

The pact on acceptable risk a psychodynamica model for road safety education with a group of adolescents

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Abstract

Drawing on a clinical situation that brings together a family affected by adolescence and two institutions, the author considers the interaction between families and institutions and, more precisely, the psychic material brought into play following the cooperation set going in networking.

Analysis of the clinical case makes it possible to consider whatever acts across both institutions as the psychodramatic staging of the family scene on the verge of symbolisation. The ideological rifts, the experiences of encroachment, the limits on the work and competence of each professional will be strongly mobilised. These effects, conflictual or not, are unlikely to be acknowledged in their counter-transferential form because, as they harm each party's professional narcissism, they very often give rise to ideological rigidification and the reification of the other's positions. The author suggests using as a methodological a priori the consideration of interactions between institutions as working tools for the transmission of the family, particularly during adolescence, when the issue of the limits of the law is brought into the foreground.

Key words: risk, adolescent, trauma

Thanks to the activities promoted by the Alfredo Rampi Centre, a non-profit organization (website: www.centrorampi.it), I have been able to experience at length the effectiveness of road safety action with thousands of children and adolescents and have developed a critical stance towards traditional road safety education methods. In the majority of cases this has proven to have little influence on adolescent behaviour and in some cases has even the opposite effect. I have, instead, reached the conclusion that a global approach to road safety education, which goes beyond the idea of specific material with inevitable correlated notions and links the topic to environmental education, learning the law and how to live with others, health education, in other words an education on life which is a transversal task of all teaching. The acquisition of a positive relationship with ones body, with the environment and with the rules of civil cohabitation, as is easily understandable, cannot be the task of a single subject, but must pervade all social, affective and cultural behaviour, which the adolescent lives both in and outside school. We cannot, furthermore, continue to delegate to schools the management of such an essential problem for civil cohabitation and for keeping the individual free from harm. There is a need to promote a road safety culture within a cultural framework shared by adults and make a coherent proposal to young people. I have defined this training framework as the "Pact for Acceptable Risk" (Biondo, 2006), which involves

reciprocal commitment from both the younger and older generations. The training “Pact” we are suggesting responds to a cultural choice which finds its principal foundation in the category of pluralism. Acquisition of a sense of the law is linked to the acceptance of limits and is the result of an educational journey built around a sense of codes and their regulatory function in relationships. To assume these functions, accepted by young people, it is necessary to engage in a profound dialogue and lengthy educational work. Only under such conditions can young people understand the sense of rules but above all accept and respect them and put a limit on their desires and impulses. The acquisition of a road safety code has perforce to be the point of arrival of that journey which, in my experience, can only be achieved by involving a group of adolescents and asking them to play a leading role in road accident prevention policies.

The group is the psychological subject to suffer most from a serious road accident involving one of its members – and remain traumatized by it. By exploring the self-made codes produced by a group of adolescents can enable the “road safety educators” to link their regulatory proposal to the experience lived by the group participating in the training course. Usually no attention is paid by road safety educators (bearers of the code) to the adolescent’s codes, which are relegated to a humiliating cultural subordination. Such a discrimination leads to a just protest by the adolescents and reflects the reason for their refusal to accept the adults code of conduct. If, as adults, we want adolescents to learn our road language, we have to accept to learn theirs. Road safety education should be a process simultaneously involving both adults and young people if it is to acquire authority and credibility and simultaneously adapt to the complexity of modern society. If we are to succeed in creating, socially, a representation of the street as a venue of community life (which it has been always) and overcome the narrow vision of the road only as a means of connecting one place to another, we need to involve, alongside the adolescents, all those adults who have institutional responsibility to supervise street life (local authorities, municipal police, etc.) as well as those who have a professional relationship with the road (bus drivers, taxi drivers, driving instructors, etc.). It is impossible, in fact, to separate road safety education for the young generations from territorial strategy which includes the realisation of safe pedestrian lanes, bicycle lanes, wider areas of pedestrian dominion, connected on one hand by public transport (trams, buses, railway and underground rail systems) for longer journeys within the cities and on the other with green areas, sports centres and play areas, places where young people gather and can be reached on foot. We need all this to create a safe, integrated circuit linking services easily, limit the need to use motor, mopeds, scooters and cars, slow down and limit the speed of cars and increase pedestrian or cycling mobility in the urban areas. With this global perspective in mind, the Alfredo Rampi Centre has developed the method of “Psycho-pedagogy in environmental risk” (Biondo and Di Iorio 1989, 2003, Biondo and Tini, 2003), which in over twenty years of activity has enabled teachers and approximately 170,000 school-age children and adolescents to

