

Free Associations, Free Flowing Discussions and Group Thought  
*Claudio Neri\**

### Summary

*The author makes two basic points, ones that have not been elucidated in the literature. The first is that when group associations coalesce, in some sort of unified way, they form in two levels. One level is the manifest theme that the therapist perceives and, in traditional group-as-a-whole approaches, interprets. The second level, the deeper one, is an emerging fantasy, that is, one that has yet to be defined. The existence of these two levels has clinical significance. The classic group-as-a-whole approaches dealt only with the first level. Notably, such approaches often proved ineffective. The reason, according to my thesis, is that they failed to address the second, deeper level.*

*Key words: free association, group thought, therapeutic effectiveness, pregnancy, free flowing discussions, therapist, tamagotchi, chaos and order.*

### Introduction

The free association technique cannot be used extensively in a group setting. In fact, other members of the group, on hearing a fellow group member working at length and intensively on associations regarding something he has said, may well feel that they are simply passive observers and even react by becoming mentally absent.

'Free flowing discussions' that take place inside a small group correspond, in this kind of setting, to free associations in the traditional setting. During these 'free wheeling discourses', one word, emotion or image may provoke another word, emotion or image from another participant. The result is an associative chain (Foulkes and Anthony, 1957).

### Associative chains

Associative chains, like free associations, bring the unconscious to light. Both these techniques are precious for the many images and emotions they provoke which enrich

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discourse during a session. However, group associative chains differ from free associations in one very important aspect.

Images and fantasies which are produced through free associations allow an analysand's fantasy world and his history to be expressed. Images and fantasies in associative chains are an expression of the fantasy world of each person in the group and also an expression of the group as whole. My opinion is that these chains are brought about in two ways. They are made up of statements by members of the group and are determined by a group logic in which contents and structuring methods reveal the existence of group thought and of shared fantasies (Foulkes, 1975; Kaës, 1999).

### *Non-formalized decisions, hyperbolic jumps*

This account of a session of a 'Village Council' gives a clear idea of the impression you might get when, within a group, you 'look in' on a free-flowing discussion.

W.H.R. Rivers (1932) tells us that in some relatively small groups in Polynesia and Melanesia, decisions are often taken and put into action even though they have never really been expressly formulated by anyone.

On listening to an indigenous Council session, a white observer discovered, after a while, that the original theme of the discussion had changed. When he asked when they would come to a decision on the subject that interested him, he was told that they had already made a decision on that problem and had passed on to others.

The decision had been made in a way that was completely different from that of our councils and committees when faced with a controversial issue. At a certain point, the members of the council had found that they agreed on that particular point and therefore there was no need to express agreement explicitly. (p. 374)

The small psychotherapeutic group – in a way similar to that of the Village Council – reaches conclusions, which are accepted by everyone or by the majority of the participants, without needing formal consensus.

However, there is an important difference between these two ways of making decisions. In the small group, the passage from the intervention of one member to another often involves acrobatic leaps and jumps and contortionist parallels.

Therefore, the associative chain of a small psychotherapeutic group, rather than resembling a thread that gradually unravels, is more similar to a monkey's zig-zag leaping from tree to tree.<sup>1</sup>

### *Star-shaped pattern*

The therapist who participates in a small group can try to follow these leaps and jumps by imagining the overall path. Nevertheless, there is also another way in which he can follow what is happening in the group. This method can be used jointly with the former, or alternatively.

The therapist can choose not to focus his attention on associative chains and instead hypothesize that the different interventions are related to a nucleus, which is both a point of attraction and a junction. I call this second way of listening by the group's therapist 'looking for the star-shaped pattern'. In this case, the therapist ignores the temporal organization of the interventions. Instead, he pays attention to their spatial organization. This hypothesis can be made more complete if we consider the existence of not just one but two nuclei which are on different levels. The first level nucleus is represented by the theme of the session. The second level nucleus is unknown, is in evolution and is in the process of being defined. It is like a 'focal point', which both attracts and propels (Bion, 1970).<sup>2</sup>

The therapist – using this hypothesis – can make contact with this active focal point during the session. He can also follow it as it takes form through the group members' interventions (Neri, 1995).

