



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

Group Psychoanalysis: Reporting on 50 Years of Work



Experiential Group: Interview with Cono Aldo Barnà

Edited by Stefania Marinelli

Question: The word experiential group, by its very nature, brings to mind the historical group, the historical experiential group that we of Pollaiolo did in Rome, led by Francesco Corrao. And it was precisely while working on the experiential group that I happened to re-read *Clinamen*, Corrao's paper [(1979), published in *Orme* vol 2, Cortina: Milan, 1998] on the experiential group, where he fundamentally argues, with that very special skill of his, that the group of this type, the formative group, if well led, enables one to perform, despite the fact that the format is not one that respects the psychoanalytic rules of the small group with an analytic purpose, but in fact ensures that the group has a true psychoanalytic experience. Now I have been following your work over time and I am particularly curious to ask you about this point... I am very interested in your opinion on this: do you think, as Corrao thought, that a training group really succeeds - even if sometimes diluted in the setting, sometimes even monthly or fortnightly - in making the participants, the whole group, have an experience of analytic quality, of an analytic type?

Answer: I certainly think so. I certainly think so because of my experience of the group with Corrao, the dates of which I don't remember, but I do

remember that it lasted a good five years. It had a fortnightly rhythm, sometimes monthly, which lasted fairly stable in composition for five years. I consider it my analysis, along with my personal, individual analysis; I consider attending the group a personal analysis with a different setting let's say. I would say this because of the confluence of two researches: one is the tradition of the group, the tradition of the group as a context of reflection, of exchange, of awareness, of analysis of people's experience, of collection of people's narratives. So this tradition, this research, comes first from psychoanalysis, it is a very old tradition of using the collective, a small collective to obtain an evolution of people's awareness, let us say, of the relationship with themselves, of the micro-social relationship, of collaboration or group work with others. A confluence of this older research with psychoanalytic research, which from the dual context met the group in an extension of the method. It changes the setting, the rules of engagement, but it is an enlargement of the psychoanalytic method with all the intrinsic and extrinsic components of the analytic method: the attendance, the sharing, the narration, the exchange, the confrontation, the silence, the elaboration of reciprocal dynamic experiences, of the problems of activity, of passivity, of narcissistic realization, of the evolution of one's self-consciousness. So I would say that all the intrinsic elements that are used by the psychoanalytic method for the development and conscientious growth of a self-critical person, are all present in the experiential group, especially in a precisely competent, creative conduction, like the one Corrao was able to have. So I certainly consider it a context of psychoanalytic work, in an extension of the orthodox method, which however adds potentialities, in the sense that what we have already said that a collective mind is built, the mind of the group, as if it were an expansion of the mental capacities of the individual participants. So, with these additions let us say in historical-methodological reflection, I think so: it is a context of psychoanalytic elaboration enhanced by the particular capacities of the group in presence there.

Question: So while you are saying this, a comparison comes to mind: I remember a paper you wrote in 1999 or 2000 with Nino Brignone on the group as a dream [(2004). *La supervisione ai gruppi istituzionali: i miti e i sogni*, in *Mito sogno gruppo*. Borla: Rome]. It occurs to me that Grodstein when speaking of analysis, of supervision with Bion, said that the dream narrative is a dream within a dream, because the session itself is a dream. Then precisely I remember your writing on a case supervision where you spoke of the institutional group, within the institutional context, where you spoke of the group as a dream. I would like to ask you if you believe that for those five years we did a dream group.

