

The group session between adolescents and adults

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Abstract

The ways of relating within the group varies according to different factors such as age, culture, pathology. Several participants represent different groups and in particular what happens in adult groups compared with groups of children or adolescents. The same preparation, the group is evident and characterized in different ways depending on their age, needs and possibilities and capabilities of individuals.

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The psychology of the group changes according to the age of its participants, their particular pathology and the culture to which they belong. The significant characteristic in groups of children and adolescents is the asymmetric combination of adults and young people. This is the major difference that distinguishes therapeutic groups of children and adolescents from adult therapeutic groups and implies a theoretical reflection that considers the presence of the adult in the group and how participants of different ages experience that presence. Group relations accompany the entire evolution of life and the tendency to form groups starts at a very early age, even though physiological and affective needs seem to oppose the concept of peer groups in early childhood.

The conditions of development in early childhood secure the child to the original family nucleus so strongly that a separation would seem highly improbable, (specially from the mother from which the child depends on almost entirely for his survival). Yet, study in depth on the origins of socialisation point to a surpassing of the mother/ father/child relationship.

In the nursery school numerous interactions between babies come about and the creation of stable relationships is also possible. Many observers among which H. Montagner an ethologist, have drawn attention to the characteristics that distinguish the kind of communication children use among themselves and with adults. The type of interactions used are completely different. When children are alone among themselves, one can observe an awareness they have in common for games and for space. Competition and aggressiveness that emerge from their games come about mainly to ensure a dominant role or simply to test the reaction of the others.

This type of communication seems to be an important source of enrichment, learning and self-esteem, if utilized later on in adulthood can become a valuable contribution to social life.

On the other hand, when children establish relationships with adults their behaviour becomes more filial: they request help, consolation and protection. They abandon the interaction used among their peers and favour a more socialised type of communication intended for adults that becomes universal among the whole group of children. This change in behaviour however, results in a loss of creativity, the child

does not continue to express his full potential. We are speaking about interaction and not groupal function, as the group would not exist without the adult that organises it. During the school years the “class-group” satisfies and absorbs almost all the interest for the group where the psychic dynamics of the child are characterized. It is a type of group (organized by an adult), that favours conventional filial behaviour necessary for learning, often to the disadvantage of creativity. This situation though, is indispensable to socialization, and in part is responsible for the de-sexualization of the object-relationship that is characteristic of childhood, allowing an adjustment to reality. Facilitating learning, the teacher helps the functioning of the pleasure ego to emerge, and is conferred with the role of narcissistic sustainment. In fact narcissistic counter-cathexis is the most effectual way for making the repression of the Oedipus complex possible.

During adolescence, the peer group becomes a space for narcissistic analysis and sustainment of the identifications. It's a way adolescents can express doubts regarding their “identity filiation” (identity as son/daughter of those particular parents). This task of separation will come about through a process of “de-identification” from the primary objects (in that they are part of the self), while the functions and the qualities of the object will be preserved and go to concentrate on the ego ideal. In spite of this the cathexis of the peer group is a difficult moment for the adolescent who finds his identity in crisis, but has a good chance of coming out of this situation if he is helped by the group. The group cannot be formed if contemporaneously it doesn't keep its distance from the adult, this seems to be the only possible solution to acquire real autonomy. Consequently it is the group that gives the adolescent the opportunity to free himself from the family group. When the recognition and the elaboration of the gap that exists between his own ideal and that of the group is accomplished, and he has accepted the groupal ideal as an analysis of his identification objects, he will be able to form his future ego ideal and make progress in socialization.

In short, during adolescence we observe the peer group that takes shape in opposition to the adult, helping the adolescent to free himself from the family context that has become too stifling and a place of infantilization. Adolescents live an experience that is close to groupal illusion. This experience of omnipotence and ‘everything alike’ attempts to annul differences between the sexes and generations.

It could be described as a “second phase of individuation/separation” that culminates in the separation from the parental figures and a structural intra-psychic readjustment. But to be able to break away from the parents, it is indispensable the acquisition of sufficiently solid narcissistic bases, as well as the lastingness of the internal object: for this to come about, a positive family situation is necessary during early childhood, and a successful process of separation/ individuation that allowed the forming of an internal world.

