

Adolescent group, institution and virtual world: the negotiation of boundaries

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Abstract

In this paper the authors propose a reflection on how digital era has changed the communication and relationships among adolescents. The focus is placed on how the unlimited possibilities offered by the virtual world can reinforce the omnipotence of adolescence. The information and communication technologies (ICT) allow the adolescents to reduce the face to face confrontation and to replace the direct experience with a mediated perception. The purpose of this study is to explore how the new “rules” of the virtual world collude with the adolescent mental functioning. The reflection is focused on the negotiation restricting the usage of smartphone within the recreational and occupational space in Psychiatric Day Hospital for Adolescents of the Policlinico Umberto I of Rome.

Key words: adolescence, identity, internet, limits, group relationships

Technology, in constantly expanding, has become a *status symbol* and a trend for a lot of people. The most recent sophisticated and expensive *device* is now the object of desire. We live in a world technologically advanced: *hi-tech, computer, tablet, Wi-Fi, internet* and *e-mail* are part of our daily routine by now. In the last few years, the development of technology has promoted essential social, psychological and anthropological changes and it has encouraged an exponential dissemination and consumption of new cultural objects which are constantly evolving. Scientific discoveries have been quickly turned into technological innovations and the human mind had to make an effort of imagination and reprogramming. The world has been reworked. Using Internet and mobile phone, distances become shorter, concept of time is changed, relationships between people are made possible by new and unexpected ways, as it happens at all (Rosci, 2004,). The advent of so-called “new media” has contributed to change significantly the life, the needs, the emotional and relational mode and the relationship with social reality of modern man. At the present time, it’s hard to imagine an adolescent who doesn’t have a computer or *smartphone* on hand.

Thanks to this tool, adolescent can use a series of new freedoms and opportunities because every place and social chance are available to the flows of communication. Thus, the subject can keep multiple attendance, at work as at home, as in the whereabouts, and it has the possibility to deal with people in their physical absence quickly and instantly.

The state of being connected is a need and, above all, an absolutely natural condition of the existence for the digital generation. The daily routine deploys itself in the network world and the teenager is a stable resident of all such world's places.

Today's teenager grows up in an environmental context that is strongly defined by technological media which are used like a self's extension. Technological media tend to be like actual forms of extension of the adolescent corporeal self. The dissemination and types of use of these technological support refers the use of others forms of self's extension, expressive and communicative addendum typical of adolescence: from bicycle to scooter, from skate to roller blade, from piercing and tattoos to spray can. The terms "real" and "virtual" has been replaced with *online* and *offline*. These terms don't refer to separate and antagonistic worlds, they refer to different parts of our own experiences, relationships and communications. Digital world became part of ordinary world by creating an anthropological place which is interconnected with other people's life and a connective network which represents ours identity and social presence.

Group dimension takes a value of support, confrontation and sense of belonging in different types of human contexts and it makes possible the communicative and identification potential towards others.

Teenagers, in particularly, are the first, in terms of generations, to deal with virtual world early, so much so we often talk about *digital natives*.

Virtual world is parallel and also interacting with real world and the digital dualism seems to disappear in favor of two contexts mutually consistent where the relational and affective experiences of who belong to it can take place. Social media makes us free and not much involved with others *net surfers*, unlike actual communities that makes us belonging to a group in an irrational way. Social networks allow us to be *offline* whenever we want - *push the botton* - and we don't have any engagements, relationships, duties. Everything remains out of the screen, where *Digital Natives* have more difficult to understand the difference between a real friend and an only "social" friend.

Virtual reality risks to be an accelerator of the narcissistic's features of personality due to its own characteristics, where the instant communication gives an instant gratification that doesn't train to wait and frustration as constitutive strength of "Ego". To understand how virtual world interacts with real world is useful to refer to its etymology: "Virtual" is derived from the Latin *virtus* (meaning strength) then it understood as being in power, what it has potential to become still without a concrete manifestation.

Adolescents, through the Social Network, can use information and incentives to explore new forms of identity construction. However, teenage social identities conquered too early is likely to become the only form of possible identity.

