

Identification Processes in Group Organisation

Haydée Popper-Gurassa

Summary

The group framework is the cause of a first moment of identity-based anxiety, characterized by the non-differentiation of the group members and the projection of cleaved aggressive and libidinal elements. The group becomes a real object, represented and invested by its members as they organize it into a container/constructor of their primal anxieties. The identification processes, whether to the group or to its members, are constructed and help the psychological person's development.

Key words : Group, Individualisation, Construction, Identification, Identity-based anxiety

Within our work amongst groups of children, we continually observe the emergence of signs of identity-based anxiety as well as the appearance of various defence mechanisms when children are confronted with this situation. These mechanisms protect the members of the group from the effects of the lack of differentiation and enable the children's individuation process. In this paper, we propose, on the one hand, to introduce the theoretic foundations and, on the other hand, to present examples which clearly highlight the psychological differentiation within the group.

Framework and group process

The clinical group work requires a specific framework. This will guarantee the functioning of the group process, since it constitutes a fixed referential system in relation to the complex formation of expressed movements. The modalities of the framework must fit an unchanging organisation, the form of which is reassuring and adapted to the children's multi-form movements of association. Regularity and formal organisation therefore constitute essential requirements.

The group framework thus organises an assortment of varied and stable identification sources allowing the functioning of a system capable of supporting the archaic elements projected by the children within the group.

This support system is the basis and the container of an intense effort of working out, and it helps metabolizing the children's psychological reality.

Identity-based anxiety

Group organisation bring up to date all the situations causing conflict specifically linked to identity, as it provides from the start a collection of varied possibilities of identification, a variety of perceptions thus creating a large range of self-images for each person within the group. Insofar as it calls upon distinct aspects of one individual, aspects sometimes clearly separated from one another, this situation brings forth a vital movement for cohesion. If this cohesion is impossible, the individual sees himself confronted to splitting and division. In this situation, the conditions appear more sharply in groups of children, as the construction of their identity is still at a formative stage. They can generate violent chaotic manifestations, specific to a psychological deconstruction, and to the emergence of primal anxieties.

These psychological transformation processes therefore unfold into a series of manifestations in which identity-based anxieties are provoked by splitting, fusion and projective identification mechanisms, as well as incorporation and identification movements, thus creating specific group structures. Once set up, the group organizers will create working out and defence mechanisms in order to protect the group from possible situations of disorganisation.

Example

The following example is a group situation illustrating a number of the issues dealt with in this article, concerning identity-based anxiety and the mechanisms created to deal with it.

A group of children at the latency age begin their therapeutic work with relatively violent and aggressive manifestations. Assaults are frequent, objects being hauled through the room; the violence does not appear to be differentiated, and does not need any previous act to justify it. From time to time, and without any previous act justifying this or leading to the anticipation of this act, the five children composing the group get into a “sandwich”, they pile up on top of one another, inserting a mattress between each of their bodies. The following step is the “fall”, when the stack collapses with a loud noise. This activity causes great pleasure amongst all members of the group, and the act of “becoming a single body” and the outcome, the collapse of the game, virtually become a ritual. It is important to underline the fact that the bottom place within the stack is the most sought, and that this is due to the sensation of being squashed. This is obviously the manifest content of the situation.

The underlying homosexual fantasies which we will develop further on are undeniable. We can also observe a splitting between impulsive, aggressive or libidinal movements, the alternation of which is surprising. Becoming a single

body therefore appears as a form of representation of the unity of the group in a non-differentiated bond with the therapist, whose role it is to contain the expression of identity based anxiety and violence.

Working out the Non-Differentiation and the Creation of the Group Object

What enables the creation of the group-object for the children? Does the group have a 'real consistency'? It is obvious that the group does achieve existence for its members, and is, to the eyes of the members, a reality. Beyond the suggested framework, a set of distinct rules and limits are established by the children themselves. All objects used are marked with signs of possession, and the whole group-space is used, in each of its dimensions, from the floor to the ceiling. This is particularly true amongst groups of children for whom, as in the first steps of life, the construction of a psychological space and the appropriation of physical space go together.

The Mechanisms at Work

The group therapeutic framework is an experimental reconstruction of the identity-based process, revealing both its nature, between the collective and the individual, and the position of the subject as part, not of one, but of numerous systems providing means of construction of self-identification.

The mechanisms at work in the group movements observed are varied and belong to distinct meta-psychological processes. M. Torok, who studied the distinctions between introjection and incorporation in depth, puts forward the differences between introjection: a “mechanism of enlargement of the ego which introduces the unconscious libido” and incorporation: “a fantasy creating mechanism, in which an incorporated object replaces the lost object”. The latter movement is obviously unthinkable, as it is founded on the impossibility of any form of acceptance of loss and of a denial of mourning. The incorporation is in place and eating is proposed as an equivalent to an immediate, but illusory, introjection. In groups of young children, we can observe frequent moments of excitement often linked to the absence of one of the group members, which end in the ingestion of a material object belonging to the group, such as small toys or plasticine for instance. The splitting and projection mechanisms are fully a part of all group process, in so far as the members are faced with the plurality of individuals and that each member projects his or her internal fantasised objects onto the others and tries to fit others into his (or her) personal scenarios.

J.C.Rouchy clarifies the way these primal mechanisms interact within a group: “the group is not a dream, but the anxiety due to a situation of void and uncertainty linked to one's own identity; furthermore the tensions emerging of various identification sources appeal the reconstruction of an archaic maternal image – an image of nurturing and protection or, a contrario, a destructive figure which builds up anxieties and facilitates the projection of aggressive impulses. Thus, the members of a group re-create their bonds to this archaic mother figure and, through the relation to this object, they integrate once again the parts of themselves which are dispersed and chaotic.

