

Introduction

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Abstract

In this introduction, after a brief account of the advantages and application areas of group psychotherapy as a method of intervention in developmental age, they are briefly summarized all the articles that make up the volume. In this way, it is given an overview of the content, following a central thread that links the different aspects of group therapy with children and adolescents deepened by each author.

Keywords: emotional and relational problems, group, intersubjectivity, play, imagination, narration, reflective function, shared thought

This volume is intended as a further contribution to the diffusion of this intervention, group therapy with children and adolescents, noting how this method, in fact, is not very common in Italy, despite a clinical experience that proves that it is a valid complement or, in some cases, a valid alternative to traditional methods of individual psychotherapy.

This intervention can be suited for different types of disorders. In this volume, with a collections of articles based on clinical experiences conducted both in the public and private sectors, the focus is on its use in the case of emotional disorders, with problems ranging from poor socialization to phobias, tics, stuttering, anxiety, depression, strong inhibitions, disruptive behavior and personality disorders in general, as well as relational dysfunctions related to language disorders, learning disorders on a primary affective base, and so on.

Among the more obvious advantages, in addition to being a valuable method of treatment for all cases that, for various reasons, are particularly resistant to an individual treatment with an adult, we remind how the tool “group” allows to reduce the costs of health care, by meeting the need to respond to a growing demand of interventions in the face of a downsizing of personnel and financial resources in the Public Health services.

As widely known in the literature, the psychotherapy group is an experience that, going beyond what can be done in school groups, spontaneous ones of peers or

rehabilitative, is offered as a specific and appropriate tool to help children and adolescents to overcome difficulties and emotional blocks in their growth, working both on an intrapsychic and relational level. The absence of performance requirements and judgments of merit of the therapeutic groups lets the child able to experience the other not as a limit to his autonomy, to avoid with rigid defenses and closures, but as a mirror and interlocutor for a different relationship, to experiment new parts of himself. After symptomatic remission, which typically, depending on the case, with children and young people can be reached fairly quickly, the group can be so a valuable aid to pursue goals such as the development of reflective function, mentalization skills and recognition - expression of emotions, social skills and management of intra and interpersonal conflicts, working on all those aspects that help to define a situation of well-being in the developmental age.

As a therapeutic method, this intervention has specificities that differentiate it from other forms of psychotherapy, both in the use of the language, very different if compared to interventions with adults, both in technical and structural modalities, specific if compared to the individual therapies.

In her work, **Haydée Popper-Gurassa** develops a basic aspect of group interventions, namely the topic of the “*individuation*” in a group. After recalling the importance of a stable framework to contain the group, as a structure that can ensure the projection of archaic parts of the child and therefore a therapeutic work, it’s highlighted the wealth of the groupal organization, for the different possibilities of identification offered to every individual. It also emphasizes the conflict, in the central relationship between the individual and the group, which emerges between the push to cohesion with the other, and the activation of defense mechanisms that protect an individual identity fragile and still in formation. Against the background of the demonstrations of chaos, typical of fragmentation and weakness of the psychic apparatus, with the emergence of primary anxieties caused by the splitting, fusion and projective identification mechanisms, it’s highlighted the role played by the *group organizers* in protecting the group from disorganization. Through the presentation of clinical material, it’s shown how the corporeal and aggressive action carry the expression and management of anxieties and fears of fusion. It’s illustrated how the group can provide the necessary support for the processes of introjection and incorporation, to make tolerable the pain of emptiness, of separation and loss, and the importance of the formation of the group as an object to invest narcissistically, able to

survive and to contain these tensions, defining its own psychic space to promote the psychological development of the individual, with the transition from primary to secondary processes. From a therapeutic perspective, it's underlined that only with the recognition of the group as a *real object*, the group can then perform a containment function and allow the deployment of identification processes, useful for the child's psychological development.

