

Rejecting the foreigner as an institutional symptom and a specific defence modality within groups: A paradigmatic case

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Abstract

The paper presents what happened in Padua, after 14 years of peaceful cohabitation apparently without any conflicts in the same school building, between an elementary school and a CTP for adult education and development of literacy among foreigners. Such a paradigmatic event prompts us to discuss the concept of ethnic level of group mind functioning and illustrate how sometimes inter-ethnic conflict is a defensive modality in human group functioning, especially when an adequate institutional function is missing. Lastly, the adopted non-elaborative solution is discussed and possible analogies are made with what reported in recent contributions based on sophisticated mathematical models that take into consideration the existence of poorly defined boundaries between groups who live near but are separated by culture and ethnicity as data able to predict the onset of conflict between the groups themselves.

Key words: group dynamics, boundaries, inter-ethnic conflict, inner groupality, defence mechanisms

Introduction

In Padua, a medium-size town in the Veneto region of North-east Italy, an episode of racial intolerance has recently occurred in a state school. Intense emotions, totally devoid of foundation and disproportionate to the real situation, and a complex web of fears and fantasies never fully expressed, pivoting on the danger of paedophilia and drug pushing, have characterised the episode. The alarm was seemingly justified by the coexistence in the same building of an Elementary school and a *Centro Territoriale Permanente* (CTP; a special centre for continuous adult education) attended mainly by foreign immigrants.

The aim of the present work is to reflect on such an episode, which we consider paradigmatic in many ways, and which epitomizes on a smaller scale an example of the social syndromes described by Di Chiara (1999). Besides, it allows to rethink in the light of Vanni's (1984) group mental model the relation between what can be observed in

small interactive groups and what happens in large ethnic, political or religious groups, understood in the sense that Vamik Volkan (1999; 2003) attributes to this term.

Di Chiara (1999, p. 3) writes “I define as psychosocial syndromes those collective behaviours that generate immediate or future discomfort, which can be either highlighted or reasonably predicted, without those behaviours ceasing to occur, even if insurmountable reasons do not actually exist. They correspond to strong anguish shared by the community and whose real origins are unconscious”.

The case

A single spark will cause a fire if there is enough combustible material.

The setting

The setting is a region and a city vibrating with strong socioeconomic tensions and feeling deep, mainly cultural discomfort, which has been ridden in the last few years by political forces that have managed to convey it in a projective and sometimes persecutory direction. For the last fourteen years, a state elementary school and a *Centro Territoriale Permanente* (CTP) have used different areas of the same building in the centre of Padua, sharing the same entrance and a well equipped computer room.

The elementary school takes children from the estate and many of them have immigrant parents who attend the CTP. The school is unusual, as it has put inter-culturality at the core of its POF (Italian acronym for Plan of Educational Offer) and for a long time has accepted Rom children - in relation to projects run by the Local government and by non-profit Organisations - and arranged for a number of in-depth intercultural initiatives in collaboration with the CTP.

The CTP organises Italian courses for foreigners, mainly women with children, youths, and people just arrived in Italy and still looking for a job. There is also a middle school section for people, both Italians and foreigners, who have not completed compulsory schooling. Several other projects are implemented for foreign minors without a family, often qualified as political refugees, and adolescents who have immigrated with their families and are going to attend high school in Italy. Italian adults also go to the CTP to attend courses of English and Computer science. This ‘co-existence’ of children and adults in the same building has continued for fourteen years without any problems at all and with the only schedule differentiation of the starting and finishing times for the different activities.

The spark

At the beginning of March 2008 a seventeen-year old Bengalese boy who attends the CTP takes a picture of the school to send it to his parents far away. In the centre of the photo there is an Italian child attending the first year at the elementary school. The other children, unaware of the privacy law, on a par with the Bengalese student who has

arrived in Italy a few days before, eagerly ask to be photographed too. All the noise attracts the attention of a school operator who intervenes and tells the student off. However, things do not stop at that.

The fire

Perceiving an element of danger in what has happened the Management immediately activates an educational activity, run by the CTP teachers, on the use of the cell phone and on the privacy law, which forbids anyone from photographing minors without the explicit consent of their parents. Instructions are also issued for teachers to accompany adults to the entrance and to the exit of the school. The event resonates in and out of the school in the conversations of operators, pupils, teachers and parents.

