

Transformational potentials of the peer group

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to examine the transformational potentials that characterise the peer group, in groups of adolescents as well as in groups with members of other ages but in which adolescence is reactualized.

Key words: adolescent, dream, peer group

Typical examples of peer groups are those commonly formed during adolescence
Rapid and extensive changes in post-industrial society have brought into question traditional values. Moreover, modifications in social and economic roles and gender identity have intensified the lack of certainty in points of reference. A painful task is in progress at a social-institutional level as well as at an individual level, the redefinition of the identity of the self that makes all phases involving change much more difficult. Therefore, adolescence, the phase of change par excellence, can be considered the emblem of moments during which transformations must be faced. However, in some ways, the imposing social-economic changes which took place after the second world war have in themselves changed, and in some ways the status of the adolescent as well. Adolescence in western society has become much more difficult today, because traditional mechanisms used to transmit values have been put in a critical position, since the family unit seems to have abdicated its role as supplier of rules and guidance for life. Consequently, since the 1980's there has also been less generational conflict within the family unit. It has in itself become, in many cases, a permissive dimension, a relatively protected place that supplies a series of services and often allows adolescents great freedom. In some ways, because of this, it has become more difficult for adolescents to emancipate than in the past. The 1968 movement allowed young people to form a strong collective identity, antagonistic cohesiveness against the adult world and traditional values. Young people today, particularly because they are less in conflict with the family, have instead not developed a collectively strong identity to the same extent.

Adolescents must therefore measure themselves against a series of changes which influence all aspects of their lives (physical, cognitive and social) in an environment that is in itself constantly changing, with a plurality of values, in which the fortification guaranteed by the institutionalised biographical process, prodigal of criteria on what could be considered a valid existential objective in a certain phase of life, has fractured. We have more freedom but are also socially more alone, in a situation of global uncertainty as far as regards present as well as future possibilities.

Berger (1973) observes: "On the one hand modern identity is open, transitory and subject to continual change. On the other hand the sphere of subjective identity is the main support an individual actually has." So the need to reflect on who one is and what sort of relationships one has with others, which has also led psychoanalytical research to pay ever greater attention to the development of the self, finds its natural habitat of growth in adolescence. It is precisely in this phase of life that individuals must deal with a changing psycho-physical identity. Selener (1991) points out that adolescents must face three fundamental processes of mourning: a) mourning for childhood idealised parents; b) mourning for their childhood body; c) mourning for their identity and childhood role, all at a moment of great instability and confusion. C.Zucca Alessandrelli (1995) strikingly defined adolescence as "the apprentice of time", particularly because one of the most difficult tasks during this phase of life is to maintain a sense of continuity of the self by diversifying the past, present and future, and at the same time maintain a connection between the three and integrate them.

There are many other aspects that could be examined regarding the complexity of interactions of the developmental processes involved in identity formation in adolescence, and the consequent difficulties that an adolescent must face which, in some cases, can cause pathological situations to take shape. However, at this point, I think I should try to explain why I feel the group setting can, in many cases, be the most adequate therapeutic situation in which to face and solve them, considering the above mentioned problems.

In fact, it is immediately evident that putting adolescents together in a group means stimulating and facilitating a movement towards peers that in this phase of life is particularly natural and spontaneous.

The peer group is precisely the context that adolescents turn to to try to emancipate from the family group of origin, and offers the possibility for a fundamental experience. A sort of social laboratory in which a young man and woman feel directly involved in daily interaction with the others. The time spent with peers guarantees adolescents a formative space for relationships and is also particularly important for identity formation, removed in principle from subordination to others and gratifying from an emotional point of view. They stay together just to stay together and gain gratification from the possibility of spending time in an environment with symmetrical relationships where the accentuated value of the present allows them to emancipate from the past and plan for the future. A situation is created in which their need to communicate and search for values that can be shared, is accepted and is answered to. The peer group, particularly for the above mentioned reasons, takes on the function of Ego-ideal that, if at times reinforces the illusion of being able to recover childhood omnipotence and individual narcissism threatened by the above mentioned mourning, also becomes a place where realistic projects can be developed towards a shared ideal tension. If what has been said is valid for adolescents without pathological problems, it is even more so for adolescents with problems. Obviously, though, a spontaneously formed peer group does not have adequate valencies at a