In her contribution, **Bianchi Ranci** reminds how "the group is the protagonist in the therapeutic process", where this is possible only through the work and the technique of the therapist conductor, "guarantor" of this process. Against this background, the author reflects on the different therapeutic factors of this intervention, with particular interest on the one hand on the involvement of parents in therapy, on the other on the sense of continuity that substantiates the therapy itself, as that feeling that makes individuals "feel to belong to that group, that it is their group, with its life, its vicissitudes". It's then explored in this paper a central aspect of group theory, namely the threat to this continuity of identity that changes of various type (a long absence of a member, the loss of an old one or a new entry, a changing of the place of the group, holidays, etc.) have on the group, and the important role of the therapist in supporting the experience of chaos and exclusion; his work allows in fact the group to express all the fears, anxieties and ambivalence related to change, in order to further its assimilation and processing, integrating it in its history, and recovering the feeling of its own continuity and the course of the treatment. If the open group must rebuild itself every time it faces a change, it's a task of the therapist to aid this work and ensure that the group will emerge stronger, more aware of his own potential; in this direction, the author offers a vision of *the group as co-therapist*, and highlights the great resource of the open structure, the possibility to "take care as a family" of the member in trouble, allowing him, when ready, to go out to look for a place more suited to the needs of his growth.

As Bianchi Ranci emphasizes a few differences that characterize groups according to age, if composed of children, latency-age boys or adolescents, the contribution of **Miglietta** discusses the importance of the bodily dimension in the analytic treatment of children, underlining the involvement of the analyst conductor through the *sensory function of play*. In fact, his main function will be to participate, through the language of play typical of this age, to the creation of an area of thought and symbolization, integrating the expressive contributions of the children with transformative images

and narrative links, always starting from the awareness that the narrative, in groups of children, is generated through forms of bodily contact, which often arrive at the borders of action. Specifically in fact, the more children are young, the more their communications will consist of a set of motorial “explosions”, noise, shouts, chaos; as well as their emotional contents appear and disappear as fast as colored fragments of a kaleidoscope, so it’s a task of the conductors, - exposed to an experience of disorientation and difficulty to think - , to undergo and tolerate this state, to lead then the group toward the construction of a shared play and a possible creation of sense; the analytic function consists in fact in the ability to grasp, use and transform the visual and perceptive elements put into the groupal common field in co-construction. This analytic function will vary, depending on age. Miglietta notes, in fact, as the use of “bodily” varies in intensity with the growth, turning towards ever more verbal communications, leaving space for the word, with an increasing use of the narrative in therapy; from preschool period, in which the telling happens through the representation in the play, in the drawing or storytelling, to the stages of puberty, preadolescence and adolescence, in which, even if the play takes still place, gradually it takes the form of tales-stories-plots, namely it occurs in an increasingly narrated language.

The same subject is developed in the contribution of **Piperno et al.**, where it is recalled the importance of the playful channel as a form of communication and evolution towards symbolization, by focusing on the construction of a shared psychic space where children can experience fears and deep anguishes, starting from the real use of the room as a meeting place. Specifically, the article discusses the use of the group as a place to experiment new identifying processes, to act processes of separation-individuation, and focuses on its use with preschool children between three and six years of age, as a tool to deal with the specific developmental conflict of this phase: the pain of separation from the mother, the fear of being alone and the simultaneous desire to be with others. Aim of the therapist will be to allow children a process of self-other differentiation, stimulating a sense of belonging, managing and adjusting the anguish of emotional fusion that take place in the groupal space. If fantasy and play are those channels that children spontaneously use to control and expel painful experiences, the narrative is that medium which gives a time, a place and a name to the suffering: giving a meaning to experience and to the Self, the narrative provides it with consistency, unity and continuity. Under this premise, the

authors highlight a model based on the “*acting*”, an “*interpretant action*” function of the therapist, a way to provide children stimuli in the form of associations to be transformed into playful representations, so as to activate the symbolization and facilitate, in the group, the interweaving of relationships capable of solicit experiences of emotional sharing and psychic differentiation. If the presence of toys in itself doesn’t imply the act of play, it’s thanks to the support of the therapist that the relationship becomes possible, favoring the transition from the act to an increasingly shared play. Presenting clinical material, it’s then shown how the therapist can carry acted moments towards a co-construction, through a playful-symbolic conquest of the toys and real parts of the room; through the imaginary use of these real spaces and their emotional signification, children are helped to express, explore and experience their inner world, being able to implement, share and metabolize in the fiction of the play their unconscious fears and giving space to the emergence of nondestructive identificatory processes, sustaining so a new continuity of thought and of the Self.