### *Two levels*

I will explain this basic point again using other words. When group associations coalesce, in some sort of unified way, they form themselves into two levels. One level (the first level nucleus) is the manifest theme and the preconscious fantasy that the therapist perceives and, in traditional 'group-as-a-whole' approaches, interprets. The fantasies of this kind are suitable to be worked through with what Bion calls transformation in K (knowledge).

The second level (the focal point), the deeper one, is an emerging fantasy, that is, one that has yet to be defined. This emerging fantasy doesn't have a shape, but has a strong propelling force. It is impossible to approach it through knowledge as it is still without a shape, but it can be evolved. Bion (1970) speaks about evolution in O, that is, the evolving unknown.

The existence of these two levels has clinical significance. The classic 'group-as-a-whole' approach dealt only with the first level.

Notably, such an approach often proved not to be effective. The reason, according to my thesis, is that it failed to address the second, deeper level.

The group analyst's role is to facilitate the emergence of the second, deeper level. However, this deeper level never emerges in bold relief. It is always evolving. Thinking of the process this way implies that the group analyst's role is to sense what is happening in the group, understand it, but not necessarily interpret it. The participation of the group members in the emergence of these deepest fantasies is richer in therapeutic potential as compared to any comprehension which can be obtained through interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

### *Division and synthesis*

Working from the standpoint of this hypothesis and from the relative perspective, the therapist will see how the group's thought operates through divisions and syntheses.<sup>4</sup>

A useful analogy may be made with the phenomenon of optical polarization. This is the phenomenon which corresponds to a rainbow. As we know, white light is the result of the sum of a series of emissions of various wavelengths. Passing through a prism, the ray is divided according to different wavelengths making the different colours in the white light visible. In the group, an emotional and fantasy nucleus, just like the light passing through the prism, is subdivided into the elements that constitute it. Each of these is taken up and represented by the interventions of different individuals. During the session, different aspects then find new syntheses.

### **A clinical example<sup>5</sup>**

I will now present a clinical sequence which illustrates the characteristics of group thought as described previously, i.e. free-flowing discussion, associative chains, star-shaped pattern and divisions and syntheses.

Together with the clinical material, I will present an account of my thoughts during the sessions, and I will also add a few afterthoughts. First of all, though, I want to present the group. The group is made up of myself and five patients: one man – Marcello – and four women – Loredana, Fabiana, Antonia and Gabriella. The symptoms, social and professional positions and sphere of interests are all heterogeneous. Their ages vary from 25 to 50. The group has reached its third year of analysis. There are two sessions per week. Each of the sessions lasts two hours. All the members of the group – including myself – sit in a circle so that any one member can see both the whole of the group and each of the other members.

#### *Two parallel stories*

During the sessions that I am going to present, the participants' interest is concentrated on two women – Loredana and Fabiana – and on their parallel stories.

Loredana is pregnant. She started analysis because of problems in becoming pregnant and above all because of the impossibility of carrying a pregnancy through. Before entering the group, Loredana had started a pregnancy several times, but had always lost the baby by the third month. This time, however, she became pregnant after only a few attempts and, for the moment, the pregnancy is going well. The third month has come and gone without any problem. Fabiana, who is younger than Loredana, has entered a state of strong emotional and fantasy resonance with this pregnancy. In the past, Fabiana had often shown strong opposition to weddings and maternity. In taking part in the events that involve Loredana, her strong opposition has weakened in some way. The fantasy of having a baby of her own has emerged. Fabiana is jealous of Loredana's pregnancy. However, Fabiana's main problem is not her jealousy towards Loredana. Fabiana's real problem is that Loredana's pregnancy is putting her survival at risk.

Fabiana is suspended between creativity and self-destruction. In many ways she depends on the continued attention of the group in order to maintain sufficient cathexis upon herself.

Up until now, Fabiana has been at the centre of everyone's attention. The members of the group have followed her ups and downs constantly, uninterruptedly and intensely. The attention that is now given to the embryo in Loredana's womb distracts their attention from Fabiana and the events that involve her. The interest which the other participants constantly took in her day to day progress has now become less exclusive. Consequently, Fabiana is at risk.

### *The baby in the womb and the Tamagotchi*

At the beginning of the first of the sessions that I am going to present, Loredana tells us that she has seen the scan of the small human being that is living in her womb.

