

The adult therapist in health services: between parents and public institution

Stefanella De Santis, Vincenzo Ricciotti

Abstract

We could affirm that in the Institution's base, that has mental health as an aim, in a paradoxical way we can find a primitive psychic functioning, thus infantile. This infantile position seems to constitute the link between the three original objects: Institution, therapist, parents. The three objects are linked by a common affiliation and by a shared common area and are tied together by dynamic intense interrelationships, which are all characteristics of groups. We could then make the hypothesis of the constitution of a macro-group with a macro multi-personal field in which the unconscious fantasy consists in that primitive mentality that we can find in Bion's basic assumptions.

We have been able to see that in this multi-personal field there is an issue that settles and acts, transferring itself from an object to another. This issue represents itself in the infantile part carrier of proto-mental contents equipped with a high emotional potential, that permeates one or another object in that crossed game of projected identifications in the multi-personal field of each group.

Key words: children adolescents, institution, parents, multipersonal field

The paper we are going to present has to be situated in the public service's reality in which we work.

This is a Service of Mental Health Care and Rehabilitation in Years of Growth of Rome's A.S.L. RM/C, that takes care of children and of their families. We work as therapists inside a public institution. In this case the Therapist, differently from private activity, relates himself both with patients- individually or in group- and with the Institution of which he is part. We could consider an Institution like a big container, that should give birth to more healthy children even because its actuation of ideas and new instruments.

Pursuing these goals, we thought that a group's intervention could constitute a useful and suitable instrument. Instrument that in Italy and in Public Services is still not much widespread. In this paper we are going to focus on the experience we had with two kinds of groups: a group of children and a group of parents. In this context what will the therapist's position as an adult be? What are his experienced emotions and expectations going to be? What is he going to ask the Institution? And will his patients expect from him? These are the questions we are proposing to face. For what concerns the Institution as starting point we assume the task that characterises it: health's care. In regard to the therapist and his work the Institution can assume a welcoming attitude, allowing spaces and time and it can also have a faithful attitude that, in our case, facilitates the group's construction and strengthening or it can also hamper with red tape and super-egoic controls. The Institution, with its new actual

logic, will expect that its operators will work to favour the treated patients' health, with efficacy and efficiency. The maximum result with the less waste of time and energy. We can see that this criterion contrasts with Bion's principle that formed many therapists: facing therapy without memory and without desire. We could object about the therapist's difficulty of facing a therapy without desire and how much the desire of soothing the patient's suffering and enable the patient to face his life at best is implied in the therapist's soul. But in this case it is an inner desire which is not determined by external factors. We could outline a first contrast between therapist and institution that risks to intrude in a phantasmic way in the relationship with the patient. So, we could also say that the therapy's room lives up with other unknown presence which are harmful for the treatment's course. It's a question of modulating the intervention on the patient's state, -in individual therapies, or on the group's level of development- by listening the present atmosphere and respecting its time and rhythm issues that could be in contrast with the urgency induced by the Institution.

Another aspect is: which instruments does the institution offer to the therapist to enable him to fulfil his task in terms of physic, mental and time spaces? There is often an overburden of activities and engagements that take away energy and concentration and that clog up mental spaces, in this kind of work that implies a big emotional involvement, and these activities also structure themselves as an obstacle to the therapeutic course's good functioning.

We propose a distinction that we think as appropriate between Institution and Service.

The Institution- in the operator' s experience - results a far and abstract entity, which is not so interested in its work, in intrinsically qualitative and technical terms, and not so careful to its health, so that it could do its work at best. Though, it results reliable: its operators find themselves in a secure house, from which they won't be evicted. On the internal front this involves a risk of a non assumption of responsibility and on the external front a disqualified image of the Public Institution' s collective representation, that the therapist atones for personally.

A total request is then asked: recovery. And here the message becomes paradoxical: freedom without autonomy, that seems to correspond to the contrast of characteristics that Chapelier assigns to the Institution which could be permissive and repressive at the same time.