develop concrete projects to improve the safety conditions in the environment, integrate with the territory to which they belong and train their own self protective capabilities against urban risks.

The group as a protection

In the perspective of interaction, psychosocial risk is understood as a dynamic condition between lack and resources: particular life situations can have a determining impact on the “positive” evolution of high risk cases at, or develop towards more serious forms of unproductive maladaptation in cases for which risk conditions appear at the start to be particularly slight (National Centre for Documentation and Infantile and Adolescent Analysis, 1997).

In adolescence, one of the strongest forms of help available in the event of difficulty is that supplied by the peer group (Pombeni *et al*, 1990). As affirmed by Pietropolli Charmet, the peer group is a psychological subject with a powerful influence on individual decisions. As a consequence, continues Charmet, prevention of a tendency towards risk can be well-expressed in school because it contains already formed and closely-knit groups of adolescents. When these environmental resources are not available, as we have seen, the adolescent turns to “support environments” (Novelletto *et al.*, 2000) which represent a valuable opportunity for protection from risk and breakdown of the Self, inasmuch as they represent the only space available where the Self in difficulty will be understood by someone capable of decoding the inner state of emergency. However, in order to achieve this, adolescents must use behaviour models symptomatic of themselves (infringement of the road safety code, aggression towards their parents, vandalism, accidents, etc.). They have to enact a means of attracting adults’ attention. Such a consideration enables us to fathom the unconscious fantasies young people develop in relation to representatives of the law. Various cases have enabled me to observe that the figures of policemen and judges can assume a symbolic meaning of extreme importance for young people. These figures, in fact, can stimulate in young people the fantasy of recovering an indestructible, strong and authoritative father figure (Biondo, 1993) often absent in the background of problematic youths. Although the youth might appear to be contesting the disciplinary action of the policeman, at a more profound level, this action reassures him that when he is unable to control himself, external supervision intervenes to restrain and protect him from himself.

All this enables us to affirm that the adolescent can find in the environment – be it in the natural one, with his peer group, or the support group - see the secondary prevention experiences promoted by Paola Carbone within the Emergency Ward (Carbone, 1998, 2003, 2009, Carbone *et al.*, 1997) -, that which allows the adolescent to understand the significance of the accident experience thus becoming aware of his unconscious motivations. Reflecting on affective relationships which really count in life (those with parents and friends) can help the adolescent to understand the hurt his accident can inflict on them. On the other hand, it is thanks to these significant

relationships that a sense of limit and respect for his person can be acquired. In this psychological perspective the main protective factors are: selfconfidence, self esteem, respect for the group, awareness of being loved (Fonzi and Caparra, 1998). All this seems to be at the basis of each real “process of expertise” which produces in young people a positive evaluation of driving success, “pride” in prudent and competent driving (Di Cristofaro Longo, 2002).

A culture of road safety must help create the capacity to socio-culturally evaluate risk: young people need to be properly prepared in order to recognize risk factors and have the necessary competences to control various situations. An expertise must be created to favour correct decisional processes and adequate performance (Di Cristofaro Longo,2002).

As psychoanalytical literature in the field of adolescence has widely demonstrated, the prevention of somatic acting-out, among which, for males, road accidents play a priority role, occurs through the activation of symbolization processes, often lacking in subjects who have deviant behaviour.