Therefore, while the real world brings to concrete, the virtual one is proposed as a "place-no-place" of the possibility (Lancini & Cirillo, 2013). Adolescence seems to share with the latter the character of potential, which is the distinctive element of this developmental stage in which the individual's resources begin to develop and take shape.

"Adolescence", which derives from the Latin *Adolescere*, means "begin to grow" and declines as a process of transition from one "babbling" phase (Etym. of "child") to a growth one characterized by "intellect and discernment" (Etym. of "adult"), which founds opportunities of experimentation in new technologies. In this sense the virtual world provides the intermediate dimension that Winnicott calls "transitional space" (1967); a "protected space" in which experiencing the confrontation with reality but also an opportunity to build own personality through ways more related to "I can be" mode than "I must be" mode (Lancini & Turuani, 2009).

The literature has focused extensively on the role of the Internet in adolescent development, exploring different features which are attributable to three main lines of research. The first focuses on the negative effects of new technologies and how they impact on the well-being of adolescents. Some studies point to the use of Internet associated to social isolation (Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000), while others show a correlation with the poor academic performance (Wainer et al., 2008). Studies on the negative effects have also helped to expand the literature on bullying, highlighting which one is perpetrated through the network and which is known as cyberbullying (Raskaukas & Stolz, 2007; Fogel & Nehmad, 2009).

Some authors have studied the relationship between Internet use and feelings of loneliness and depression (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003), recently focusing on internet addictive diseases, so much so that we talk about Internet

Addiction Disorder as "consumption without substance" (Perrella & Ankle, 2014; Lancini, 2013). In the second line are attributable the studies that have focused on the positive effects of Internet use; some of these highlight how Internet can be used to cultivate emotional ties and to form new relationships (Lenhart, Purcell, Zickuhr & Smith, 2010), by facilitating interaction with peers (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011) and expanding the social network (Reich, Subrahmanyam & Espinoza, 2012). The third line consists of theoretical reflections on the internet function as context in which the construction of identity (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014), the development of the separation-individuation process and the renegotiation of emotional relationships (Turow & Nir, 2000; Rosen, Cheever & Carrier, 2008; Sorbring, 2014) take place.

The new "information and communication technologies" (Information and communication technologies, ICT) attempt to overcome the limitations imposed by the vis-à-vis relationship and, as a mediation device, replace the direct experience of the other with a mediated perception.

In this perspective, how can we pay attention to the unconscious communication of affections and fantasy without nonverbal cues? How much the order to have the handy object is a narcissistic form of being in relation with the object without having to struggle with the wait? (Gabbard 2001, 2012).

The physicality of the subject has been replaced with the content of the message, which acquired greater autonomy and stability. It is no longer contextualized but individualized, as it doesn't require the presence of physical places, transforming the aggregation group in a "network of individuals online". Failing non-verbal communication made of gestures, postures and tone of voice within the communicative process, adolescents-surfers have introduced the variety of conventional signs represented by so-called "emoticons" or "smileys". However, although emoticons can help in deciphering the message and mood of the interlocutor, capturing better the emotional nuances, online interaction is still much poorer than face to face communication, and this poverty is due precisely to the absence of the body in the act of communication. It makes it recognizable facial, personal and social status features, whereas the on-line communication is able to preserve its impersonality and anonymity.

The possibility of remaining anonymous, simply showing up with own nickname (a sort of virtual visiting card), makes the world of the chat a space where it becomes possible to express themselves in a more free, creative and uninhibited way. At the same time the anonymity can lead to take aggressive

and socially undesirable attitudes, since impersonality results in an attenuation of the sense of responsibility for own actions.

According to Giddens (1990), new technology has created a such separation between time and space and even between space and physical location that the social relationships tend to flow from the interaction contexts and no longer correspond with the actual places of the face to face communication. Therefore, the use of technology leads teenager "over the sense of place" and outlines a sort of expanded communicative space, characterized by the continuous and immediate availability of the communication channel (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Institutional role and virtual world

This work comes within a specific institutional reality, which is the Psychiatric Day Hospital for Adolescents of the Division of Child Neuropsychiatry of the Policlinico Umberto I in Rome, University "La Sapienza."

