THE GROUP'S EMOTIONAL BIOGRAPHY

Claudio Neri

SUMMARY: A feature of group life, its biography, is described which derives from the history of the group and which gives a unique character to the life of the group in the present. This inheritance is important in the present functioning of the group and for the experience and development of its members.

The use of the word `biography'[1] is intended to indicate the emotional history and tradition of a group.  These are built up into a body of experience among the members during the course of the group existence.  It includes the sense of an emotional inheritance or legacy from the past, but the `biography' also conveys that this emotional development in time is felt as the organic growth of some important entity which becomes a significant influence on the present activity of the group and

---

[1] I have chosen to use the word `biography' as, in the original title of this paper, the Italian word `patrimonio' does not translate properly into the English word `patrimony'.

Claudio Neri is a psycho-analyst and Associate Professor of Theory and Practice of Group Dynamics, at the L'Universita "La Sapienza", Rome. Address for correspondence: Via Cavalier d'Arpino 26, 00197 Roma, Italy.

on the experience of each member. McDougall (1920), however, identified the organization of the group as the important variable upon which the quality of its performance depends.

The organized group

In McDougall's view, participation in the life of the group degrades the individual and likens his mental processes to the crowd's, whose brutality,,inconsistency and irrational impulsiveness have been discussed by many authors. However, only by participating in group life can the subject become completely human and rise above the level of the savage.

The solution to this paradox lies in the organization of the group. At best the organization checks the degrading tendency and makes the group constructive; and thus `man can slightly rise above the animals' (McDougall 1920, cited in Cruciani 1983). McDougall described four conditions for the group to become organized: First, and foremost, certain degree of continuity in the experience of the group; secondly, the group members' adequate conception of the group itself - of its nature, composition, functions and capabilities; Thirdly, though not essential, the interaction (especially in terms of conflict and rivalry) with other similar groups, inspired by different ideals and goals and dominated by different traditions and habits; And, fourthly, the group member should bear in mind the body of traditions, habits and customs that determine the interrelations between the members and the group as a whole (Cruciani 1983).

Cultural heritage

The well-functioning group depends not only upon McDougall's conditions, but also upon other factors highlighted by Bion (1961). I will not deal in detail with Bion's frequently discussed ideas, but rather summarise some important aspects that have influenced my practice in groups:

1. a certain degree of freedom of thought and speech; and, in particular, the freedom to express emotions other than the prevailing ones.

2. tolerance of anxiety, together with the means to face and mitigate it.

3. a deeply-felt group-identity, which allows new ideas and new members to be absorbed (and lost) without the paralysing fear of being deprived of identity and originality.

In considering whole institutions, the exercising of freedom of thought implies the communication between sub-groups. Sub-groups are, in fact, necessary to support and translate thoughts into the concrete activity of the institution. However the way sub-groups work together must not be destructive, and should not affect secure group `bonds' that link all the members.

Bion drew up guidelines that contribute to a favourable environment for the work of the group. Firstly, an awareness of the value of a rational approach to problems and of the need at times to loosen the grip of fantasy and emotions needs to develop, to create a work group. Secondly the concept of `development' of people and of their capacities, as opposed, for instance, to the notion of `being already gifted' by virtue of birth or social status. Bion comments:

Certain ideas play a prominent part in the work group: not only is the idea of `development' rather than `full equipment by instinct' an integral part of it, but so is the idea of the value of a rational or scientific approach to the problem. So also, as an inevitable concomitant of the idea of `development', is accepted the validity of learning from experience (Bion 1961, p. 99).

Thirdly, it needs to be accepted that learning from experience is a valid approach. In Bion's work,   the key word is always `experience' later to be formalised as the basis of `learning from experience' (Meltzer 1978, p. 3).

The emotional biography

I will turn now to consider some elements related to the emotional significance of the group. For the sake of completeness, I will gather them under the general term `the group's emotional biography'. First I will define this notion and them illustrate some of its aspects. The environment, how to be together, the small rituals of every meeting and, more generally, all that pertains to the history and the tradition of the group are subject to great emotional investment on the part of the members of a small analytical group, a team or a psychiatric service. Also the functioning and the reputation of the group are subject to emotional investment; in fact the group is considered as a `team' when they perform with great involvement and integration. These emotionally invested elements are perceived as a part of an organic whole (which I have termed, inadequately, the group's `biography'). This pool of emotion is concurrently invested by the members collectively.[2]

---

[2] Emotional investment is accompanied by the projection of fantasies and of aspects of the self, though I shall not emphasise that aspect in this paper.