This specific group of “problematic” adolescents is often marginalized by their different educational backgrounds (school, sports and recreational centres) owing to their failure to adapt and their objective difficulty to accept a regulatory context. But if the street experience of these adolescents – often superior to that of their age group – can be valorised within the educational group (school, hang out places) as a resource, these boys can discover the value of their experience and put it at the group service. The role of adults, in these cases, as witnesses of risk and promoters of a sense of limit, becomes central.

It can be useful to ask the adolescent group to reflect on the relationship which three young people in ancient history, Icarus, Oedipus and Telemachus (Biondo, 2006) had with their fathers by

providing a metaphorical interpretation of the themes related to the assumption of risk and the ways

for adolescents to deal with entry into the adult world. The story of three characters belonging to Greek mythology is well suited to mobilize the adolescent group into a confrontation on limits, potentiality, sense of adventure and the need to put oneself to the test, typical of young people during this stage of their development. Young people can be helped to understand the symbolic function of the father: that of indicating limits without you risking your own safety (the myth of Icarus) and that of instituting a fundamental law, that of prohibiting incest, as a prototype of all laws based on a natural principle (myth of Oedipus). They can also identify the psychic obstacles which prevent adolescents from using the symbolic function of the father: when a father is felt by the son to be unreachable (Dedalus is a famous architect and he is too far ahead of Icarus in his flight to be aware of the risk his son is running), or trapped, like him, in his own difficulties (Minossus’ labyrinth in which Icarus is shut in with his father Dedalus) or, too estranged because he is a prisoner of his mother (Icarus is

the son of a slave who had instilled in him the need for his own liberty or omnipotence), or when conceived as being responsible for all his suffering because he is the bearer of a load of unresolved transgenerational violence (as in the case of Laius, the father of Oedipus, who was an infanticide and a parricide.) At this point it is useful to refer to Homer's epic poem and the figure of Ulysses, the father of Telemachus, who possessed all the necessary authority to offer his own values to his son, to provide young people with a positive model of resolving adolescence and reaching psychic maturity. Telemachus is luckier than the previous two characters. He has Ulysses as a father, the symbol of wisdom and untiring search for oneself, realised through his adventurous journey (metaphor of one's inner journey) which everyone must face to reach maturity (Cahn, 1998).

Road safety education with the class-group

The discussion groups, which we form with students from the secondary schools, represent a valuable moment of confrontation with young people on the topics of safety, controlled risk, excessive and useless risk and proper behaviour on the road with motor scooters. The method used is that proposed by Giori (1998). This method envisages that at the beginning the group leader (an expert psychologist in educational problems) brings a structured stimulus to the class: a topic related to risk. The structure of the story is articulated in such a way as to ask the class group to take a stand or to make a definite decision: express an opinion on a specific risk situation. Inevitably different positions emerge which bring to light the motivations that lead some people to justify useless and excessive risks and others to refute them. The ability of the group leader is that of using all the contributions made by the group to widen their mental horizon and lead the group to discover the hidden meanings of risk actions. "The objective, the primary function of the leader, consists therefore in putting on the stage and encouraging the mental representation of some typical existential situation common to everyone" (Giori, 1998). This is a non-directional method, not centred on information (which the students usually already have) on excessive or useless risks, but centred on affective learning in which the object of analysis are desires, fears and conflicts connected with behavioural risks.

