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Group Psychoanalysis: Reporting on 50 Years of Work



**Group and Gruppality of the Adolescent Mind
Interview with Savina Cordiale**

Edited by *Stefania Marinelli*

Question

Do you think, on the basis of your knowledge and experience, that the peer group in the adolescent period performs a particularly important and specific function? At what level, if at all, is the group fundamental?

Answer

In line with psychoanalytic thinking on the functioning of the adolescent mind, we can consider this phase of life as a process of transformation involving various psychic systems, some that continue to develop, others that form during this period of existence with specific characteristics and needs. The adolescent's psychic functioning attributes, in fact, an important role to the representation of external reality in the process of reorganisation of investments and conflicts, since the distribution of affective movements and needs emerging in the adolescent's living environment is reflected in the complex process of reorganisation and structuring of his mental functioning. The adolescent is thus involved on multiple fronts, since his conflictuality engages him on the side of the representational space, which relates internal and external representation, but also on the side of his actions and his interrelations with the external world. It is the external environment as a whole that for the adolescent has the delicate potential to be either a support or an obstacle to what Cahn (2000) defines as the process of subjectivation.

In fact, the specific developmental condition of adolescence, grappling with developmental tasks such as separation and individuation, sexuality and identity, lead the subject to engage in relational and intersubjective exchange with external reality in order to realise his or her own psychic growth process. This is the complex articulation that Gutton (2009) describes as the 'adolescent creation' that arises from pubertarius, understood as the recognition of a psychic apparatus, an intrapsychic life, and an unconscious world of one's own. In this direction, the possibility of thinking of adolescent mental functioning within group dynamics constitutes a natural evidence and resource. In this regard, Monniello (2010) emphasises how the passage from projective thinking, whereby other people represent an extension of ourselves, to the consideration of others as a source that opens up information and stimuli useful for the subjectivation process, represents a particularly important transition that characterises adolescence.

Subjectivation in adolescence, therefore, invariably involves and complicates the position of the peer group as a source of identifying reference, but also as an opportunity to discover the dimension of internal psychic groupality and its potential. Furthermore, psychic groupality in adolescence also assumes the important function of representing a sort of transitional field that nourishes, develops and ensures the vitality of the preconscious. The functionality of the preconscious is fundamental in adolescent psychic development. The preconscious is required to be a transitional space for the translation into words of the presentation of things, but it is also a space that can be traversed by affects. In this sense, a vital preconscious in the adolescent group mind accompanies the naming of affects, the mirroring, the sharing of difficult thoughts, the development of symbolic capacities, as well as promoting a sense of group belonging in facing the complex developmental challenges to which the adolescent psychism is called. I refer, for example, to the particular quantitative regime of identifications that takes the form of a veritable insatiable hunger that sustains the curiosity and attraction for the new, typical of adolescence. Linked to this are two other typical phenomena that mutually influence each other: the reshaping of the ego ideal and the use of the group as a new source for this instance. In adolescence, the ideal of the ego based on the infantile idealisation of parents undergoes a radical downfall, and a new ideal of the ego becomes urgently necessary in order to avert feelings of disenchantment and the risk of swerving between moments of exaltation, driven by fusion regression to archaic images of the self, and moments of depression. In such an emotional oscillation, the ego ideal can be said to represent a regulator of narcissistic homeostasis. In fact, while it tensions the Self in an effort to adapt to evolutionary goals, urging the setting in motion of narcissistic charges useful for its differentiation, at the same time it channels its resources, avoiding the risk of haphazardly directing instinctual charges towards other, less usable objects or towards objects that would

favour regression towards grandiose images, ultimately towards negative identities. Furthermore, in order to maintain the narcissistic balance, the adolescent's ego ideal, in addition to the internal situation, must cope with new and intense pressures, demands and influences from the external environment. In this climate in which the adolescent mind is enveloped, the peer group provides opportunities and objects for new identifications along with secrecy and solidarity, which facilitate separation from the old objects and alleviate the sense of guilt that the adolescent feels for his or her desires for individuation and differentiation from parental figures. Another fundamental element of adolescent subjectivation involving the ego ideal and the group concerns the choice of the new love object. The love experience, sentimental and sexual, usually takes place within the group and is influenced by the ego ideal which, especially at first, imprints on it those characteristics of mirroring or alteregoic bonding that is often very important for adolescent creativity.

