

Supervision of institutional groups: myths and dreams

Cono Aldo Barnà, Antonino Brignone

Abstract

Just as the vertice of the dreamer is not the same as the one the dreamer finds himself in when he wakes up, and the vertice of the artist is not that of the interpreter of the work of art, in the same way the vertice of associations is not the same as the vertice of the psychoanalyst carrying out interpretations and the vertice of the creator of the myth is not the same as the one of the person who attempts to reformulate it, contributing to the transformations that occur in the course of institutional supervision. Viewed in this light, institutional myths become elements for the understanding of the basic functioning of the service. And if a non-rigid myth presents itself in the course of supervision, this helps professionals and the group to treat their patients. However, the discovery of a rigid myth can also sometimes give the supervisor an opportunity to make it interpretable, thereby offering it up to the understanding of the group, in an attempt to unblock it and commence the transformative processes.

Key words: process, group, supervision, myth, dream

Investigation of dreams and the study of myths lend themselves to being the underlying thread permitting exploration of the deepest roots of the story of humanity. Mancia (1987) observes how, from the dawn of civilization to the present day, dreams and myths have always been a part of belief systems and have contributed to the establishment of norms regulating the fantasy and real life of human beings in their relations with other humans and with the divine, and in the foundation of institutions.

As Kaës (1988) underlines, institutions then became the implicit background to our psychic life, the cultural element complementing the biological rock on which our psychic space rests, ensuring continuity of life and its biological, social, political, religious and cultural interconnections.

Myth and dream appear to Abraham to be founded on the fulfilment of desire; while the dream is the fulfilment of a desire stemming from childhood psychic life, the myth has the function of fulfilling the more ancient desires of peoples. Abraham also argues that, starting from the Myth of Prometheus, “the provident”, monotheistic peoples came a process of repression to subordinate themselves to God as the Creator. Man desires “providence” for himself and projects this desire into the heavens, where a residing father provides for all men. The cult of the Madonna also fulfils the fantasy of a mother who takes care of and is by the side of her child in the face of all adversity.

Kereny (1952) observes that while we can assume that the Myth of Oedipus refers to something that really took place in antiquity, all the other myths and stories about

gods and heroes appear true to us only if we consider them to be expressions of a human truth. Equipped with human qualities, mythological gods represent and relate those elements that humans were not yet capable of consciously observing in themselves. For this reason, he adopted the term “mythology” in order to better express the tie between myth and its narration, and how each narrative expression of a myth enables the narrator to modify it to some extent.

Adorno (1952) emphasizes how the introduction of the narrative function and the aesthetic dimension transformed mythology into epic or lyric art and resulted in the unconscious appearing alongside the conscious; from then on a poet chose a God as the subject of his work because he was unconsciously attached to that God. Through the chosen myth, the poet expressed his own internal scene.

Myths, like oneiric thoughts and dreams and everything that is expressed in narrative terms, were positioned by Bion (1962) on row C of his Grid. In his “Cogitations” (1987, p. 109), he considered dream to be a way of managing both to evade frustration and to modify it, as the dream contains and at the same time manifests painful tensions (p. 59).

We believe that myth, in the various contexts in which it is produced, can carry out a similar function and help to manage painful tensions, avoiding or modifying frustrations. This is what we will seek to argue in this paper, taking as our starting point the experience of supervising institutional groups.

Bion (1987, p. 65) regards the human mind as an “intestine” and the dream as a product of mental digestive processes. As with intestinal functions, digestion (the alpha-function) and the dream as its final product can achieve entirely different objectives.

According to Bion (1987, p. 61, p. 67), the alpha-function transforms sensorial-emotive material; it is a kind of metabolic function through which dream material can be compacted and stored – put in more modern but no more elegant terms, one might say it is “zipped” – and then come to make up the contents of what we call memory, which requires the availability of recallable material. In some cases, however, the alpha-function becomes blocked: the sensorial-emotive material does not undergo these transformative processes, but is projected in an identificatory way into a visual image whose task is to evacuate the emotion-event by means of a hallucinatory kind of mechanism.

In the positive version of the alpha-function, the amorphous mass of unlinked and undifferentiated sensorial-affective beta elements undergoes an initial stage of containing (container-contained) which is followed by a second transformative step enabling pre-communicable material to acquire a degree of integration (PS-D). With this second step the conscious and unconscious material undergoes transformation from a more fragmentary position (PS) to a more integrated position (D), thus making it more suitable for storage.