Answer: My opinion on the experiential group was then proved by using this set-up, the methodological set-up and the mental, inner relational, in my institutional work in the group supervisions to the working contexts in the institution. And it has been confirmed in this sense. In the work with Brignone we used to say that the supervision group was able to collect the institution's dream. That is, as if every institution has a founding phantasmatic element, of what it is, what place it is, what function it has, how it is experienced by people and what purpose it has. Then, from this point of view, all experiences converge to be concordant or conflicting with this shared dream of the institution, even if the dream is not made explicit. Perhaps the dream is an implicit part of the people's motivation to work, all the individual motivations to do that work flow into it, so a dream or phantasmatic group scene of the institution is constituted. The supervision group, the experiential group is able to better conceive, reach and sometimes make explicit what the founding dream of the institution is. I think we have lived a long dream, a long dream that, if nothing else - I don't know if your impression is like this, I have made many friendships in my life, after the fundamental youthful ones, but if you think about it, the emotional relationship, the belonging, the affective flows of the people who have been inside the group, in all the existential evolutions that they have had, but it is quite particular. That is, you are not just any friend to me, Claudio [Neri] is not just any friend. They are people who have shared that emotional condition. So it is a friendship that is particularly significant for having shared hopes, aspirations, conflicts, moments of difficulty, like the whole latent dream scene that was inside the group. For example, the feeling of affiliation and belonging with Corrao. I think Corrao is a significant parental figure for us, that is, the leader of the group was constituted over time as an internal object, Kohut would say, a particularly significant object-self. It still happens to me at times to think what Corrao would do, what Corrao would say. So let's say, the constitution of such strong projective bonds is a dynamic result of having also been in a dimension of oneiric belonging.

Question: Yes, a quite exceptional teacher for a very long time. It also happens to me to give an interpretation decades later and realize that it is modeled on the memory of words said by Corrao. It is the bond between us all. Thank you very much for these words of yours. Let's see, I would like to ask you a second question among those that I had also sent you to try to sequence our discourse. I had an extraordinary memory of the experiential group led by Corrao, with all of us from the "Pollaiolo" in Rome during our formative period. I have always wondered if the luminous, that is, enlightening intensity of those sessions conducted by him depended on his exceptional nature as a psychoanalyst and tireless researcher, creator, thinker, or if the format of the experiential group itself could have an equally

powerful experiential value. But in part you have already answered this question because you spoke of the group taking place within an institution and the dream of the institution. But there is probably something about an experiential group, e.g. that takes place in another way, the formats can be very numerous and I know that you have a long and great experience of this, of training operators and analysts.

Answer: Meanwhile I would also like to say something about Corrao, about Corrao's particular conduction and about Corrao's affective and scientific character, which is absolutely not ordinary. He really was an extraordinary person in terms of culture and the horizon, let's say, of his research. It made an impression on me... I read an interview with Letizia Battaglia before she died. I know that they are now producing a television series on the life of this great photographer from Palermo, and she talked about a rather problematic life, prior to a fundamental meeting in her life: at one point she says she met Francesco Corrao. I don't know if she was Corrao's pupil or if she was a patient, if she was a friend of Corrao's, but she says the same thing: that this person's charisma, this person's ability profoundly transformed her life. Now, it is true that an analysis, if it works well, transforms a person's life, but the transformation he allowed had a particular horizon. A particular horizon that was to embrace all that was profound in the past culture, but also to be very open to innovation. Very curious about finding new paradigms. So certainly the figure of Corrao was a fundamental element in the quality of that experience. In another article, I wrote that the experiential group or supervision group actually works in relation to the charisma of the conductor. That is, that the conductor, however discreet in his presence, in his operation within the group, yet contains a charisma, a particular expectation, a significant idealization that is also projective of the members. And so charisma is a dynamic component that accelerates aspects of people's growth and becoming. Hence, this with regard to Corrao, but also with regard to the function of the charisma figure of the conductor, who ensures that the group unfolds as such, that the group does not become a group other than the function of being experiential, that it does not become a group that degrades, that it preserves a capacity to work on the task and does not take any worldly drift of any kind. Which then, collaterally, as a construction of the bond happens: people then hang out, see each other, become friends, quarrel, but within the group this summit of research is maintained, of naming, conceptualizing, acquiring the experience that is made together. I don't know if you remember this situation of extreme enhancement of the mind that the group gave. That is, my mind in the other hours of the day had the limit of my personal capacities. Within the work of the experiential group, my mind found an expansion, a conceptual, emotional, connecting capacity, which was then also lost during the rest of the hours. But during the experience it

worked in terms of empowerment. And this is a specific element of the group. Of enhancing the representative capacities of the mind within the group exchange as well.