therapeutic level for persons who are more fragile, also because at times these groups can be more or less unintentionally cruel towards weaker and needy subjects. The therapist should know how to exploit the transformational potentials of the peer group, but at the same time be able to contain and keep under control aspects that could be dangerous or, worse, destructive.

Therefore when an adolescent phase of the peer group is reactualized in a small group, the presence of a leader who knows how to put to good use therapeutic valencies, that characterise this specific group, by controlling aspects that could become negative is useful.

A small group not only facilitates spontaneous movement in adolescence, precisely because of a particular characteristic that I will explain shortly, but is also the most valid instrument to work on individuation and separation processes. These processes characterise the construction of a personal identity which adolescents must newly define both at an intra-psychic and relational level. Blos (1971) rightly considers adolescence that phase in life where there is a second process of separation-individuation. We know, in fact, that identity is defined in a relational context through processes of identification and differentiation (assimilable in moments of fusion-individuation). They are intrinsic to the formation of a group. As I have often indicated in my work on the group, the fusion-individuation dialectic is a specific movement of the group setting, it underlies every session and is therefore always available.

It seems useful to clarify, however, that when I speak of fusion in the group I am referring not only to the possibility of symbolically reactualizing the symbiotic phase with the primary object (a fundamental moment for development, that permits the mending of the course of the grandiose self, the basis for the development of the real self), but also to the possibility of sharing other and more evolved phases of fusion. I will take up this important matter later.

At this point, I would like to highlight the usefulness of thinking in terms of interactive dialectic thought when we talk of a group, time seen metaphorically as a spiral, and consider group space as transitional space. There are four elements simultaneously present in the group with their own complementary and parallel evolution: 1) the individual with his/her internal world, 2) interaction of group members, 3) transpersonal phenomena, 4) the group as a whole, with all the phantasmatic representations that it can take on.

Transpersonal phenomena should be considered synchronically as well as diachronically. In the first sense it is linked to modalities of archaic ego functioning, pre-verbal, whose premises are the non separation of the self and objects, that emerge in the here and now of the group situation, as a defence against fragmentation and separation anxiety, and as the subject and group's evolutionary potentiality. Neri (1995) identifies them in the atmosphere, in the underlying tone that characterises the various meetings, in the medium, and in the effects of primitive mentality and basic assumptions. Instead, diachronically the transpersonal function is a sort of

"precipitate" that contributes to the formation of the self. For Menarini and Pontalti (1994) the transpersonal is unconscious and the root of interactive behaviour linked to the history of human groups, the family of origin. According to Rouchy (1994) family culture is unconsciously incorporated and establishes the subject's collective identity and unindividualized self. Cultural incorporation is the basis for relational space and time and influences them. The subject is unaware of its functioning, like an automatism, in planned and not "mentalized" behaviour that, thanks to group work can be seen and understood, and therefore, with awareness, can be integrated or rejected.

Instead, as for the understanding of the group as such, keep in mind that the mother-child symbiotic orbit constitutes the rudimentary basis for "phantasizing the group as a whole". It is precisely this possibility that allows dialectic, specific to the group, to develop between fusion and individuation, in which positive transformations take place, for individual members as well as the group as a whole. This dialectic movement moves through the time of the group work that, as I have already said, is well defined by the spiral metaphor. The spiral figure rotating around an axis allows us to synthesise the plurality of dimensions and movements that constitute our temporal experience in the group.

It is therefore possible to go ahead or back, with the possibility of going back to the same point in relation to the distance from the axis, even if at different levels, since multiple levels of reality are present at the same time in every session and for each individual.

