

## **Dream in group experience**

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### **Abstract**

The group is a dream that cannot be explained, an experience influenced by institutional biases, that can however find reassurance in the conductor's figure. Is dream a system of self representation for groups and persons capable of producing deep emotional meanings, unconscious language and expression for communicating primitive mechanisms?

**Key-words:** dreams, conductor, group, primitive mechanisms

"Heaven, if this is dream, suspend my memory.

how can so many things happen in a dream?"

*Calderon de la Barca*

When a person starts to bring a dream in a group, both person and group change. This means that group and person are ready to communicate and share the dream experience.

Reporting a dream establishes an associative chain which will constitute the group's story. Dream becomes a group tool that gives worth and a route to the group. The American writer Paul Sanberg (1) writes that nothing happens if it is not dreamed beforehand.

In "Vida es sueño" (2), Sigismondo says: "Heaven, if this is dream, suspend my memory; how can so many things happen in a dream?"

And Bion: "each man must be able to dream an experience while it happens, both in sleeping and in waking" (3). The classical division between daily and nightly thinking in the sense of considering dreams as a structural aspect of the unconscious is overcome by Bion, who considers dreaming "an integral part of waking thinking... a bridge for exercising conscious thinking." "A particular basic form of the symbolic function.. a first evolutionary stage of symbolic thinking" (4).

Starting from the perception of emotional experiences, dream is an effort to generate new meanings. In fact, in order to be dreamed these experiences "must acquire the characteristics of thought", must be transformed into alpha functions. Dream thoughts and conscious thoughts differ in terms of quality and quantity of transformational abilities enacted by this very function.

"The act of dreaming creates the unconscious and thus consciousness" in a continuous exchange.

The act of dreaming in a group and relating a dream represent then the ability to perceive an experience, to be able to dream it while experiencing it and then turn it into thought.

This seems to me to be the function of dreams in a group.

If the transformation of emotional experience into cognitive experience takes place along the transformation line, it is possible to activate in the group an imaginative participation, the amplification of experience and the construction of sense and meaning.

Dreams in general have been considered as a product of the internal world and not as a relational product. We should think of it not only as the expression of affective and emotional internal experience, but also as the expression of the quality of the environment and the relation among members of the group. In experiential groups dreams are the expression of how a person represents the group to himself in that moment or how he represented it before making that experience, how he changes or/and maintains this representation.

The world of representations is a stable world with precise rules on the one side and rooted in "non experience" and multifaceted impression on the other (Sandler) (5).

It is interesting to consider with Zavattini and Norsa "the return of interest for the unconscious functioning of the mind as a peculiar 'dream function' related on one side to the Kleinian concept of 'unconscious fantasy' and on the other to the representational world made up of memories, feelings, emotions of the past and of the present" (6). Dreams are then "an expression of the unconscious in a dynamic sense" (6) a place of subjective and group experience. In the group and in group dreams, a person experience the mental simulation of himself and his relations in a position of autonomy from external reality.

Experiential groups allow their participants to experience a copy of the representation they hold of the relations constituting that of their internal group, to reorganise their scenarios, to review their ideal expectations on how they thought or created within themselves the group with reference to omnipotence and idealisation.

When motor actions directed to the external world are suppressed and the person is making a group experience with other persons, experience is related to the sum of each person's internal schemes used to reorganise data and rules on which the new experience is based.

This reorganisation based on internal schemes will regulate ideal expectations on how a group should be, on the healing ability of relations in higher attention paid to taking care of others.

Dreams in a group represent the need to create an internal reference to which all members can relate to entrust parts of themselves simply experienced or to evacuate or experiment or transform.

Dream is a form of communication with a high representational meaning which channels and connects individual, group and therapeutic or experience issues. It is a

valuable indicator of connections between internal individual worlds that the group can experience as a collective psychic production.

If we take the Bionian purview, we must consider experiential groups as "mental state" (3) in which two categories of thought are active at the same time, the emotional one related to basic assumptions and the cognitive one related to the performance of intellectual tasks, we must consider groups at a time as sociological entities and as primitive emotional entities.

Claudio Neri (7) in identifying the principles directing experiential groups' practice stresses the importance of "work in progress, the interaction of practice and theory, the oscillation between knowledge and participation, the centrality of the concept of transformation and the privilege of collective."

Dreams are objects of cathexis, experiences of the Ego, of the You, of the collective. They are a story common to all, a beginning and an end, a collective memory, a group thought, a place, a stage where all experiences are represented.

To be in a group, then, can be represented by Alessia's dream. "I was on an islet where I saw a flock of seagulls. Other seagulls were on nearby islets. I too was a seagull. There is great disorder and the seagull cries bothered and confused me, a confusion and substitution of seagulls. I knew only four or five seagulls. But I felt that the islet was stable; I could find limits and boundaries from here. So the seagull cry did not bother me any longer." This dream shows experiences of isolation, confusion, loss of boundaries. An unpleasant language (to talk of oneself in a group is not always easy) can be turned into pleasurable sensations, if one feels in a stable place, with safe boundaries, within a collectivity which is no longer felt as dangerous and confusing. People coming and going give the idea of a fragmented and too large group. On the one side, the need to be few in order to be able to internalise the group, on the other to talk about oneself, can be felt as taking a much larger space than other members.

