The Co-construction of the imaginary space in a group of children through the narration of stories and dreams

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Abstract
This work originates from the idea that the use of a mediating object (Privat P., Quelin-Soulignoux D., 2000) such as the narration of stories and dreams that emerge in the group, may create a new potential space where children may discover the dialectical relation between reality and imagination through the direct experience of what Winnicott D.W. (1958) defines as “me” and “not-me”.

The author will describe through clinical material, how children once engaged in group psychotherapy,, start to build together a common language of meanings, from chaos to a shared play in which they may talk about their feelings, fears and “bad dreams”.

Eventually, group psychotherapy is considered as a new creative space of symbolization, where children can share a common narration and give meaning to their subjective experience.

Keywords: Psychotherapy group, storytelling, dreams, mediating object, symbolic play and thinking

Premise
I would like to introduce my work on groups of children with a few words from the following childhood memory:


We are,
here in our bunk beds.
Small,
Yet not tired enough to close our eyes.

So we think that we have stopped playing
only because it is “so truly late!”
But on the floor still our traces.
On the background,
I see the wooden towers rise
between our fantasies
and our bedroom furniture.
Visible tyre-whirled traces of the fireman engine,
that we had parked close to the talking-dolls house, still trying to extinguish the fire due to burning-biscuits baked at 360 degrees.

In the shadows, we notice, at the foot of our bed, our father that with a small torch, uncovers gently the pages of a storybook. His voice breaks the restless silence of the darkness; We feel embraced by the images that the story brings to life. We start to play with our imagination then fall asleep, and play again with our dreams.

Even though this image has risen from my child memories and carries a personal meaning, I would like to share it because of the eco that it might have among the readers. In this sense, the image could enter in an hypothetical shared imaginary space although remaining virtual, as there is no direct interaction and relation between myself, author, and you, the reader. Following this theme, this work deals with the construction of a similar space – a container box of thoughts, sensations and images- its insights resulting from first-hand experience with group psychotherapy with children. Starting from this image, four keywords stand out from it: play, image, storytelling and dream. Therefore, I wish to mention some authors who have already worked with children groups.

**From chaos to shared play**

The peculiar character of children groups compared to the adolescent and adult ones is the presence of play and the imaginary as a mean of expression, communication and relation among the participants, with the co-creation of “a common language “ around which meanings are related.

On this subject, I quote Anna Baruzzi (1900):

> Chaos in the group may become a disorienting and difficult experience. It goes against the Leader’s “thinking” and this is exactly what he is supposed to tolerate in order to be able to work with a group of children.
By referring to the co-construction of a shared play and the creation of a sense of the experience that children live during the sessions, the play activity allows children to communicate their personal emotions, anxieties and fears.

The child, through his pretended play feels in touch with the “being other-than-me” for a determinate period of time, passing from a role to another, where this flexibility of roles and play in action may widen the possibility to live different emotions that, moreover, surprise the children themselves while acting.

In this sense, shared play that stands in the group may be intended as a point of arrival in the the therapeutical process thanks to which it is possible to give an expression to the unthinkable emotions that firstly appear only through impulsive and uncontrollable actions.

It is observed that body movements, privileged way of expression of affection in the child, are gradually intertwined with the imaginary and symbolic language of the group.

Following these dynamics, the adult’s interventions are introduced inside the group following the spontaneous play and story telling of the children.

The group leader becomes the carrier of the “collective memory” which belongs to the group by participating and observing, but not interfering too much.

During the sessions the high emotive-affective temperature feelings circulate in the group and the group leader experiences it along with the group. He observes the emotional fluctuations and tries to give a linguistic form to the meanings that seem to emerge, making it a continuous transforming shared narration. This process of co-narration challenges the group to assume a co-therapeutical function.

In the small group with a psychodynamic approach, symbolic play, the fears and desires of each one are seriously taken into account, with no requests and judgments on the merits by the adult.

Finally, in this space characterized by play the child finds the proper place to find in others not a danger to his own mental autonomy to avoid with rigid defences and withdrawals behaviors but instead mirrors and interfaces to their personal needs, in touch with the different characters of their own inner play.

**Storytelling as Group Memory**


> Actually, every narration since prehistory has origins from shared experiences, and it is still the same today. It is through oral transmission that stories of different type come to thread the tapestry of our lives.
Moreover, other medium are presented here, in particular concrete objects, not only as stories and dreams, that facilitate the symbolic and narrative process within the group.

In fact, for the two french authors, Privat P. and Quélin-Soulignoux D. (2000), in children psychotherapy, fairy tales may be considered as mediating objects as they may facilitate the search of a symbolic language also through images with whom therapeuts may give a sense to the “unshaped and the unthought” (Bion, 1962) present in the group.

