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Group Psychoanalysis: 50 years of work report



Experiential group with object mediator

Interview with Lilli Romeo

Edited by Adelina Detcheva

Question: How can it be defined, what is an experiential group?

Answer: Experiential groups, as we understand them, were born as research and training tools and, in continuity with their origins, as such we continue to use them in our clinical and scientific practice. Moreover, it could not be otherwise, in view of their specific model; of the questions they answer, which are never for therapeutic intervention; of the most varied contexts, often institutional, but not only, in which they find ample scope for practice. They originated as situations for training in the recognition of group phenomena from lived experience. This is how they are defined in the Red Book of Experiential Groups. It is a text that has never been published but which contains the first writings produced by the practitioners /psychoanalysts who pioneered applied research on the model, first as participants (the very first experiential groups were held by Francesco Corrao in the early 1970s and were addressed to SPI social workers and psychoanalysts who had requested them), and then as group leaders,

especially since they were widely used in the academic sphere in prof. Claudio Neri, first (1975), and then Prof. Marinelli both at La Sapienza in Rome and at the University of L'Aquila.

Experiential groups are instruments of research and training in that they allow for a continuous investigation of the group and the phenomena observed in it, both in relation to group dynamics and to any phenomena, including those of clinical significance, that may manifest themselves there. They also allow the acquisition and development of the ability to work in a group in a cohesive and cooperative dimension, even in difficult emotional conditions.

The specific methodology of intervention that characterises them received a first fundamental imprinting, if we could say so, and we will perhaps have the opportunity to talk more about this in the course of our conversation, from the model of working with groups developed by Bion. Just thinking of Bion, when we speak of formative experience we refer to the possibility of "living" something and, above all, to the possibility of thinking and making sense of what one is experiencing; of transforming tensions and perceptions, more or less conscious, into more evolved elements and thoughts. In this sense, experience implies not only the attainment of new knowledge, but also a transformation of the meanings of the reality experienced and of the person experiencing, as well as of the group.

The model has essentially transformative and cognitive functions, while the therapeutic function, often fantastically evoked in academic contexts by the students participating, for example, remains more in the background. It is possible to identify differences in the meaning and function of experiential groups, depending on the context in which the group is conducted and the purposes for which it was created.

For instance, in the case of groups not aimed at students or trainees, it is the formative function understood as an opportunity to learn group dynamics, although present, that remains more in the background (this is not the purpose for which the group is founded or the participants request it), whereas the primary function of the experience in these cases is to foster the participants' own processes of knowledge, awareness and change. And it is clear that for the correct direction, so to speak, of these different functions, the ability of the analyst holding the group to appropriately direct its analytical function is of primary importance.

Question: What are the contexts in which it is possible to practice the experiential group?

Answer: The specific peculiarities of the model have allowed the practice of experiential groups in the most varied areas, even outside of university contexts or specifically training for mental health workers and professionals,

where in Italy they were born and have found primary and widespread use. Today they are widely used in many different areas of intervention: in social/health institutions for the training of operators and the understanding of institutional dynamics, for example; in schools, in projects aimed at the training of both students and operators (teachers, school operators in various capacities) and families; in associations; in cultural centres and even in professional studios, for groups of people who meet around a theme, for example, when an experience of growth, awareness, transformation is requested or desired, without any therapeutic or curative purpose. In the university sphere, experiential groups have performed and continue to perform the function for which the model was created and for which its use is now largely consolidated: they constitute, and the testimonies of the students who have taken part in them confirm this, that important opportunity for learning, observation and direct knowledge of group phenomena which we have already mentioned.

It is not infrequent, however, that participants, at the end of the course, report an experience of change and transformation/evolution, in terms of better knowledge and self-awareness. This occurs in academic as well as other contexts.