Two days later, seemingly without other contacts with the teachers, the class representatives of the first elementary grades send a communication to the Local Bodies and Institutions in the following order: *Prefettura di Padova, Comando Provinciale dei Carabinieri, Questura di Padova* (these three are all police bodies), *Comune di Padova [Town Hall], Assessore alle Politiche Scolastiche [Education Councillor], Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione Uff. Scolastico [Ministry for Education, School Section], Dirigente Scolastico dell'Istituto Comprensivo [Head of the Comprehensive School]* and, last of the list, *The teachers of the elementary school.*

In the letter, the parents *state* that their children “have reported ... the presence of adults that were taking pictures of them in the school corridors and also in the school garden during the break.” *They underline* that “... within the school there is a CTP, *Centro Territoriale Permanente* for adult education (non-EU members, Rom, etc.), with the entrance and some other spaces shared by the children.” *They point out* that the CTP schedule of activities coincides with the school timetable and that “such activities allow a continuous hard-to-control moving about of adults who are alien to the school. *They request* the immediate suspension of the CTP activities during school hours in order to guarantee the children’s safeguard and safety.” *They also request* the prompt activation of any possible initiative aiming to safeguard the children’s privacy and to prevent any form of crime...” The School Council is convened, school and inter-class meetings are called, which, however, do not apparently help to make things clear and calm things down. On the contrary they underline the existence of tensions, ambivalences, conflictuality and divisions among the school operators themselves. Almost immediately the local media are involved as an instrument to put the school under pressure. Very quickly, however, they take the case over and put emphasis on it, so much so that it attracts the attention of the national newspapers and television networks. Journalists with recorders, cameras, and video cameras station in front of the school. On the newspapers appear titles like “Foreigners bother children”, “At school another anti-immigrant wall” (making reference to a previous local administration

decision, taken in a totally different situation), “School: a wall to separate children from adults”.

The various institutional bodies involved in the event do not produce a coordinated reaction and the police repeatedly go inside the school, sometimes with anti-drug dogs, and thus increase the impression of a really serious danger.

A few days later - following the exchange of some ambiguous and contradictory messages but without really going in depth into the true nature of the fears underlying the protest and without drugs or paedophilia being openly mentioned - the parent representatives' idea that the source of the danger resides in the CTP is accepted, apparently without criticism, and the likelihood of putting up a wall inside the building to fully isolate the CTP from the elementary school is considered. Such hypothesis is supported by the Town Hall, but openly opposed by some of the teachers. On the outside, a strong wire fence will separate the main entrance, that of the school, from the secondary entrance, that of the CTP. Thus, the two institutions will be completely separate and with no further space in common. Building a wall, however, is explicitly forbidden by the fire brigade, perhaps the only body able to express an unequivocal and definite position in the circumstances.

So, the compromise solution consists in building a strong wire fence to separate the entrances, at the same time giving up the common spaces shared so far (computer room). An intangible boundary, insurmountable for adults and children alike, guarded by the school non-teaching staff is thus created inside the building. The only, albeit partial, exception is the refreshments area, where the coffee machine and the food dispenser are placed. Although positioned in the CTP side of the building as it is intended for the CTP teachers and users, it is also used - with some discomfort and circumspection - by the elementary school teachers, who avoid as much as possible meeting the colleagues from the other side because it causes embarrassment.

Although some parents declare that they are not satisfied with the adopted solution, the case gradually peters out and is practically forgotten.

On the surface of it, then, it seems that the effective solution has been adopted. However, it seems worth wondering what has really worked and how.

The antecedents

To better understand what has happened, some ‘collateral’ information is necessary. It is useful to learn that from the beginning of that school year the elementary school was more crowded than usual because it had to temporarily house two fifth-year classes from a school that was being renovated. That required the reorganised use of some spaces: access to the computer room was reduced; classrooms habitually used as laboratories were used for typical school activities; and the canteen opening hours were extended. All that caused the CTP students to pass through the hall at one p.m. while the students of the fifth-year elementary school were still queuing up to get into the canteen. That

created some sort of mixing between adult/foreign users and children, which had thus far been efficiently avoided. The overcrowding situation was over one and a half months after the 'definition' of the boundary and that may have strongly contributed to calm down the conflict situation.

The 'evacuees', that is the pupils coming from the school being renovated, their teachers and their parents generated an unstable and tense condition because they were 'new and alien' to the culture of the main group. That was because they were not used to attending a school where for a long time different cultures and generations had lived together in close contact, and also because they were unknown to the 'historical' group of teachers and pupils of the hosting school (too many new faces around the school). The latter, that is the pupils, parents and teachers of the historical group, were made to welcome and integrate an unusual number of new members, whereas in previous school years the integration process involved almost exclusively the pupils and the parents of the first classes. During the 2007-2008 winter and the following spring, from a group perspective, there were no longer only two groups inside the same building, but three different ones: CTP, 'historical' and 'evacuees', the latter fairly muddled between themselves, sharing corridors, classrooms, the canteen, and teachers' spaces.