Loredana: The thing that impressed me most is how quickly the baby moves. At one point, the baby even turned over on to his tummy.

During the same session, Antonia – a patient who has always been particularly attentive to Fabiana's moods – notices the Tamagotchi. The Tamagotchi is a red pendant, three centimetres in size, and has the shape of a heart. Fabiana explains that on one of the two sides of the pendant there is a small rectangular panel – a monitor.

Fabiana: My Tamagotchi is not a puppy or kitten, but a baby dinosaur. It is eight days old. It weighs 70 kilos. It has to be fed, cuddled, cleaned and put to bed. Whenever it needs something, it gives a low warning sound. If you don't take care of it continually and well enough, the dinosaur dies. Till now, it hasn't been much of a hassle for me. Even if it sometimes seems as if nothing satisfies the Tamagotchi. There is not much that needs doing, only what I have described above. It is sufficient to try one thing after the other – feed, cuddle, clean it when it dirties itself, put it to bed – and see which one of these works.

The Tamagotchi can be turned off. When I am at work, for example, I turn it off. Even now, before coming to the session, I have turned the switch off.

While saying this, Fabiana takes the Tamagotchi off her belt and shows it to the other participants, but doesn't give it to them to hold. Then, she turns the Tamagotchi on. The virtual baby-dinosaur gives a chirp. Fabiana rapidly presses some tiny buttons on the side of the monitor. She turns the Tamagotchi off and hangs it back on her belt.

Seeing the Tamagotchi appear in the same session in which Loredana speaks about the echo-graph on her baby, some thoughts come to mind. I think about how Fabiana's behaviour could be an expression of rivalry. I think about the fact that instead of rivalry, this could be the expression of her need to deflect the group members' attention from the embryo on to herself. These thoughts help me to understand Fabiana's condition better, but they don't give me much insight as to what Fabiana is expressing on behalf of the group. Only thinking about an interpretation of Fabiana or about the relationship

between the two women would mean neglecting that which is happening in the group as a whole.

I then think about what is beyond the themes which arose in the session. The group members may be converging upon a common fantasy, which is expressed both by the embryo and the Tamagotchi. It is a fantasy that may be relative to that which is growing and that which is in evolution. The convergence upon this fantasy, this deep nucleus, is probably accompanied by intense ambivalence and creates tension between creativity and destruction in the group. I decide to stay silent for the moment and wait for some development of what is happening in the group to appear.

### *The death of the Tamagotchi*

At the next three sessions Fabiana brings the Tamagotchi with her. The members of the group simply ask a few passing questions, such as: 'How is the Tamagotchi doing?' 'Has it grown?' Fabiana's answers are just as circumstantial. The group's caution is probably due to perplexity over the fact that Fabiana is taking care of a 'virtual dinosaur', and not a real baby or a doll. The members of the group do not know what this might lead to. After all, Fabiana's bizarre idea may well work. Therefore, the best thing for them to do is wait, without interfering. On arriving at the fourth session, Fabiana does not have her Tamagotchi with her. She explains that the dinosaur has suffered from an interminable crisis.

Fabiana: It needed something every minute. It was always sick. I couldn't take it any more. I was fed up. I repeatedly pressed the same button, until I killed it.

### *Mourning, chaos, abortion (associative chain)*

Now that Fabiana's baby dinosaur is dead, the other members of the group show the depth of their participation in its story. The associative chain set off by the Tamagotchi's death starts with the theme of the care which is due to the dead and therefore with the theme of mourning.

Gabriella: The Tamagotchi is a virtual object, it does not have any substance. The ritual of taking care of a virtual object is similar to dusting and tidying the photos of one's loved ones every day.

Marcello jumps from the due ritual to shadows or the dead, such as dusting their photographs, to the increase in disorder. In fact, disorder is a theme that was already present, but which had been of secondary importance in what Gabriella said: dusting and tidying.

Marcello (speaking to Gabriella as if she had been talking about herself and not about the Tamagotchi): How are you doing with your tidying up rituals?

Gabriella (answering in a fitting way): In my home, underneath apparent order, there is actually chaos.