The first text published on experiential groups, edited by Prof. Marinelli and Prof. Neri, in 2011, in addition to the contributions of various analysts who have held experiential groups for several years (among these is my reflection on the possibility or otherwise that fantasies, expectations and transformative and change processes analogous to those in therapeutic groups are activated in the experiential group), includes some interviews conducted by a then graduate student, Benedetta Pazzagli, who I recall had participated in that academic year in an experiential group held by me. For the preparation of the dissertation she would have discussed with Prof. Marinelli, she had interviewed some students who had participated in university experiential groups and had agreed to give their testimony. The aim was, among other things, to understand the meanings they attributed to the experience itself. I have the text here, we could read together extracts from some of the testimonies (p.193). Here, for example, the first girl interviewed, Mariarosa, who, moreover, was at her second group experience (the first had been in the previous year as part of the training offered for another course directed by Prof. Marinelli) reported that she had decided to take part for the second time, confident that it would be a good experience in this case too, with the idea that it would enrich her and help her get to know herself (p.193); recalling her first experience, she also refers to her fantasy of the therapeutic nature of the group: "...the first time I had the fantasy that it was a therapeutic group, that it could help me to enucleate some of my problematic knots..." and in giving an evaluation of the experience she says: "...through

this path I have learnt to know myself better and not to be afraid of what we really are, of those parts we do not recognise...". (p.195).

Dina, on the other hand, says '...I didn't think it was a therapeutic experience, also because we were warned that it wasn't; however, perhaps in the end it was for me [...] I went through a whole process that helped me because I never thought I would be able to speak in a group (p.197). [...] She reports that she went from an image of herself as a bare tree to that of a blossoming tree [...] seeing that others were interested in what I was saying continued to put shoots on the tree and this was an important experience...' (p.198). (p.198). Such testimonies clearly appear, in my opinion, as indications not only of a tension towards change in the participants, but also of the improved self-knowledge that the experience allows.

He believes he observed a similar evolution in the group as well: "...as the sessions went on, the other people who were in the same position as me were talking [...] so I think the same transformation that I had, the others also had" (p. 199) [...]. He defines it as 'An experience to have! [...] not only with the purposes of the examination, but to 'live more' [...] its function is that of an awareness raising, a beginning of transformation [...] so I learned to grow...' In her concluding remarks, the interviewer reports that even the most critical subjects, gave a positive reading of the experience saying that they were ready to recommend it to all their colleagues, in order to better understand the group mechanisms studied in class through their direct experimentation in the group field; for the achievement of a better understanding of self, of relationships with others, of the possibility of a thinking together and so on... (pp. 226/227).

Just as effectively, the experiential group, with or without a 'mediating object', can be applied in the most diverse institutional and working contexts, companies, health and social facilities in general (libraries, toy libraries, psychophysical wellbeing centres, etc.), in order to better investigate issues relating to the institutional functioning itself, to internal relational dynamics, or of general educational interest.

Question: Which, in your opinion, can be considered the theoretical and clinical reference models?

Answer: In Italy the birth and practice of experiential groups derives from the research on group formation started in the second half of the 1960s, on the initiative of some operators of the Institute of Psychiatry of the University of Rome (among them Neri, Barnà, Correale, Adelaide Palmieri.). The first theoretical and technical models of reference were Basaglia's, with the large assembly meetings; the model of the French T-Group (Lewin) and Spaltro's, which, in Italy, was based on the French one; models of a psychoanalytic matrix, such as Anzieu and Lebovici's psychodrama, and,

more specifically, the Bionian model of the small group with an analytical function.

In those same years, in fact, Francesco Corrao, who was the first to bring Bion's thought to Italy, had started research on the small group with an analytical function, precisely by conducting the first experiential groups in which analysts and students of the Institute of Psychoanalysis in Rome and social and health workers participated.

Over time, with the birth of the 'Pollaiolo', the Group Research Centre also led by Corrao, alongside the models mentioned and evolving from them, others were elaborated that became equally important references for understanding group phenomena, even in experiential groups.

I am referring to Corrao's notions and models of field and institutional field, as well as the Bionian notions of group thought, of transformation in K and evolution in O, of individual/group oscillation and again of Anzieu's group illusion, of Claudio Neri's commuting. Up to more recent models, such as Kaës' isomorphic/homomorphic oscillation processes, for example, and Prof. Marinelli's notion of homogeneity and homogeneous group.