Finally, there is the narration of the dream, through which there emerges an attempt to add a common meaning or to bind one sense to another, introducing a logic or a certain degree of coherence between elements (Bion, 1987, p. 76).

If containing and integration are successful, the alpha-function completes transformation of the sensorial-emotive mass and the dream becomes capable of storing and communicating the mental experiences it contains. We might therefore express this process by the formula: beta[(container-contained) (PS-D)] alpha.

In the negative version, due to various kinds of disturbance in the containing function of the sensorial-emotive mass (container-contained), or due to blockage of the integrative function (PS-D), the transformation of beta-alpha elements by the alpha-function does not occur and the dream becomes a form of evacuation through the image (Bion, 1987, p. 70). In this case the visual images of the dream are adopted in order to control and eject non-desired emotional experience, since through the visual component of dreams the feeling can be excreted further away. The visual image of the dream is used as a target for projective identification and it is experienced as a hallucinated container (that is to say, produced artificially), the purpose of which is to lock up emotional experience that the personality is unable to contain without risking rupture. In this case the dream is the product of a failure of the alpha-function and becomes an attempt to perform, on a visual plane, an evacuation similar to that of visual hallucination, like through flatulence.

While the real dream is felt to be life-promoting, the dream as a container for projective identification is felt to be a construct lacking in quality. The use of the dream in an excretory fashion increases the sensation of being incapable of dreaming. Drawing on Bion's thinking, Gibello (1996) sees institutions – ranging from family institutions to more strictly social ones – as being full-blown thought containers with a transformative capacity; that is, they are capable of treating thought contents and to frame them into categories such as “banal or extraneous to the culture of the subject, conformist, revolutionary or unacceptable”. The function of institutions as thought containers is expressed through the production of myths, beliefs, legends, traditions, customs, educative practices, etc.

Kaes describes the presence of a mythopoeic function in all institutional groups, as one of the interpsychic and transpsychic group organizers that contribute to the formation of the link between the psyche of the individual subject and the group. This function tends to make the group the carrier of a myth which will have a role in the organization of the culture, ideology, experience and plans of the group itself. However, as Correale (1996) observes, given that institutional groups are not equipped for self-analysis, a large series of affective and fantasy experiences in the institutional field tend not to be contained and worked through, but remain, as it were, in a divided and non-integrated state. The failure to work through these “remains” will tend to lead to their being incorporated into rigid stories, which become so due to the division between content and affects. This pattern of institutional group functioning seems to us similar to what happens in the production of a myth.

Myth is a product of the intersubjectivity of the participants (Kaes), as it stems from a kind of meshing of the unconscious of different individuals, from the entwining of transference going on among individuals participating in a given situation. We might consider the Myth of a given institution as its most recurrent “dream”. (Barnà and Brignone, 1999).

According to Kaes, myth introduces a historical and diachronic dimension and allows the group to evolve, and – with the working through of the departure or arrival of members, of disappointment, bereavement and renunciation – it enables its development. Often the profound disorganizer of a group is the Oedipus, allowing individual desires and rivalries to re-emerge.

Myth, like dream, stems from the working through of emotions, which consists of the functions of containing–integration–transformation–narration. As a consequence, if the institutional thought container is able to use, in the production of a myth, these various stages of mental functioning, the myth will be capable to store experiences, retaining flexibility and the potential for transformation.

On the other hand, if the Myth serves the need to avoid frustrations, freezing painful emotions and unutterable group events, it is generated by the trans-subjectivity of the group (Kaes) and tends to be passed down in a highly unalterable and unshapeable way. In these cases, the Myth becomes a repository for emotions that have not been worked through, where the projective, hallucinatory and evacuative identifications described by Bion are deposited. The Myth may be determined by distant events which can no longer be recalled or for which there are no longer any witnesses. However, as it remains rigid and unaltered over time, it also forces new arrivals to adapt to it unknowingly.

The age of tyrants

A head physician, who had previously occupied a dynamic leadership role, “betrayed” the service by diverting his energies towards private and training interests, leaving the clinical and organizational management of the service in the hands of an assistant. This placed the assistant in a position of power, which he used to form a group of favourites and a group of enemies from which to choose a scapegoat. Aggression towards the scapegoat took the form of criticism of clinical decisions and refusal of requests for leave if these interfered with other people’s programmes.

