



**ARGO** Associazione per la Ricerca sul Gruppo Omogeneo  
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*Group psychoanalysis: 50 years of work report*



The experiential group between training and change

**Interview with Vincenzo De Blasi**

*Edited by Stefania Marinelli*

**1. Question:** *First as an expert in the subject, and then as a teacher, you participated in and organised experiential groups with formative value at the Faculty of Psychology for students. Can you say which model you followed for this?*

**Answer:** The model followed referred to the theory and technique of demand analysis, complementing the theory of experiential groups and, more generally, psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

In particular, on a few occasions, as facilitator and co-learner I adopted the group device with the object of mediation, particularly with meetings called "the art of dreaming". The possibility of sharing dreams within a group experience, which starts from G.Lawrence's intuition in the application of the Social Dreaming technique (Introduction to Social Dreaming, Borla, Rome, 2008), helps to know and unveil the different levels of psychic reality that characterise the transitional area where creativity is born and develops.

In a Social Dreaming matrix, the experience of sharing the dream material in a group, represented - and thus evoked through the representations that characterise the different modes of expression freely chosen by the participants - also amplifies the social value of the symbol and dreams themselves, creating a space for the integration of the complex emotions that convey significant relationships, even with respect to the institutional and work reference container.

In the methodology that intends to stimulate individual and group psychological work on the art of dreaming and dreaming, these aspects are amplified and exemplified through the invitation to dream narrative and its characterising elements, starting from a creative stimulus, by means of the various representative channels (painting, sculpture, music, visual arts, etc.) through which the individual symbolic area is socially manifested.

The "art of dreaming" experience is designed for a group of 20-25 participants, and envisages one or more meetings (lasting about 3 hours each), consisting of an initial short theoretical part, in which the main psychological and psychoanalytical theories on dreams and the psychodynamics of creativity are briefly presented through lectures and audio-visual teaching materials, followed by a second practical/experiential part in which participants are invited to freely represent their individual dream potential in groups, for example through drawing.

More generally, in the experiential device it can be said that the dream "naturally" tends to configure itself as a mediating element in the group and, therefore, facilitates the process of mentalising emotions and experiences, promoting self-awareness and knowledge through a synthesis of similarities in the field. In activating a dynamic of interpersonal mirroring, the representation of the dream through drawing acts as an impulse for the processes of group associative chain, thematic amplification, self-representation (individual and group) (Neri, 1985), and favours the establishment of more circumscribed ties that "give meaning to the myths of humanity and to the imaginary they convey" (Vacheret, 1995).

In the experiential group thus conceived, dreams emerge with a living, factual and symbolic presence, in a here and now where it is possible to experience new bonds between the members and new meanings of past and present experience; from such premises, the representational area of the "as if", both in an individual and interpersonal key, is extended and nurtured through the evocative potential of a shareable element, and experienced in an intermediate space between fiction and reality.

In the experience, there is thus a continuous transition between individual and multi-personal imagery, between the internal images of the individual compared with those of the other participants, between the individual ego and the group ego.

Through the group dimension, images are elaborated in a broader sense and individuals can draw thoughts and emotions from the established field, benefit from new identifying elements, regain possession of contents originally their own that they find transformed and made manifest. Within a training dimension, the Social Dreaming experience allows one to focus on the dimension of "knowing how to be" within the institutional context of reference.

**2. Question:** *I remember your work in the Faculty in Rome and L'Aquila with students in small groups: you used scripture, dream telling, role playing, and the participants were productive and enthusiastic. Perhaps you can describe a model of yours that you personally helped to create?*

**Answer:** Again, in addition to the Social Dreaming device, I used the mediator object in the group as a tool for activating co-dreaming. The literature in the psychodynamic field that describes the use of mediation objects in groups and their effectiveness with respect to the objectives defined by the reference setting is now extensive and consolidated.

Among the methodologies to date, for example, Photolangage (1) provides an elegant and ample demonstration of how the evocative potential of "cultural objects" in a therapeutic or training group situation manage to facilitate the processes of communication and mirroring between members, as well as the mentalisation of experiential experiences in the here and now of the established field.

The 'cultural objects' that can be used as mediation tools emerge in the group device through three types of functional quality: a) link between primary and secondary processes; b) transformation of unconscious phantasms and preconscious fantasies; c) mediation between the body and the social field (Kaës, 1996).

More generally, therefore, it seems that the mediating element in the group facilitates the process of mentalising emotions and experiences and promotes self-awareness and knowledge through a synthesis of similarities in the field; By activating a dynamic of interpersonal mirroring, it also acts as an impetus for the processes of group associative chain, thematic amplification, self-representation (individual and group) (Neri, 1985), and encourages the establishment of more circumscribed ties that "give meaning to the myths of humanity and the imaginary they convey" (Vacheret, 1995, p. 15 ).