Question: Your words had a surprising sharpness, thank you, and a synthesis that was also surprising. I thank you very much. And there is a strong evocative value. I am also reflecting on some lateral elements to what you are saying. One is the recollection of how many associations have undergone even revolutionary changes, sometimes involutions, sometimes the reverse, in their ability to continue, when they have lost their charismatic leader. I am thinking of many private, psychoanalytic institutions, where there have been epochal changes when the founder, the charismatic leader, what for us was Francesco Corrao passed away, and so I also think of the whole issue of inheritances and changes following the foundation. In our case of the "il Pollaiolo" group research center, I am naturally reminded of the transition from the living and initial moment of research, linked to these particular exceptional aptitudes of Francesco Corrao, to the later scholastic period, that is, when you spoke of the mundane drift of the training group. So, I was reminded of when the research group was then organized. Corrao was still making his strong contribution in that direction, after the discussions that had taken place in an institute that was also scholastic and formative, which was organizing what has now become the IIPG [Istituto italiano di Psicoanalisi di Gruppo], which has already contributed to training generations of new psychotherapists and group psychoanalysts. So, there is also this, if you think you can or want to continue to speak on this... a point that concerns perhaps either the theme of the evolutionary phases of the group, perhaps of every group in fact, or in any case the transition relating to the theme of the legacy, inheritance and mourning when the founding father, let's say, disappears from the group scene.

Answer: It is very stimulating what you say, Stefania, it contains within it several strands of reflection. For example, I would come back to the particular conceptual expansion that the group manages to give. At one point in the group one of the participants, Gianvito Iannuzzi, wrote a fundamental article. Gianvito spoke very little, sometimes the things he said appeared a little confused, he had a somewhat mystical summit in his heart. At one point he wrote an article on the eschatological aspect of the group, it is a formidable article [G. Iannuzzi (1979). Primary scene, contract and eschatological scene in the 'Here and Now' of the analytic group. In *Gruppo e Funzione Analitica*, I, 1, January-April 1979]. He managed to come up with a conceptualisation of the group. I think Gianvito could never have expressed his thoughts and written that article if he had not been inside the group. This is to say the particular empowerment. Another thing I thought was about mourning

Corrao. Corrao's mourning, his mourning, even his way of dying, without having given an inch on super work, super commitment, does not seem to me to have given rise to any particular regression of the members of the group, each of whom has continued to carry out his own growing, maturing, existential story, of choices. But the group is still present, the mourning is still present. That is, all of us, even now, so many years later, having become something else, other things, each... how should I say, accomplished on their own, but all of us are still mourning Corrao's absence. Even in an unrealistic fantasy, i.e. he would no longer be able to carry anything today, even if he were alive he would be a hundred years old, he would be very old, but we continue to experience the loss of his thought, the loss of what he could still help us with. At least I personally understand it that way. So it seems to me that the mourning of the leader is also particularly significant. Many other people I met on the street did not leave this kind of emotional void, let's say. And then there is the hereditary aspect that you say, including the miraculous survival of the Pollaiolo. Because if you think about it, Pollaiolo has encountered internal conflicts, splits, differentiations, huge problems. And yet it is still able to give the same special feeling of learning to everyone who attends it. Conducted now in somewhat familistic terms, however, it evidently continues a place where the group function is on, where one participates in group learning, it is still meaningful and valuable for people today. I meet young people who deal with Pollaiolo, they propose all the problems that young people are proposing as a generation, they are different from us, in some aspects they are worrying. But everyone who attends Pollaiolo shares that feeling of dealing with a particular medium, a particular learning tool. I don't know about the acquisition of psychoanalytic competence, then let's say for working with patients, that I don't know, that I don't know if one can become competent and capable only with the group without a personal analysis. That is an answer I cannot give you. I think that a personal analysis work is always necessary in the competence of a therapist.

Question: But on this last point, now I was reflecting on the training of the present generation. These last words of yours remind me of an occasion in which I think in a presentation for COIRAG [Confederation of Italian organizations for group analytic research], Claudio Neri presented a theme in which he maintained that if one wants to become a group therapist it is good that the first analysis is a group analysis, then the personal analysis is also something else and he does not talk about it. That is, he posited in that presentation the idea that the first analytic impact is good for someone who will then have to learn to see the group and to lead it and to think with the group, it should be a group analysis as a first experience. Let's say then that personal analysis and group analysis were not correlated but it was the idea of the first experience that he posited.