It is important, too, that from a psycho-analytic point of view, this body of emotional investment is equivalent to mother's body. As such, it is experienced totally differently from a lifeless entity, or an abstract idea of the group. The members behave as if they considered it alive, something that can grow or, alternatively, be hurt and wounded. And, if it is wounded and injured, the members will work for its full recovery. In fact the integrity of the group, felt as this organic biography, largely conditions its ability to be a permanent source of development and well-being for the members.

The tendency to make the emotional investment in the group is spontaneous, however, allowing the investment to `circulate' calls for effort and work. An institution has special features which are emotional invested: the relationships with working colleagues; and the proximity, or distance, of the hierarchical, operational and cultural leaders.

Characteristics of the emotional biography

I will now consider some of the features of the investment in the group's biography.

The first distinctive characteristic is the personal nature of the emotional bonds linking the members to the emotional biography of their group. Knights described something connected with this:

the things that really concern us are obviously those with which we have a personal and direct relationship; they belong to the world that Martin Buber defined as the world of I and Thou, the world of relations. But man cannot exclusively live in the world of I and Thou: there is also the world of It, i.e. the one that can and must be manipulated and arranged and that necessarily bears on the quality of the personal world. (Knights 1971, Literature and Politics with Special Refeence to the Seventeenth Century, quoted in Melchiorri 1973, p. 43).

Knights indicates that the elements of the `It-world' are experienced with great emotional significance. To a certain extent, they are considered as persons with whom one has a relationship. These personal feelings stem from different sources. Amongst these it is important to mention one - the intensity with which the members treat the group during the analysis. A helpful example is the following: Goldwater (1953, cited in Searles 1960, p. 249) wrote about Vincent van Gogh's paintings in order to understand what gives the paintings their great expressive ability. Whether it is van Gogh's conscious preoccupation with the effect of light, which is partly true. However, in fact, van Gogh exchanges an (unfinished) unpainted wooden chair for a yellow one to highlight the contrast with red, thus integrating and harmonizing the colours. But it is not so much his drawing skill that is impressive, rather his extremely intense way of looking at such common and familiar objects, with such a deep-rooted respect as to almost transform them into living creatures. The `It' becomes `Thou'

The second special characteristic of the emotionally invested biography is it ability to become a source of well-being for the members. As members invest their emotions,

these become at the same time a source from which the members can gain. The integrity of the emotional biography and its positive nature for the group greatly contribute to the members own identity and self-esteem. Thus members both give and they also take; it is a two way emotional movement.

Thirdly, sharing: the relationship that each member has with the group's emotional biography is not exclusive. Indeed, it is a common object for everyone who has invested emotions and fantasies in it. Combining and sharing the same emotional biography make the individuals' investment a reality; and also others will relate to each other through the common investment. In this way the emotional biography both belongs to each member and it is also an object they possess in common. Acting together these two trends generate great solidarity and at the same time powerful conflicts.[3] In addition, both solidarity and conflicts are enhanced because the emotional biography is a fundamental element in the personal identity of the individual members. So that any change in the state of the perceived group biography is experienced by the individuals as a change in their identity. Concerning the relation between personal identity and the functioning of the group, Levy-Bruhl (1922) has described parallel observations in primitive cultures:

> The primitives do not understand why the earth should be individually owned.
> What individuals are entitled to is the use of the soil and to handing it over to
> others. Actually, the earth belongs - in absolute terms - to the social group as a
> whole, that is to say to all the living and the dead... The inmost aversion... to

---

[3] There is a further important cause for insoluble conflicts within the group. This occurs as the elements of the group come to represent unrecognised aspects of the members - including the therapist. These projected and rejected aspects of the Self will also enter into the emotional biography and be sustained unconsciously to maintain the defences against recognising what has been disowned.

> the complete alienation of the earth following through selling it... (for example) has to be explained by taking account of this aspect (Levy-Bruhl 1922, p. 122; quotations taken from the Italian translation).

The sharing of the earth corresponds to the individuals' intimate relationship to the group. Indeed,

> the social group... is the actual unit of which the individual is the simple element (Levy-Bruhl 1922, p. 101).