The psychosocial syndrome: ethnic and institutional dimension

What happened in a limited period of time, but in a way that has created high tension and sparked off conflictuality and agitation, prompts us to make some reflections, also starting from a thought model (Vanni, 1984) which allows a reading of what has happened in relations to the different actors in the light of a specific and constituent functioning of the human mind.

According to Vanni (1984) the human ability to 'produce groups' would depend on at least "*three mental areas*" devoted to the elaboration of ethnic, institutional and interactive elements of the mind, defined as *ethnic level*, *institutional level*, and *interactive level*. The interweaving of such dimensions is an essential constituent component of individual identity and Self-feeling. The three areas together make up the "*inner group apparatus*". It underlies humans' ability to form groups, to become members of them and to leave them, to separate from them, to live in them, producing a shared common psychic activity. The 'interactive level' relates to the *hic et nunc* (*here and now*) and to the conscious or unconscious instantaneous communications between group members, to which it gives sense and comprehensibility. The second and the third, instead, relate to the *alibi et tunc* (*elsewhere and then*), the conscious and, especially, the unconscious repositories of fantasies, codes, models connected with the institutions and the *éthnos* (*ethnic group*) one belongs to and on which the likelihood of a significant and appropriate interaction is based. In particular, the 'institutional level' concerns the codes of the different institutions, both internal and external, to which everybody inevitably makes reference (Pauletta d'Anna, 1990), for instance professional memberships and

ideological choices. The 'ethnic level', on the contrary, regards the ethnic elements of identity and of affectivity management, learnt and interiorised through the way one has been brought up, typical of the cultural background one has grown in (Erickson, 1963). The ethnic level, then, concerns communication models between and among individuals, but also the repositories of images, sounds, tastes, smells and experiences made especially in childhood and strongly laden with affectivity. The three areas, which are continually active, relate dynamically to one another and their activity gives meaning both to inter-individual and intra-individual communications and to the different cognitive and/or affective mnemonic elements deposited as stratifications on the three levels. Thus, each action and all contents of the inner world and of individuals' relationships can have a different meaning in the different levels where it is present at the same time, according to the well known principle of overdetermination. The functioning of the three areas is mainly unconscious and/or pre-conscious and, in normal conditions, individuals can only occasionally become aware of it. However, in social and group situations the process becomes particularly relevant and visible. More on the surface, such an activity emerges in the modulation of verbal and non-verbal, intentional and non-intentional, conscious and unconscious communications between individuals in reciprocal interactions. From a superficial level of observation the impression is that that activity affects the perceived appropriateness of the different behaviours and attitudes held in each situation¹. At a deeper level, as already said, it contributes to dynamically form a Self-feeling, which in the small-group interaction finds confirmation and support as well as fertile ground to develop. However, as the consequence of deep defensive needs, it can sometimes trigger important regressive phenomena, in which the ethnic elements end up prevailing over the institutional ones.

In the event occurred in Padua - when a situation of discomfort broke out in which the group boundaries were perceived as endangered and more fragile - a regressive process seems to us to have been started in the 'school group', with the activation of defensive modalities intending to re-establish a more cohesive 'Us', also through the activation of a different and foreign 'Them'. In such a situation the elements typical of the *ethnic dimension* have taken on a more threatening meaning and led to expressions of racial hostility, clearly shown by those group members more inclined to it. In the case in point they were the parents of the first graders, who were still not fully part of the school's main culture and who therefore felt more anxious. Moreover, some group members, because of their psychological characteristics, may have lived the situation in a particularly anguished and disturbing way, thus activating division and projection mechanisms, which may have easily found echo and diffusion in the situation we have described.