A particular aspect of the play is caught by **Dondona**, who in her article mentions Benjamin (1928) in the quote “the child does not express itself through things, but things through itself”; in this perspective, doing something we always tend towards something new that at the same time recalls the past and awakens it in the here and now, where every action, even the choice of a toy or a simple idea, are an act of the identity that characterizes the object itself and its subjectivity. Framed into a groupal dimension, the imaginary use of the object becomes an act of bonding with himself and with the other, and the psychotherapist becomes the author and the caretaker of this bond, when he sustains, protects, includes and stimulates the action and play in the group, in a continuous process of finding and re-creating those forms that may be necessary to give meaning to the experience. The most fascinating aspect of this vision of the *movement of playing* pointed out here is its being without goal or purpose and without effort (without duty), giving rise to a primacy of play over the consciousness of the player. In his spontaneous and cathartic essence, playful mode attracts and allows to contact in therapy even those children particularly fragile, blocked and relationally insecure, leading them to engage in a common challenge and bringing into play their subjectivity in a fusion with new aspects of reality; this way, they can be taken away from closure in themselves. In addition to simply focusing on a strictly psychotherapeutic point of view, it’s here emphasized the commonality of

this experience with music, art, or love in its broad sense; namely creativity, and the play as a form of communication and experience, facilitates personal growth, leading to the relationship and configuring itself as an aspect of health, a tool with a “potential health benefits”.

Interesting in this article the exposure, through clinical material, of how the word can become a defensive object, something used in a non-communicative way, to exclude others from the relationship, and the great contribution that the group can give to evolve towards its interpersonal communicative use, that tells and accepts-recognizes-includes the other one. The act, gesture or word of children are often something fragile and “disconnected”, which doesn’t have a clear meaning, but asks for recognition and value and that get them in the context of a communicative exchange co-constructed; with, on the one hand the co-participated and reflective support of the therapist, on the other the get in touch of more subjectivities, it’s possible to realize that transition from language to speech, which starts the experience being together, a common history, a consciousness of being for himself and for the other, the continuity of the bond, intra- and inter-individual, of the Self and of the group. Through a joint work of minds, the emotionated thought and play with each other, is structured this way that *creative bond* that narrates and weaves new experiences; these experiences modify those who take part, capturing aspects of reality and parts of themselves not yet revealed, supporting the structuring and enrichment of subjectivity.

Similar themes are addressed in the work of **Inspector** and **Moorman**, that describes the experience of running a psychotherapy group for five latency girls within the project “TOPS” in a British primary school. By developing five main themes - falling apart and coming together, Pandora’s Box, relationship with the group leaders, anxieties about change, moving towards a Work Group -, the authors provide an overview of the complexity and processuality of working with groups.

It deals with the chaos and attacks on thinking, the difficulty to maintain the limits in a group therapy combined with the need to allow catharsis, letting the girls express their emotions, even the most aggressive. It highlights how an appropriate leadership by the conductors is crucial in these situations to give containment and shape to these transference processes, that combine the free emotional expression, challenge authority and test boundaries; it observes that the stimulation of thinking skills promoted by conductors aids to contain the chaos, expression of conflicting feelings