In accordance with Vacheret's (1995) and Kaës's (1996) theoretical understanding, in the group field mediating objects thus have a highly evocative and transformative potential: literary texts, photographs, musical excerpts, film projections, paintings, emerge with a living, factual and symbolic presence, in a here and now where it is possible to experience new bonds between the members and new meanings of past and present

experience; from such premises, the representational area of the 'as if', both in an individual and interpersonal key, is extended and nurtured through the evocative potential of a sharable element, and experienced in an intermediate space between fiction and reality. The mediating object is malleable by those who participate in the group experience and, for this reason, transforms imaginaries. It therefore contributes to the integrating function of the imaginary. It is through the latter that the unconscious can become conscious. The mediating object serves as support, supports projections, supports productions, tolerates contradictions, it is neither me nor the other, it supports both, it is third between the other and me, intermediary. It has a double polarity between the object and the subject, the inside and the outside, and it also has a double polarity between its side inscribed in reality, in materiality, visible, tangible, manipulable, and its side of representativity metaphorising another reality.

The idea of using the object of mediation in the group stems from the possibility of integrating the theory of the group field (Neri, 1985) and of the experiential group (Neri, Marinelli, 2009) with the theoretical-technical directives of methodologies of recognised value, such as Photolanguage and Social Dreaming (2).

The prior assessment of the demand for "institutional" intervention refers to the device and its contextual location; in this sense, therefore, it is a significant part of the group field. Experience over time makes it possible to "adapt" the method, to "calibrate" it with respect to the institutional specificities in which it is presented, carefully preparing the choice of the object of mediation, reflecting on the degree of implication that this is going to arouse with reference to the peculiarity of the training field.

In training groups with experiential characteristics, the objects of mediation are conceived in such a way as to induce an evolution in the signification of the experience in the here and now and in the mentalisation of the emotions related to it.

Moreover, they can refer to the affective symbolisations evoked by the context and, consequently, to the group's collusive and phantasmatic dynamics in relation to this. In this sense, the experiential characteristic of the group thus constituted goes on to define a representational space between a logical, 'secondary' thought, organised - in view of the task presented - and the mobilisation of a more emotional, 'primary' thought - the one instead evoked by the very nature of the mediating object - which promotes an associative dynamic such that the subject is invited to create a more cognitive logic (secondary process) starting from the link with the ana-logical valence of one's own internalised images and affects (primary process).

The basic care and creativity in choosing the object of mediation is in tune with the fact that these should not be overly direct, lengthy or complex.

In bridging the gap between fiction and reality, it is therefore preferable to avoid an overly 'intellectual' formulation of the interaction dynamic, which would saturate the field of symbols, representations and associative thinking. The starting point of the method is to reflect on the social representations and fantasies evoked by the context of reference according to the specificities of the training field, both on an institutional and individual level.

In the field of psychological training, it is interesting to consider the symbolic fantasisations that go to define the collusive structure of the individual and the group with respect to the institutional context of reference: ideals, expectations, emotions with respect to the role and the professionalising process in itinere (Carli, Paniccia, *Il gruppo in psicologia clinica*, Carocci, Roma, 1988).

The method's peculiarity is also such that it greatly facilitates taking the floor in front of the group, the pleasure of exchanging and being in the group, of functioning and thinking, even through new and creative modalities, perhaps never experienced before.

It also supports imaginary exchanges and productions - in their individual and group dimensions - while also favouring identification and interpersonal dynamics.

The use of the mediation object in the group ultimately enables a 'suprapersonal' interpretation of the experience. The conductor invites participants to suspend for a moment the individual view of experience in the here and now and to try to think and associate in group terms. This, starting from an overall "reading" of what happened in the here and now of the experience.

In other words, participants are invited to move from the "I" to the "We", from the subjective of participation in the experience to an "I-group" through a new way of understanding that leads towards a form of thinking that is "non-existent" and "non-thought" before the very constitution of the experience just lived.

Such a dynamic shifts the focus to the possibility of accessing a "known not known" or "not thought" as an unsaturated mode of thought, useful for grasping the characteristics of the non-finiteness of the psyche and the group field as an emotional-phantasmatic constellation and trans-personal repository.

The object of mediation has an enormous evocative potential and demonstrates an inseparable link with affect, through a natural process that is constituted on the basis of thought nexuses; presented in a group, it creates an area of play contextualised by the question and the choice that activate at an unconscious level the dialectic between the primary and secondary elements of the subjective psyche and the group psyche. The object of mediation in the group, in other words, operates a cathartic effect with respect to each person's inner representations, sustained by the affective

resonance it provokes. In the experience, there is thus a continuous transition between individual and multi-personal imagery, between the individual's inner images compared with those of the other participants, between the individual ego and the group ego. Through the group dimension, images are elaborated in a broader sense and individuals can draw thoughts and emotions from the established field, benefit from new identifying elements, reappropriate contents originally their own which they find transformed and made manifest.

This peculiarity has two main effects on the group experience: 1) "containment" in an internal setting defined by the question and the poem; 2) "play", in the emotional oscillation between the individual and social dimensions of the experience.

To express the nature of the processes activated in the group through the use of the mediation object, it is useful to refer to an experiential exemplification.