Within the strategies and interventions for prevention and promotion of mental health the Day- care for Adolescents is a care place which respond to the problems that may arise in adolescence.

In this period of life, cognitive and emotional features are vulnerable, appearing frequently impulsive or sensation seeking attitudes, which make the individual more exposed to risks of psychopathological trajectories. In a phase in which the identity is still in the process of structuring, these features may be related to an ambivalent relationship with the outside world which is characterized, on the one hand, by a greater dependence on the environment and on the other by the fear of being overwhelmed. Focusing on prevention in adolescence allow us to recognize the warning signs of a possible psychopathological area in onset, so as to take action by offering a specific containing function. The Day Hospital for Adolescents presenting itself as an alternative "emotional" environment which supports the reorganization of internal working models built during the first years of life. This device allow to work on containment and re-signification of the emotional dysregulation, the impulse dyscontrol and the dysfunctional relationship patterns.

Guys from 12 to 18 years old access the service due to emotional distress, relational difficulties or behavioral problems. Symptoms are often a sign of precarious balance of adolescent functioning and Day care for Adolescents has the function to prevent that a psychopathological organization develops in a personality disorder. One of the rehabilitative aims is to promote the process of subjectivation and self-observation through a work on defensive structures.

Day-care adolescents provides a first diagnostic step, which helps to make psychodiagnostic hypotheses and allows to build a possible therapeutic rehabilitation project. Day-care offers both clinical interviews and groupal experiences of recreational and occupational therapy. These activities are structured and the adolescent has the chance to compete with peers in a safe place where specialised personnel has the role of mediator. This device becomes therapeutic and containing because adolescents can invest and entrust their narcissistic resources on it like an external object. The regular, consistent and predictable meetings assure continuity to institutional service, which becomes a container, a space where it's possible to work with adolescent symbolizations. The device becomes a transitional space where destructive and aggressive features can be tested and revised, so it could be at the same time container and content. Recreational and occupational therapy becomes an "anti-stimulus barrier" (Monniello, 2000), that support the strengthening of the patient's psychic functioning and protects adolescents from an excessive excitatory charge. According to this goal, operators and shared rules contains adolescent narcissistic fragility. Within the agreements between adolescents and operators there is a limit in the use of the phone and what characterizes virtual world. During recreational and occupational therapy every adolescent has to leave own smartphone in a safe place until the end of the activities. The agreement represents an opportunity for discussion and "negotiation" about limits and their meanings. Adolescents clash with a desire that can't be satisfied, so they can experience the function of the limit as a training in the management of the frustration. To explore reflections and emotions related to this "rule" for adolescents who access to Day-care we used a brief structured interview. The questions aimed to test the knowledge of the rules in the classroom of recreational and occupational therapy ("*There are rules in the classroom?*"), then the opinions about restricting the usage of smartphone ("*What do you think about the ban on using smartphone in the classroom?*") and emotional experiences related to this rule ("*How do you live the fact of not being able to go on Whatsapp, Facebook, etc .. during the hours you spend in the classroom?*").

A first analysis showed that negotiating this limit allows adolescents to reflect on two levels, about phone meaning in everyday life and also the role of this limit in the relationship with the adult.

Through the smartphone the adolescents can bring their own private world even in those places which are less familiar to them. This means they can stay in

touch with each other through virtual space, reducing feelings of anxiety and loneliness and improving the sense of safety (Lancini & Turuani, 2009). Chiara, for example, says *"I suffer because I miss some people"*, while Davide says *"It's all right but I just want to read messages"*. It emerges a difficulty in separation from the mobile phone, which becomes "a prosthesis capable to protect the individual from own weaknesses, limits, the sense of own fragility" (Biondo, 2008, p.35). In this regard, some interviewed guys recognize in the limit a containment function about separation anxiety. The state of anxiety and fear that emerges when it's no possible to control the smartphone was recently defined as Nomophobia and refers to a disconnection syndrome which can generate addiction. Some authors have studied this phenomenon and they showed that the attachment to the smartphone is similar to all other addictions, assuming an interference in the production of dopamine levels (Greenfield and Davis, 2002). According to these considerations, King and collaborators argue that Nomophobia should be considered an addiction instead of an anxiety disorder (King et al., 2010).

