The Epidemic Disturbance of the Adolescent's Groupality Process

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Abstract: The author shows briefly in this text how the psychological dimension of groupality is fundamental for the psychic functioning of all human beings. He further depicts the way this dimension is part of the adolescent process and its adjustments which help the subject to mature. He describes more analytically the adolescent's re-birth in a new body and in a new social place by going out of childhood and becoming adult. He describes the two fundamental dimensions that are composing this process. The first of them is the Un-marking process that contains all the adolescent oppositions against the parents and the adults 'positions; this opposition and contestation is necessary to him to un-mark himself of the child position in which he was before. The second one is the marking process in his generation and in the group of his friends; the in-scription is characterized by a lot of signs (way of thinking, of being dressed, of speaking, of preferred music etc.). Many of these signs are created; this creativity is bringing some new ways of life and it is contributing to the time and history's social evolutions. He presents, in the fifth part of the text, two clinical examples of adolescents whose mental balance has suffered due to the confinement and their inability to physically experience the psychological level of groupality. He finishes the text by questioning the invention of prison as making a prisoner suffering by preventing him from experiencing groupality.

Keywords: Process of Adolescence, Groupality, Epidemic Disturbance

1. Introduction

We study here, shortly, the consequences of the COVID epidemic on groupality, one of the fundamental dimensions of the adolescent's process. These thoughts are coming from our clinical observations.

The particular place occupied by groupality (the group aspect of individual or collective psychical function and behavior) during adolescence can be understood by studying the interaction of the adolescence process with the construction of the Self (and of the speaking subject) at the beginning of his life.

2. The Ego's Groupality

We know that the Self is builded progressively through different identifications. Those called primary identifications emerge at the beginning of the psychic life without consideration of the other person of the baby's relation as an object of satisfaction; they give rise to two premises of the Self: the *Ideal-Self,* resulting from the identification with the object which satisfies a pulsion and being the source of narcissistic omnipotence, and the *Ideal of the Self,* which grows on identifying with an object which is overestimated (the father's figure of our culture? the parents? The Other?) and which induces the insertion of this Other and of the social ideals into the foundations of the Self.

These narcissistic identifications allow to redirect towards the Self a part of the love investment energy destined to the object; this investment energy returns to the subject and give libidinal energy to the ego; this one becomes slowly the «subject of his own speaking". He can also do sublimation aims transforming this narcissic energy in sublimations energy [1, 2]. The Oedipean identifications are completing the primary ones; they are giving elements to the subject's sexual identity and interiorizations of the social prohibitions. The subject is, in this way, ready to self-accomplishment in social aims and between the others. We meet here what Aristoteles was saying about human being when he was considering it as a social being. It is consequently evident

that happiness is also coming in the realization of personal aims and sublimations and their sharing with the others.

This constitutive groupality [3] of the Self (who is an inheritor of his ancestors) must be completed by the gradual absorption of « psychic envelopes » (reassuring relationships, sentimental attachments, trust in the other as well as in oneself, all of which leads to taking care of oneself and « feeling» good, etc.). This process allows the setting up of the narrative function (identification of the places of the Self and of the others in the different interactions by the first semiotic movement called deixis: pointing or targeting) and the building of meanings (through understanding the stakes between the places). All these interactions and process enables us to construct bit by bit an autonomous opinion (critical appraisal) and also the possibility of finding one's way by taking part into social meanings and aims.

3. Groupality: A Constitutive Dimension of the Adolescent's Process

The adolescence process is this one of the process of being autonomous; it is driving out of child status and building adult insertion into a social group [4] this process of being autonomous, occurs naturally on a background of psychic separation which reflects and extends this one that has begun with the birth (and whose anguish and dead-ends can be reproduced).

This autonomation is deployed by the way of the double birth which characterizes adolescence:

1. Rebirth of the body (a new body to inhabit or to «creep into», a new self-image of oneself to be loved by himself) which reboots the narcissistic issue (how to love and how to be loved) and its shortcomings leading to auto-erotic and perceptual responses which we call «body language" [5] (scarring, food disorders, addictions, violent behaviors...).

