Adolescence and urban cultures

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Major contributions can be found in Psychoanalysis both in regards to the understanding of Adolescence as a crucial aspect in the life of the individual, and to the psychopathology that manifests itself during that developmental phase.

We have to bear in mind that one of the most serious forms of mental illness, schizophrenia, commences often in adolescence. It is also true that eating disorders, one of the most frequent clinical presentations in our current practice, is prevalent between puberty and adolescence.

The passage from puberty to adolescence, and from there to adult life implies very complex processes. These demand 'psychic work' from a mind that is indeed in a chaotic situation: at puberty the latency structure collapses, drives that come from a body that has become a 'stranger' burst in. This situation will imply a complex task of integration for the psyche. And this body will determine the complex task of integration.

During puberty the body has a leading role. It is not only the parents at home or the analysts in our offices who witness this: the marketing specialists see it with a keener commercial eye. They know perfectly well that the consumer target are the young people, enthroned at this times by the ideals of an eternal youth, as one can simply appreciate by watching the commercial ads.

We cannot study the adolescent phenomenon only from the point of view of their inner world, or from the impact their body has on their mental organization: adolescence ties together the body, the psyche and the social.

The time when psychoanalysis could infer meanings from a single standpoint, either the internal world or the environment, is long gone. The patient and the therapist are social creatures and both are influenced by the environment in which they live.

Although the adolescent process has certain invariants, the production of different subjectivities will change according to the different social environments where the individual will carry on the developmental process.

This is why I decided to focus on certain means of expression, encounter, collective, anonymous ? contributions, that can be seen in the cities and that, when looked at, 'talk' for themselves of certain characteristic traits of our times.

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The adolescent process in Psychoanalysis

Many authors have dedicated meaningful contributions to the work with adolescents, with topics like sexuality –subordination of pregenital sexuality to genital sexuality (Freud, 1905) -, mourning – for the parents of their childhood, for the infantile body (Freud, A., 1976), (Aberastury, A. 1971)-, the review of the Oedipus conflict in the light of genital sexuality (Blos, P., 1981), the identification and des-identification processes and the need of historizing work (Aulagnier, P., 1991) are some of the main contributions to it..

After many years of practise, as is my case, we reach as analysts our own personal view, very much linked to our analytic identity, which is perpetually in construction and whose history arises from our personal analysis, readings, supervisions and the exchange with colleagues. It is anchored in the process that Bion described as learning from experience, and mostly derived from our clinical experience, whether with good outcomes or failures. We must include, and very importantly, the history of our own adolescence, and if, like for me, it was the case, one's own analysis during adolescence. I think that in the daily work as analysts, the adolescent turmoil moves deeply the infantile structures of the analyst at a countertransference level, perhaps more than working with children.

The area that I always bear in mind when seeing a child or an adolescent is the point of view of the human emotional development. I believe that psychic life starts with a foundational encounter between the newborn and the mother. Stated like this it might seem simple, but it is enormously complex since each of the terms involved is subjected to multiple factors. Therefore development does not entail a linear path, but a complex web of conflicts that the developing person must unavoidably face.

Within that maze of developmental problems, the infantile neurosis constitutes a first 'organizer' (Ungar, 2004). Freud says that once stated the existence of the oedipal conflict, all children go through the infantile neuroses. Melanie Klein was also interested in this concept and she also attributed it to the Oedipal situation, only that her Oedipus occurred much earlier.

I firmly believe, as Freud and Melanie Klein stated, that it is necessary to traverse the infantile neurosis – which I consider a developmental organizer- to build up a latency period. In turn this has to be dismantled by the adolescent process, which will generate new transformations so as to reach adult subjectivity. This is an important point, since a good number of current consultations have to do with young people who extend the 'latency state', incapable of creating the necessary adolescent crisis. The marketing experts have coined a word, 'Adultescents' to refer to the young adults who extend the stage of dependency on their parents. There are interdisciplinary studies that indicate that there is a high percentage of population around thirty years of age that still lives with their parents, who dress similar to pubertal youngsters, who watch TV programs addressed to children –cartoons for instance-

play video games, collect superhero comics and even decorate their rooms with the dolls of the trendy television serials.

In clinical work with children, we see an increased frequency of children with developmental disorders and what we usually do in such cases is precisely help the 'building up' of the infantile neurosis. As we have just seen, it is true that many adolescents and young adults continue with symptoms of extended latency not having succeeded in 'dismantling' that infantile neurosis through the *necessary* adolescent crisis.

An author who has made very important contributions for the understanding of the adolescent process is Donald Meltzer (Meltzer, 1998). One of his contributions is the importance of the peer group in adolescent development. Meltzer talks, not only of developmental task of the adolescent, the socializing process, the necessary passage from endogamy to exogamy. He states that the group is essential for the containment of the confusions created by the use of projective identifications, in which, parts of the self come into play so forcefully that they inevitably lead to action, which is so characteristic of young people's behaviour. The central idea is that the pubertal-adolescent group creates a space in which they can experiment with human relationships, in the external world, and without the presence of adults.