Answer: Listen Stefania, I think I agree with this idea of Claudio's [Neri]. Because personal analysis gives a lot of inner growth, but at the same time it structures a personal narcissism, a feeling of identity, a closure of paradigms useful to carry on one's life that are a sort of potential rigidity within the group. If one then arrives at the group after a personal analysis, it is difficult for one to dismantle this armour in order to be able to rely on all the fusion within the group, on deep sharing, more affective than conceptual. I believe that inevitably coming from a previous personal analysis in the group one is less elastic, less available, unless one is struck on the road to Damascus, unless one understands that this thing serves to improve one's healing.

Question: Now you have reminded me of a circumstance in which, with regard to the different generations between ours and the present ones, halfway through the millennium when we began to see the products of the formation of the new generations from the point of view of psychoanalysts who observe the change with respect to tradition - well, I have a memory of that time, of a dinner at which you spoke in a way that was surprising to me at the time, you were talking about the language used by the analyst and you said well, in short, the analyst, if he cannot speak Italian, is not a psychoanalyst. Where by Italian we meant comprehensible language that was not cryptic, not *psychoanalytic*, or jargon. So it occurs to me that the group is perhaps conceived of as a constant, despite the fact that at the moment it is less idealized than in the past, but I believe that it is always conceived of as something that helps to preserve a certain constancy, a certain coherence, through the fact that the language is common, that the language is more about availability, listening, flexibility than the trappings, let us say, of individual psychoanalysis. What can you say on this point?

Answer: It seems a bit complicated to me, because I meanwhile have the impression that the fundamental function of these contexts of meditation or awareness or expansion, the fundamental component is silence. The capacity for silence, to pause within the silence, to take the silence a little further than one would like to interrupt it. And then the language one uses when coming out of silence is very important. And this language in my opinion must have an intrinsic conceptual quality, it must be able to say some very clear things that can be put in, but then it must also have a particular prosody, it must have a way of being carried a language, rhetorical, affective, but also of quality. So I think that what I say 'speaking Italian', I mean a general knowledge of language, not psychoanalytic, but language as a method of reaching the other, here it must be capable of being sophisticated, otherwise the function it performs is less sophisticated than it could be as an encounter. So, this is what I meant by 'speaking Italian'. To have this ability to also use a

way of speaking that is also affected by a person's general culture. If language remains too ordinary, it is difficult to formulate richer mental images. In the group there is even more. In the group there is the prevailing expression, i.e. everyone tries to say with their own language what is going on, what they are participating in. Then there is a group member who is able to say it with a diction that is adopted as the prevailing one. So: yes, that is what has to be said. Then there is this exchange also of prevailing expressions that resonate in my experience. That time Claudio said this, that time Stefania said that, that time it was formulated like this... as if they were pregnant and significant expressions of the object that was being assembled together. The experience, the situation, the particular anguish, the configuration of that moment. It also happens in personal analysis. It is those moments from which one begins again: this then is so. From that moment on it is said in synthetic terms with that word which at that moment meant it particularly meant it. A local jargon. In all analyses, a local jargon is constructed with which all the thinking behind it is taken for granted.

Question: Nevertheless, in the group and even more so in the training group, what counts is the *here and now* of the expression. So there is a balance between history and actuality in the group that is particularly sensitive, much more so than in individual analysis.

Answer: Yes, a bit paradoxical, as if it were a continuous topicality of breaking through where we had arrived before: then we understood this too; then we can add this; today we experience this; on this we found this formulation. It is a continuous topicality, a continuous here and now, but it makes history, because then it settles. And I remember the epochs of the experiential group, due for example to the significant participation of certain members: that time when that one came, then when the one who left how the group was reconstituted. That is, all the people who also pass through the group then represent milestones of an era of the group. So there is a history... I once wrote about it in an article... as an epic! That's it, like the group then has a history that is the epic of the group. And all of us, if you think about it, have those moments that then correspond to particular existential moments. Those moments that in the group this happened and in my life this happened.