This style of management led to a high number of resignations amongst the contract staff, but also among permanent medical staff members who were not part of the group in power. This high staff turnover was all part and parcel of this type of functioning, because the newly-arrived staff member was always the one most willing to cover the heaviest shifts. This way of functioning was incompatible with real thought functions and the weekly staff meeting was a chaotic, shapeless ritual that represented the malfunctioning of the group.

However, even after the head physician and his assistant left the service, there was a tendency to maintain the same atmosphere, almost as if to maintain a fixed memory of the original betrayal of the “father” and of the suffering that this had generated.

Myth in the supervision of institutional groups

In the paper we gave at the conference on “Group and Dream” (Barnà and Brignone), we sought to explore more fully the emergence of an image in the course of supervision, and how this image, whomever it may come from, can form a kind of “dream” of the institution. These images perform an iconic function and lead towards

deeper understanding of the clinical material under examination; on another level, they also allow understanding of the myth underlying the work of the group.

In this paper we focus more directly on the role of myth in institutional groups and in the supervision session, in an attempt to stimulate a forum for reflection.

Zizek (1997) observed how Freud integrated the Oedipal Myth with that of the “primordial father” of Totem and Taboo, which is its exact opposite. Unlike what emerges from the Oedipal Myth – from which one can deduce that it is the presence of the father, the Third, which impedes contact with the incestuous object, enabling the development of symbolization – in Totem and Taboo it is the killing of the primordial father, namely the realization of the Oedipal desire, which gives rise to the symbolic prohibition. The dead father prevents the incest through his return as The Father’s Name, which embodies law and prohibition. As symbolic authority and the prohibiting law appear to be based on a primordial criminal act (the father being venerated as a symbol of the law after his murder), followers of any institutional leader will continually have to deal with the presence of this dual level represented both by the leader in person in all his immediacy (the Oedipal father) and by the symbolic position he occupies (the murdered primordial father).

We may suggest the existence, in every institution, of a myth representing the working through of an area ranging from the father figure of the Oedipal Myth to the murdered primordial father from which the law/prohibition originates.

In the course of supervising an institutional group, foundation myths assume a central role (Barnà,). When going into a service as supervisors, we always get in contact with the Service Myth, and we have to ask ourselves what position we are going to occupy in relation to that myth (article forthcoming).

In the following examples, we consider two different supervisions. In the first it is possible to note a mechanism whereby the supervisor became caught up in the myth of the group. In the second, one can observe how the presence of a more flexible and constructive myth enabled professionals to reflect on themselves in a more profitable way during a period of change in the organization.

The myth of brothers in conflict after the killing of the father

The following supervision was undertaken by one of us in relation to a group of people working in a youth guidance centre. Notwithstanding the fact that they had requested supervision, at the first meeting they expressed a desire not to talk about cases but rather about the conflicts within the group.

The problems of the group seemed to revolve around their health and sexual education policies in schools. Indeed, intervention in the schools seemed to be a regulating function substituting the lack of institutional leadership in the group; the group seemed to be like a kind of kinship group, a group of brothers without a father. The leadership vacuum appeared to be filled by a couple consisting of a social worker and a psychologist, who tended to assume a super-ego function and to use the work in the schools to dominate and be tyrannical towards their co-workers.

The social worker, who performed the “myth-carrier” role (to use Kaes’ terminology) talked in terms of establishing an egalitarian group (Barnà) so that the work in the

schools could be carried out by any one of the professionals in an entirely interchangeable way, irrespective of different skills. The end result of this was to propose a rigid parity and an ideological interchangeability of roles.

This work in the schools had become unbearable for all the others, who no longer took any pleasure in the contact with the pupils, and the work thus seemed to be counterproductive.

At the end of the third of three sessions all marked by conflictual discussion, the professionals started talking almost by chance about a girl's abortion, as an example of the frustrations deriving from their work. The girl had not wanted to consider the possible alternatives that were proposed to her and had not even wanted to take time, after the abortion, to reflect on her experience. The abortion and the impossibility of stopping to think seemed to allude to the type of thought pattern that was unconsciously at play within the group itself. Dominated by a rigid and evacuative myth which recalls the conflict between the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, after the death of their father, not only was the group unable to give birth to new thought, but it was not even willing to take into consideration alternative, non-abortive solutions.

The supervisor became caught up in this configuration and was unable to disentangle himself.

The myth of the generative couple and group thought as excluded third party

This supervision took place with a group of social workers in a psychiatric day care centre, and arose from a request to reflect on the group dimension in rehabilitation work.