Question

How would you define the nature of the bond that the adolescent has with the peer group?

Answer

The tendency to group and the attraction to the group are particularly felt by adolescents. The adolescent group, in evolutionary terms, represents a 'subjectivating agent', open to social, cultural trends, environmental pressures and everything that influences the individual in his or her daily life. Conviviality with peers conveys new psychic landscapes of socialisation as a phase-specific element, but above all, it encourages and supports the difficult and unprecedented process of distancing from parental figures. It is widely reported that, more than in previous generations, the peer group today represents an almost superior identifying element to the parental one, at least as an alternative. In the group, the identifying references seem to follow paths of closeness according to horizontal relations with those who are similar, rather than according to vertical relations with those who are different. Consequently, identities would be less defined and more diffuse, with the need for narcissistic contributions prevailing rather than object relations. On the other hand, the necessary adaptation to plurality that the group bond requires of the adolescent, and which translates into seeing the expression of his own individuality limited, seems to find meaning in the strong support that the group can offer to his fantasies of maturative development. Thus the group performs for adolescents central functions of defining values, of guaranteeing the elaboration of a future project, of providing an evolutionary perspective of one's own existence, of supporting the conquest of social visibility and the contractuality in underwriting ties and bonds, thus allowing

the adolescent to become part of a generational culture. On the opposite side, those adolescents who for different reasons have seen the possibilities of using the peer group as objects of identification absent or lacking, often having grown up without adequate narcissistic confirmations from their parents, cannot access and realise the affective and maturative group experience. The pathology of the transitional space, which characterises and unites the quality of the primary relationships of the members of the pathological adolescent group, is located primarily in the causal relationship that it founds and develops between personal conflictuality and the relationship with the world, even if the introjective and projective to-and-fro between the two poles proves decisive. Moreover, the genesis and structure of the pathology of the transitional space oblige one to take into account, in an equally decisive manner, the role of the external object in its reality, such as the role of society with its values and the weight of its multiple and complex determinants. This is what Winnicott (1974) emphasises from the earliest stage of development, through a statement to the effect that, in the subject, the qualities of the internal object depend on the existence, vital characteristics and behaviour of the external object. If the external object persists in its inadequacy, to be considered in the threefold direction of excess, insufficiency and incoherence, respective consequences are determined on the fate of the area of transitionality in the adolescent's path of subjectivation. It follows that, when the process of group subjectivation is hindered or blocked by the weight of childhood traumas, by histories of deprivation and disavowal, the adolescent falls prey to isolation or primitive forms of 'pseudo-grouping' such as that of the youth gang. In the youth gang, the developmental links with the Other and the mental functioning model characterised by the values and aims of the peer group are replaced by aggregations of adolescents imbued with projective, paranoid and clearly depressive aspects that annihilate hope in the future and relegate adolescents to an eternal present marked by the reiteration of destructive acts and the deficit of empathy towards the pain of the other. When the adolescent group aggregates into a gang, it completely overhauls its organisation, as it needs a leader to take power. A network of projective identifications and the presence of intense ties of interdependence push into the role of leader the one who, for personal reasons, has the greatest aptitude for deviant behaviour; at the same time, the leader co-opts those who will have to fulfil the mandate to carry out the behaviour acted out. In this direction, the search for identity in action and not in thought represents for this type of adolescent aggregation a form of attack on growth and the systems of civil coexistence, expressing itself with a functioning defined by Biondo (2020) as pack-like, which results in radical and rigid behaviour such as sadism, bullying, hooliganism, racism, vandalism, extremism and fundamentalism. Faced with such frameworks, but also in less extreme situations of symbolisation deficits affecting the evolutionary

socialisation of adolescents, the need to introduce appropriate treatment pathways to facilitate the activation or reactivation of the adolescents' evolutionary pathway in the peer group context is inescapable.