Analogous phenomena can be observed in situations characterised by high tension or frustration in the smaller groups we deal more typically with: small therapeutic interactive groups, support groups, psychoeducational or training groups. Such

phenomena can be caused by events either external or internal to the dynamics of the group itself but in any case affecting its members, like serious illnesses, tough work problems, crucial family issues. In a previous work (Silvestri et al., 2007) a similar case was described which occurred in a *slow-open* group during a psychoanalytic session. Resorting to defensive modalities aiming to re-establish the sense of 'Us' through the evocation of an alien 'Them' coincided with a moment of difficulty for the group due to the turnover of some of its members. Several elements surely contributed to triggering the regressive process, but at least part of the tension, possibly the most important, originated from the feeling of threat to the group boundaries, the 'skin of the group', a guarantee for the needed intimacy. Living again through the anxiety-provoking moment of the nascent status, described by Neri (2003), triggered a temporary regression. In that case, regression was soon overcome without any need for the therapist to intervene, thanks to all the group members' voluntary and deeply conscious adhesion to the therapeutic project. Such attachment to the group's aim, institutive element and therefore typical of the institutional aspects of the group (Carli et al., 1988), supplied the necessary support to cope with the anxiety and the discomfort implicit in carrying out the assigned analytic task.

A second example of such dynamics can be offered by what happened within a support group for parents of drug addicts. One member of the group was looked upon by the rest of the group as the repository of hope. He was the father of a young man of about thirty who for some years had given up drugs and was considered by a few members, and despite the efforts of the therapist, "by now, free of addiction" and often pointed to as an example of how treatment could be effective. Unfortunately, one day, through tears, he reported of his son's relapse. All of a sudden the group was deprived of hope. Facing such a catastrophe and needing to painfully admit the almost always chronic nature of drug addiction, the group first tried to express mournful, sad and angry feelings and then, suddenly and without apparent logical connection, went on to nostalgically reminisce over foods prepared by mothers or grandmothers in their childhood and never tasted since. Almost inadvertently, the therapist herself was caught up in the atmosphere prevalent in the group and experienced strong feelings of warmth and nostalgia for 'the good old times' of their childhood, when everything seemed more simple, understandable and reassuring. The Other, the outside in this case, was not seen as a precise antagonist, but was rather perceived as a huge space, complex and dangerous, the source of evil, with irretrievably badly defined boundaries².

With all the necessary caution needed in applying data and interpretative hypotheses regarding small groups to much larger situations, nonetheless what is observed on a macro-social scale is consistent with what just described.

By analysing the spatial structure of populations involved in violent conflicts, Lim, Metzler, and Bar Yam (2007) have shown its analogy with what found in physics in the phenomena of the separation of states. By assuming that the outbreak of violence

depended on the boundaries between the two areas occupied by the two different ethnic groups and thanks to the use of very sophisticated mathematical instruments, they underlined that such an event could be accurately predicted and that it depended on the presence or absence of favouring or inhibiting circumstances. These Authors found two factors that determine the expression of interethnic violence: the extent to which the boundary is defined between the areas occupied by the different ethnic groups and the size of the groups involved. If the boundaries are not well defined and/or if the groups are large enough to allow a feeling of 'Us' opposed to 'Them', possibly perceived as threatening, violent manifestations are likely to occur. On the contrary, they are less likely when the boundaries are settled and well defined or when the mixing of the different ethnic cultures is such as to make it difficult for individuals to recognise themselves or be recognised as members of a clearly identifiable group. This model was developed on data collected during the Yugoslavian conflict and was then experimentally tested by applying it to some districts of India. It turned out to be highly predictive. The Authors underline that the spatial distribution of the ethnic groups is not enough to explain the onset of inter-ethnic violence, but that it is in any case highly predictive of the place where it will occur under the right conditions.

Perception or feeling of fragility or insufficient definition of boundaries of one's own group would then trigger a state of anxiety and alarm for the likely weakening of group identity. The need to re-introduce the group boundary would follow by marking the difference between 'Us' and 'Them', possibly even through the escalation of expressions ascribable to the *level of ethnic group*. If such dynamics cannot find adequate constraint in the *institutional dimension*, it can clearly evolve towards a *psychosocial syndrome* (Di Chiara, 1999), with the increasing intensification of division and projection till reaching a persecutory paranoid-like situation in which action is almost inevitable.

Very likely, this is what happened in our school, where tension and conflictuality between the teaching staff and the management hindered a possibly more efficacious institutional handling of the situation, which should have contained and elaborated the discomfort. It should also have reiterated the key value of 'reason and knowledge' underlying the educational project and offered adequate time and space to explore the real nature and extent of the fears expressed rather than by-passing them via mechanisms of division and expulsion. Mechanisms that are similar to those activated in the case of a 'scapegoat' described by Corbella (2003) for the small therapeutic groups, and by Friedman (2009; 2010) for social and ethnic conflicts and concretely realised through the building of a boundary as material as possible. Tension and conflictuality can be inferred from a variety of symptoms. Among them are: the intensity and rapidity of the management's and teachers' reaction to the event (in itself almost negligible of the photos taken by the student), which came earlier than the parent protests; the ambivalence and inconsistency of the response given to the protests and requests made

in an incongruous way by the parents' representatives; and, finally, the need to confirm one's own educational identity.