With an even more hyperbolic jump, Loredana establishes a connection between these statements about chaos and the violent suppression of the Tamagotchi. In my opinion, Loredana understands that the prime motive of Fabiana's killing gesture might have been a need for simplification, a need to put things in order at any cost. This insight probably originates from an understanding of what had happened to Loredana herself, when she had had her numerous miscarriages. In fact, the miscarriages had been preceded by a growing fear of being unable to control the situation.

Loredana (answering in a synthetic way and moving the attention back to Fabiana and to her embryo's death): The tidiest of us all is Fabiana.

Antonia then immediately shifts the group's attention to another object. By doing this, Antonia helps Fabiana, who could be in a position to be accused. However, Antonia's gesture also conceals a more constructive intention, one which is more than just defensive or diverting. Antonia suggests a more adequate object than the virtual dinosaur game for Fabiana and the group. Something different that can give Fabiana a better possibility of expressing herself and growing. This means 'writing', and more specifically, the 'writing' of a diary.

Antonia (turning to me): Have you seen Fabiana's diary?

Fabiana (following Antonia's suggestion) gets her diary from her bag and shows it to me. It is a small diary, similar to those that many high school students use. The letters are neat and precise. The notes form perfectly regular blocks. It is impossible to tell the printed parts from those written with a black pen by Fabiana.

### **Creation and chaos**

While looking through the pages, I see some verses. As I read these verses, ideas tumble through my mind in relation to the Tamagotchi, Loredana's pregnancy and everything that is happening in the group. First of all, I think that 'the development of an embryo' is the growth of something that is 'beyond any possible control'. I also ponder on the fact that the 'development of an embryo' (just like the development of a self embryo) might have, perhaps wrongly, been considered by Fabiana and the other members of the group as a 'further growth of chaos'. Therefore, the survival of an embryo and its taking shape depend on the ability, both of the individual and of the group that he/she belongs to, of living with anguish. In turn, this ability is linked to the possibility of finding non-violent ways of relating to 'what cannot be controlled'. All these thoughts lead me to decide to tell the whole group about the contents of the verses in Fabiana's diary.

Dr Neri (reading aloud): When he had finished dividing and ordering that confused collection<sup>6</sup> and organized the fragments into limbs, that god, whoever it may have been, primarily . . . .

Fabiana: The verses I've written in my diary are the theme that I and the other participants in the theatrical dance studio have chosen for a show that we are preparing.

Fabiana reveals that the problem of putting the 'collection' in order and organizing 'the fragments into limbs' has long been on her mind.

The proposal of this theme as a task for the participants in the theatrical dance studio, and implicitly for the participants in the therapeutic group, indicates that an effort should be made not by an individual but by a working group. Fabiana's proposal is, in fact, very general and embraces Loredana's condition as well as the analyst's and the other members' conditions. Every member of the group has an embryo of himself to which to give a form.

### *Water-polo*

The section dedicated to the relationship between individual and group thought will end this talk. I will introduce the theme with an illustration.

During a game of water-polo one player, with a good throw, scores a goal. His team-mates, with a series of passes and forward spurts, have led him into the 'goal zone'. The throws and the passes are performed by single players. Their ability is decisive. Although the game is made up of various moments, the action is developed using a complex move. Furthermore, at any moment in the move, each player knows where to find his team-mates. Team work is as important as individual work. The 'character' and the psychological strength of the team are also essential.

A few explanations may be needed to clarify this analogy. The image of this game gives us the idea of group work, as an effort which leads to a common purpose, that is to score a goal, to win the game. On the contrary, group psychotherapy often fails to show an objective for long periods of time. In water-polo, all the players work for the good of the team. In psychotherapy, although the participants make efforts for the good of the group, at the same time they still think about their own personal aim, which is to cope with and overcome their anxieties and problems. Despite these and other important differences, I think that the water-polo example is useful. In fact, it highlights the main point very well. In a psychotherapy group, just as in this game, when conditions are favourable, there is no contrast between individuals and group, between individual thought and group thought. On the contrary, there is often symbiosis and reciprocal advantage.

### *Group thought and individual thought*

The group – which is made up of Gabriella, Marcello, Loredana, Antonia, Fabiana and the analyst – starts off with the Tamagotchi's death and arrives at the formulation of the thought: 'Giving form both to a collection and to an embryo'.