Having understood this, it is evident that group therapy can be particularly efficacious for adolescents "apprentices of time" for another reason, precisely because the group setting permits, as I have said, to move "freely" in time, in a particular way that differentiates it from individual therapy, back and forth, in situations where past, present and future are potentially always available and interact. In fact, it is not only possible to go back to the fusional archaic phase but also back through all fundamental stages of personal maturing and constructively work through unsolved problems. And, in the end, be able to "try" new and more evolved modalities than ones usual way of being. Therefore project oneself into the future adopting roles, that are useful in making emotional stands emerge that had never previously been taken on. If this is true for a group of adult patients, for adolescents the therapeutic and corrective function of the group is even more incisive, especially since, as M. Sacchi (1988) reminds us: "because of the young age of the members the group functions as a formative experience for their personality and identity as adults, instead of being perceived over all as a corrective experience of neurotic disorders, as happens with adult patients".

As I have already mentioned, it is also important to highlight, how space in the group is transitional space, with underlying fusion-individuation dialectic in which a new culture can be created and shared values established, and within which an adolescent can test and put into practice constructive potentials. The significance of being female and male is also discussed, by re-elaborating Oedipal problems and dealing with this

theme in the here and now of the therapeutic situation where female and males are directly in confrontation. This permits, adolescents in particular, to question and emancipate from stereotyped roles often learned within the family, acquire a more authentic understanding of how they feel about themselves and their relationships with others, and reinforce and define their gender identity in a personal way. Now, we should go back to fully understand the fusion-individuation movement, which is extremely important for group work and for adolescents.

Since the group setting should be able to activate common symbiotic zones, at times it stimulates identification between the ego and the us which tends to obscure the boundaries between self and objects, and smoothen the boundaries between the individual and the group and therefore evoke the relationship with the primary object (the mother during early infancy). The possibility of a symbolic reactualization of this phase which is so archaic, is immediately present in the history of the group, even if at first the group members, in particular adolescents, defend themselves from letting themselves go in this dimension since they fear the fusion as potentially destructive and at the same time are afraid of falling apart. But during group work an atmosphere of trust and acceptance is gradually created which stimulates the first signs of the possibility of this phase. The leader becomes aware of this when group members begin to use the pronoun "we" more and more, the allocution "me too" becomes a sort of password, and the group is phantasized as "closed", since a repeated phrase during this stage is: "we began together and will certainly all finish together".

This beginning of "formal" fusion, potentially present from the first sessions, and from the moment they begin to feel good together, even if in a confused way, represents the possibility of a more authentic and deep fusion as the group process evolves.

When this is accomplished it is important that the leader let all the group members fully and deeply experience it, as long as it is therapeutic; only after this experience has been completely and constructively lived can it be elaborated and transformed into a possible object of thought. When the positive and regenerating aspect of this experience begins to vanish and elements that disturb therapeutic work begin to appear along with anxiety provoking aspects of fusion tied to the fear of losing one's identity, when anxiety of fragmentation emerges with the surfacing of relationships with partial objects, only then can the leader reveal the danger of this situation lasting and of antitherapeutic factors emerging.

The possibility of regressing to archaic levels seems to me of fundamental importance in facing adolescent themes, since it allows for an understanding of childhood experiences, even the most archaic ones remain a reservoir from which one can draw throughout one's life and not something that must be given up once and for all. Moreover regression shared in the group is much less anxiety provoking than in individual therapy. Sharing, in fact, greatly reduces excessive dependency on the therapist that often massively regressive situations provoke in individual therapy, also because the behaviour of a leader who has known how to be present without

interfering with the prevailing atmosphere in the group, but better still has calmly immersed into it helping to maintain it, has permitted the members to understand that not the therapist, but the "group" consented to experiment that "sufficiently good" atmosphere in which one can trustingly let oneself go and live the regressive experience and that therefore it can act as adequate substitute of the primary object. In this situation one can distinguish the present from the past that adequately revisited can be abandoned along with its coercive aspects of "compulsion" and become a memory; memories can become shared communication and at the same time an instrument of individuation and identity. Each one is alone with their own history that characterises, but loneliness together with others is not annihilating as feared, also because restoring ones individual and characterising history allows one to rediscover a sense of continuity of the self, that physical change deeply brings into question. Restoring ones past means finding ones present and be able to project oneself into the future. Only after the "fusion" and the deep and authentic sharing has been experimented in a satisfying way can it be possible to attempt individuation and emancipation.