> In our view, an individual, however, however complicated, is essentially characterised by his being one; otherwise he would no longer be an individual, but a combination of many individuals. However, among primitive populations, the strong internal feeling of their own person is not matched with a similar rigorous concept of individuality... its boundaries remain vague and imprecise... [They] even vary according to whether individuals have a mystical force or `mana' (Levy-Bruhl 1922, p. 228).

> The individual is far from being one, as we conceive him, but is both one and multiple; he is therefore a so-called reference point in terms of participation (Levy-Bruhl 1922, p. 131).

A fourth distinctive characteristic is the quality of vitality of the emotional biography. Any Perturbation of the pool of emotion)such as a change in group structure, the arrival of a new member, etc.) affects the ability of participants to use the group as a Self-object that can reliably, immediately and vitally confirm their identity and well-being. We must remember that the Self-object is neither the Self nor the object, but the _subjective_ aspect of the Self support function, stemming from the relationship that the latter establishes with the objects. Through its presence and activity it reveals and

maintains the Self and the experience of being oneself. The relations with specific types of Self-objects can be described by referring to their particular functions (Wolf 1988).

If the integrity and stability of the emotional biography is felt to be threatened, then so is its Self-object function. The notion of the emotional `biography' suggests that the environment and the conditions under which the group works, lay the foundations of a very important `Self-object relationship'. Whenever these conditions change so does this relationship. The group will respond with agitation and panic, and a series of impulsive actions. The members will try to resume the contact with their source of a sense of being, and attempt to revive it (Kohut 1971, Correale 1991). If change in venue and schedule, new members, the introduction of a new style or way of participating in the sessions etc. occur, then the analyst must be ready to deal with the ensuing disruption. The significance of these collective responses designed to resume contact within the group can be understood best by analysing the Self-object function of the emotional biography.

Sometimes the members experience the group as if they were dreaming so that the line between I and Thou has not yet been drawn. In the situations I am describing, this confusion does not result from one between subject and object. It cannot therefore be understood by using, for example, the notion of massive projective identification. Instead, it is simpler and more useful to understand these phenomena in the light of the fantasy of the individual and the group `being hand in glove', and hence of being united.

The support member receive from the group is felt as if coming from a mirroring Self-object, not completely separated from their Self and that produces and strengthens a positive image of the Self. In addition the primary narcissistic needs are met, not only through this feature, but also by transferring the perfection of the all-powerful Self onto the group. The group as an idealized Self-object is experienced as an extension of the self.

For its members the group is also the source of other experiences, achievement and more realistic confirmations of the Self that cannot be classified as the mirroring requirements (the mirroring Self-object) of the need to incorporate ideals of calm and strength (ideal Self-object). In fact the group's members achieve a vague but deep all-pervasive feeling of security due to the presence of other people (voices, smells, emotions, noises). All this gives a sense of belonging and participation and makes them feel humans among humans. These sensations cannot be explained in terms of a mirror response or of fusion with the ideal. Their presence suggests that the group responds to a third requirement of the Self-object, that of a twinship or alter-ego.[4]

A fifth characteristic of the emotional biography is the basic tone of the group. The environment the group provides was described by Anzieu and Martin (1990) following Fritz Redl as

> the key, deriving from the fundamental feeling underlying the life of a group, the sum of the emotions experienced by each member vis-a-vis the others, the work and the institution, the group as a unity and the external world (Anzieu and Martin 1990, p. 245).

---

[4] Kohut's ideas on the Self (Kohut 1966 and 1971) used here, follow the account of Siani (1992).

Redl's description elaborates the idea of the basic tone of the group. It forms a background against which play the member's own feelings deriving from their own underlying fantasies and values play.

Finally a sixth characteristic of the emotional biography of the group fosters a quality of animation. It draws out of members some of the deeper and more intense features of their personality. These are brought to life in the group though they have always been present in a dormant and hidden form (Pasolini 1956).

Negative aspects of emotional biography

It is certainly true that the group I have described is a representation of the group as it should be, rather than as it is. Actually in certain groups, the climate is inclement, discouraging and negative. It is also true that, especially in institutions (teams in mental health services, centres and hospitals) conflicts occupy most of the time. The members could occupy themselves in more profitable and satisfactory ways.