Accepting a project of group therapy

Some adolescents are unable to face a new phase of development because the first process was interrupted or obstructed by numerous difficulties. Often a request for help comes directly from the parents.

At the origin of these consultations we usually find family conflicts, previous unsuccessful therapies, drug taking, together with phobic or psychotic inhibitions or simply lack of confidence. In short we have an adolescent with a family crisis and difficulty in facing groups. Lack of insight into his own suffering along with meddling despotic parents do not help to create the conditions for proposing an individual therapy. The transference reveals infantile privations concealed up to that moment, and the suffering for the absence emerges in the presence of the object. We propose a groupal procedure that allows the adolescent to keep at a distance from the object and contemporaneously try out a bearable approach to it; this should give him enough external support to appease the internal representations and a space for thought, to elaborate this problematic situation.

In this way the systematic recourse to an act, (or sometimes violence) in that it is a process of representation and therefore an attempt to represent the internal reality, can be avoided. Moreover the group will allow a narcissistic restoration that is essential to psychic work. The group situation is ideal for living an experience with others, for getting to know each other and creating a situation of trust where personal difficulties can be faced. In fact, at the beginning of a group, the therapy does not commence straight away, but a space is created for meeting and getting to know each other and attempting to understand what is going on not only between each other but with adults, elaborating an omnipotent illusion of annulment of the differences. In the therapeutic group the major part of the work is concentrated on this elaboration and overcoming it. This can only come about if such a phase is reached in the groupal process. The beginning: The following vignette illustrates the participants search for something in common in their a newly-founded group.

After a period of silence, Mikaya introduces herself, and so do the others. Silence returns ... another question: <<*What class does everybody belong to?*>> From 3rd year of junior high school to 2nd year of high school...Silence. She continues: <<*What music does everybody prefer? Some say they like rap, but each person has their own preference, for instance Jeremie likes 'fusion'.*>>

I ask for an elucidation, they kindly inform me it's a mixture of rap and hard-rock. Others are keen on reggae, techno and even classical music. In other words they have very little in common. They start asking questions about what musical instruments they play, Jeremie prefers the guitar while someone else the piano, also here very little in common. They leave music and start on sport. What sports do they play? Michel plays rugby, Julien tennis, Jeremie squatt, X volleyball, Mikaya doesn't play sport, nothing seems to unite them. But they continue..... each participant talks about his hobbies and activities. All the subjects discussed gradually dwindle, and silence sets in, followed by a last question.

The therapist participates in the conversation showing interest but remaining strictly neutral. The silence begins to get awkward. The therapist prompts them to narrate personal experiences, but no-one has any ideas. He then suggests to compare the

present situation with the first day at school when the pupils don't know each other. A boy says: <<*Okay we are at the entrance of the school*>>. We get up and push the table to the side of the room, they ask the therapist to play the part of a teenager. The game begins and someone asks anxiously: <<*What about the teachers?*>> Jeremie exclaims: <<*Oh they drive me crazy!*>> An opinion shared by all, someone proposes a school without teachers.... The idea interests everybody, they make jokes and talk about autonomous management of the school, and getting along without adults. Michel says he knows a boy who goes to a school run by students, a complete chaos, where you buy hash...the idea of chaos without adults is touched on, but no association comes from it and an embarrassing silence sets in. The therapist stops the game and Julien observes with a grimace that it didn't work, <<*we can't make it, we don't know each other well enough*>>.

This first theme that emerged, the refusal of adults, will appear later on. For the moment they say it's not working out. Why not? Perhaps it's their refusal of the procedure the therapist proposed to play their parts? Or the guilty conscience that arose for having excluded the adult? Another attempt to find a common theme finishes in failure. In fact they are searching for a perfect likeness. An interest in common is not enough, they want to be able to share everything, to be one and the same, and not finding it, they insist on pointing out the differences that exist. What are these differences? The differences between adult and adolescent obviously, although they accept to be united to the adult (the therapist), the differences remain. In reality what unites them is their parents' demand to have them cured and this is made clear during the following session that describes another group of adolescents composed of five boys and two girls between the ages of 14 and 17 years old and two therapists. This group began 3 months before with a duration that had not been decided beforehand. We always hold a meeting with the parents and children before the group begins, after that the parents continue to meet with another therapist on a different time basis.