Another aspect typical of the group that permits adolescents to recognise themselves in the present is due to the important function of mirroring carried out by the group in relation to the single members; mirroring which on the one hand limits, forcing to abandon the omnipotent phantasy that "when I grow up I will be able to do anything", on the other hand characterises and puts to good use the uniqueness and particularities of an individual.

Problem adolescents have often had deficits in the formation and development of the self, that have made the foundations of their healthy narcissism fragile, therefore another fundamental function that the therapeutic group as a whole can perform is that of the self-object (Neri-cit) which makes the self of every component emerge, maintains it and gives it meaning. The group can therefore play the role of mirroring self-object, as ideal and omnipotent self-object (as for example in the first stages described of archaic fusion), and as twin self-object.

In addition to my personal experience with groups of adolescents, the supervision of a group formed within a community home, with boys and girls, between the age of 14 and 17, who had in common a particularly traumatic childhood to which their reaction had been the rejection of all forms of authority coming from the adult world, further confirmed the usefulness of the therapeutic group for adolescents. In fact the possibility of experiencing a relationship with a leader (adult) who knew how to face problems with them and together reach a solution without giving pre-established answers, of expressing hostility and rebellion without destroying or being destroyed, of not having to endure but be able to consciously take on an active role, was fundamental to resume the process of identity formation. In an advanced phase of the therapy, at times even the group as a whole became a valid parental substitute and allowed a bridge to be built between internal and external reality so that symptoms became communicable and therefore modifiable; the answer of others, in the here and

now of the therapeutic situation, transformed the projections and corrected them; problems regarding dependence were dealt with and in part solved also because they were lived as less dangerous within a situation of sharing. Moreover, having been able to benefit from the various functions of the group previously described together with others, permitted all members to reach a greater cohesion of the self, a sense of continuity in their personal history and, a greater awareness of their internal world and personal relational modalities with others; although, all of this, may not have solved all their problems once and for all, it did put them in a condition to deal with them better and hope to sooner or later solve them at least in part. My experience as supervisor of this group that for bureaucratic reasons had to be suspended after about three years and, as individual and group therapist of adolescents, permits me to recognise the reactualization of this phase in a shorter period of time even in groups of adult patients (spiral time) and to deal with problems typical of this existential situation in a better way. I have, in fact, shown how in the group the various developmental stages of life are repeatedly worked through to elaborate them in a maturing way. Regarding this, to fully explain how group work functions when dealing with adolescents and the reconstruction of a peer group, I will give an account of some sessions in which my group constructively "regressed" to this stage of life.

A brief theoretical premise

As we know, parental influence supports all the development of an individual and leaves its mark on the ego as a genetic continuum of total or partial identification, tied to the progressive structuring of the ego in all fields. Usually though these identifications are so interwoven in the structure of the mature ego, that they are not recognisable. But with the re-emergence in the therapeutic group of identification and projection processes that reactivate regressive movements, as also happens in adolescence, previous identifications can be deconstructed and partially reprojected and re-personified. It is precisely this possibility that allows for, in this case, the developmental-therapeutic use of regression, since a pre-constructed system of roles, laws and needs, that condition one's self-image and the world become modifiable in the matrix of the group. Therefore inter and intra-psychic conflicts tend to come up and be acted out in relationships with objects that could represent objects of the past or self-objects with the consequential lived experience, typical of adolescence, of uneasiness and confusion.