The so-called *adolescent transition* implies precisely the passage from the *world of the child in the family* to the *world of p*eers and from there to the *adult world*.

Entering adolescence implies colliding head on with a world that does not follow the rules of childhood.

Institutions are changing at an accelerated pace. In this sense, many of the consultations we have are about young people who come from newly re-constituted families. Likewise, the external world is threatening for the young person, because it is new and unknown, and it also has real threats because of the insecurity and possible violence linked to robberies, kidnapping, street fights, and the consumption of alcohol and drugs.

I believe it is still valid that the peer group is of vital significance. Until not so long ago the peer group had its origins in schools, in the sport clubs or in the neighbourhood. This is still the case for some people. However we have to acknowledge that now there are new ways in which people associate, and new forms of group identity. For example we can find groups linked by sport, others that group together around specific tastes of music, fan clubs, or even gather to pursue environmental issues. Other less common group gather to worship pagan gods inspired by obscure English poets of the 18th century or form part of ultrareligious groups.

Currently the most vital groups are what the social sciences experts call subcultures. These are formed by groups of individuals that have common interests and values, who meet to exchange information that ranges from role play games, types of music (dance, electronic, rap, alternative, cumbia) to the groups of 'floggers' or 'Emos' for example. This name, Emos,

originates from *emotional* in English. These people are thin, they wear their hair black with a large fringe that covers half of their face. They explain that as they are ashamed of part of society they don't want part of society to be able to see them. They say they are 'sensitive', and some of them practice self-cutting, and sometimes they show sequences of this on You Tube.

To introduce You Tube means we have reached a point in which, without expecting to analyse in a way that would require a group of experts in Social Sciences, Sociology, History, Anthropology and Communication Sciences, we plunge straight into the field of the mass media. Mass media constructs Ego Ideals, aspirational subjects by means of the product that *must be* consumed, and employs consumer advertising which recruits at an unprecedented pace.

Young people are seduced by the media which then occupies a great space of the field in which their relationships develop, a place that the family, the school or the sport club previously occupied. The present-day adolescent traverses this mass media universe through the so-called virtual reality. Group exchange does not necessarily have to be in the schoolyard during recess, nor in the club, nor the pavements of the neighbourhood. It can take place in the cyberspace, by e-mail, by chat *, in online games, in the forums. There the young people can be who they most want to be.

They can also do what is forbidden to them in the real world; they can choose who they want to be; they have the possibility of creating an identity of their own liking, name and surname hidden behind their nickname, even their physical appearance can be created by their imagination. It is also not necessary to meet in person; one can use the computer or the cell phone that has increasingly more functions.

A number of games exist, e,g, SIMS, and the Second Life, which are very successful. In them people can spend hours 'creating' the life of one character, called *avatar* which one has to name and one can 'raise' like in the SIMS, from birth to death. One can follow its graduate studies, postgraduate studies, romances, marriages, birth of the children, divorces, etc.

Carrying on with the topic of the current types of groups, I think that we must, as psychoanalysts know more about the ways in which the adolescents interact nowadays. Since they do it very differently from the groups of the neighbourhood, the sport clubs, the political or religious associations that we used to know. This is what our adolescent patients talk to us about in their analytical session.

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* This software allows to take part in groups, forming 'virtual cities' with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, available 24 hours a day.

They tell us about chats, online games, fotologs, blogs, videologs, graffitis, stencils and other ways of meeting that paradoxically have a certain anonymity ingredient: they may never get to know each other in person.

I will refer only to one of these types of grouping.

In the **fotologs**, the principal element is the picture, which together with the date must be present. Added to this are comments from the author and the comments posted by friends. When this is the principal element and the links to the fotologs of friends are added to it, then we are facing a fotolog to create communities.

In March 2008 it was said that the fotolog.com site had no less than fifteen million users!

From an analytic perspective we can understand the importance the image has for the young people. They are working through their anxiety about loss of their self representation and their infantile bodies, which change so fast that it cannot be absorbed by the internal world. Others have to look and reaffirm like talking mirrors. Their messages return something, which, as you will see when I read some of the messages to you, is most of the time confused and childish, but has a calming effect to alleviate the anxiety linked to the vacuum of existence.

The **blog**, on the other hand, can be defined as a personal web site where periodically someone writes in it, like a diary on line, about different topics that interest the owner. Each entry is arranged chronologically and the site has links with other sites and it also receives comments. The number of blogs that run in the world is stunning, it is said to be 71 million on the planet.