So Giulia sees "a very clear blue circle. Inside and outside the same bright colour, like the sky. Giulia looks at the circle from above. She sees it inclined, but she feels she is inside it. She sees five persons talking. Within the space is a bit empty." This dream, made at the beginning of an experiential group, is followed by another dream in which Giulia "sees the whole group and recognises faces. The group is sitting in a circle in a field between a building and a wall. On the ground they laid some blankets." After hearing the dream, the group's position changes. There is a movement to sit closer to one another, but some say they are afraid of doing it. At the end the group will be sitting in a circle.

"In Indian symbolism a circle is the symbol of the self" (8) in fact it expresses "the whole psyche in all its aspects". Brahma and Buddha turn their eyes around. The circle is made of a single line, which contains all points and these are all at the same distance from the centre. Distance, belonging, similitude, familiarity, these are characteristics with the quality of being lasting or provisional and are related to time. Dreams in the group contain them all, as the human psyche contains residual memory

traces of the phylogenetic states of development. By dreaming man responds to them and to his symbolic forms, residue of a collective unconscious with an instinctual unconscious content. If we think of the circle as a geometric figure, with a circumference delimiting space, and if we think of the group in its circular disposition, we cannot but reflect on the inside which was thus built. In the circular position group members can imagine and feel that they are closer and, borrowing Winnicott's phrase, the listen to each other with their eyes.

If we think of the members moving along the circumference line, all at the same time and in the same way, we can ideally think that all of them reach the centre. The centre represents the group's soul, the meeting point of each member's unconscious.

Kohut (9) says that "it is necessary to exist in order to be able to dream", today we could say that "it is necessary to be able to dream in order to be able to know" and when a dream comes we can say that an aggregate has become or is becoming a group which is beginning to know itself.

Some aspects related to the institutional context and to the binomial normality-pathology are present in Marina's dream.

"The group, looking the same as it did when it met once a week at the university, was now in a psychiatric hospital ward. Each of us had to explain a dream displayed on a screen. Marina tried to read the images but could not make them out. Neither could the others explain the dream in front a jury, sitting impassible in front of them. Only one member of the jury, who seemed nasty but in the end was discovered good, could explain the dream."

Marina related the dream to the group. Later work shows the superego aspects of institutions, the distance from professors, interference with the Chair of Group Dynamic and the fear to be considered crazy, as if the boundary between mental health and illness were too thin. The jury in the dream represents the examination and evaluation of work presented.

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Carla dreams of Fathers' Day "there were yellow candles. A girl in the group had lit them, but Carla told her not to do it but to put them on the cake for Fathers' Day". The dream is an opportunity to relive with the group her father's death, when a friend had had to tell her. In another dream Francesca says "my father had died. Near me there was Rambo telling me not to worry. I was in a classroom at the university. I am sitting in a top row and I don't know how I will get down. I make little jumps to get down."

Carla could no longer think of her painful experience because she felt that suffering was overwhelming her. She always played the strong person. Now, feeling accepted by the group, she can get nearer to it with more courage. Feeling less lonely, Francesca knows in her dream that she can get to the group, even if she is at the university, because she can express painful contents that shall be accepted.

Eugenio Gaburri (10) indicates in future research paths for psychoanalysis the space for "circumscribing and identifying areas still empty and enigmatic, unexplored (what one knows not to know)... stimulating elaboration and transformation of patterns."

Does the experiential group conducted by psychoanalytically trained persons represent an "empty, enigmatic, unexplored space"? It is hard to answer this question as concerns the binomials familiarity-extraneousness, normal-pathological, real-unreal. It is hard to answer especially as concerns the value of dreams.

Persons extraneous to each other with elements of familiarity in the choice of studies, in the occasional nearness of certain experience, how do they experience this group experience?

The experiential group made up of persons who are not requesting psychological help (in the contract it is clearly stated that it is not a therapeutic group), but at times show great need for help, seems to move in an area oscillating between reality and unreality, normality and pathology, as a transitional group between a shared experience and experience of an unsaturated kind.

We could say with Kaës (11) that the setting of an experiential group is in a connection and mutual relation with the institutional setting, with the therapists' internal setting and that each member in his own way participates to the maintenance and mutuality of settings in their antagonist and complement relations (administrative institutional setting and experiential setting).

The group, as an intermediate psychic formation, Kaës says (11), is what binds persons in an institution, in a dream-like realisation, through shared symptoms, phantasms and institutional contexts.

The experiential group is a group in groups, in the larger group made up by the School of Psychology, the Chair of Group Dynamics, the supervision group and other supervision groups, and the students' group and other experiential groups. Like Chinese boxes or matrioskas where a box or a doll contains another but is in turn contained in an exchange of nature and relations. An experience is made between reality and unreality, where birth or the presentation of an object are compulsively experience by fantasising a non end.

The experience of experiential groups concerns the sense of ourselves and the difference from other groups, mutuality, the use of relations and its possible constant negative relation, the affective mutual monitoring.

Should then the experiential group support and acknowledge narcissistic cathexes, contain primitive anxieties, maintain identification references in the protection against solitude and unknown?

In the group's formation are the need for safety, unconscious alliances, shared knowledge and common ideals present?

Is dream a system of self representation for groups and persons capable of producing deep emotional meanings, unconscious language and expression for communicating primitive mechanisms? These questions are left open in an unsaturated dimension to be searched and discussed from theoretical and experiential points of view.

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