Question

In your clinical experience, have you sought technical devices to facilitate access to treatment for adolescents in general or for difficult adolescents, for example those more inclined to concreteness and action, even impulsive and violent action, rather than to thought processes and symbolisation? If so, can you describe some of them as examples?

Answer

The multidimensionality of adolescent needs, especially if we refer to pathologies of the ego-self system in which more or less precocious traumatic factors are pathogenetically in the foreground, requires a treatment environment that experiments with forms of response to malaise that allow different functions to be deployed. Listening to the adolescent and his or her problems implies sharing and co-constructing, with the adults of reference, a possible growth support project, in order to delineate the areas and resources that present themselves as potentially available for a working alliance. I am referring to what Jeammet (1999) described as the enlarged psychic space, to define the space constituted by people, places, ideals, groups, to which the adolescent unconsciously entrusts this or that part of his psychic instances, in this or that moment of his history. When it belongs to this space, the object is invested with a supplementary role and the possibility of effective therapeutic interventions can be based on it. The therapeutic devices present in such a real and mental environment of care, allow suffering adolescents to be able to draw on two facilitating conditions on the path of recomposition of their development: the support of the group and the use of mediating objects as a source of containment, mirroring and identification. In the group experiences with adolescents conducted by the therapists of the Associazione Romana per la Psicoterapia dell'Adolescenza e del Giovane Adulto (ARPAD) and in our theoretical-clinical reflections, it emerges how much psychoanalytic group psychotherapy with adolescents can activate psychic processes and dimensions of subjectivity that cannot be superimposed on those of individual therapeutic work. Working with the group one realises the various potentialities of expression of creativity and trust that group functioning can set in motion in all those who participate in the shared relational experience with 'more others'. In fact, the group constructs its own psychic apparatus, not referable to the simple sum of the psychic apparatuses of its members, characterising, as Kaës (2007) says, an unconscious psychic reality proper to multi-subjective ensembles. The group psychotherapeutic experience, moreover, favours the development of free associations in adolescents, a

functioning of the mind that is generative of psychic life. The perceptual systems are also activated, the sight of others, the many images stimulated by the continuity of perceptual exposure to the expressions of the body and mimicry of the other members, favour the work of representation, opening a pathway for the construction and narration of one's own dreams. A further characteristic of psychoanalytic group work is that it facilitates discussion on the meaning of the shared experience in which the possibility of using words to express one's own experiences relies on the verbal expressions of the other group members. Gradually, the free plural discussion allows one to discover the multiple facets of the self reflected in and by others, so that psychic grouping can bring the adolescent closer to observing himself, and interest him in the reflective condition in resonance with the thought developed by the group. I now turn to another type of group setting, the clinical device of the Integrated Psychoeducational Workshops of Rifornimento in Volo, a private social organisation with a psychoanalytic orientation that refers to the scientific culture and training tradition of ARPAd. Rifornimento in Volo includes, among its Areas of Work (Montinari, 2006), the clinical interventions of the Intermediate Area (Cordiale, Montinari, 2012) of which the Group Workshops are a part. The experiential device of the Group Workshops is aimed at adolescents who present different psychopathological pictures that have in common a serious difficulty in accessing a representative level and a developmental group socialisation. Indeed, these are adolescents who express, often urgently, a risk of arrest or serious distortion of the developmental process, to whom the different functions and reference figures of the integrated multifocal management of treatment can offer containment and the opportunity for a resumption of the developmental process (Cordiale, 2017). According to this treatment methodology, in the Group Workshops the "doing with", a concrete dimension of "being with", becomes a meaningful and structuring action insofar as it is inserted in an adult mental "environment" capable of making room, of adapting to the adolescent, of concretely and emotionally sharing activities that can favour the creation of a transitional, intermediate space in which the adolescent can access a first level of figurability and thus support the capacity for mentalisation. From a descriptive point of view, briefly, the Group Workshops are distinguished by age group and adolescent mode of functioning, the meetings are weekly, last two hours, and are conducted by a mono-professional pair of conductors (psychotherapists and psychologists in specialist training) or mixed by competence (psychological and educational) depending on the psychopathological needs of the group of patients. The semi-structured expressive activities and the use of games serve as facilitation tools to accompany the group in the difficult task of expressing their emotions, getting to know each other and making themselves known. I will now try to convey the climate of the workshop experience through a brief example of a

workshop meeting with a group of difficult adolescents who presented aspects of distrust, avoidance and control when they entered.