The mediating objects may facilitate the symbolical and the imaginary process of the children’s minds in the group. It has the function of stimulating the symbolization process and shared imaginary. It supports the intersubjective communication between the group participants.

The symbolic play is very important for a child’s healthy development. We could consider it as the preferential mediating object that a child can use to communicate with others.

The mediating object and the group dimension reinforce the construction of what D. Anzieu (1985) has defined as the group’s membrane.

The containing effect of the group membrane can stimulate the creation of the individual’s psychic skin (E. Bick, 1968) or genuine skin described by Tustin F. (1990).

The mediating object may be:

- A concrete object (toys, plasticine, musical instruments, paper and colour pencils ecc.)
- or drama play spontaneously used by children or prudentially induced as a way to furnish performances by the Therapeut.
  In psychodrama indeed, drama improvisation is not an end in itself: “It is not other than a mean that tends to other goals..” (D. Widlocher. 1962, p.129)
- or a cultural object (paintings, music listening).

As we will see in the following paragraphs, tales and dreams may be considered as cultural objects, that carry both individual and collective meanings.

Given the dialogical nature of language and how we use it into narratives, J. Zipes mentioned the recent book written by A. Frank (2010), entitled “Letting Stories Breathe” in which the author illustrates Storytelling basic premises:

1. Stories do not belong to storytellers and story listeners because all stories are “reassemblies of fragments on loan” and “depend on shared narrative sources.
2. Stories not only contribute to the making of our narrative selves but also weave the threads of social relationships and make life social.
In this second part it will be considered the onset of dreams and its narration and illustration through drawings by a group of children during a therapeutic session. Next, we will emphasize how the ordering function of thought appear in dream narrations.

**The emergence of Dreams within the group**

The title of this paragraph is inspired by an interesting work written by Lucilla Ruberti (2004), in which the issue of dreams configuration is related in a specific manner to group psychotherapy experience with children.

Following her thinking, language and dream:

> [...] take on the importance of a construct of shared objects that are basic to the evolution of the group. Fundamental to these objects is the access to a metaphorical space-time that is conducive to the passage from the concrete to the abstract. [...] From the space-time of the dream they begin the tale of the emotive experiences converted into images.

Dreams are considered as an ulterior metaphorical box in which the most primitive affection that children, through their bodies, movements and signs, may circulate and be communicated in the group. These aspects may emerge initially in a chaotic and sudden manner, taking shape in the group mostly through sensorial experience.

This apparatus for thinking through images and symbolic language brought by the storytelling event allows children to give a sense to those terrifying lived experiences, not communicable verbally by the child.

**Clinical material: series of bad dreams**

This clinical vignette wants to be a small “image zoom” to emphasize the series of dreams and their associations, which appeared during a group session conducted by Adriana Dondona well described in her article entitled The Mind as a space to play: creating bonds within the group (in this same issue).

The therapeutical group ran from the month of March 2012 and was located at a Public Mental Health Service for children between 5 and 7 years old presenting different typologies of affective-relational difficulties.

Through the following clinical material I would like to highlight the dialogical function of dream narratives and the interchange within the group of the oniric contents that are then integrated by the group for the construction of a common and shared imaginary.
I have privileged dreams compared to play as, despite their narration may appear similar to stories, in the specific, nightmares may remain suspended as spontaneous sufficient content from the child’s speech, as the fear itself to tell the “bad dream”.

Jean Piaget, in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1951), in his work on Symbol and Thinking formation in the child, he describes very well the potential transference of affective feelings through the oneiric content, I quote:

In dream symbolism there are nightmares, while in ludic symbolism fear is still enjoyed. (Piaget, p.179)

We will see how children's “bad dreams” are accepted and shared within the group and its transformative process. The serie of oneiric narrations develops itself also through the children’s drawings about their dream-stories. Then children are able to use their images to give them a name, such as “The Witch eats the children and the Dragon spits the fire”, “The alien that kidnaps” and “The alien on Mars”.

**The session**

During the sixth session children start to tell about their dreams that are successively rielaborated and illustrated using papers and colours and realizing very significative drawings.

Dreams are linked to one another as a flow of images with a central theme: The Nightmare or also called by the children The Bad Dream.

First comes Lidia, that tells about her “bad dream” where a witch wanted to eat her. Next, Dalia tells hers, this time it was a dragon who wanted to eat her. The group leader gets involved in the narration of their stories and so asks them how they did defend themselves from these dangers, the girls replied summing up the two dreams and constructing a common solution where “the witch and the dragon become good”.

Giacomo keeps on telling that, when he has bad dreams, he founds himself on Mars and an alien wants to kill him. Matteo tells how in his dream the alien wants to kidnap his sister in order to “to be like her “” and kill him.

The group leader invites the children to draw their dreams. Even if the children seem at the beginning uncertain, they curiously start to draw with the help of the group leader.