The adolescents are sufficiently informed about the regulations contained in the road safety code and, when they have a scooter, about the correct form of behaviour to be adopted, the proper equipment and maintenance of it. However, in many cases, they voluntarily infringe the regulations. They don't wear their crash helmets, they "soup up" the engine to be able to start off at great speed, they compete with each other, they rise up on the rear wheel, do slaloms, etc., this is often motivated by the need to show off in front of their peer group, to test themselves, to kill boredom via strong emotions. In the majority of cases there is no awareness of the profound reasons underlying such needs (insecurity, dependence on the opinion of others, conflict with parents, etc.) and often their risky behaviour is a real, personal discovery for them. In many cases, the boys say they take risks under pressure from their group of friends. One of the most frequent reasons why motor scooters are an object of desire for

adolescents is to be accepted by their peer group. We discussed this desire to be accepted by others which, should not be forgotten, if crucial for adolescents, is to be found in all age groups. We were able to consider the relationship that exists between respect for the law and the need for group approval. The group discussion reached a conclusion, at first not accepted by the majority, that the acceptability of a request by another or not, depends on the extent to which this agrees with ourselves or not, whether it is damaging to our dignity or not, if it can damage our or others' physical integrity and whether it can cause us to infringe the law. A positive conflict was opened between the requirements of the group in which the individual cannot become dull, and the requirements of the Self. Another theory of great interest to the group of adolescents was that related to the psychological factors that intervene when driving a scooter. The students described the feelings which characterised, above all at the beginning, their relationship with their scooter: the pleasant sense of being able to be anywhere one wants in a short time, enthusiasm, surprise, euphoria, fear, the burden of responsibility, anger against car drivers, the sensation of power given by speed or by their own ever increasing expertise in driving. On one hand, this certainly contributed to consolidating their sense of independence from adults, but on the other it exposed them to the risk of having an accident. A risk which young people do not usually undervalue, but are, on the contrary, rather worried about. What they do undervalue instead are the individual risk factors. For example, the new possibility of reaching their friends' houses or school in a short time leads them to underestimate distances and overestimate the time which is available to cover them, forcing them consequently to increase their speed and commit driving infringements to arrive earlier. In order to discuss this, the group made a realistic evaluation of the times and distances on their scooters as an exercise in learning how to face up to reality. Another dynamic which emerged in the group, was that related to considering their scooter as an extension of their bodies. This led them to drive it with excessive carelessness, almost to imitate/desire full control of their own bodies. This attitude, mostly unconscious, was compared to the features of the scooter and above all its limits. The topic of limits, which was central to the analysis of the psychic dynamics related to driving motor scooters, enabled us to identify behavior and omnipotent fantasies linked to difficulty in relating to the reality which they talk about. This enabled us to discuss, in the right emotive group framework, the question of various drugs and how the effect of these was incompatible with driving. Again, the young people showed they were well informed on the general effects these substances had on driving, but they were stunned and amazed on learning the specific effects at the level of cognitive, emotive and sensorial functioning, which they grossly tended to underestimate, which drugs have, for example, on control, vision and perception, on mood and reflexes rendering the use of these drugs incompatible with driving. They discovered, for example, that opiates inhibit vision of dark objects (with the consequent risk of running over a person dressed in dark clothes crossing the road), that cocaine inhibits perception of bright-coloured objects and that marijuana makes everything blurred, while alcohol alters the state of control.

When we asked the group, with the ‘generator topic’ technique (Freire, 1971): “why do accidents happen?” we were faced by the most diverse individual positions. There is a cognitive attitude towards an accident, which should be taken into consideration in order to bring the group to mature a self critical awareness of their behaviour. In many cases we can observe a certain fatalism when considering an accident, whereby it is totally incidental to put oneself in a safe position because “if it’s going to happen, it will happen!” It was, therefore, very useful to present accidents to the group as a complex process comprising many interacting elements by showing them a dynamic model which explains the accident-event as a mechanism whose dynamics can be explained in factorial and probabilistic terms (Biondo, 1984), by analysing the individual components and relating them to driving the scooter. Only after they grasped the notion of probability applied to risk, were the group participants able to agree on the fact that, if an accident is a process produced by the presence of a clearly identified series of factors, diminishing their number automatically decreases the probability of having an accident. This created in the group a scientific attitude towards accidents and enabled the participants to overcome the fatalistic and superstitious attitude.

