

The group dimension in the formation of Man

by Alfredo Anania



Often to my patients and to people I meet, I say that we feed ourselves through the affective relationships with the others and that equally we feed the others through our relationship with them.

This isn't a romantic conception of the inter-human dimension but the most rooted experience that mankind holds in the deep personal and collective unconscious, beginning from the primary dyad (mother-child) and from the other *relational matrixes of the Self*.

The ties of affective attachment - they are present in all the superior animals (mammals) - are the fruit of maternal cares and of the protective actions that the group practices towards children and this carefulness represents a relational prototype that pushes us, even as adults, to search for others and to join them.

We don't know if we can speak of true *social instinct* about the tendency to “create group” and consequently to socialize, to cooperate, to join forces; we can only say that this natural and cultural “pulsion” is so developed in *Us Men* to make *Us* as the absolute masters of the terrestrial globe.

The hypothesized natural state of “war by all against all”, that would characterize the Humankind, neglects the fact that the war it is inevitably a multi-personal operation otherwise it would be a duel, a challenge to single combat. In short, the war can be practiced only by an organized coalition against others humans and not-humans.

A “social instinct” doesn't correspond automatically to being sociable and to having a suitable *social sense*, a good team spirit, the capacity to construct the social reality or being endowed with a healthy “psychology of coexistence”: suffice only to mention the excessively shy and introverted people, if not the “schizoid” pathological personalities.

Yet the interpersonal matrix of the Self, the original family group and then the first playmates, the initial school-class and the early relational vicissitudes that accompany these childish experiences, all remain deposited in our psychological interiority.

The first imprinting is maternal (dyad mother-child), after the third included appears, that is the fatherly figure (the triad is the minimum group but it is an oedipal group, it misses of the *quaternary*) and successively, in the most cases, one or several brothers appear, in that case the family group achieves its pluri-personal dimension and becomes the prototype of intersections, alliances, separations and confrontations in a mutable interactive play according to the context that gives a specific configuration to the whole ecosystem of belonging.

Together with the genetic equipment and the natural environment, the *intersubjectivity* is foundational part of our being.

In combination with the *trans-personal* and the *trans-generational*, the *human ecosystem of belonging* lays the foundations of our way of thinking, it grafts our beliefs, our attractions, our aversions and our affinities with others and our incompatibilities.

At its primary emersion, our psyche is largely a psychological “precipitate” of the *Other* that is unconsciously internalized so as to become a constituent of our psychological *Self*.

In every case, we must not forget that our *Social Self* (which goes together with our *Biological Self* and the *Psychological Self*) has its bases on the *psychobiological program for maintenance of the affective bonds* that is common to all superior animals and assures to offspring the cures and the protection necessary for its survival. A type of stress, in fact, the *stress of attachment-loss*, is activated by those situations that, at real or symbolic level, are connected to *separation, loss or mourning*.

All vertebrates, therefore including humans, tend to aggregate, overcoming the repulsive forces among individuals to form, more or less complex and structured according to the species, *social organizations* that can allow the survival of the group. Forms of cooperation for stocking up on food or for defending against potential aggressors are prototypes of these social organizations.

Besides, all know the psychological benefits of belonging to a group. I often tell my patients that both staying alone as being together with others, there are problems, but that, between the two evils, the second is certainly preferable.

The psychoanalyst *W.H. Bion* says that often the individual *uses the group to gain a greater sense of vitality through group membership or by means of repudiating it, and that this part of the personal psychic life, which is constantly stimulated and activated by own group, is an inalienable patrimony of man as a social animal.*

In truth, psychoanalysis, in its early days, was not very interested in the groups and in the social things - as it was undertaken to understand and to focus the problems of the individual and the couple -, but at some point, even if with some reluctance, *Freud* felt the need to analyze the processes of foundation and the functions of the group. Indeed, to this end, he used an interpretative model derived from the dual psychoanalytical field and therefore scarcely exhaustive. In short, according to *Freud*, the multiplicity of individuals in the group forms a unity as if the *limbs of one body*, by virtue of a process of *identification* with the leader and the consequential *fascination*.

Psychoanalysis, with *Bion*, recognizes that the leader is not so much a spellbinder how much the individual more able to interpret and express the emotions and the unconscious feelings prevailing at a datum time in the *group-mind*.

With *Bion* acquires importance the "group-mind" as *unanimous expression of the group will to which the individual contributes in a unconscious way*.

There are also some aspects of the group that deserve particular attention because they have to do with its *ambiguous side*. *Bion* applies to the group the metaphor of the *Sphinx* as opposed to the metaphor of the *Oedipus* that is more suitable to the individual dynamics. The ancient Romans said "*Senatores boni viri, Senatus mala bestia*"!

Effectively, if we reflect for a moment, the group can greatly facilitate the *deresponsabilization* that can allow and promote in its members some actions that are prohibited to the individual; classic example the killing of the enemy or the rape during the war.

But even in times of peace! Suffice it to think that only in a group context the *deviant social organizations* can arise and thrive, for instance the criminal gangs or terrorist groups on a *fight-flight basic assumption*, the prostitution organizations on a *basic assumption of coupling* or, in the end, the drug addiction groups on a *dependence basic assumption*. In these cases we can quote another saying: "God makes them and they couple"!