In freedom, without instruments, occurs solitude, poverty but also creativity. Without autonomy, occurs the duty of realising not the final result, which could also be positive, but the eventual error committed, evaluated not as a stimulus of reflection and growth, but as a sin from which one has to be punished.

The implicit message is that you can do what you want, equipping yourself in the way you can, without making requests, but you can't make any errors. Where there is an error, the punitive heavy hand of a persecutory Institution comes out.

We could make a parallel with those super-egoic families, in which parents don't give anything can't say "bravo" to their son because what he does well is considered a foregone conclusion, but they are ready to reproach and punish any kind of mistake. It seems that for the operator-therapist the sense and proof of his existence is in the errors: besides this there is pure anomie and he is sucked down into the mob. The Institution reveals itself more quickly and concretely in Services. Here it seems that the image of a poor family, often numerous takes shape, restricted in insufficient and degraded spaces, mirror of many deprived families, that Services have in treatment. Where the children-operators are obliged to fight for cold and bare rooms that aren't cozy and that with their work, their affectivity almost repairing and compensating have to heat and animate. The quality and the welcome is devolved only to professionalism, responsibility and we would say to the operator's heart, so, to the therapist's personal quotient. In Services there are other factors that are into play, particularly due to the group instrument. It is known how much waste of energy and time implies the formation of a group. In the group's formation even a dependence from the service's colleagues occurs:

they are often the ones who send patients expressing their esteem and trust but in the therapist's lived they result requesting of results.

Even in regard of the parents group we feel we should give an answer of the treatment's positive effect on children, often patients of colleagues. In this case the super-egoic front is displaced and lived more in regard to one's colleagues, expressing itself on two points of view: ethic and technical. The ethic one concerns the implicit request of improving the minor's mental health or directly treated in group or through the parent group's mediation. The technical one concerns the group instrument used. In most of cases this is a new instrument that is not so known and that has been experimented only in services. This can solicit ambivalence in the colleagues, like always in front of unknown things: curiosity and trust or diffidence and envy. In the services it happens that, as we said, in a familiar context the feelings activated, even submissively, result to be of abandonment, just like in regard of a brother that differentiates and starts off for his own pathway going far away; feelings betray and exclusion are activated towards who is interested of something that isn't shared and isn't shareable anymore. A rivalry emotion in regard of the group-object can also be activated, that assume s particular value because it is owned by a brother-therapist or we can also find an envy which is emulative in gaining the precious and desired object or of obstacle the other's possession of the desired and not owned object. The colleagues' reactions to the group's sessions can be particularly significant. The group's atmosphere widens beyond the room's walls as A. Correale points out, and this can raise curiosity, exclusion, desire. Other times instead the atmosphere created outside the setting can be felt as intrusive by the conductor and the therapist feels like he has to defend the group as an own threatened creature.

But, lets see the position of parents that address themselves to a therapist that is seen as representative of an Institution.

When a parent expresses a request of cure, both if it is a conscious responsibility assumption that comes at the end of an elaborated pathway or if it is a premature condescension stated by another authoritative, for example the school, this request takes on a substantial ambivalence which is due, on one hand, to an affiliation need induced from anxieties and on the other from persecutory and aggression that are unleashed by a narcissistic wound, and its consequent restoration.

The transfert disposition, re-enforced from need and suffering expresses itself with different modalities according to the parental characteristics and to an individual or a group's setting, proposed by the Institution.

The setting is the physic and mental scenario where emotional shapes, that create the links parents-therapist and Institution-group, condense and represent themselves. As we have seen the conflicts due to mutual projections express themselves and are acted-out in the organisation, that is the setting's care and preservation. In the individual therapy the projection of a parental idealised and well-disposed (pre-positive transfert) or persecutory (pre-negative transfert) imago remains prevalent. This imago draws its legitimacy from an inclusion in the couple's dynamics (mother and father) and the fiduciary entrusting relationship founds itself on this couple. The group instead evokes a projection on the therapist of different imago:

for example the one of a teacher, a super-father, carrier of a desire that didn't find an object (the mother) and that went back to his origins ("Sinite parvulos venire ad me" says the Gospei) or, the one of a leader in which the desire remained adjacent to a primitive drive of the species.