Neighbourhood youth centres for the prevention of risk behaviour

Among all the psycho-educational experiences which the Alredo Rampi Centre created to propose to adolescents, the “Pact for Acceptable Risk”, was that realised in a youth centre which appeared the most suitable to achieve the prevention of road risk behaviour. Given the intensity and the length of the experience, it was possible to develop together with the participants in a complete and profound manner the “maturative route” necessary to conclude with them the “Pact on Acceptable Risk” and retrieve them once and for all from the area of excessive and useless risk, in which many of the participants involved had found themselves. We were able to describe this route, given that the experience with two groups of adolescents had ended its cycle after nearly five years of activity with each group. I cannot describe the experience in the youth centre in the limited space available for this article and refer interested readers to other publications which describe in depth the various aspects (Biondo 2001, 2002, 2003, 2008, Biondo *et al.*, 2001, 2003a, 2003b).

The Alfredo Rampi Centre was able to experience the worthiness of the youth centre to help adolescents develop a sense of security and fight psychosocial risk. This seems to us to be an experience which, in addition to its originality, can become an action plan in the prevention of adolescent accidents. The youth centre is different from other prevention actions owing to the continuity of the action and the depth of the relationship it is capable of developing between adults and adolescents. Our cultural orientation on the theme of adolescent risk recognises that the adolescent needs to undergo risky experiences, understood as a “testing ground” for the newly developed independence of the Ego (Biondo, 1997). For this reason we felt the need to develop an educational context which enabled the adolescents to have an experience of moderate and controlled risk. Risk qualities, the latter, given not by the

intensity of actions or the level of performance, but by sharing the risk experience with a group of peers and with adults. This feature is essential because risk loses its characteristics of self-destructiveness and self-harm (which express hatred of one's body and the adult world) and is brought back into a relational context which has an intrinsic calming effect. It is possible to help adolescents to distinguish the risk experiences which encourage the maturing process from the pathological variants which impede it, only in the context of an affective and educational relationship (Biondo 1997). The intention of C.A.G., *Centro Aggregazione Giovanile*, (Youth Centre) promoted by the Association is that of helping young people to deal with the inevitable risk inherent in subjective affirmation, to actively oppose the self-destructive culture of useless, excessive and uncontrollable risk, which dominates the environmental experience of many maladapted adolescents (Giori, 1998). What the Youth Centre has succeeded in doing is to allow adolescents to discover *the creative culture of risk* understood as a controllable event, such as adventure, testing one's own capabilities, opposing the conformist schemes proposed by society, the discovery of more evolved forms of contrasting adults lived as slightly disrespectful of excessive behavioural risk, as an affirmation of the value of courage, as an affirmation of individual responsibility towards society, as an affirmation of the culture of legality, as a development of one's own protective capacity. The peer group has been identified by many (both in the pedagogic and psychological fields) as a valuable social resource to reaffirm the effectiveness of the safety value and as a laboratory in which to elaborate individual destructiveness and transport it to an evolutive area of constructive aggressiveness towards the environment (Palmonari 1993, Pombeni 1990, Giori 1998, Pietropolli Charmet, 2000, Biondo 2003, 2008). All this is for us confirmation of the possibility to guide young people, even the most difficult and angry ones, from the area of excessive and useless risk to the area of Acceptable Risk, of that risk in other words which enables growth and encourages the process of subjectivisation. If this maturing process on acceptable risk is to be successful, it is not sufficient to have a place where young people and educators who conduct a series of activities can meet. There are other ingredients and factors which are necessary if the Youth Centre is to function as a mechanism for the prevention of accidents. In our opinion, a specific "psychological function" needs to be inserted in the Youth Centre for a psycho-educational purpose. Without this mechanism, there is the risk of an educational process which ignores the complexity of the problems in the field to be dealt with, consequently tending to deflate into a substantially improvised and voluntarist experience.