The commonality of elements between the participants is always found in experiential groups, both at a more superficial level, in terms of social and cultural characteristics, and also of status, identity, belonging, common interests (think, for example, of groups that meet around a theme, or those for operators working in given institutions), and at a deeper level, think of archaic and primitive defensive mechanisms (introjective, projective, incorporative), of Bionian basic assumptions, as modes of functioning of the group mind; the unconscious fantasies that are poured into the group field. These elements, which aggregate among themselves contributing to forming the group psychic organisation, although they risk immobilising the group's mental activity on defensive functions, if suitably channelled and elaborated by the group's γ function, can perform an important integrative and transformative function through, for example, their capacity to favour the phenomenological representation of the group's homogeneous theme(s) and mobilising, at the same time, the formative and transformative potential of the experience.

Question: Do you think that an experiential group with a formative purpose for university students and trainees can represent an experience, albeit brief and delimited by an established context, with analytical qualities and aims?

Answer: Although I think it is necessary to make significant differences between an experiential group held in an academic context and an experiential group addressed to students in training, for obvious reasons (I am referring to the limitations, so to speak, deriving from the specificities and qualities of groups held in an academic context whose duration is limited,

they take place in an institutional context different from that of psychoanalytic training institutions, etc.) I would certainly say yes. This is certainly made possible by the methodological orientation chosen, which is that of the small group with an analytical function. The group's analytical function is already pertinent to it, and it is in the group that it develops.

It is naturally activated and guided by the analyst who holds the group, whatever the context, academic or otherwise, and whatever the purpose for which it was set up, but it is always operative when a group mental field is activated.

In fact, the group field functions as a micro-universe, both material and mental, Corrao would say, that investigates itself, thanks precisely to the dimension of koinonia that is established between the participants and to the reflexive connection between the external and internal worlds of individuals and of the group itself, which the area of common belonging allows. Knowledge derives from participation and from the possibility that the group offers of constructing this common intellectual, emotional and phantasmatic area of belonging, which allows for the sharing, among participants, of their experiences, experiences, emotions, fantasies, narratives, etc.

The analytical function suitably guided by the analyst will allow the mental activity of the group, and even more so the individual and group "digestive" functions, respectively α and γ , to process the elements poured into the field by the participants, favouring the passage from a mode of functioning of a more emotional type to one of a more cognitive type, that is, more inclined to the attainment of knowledge (transformation in K) and, subsequently, also to the promotion of the transformative processes indivisubsequently, also to the promotion of more evolved individual and group transformative processes (evolution in O).

Question: Do you think that the formative purpose can be understood as a mediating object?

Answer: The question you ask me is interesting and can certainly open to multiple reflections that testify to the complexity of the issue. It occurs to me that in the Psychoanalytic Society there is a lively debate on didactic analysis, on what its function is. Can we make similar reflections between the two training models, about the purposes for which they were established and their actual functions?

The issue that arises and on which I think it is useful to question is whether training can/should be considered an internal object or an external object... or both... Interesting...! and, for example, whether the purpose for which an analytical pathway is started, especially by an analyst in training, or by a university student, or rather, I would say, the frame of mind with which one

prepares for it or undertakes it, is more oriented to the willingness and curiosity to have a profound cognitive experience, or to the need, so to speak, to respond to an institutional request and to have to learn the techniques necessary to carry out a profession, or prepare for a university examination... It is clear that in the two cases the sense, the function of the training experience - because in both cases, although differently connoted, it can be considered as such -, and its very outcomes, may be different... It seems superfluous to say that, in the case of a trainee in training, the analyst's analytical function is much deeper and more vigilant, not least because the context, including the institutional context in which the experience takes place, is different, in grasping possible distortions of meanings of the experience itself and also careful in bringing out such distortions in order to better orient the candidate's awareness...

But returning to the way in which the formative function can be understood, I think again of homogeneity. How can we consider homogeneity? Can we consider it an action, an object... a container capable of acting as a mediating object, as Prof. Marinelli would say, i.e. capable of catalysing the most primitive elements of the mind (emotional experiences, fantasies, expectations...) that are connected to it and that are introduced into the bi-personal or group field, which constitute the primary analytical objects from which an analytical function can be activated to favour their evolution, the evolution of the experience itself and connote its quality.