Question: First [I would like to] thank you, because your words are extremely ordinary but extraordinarily clear and suggestive of meaning. So I thank you for that, I think it is valuable. I wanted to ask you if you agree, despite the fact that you work a great deal with groups, [if] you agree with my hypothesis that all in all in the last few decades, maybe one or two decades, maybe more, the idealization of the group as an ideal place, as an elective place to have the experience of transformation, the analytic experience and of

the bond, [the idealization] has been waning. That is, it seems that today individuals have a greater reserve, a greater need for individual, personal initiatives. I would like to ask you if you share this idea, that the idealized group of the late 1900s, let us say, has given way instead to a... if not devaluation, at any rate greater distance from that format let's say.

Response: Listen, I share this impression with regret, concern, because beyond the experiential group, the very reliance on groupality, on collectivity, on doing things together, on living together, was a fundamental instrument, even social, political, cultural throughout the end of the last century and the first years of this century, and it has faded. It has waned and I would like to better understand why. But certainly because, in the meantime, doing politics has changed. As if politics has become more professionalized, less grassroots, I don't know... the whole crisis of the university, the representation of the university, the riots in the streets. Maybe interrupted by some dramatic things, like the appearance of terrorism, all the problems... at least in short a historical context that discouraged and made people experience the group dimension as dangerous. And then there is, in my opinion, the whole role of the media that gives rise to a kind of false groupness. That is, this thing of being very connected, continually connected with social networks, of being inside all these rapid communication systems and all the narratives of social networks gives, in my opinion, a false feeling of belonging, of sharing, instead people reflux into an individuality that is not always an experience of personal functionality - as if to say, I mind my own business, I don't waste time because I mind my own business. Very often they are instead pockets of regression, of inhibition with narcissistic anxieties about how one is flowing from others, of recrimination over inequalities, that is, I have the impression that it is a false groupness that is detrimental to authentic being in a group. All of us I think have become more private, more isolated, I for one don't have all this energy to group, I don't know. I'm too busy, too busy. But we keep the idea of having had in the group a particular food, a particular nourishment.

Question: Here. This is certainly a theme that remains open and we certainly do not want, in this interview, to exhaust the theme of choosing whether to be part of a group or to be part of a personal analysis when faced with this question, this need. And certainly the last couple of years in particular have been so attacked by extreme experiences such as the pandemic and today's war news in short. Moreover, it is the first time for the current generation that there is a war in Europe, but a war also experienced in everyday information or through technological means. So, it is certainly an extraordinary experience, the results of which will perhaps be seen later. So, it seems that being in a group has also in itself become more difficult. Now it occurs to me that in the IIPG, in short, the scholastic tradition of the founding

Pollaiolo... that is, a young trainee was telling me of the enormous suffering that the students are experiencing, because not only have all the activities been transferred online, in other words, group activities, but they have even been formalised and increased in training hours online. So he said that there was also the group of teachers of the whole institute, which is showing signs of discomfort. In short, he said, there is a sign of great suffering because it seems to be very difficult to get the institutions to recognise the specific nature of this group tradition and therefore the need to enhance the presence and the exchange of presences to perhaps reconnect with what you said at the beginning, which was a unique tradition of an almost extraordinary experience that was done in a group. And so there is also this in today's generations. So many fears and so many also difficulties that have been created in the last 2 or 3 years in short.

Response: Listen, I share these concerns, which then also correspond to what is happening in the school, for example at the Psychoanalytic Society. There is this recourse to the possibility of participating online in so many things, which in the meantime is much more tiring despite starting from a comfort. I was there five minutes before, I clicked, I am with you, we are working together. But it's not that this is less tiring than going on a date, meeting, sitting down, being together... taking advantage of all those other psychosomatic elements of confidence, of belonging... that is, I have the impression that this specialisation greatly reduces all those non-collateral but significant aspects of learning together, of learning in presence, all those other psychosomatic elements of closeness, which are also relational, social learning, all those introibo let's say to situations, which instead help, help to carry out experiences. However, the inevitability of this method, not only because of the pandemic that has made it compulsory in so many things, but also let's say as a phenomenon of globalisation, of the attempt to annul distances. I connect with people who are in other cities, even the other day with a girl who called me from California... that is to say, things... extreme potentialities, but we don't know what they take away from traditional, relational nutrition. I think we will only understand something about this over time. We will understand what changes but we will not be able to prevent them from changing. That is to say, too powerful is the facilitation it gives precisely in relation to distances and globalisation. So it seems to me that we are being drawn into a becoming that is worrying but which we will only be able to understand a little at a time. We personally, me [and] you who are talking about the experiential group, I think we also add this to the nostalgia of the experiential group. And that is symptomatically significant. It means that really having experienced it gives us a special sense of gift. Then maybe it is simply that kind of narcissistic emphasis that one puts on all the

experiences of youth, but in short, we have the impression that it is a good thing we had it! That's it.