The Pact on Acceptable Risk represents the educational and cultural proposal which the Alredo Rampi Centre work group made to adolescents and young people for the purpose of instilling in their minds the value of useful risk, which encourages growth and forms in them a strong position against useless risk which puts their life in danger. This route envisages that the adolescent group (class group, group in the youth centre) undertakes certain activities, divided into phases, as I will try to

summarise below. Interested readers can learn more about the subject by reading the manual “Road safety education and acceptable risk (Biondo, 2006).

The role of the adult in an educational group to promote the experience of acceptable risk

In a group situation conducted by an adult, presentation by some elements in the adolescent group of behavioural risk, can be understood as an attempt to test the adult, who is insistently called upon, together with the group of mature peers, to take a position on such behaviour, according to the work method envisaged by the “Pact on Acceptable Risk” described in brief above. The adult’s reply to such a request – which more often than not is presented unconsciously by the adolescent with the story of his behavioural risk – can oscillate from explicit to implicit collusion terminating in a condemnation. The adolescent cannot refer to a mental model of relationship with risk, death and with his capacity for survival. Without the transgenerational memory of survival strategies his sense of guilt in respect of death becomes unsupportable, as the case which is presented in the following vignette testifies. To be able to personalize his request for help, the disturbed adolescent (and the disturbed part of the group) must be able to emerge from the group situation in which he has been projected, to start a process of subjectivisation. He must stop, therefore, using the group as a container of his problematic parts and take on the responsibility of their management. A maturing process which he is able to realise only thanks to the group. The vignette which follows¹ describes the “witness-function” of the group, which allows the adolescent to place a limit on his behavioural risk, mobilising the group when he does not succeed in realising this important self-protective action. The intervention, almost casual, with the classgroup enables a youth, profoundly traumatised by a specific tragic event, to heal the fracture with 1 Reformulated from Biondo (2006), *Educazione Stradale e rischio accettabile*, Erickson, Trento the adult world and thus succeed in being helped in respect of his own specific emergency. In this meeting, for some aspects dramatic, the class-group called on the group leaders² participating to share a terrible secret.

Two teachers (one of whom is the class coordinator) asked us if we could hold a meeting first in a certain class because they had learnt from the mother of one of their pupils, Antonio, of a rather delicate fact: Antonio’s brother was in hospital with a knife wound in his side, which led them to think of a settlement between bands.

When we entered the classroom our attention was immediately captured by the visibly disturbed expression of Michele, staring at his desk, sad face, his shoulders curved over. This was particular surprising because the previous time he had given us the impression of a happy and very friendly boy. As usual, we asked the components to form a circle. As soon as the circle was formed and we began the discussion, Michele burst into tears saying “It’s not fair, you can’t die when you’re fifteen years old and in this way!” We all froze and were surprised at the intensity of his emotional outburst and the content of his words. After several minutes of silence, we asked

what had happened. Since Michele continued crying desperately with his hands covering his face, we asked the entire class-group in order to find out more. The students told us that the day before a friend of his had died in a motorbike accident. Michele at this point burst out saying: "It's not true, he didn't die in an accident, they killed him." While the boy continued sobbing silently, the other boys explained that it would appear, from the internal fractures he had that the boy had been attacked after the accident. Our surprise turned into horror and concern for the gravity of the event. We communicated our feelings to the group and asked them if they wanted to discuss the question in depth. Michele immediately said it was important for him to be able to talk to somebody because he had had to keep everything inside and he couldn't cope any longer. He began by telling us that his friend had gone with another boy in the late afternoon to a place in the area where transsexuals procure customers. Since it had happened the week before that Michele and his other friends had been there to have sex with these people and had left without paying, he imagined that after not being paid for the umpteenth time the transsexuals had called their protector. A person, in the company of some accomplices, had waited at the exit and, after having bumped the boys with their car, carried one of them behind some bushes (the other had run away in the meantime) to beat him up. Therefore, according to Michele, his friend had died as a result of the beating inflicted, while the accident had been simulated to cover up the murder. We understood the seriousness of the personal situation Michele was going through, caused not only by the violent loss of his friend, but also from the awareness of having run the same risk in the past, and from the consequent fear to keep what he knew to himself or to reveal it to the authorities. In that moment, we represented for Michele adult-witnesses to the dramatic situation he was living. He had been offered the possibility of revealing what he knew without having to immediately pay the consequences and without having to make an operative decision in regard to what had happened. We calmed him down saying there was a witness, the other boy on the motor scooter, who had a greater responsibility than he had as far as the possibility of informing the police

