



ARGO Associazione per la Ricerca sul Gruppo Omogeneo
la Rivista, Gruppo: Omogeneità e differenze

Group psychoanalysis: 50 years of work report



Dialogue between Silvia Corbella and Stefania Marinelli

Dearest Stefania, as I read the interviews you sent me I wondered when I would be able to read the interview with you. I also thought that our friendship was born thanks to our shared interest in the analytically oriented group and having come to a conference at La Sapienza in Rome at the invitation of Claudio Neri, following my presentation of his book "Group" (1995), which I had enjoyed very much. So much has changed since then; it is beautiful and important to me that our friendship has deepened and goes far beyond our shared interest. But, perhaps conditioned by the interviews, I would like to know how your approach to group work has changed since our first meeting? Mine, as you well know, has also changed thanks to the talks between us, particularly with respect to the Bion approach. After you told me

about the seminars with Bion, I was sorry I had not met him or listened to him directly, a thought that would never have occurred to me while reading his texts, before I talked to you about it.

Dear Silvia, what a great start! History and temporality: exchange, evolutionary transformation and differences in actuality! Of course, I too would never have thought of going to see the differences between Group Analysis and Psychoanalysis of Group in a 'historical' way, going back to original theoretical matrices, yes, those of Bion and Foulkes; but also to the processes of self-differentiation that, following Bion on the one hand and Foulkes on the other, the two groups have gone through, particularly in Italy. In an issue of *Funzione Gamma* in which Leonardo Ancona participated, I remember, perhaps you do too, the theme of the theoretical but above all historical and let's say 'political' diversities of the two traditions is bravely addressed: he also reported original historical data with a free spirit as was his style, and spoke of the pain of separations, with respect to the hope of having a broad and cohesive 'group' of group psychoanalysis. But then, I think, you and I were really good: we respected our differences and the differences within the association we founded, ARGO (which studies precisely the homogeneity and non-homogeneity of groups...) we collaborated out of affection and friendship but perhaps also out of tolerance and foresight... we understood that a group is well if its 'matrices' and its 'mentality' are well; and that diversity honours and understands those who respect it and the group that contains it. I have a distant but vivid recollection of a doctor friend to whom, after various group experiences that he had done with talent and good results, I had suggested that he undergo training to learn how to conduct Balint Groups: he was intimidated, as soon as he joined the training group where he saw himself as the only doctor on the course - or at least doctor of the body, because the other doctors were all specialised in psychiatry or neurology or child neuropsychiatry - he wondered how to orient himself in order to stick to a safer and 'more objective' working model, i.e. similar to his basic discipline, medicine. He imagined finding something certain, with the compass function, like that function perhaps given to the doctor by the lab coat with the stethoscope and pager, which confers and reinforces identity through role. He imagined being told: this is how the group is conducted, we go from here to there, these are the theories and these are the techniques. But instead, just to begin with, there were not only supporters of individual analysis and those of group formation; relational psychologists and those of object relations - but also followers of Foulkes or group analysts, and followers of Bion or group psychoanalysts. I remember that he had a moment of strong hesitation. But I also remember that the double polarity helped him to feel less alone in the field. And that having two models would help him shortly afterwards to love one more and discard the other, which was useful to

start with and give himself courage. In short, a handle. We had an exchange at that time and I remember his first impressions: Bion is luminous, nouminous indeed, and innovative, reading him gives energy and clarity. Foulkes seems to be concerned with rules.... (he was reading after *Experiences in Groups*, the Introduction to Group-Analytical Psychotherapy) and behaviour: the group circle, the place where the participant sits... That's it: the doctor, I thought, had already entered into the matter and understood, put his hands in the game. He assumed a (psycho-analytic) dialectic in himself and developed a formative transference: Bion made big drawings; Foulkes followed small events step by step. In the workshop where multiple, plural psychoanalysis was being forged, the group, its subject and its object, its thought, different and numerous needs converged: in order to see a panorama, one had to go upstairs. Again, to approach complexity, one can start either from the whole, or from the numerous individual components. Then you have to choose, or you have to postpone the choice after you understand that the simultaneous whole that happens in the group is different from the linear sequentiality of the happening seen on the level of causal connection. With the group we are in the room of polydimensionality, of multiple signification, of the assignment of multiple meaning through the representation of the articulated and connected thing. The object is simultaneously arranged on multiple levels of representation and meaning. Finding a shared language is not the departure. It is the arrival. I recalled the example of the doctor colleague because it is indicative of the contrast that is always found in the experience of the different, of the difference of the unknown: a contrast that characterises this double category of carers, between the objectivity of the doctor and the subjectivity of the psychologist - even though these qualities may be belied by exceptional subjects, or may be taken to extremes by 'party' subjects.