2. Social birth (becoming an adult with his own views, critical judgement and ability to take on social responsibilities). This second aspect of adolescent rebirth occurs on two planes, just like walking on two legs; (a problem arises when one of these planes is working): we are referring to the planes of "marking process" and «un-marking process».

A. The *Un-marking process* is the gradual distancing from the position of the child who accepts without criticizing parental positions (values, rules, « truths »...); this process is evolving by means of protesting that is the characteristic behavior of the teenagers. This protesting of rules and values of the preceding generation can go sometimes as far as the confrontation but it doesn't signify rejection. It rather signals the issue of mentally « digesting» things conveyed and inherited so as to assimilate a part, update human and social values and to create, by way of the « *marking process*», new forms of expression and « living together ». To be noted here the role « contested ones » (members of the older generation with whom the teenager has extensive relations) is verry important for the unfolding of this process. By accepting

protestations and keeping their positions and their views on things, they allow and accompany the teenager to distance himself mentally (not necessarily physically) and to build on his autonomy while maintaining his relations. This is what happens to 80 to 85% of teenagers. (6) [7] There are four attitudes of the « contested ones » which don't allow this process to unfold and ensnare it in a cul-de-sac:

a. The parental authoritarianism in like totalitarianism: it let no place to the adolescent's subjectivity and pushes him to submission. This position is deeply uncomfortable for the adolescent and completely different of the position of being obedient; this position means that he is trusting the relation with the adult [8] while the obedience is destroying the adolescent character and can drive to the revolution and to violent behaviors.

b. The parent's playing the role of a friend, sharing the same interests and friend, don't let the adolescent the possibility to protest and to construct, by this way, his opinions and his personality. The situation looks like he had no parents!

c. The parental absence (real absence after departure or psychic absence because of illness) is letting the adolescent alone without the possibility of protesting and constructing himself. He can show, sometimes, an early maturation pat it is covering child anxieties that have not been exceeded.

d. The parental alienation is the worst parental attitude for a child or an adolescent. The word alienation means that the parent has transformed the relation with his child by including him in an alliance against the other parent. This alliance has grate consequences on the psychic functions or the child or of the adolescent: the child has nobody who is taking care of him and he is trying to understand how to defend a parent against the other parent; by this way the child is losing the tow parents as psychic function and nobody sees neither takes care of his suffering.

B. The *marking process* in one's generation is the second plane of the adolescence process and is complementary to the *un-marking process.* (Certain authors have described these two planes by opposing filiation to affiliation, but this opposition doesn't appear to highlight sufficiently the deep issues at play at this moment of life). The important thing of the *marking process* is the inscription as being similar with the others of a group of peers; this process comes through friendships and through sharing activities. The psychic aim for the adolescent of this inscription is the recognition of his place among others of the same generation; this recognition is visualized by several signs which mark and differentiate each generation from those preceding: clothing, music, ways of speaking etc.

This groupality, in which *marking process* is the complement of *the un-marking process, accompanies* the being autonomous process; this autonomy is what the adolescence process *is* targeting. The *marking process* in a directed socio-historical time - on which future forms of organization are unknown - contains the dimension of creating newness through cultural expressions as well as in the relations with oneself and others in a cohabitational framework.

4. Dynamics Between the Two Groupalities

The *marking process* also points to the way in which the *un-marking process* has emerged; where the second one manifests failures, *marking process* points to the dead-ends of the process in two opposing ways:

-the first one is developed in the tendency of isolation and withdrawal (even being an «excellent pupil»); troubles with his own body are often observed in this dead-end of the marking process: sleeping disorders, food disorders etc.

-the second one takes place in the total break with the family and the adherence not to a social groupality, but to a gang which operates often in violent and antisocial ways. We call also find here the beginning of *radicalism* [8] in some young persons.