2 The session with the class-group was conducted by the Author and the psychotherapist, Maria Patti (ARPAd's member), at the Istituto Tecnico Industriale, on the outskirts of Rome.

about these facts was concerned, and how the accident had really happened. Michele explained to us that this boy was scared and would certainly not speak up as he had been threatened. We understood that he was also talking about himself and that he was desperate and didn't know what to do. We were both stunned by the weight of the situation: neither of us knew what to do and we were tempted to deal with the situation in operative terms, by translating our intervention into a consultation as to what should be done. We preferred to keep quiet in order not to act, also because we were conscious of the fact that the real emergency to be dealt with, in that moment, was Michele's emotional outburst, which had involved the entire class. The fact that attention passed from the individual to the group level came to our aid. It was as if the class, unconsciously, had come to our aid, to allow us to take time, to ease the

situation a little. A subdued discussion commenced in the class. The slow drift of words allowed the group to begin to breathe. Some young people, particularly some girls, began shyly to point their finger at the victim affirming: "In a way, they were asking for it!" Encouraged by this first intervention, we pointed out that effectively they should have known that you don't mess around with such things and to go there to have sexual relations without paying for them was in fact a little dumb, like playing with fire, an unacceptable risk. We reminded Michele that at the previous meeting, he had shown pleasure in infringing the rules with his motor scooter, telling everyone about his adventures in which he enjoyed going very fast, rising up on the back wheel and doing slaloms in between the cars. We discussed the difficulty they had in evaluating the hazards and risks properly at their age, thus putting their life in danger, as the case we were discussing showed so dramatically. We asked the participants to express their opinion on the need to have certain dangerous sexual experiences. Many replied that certainly there could be curiosity about them or the need to have the experience; others said that it was a way to kill boredom. We pointed out that that type of sex was promiscuous and that certain things were much better with ones boy or girlfriend, even if it is easier to consider having the experience by paying someone for it. We added that, in order to be reassured about their masculinity some boys have experiences like these, that in reality it confuses them about their identity as the experience had been with a trans. Michele replied that he knew this, but at times one feels obliged to do it because others do it and because one doesn't have a girlfriend. A girl intervenes saying that if you do these things you must find them sexually exciting. And here Michele intervened resolutely to say, almost shouting: "*It's not true, I did it and the only thing I felt was DISGUST, a sensation of utter DISGUST which you need a lot of time to get rid of.*" The class listened to him attentively and disturbed. We underlined for everyone the sense of Michele's words: a heartfelt appeal not to fall into the same trap! At this point we asked everyone for their opinion to learn their position on the matter so that they would take a stand on the idea that these experiences could be useful and pleasurable or could cause scars. The class was very involved in Michele's pain and everyone expressed their opinion on the matter. The girls had a more rigid attitude towards sexuality and very clearly labelled this type of experience as negative. Valentina spoke on behalf of the girls: "*It's not necessary to have this type of experience to feel expert, you should wait and begin with a girl, it's better because neither of the two has any experience and its much nicer to start together*". The boys were more ambivalent. We understood that some of them had had this type of experience even if they didn't say so explicitly. In this interval Antonio intervened (the boy whose brother had been knifed in a brawl) who was visibly taken by the discussion and said firmly: "*I don't approve of the fact that you do things simply because others or friends do it. For example I don't smoke and nearly all my friends do, but I haven't started smoking because they do. You should know that certain things or certain people are dangerous*"! Antonio said all this in a very serious tone of voice, determined, almost hard. The group protested about his