Dear Stefania, I well understand the theme of hesitation when faced with different theories and ways of conducting groups. Often learners ask for a rigid model that can be applied to the different diagnoses attributed to patients, so they want to know whether group therapy may be more or less appropriate for a specific category of patients. This brings me back to all the time that has passed since the first books by Foulkes and Bion appeared in Italy, to the present day, to all the works and books written since then on group settings. I am thinking of the spread in the scientific sphere of the paradigm of complexity, complementarity and uncertainty, which pushes us more and more to the importance of contextualising pathologies by paying attention to the individual who represents them. Today, we not only ask ourselves whether "marco rossi" who has personality disorders can constructively benefit from the group setting, but also in which group it is best to place him, taking into account the composition of the reference group and the issues the group is dealing with.

Certainly Dear Silvia, the evaluation first of all of the group and of the phase of its process at a given moment we tend to privilege it on the occasion of new insertions, you have summarised the issue well. And also we must not overlook or forget that in each of us there has been at some point in our clinical experiences the impression that psychology and psychoanalysis would not have been sufficient to cure and treat properly psychotic or in any case hyper-concrete situations that presented themselves, in the institution or in the studio, or in the specialised association, more serious and more inaccessible than expected. And for each of us interested in the group, there was a moment in which considering the social being of the individual mind and body revealed itself as providing access to a new way of understanding even the subjective thing. Not: I put them in the group so they do things on their own and I worry less. But: in the group I see objects and their dynamics and functioning, which in the dark, in the subjective alone, I cannot see or not as quickly and articulately. Certainly Bion created the great tradition of the group as exclusive and overdetermining subject. He pointed to the permanent conflict between deep group mentality and work culture. Foulkes identified the networks, the matrices, sought mediations between subjectivity and social belonging, which in Bion's group seemed to converge to generate a single process, almost without distinctions being useful. Two researchers, Bion and Foulkes, who seemed to have started from the same experience (Northfield Hospital psychiatric ward) and the same way of approaching it (the group) and instead would elaborate contexts and contents in profoundly different ways. Bion drew from Rickman, his first analyst, the idea of the social extension of care that animated the hopes of post-war reconstruction, and he valued the notions of conflict between groups and between individual and group, which had troubled the war-stricken generation (see Hinsky's *Bion's Sources for the Psychoanalysis of the World War II*. Hinshelwood's *The Sources of Bion*); and he would later ferry his baggage to the encounter with Melanie Klein and Object Relations Psychoanalysis, which would give group epistemology a psychoanalytic paradigm rich in future developments. Foulkes, on the other hand, immediately put to use the idea of combining individual and group through certain fundamental keys, such as the idea of original commonalities (matrices) and permanent connections (networks). Genius and method perhaps, each contained the other.

Dear Stefania, today the social constitution of the individual is a given, together with the possibility of extending the understanding of group dynamics to a wider social. The group is not only an instrument of treatment, but also of prevention, of conflict resolution... In Italy, for some time we have been thinking about a possible integration between the positions of Bion and Foulkes (Corbella 2000, *Funzione Gamma*, 3 Ripensando a Foulkes and the

basic assumptions of 'Italianiter') and also about a responsible use of the different theories according to the problems faced in the specific group. We have come to know how to use what is understood in the analytically oriented small group, in a differentiated manner depending on the focus that the group proposes, depending on whether it is a homogeneous group or not, and whether it is fixed-term or indefinite, within an institution or in private practice.

Dear Silvia, if we retrospectively look back for a moment at the history of our association and the many contents that have been approached and elaborated in its time of life (ARGO is now more than 20 years old!) we see that the very reasons you illustrated have structured a multifaceted culture. Within Argo both traditions were alive from the beginning, represented by you and me as founding members, but then also by later members who were part of the IIPG (such as Lilli Romeo) or the Coirag (such as Maurizio Salis) and the APG (such as Nadia Fina, with her Jungian provenance from CIPA) as well as other different traditions and topicality - I am thinking of the working model of the group as a body, which works on the themes of the body, on which Simonetta Bruni focused; the point of view of demand analysis brought to our group by Vincenzo De Blasi; the point of view of the Psychologies of the Self represented by Pina Bencivenga, by Adelina Detcheva, to mention but a few of the many who took part. For example, I remember the strongly clinical and equidistant point of view of Antonio Fazio, who was important for a period in the Association also because of his derivation from English experiences; and the valorisation of Bion's aspects linked to 'faith' and the study of the unknowability of 'O', the 'mystical' aspects if one can say so with reference to Mario Giampà's research, who at the time had coagulated an important subgroup in ARGO. And then again I am thinking of the orientation of the Turin centre on group analytical psychodrama; or the institutional research of 'Asvegra' in Padua. Well, a lot of water has passed under the bridges of Argo, people and groups that have transited there have imprinted different footprints, reshuffling a fluid groupality - a bit like the one you talk about in your book *Free Ties*, comparing it to the culture and life of ports, of the free exchanges that connect the ways of the cities and those of the seas. So I wonder if there has not been at work in our association a function of mutual containment between different lines of development, which has made the life of the group more compatible or at least not 'churchy', if you will excuse the expression. I am thinking of the idea proposed by me in our book *'Homogeneous Groups'*, of a 'counter-field' that arises as a reaction to the homogeneous psychic field of a group (which has been declared 'homogeneous' in terms of composition or focal theme dealt with), which would stimulate the demand for individuality and individuation. And I think of your idea of the group 'we', which germinates from the device as a new