As we have seen, some immoral behaviors can become licit on the base of a shared collective thought. Therefore, the main flaw that can be attributed to the *group mind* is that its *validation principle* is not based on an examination of reality and on the ethicality of the experiential pathway that the group in its whole makes but only on the sharing of thought among its members: *for the group only the inside shared beliefs have a validity!*

Bion, realizing that society had considerable difficulties to reach a capacity to introspection sufficient to evaluate the nature of own suffering, thought that was necessary to push society to treat its disorders by means of the psychological ways.

So various psychological models have emerged and developed - from the *experiential* and the *little therapeutic groups* to the widened group (*Large Groups*). The *Bionian experiential group*, for example, instead rather than aiming to the treatment of the single one in a group context, has the objective to "*cure*" the group as a whole by promoting in the participants the acquisition of knowledge and experience about the factors that can favor a "*good group spirit*".

But research on groups cannot stop: just as in medical science is necessary to experiment and develop new medicines, new diagnostic tools and new forms of therapy, even in the psychological field it is necessary the researching of new models, especially about groups; this latter is a very promising field, considering that, in the end, humanity changes in the time and that, for example, still today not many group techniques are able to meet the needs of post-modern man because he is significantly different in comparison with the man of the time of *Freud*, of *Jung* and of the same *Bion*.

From nearly 15 years, together with my collaborators, I conduct a research on an experiential group that weaves the Bionian experiential model, the Jungian analytical psychology and the Intercultural psychology; it is the *Itinerant Seminar "L'IMMAGINARIO SIMBOLICO"*, whose very original formula is based on: a series of meetings that develop directly in a variety of places that can be considered "symbolic" of the *cultural identity*, of *mythology* and of *folklore* with a "working in progress" course so that the group's elaborations happen without predestined themes for giving space to the "free associations" and to the "imaginal world" under the stimulus of the "magic" of the places where participants meet, and finally a particularly *soft* (ie not excessively piloting) model of conduction that is multiple (various *leaders* of different cultural belonging).

It is not easy to explain as just the intentional lack of prearranged themes open a great space to communication and as the group's "discourse" can follow a spontaneous order that is not only function of intellect but also the result of sensations, of intuition and especially of the "*understanding through feeling*".

This last consideration can explain one of the reasons why, with the passage of time, the *Itinerant Seminar "L'IMMAGINARIO SIMBOLICO"* has laced increasingly closer connections, as well as with the dynamic psychology and the psycho-anthropology, even with the world of the *Muses* and specially with those group techniques that - using art, the body expression and the creative expression, the world of color and the perfumed gifts of nature - can be placed side by side to some more traditional forms of psychotherapy.

The number of specialized group trainings that recently we have launched [**Group Formation to care of the Self in psycho-oncology, Group Formation to body expression in adolescence, Group Formation through dance and movement, Group Formation through dramatization, Eco-psychological Experiential Group Formation,, Balint Group Formation focused on professional helping relationship**] represents the start of the *Multi-modal Dynamic Psychology*, a model that I presented the first time in the workshop "Ecology of Psychotherapy" held at the University Milano-Bicocca in November 1996.

As the *Multi-modal Dynamic Psychology* has its basis on a different type of group that is the *working group* and the (not foregone) ability by all members to the *team work*, it is clear that we are engaged in the effort to train to our model, through different group activities, young people who could work tomorrow with us.

All this is evident when one takes into account that the *multi-modal dynamic psychology* requires four conditions:

- 1) the team reunion as a founding moment of the working group;
- 2) the poly-valence of the team;
- 3) a culture of reception;
- 4) the ability by all the team members to reciprocal connection and to net-work.

Needless to say, all this does not originate from our aspiration to introduce unnecessary changes, in fact, in my view, *we are still too anchored to the bed, to the hospital divisions (divisions precisely!) - where the participation of other specialists happens at the most through the consultation -, to the number of private practices where doctors and patients end up being alone side by side to face the disease. We are too conditioned by the separation, even in the university teaching: separation among the places of doctrines (the degree course, the school of specialization), the areas of research (university department, hospital specialized unities) and the places of training and of the practical application (apprenticeship).*

There is the need to transform the current medical and psychological culture in a *multidisciplinary team culture*, that is to say in a culture that replaces the single doctor with *a multidisciplinary network of therapists*, the hospital department with *the integrated functional services and the mobile assistance in the territory*, the therapeutic community with *the social centers* and so on. The mono-specialistic team now appears on the avenue of sunset!

Luckily, in psychology we have the group models, which can allow the evolution and respond to the different needs to know himself by modern man, whose current therapeutic needs, in comparison with not many years ago, are certainly more extensive, sophisticated and, all things considered, indicative of a greater desire to be able to use symbolic-expressive moments and, probably, various contexts in which the "*care of the soul*" is facilitated by the happy wedding between *nature* and *culture*.

From this point of view, the *multimodal dynamic psychology* is a scientific discipline that can better respond to the *idea of an ecosystem (natural and interpersonal) in which the individual can develop a continuing exchange between the inner and outer world and in an active way because, becoming more deeply aware, he has the possibility of usefully self-determining, modeling himself and participating, together with others, in a satisfactory construction of a common life context.*

All this, however, requires a different conception of the man's formation and of the formative institutions, starting with a radical transformation of a by now obsolete University!