The peer group or the group characterised by the presence of a collective subject (Fraternity Community, Neri cit.) that because of its formal structure is similar to adolescent groups, therefore becomes, in many moments, that facilitating environment, that place in which it is possible to explore shared common tension, and in this way it takes on the same "creative" function of new solutions, typical of adolescent groups. Again the dialectic, always present in the group, of fusion-individuation is in progress followed by processes of separation but that often, as in adolescence, are accompanied by an intense sense of guilt. And as in adolescence, in this phase problems associated to hypochondria begin to appear, contradictory

behaviour and rebellious attitude, and themes of rivalry associated with the choice of sexual object. In this case as well, as for adolescents, it is important that the challenge be gathered up by someone, that there be an attitude of frank discussion and stimulating and constructive confrontation. This time, in a different way from what took place in the personal history of almost all the patients, there can be the possibility in the group of building together with an adult (the leader), who is not detached from the relationship, new and more adequate models of behaviour. But in this phase the relationship with the adult is not always important; fundamental instead is the peer group, the Fraternity Community that, analogous to the adolescent group, becomes a constant point of reference, a cohesive force determining new modalities of being and of social attitude, and it is also an environment in which one can express the desire for freedom and at the same time the need for protection.

In this situation subgroups can at times be formed or privileged relationships of pairs. The transformational aspect can be taken in by one or more members who can act as "spokesperson" of the new prospective, and the shared therapeutic aspect is created because of the possibility of dealing with, finally in an adequate way, typical themes of adolescence. It is a stage in which group discussions concern "maximal systems", the sense of life and death, and reflect the reactualizing of conflicts with re-externalised internal objects in the group and anxiety tied to feelings of destruction and loss that always accompany phases of change.

Themes regarding transgressive aspects of sexuality are also dealt with; so often there are past transgressive moments, of which one has never spoken because of underlying feelings of shame and guilt, that can be "redimensioned", in the sense of cut down to size, precisely because they are no longer lived as a memory of guilty solitude, but shared with others.

In this phase there is also the risk of external acting out of pairing behavior but that the therapist's experience can, most of the time, foresee and therefore avoid.

This adolescent position, at a more evolved level of the regressive stage previously described (the fusional archaic one), reposes the fusion-individuation dialectic to the group for better integration of the different aspects of the self and to build personal and at the same time shared projects; it occurs when real therapeutic work is already in progress, therefore some time after the group has started. Having said this, let us move on to the example.

Clinical example

The group I will speak about (that I will call A) is, as all my groups, an open group, in which each patient terminates the therapy at their own pace and is then substituted by a new patient; this means that in a group more than one generation of patients can be present.

In A at least three persons are almost at the end of their therapeutic work and there have not been any new members for two years. Moreover, as often happens during a therapy, very important external events have been reported and therefore shared, such as births and deaths of dear ones. This sharing has increased the cohesiveness of the

group and the level of empathy among members. All have been able to experiment phases of primitive regression several times, that were functional to their development. It is, therefore, a group in which often has an atmosphere of deep trust and open to listening and solidarity.

This group has been dealing with themes typical of adolescence for some time. What characterises regression to adolescence is not the specific content of single sessions, that can be similar to those of other periods, but the emergence of a collective subject and the particular intensity of the adolescent problems dealt with, their emerging, overlapping or interweaving in a relatively short lapse of time. Initially a common theme was adolescent hypochondriac preoccupation, the spokesperson was Susanna who made herself have, directly in the group, a massive attack of tachycardia (this is not the place to stop and describe how this was an important development for Susanna, nor analyse in detail what this event aroused in all the group; I only wish to demonstrate how this event, for this group, was "the spark" indicating that we were entering the adolescent phase). Afterwards the group spatially divided into two subgroups, the males and the females sitting facing each other, with me as divider. This phase was accompanied by greater care for ones body and way of dressing both by the women as well as the men, and as a result the display of a sort of pleasure in showing off. Later space was given to the expression of sexual phantasies accompanied by shame and guilt feelings that through interaction, which permitted confrontation and sharing, were understood and redimensioned. All of this was not plain and simple, but accompanied by anxiety, feelings of inadequacy, confusion and anger that rekindled old unresolved conflicts. Fantasies of transgressively "materialising" possible pairing between men and women of the group also came up, that aroused intense feelings of exclusion and rivalry. In facing these themes, in particular, at times they tried to exclude me, other times I was lived as a distant and insensitive parent who aroused anxiety of abandonment along with the fear of losing love, or as a superficially too pleasing parent because actually indifferent, other times again as a rigid and superego authority stimulating violent outbursts of anger.