difficult to be expressed otherwise. It is recalled that the exclusion of a member or of the conductors represents one of the groupal structure typical of working with a group. In particular, it analyzes this process in relation to the conductors, as representatives of parental figures, on the one hand a source of curiosity about the world of adults, on the other hand seen as other figures to challenge, as representatives of discipline and authority. In these moments, the group works on a “gang mentality” in which therapists take on the role of “enemy” and find themselves having to bear strong uncomfortable feelings expressed through the projection. The projective mechanisms assist in fact on the one hand to deal, in therapy, with all situations source of anxiety in the lives of girls (as life changes, body changes related to puberty, the emerging interest in the other sex, and so on) on the other, structurally, help the group itself to “become a group”, forming a coalition towards an enemy against which “doing group”. In this scenario, adults’ support helps to give to the chaotic and disconnected actions and gestures of the girls, a containment, a thoughtful sense and a bond that allows the progression towards being in group like a “Work Group” , which is dominated by cooperation, contact with reality, tolerance of frustration and control of emotions. It is noted that typically the co-existence of oscillations between the Group as a Gang and the Work Group represents a permanent conflict that occurs within the group; a recurrent oscillation between regressive moments and moments of maturity where the Group is able to “think together” and act constructively.

As therapeutic outcomes, with regard to social skills, they highlight positive changes in the behavior of all the girls, among themselves and with peers; it’s shown how over time the girls appear more able to express themselves openly and listen to each other, and how they improved their behavior, both in class and at home, with a decrease in conflicts and an increased ability to repair their relational ruptures by themselves. It’s underlined how the group provides that space for thought necessary to process their experiences with each other - allowing them to see the consequences of their own behavior and the impact of the behavior of others on themselves - and how the group favors the internalization of an increasing skill to think and cope with difficulties and conflicts with the other members of the group, evolving towards an interpersonal communication that includes, accepts and includes the other and supporting the foundations to be able to structure helpful, positive and meaningful future relationships.

The transformative potentials of the relationship with the Other offered by the group are the central theme of the article by **De Tursi**. The author highlights an aspect of great value of the group therapy, namely the possibility to benefit from the presence of several children simultaneously, “*multiple Others*”, an element that, compared to individual therapies, leads more easily and immediately to the manifestation of *dysfunctional relationship dynamics* that typically accompany the emotional disorders, *reifying relational schemas directly during the session*. In this way, and thanks to the expressive channel of the play, - *connector tissue, halfway between the inner worlds and reality, that enables the communication and the therapeutic language* -, the space of the group allows the *recreation of a microcosm of the real world*, offering itself as a theater in which to play and act everyday situations and problems that the child encounters in natural contexts of interaction (such as school, family, the sibling subsystem or relationships with peers), but also at the same time as a place in which *to recreate the experience* by providing a processing context to move the “iterative” experience in new directions. To this purpose, fundamental is the function of the adult who co-constructs the group itself with the children, to create a therapeutic dimension and structure, in which progressively he can give an evolutionary form to the material emerging from the group mind that gradually grows in the intersubjective field. The article deepens how, thanks to this function of “guarantor” of the therapist, the groupal setting encourages the natural unfolding of a process of social learning mediated by the direct experience, by the simple observation of the Other or by a “*corrective interpretation during the dysfunctional action*” made by the therapist, offering the opportunity to learn contextually new patterns of behavior or coping skills and conflict resolution. Centering the focus on maladaptive behaviors, the repetition of “corrective relationship experiences” promotes a gradual remodeling of relational schemas and the related “cognitive structures” at the base of behaviors, a “learning guide” that, once internalized, structure a greater self-awareness, a more appropriate process of recognition, management and regulation of emotions; anticipating and correcting the future conduct, in addition to a more immediate reduction of symptomatic behaviors, this learning is the basis for the structuring of positive and *stable internal representations of the Self*, initiating the preconditions, through the remodeling of representational Self-Other schemas, for an effective *structural change of personality*. On two levels, it’s shown how, while on the one hand the support offered by the *groupal holding*

favors the development of socialization skills, on the other hand, on a more purely intrapsychic side, the experience of a *relationship with a thinking object* that supports and reflects the Self allows the internalization of a higher *reflective function* as an acquisition of the Ego.

It's highlighted the graduality and complexity of the process and the aid that the figurative possibilities offered by tools as the play, drawing or storytelling, can have in supporting, through the symbolization, the exploration of new aspects of the Self and then the change.