A negative atmosphere, however, can be highly alluring. It can feed on itself and can become self-replicating; and thus it affects any mental activity including thought. In this case, the emotional attachment to the group seems to manifest itself only through the powerful feelings of hatred, contempt and indifference. As a result, the emotional bond with the group makes members feel empty rather than full, captive instead of free. This pervasive emotional bond becomes the building basis for what I call ` a system of institutional misbelonging'. As a result everyone has an extremely

diminished self and personality. Often these features are linked with complacent and compliant attitudes to authority.

This association of self-devaluation and complacency describes an intrapsychic configuration that the group needs to recreate in its relationship with the analyst and/or the group establishment. The patient aspires to achieve an image of worth without having to do anything about himself; to be treated yet without dealing with the difficulties inherent in changing. The analyst wishes `everything to be fine' and patients to show due improvement. In particular he wants to maintain a direct or indirect control over the mental and emotional forces in the group, in the members and himself. These two concurrent needs, the patient's and the analyst's, deprive the meeting of its significance. The result is the denuding of experience. This void, empty of thought and freedom, generates disappointment, distrust, insecurity and increasingly the need for confirmation. The emotional attachment to the group remains but it becomes a source of improvement rather than growth.

In order to deal with these situations, the analyst must bear in mind that this pall of indifference and apathy conceals the smouldering ashes of intense positive feelings.

<u>The work of the analyst</u>

A thorough analysis of the negative aspects of the group's emotional biography goes beyond the scope of this article. I will now deal with the contribution that the notion of the emotional biography can make to defining the role of the group leader. Before

starting this, I will summarise the basic elements of the leader's function: (a) the analyst working with a group has a task what is slightly different from the one he would have in a traditional psycho-analytic setting; (b) he has to pursue two concurrent objectives - developing the abilities and the identity of individual patients, and improving the closeness of the members in the group as a whole.

I will concentrate in the last part of this paper on the latter aspect; in fact, it is the one that specifically characterizes the work in the group setting.

The analyst's position

In my experience, it is necessary for the group leader to have an `internal' role, but also and `extra-territorial' one. I will clarify these terms. To explain the `internal' position, I will use an analogy.  It is a time-honoured expectation that the doctor should be gentle and involved during his objective (physical) examination of a patient; he should `touch the affected part with suffering hands'. This suggest that, by feeling the disease in his hands, the doctor will touch the patient gently and will perceive his suffering through his own. Similarly, the group leader has to use his own expectations and fantasies in order to grasp the members' fears and fantasies; and especially the feelings and the fantasies occurring during the session. His personal experience, generally not made explicit, will represent a sensitive and flexible tool to perceive the emotions that are present during the session within himself and within the group.

The analyst will participate in the group's ongoing emotional biography without however completely giving himself up to the shared experience. He will come into contact with it through his own emotions that remain to a certain extent autonomous from those arising during a session. In order to clarify this `extra-territorial' position I will use the notions of the `group-institution' and the `group-experience'.

Two trends can be identified in the life of a group. The first one (the group-institution) coincides with the birth of the group as a small community. therefore, the members do not only live intensely and share values, aspiration and emotions, but they also institutionalize them. The second trend (the group-experience) mainly corresponds to the group's analytical task. This task is designed to focus attention on fantasies and emotions, to highlight internal tensions and to pass from past to new experiences. These two aspects are somewhat complimentary. In fact, the cohesion and the stability typical of the group-institution provide the necessary support for the group's cognitive and analytical function. However the growth of the group as a small friendly and protective community can hamper the analysis. For example, the group members might privilege stability over knowledge, which would create and emotional turbulence. Accordingly, the analytical group should not be characterized so much by institutionalizing aspects but rather by thinking and emotional development.

By `extra-territoriality' I mean a separation from the institutionalizing trend in the group. Hence, the analyst does not contribute to the ever-present tendency to repeat slogans and clichs, to stabilize the relational network into fixed roles and to institutionalize values, aspirations and emotions. In a word, he does not contribute to

transforming the emotional biography into a museum displaying the group's history and events. Indeed he tries to revive the feelings that have declined into convention, and to shake the longstanding crystallized establishment of the group itself. he does this with kindness and respect; for example, by enabling the experience to be lived from a new perspective, or by giving a place to neglected emotions. By `extra-territoriality' I also mean the separation of the analyst from some of his own traits, the ones that need the consensus and the anonymity of the group. In other words, moving away from people is not enough, it is necessary to move away from the common responses he finds in himself. It is necessary to be objective in this way from ourselves (Montaigne 1595), Malinowski 1922, di Norschia 1981).