What emerged very clearly from the description of the centre's activities in the first session was the professionals' strong commitment at an individual worker-patient level. This had contributed to defining the "intervention philosophy" of the service.

In the second session, an observation was offered about the work of the painting studio, but in the following discussion professionals appeared not to be interested in what the patients expressed, nor in the communication patients had among themselves or with the professionals ; rather, the prevailing feeling was a sense of it being futile, accompanied by a formal assessment of the learning of a technique. However, the observation material seemed to be dominated by the theme of the "couple", revealing a couple-based pattern and signalling, almost visually, the presence of a basic assumption of coupling.

The third supervision session began with some difficulties: the group was silent and while one person reflected about a relationship with a patient in rehabilitation, the theme was rapidly superseded by comments from many other members about an imminent work reorganization. One of the group leaders then described the reorganization of their work that was underway, explaining that its purpose was to strengthen the individual dimension of the work.

The ensuing comments revealed dissatisfaction with the forthcoming changes, which would lead to working on Sundays and public holidays. There was anxiety about the group being broken up, and people were afraid of losing their closeness with habitual

colleagues. There was fear of a dispersion and remixing of subgroups who were used to working together, and fear of losing their own specificity and operative capacity, plunging into a kind of anomia. What emerged, in other words, was a contradiction between the strengthening of individual scope for action in relation to patients and a reduction of the individualization of the professionals, who became more interchangeable.

The supervisor went over the sequence of comments with the group as an example of their pattern of group thought. At the beginning, the emerging theme had been submerged by talk about the reorganization. This was an example of all those situations in which institutional tensions block or make it difficult to maintain emotional contact with the patient and with the work itself, creating the risk of transforming patients into receptacles of the professionals' anxieties.

The subsequent course of the discussion helped to grasp the emergence both of persecutory anxieties, connected with the arrival of the new, in the shape of reorganization, and of depressive anxieties, relating to the loss of something well-known. The professionals were thus able to grasp directly how their comments, besides expressing the individuality of the speaker, were also the expression of a group thought that was unravelling. By reflecting on themselves and their comments, the group entered into experiential contact with the group thought.

Recognition of group thought prepared the ground for the reappearance in the group of the theme that had been initially discarded. There was progress towards differentiating between “strong rehabilitative work” of the kind that was able to attract patients with its entertainment and socialization function, and “weak rehabilitative work”, which is not attractive in itself but is useful as a relational and therapeutic mediator.

Corrao points out how Freud assigned the Oedipal Myth a fundamental role in understanding the emotional and relational vicissitudes of mental development.

Bion (1970) suggests that all the elements of the Oedipal Myth should be considered significant, not only its fundamental structure. In fact, he observed (1970, p. 127) that the theory of the Oedipal complex, when connected to the myth of the lost paradise, the myth of the Tower of Babel and the awaiting of the Messiah, can continue to illuminate mental operations. An aversion to curiosity can be rediscovered in the attack on language which is present in the myth of the Tower of Babel (the confusion of languages), in Tiresias and his warnings to Oedipus, and in the Sphinx. Each of these versions of the Myth stresses a different facet, but together they point to a common pattern: an attack on the attempt to reach heaven is an attack on linking, on the language that makes cooperation possible (Neri).

But just as the vertice of the dreamer is not the same as the one the dreamer finds himself in when he wakes up, and the vertice of the artist is not that of the interpreter of the work of art, in the same way the vertice of associations is not the same as the vertice of the psychoanalyst carrying out interpretations and the vertice of the creator of the myth is not the same as the one of the person who attempts to reformulate it, contributing to the transformations that occur in the course of institutional supervision. Viewed in this light, institutional myths become elements for the

understanding of the basic functioning of the service. And if a non-rigid myth presents itself in the course of supervision, this helps professionals and the group to treat their patients. However, the discovery of a rigid myth can also sometimes give the supervisor an opportunity to make it interpretable, thereby offering it up to the understanding of the group, in an attempt to unblock it and commence the transformative processes.

Cono Aldo Barnà, Psychiatrist, psychoanalyst (SPI-IPA) Training function of the Italian Psychoanalytical Society and the International Psychoanalytic Association. Supervisor in several Mental Health Services.
E-Mail: cobarna@tin.it

Antonino Brignone, psychiatrist and supervisor at Mental Health Department, teacher of the Italian Psychoanalytical Society and the International Psychoanalytic Association.