When the Institution cannot convincingly express values that can contribute to group cohesion, such values are eventually sought elsewhere.

To complete the picture, individual elements must also be considered which, especially if they are pathological and manipulative, can play an important role in institutions. In that connection, interesting contributions on the *narcissistic-reparative or malignant leader* have been made by Volkan (1979; 2009). In our case, a mother particularly stood out among the parent protest leaders. She was a licensed street vendor at the Padua open fruit and vegetable market and had a stall in one of the main squares of the city centre. Traditionally, such activity has been run by Paduan people and often handed down from generation to generation. However, in recent years many stalls have been bought, and are now run, by Bengalese or Singhalese immigrants causing a considerable change to the city's scenario, which has become less familiar to its traditional inhabitants. Although the issue was obviously external to the school, it was strongly felt on a personal level and might have had a non-secondary role in the case in point.

Final considerations

In the light of what said above, some considerations seem in order, especially as regards three aspects:

First of all, the ethnic conflict and, more in general, *any accentuation of the expression of ethnic elements*, expression that often anticipates and prepares conflict, *is a modality through which the group can organise its defence*, whether it is a small interactive group (Silvestri et al., 2007) or a large group on a macro-social scale, as already shown by a number of scholars (Volkan, 1999; 2003; 2005; Friedman, 2002; 2009; 2010).

Moreover, the complex interaction between the elements of internal or inner groupality and social life processes determines the degree of stability and the characteristics of the individual Self. Consequently, it determines also apprehension and insecurity, or, vice versa, satisfaction and peacefulness, thus directly affecting the needs and the defensive modalities of the group the individuals belong to. In particular, *in the mental areas of the group* (Vanni, 1984) *the dynamics between 'ethnic level' and 'institutional level' is decisive in modulating the expression of the elements typical of the ethnic group area and of the subsequent intensification or reduction of the connected feelings of belonging and identification*, the feeling of being one of 'Us' more or less opposed to being one of 'Them'. All the different contents processed at the two levels can indeed either be in conflict with each other or synergistically combine to take on different meanings and different affective valences. The already mentioned case of resorting to ethnic elements in order to defend a small therapeutic group (Silvestri et al., 2007) is also an example of such an interaction between ethnic and institutional levels. We are referring to the containment function made possible by adhesion to the therapeutic project, element

typical of the institutional level, which has allowed the group to realise a benign regression, useful to diminish anxiety, but not so rigid and deep to interfere too long with the analytic task of the group itself.

Lastly, *the defensive modalities of a group, if the necessary conditions exist, can sometimes bring about a real psychosocial syndrome*, possibly of the racial type, or in any case including racial elements. Therefore, at least at the beginning, *manifestations of racial intolerance are not a stable characteristic of individuals and/or of cultures, but rather the dynamic expression of a group process combined with the appropriate circumstances*. Nobody can think themselves totally shielded from such an occurrence.

¹ “For some time human interaction has been recognised as based on a set of communication instruments that can be complexly structured, verbal and non-verbal, biologically determined and typical of our species. However, the use of such elementary communication elements and their combination into more complex communication structures is modulated by the cultural codes learnt during the early phases of upbringing and socialisation which underlie the ethnic level. Among the many possible examples, one is made available to us by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975), a human ethology scholar, who has studied in depth the modalities of human interaction through the ethno-comparative method. The expressive pattern used in ‘friendly greetings from a distance’ is universal and stereotyped; in other words it is repeated in all the cultures investigated. It is a rapid lifting of the eyebrows accompanied by a smile, a small movement of the head backwards followed by a movement of the head forwards. This combination of movements is universally interpreted as a greeting, even if the appropriateness of such a greeting varies deeply according to the different cultures. For example, although the Japanese frequently and unconsciously use it with children they consider it inappropriate in adult interactions. On the contrary, the Samoans resort to it continually and consider its use appropriate also with strangers. In Central Europe, it is felt appropriate only in close friends’ interactions. Thus, Samoans could be perceived as ‘cheeky’ and inappropriately open and friendly with strangers both by Japanese and Europeans not familiar with them. However, the interaction between two European friends will remind the Japanese of a childish relationship, equally inappropriate between adults. The Samoans, on their part, will consider both the Japanese and the Europeans cold and hostile.” (Silvestri et al., 2007, p. 89).

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