These dead-ends of *marking process* within one's generation indicate that the groupality of the Self is removing within the framework of the social groupality of the *marking process*; the emergence of an adult and socially responsible Self during this process will depend on the ability of asserting oneself (one's thoughts, one's values) among others, on the ability to make deep and authentic relationships and on the place in the subject of these « others » as similar people but also as different/other people. In the opposite, we can see the failures of this process in the adolescents' addictions, fallbacks, suicidal attempts, violent and antisocial attitudes etc. [9, 10]

5. The Disturbing Effect of the Epidemic on the Groupal Process of Adolescents

The main protective measure against COVID-19 was confinement: it was imposed by most states, give or take a few variations, and confirmed a lack of trust in citizens taking responsibility to prevent the spread of the virus through social distancing. "Living at home" has therefore come to stand for protection against the epidemic as well as being a living space or a place of work and fun; exchanges and entertainment have developed considerably through internet which very slightly made up for physical contact in its main representation, i.e. the group. Isolation "at home" or living 'in camera' is taken by several researchers as being the cause of a considerable rise in intra-family violence and couples separating. [11]

Without wishing to dwell on the reasons of this explosion of violence within the home, which for some resembled a prison, we can take a closer look at the effect isolation has had on adolescents.

As we have seen above, the groupal aspect is one of two components in the adolescent process. It allows them to be projected into an adult sexuated body and also into the role of a social being committed to social exchange and decision-making. This fundamental aspect comes about through "marking process" with pair groups and at the same time with a generation forged in a new socio-historic mould. This aspect needs, in order to arise and develop, the involvement in a group, reaching out personally to other members and sharing activities and interests which bind the members or the group.

This dimension has been able to follow its normal development during the period of epidemic confinement; it concerns of course and in varying degrees all teenagers. A lot have come through unscathed. The fact that they have all supercharged internet activities to replace shared physical groupality, has had serious effects of many of them. We can see these dimensions in two examples of my own clinical experience:

I have been following Teo, 17 years old, in psychotherapy for three years due to his trouble speaking in class and also sleeping disorders with numerous nightmares. His bad nights were connected to his trouble at school and consequently had to repeat his lower-sixth year. His school trouble stemmed from a lack of concentration in class even though he was very intelligent; he worried about the image he was giving to his class-mates when he was stuck for words. He strongly suspected that everybody thought badly of him. Our therapeutic work allowed us to analyze and understand the content of the threats in his dreams. It was a question, most of the time, of recurrent scenes of falling from an airplane, a boat or cliffs. He remembered furthermore scenes from his childhood nightmares in which he saw « monsters » coming into his room.

The analysis focused on the common element of his nightmares: a non-protective container which "let's go of him". His memories were revived gradually and he evoked moments of his early childhood when his saw his mentally absent mother apparently looking after him. He found out, while asking his parents during his therapy, that his mother had had a depression. His images of non-protective or even frightening containers offered an explanation as to his internal panic attacks which disturbed his sleep as much as his place in the group. This understanding of frightening experiences, which he had locked up in himself since his childhood, began to have a positive effect on his sleep as well as his place among his class-mates: he was more at ease, his teachers congratulated him for his school achievements and he began to make a few friends.

The epidemic confinement disturbed this development: being isolated at home with no possibility of meeting his friends, he started spending much more time on the net hoping for some exchange with his friends as well as visiting different sites. His relation with his parents had become bad and he was often angry with them for no apparent reason. The therapeutic work had been undermined as well as it could only be carried out by telephone or on Skype which upset his spontaneity in conveying his thoughts and the contents of his nightmares. Resuming therapy a few months later allowed us to consider the effect of physical isolation on him within his group of teenagers but more specifically among his friends. He understood that he had tried to find a 'group feel' by means of the net but it didn't replace the physical presence of relationships.

He experienced the lack of group life as a handicap which increased his feeling of being alone and insecure; for him, his violent reactions and angry outbursts towards his parents were defense mechanisms against intruders threatening his

psychological space but at the same time he perceived them as incapable of understanding what he was experiencing.

Signs of anorexia and bulimia among certain teenagers have increased in this period of confinement; they are part of auto-regulatory patterns responding to internal distress, which is not expressed and burgeons during confinement. Such behavior is quite close to attitudes of desperation and self- harm.

The example of Héloïse, 15 years old, shows us how certain psychological mechanisms have been upset and magnified by the epidemic confinement: Héloïse had begun to self-harm long before confinement without her parents noticing. Only when she started to express suicidal ideas did they take fright and make an appointment with me.