The therapist, that is the carrier of this imago not balanced from the maternal element, attracts children with a supernatural power, if we want, in the same way in which a group of children is supernatural: so numerous that it can't be a family under the couple's aegis, but is a herd that became unsociable and that for this is in contact with the species' drives, and that is attracted by an essentially free aggression and a promiscuous sexuality. The leader participates of this drive, or rather he transmits it: this is the parents' suspicion that is re-enforced by what he sees in the therapy-room when he eavesdrops at the window or he hears while he waits in the adjacent room. For these reasons the request made to the therapist is to be a guarantor of order and so re-integrate himself in the parents' community assuming and re-enforcing one its principle roles.

The waiting room is a sort of parallel scenario in which emotional vicissitudes, that link together the group's parents, are represented.

The defensive necessity to place the pathology cause on the outside widens the contamination fantasies of the other children which are fantasised as harmful because more pathological and different.

The Institution is a place of the impersonal (from parent to parent and from house to house is the guarantee that a parent requests). We can observe denied persecutory manners in between similar people that "gang up" in subgroups, in which differences

are cancelled and similarities are idealised, or we can also register precocious abandonment when persecution results enlarged.

In regard to the groups of parents generally we have observed that at the beginning they tend to identify the therapist with the Institution. The result of this process is that on one hand the therapist is incorporated in the Public Service's disqualification typical of the collective imaginary and as a result parents ask their child's magic recovery, proposed and promised by the Institution. In this case parents and Institution converge in a unique and total request that burdens on the therapist and that for the therapist itself becomes a super-egoic challenge. Only during group work a process of differentiation between Institution and therapist occurs with a more clear definition and individuation of the therapist in the concrete relationship with him, against an abstract and far Institution entity.

At this point a total request articulates itself in many ways and in differentiated expectations which are always in a dynamic evolution. At the beginning with parents we find ourselves in front of a group connoted by depressive emotions of self-devaluation, inadequacy, impotence, and disorientation: we could talk about frightened and puzzled children. This adduces them to project their desire of idealised perfection on the therapist-parent. The group's conductor feels himself felt with super-egoic qualities (the one who judges) or omnipotent and omniscient qualities and as an oracle (the one who knows and can give exact answers and magic solutions). The consequent expectation in regard to the therapist is: you can't and you don't have to make errors and you also have to enable us not to make mistakes with our children. The dynamic groupal process during its path brings towards a changing development in a biunique sense of the relationship between therapist and parents. From a regressive infantile stage parents go towards more developed stages with a withdrawal of archaic projections on the therapist, in order to gain a more adult level of cothinkers, asking themselves questions and activating their more adequate and capable aspects, recovering their being themselves as individuals and regaining and rediscovering a marital couple's sense which is also functional to the parental couple.

The therapist discovers himself occupying different and dissonant positions with consequent differentiated functions: in regard to a protective, and at the same time, persecutory Institution. He is relegated in an infantile position while called to carry on an adult function of parental-educative kind or of curative kind in regard to patients. This phenomena can present splitting and fragmentation risks and only a steady self-knowledge with a relative adult flexibility can integrate the two aspects. It then seems that the therapist -at the center of a multiplicity of solicitations of a such complex and articulated system made of criss-cross plans, that is the Institution, Services, patients children or parents- can't do anything else than attain from his adult resources. In this sense we define the therapist as an adult. So the therapist is called to deploy all his most developed functions like frustration tolerance, that Bion assigns to maturation and mental health, acceptance of boundaries that reality sets to total desires or to idealising and omnipotent fantasies and at last living errors in an

untroubled way, as an aspect of human beings, so not to be expelled but to be integrated in the intra-psychic reality as a reflection stimulus and a fertile element of transformation. The therapist proposes an adult model to parents which is accessible, that doesn't make feel guilty and at last that facilitates their maturation in Winnicott's sense. The anti-institutional group traced out by Chapelier now gets formed because it contrasts with an archaic model of perfection, without any possibility of mistakes, that the Institution sets.

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Stefanella De Santis,

Vincenzo Ricciotti