Question: Exactly. If you don't feel that you are being over-exploited... I'll ask you one last question and then we'll go back to our activities or even leisure, because today is Saturday, let's see. So, yes, something deserves to be mentioned among us today, that is, my impression, rightly or wrongly, is that the analyst can find it easier when the group is made up of enthusiastic people who have a desire to do research on the group, as we, analysts in training, might have been at the beginning when Francesco Corrao was interested in bringing Bion's studies and thus group studies to Italy and founding the analytic group. And certainly all the analysts who were part of that group, I think, helped the conductor Corrao to feel passion, enthusiasm for the work. In fact, I myself realized over time that when I worked with psychologists and operators in training, i.e. more specifically interested in group research and study, the group had greater tonicity than when it was a training group or a therapeutic group with people who did not have the same characteristics. Now I don't know if I am talking about a disciplinary narcissistic reinforcement or if I am really talking about a deep collaboration that can exist to produce that expansion of thought and experience that you were talking about at the beginning.

Answer: You know, I honestly couldn't answer that in a certain and clear way. Surely it is a reinforcement, surely it is a sharing of responsibility, surely it is a strong thematization of things. Whether it is then a facilitation to the constructive development of the group experience, because it is intentional, because it is shared on an intentional and emotional level, I don't know. Frankly, in my opinion the group is a rare diamond, because it has this ability to unpack the light, the ray of light, as if all the rays were applied to a particularly powerful polyhedral element. And I believe that this group functionality, if conducted well, if captured by a good leader, occurs in any group situation. I don't know how much membership, explicit motivation facilitate. You made me think of this thing that we have been going to the seaside in the same place in Tuscany for many years. So over the years we have made a group of friends who frequent the same small beach establishment. And there I, for better or worse, am the psychoanalyst and so this gives me a way of being seen, of being used, particular. I mean, you can't... I never manage to make people forget that I'm a Freudian psychoanalyst, it's something that conditions the encounter a lot. So we create these situations of the beach, of men, of umbrellas talking about politics, things... and many times within myself I do this thing of considering it a group and seeing it function with the same diffractive, associative potential, of constituting exemplary dictionaries as a work group. So the problem is how

the experience that happens is collected. If it is put in a specific order, if one collects it with a specific focus. There. I don't know if I have been clear enough.

Greetings: I think very clear and really also this addition of the image of the group of bathers seems wonderful. I not only thank you for me, I also thank you for the listeners and the readers who will listen to you, because it is very clear what you are saying, everything you have communicated. And in fact this image of the diamond group I think I would like to leave it just as the theme song of our conversation and create our farewell now here on this image, as well as on the group also beach, on the diamond group. So really thank you, Cono.

Group Psychoanalysis: Reporting on 50 Years of Work

Cono Aldo Barnà is a psychiatrist, teaching psychoanalyst of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI) and the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA). He has worked in various psychiatric units of the Italian Health System and has been supervisor of many social-health teams in various Italian cities. He was President of the Roman Psychoanalytic Center and Vice-President of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society. He has published numerous articles and books, including *Emergenze borderline*, FrancoAngeli.

E-mail: conoaldobarna@gmail.com

Stefania Marinelli is a psychologist, group psychoanalyst (IIPG) and (formerly) associate professor at Sapienza University of Rome. She is President of the Association for Research on Homogeneous Groups A.R.G.O and co-directs with Silvia Corbella *Gruppo: Omogeneità e differenze*, 'Group: Homogeneity and Differences'. She is on the editorial boards of several journals and research and Training institutions. She has published numerous articles and monographs. She edited with Claudio Neri: *Gruppoesperiennale*, Cortina.

E-mail: stefaniamarinelli2014@gmail.com