In this sense, and analogically, could we perhaps say 'yes', that the formative purpose could be understood as a container, as a mediating object? Perhaps... in the sense that it could orient the meaning of the experience, depending on the fantasies, expectations that are catalysed there...?

In any case, it remains fundamental to know whether or not the analytic function is active in the experience..., which, as Corrao said, allows the connection between the different levels of reality (fantastic, real, symbolic) operating in a given context, especially the formative analytic one, and makes its transformation possible.

Question: In your opinion, could the mediating object commonly used in these groups take something away from the group's analytical function? Or on the contrary facilitate it?

Answer: The introduction of certain constituent elements designed for the academic context has endowed the experiential group with characteristics that distinguish it from other training models. These include the time limit, the request to prepare a written work or other form of expression to represent the experience at the end of the course, the use of literary text: at the beginning of the experience, in fact, the conductor proposes a literary text to the participants, with a preferably group plot, of which he or she briefly

narrates the contents. The text may or may not be read by the participants, but it can offer them associative and creative stimuli around which, if they wish, they can initiate participation in an experience that, due to its characteristics, is often perceived as perturbing.

Over time, then, mainly in contexts other than the university, the various conductors, in order to facilitate the sharing of the experience and encourage an emotional exchange between participants, began to use and still use mediating objects other than the literary text, such as artistic images, for example, and/or audio-visual stimuli such as films or short film sequences, appropriately selected.

I, for example, often resort to the artistic image(s), as I often prepare short video sequences, lasting about 6 to 8 minutes, with a succession of images specially selected for the specific experience.

I preferentially choose this type of stimulus because I think that the artistic image constitutes a primary element that is able to come into profound contact with the inner world of the individual, create a link between inner and outer reality, and allow expression and re-signification.

The aim is always to offer participants the opportunity to share an experience, working, for example, on a theme. But even more, that of fostering a better knowledge of Self and others, through communication and sharing - in a group device - of new ideas and conceptions of reality.

Art, in fact, in addition to reflecting the vision of the world of those who produce it, the way they observe or dream about it, as Van Gogh would say, is capable of communicating, metaphorically, the link that exists between individual human reality and social reality, and facilitates communicative exchanges. For all these reasons, I think it is an effective aid in group work and with groups.

I think that, in some cases, the presentation of an albeit brief sequence of images, analogous to the presentation of a film or film sequence, can be less 'disturbing' to participants than a single image.

In my opinion, we can consider the image as a 'chosen fact' understood, in the Bionian sense, as an element capable of giving meaning, in condensed form, to an idea (Bion, 1996). It therefore contains within itself a multiplicity of other images, emotions, thoughts, intense and not always clearly intelligible and narratable, and has the power to activate equally intense multiple identification, projective and symbolisation processes.

This can make the encounter with the image more complex and destabilising than that with a narrative or filmic plot, which already offer a succession of images, the presence of numerous protagonists, one or more coherent narratives... All these elements facilitate not only innumerable identification and expressive possibilities, but also transformative and evolutionary ones of the aforementioned psychic processes, just as they offer multiple expressive and transformative possibilities to the emotions and thoughts of the

readers/users.

I have applied the model of the experiential group with the artistic image in the most diverse fields, from educational to playful-expressive. In workshops, academic seminars, and conferences, it is a valuable tool whenever the speaker wants to combine theoretical information with an effective and stimulating communicative medium, capable, among other things, of facilitating communication and exchange with the audience.

I do not think at all, therefore, as you have been able to understand, that the use of the mediating object can limit the group's analytical function, on the contrary, I believe that when wisely proposed and appropriately metabolised in its possible meanings by the group's thought, it can only facilitate its pivotal processes, that is, the cognitive and transformative one (transformation in K and evolutions in O), moreover recursively, the latter being, as we know, never completely saturated but in continuous evolution.

Question: Can you describe some examples drawn from your experience in the use of the mediating object?

Answer: I could cite several, starting with the first ones, or the first one held at university as part of the courses directed by Prof. Marinelli, when I was still a student in training at the IIPG, to those held subsequently, in other contexts - from schools, to cultural centres, to experiences even of themed seminar meetings, etc..

Two come to mind, held at very different times in my professional experience.