Héloïse was good at school, was learning the piano and harp and agreed to psychotherapy treatment; she understood that the pain she was inflicting on her body, through self-harming in order to seek psychological relief, indicated that the spontaneous tendency of all children to ask their parents for help was absent in her. Of course, she had no idea as to why crying for help was not operational in her; she was convinced her parents had always been attentive to her. In therapy she mentioned scenes in her nightmares which depicted her in the situation of a little child in great danger running for her life and which made her think that crying for help was a blocked mechanism in her for some reason; these remained most probably inaccessible in her subconscious. Confinement came about during this process and made our psychotherapeutic work very difficult as she could not adapt to distancing and tele-presence.

Being alone at home and not going to school, she started like almost all teenagers to find websites in the hope of finding someone to talk to; physical isolation was unbearable for her, she understood later, as she was reasoning within the framework of her psychological isolation; this one was the consequence of not being able to talk and confide to her parents the unbearable experiences when she was a small child.

She surfed the net for long hours and made contacts, one with a class-mate which took on an amorous complexion with great declarations of passion on both sides and promises of a dreamt future together. This intense amorous dream removed all inclination to self-harming and any suicidal ideas. She even thought that our therapy was superfluous, as she was feeling good! During the sessions she spoke only of secrets and promises for the future shared by the boy and her.

This romantic dream unfortunately didn't last long; the boyfriend quickly got fed up with this "fictitious" relationship and left her unceremoniously. Her isolation and distress became unbearable; without saying anything to anybody, she had done scarifications [12, 13] and swallowed several anxiolytics, which she found at home. Her parents found out quickly and after phoning me, took her to the emergency service at the nearest hospital. The doctor on duty didn't want to keep her saying that it was just a teenager's whim. After my insisting he kept her for three days and discharged her with a small treatment of anti-depressants.

That short stay in hospital was fitting for Héloïse who had also underestimated the importance of her act.

The same scenario took place two weeks later and changed the minds of everybody, parents and emergency doctors: this went beyond a simple teenager's whim! Héloïse embarked upon a new romantic relation shortly after leaving hospital and without giving herself time to understand, through our therapeutic work, what had just happened. The new romance "flared up" quickly as before with reciprocal passionate declarations between her partner and herself together with promises of a shared life in a future they imagined eternal. Héloïse felt well again but didn't share my attempts to understand what was going on internally and what risks of repetition were afoot in the light of the recent events.

She attempted suicide by swallowing pills again the very same evening that followed the end of the new romantic relationship, which had cured her psychological turmoil. Her romantic partner said he was tired of her endlessly insisting to be in touch with him constantly and relentlessly. The emergency service at the hospital kept her longer than the time before and, liaising with me, directed her to a psychiatric institution for a longer stay.

6. Conclusion

What we can consider as common to the psychological problems of Teo and Héloïse, all be them different, is the fundamental role of the absence of physically shared group life. It is also characteristic of what has particularly upset the life of many adolescents and adults alike. The substitutes of this physically experienced groupality through internet seem to have magnified rather than reduced the feeling of isolation. [14] It is in this regard that Teo became violent and aggressive towards his parents as if he had to protect himself alone against all ills! By being without a subjective group support, which results from the physical sharing of several aspects and characteristics both generational and cultural (marking process), he was deprived of a sense of security. The latter stems from feeling similar to others by being part of a group. It's the same for Héloïse: the absence of physical groupality greatly magnified her psychological isolation: suffering pushed her into a passionate and blinding love experience for one boy, then another. The romantic passion obviously represented for her a therapeutic dimension: self-harming and "dark ideas" dwindled whereas the brutal interruption of this "sentimental shock" plunged her into total despair and unbearable fears amid considerable psychological isolation. Faced with these unbearable experiences, she wanted to escape them by taking her own life.

To this same factor of absent groupality due to the confinement, [15] we can attribute the rise in intra-family violence during confinement as well as offences committed by many teenagers. It is clearly very hard for everybody to lead a balanced life with the basic psychological support of groupality being neutralized. We might also consider that punitive suffering imposed by imprisonment works on the same psychological level.

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Biography

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