Cedric begins: <<*I don't want to come back next week, I didn't even want to come today, I'd already decided not to, but they told me to come here and tell all of you, so here I am*>>.

Straightaway the theme of not wanting to participate was developed by Cedric, for a reason that was not taken into consideration during the preparation of the group. Cedric lived far out in the suburbs and the trip home in the evening was very wearisome for him. The others seem to be already informed of his decision, as they have started meeting in front of the entrance of the building before the group starts, and they enter only when everybody has arrived. They talk among themselves while they're waiting and in fact are not at all surprised by his announcement.

Justine breaks the silence: <<*I thought it was the rule that we have to stay together*>>.

Olivier: <<He said he's not coming anymore, that's the rule as far as we're concerned. We agree with him, he's free, we can't force him to stay, otherwise we're behaving like our parents! We do what we want. What counts is to feel free!>>

Guillaume turns to Justine: <<In any case, nothing's stopping us from saying the same things and I imagine nothing can stop us from terminating this group; we don't know exactly what we're doing here, and if it wasn't for my parents I wouldn't come at all>>.

Cedric: <<It's true, nothing's changed for me in particular, I don't even know what changes should come about, and since my parents don't obligate me to come, I don't see why I should keep on coming, seeing we never do anything>>.

These conversations are typical at the beginning of adolescent groups, since the group object has not yet undergone cathexis. Here we clearly see that the group compares the therapists with their parents who want their children to be cured. Adolescents think that the founding of the group depends entirely on their parents and the therapists, and since it's an invention of the adults it's natural not to trust it and to attack it.

In fact psychic dynamics in adolescence have to overcome the sense of dependence related to the need of identification. The need to nurture from others seems to be as strong as (in order to protect the narcissism), the need to struggle against the dependence that is caused by it. This often results in a provocative and defiant attitude in the adolescent that makes difficult any therapeutic alliance. The peer group is conferred as a space of narcissistic analysis and sustainment of the identifications. On the other hand we have seen how before and after the session they eagerly meet to talk among themselves.

The early stages of the therapeutic group is experienced as a sign of dependence on the parents, and for this reason we suggest adolescents whose aims are not completely satisfied by the peer group to attend, while others find the peer group sufficient.

The presence of the adults introduces a sense of persecution that will have to be overcome so that feelings of belonging can emerge, allowing an anaclisis and possibilities of identification to come about essential for therapeutic work.

The therapist has the problem of finding the right distance for intervening in the group. The almost unbearable attitude of refusal of the adolescents compelled us to continually safeguard our roles and interventions otherwise there was a risk of returning to a more rigid and tense situation.

We believe that therapeutic work in any age group should help to sustain the development and elaboration of specific ways of communicating among peers, and adults should respect this specificity. However the attitude and the modality of the interventions of the therapist/s must take into account the particular cathexis of the group in the psychic economy of young patients.

The aim of the therapeutic group in fact, is to mediate the relationship with the adult, who acts as a buffer, which in turn allows an elaboration of the relationship, as long as the question of the differences between the generations has been faced. We have observed it is of particular importance for adolescents the notion of reciprocity in the disposition between their own position and that of the adults. On the contrary to the conventional pedagogic relationship where there is a dominant-dominated or teacher-pupil relation, here everybody relies on each other and is equally in need of each other.

From the very beginning of the group we favour the set-up of a common space, to get to know each other and to learn to function together not only in the presence of the adult but with the adult. We prefer not to give a meaning to the contents of the group (as described below) too soon, even if they are clearly groupal contents, because it would be seen as too intrusive by the participants, creating a feeling of ignorance in our 'knowledgeable' presence, and would introduce a sort of hierarchic superiority that the adolescent would find unacceptable. In the following session therefore, we will not interpret the transference, nor will we explain the difficulties regarding the groupal function, that had to do above all to our presence in the group, rather, we will simply highlight the following observations: <<*Cedric reveals to us that the group experience is still not totally positive for everybody, is there something we can do altogether to improve the situation?*>>

Justine and Aurelien both present the positive side to the sessions and how they have benefited, but only Justine insists on continuing the group. Aurelien would be ready to leave the group even though he recognizes it as being a positive experience, if only it wasn't for his father... (who forces him to stay).

The other participants nod their heads affirmatively when Olivier asks each one in turn if they agree to finish the group experience.