In retrospect, this thought sheds light on what has happened. Pregnancy always gives rise to ambivalent feelings in the woman who is pregnant. The embryo changes her body. Her life will never be the same again. By becoming pregnant, Loredana has almost got over her ambivalence. In order to continue her pregnancy – this creative project – she must face the remaining ambivalence.

Ambivalence is, at root, the simultaneous presence of drives towards destruction and drives towards creation. Drives towards destruction accompany every creative effort. The group, as a whole, accepts the duty to try and cope with destructive impulses. After a while, it is clear that drives towards destruction cannot be continually repressed and contained. At a certain point, they have to be dealt with. Fabiana takes up this situation. By introducing the small Tamagotchi and then killing it, she gives Loredana and the group a lot of help. Fabiana actually diverts the group's attention from the baby to another object. Then, following a destructive impulse, she kills the Tamagotchi. The rituals of mourning can begin. Life goes on.  
The Tamagotchi is dead. Six months later, Giuseppina is born.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

Presented at the University of Haifa, Haifa Post-graduate School for Psychotherapy (10 May 2001). This paper is a modified and wider version of a previous paper on 'Features of Group Thought', which I presented to The Australian and New Zealand Jungian Association, The Institute of Australasian Psychiatrists and The Group-Analytic Society (Sydney, 13 April 2000), to the University of Western Australia (Perth, 19 April 2000) and to the University of Geneva (25 November 2000).

1 A. Green (2000: 444) has presented an illustration of free association which is very similar:

It is clear that such functioning is much more suggestive of the figure of a network than that of linearity, sometimes ramified in the coexistence of different temporalities, linear and reticular. Further, among the ramifications involved in representing the process, certain branches may remain mute.... They are no less active in the unconscious and are capable of being reactivated or, in other cases, of exciting others without expressing themselves explicitly and directly. Others will appear absent, since meaning never develops from them, but they suggest to the analyst's mind the idea that they are necessary for arriving at a minimal understanding, which is nonetheless always hypothetical. If meaning is indeed arborescent, it is in the sense that one can go from one branch of the tree to another by a recurrent route, then returning to the subsequent bifurcations of the branch from which one set out.

2 H. Ezriel (1950, 1952) spoke about 'group common tension'; Foulkes and Anthony (1957) used the term 'shared group events'. I am referring to similar phenomena. However, my theoretical and technical perspective is very different.

3 I would like to thank Howard Kibel for the useful comments that helped me to better focalize both this paragraph and the previous one.

4 From a different theoretical point of reference, D.S. Whitaker and M.A. Liebermann (1964) speak about 'focal conflict'. The focal conflict includes a distressing theme (i.e. every member wants the therapist for himself only). This distressing theme triggers a reaction (i.e. the fear of disapproval by the therapist and the other members). The result is a group solution (i.e. a mistakenly collaborative attitude). Whitaker and Liebermann emphasize that the group solution is not a stable one.

5 This clinical material was presented in a slightly different form at the Colloque International 'Matières `a symbolisations' (Lyon, 6–7 March 1998). It was published by Neri in 1998.

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6 The Latin word is 'congeria', which is translated by the Italian word 'congerie' (a collection of heterogeneous elements). The English words 'aggregation' or 'collection' do not render the same meaning (see Ovidio Nasone, 1995).

7 Doris Neuwerth, who participated in the presentation of the paper at the University of Western Australia, has raised an interesting point as regards mourning in the group. This point does not contrast, but actually complements what I wrote in the article. She mentioned that she had noticed that, in the associative chain, the words used most by the group members were 'chaos and disorder', while words like 'murder and child killing' were never used. She asked herself why this was so and her answer was as follows: the group felt exactly what it said, 'chaos and disorder', not 'murder and killing'. Loredana's pregnancy means the arrival of a new member, the child in her womb. The group is thus faced with a significant change and, above all, with the risk of losing its identity. With the arrival of the baby, the group will never be the same again. The members will not be able to speak to each other in the same way as before. With the death of the Tamagotchi, mourning is triggered, not for the death of the child-double, but for the loss of the old group. Group restructuring phenomena are triggered. I am referring to the way in which the members interact and support each other.

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