Everybody participates with the exception of Dalia, that decides to draw by herself alone, and that she will put in her pocket to carry home in order to give it to her mother.
This explains why Lidia, the other girl, decides to draw two girls as the main characters of her nightmare, adding the figure of Dalia on her drawing, that is also threatened by a witch and by a dragon (drawn by the group leader). Lidia will add in her drawing a heart between the two “bad” characters pointing out that they have become “good”.

Matteo draws his dream. Giacomo refuses to draw, but gives indication to the group leader, then takes the drawing and completes it to give an ending, by saying: “I have the shield to send back the bullets fired by the alien and so the bad gets finally killed”.

Giacomo seems very uplifted by this solution to his nightmare as if, once appeared in the group, children have tried to transform those fears, negative affections and conflicts, resolving them through the search of creative solutions to give a positive final, more tolerable and possible to be shared with others.

The imaginary created by the group modifies and welcomes these new aspect of the Self, enlarging the capacity of elaboration and symbolization of each child.

Here are illustrated the emergence of the series of bad dreams within the group:

1° dream: The dragon spits fire and the witch eats the children (Lidia)
2° dream: The Alien that kidnaps (Matteo)

3° dream: The Alien on Mars (Giacomo)
Commentary

To find courage to express oneself, the child often copies and imitates others. Even in the narration of dreams children associate to the narrations of the first ones, maybe to find complicity and support to express themselves in a group. The group leader then tries to open the fear and the negative affections that circulate in the group to a new imaginary and ludic dimension. Children may be scared of drawing fear. So the role of the group leader is similar to a guide who in case helps them. The monstrous characters imagined by the girls, such as the “witch” and the “dragon” differently from the boys who had choose “the alien that fires bullets”.

To protect the child’s own illustration in the drawing, Giacomo asks the group leader to draw a self-defence as the “Shield” that could throw back the bullets and kill then the bad alien. Matteo tells about an alien that kidnaps his older sister, object of his envies because, to his eyes, she is older and bigger, bigger and clever. The “alien” figure realizes two desires of Giacomo: to kidnap his sister in order to be like her and become a single child/son. In the dream he distances himself from his aggressiveness and jealousy affects, felt as alien and horrible and delegates them to a monster, protecting in this way the good image of himself, that witnesses horrified the scene of the nightmare.
It is central, then, the figure of the group leader that follows the children through the threading of a shared narration, she colours the imaginary related to their action, holds the group memory, letting children re-cross the fear of the oneiric dimension, giving shape to it through words, drawings and making them the object of a symbolic elaboration and affection interchange.

Conclusions

The groupal device promotes through the creation of a shared and mirroring space, the elaboration of deep and scarring conflicts, that risk to remain unexpressed and unthinkable in a context of individual psychotherapy, at least for a long time. In fact, the child tends to deny his own suffering to defend himself from them while the therapeutical group, based on free play and symbolical association, becomes an oneiric space in which fears and frightening fantasies can be played, overcoming individual defenses.

The union between the “facilitating” materials and the non-directive ways of intervention by the group leader creates the ideal setting to give each child a therapeutical space of transformation.

Infected each other with their imaginary make the individual defenses get smoother: the group device allows the flow of each one’s fantasies and suffering within a shared container capable of bringing temperatures down.

The narration, the play, the images brought in the group from each child may be added and transformed in the groupal experience giving the chance make the experience of their own interior world with its different and sometimes contradictory aspects, of its movements toward others, the feeling of passivity towards his own thoughts and emotions, as it happens in dreams.

The emergence of a potential space inside of which it is possible to dream together make the group re-build a new thread of ludic narration in a continuous transformation. Even the nightmare can be replayed, not to find omnipotent solutions, but to experience oneself as being the main “actor” of one’s personal story, where also the fears and weaknesses have a value, recognition and find a cure.

Children who arrive for consultation at the Mental Health Service have affective-relational and emotional problems. These difficulties emerge and can be treated in a therapeutical group according to a Bionian model: in the collective play both emotional difficulties related to oneself and to the others are activated, which are welcomed, understood and transformed, with the contribution of each one and with the feeling of not being alone dealing with one’s own nightmares.

Quoting the author Donata Miglietta (2004):
Without any doubt, we can state that body contact in therapeutic groups with children has this very function: to give a home to the dragon so that the fire of excitement turns into a sufficient warmth to let emotions become thinkable and narrable.

Finally, I would like to present this image entitled “The merry-go-round of children” illustrated on a paper origami built by Giacomo, one of the group participants. Despite his strong inhibition to draw, the child succeeds. During one session, he surprised the group by grasping the meaning of the bonds that were starting to exist between him and the other children: a merry-go-round of meanings linked to one another.

References

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