The conductors involve the group of adolescents in a common work by proposing to use a large sheet of wrapping paper to start preparing all together a poster that will be the sign of "that" workshop. The presenters immediately tell the teenagers that they will make several versions of it, "like rehearsals", at the end they will choose the one they like best. It is then a matter of sharing a large sheet of paper, teenagers and presenters, managing the physical space in which one moves, as well as that of the sheet, and putting on one's favourite colours, to paint a colourful background. The group of teenagers become curious about the conductors' use of tempera and begin to "rehearse", being able to show their concern about "what" to draw at the same time. The presenters return to the group that what matters at that moment is to draw the colour they feel is closest, that it is "abstract" painting. This definition of the abstract as something that can bind a concrete doing without subordinating it to a predefined form, constitutes a breakthrough for the group, legitimising it in the simple pleasure of applying colour. The children choose 'their' brushes and use pure colours in bright and deep tones, gestures become less restrained, the use of space around one's body widens to include, in glances and movements, the territories of companions and conductors. In the meantime, the simplicity of the task allows the children to begin to converse in a more relaxed, more personal way, communicating moods and feelings of satisfaction. An opening is opened in the group's inner world to the taste of sharing and mirroring.

Question

To correspond to the social level of the adolescent mind and relational needs, you have therefore developed in your work a trust in the group's resources. Have you also found, for example, a usefulness of group work not only with adolescents but also with operators and collaborators and in clinical group supervision? If yes, could you say that you have constructed a plural model of working with operators that is more appropriate to the specific and multiple needs of this phase of life?

Answer

In my professional practice, both in clinical and training work, group supervision is an important and exciting point of repere. As we know, the resilience and plasticity of an institutional framework of care is determined also and not only by its constituting itself as an external object, a concrete reality that provides the adolescent with an articulated model of functioning that is as close as possible to what his psyche lacks at that moment. The peculiarity of the institutional framework lies in offering itself as a

transformative container, in which different outlets for repetition derive from the staging of acts. Activating such a framework in the 'places' of care for adolescents is not only determined by the organisational level, what is at stake above all is the tightness of the group of caregivers to guarantee the adolescent a time of narcissistic restoration necessary for a generational time and identificatory conflict to be set in motion again. On the intra-institutional side of Refueling in Flight, in which all the adolescent care devices provide for internal supervision as an integral part of the devices themselves, the regular supervision meetings of the working group have the task of articulating different levels that require listening skills, containment and empathy, as well as attention to technical, methodological and meaning attribution skills. These skills supported by training in psychoanalytic adolescent psychotherapy outline, in the working group, an understanding of the adult/adolescent relationship in the light of individual, group and even institutional dynamics. In such a climate, group supervision makes it possible to work on specific emotions, rendering less powerful, for example, dynamics of omnipotence/impotence in order to transform them into a shared thought. Attention to psychic groupality allows the working group to fulfil its central task: to elaborate figurations, transmit knowledge and motivation to "pause and reflect" as well as maintain a vital internal setting, understood as that space of our mind in which we can welcome the other (Carbone, Cimino, 2017). Furthermore, in the methodological perspective proper to inter-institutional mediation (Novelletto, 2009), the punctual work of the inter-institutional group made up of all the figures involved in the treatment, allows the adolescent to be given back an image that is as integrated as possible where the action of the entire group of caregivers becomes the possible place and space for the development of the adolescent's psychic life (Curto, Natali, 2021). Consolidating these functions allows both the intra- and inter-institutional team to be available to be used as a container, understood in the Bionian sense, capable of elaborating modes of intervention while always maintaining the focus on the person and the functioning of the adolescent patient.

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