Again, this is a phenomenon that makes us wonder. Like the fotologs and the chat, the blog is an open space shared by millions of people. It becomes the heir of the personal diary, which I was given when I was twelve. I was very moved to have it because it had a lock and I had the responsibility not to lose the key. Now there is no space for privacy, no intimacy. The space of the blog in the cybernetic web is called blogosphere. Anyone can access the blog used as a diary. The writer does not do so in solitude but perhaps has the advantage to receive comments that might help, accompany her/him, and perhaps multiple dialogues, perhaps even inter-cultural ones, could be established.

This is the consequence of the shift technology has produced. We are seen, we are exposed, and we will have to reconsider the sense and meaning of privacy and intimacy. In the adolescent world, sometimes even the sexual exchanges occur in public, as in the discos.

Seen from a different point of view, blogs that focus on the information or exchange of for example political views have, in my opinion, some advantages. They allow decentralization of the information from the big cities. It is a kind of resistance against the control that for instance a city like Buenos Aires has, concentrating everything including transmission of

information. As it is a global process, it allows instant learning about events in a town, in a neighbourhood or even about a person's life.

In view of these changes I believe that as psychoanalysts we should try to avoid taking a judgemental stance over the current models and make an effort so as to observe and attempt to reflect upon what is happening. In this sense I think that the topic of the online relationships could be thought about as a kind of transitional space that prepares for the entry into the real world.

I would like to talk now about another space, not a virtual one like the cyberspace, which is established 'between the life and the language of the cities from centuries crammed with words that are mostly unread and images that strike the eye and at the same time go by unnoticed' as Claudia Kozak points out (Kozak, C., 2004) in her book *Contra la Pared* (Against the Wall). These are the inscriptions that line the skin of the urban walls and that are called graffiti, murals, stencils, together, visual interventions that seem to talk from the silence. This dawn suggests the city dweller the exercise of giving a new look to that which seems familiar because it is always there. This will allow us to read on the walls the traces of time and to think about the meanings that each era chose for their slogans.

Graffiti are as old as History, Pompey is cited as the first example of it, but even before in the 7th century B.C. traces appear on the Egyptian funeral temples. Of course the materials have changed, from sharp objects, through to charcoal, paint, fibre, ball point pens, and nowadays spray paint. Also the content has changed: legends, bathrooms, jails, schools, footballers, witty, political, etc.

Youth subcultures started with inscriptions from the second half of the 20th century, as founding examples we have the French May of 68, and the graffiti of the New York subways of the seventies.

Nowadays we talk of graffiti when we allude to inscriptions in public spaces, related mainly to youth subcultures, characterized by being ephemeral, non institutional, anonymous –even though they are signed- and somewhat clandestine since they are not legally authorized.

There is a very close relationship between the graffiti and the culture linked to the music mass media. In our country this has to do principally with the rock music, but also other musical trends. We can see for example graffiti like *Sexo, droga y rock and roll*; *No woman no cry* (eng. Orig) *Los redondos, La Renga, and Los Piojos are the argentine resistance* (the three last ones are all rock bands)

I need to clarify why I use the term subculture. I refer to the author that I mentioned previously. From a Social Sciences point of view one would not be able to talk about one single youth culture in a specific period of time. Subculture would account for a differentiation of code and group in a wider field of cultural practices. One can also understand some young contemporary subcultures as built in a space that contains a certain degree of opposition to

the establishment. Likewise we should not ignore the fact that these resistance practices are always under threat of being incorporated by the establishment, the most paradigmatic example being the massive sale of T-shirts with the image of the Che Guevara.

This, in my view is how it links in as a trans-disciplinary space with the view that psychoanalysis has about adolescence. Psychoanalysis has always has seen this stage as in irremediable opposition. There is no possibility to differentiate from one another without opposition.

This is one of the great difficulties for the analyst who works with adolescents. How to work in a space at the optimal distance the will not generate rejection nor seduction? If we belong to the adult world, that is seen by the young person as the most hypocritical of all…

If the adolescent is fully an adolescent he/she has to make us feel uncomfortable, as the graffiti disturbs us, even if it makes us smile. The painted wall impinges into the private property, and when it does, it generates violence in some form or other. In analysis the adolescents nearly all the time provoke, they question the setting, they arrive late, they ask for changes of time of the session, they want to read the books on our bookshelves, they don't come because they have overslept, they call to confirm their appointment time when we are with another patient. That is why they are adolescents.

Summary

The article addresses the adolescent phenomenon as an intertwining of the body, the psyche, and the social sphere.

The effects of the environment they inhabit affect both patient and analyst. Although the adolescent process has some invariants, the production of different subjectivities will vary according with the different social milieus in which the individual will develop.

The purpose of this presentation is to do some research on certain current forms of expression and encounter, especially in the cities, like the fotologs, videologs, blogs, graffitis.

Before approaching the subject there will be a reference to the psychoanalytic bibliography that has been more useful to the author in the clinical work with patients of this age group.

The presentation will be accompanied by a brief power point display.

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Translation: B. E. Schechter

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