But, in all these cases, it was possible to understand and interpret reactualized conflicts of the past even if with difficulty and pain at times. In this context hate emerges with particular intensity, aroused by love delusions, for parents of the opposite sex, and shows how this functioned as a sort of dangerous "time bomb" and in relationships with possible partners, treated with suspicion and in accordance with rigid stereotypes, and disesteem for oneself. This theme regarding identification with the presumed aggressor as the only means of not separating from him, continued for several sessions and stimulated dreams and sado-masochistic phantasies with confusion regarding who was the victim or persecutor.

In particular Antonio talks about his death phantasies after the death of his mother, who he felt had always belittled, not loved and rejected him.

When someone in the group points out, as had been clarified in the previous sessions, that the more one has had a disappointing relationship with a parent, the more one

finds it difficult to separate from that parent and unconsciously identifies oneself with him. Antonio, as he tells us later, is overcome by a terrible anxiety attack to the point that he can no longer speak.

The next session he brings the following dream: "I'm in a house similar to my childhood home, there's Renato (a member of the group who for Antonio is a sort of ideal) holding still in a bag, with a pitchfork, an enormous black and very hairy snake. Antonio wants to kill it but he's afraid and can't keep it still, until, while he's about to kill it, the snake's skin opens and two beautiful and affectionate women come out, they smile and fondle him, leaving him happily surprised". "Your wife and your daughter"- says a group member, "your wife and the analyst"- echoes another (incidentally I would like to mention that all the members think of Antonio's wife, because when he talks about her she is always considered by the group as being particularly in love with and dedicated to him, in spite of Antonio's difficulty and resistance in recognising this).

All the group recalls typical adolescent themes of transformation, and intervene to throw light on how, once the unconscious meaning is understood, old positions can be abandoned; if the mother from phallic and frightening is transformed into a good object, even the way one sees oneself as inadequate and of little value can be transformed into a loveable person. The suspicious and untrusting atmosphere between the sexes, lately dominant and which previously they had tried to deny through acting out, is transformed into the desire to exchange love, this time authentically. Guido, a man who is no longer young and who usually takes on the bitter role of the sceptic in the group, speaks, using particularly tender and delicate terms, about himself and her, his falling in love with a woman he recently met. In this situation Antonio's dream is symbolic for the group, since it condenses the multiple dynamics between the members into a "mythological" representation of the group, that is, into a comforting narration that alleviates the previous tension and stimulates the interweaving of personal elements of individual experiences in a shared résumé. As in other important group moments, a dream often, enriched by group interaction, stimulates the building of a "myth" of the group, that later constitutes a reassuring point of reference in the shared history.

In this way we can see how recognition of the other as a real person is accompanied by self-awareness, since social interaction and the definition of the Self occur simultaneously. In this period a patient sends the group a postcard that represents a wonderful "room of mirrors". This time going back to adolescence is in a context that does not distort images, indeed, the mirroring of the group allows for a transformation that modulates narcissism into more mature forms, reinforcing the boundaries of Ego and differentiation between the Self and others.

In this case, more than in others, the group, precisely because it has regressed to an adolescent phase, builds its own special lexicon, also through shared phantasies, that become an instrument for further development.

I hope I have better clarified with this example about.

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