Smartphone responds to the need to think and to be thought, to contain and to be contained as way to push away the loneliness and at the same time to search protection and safety. We could say that being able to send or receive messages means socializing and sharing, potentially ever, moods and thoughts with others; it can relieve boredom and sadness, allowing to distance themselves from isolation. Therefore, thanks to the operator and the limit, the adolescent can avoid to deal with his inability to give up dependence on the object of desire, which is the smartphone and all that it represents. In this regard Luca says that *"a good thing is that we can be distracted from using internet"* and Giorgia says *"I feel good because I can stay at least three hours without the phone"*. Moreover, if we consider narcissism and omnipotence as characteristics of the adolescent mental functioning, we can say that smartphone powers this mechanism providing an immediate satisfaction to the adolescent's needs. Adolescents agree to not use it *"if we do interesting things here"*, if activities are *"more funny and engaging"*. Cahn talks about *"omnipotent tendencies activated by technology and avoidance of main conflicts"* (Cahn, 1998, p.33). Setting limits allows adolescent to "develop his desire to protect narcissism" (Jeammet, 1999, p.90). In this sense, the institutional space takes the "protective" function of the virtual world by helping adolescents to experience the comparison with the real world. Furthermore, even though smartphone helps to maintain cohesion with peer and family, it can alienate adolescents from the "here and

now" of the relationships. This process could be recovered in recreational and occupational therapy space: in Giulio opinion do not use the smartphone *"allows us to socialize more"* and also Ilaria underlines the importance of this point (*"When we are with them [friends], we have to stay only with them without any distraction"*).

Experiencing the sense of the limit means discussing with operators and negotiating boundaries, which are bypassable in the virtual world. Interviewed guys talk about trust and reciprocity: on the one hand operators *"should trust"* and let the smartphones to them, on the other *"neither operators should use it"*. Thus, responses show a dual trading space because adolescents ask a compromise based on their ability to self-control or an agreement respected by both sides. In some cases the adolescent tries to overcome the limit with the illusion to keep intact its omnipotence: *"Yes, there are some rules, but you can overcome them sometimes"*. However the limit doesn't lose its function of containment and comparison because what matters is "the relational game and the conflictual dialectic" that it triggers (Jeammet, 1999, p.176).

Conclusions

In the adolescent process of subjectivation, the construction of identity and self development are central issues. The way through which these features are organized and processed is an important developmental challenge for the adolescent psychic growth and development. Most of the interviewed guys agree that smartphone can't miss from pockets and bags, as if it was a part of the body. It is important to understand how the use of instant messaging constitutes an obstacle or a resource in the complex development of adolescent tasks.

Could technological devices be considered a stimulus for separation and identification processes and sexual body mentalizing? Or rather do they hinder adolescent specific tasks? Is there an evolutive or regressive use?

The hypothesis is that the virtual world, interacting with the adolescent mental functioning, retards adulthood because it strengthens typical adolescent mechanisms (omnipotence or absence of limits) and it also allows the avoidance of the typical conflict in the transition to adulthood.

It can often happen that a child experiences low levels of frustration with a consequent poor capacity to tolerate them. In adolescence this child can use the unlimited availability of the virtual world as a tool through which he can exercise his omnipotence. New generations, who live in the "everything and

now" illusion, hardly experience rejection and are particularly sensitive to narcissistic injuries.

The new scenario is characterized by less binding and more surmountable rules, which allow the adolescents to continue to feed their omnipotence.

Through the negotiation of boundaries adolescents can experiment frustration and at the same time they can get in a position of self-observation, a necessary process to build a solid identity. The limit in the use of smartphone becomes a containment of adolescent omnipotence, protecting from self-destructive mechanisms.

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