peremptory affirmations. For us it was clear that his rigidity was a form of defence against what had happened to his brother. We understood that he was telling us about his defence and, perhaps, he was asking us to take a stand. One of the two leaders made a general comment to confirm to the group the validity of a position which didn't accept any compromises when the risk was so great, that there is an acceptable risk which helps one to grow and another which is unacceptable, which can put your life at risk in an irreparable way. In reality this intervention by the leader was intended to indirectly communicate to Antonio that his difficulty in succeeding to find a solution had been understood, that the solution however, rigid and unpopular, was capable of defending him efficiently from the very serious risks present in his social environment. The meeting was drawing to a close, and we were all aware of the importance of what had been said. Michele said he had tried to speak to his teachers, but briefly, there was never enough time to talk about it in depth and then he added: *"There are some things you can't discuss with teachers"*! When we were all taking our leave of each other and everyone was standing up putting the desks back in order, Antonio, smiling and visibly more relaxed, came up to us. He didn't say anything and looked at us in silence. A handshake and looking into each other's eyes was sufficient to know we understood each other. Thanks to the group instrument, the confrontation that was activated between the healthy part of the group and the part dramatically involved in risky and pathological experiences, represents the most meaningful aspect of the vignette. We were able to observe in the group that the greater part of the participants, represented by the female group, who, thanks to the dynamics set in motion, was able to express a mature point of view on the advisability of undertaking certain excessively risky experiences (dangerous driving, sexual promiscuity). Faced with the need by adolescent males to unite in a gang to reassure each other homosexually regarding the threat of the female body by having experiences with transsexual partners, the female components of the group take a stand, stigmatising the difficulties of the male component to confront the Other. Unexpectedly, the female component find an ally in Michele, the leader of the antisocial and problematic part of the group, who by infringing the road safety code was acting out his identity difficulties (of the gender level). Michele warns the group about risk connected with promiscuous sexual experiences and about the sense of desperation these hide. Michele's outburst on the feeling of disgust which such experiences leave, represented the best antidote for the boys against the urge to have such degrading sexual experiences. The group of males – who had delegated Michele with the task of legitimising and defending their deviated aspects and the search for extreme emotions – although suffering in a depressed way together with Michele from the common attitude towards attacking the rules and to pursue uncontrolled risk, was dismayed when faced with his harangue against these experiences and, in order not to come out in the open, tries an extreme defensive strategy: paranoid defence. The group of males, in fact, tries to defend itself from the impasse provoked by Michele's behaviour, via a paranoid attempt to blame society for their suffering, thus avoiding taking any personal responsibility. The

process of mentalization activated by the multiple psychodynamic setting of the educative group (Biondo 2008) offered the members the possibility of experimenting “different mirroring among the various members, multiple mirroring which protects against the fear of being confused with the other, seen in a double dimension ” (Saottini, 2001).

The mirroring process and the projective identification together with the suffering expressed by the leader of the antisocial gang allowed the group to overcome the paranoid defence it had adopted.

This was also favoured by Antonio’s firm disassociation as he knew the uselessness of such a defence and proposed another which could in his opinion protect him more efficiently from the universe of chaos by which he felt he was surrounded. He adopts a rigidly interpreted, moral rigour (denial of the possibility to run acceptable risks). The healthy part of the group cannot accept any of the defences proposed by the group of boys (that of pursuing experiences at any cost to put themselves to the test, and that of abstaining from any risk) and took a stand in favour of “Acceptable Risk”, which in this case was represented by the defence of more “normal” sexual behaviour, not dramatised, open to pleasure, not guilt-inducing or extreme. A sexuality which accepted the risk of an affective relationship with the Other, within which one could feel happy and protected. Despite the fact that in the group there was a fair part involved in risky and degrading sexual experiences, at the end, the healthy part of the group succeeded in emerging and expressing their negative opinion on such experiences, to affirm the value of acceptable risk against extreme risk which is hazardous for individual safety and exposes one to indelible psychological wounds.

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