In her article, **Gnecchi Ruscone** takes again the theme of the relationship between the shared imaginary space - container of feelings, images and thoughts - and real bonds in psychotherapy, expanding the reflection on the use of the fairy tale and dreams. The article unfolds on a few key words: play, image, fairy tale, dream; in addition to the play, it's deepened here the use of these mediums that facilitate symbolization and narration in the group. Being already articulated in images, fairy tales and dreams can indeed act as *mediating objects* that facilitate the research of a language which can express the unshaped experiences lived in the group, expressed often only in a bodily kinetic way or as an emergent fantasy; in this sense, they are facilitators of symbolization and of the narrative process in the group, halfway between the conscious and the unconscious, and can be considered as "food" offered to children to give them the possibility to recognize and identify themselves, that they can make them theirs, remodel and widen. The author recalls how the mediating object can also be a concrete object, such as toys, modeling clay, paper and pencil, etc., anything that lends itself to be as a linkage for the subjectivity to recognize, express and create itself; in this sense, fairy tale and dream are considered as cultural objects, like music and painting, which through oral transmission settled trans-cultural, trans-generational and trans-individual meanings, namely objects that carry in themselves both cultural and collective meanings. It's here shared a perspective of the image as a fragment available to the language, an organizing function that doesn't belong to the narrator, but it's borrowed and "subjectivized" to narrate himself. Through the presentation of clinical material it's then illustrated how, starting from the sharing of "bad dreams" begins a therapeutic work that leads children to face, express and share their fears, and to find tools to solve conflicts and problematic situations; all this is made possible and accessible to the child by the imaginary-

playful dimension, the containment and the emotional exchange activated by the groupal device and by the connector and guidance role of the group leader.

In his contribution, **Gerbaudo** develops instead the use of psychodrama in groups of children, with a different theoretical perspective, centered on the unconscious in relation to the social link, even more than on the affective communication or on groupal dynamics; the symptom is seen as a perturbing element of the social bond, an “unspoken”, expression of a difficult transition from the family to social, that justifies a request of intervention and that needs to be translated, decrypted and signified through the relationship with the other. In the groups of children this aim is pursued playing scenes of real life, rather than the so-called fictionalised scenes, - following a different methodology compared with the other articles in this volume -, remaining stationary on the one hand the use of the play as a means to represent and re-present the event described with the proper forms of child language, on the other, the aim of working through the “signifiers” to make the symptom discursive and lead the way towards the Ideal Ego; this elaboration is intended as an elaboration of the personal desire, which is achieved by recognizing the myth working on the individual and the conflict that prevents the progression towards the collective dimension. The intervention of psychodramatists who regulate the interactions, infact, promotes the public expression of the private theatre, putting it in relation with the collective dimension, where objects consist by other people in relationship, who receive transferal projections (horizontal and vertical) and who are matrix for identification. In this perspective, psychodrama is that place of symbolic action in which the group, in the dramatization, is from time to time surrounded by a narration of a text not previously established, in a tangle of stories, a song of several voices which transcends the simple level of the transition from narrative (story) to representation (the play), moving from speech to speech, from another to another (if a child tells, another one responds in an unconscious associative chain that founds the social link). In fact, the purpose of this intervention is not so much to let children express themselves or bring them to an emotional learning, but to reenact a play in which the child is enabled to formulate and can assume, subjectively, his own speech, through what is basically a *talking cure*.

About Author:

Psychologist with psychoanalytic formation. She graduated with laude at the University Sapienza of Rome, “Master’s Degree in Dynamic Clinical Psychology of Childhood, Adolescent and Family”, with a thesis on group psychoanalysis with children. She worked at a non-profit organization following children with pervasive developmental disorders and other disorders characterized by behavioral, socio-relational and emotional problems. She did a post-graduate internship at the Policlinico Umberto I, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, with children under 12 years of age and families, training in the diagnostic process in the developmental age and participating as an observer in a therapy group treatment with children. She held some lectures on “group therapy with children and adolescents” for the course in Psychodynamic Group Psychotherapy at the University Sapienza of Rome.

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