Technique

This leads to some points about technique. The first is very general. It is important for the analyst to have a clear idea of the bonds that the members establish with the group as an object and as a Self-object. The concept of the group's biography is a contribution to a greater awareness of these dimensions. In particular, it will help the analyst to acquire the skill that Kohut defined as empathy in the framework of an individual psycho-analysis. Wolf elaborates Kohut's notion:

> In Kohut's view, this term, `empathy', is synonymous with vicarious introspection. It is a way to have access to the psychological state of another person, thus feeling in the position of the other... As a reliable tool to obtain useful data for psycho-analysis, empathy depends of the therapist's training and experience in using it in a controlled way. Moreover, it depends on the careful

self-monitoring of potential counter-transferential distortions (Wolf 1988, p. 181)

The second point concerns the support that he must provide in the form of an adequate emotional and intellectual climate. The analyst strives to understand the viewpoint of the person who is speaking. He refrains from overriding what each member is trying to express with his own opinions. He puts forward his sincere ideas and points of view on every subject on which he deems it necessary to intervene. However he avoids doing so in a challenging way. Through his behaviour, his tone and the meaning of his statements, he helps create the necessary atmosphere for listening seriously and participating. Of course the analyst must not make decisions as, for example, a person in charge of a work team. For psychiatric teams it is necessary to separate the role and functions of the hierarchical leader with clinical responsibility (such as the chief physician) from those of the clinical supervisor. In turn these mental, emotional and material conditions create the possibility of a positive experience when problems are addressed.

The third point about technique concerns the relationship between the group's emotional biography and the patient's self-esteem. The importance that the members attach to the good functioning of the group does not only depend on their need to maintain the fiction that the group is a paradise. There is a second reason: the reconstruction of their self-esteem is largely and ultimately dependent on a valid and capable group. The notion of an emotional biography in the group is a useful conceptual instrument to assess this relation between the members self-esteem and the functioning of the group.

Conclusions

I have tried to introduce an idea which I have called the `emotional biography'. It is connected with many other ideas some of which I have indicated in this paper. But I anted to show that it is relevant to understanding the history and life of a therapeutic group. And to create the conditions for thinking about the technique of the leader. This can be extended to understanding institutions: if a community leader is not an emotional leader, or he is not able to work beside someone who is an emotionally flexible leader, his work will arouse strong conflicting movements in the group that he will spend most of his time facing conflict.

If he does not understand the history and the traditions of the institutions and the secret things that the members hold dear - even if never expressed (for example, strong negative feelings) - then he may think he makes progress in leading the institution, but sooner or later he will have to face that the institution has a heart. He will find that the heart is not with him.

References

Anzieu, D. and Martin J.Y. (1990) Dinamica dei Piccoli Gruppi. Rome: Borla.

Bion, W.R. (1961) Experiences in Groups. London: Tavistock.

Correale, Antonello (1991) Il Campo Istituzionale. Rome: Borla.

Cruciani, P. (1983) `Sighele, Le Bon, Trotter e McDougall: le fonti di psicologia delle masse'. In Neri, C. (ed) Prospettive della Ricerca nei Gruppo. Rome: Kappa.

Di Norscia, G. (1981) La Politica delle Piccole Esperenza. Unpublished.

Kohut, H. (1971) The Analysis of the Self. New York: International Universities Press.

Levy-Bruhl, L (1922) La mentalit primitive. Paris. Italian translation, L'anima primitiva. Turin: Bollati-Bolinghieri (1990).

Malinovski, B. (1922) Argonauts of the Western Pacific. London: Routledge.

Melchiorri, G. (1973) L'uomo e il potere: indagine sulle strutture profunde dei Sonetti di Shakespeare. Torino: Einaudi.

Montaigne, M. (1595) Scritti. Milan: Il Saggiatore (1992).

Mumby, T. (1975) `Large groups in industry'. In Kreeger, L. (ed) The Large Group. London: Constable.

Pasolini, P.P. (1981) La Ceneri di Gramsci. Turin: Einaudi.

Searles, H.F. (1960) The Non-Human Environment. New York: International Universities Press.

Siani, R. (1992) Psychologia del S: da Kohut alle Nuove Applicazione Cliniche. Turin: Bollati-Borlinghieri.

Wolf, E.S. (1988) Treating the Self. New York: The Guilford Press.