At this point the therapist suggests to resume the session and attempts to point out the defensive movement that unites them at the idea of interrupting the group, that would result in having to face separation and abandonment.

In fact what will the reaction be to eventual defections if they come about when the group is so closely knit against adults? There is a risk that the adolescents are united in order to escape the group and that it will end up being of interest for the therapists alone.

This is the question we asked ourselves after listening to Cedric's comments. Was he really influencing the others? On the other hand we had the feeling something was in the making, but there was no doubt that the ambivalent position of Aurelien was shared by almost everybody if not the entire group, nevertheless we had no intention of "giving in", thus showing them that our interest was for them and the experience in course. We finished the session emphasizing the fact that we were expecting them the following Tuesday.

After a few sessions, Aurelien asked to establish a date <<*to know how much longer we were committed to come*>>. It was decided that they would continue up to the summer holidays after which a decision would be made.

In short, we can say the group is united thanks to the leaving of some of its members, who become the scapegoats. The therapists and the adolescents are united by an experience of being abandoned, they become a group of survivors. Moreover the agreement made regarding the length and the commitment to the group helps to reunite adolescents and adults in a common project of increasing importance and reappropriation by the adolescents.

The role given to the parents during this type of therapy

We have observed an issue in consultations and psychotherapy that always unites adolescents, and it is the critical attitude they have towards their parents. This apparent refusal coincides with a deep ambivalence, in fact to criticize the parents does not mean to destroy them. We all know how delicate an alliance with adolescents against their parents is. The group procedure we adopt, allows the development of this aggressiveness, which is often dilated by the group dimension, but the guilt linked to the super-ego compulsions is not strengthened by this procedure. In fact the parents are invited to attend an analogous group that usually meets once a month. Giving the parents a place where they can voice self-criticism and sustain themselves, creates a narcissistic container that allows the adolescents to find new confidence in this type of structure and to rely on new relational elements missing in the family. This helps them to emerge from the repetition and allows them to put aside what they had repressed. On the other hand, the parents are facing middle-age crises and find themselves united in a quest for help. Sharing the same difficulties stimulates them to go back to the relationship they had with their own parents and to identify themselves with their children drawing from their own experiences in adolescence.

What position does the therapist occupy in the world of adolescents and parents?

The adult's position is very difficult to establish, whether he is rejected or whether he takes part in the illusion by assuming the semblance of a companion of the adolescents. From our experience, if the therapist plays the part of the analyst who gives meaning to what he hears, the adolescents fall into a defensive silence during the sessions while on the street or in the waiting-room they easily communicate in the adult's absence. If on the other hand the therapist tries to get closer participating in the conversation, the adolescents don't hesitate to remind him to keep his distance. This is clearly illustrated in the following description.

In a group composed of five girls and boys aged between 14 and 15 years old, the topic of conversation for some weeks is computers and video games. They all seem to share the same experience and use specialized vocabulary regarding magic transformation, fusion of the main characters and annulment of the differences between the generations. The group's discourse gives rise to complete omnipotence, while the therapist reduced to a mere spectator, and evidently facing a new and culture, feels alien but seduced by this unknown world. He attempts to make an alliance asking explanations. The adolescents look at him surprised, as if they had

forgotten him, and one of them kindly informs him that these are games for adolescents. Another adds that they are dangerous for adults because they become addicted, while a third boy knew of a person that had gone crazy. It is clear the adolescents maintain their positions even though this exchange has a playful quality. At the end of the session the adolescents warmly shake the therapist's hand <<*until next week!*>

Later on the elaboration of the defensive phantasies of omnipotence is made possible by referring to the potential of the video games and virtual images.

When one of the adolescents is absent in a following session, the therapist is able to jokingly complain of the poverty of the centre that has no computer strong enough to evoke the virtual image of their companion so the group would be complete.

The analytic work on the function of the adolescents, becomes proper groupal dynamics.

Lastly, these particular positions take account of the age and the psychic function of the young patients and greatly influence the modality of the therapist's interventions. Apart from these differences, his capacity to share the emotional states of the group and ability to evoke his own infantile state will always be necessary, and will allow him to establish the right distance, preserving the differences between the generations.

This is the principal condition whereby the groupal process can develop and consequently bring meaning to therapeutic groups of adolescents and children.

Bibliography

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