. It was no chance that Freud called dreams the "king's highway" for the unconscious: not only do their contents speak to us of the unconscious part of the mind in a more direct way than other processes, but their very uncontrollability confirms to us the existence in us of processes which move autonomously and mould the course of our thoughts in accordance with their inclinations.

Dream, like fantasy, is that dimension of psychic life in which it is more unlikely for external conditionings and constraints to appear, however all the same we should

witness the sight that the unconscious has conjured up for us, as if we were to observe a show conceived and carried out by other people.

No-one can dream what he wants to dream, even in a group.

In the experiential group too, as for the individual, the appearance of dreams constitutes an element of rupture, it is the most direct expression of the existence of unconscious mental processes in common which begin to appear by means of the oneiric activity of some member of it.

On the basis of the material gathered in the final reports we may observe an extremely significant fact: dreams begin to emerge and to be narrated, at a precise juncture in the history of the group, which often chooses to use them in order to reverse a situation of anxiety or of emotional stall.

The hypothesis on which we could start out is that the dream acts as a facilitating element insofar as it gifts a "narrative style" to the group.

The apparatus for being able to think thoughts would seem to need not only a container, but also a stylistic form of group binary sort on which to make everyone's thoughts and emotions travel.

This is represented very clearly in a sequence drawn from one final report:

"This emotional mixing up [reference is made to certain emotional aspects which emerged in the course of a meeting] took shape also by means of a series of dreams, one of which was presented as a written product, almost an attempt to propose a sort of common anchoring, a group culture, with the twofold function of having a working instrument for thinking, almost alternative to the texts proposed, and of sinking a common memory on which to depend."

Finally the group managed to find its own style of communication, by means not only of a self-representation, but also thanks to the possibility of ensuring the emergence of a characteristic common to all participants: that of telling one's experiences.

The dream has its own narrative style and, by utilising a more specific definition, may take its place in a literary genre.

The dream described by a girl student presents us with the following scenario: "I found myself in a group, a group of children, it might have been a school, but not exactly.

There was a lady, rather elderly, who was explaining something, I don't know, and I was absentmindedly walking up and down. First paying attention to what the teacher was saying, then wandering aside (there was a little alcove to one side of the room with - important detail - a large window open high up), from there I could see the others and I was not concerned about my behaviour. I was restless, agitated, eager to act. In this corner there was one of those containers of posters which also held postcards of my town, A; but it was a town I did not know which exerted a great fascination over me. There were close-up views of squares, houses seen from unusual angles, details of buildings with bricks visible in the foreground of a dark colour, but at the same time luminous; however the impression it gave was of light everywhere: I

was absorbed with these images, so that I can still remember some of them quite clearly, I remember that I was fascinated, almost spellbound.

The class was very noisy (or numerous), I would come back to them, in actual fact not with any great interest, since they were dealing with questions that I knew about already even if they were very strange. For me it was all so irrelevant compared with what I had felt gazing at those images. More and more people called out to me, demanding my attention: I was distracted."

To connect up the dream to the experience lived in the group, above all from the narrative point of view, we may say that the leader had proposed a text which undoubtedly acted as a stimulus to oneiric production - a sort of common left-over to the day. The invisible cities of Italo Calvino.

Immediately following the dream the group came out of situation of stall, producing a good quantity of associations and above all it succeeded in reading the narrative text proposed (that until that juncture no-one had managed to do). Many groups at the outset have difficulty in reading the text proposed by the leader, and this quite obviously has little or nothing to do with the subject, but rather with the narrative style which sets the experience in motion.

The group feels it has to trace out its own style of communications and often, after such meaningful dreams, the narrative text is resumed because now it is possible to face up to it and thanks to it traces of experiences in common are reorganised. In this way the dream acquires shared meaning and determines the sense of the events occurring in the group itself.

And it is precisely from an acquisition of sense that the conditions arise for the constitution of the experience as a qualified and not a confused modality of relating up to what happens in the group, this being the primary objective of everyone taking part in this particular training activity.

Experience is a process of elaboration, and of "narration", which tends to lead events back to an order of meanings, of events oriented according to motivations of various kinds and at various levels and to which all the participants, students, leaders and supervisors may accede with degrees of awareness that alternate and are modified as time goes on.

We would like to conclude by proposing the hypothesis that the appearance of dreams indicates a central moment in the evolution of an experiential group, a particularly live and pregnant occasion to enter into contact with the dynamics under way within it and that the inclusion in the final reports of the content of dreams has the function of promoting the elaboration of narrations which foster the very constitution of the experience as a situation endowed with sense.

The dream, in the various modalities in which it takes its place in the history of the group, is one of the most direct manifestations of the transpersonal processes which have been set in motion with its constitution.

Accordingly the final reports constitute progressively a network of paths in which the oneiric scenes reported - sometimes renarrated by several persons in different reports

- represent nodes in which the complexity of the individual experiences arrives at a shared unity and meaning.

Albeit within the limits that the institutional context lays down, in terms of time, an experience built in this way stimulates many of our students to a further exploration of that fascinating subject - group psychology.

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