The first was a group held in a middle school, as part of a project carried out several years ago by the VI (then VIII municipality) of Rome and aimed at preventing school drop-out. I took part in that project with a proposal for a training course aimed at ATA staff that was designed to enhance and promote recognition of the importance of the pedagogical function of ATA staff. ATA personnel in schools include, as we know, administrative, technical and auxiliary staff. The proposal was open to all, but the greatest sensitivity and willingness was expressed by the school staff, who were the only ones to choose to participate.

I believe that the pedagogical function of school staff should by no means be underestimated and is very important. They observe children's lives from different vantage points from those of teachers and headmasters, both inside and outside the school, and are often able to establish meaningful relationships of mutual trust and affection with them, which can also constitute very important resources for the containment of the phenomenon of dispersion, if, however, this function of theirs is recognised and enhanced institutionally. In this sense it was unfortunate, for example, that the other professional figures did not agree to participate.

However, on that occasion, as a complement to a short cycle of meetings more of a didactic/training nature, I proposed the viewing of the film, 'A scuola', by Leonardo di Costanzo, a documentary film, made in a school in another suburb than the one in which the project was taking place, the Neapolitan one. The film narrates and depicts the arduous and extremely hard educational task, which goes far beyond teaching, in which teachers and headmaster were and are engaged on a daily basis.

I remember that it was a much-appreciated opportunity for school staff to become aware and recognise their professional identity, the importance of their function, as well as the possibility of finally having a voice, a voice that could be heard and whose authority was finally recognised by someone. And for some of them, whose gratitude I still remember, it was also an opportunity to finally give voice, through the evocation of their own emotions, to the emotions of the adolescents they met every day. I remember Giuseppe, in particular, who wrote and gave me a poem entitled "Adolescent Problems" which I found, while thinking about this interview, among the materials of the groups I held, the first line of which reads "I am thirsty for words, to speak, to be listened to...".

But one of the things that struck me most was that they seemed to think that this someone willing or delegated to listen to them could not be internal or close to the school institution, or even to the difficult neighbourhood in which the school was located, but could only "come from afar". In fact, I still remember, and it was several years ago, the words of one of the most motivated participants when she opened the door to me at the appointment for the film screening and, with a welcoming attitude, she immediately showed herself willing to help me organise the space for the group, and told me "I think you come from far away...".

The other experience of conducting a group with the use of the mediating object that comes to mind is once again an experiential group held with university students. In that case, the mediating object, as per the model, was the literary text.

I always proposed Calvino's Castle of Crossed Destinies to the students. The story is about a group of wayfarers who, crossing a forest, reach a tavern in which they find refuge and, having lost the use of speech, decide to tell their stories to each other by choosing cards in succession from a deck of tarot cards that the innkeeper had given them.

I have to say that, in my experience of leading experiential groups, the text and its narrative content have mostly remained in the background of the group processes as they unfolded.

In this case, too, it seemed to me that this was essentially the case, as the participants hardly ever referred to the text. And yet, perhaps it was not entirely so, if I think that the group chose to symbolically represent and (re)signify the experience in common by presenting, in the traditional large

group meeting held at the end of the course, a short video consisting of a series of images presented in succession (just as each wayfarer protagonist of Calvino's text chose a card from the tarot deck to talk about himself), with each of which, each participant was able to talk about themselves in the experience and share their own experiences, their emotions and the meaning it had for their own formative and personal growth.

But even more, it occurs to me, among other things, that the choice made by the group confirms the important function of the models of homogeneity, group field and commuting, for example, in the whole group psychic economy, and how these operate whenever an analytic function is active, even when the device has specific characteristics that distinguish it from others, even from the small group with a classical analytic function, of Bionian matrix, and therapeutically oriented.

In this sense, I think I can say, albeit briefly, that this important function is reflected in considering, as I had the opportunity to say in a paper a few years ago on the use of images in the experiential group, that the group was, for example, completely unaware of the fact that I myself often resort to the use of the same expressive medium in conducting groups, while showing, among other things, an intense capacity of the group mind to tune in and resonate with the inner world of the conductor, to the point of being able to unconsciously listen and give voice even to the emotions that were accompanying that particular moment of her life.

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