The identification to the group thus appears as a function of narcissistic support when confronted to the threatening experience of expressing their both libidinal and aggressive impulses. This support requires a stable object which would live through assault and presupposes the possibility of continuity of relationship from symbiosis or fusion to individuation.

The support system concerns people, characteristics, bodily functions as well as the primary family group. In the therapeutic group, it takes place in the same manner, when specific conditions are filled. The group is then perceived, conceived and represented as an object, and it is consequently invested as such by its members.

Example

The following situation illustrates the constitution of a group as an object, as a space to be occupied, and the group organisation necessary to the foundation of this permanence. A child, at the age of latency, who entered the group a little after the other children, is immediately marked out as a scapegoat. We have, moreover, learned that the same child is also a scapegoat at school. He is constantly assaulted and, in order to defend himself, becomes in turn very aggressive. This situation as a scapegoat lasted for quite some time and manifested itself in the following way: considering he always arrived slightly late, the other children would not allow him into the group room. They closed the door, blocking it with the chairs and forbidding any entrance for the scapegoat. The child would only be allowed in after long negotiations. But after a time, the scapegoat, the child started arriving on time for the group and subsequently started using exactly the same method. Indeed, he would block the door for any latecomer. The scapegoat system was thus a tool which set up two differentiation levels: the first being a splitting or separation internal to the group, between passive and active aggressiveness, the external level being the separation between inside and outside the group. Once the internal – external configuration was established, we were no longer faced with the same

scapegoat type organisation. This configuration finalized the constitution of the group-entity as an existing representation for the children, and the splitting moved from the “inside” to the “inside-outside”. Although the scapegoat child abandoned his position, the situation remained symbolically present: the door stayed blocked for all latecomers, however, it was still frequently opened “to see if the others haven't yet arrived” and the slightest sound would give the signal. Hence, the permanence of the group object is guaranteed in spite of the absence of some of the members.

Towards Differentiation

The group would be the missing link between individuality, and community enabling a rigorous account of the passage from the one to the other. The unconscious representations are recorded in the group's transitional space, a container for primal anxieties. The passage from the primary to the secondary process, the working out of the depressive position and of castration, will provide the elements necessary for psychological development.

Example

The following example demonstrates the evolution towards secondary processes: the passage from bisexuality to sexual differentiation and the presence of homosexual identification mechanisms, specific to the age of latency. A few months later, the same group of children mentioned above takes on a clearly more sexualized connotation. Aggressiveness is even stronger, bad language is everywhere, essentially the language linked to homosexuality. They attack each other by calling one another “fags” and, at the same time “claiming their virility”. However, all mention of girls and of the emotions they cause is rejected. The inscriptions on mattresses, armchairs are crude, the puppets are marked, made up to become sexually ambiguous: a princess with moustaches, a hunter with breasts... loving becomes a very complex investment: liking/ loving girls relating to Oedipal complex which has yet to be overcome. Liking boys brings them back to homosexuality, but “it's better to be amongst boys. Girls would not stand the harshness of the group”. It is therefore all about being amongst boys, to identify with others by violent and aggressive behaviours, and through these same behaviours the differences with girls can be highlighted. Furthermore, on the one hand, the high level of aggressiveness can be accounted for by the necessity of the sexual differentiation. On the other hand, the fear of homosexuality, and that of not being differentiated, and of penetrating one another provokes violent behaviour meant to separate bodies

and avoid contact. These acts of differentiation made it possible to approach the diminished boy image each child had of himself, which appeared throughout the games. Little by little the roles appear: we can see the “intellectual”, the “coward”, the “quiet one”, the “bully” and the “clown”. We can also observe figures derived from the parents or the therapist, but first and foremost from the group, described by one child as “dynamite” and by another as “a place he never wants to leave”.

Another Example

We will now take a look at another group situation which brings light to a specific moment within this same group of children at the age of latency. It appears at first as a regression in comparison to the previous demonstrations. It is about a game with children who are “in love with their mummy”, in which we can observe a defensive character in relation to the problem of homosexuality, which is too worrying, and simultaneously, the approach of an even more primal core linked to the primal object. These games are completed by extremely strange behaviour, with the children washing the walls of the room as they are considered to be dirty. This situation recalls very precocious levels of the anxiety of loss, certainly due to the /foreseen/ anticipated end of the group.

Conclusions

In the situations introduced above, we can observe the evolution of a psychological individualisation process in the framework of a group of children. The group framework cumulates a first period of identity-based anxiety characterized by the non-differentiation of the members of the group and by the projection of splitted elements, at times libidinal, at times aggressive. We can observe the formation of a group as if it were a real object, which can be invested and represented by its members. The function of the internal – external limits within the group contributes to the constitution of the group-object and simultaneously sets a container-support of primal anxieties linked to one's identity. The identification processes, whether to the group or to its members, can appear and cause psychological individualization as was the case for this group of boys, thus favouring the transition from bisexuality to sexual differentiation, from group illusion to differentiating bonds specific to each, thus specifying each person's role and place and sexual identity.

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A short note on the author:

Haydée Popper-Gurassa; psychologist-psychoanalyst,
Professional contact: 2, rue des Lyonnais, 75005 Paris, France
tel : 33 (0) 145 871 408,

e-mail: haydee.popper@neuf.fr