subject with respect to its constituent parts. Here I believe that these clots of thoughts and experiences also worked in synergy for the association group. The group (Argo's, for example) presents itself as multiple and disordered when the 'homogeneous' and 'scholastic' defence cannot reassure it: and it demands that its homogeneities and differences be thought about, so that it can evolve. Certainly the group we have called Argo, the mythical ship that sails the distant seas, has generated great vitality over a long period of research...it is important that this never ends. Tolerance, multiculturalism let's say, equality and differences, freedom to be part of a common process, generate thought and set evolutionary dynamics in motion, especially if the group is able to stay in touch with the conflict that generated it.

Dear Stefania, I agree with your hypothesis regarding the value of the mutual restraining acceptance of the different lines of development of group thought, the value of the counter-field and the potential evolutionary and creative possibilities of Argo. Forgive me if I am repetitive in speaking of conflict. Conflict in Heraclitus' thought is the generator of all things: conflict, not confrontation or war. Conflict does not want winners and losers but exchanges of thought that maintain the respect and value of differences and that only in this way can generate new ideas and possible solutions. The value of differences seems to me always present in Group: Homogeneity and Differences. The wide range of group situations taken into consideration in the various issues, and the interviews in this issue, show precisely how different situations stimulate different conducts according to the purpose that each specific group proposes. Conducts that sometimes confront us with creative and prospective solutions, always accompanied by the responsibility of the conductor who can answer for his or her own behaviour and theories, used to adhere to the project and purpose of the group of reference.

Dear Silvia, you know how dear ancient Greek is to me, and may it come to us this time too! Heraclitus' *Panta rei* (), all things flow, is more meaningful today than when we studied ancient philosophy at school! Even more dear today is the Greek myth, in an age in which the study of the group is no longer as it once was strongly centred on its mythological and dreamlike production, on the iconic, metaphorical, symbolic power of its communications, narratives, and dream-telling! Historical identity is important, training is not forgotten. Today, languages are different, because they are updated to the paradigms of new rules and new communicational urgencies, to new social and psychological contents, which are more related, and also more unified by a more shared topicality. And yet, despite the many changes, the group's lexicon is the same as always: looking for similarities and differences that are part of the experience of suffering, but also of the well-being provided by

sociality, when it is free and convivial, when pain has been properly recognised and transformed.

Dear Stefania, it is very interesting to see how the different authors have experienced the passage of time by continuing, through readings and personal exchanges, to update the dialectic between theory and praxis, praxis and theory without ever losing sight of the changes that were taking place in the meantime in the social sphere. Communication modified by the advent of the digital, during the pandemic became part of the healing modality, initially with the violence of necessity, in order to be able to continue healing, and then as a potential of choice, in specific situations and contexts for which the therapist must take responsibility for knowing how to answer why the choice to use the digital was made in that group and for that person. Returning to the *Panta rei*, I like to remember that the fragment continues with *cai ouden apoluetai*, nothing is destroyed. Thus what was thought and written at the origins of the analytically oriented group is still valid and usable if one can combine, to use Augustine's terms, the past of the present with the present of the future, as happened with the use of the digital during the pandemic. I see the group as a particularly flexible and dynamic setting capable of utilising crises by transforming difficulties into advantages. Thinking and dreaming in groups and in groups can be a useful model for accompanying the transformations of the present into a future where one has the courage to highlight the paradigm of uncertainty as a *limen*, *limen* understood as a container but also as an added value that supports subjectivation but also respect for Otherness that opens us up to a future of surprises and mysteries. In many authors, I was pleased to see an increasing focus on the positive spin-off that the use of learned dynamics in the small, medium and large group can have on the social. Let us hope that the possibility of moving from the group to the social and back, facilitates solutions that respect human rights and the duty to protect the planet. I conclude by quoting Augustine again: the past is memory, the future is expectation, the present is vision.

We greet each other on the *limen*, on the threshold.