**3. Question:** *Would you like to add your thoughts and observations on the topics discussed?*

**Answer:** Along the path of belonging to ARGO, I have gradually gained the awareness that the group dimension, in its various applications, reveals itself as a methodological tool for learning from experience, and orients training towards learning processes: 1) knowing how to be, i.e. the implementation of the "announced change" during the training path; 2) transformation, which allows one to be oneself through the working through of the experiential journey; 3) the specific personal style, understood as the optimal distance from the reference theory; 4) the creative synthesis between the human Self and the professional Self.

For these reasons, the experiential group makes it possible to experience a series of "meta-theoretical" elements, capable of reconfirming the continuity that must inevitably be recognised between psychotherapy and clinical psychology and between the latter and basic psychology.

In extreme synthesis, these elements consist of:

- the symbolic dimension
- the concept of the Unconscious;
- the theories of learning;
- the concept of relationship and transference;
- the concept of setting;
- from the clinical method.

From such a perspective, the importance of the experiential group in clinical training is revealed in the continuous alternation between three levels: 1) the

dynamics actualised by the group in reality on the basis of the relational modalities of the individuals; 2) the "as if" acted out in the group dynamics and in the rules of the setting; 3) the "meta" level (re-narration) on thinking about the same dynamics (Carli, 1988).

Exposure, "relational play" and re-narration, in the triple space of reality, fiction and reflection, stimulate group members to move alternately in different roles and functions, as persons, actors and spectators within a shared and co-participated field.

In this way, all participants become the protagonists of a co-constructed experience that allows them to discover the intersections between the different planes of the training project and experience the sensations of unreality, relational paradoxes and emotional confusion (phenomenologically manifested in collusive fantasies, defensive modes and attempts to reorganise 'dispersed' emotions) (Resnik, 1986).

Starting from these dynamics, the moments of reflection and metacommunication on the complex experiential experiences allow, through the analysis of the phenomenology that emerged, to lead the group from a state of

undifferentiation to one of emotional differentiation.

The formative specificity of the experiential group thus consists in the exceptional possibility of alternating "acting" and "reflection", in a formative container that allows the different levels of the learning process to be metabolised in the best possible way.

The experiential group thus enhances the dynamic complexity of the setting (as understood in the clinical and psychotherapeutic sphere) through the articulated use of the "formative task" and the emotional area (Mazzanti, 1990), favouring the alternation of primary and secondary modes of thought and their synthesis; in parallel, it facilitates continuous interaction between the participants and promotes a dynamic of interdependence projected towards a more functional and effective regulation of the individual parameters of "position", "negotiation" and "mediation" in relation to the Other from Self and the co-shared emotional constellation.

Being "in a group" and being aware of one's own and others' existence - with all the risks and opportunities linked to the "group project" - make the various types of "thoughts thought together" "successful" and create a sense of belonging that certainly encourages more "comfortable" relational experiences.

Group training that overdetermines the importance of experience (not only in the areas defined by clinical psychology) represents the continuum of an event - the training event - where transformation and a process of change are at play that is existential even before being professional.

In this sense, group dynamics becomes an object of study and a laboratory of experience, transversal to the various fields and subjects of study, not to look

down on what are the other formative dimensions of learning, but to inform them of a community that contains a human universe made up of limits and weaknesses, of resources and potential, of People who precisely in the collective, as a whole, find the strength not to lose themselves and the courage to find themselves again.

### **Greetings and thanks**

I would like to sincerely thank Prof. Stefani Marinelli, who together with other teachers of mine, such as Prof. Paolo Cruciani, Prof. Claudi Neri and Dr. Silvia Corbella, has been an indispensable reference point for all experiences in the ARGO group over the years.

Moreover, her figure has been a precious human, deontological and professional model for me. In this sense, I feel fortunate. With competence and humanity, ever since my university training and for most of my training, Stefania Marinelli has helped me in becoming and being a psychotherapist, showing me trust, even when I had little of it, accepting my personal equation, while providing many theoretical and technical points of reference that I have integrated with the skills I acquired during my specialisation in clinical psychology and psychoanalytic psychotherapy, all elements that for me today are essential in adequately carrying out the complex clinical work that I try to honour daily in the analysis room.

### **Notes**

1. Photolangage is a psychoanalytically oriented group conducting technique, which involves the use of photography in order to facilitate verbal and representational exchanges between participants. Photolangage was born in Lyon in 1965 from the joint efforts of a group of psychologists who worked with adolescents and who soon had the opportunity to verify in the field how powerful the facilitation of verbal expression was offered by the mediation of the use of black and white photos. The Photolangage group is divided into two parts: in the first part the patients are asked a question on the basis of which they can observe some photos that have been chosen by the operators; they will have to choose one of the available ones, the one that seems closest to the proposed theme. The second half involves each member of the group taking it in turn to present their photo, when they feel it is most appropriate. At the end of each presentation the other group members can make comments associating themselves with the content of the photo or with what has been said about it.

2. For an extensive introduction to the two methodologies, please refer to the monothematic issues in the catalogue of the telematic journal [www.funzionegamma.it](http://www.funzionegamma.it).

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