

## Body and pathological defenses in adolescence\*

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In life, there is not an age such as adolescence, where the body and its vicissitudes assume so crucial importance. Accepting and integrating the newness of a sexed and changed body, besides, naturally integrating aggressiveness and restructuring the own identity, are developmental tasks of this difficult age.

But adolescence is not only a phase of life; on the contrary, it is a kind of enzyme that stimulates our minds towards new basis.

To allow the adolescence operating in the mind is a complex process that raises conflicts and fears, and there is much played at this stage. In some cases it allows the beginning of a new history.

### **Sensoriality and sensuality in adolescence**

The setting of the psyche in the soma, according to Winnicott, is the fruit of a personalization process, supported by the trend towards integration, with its alternation of non-integration phases. This continues throughout our life and it finds in adolescence one of the significant connection points, since the new experiences should be lived and integrated and these experiences are related to the new sexed body and to the aggressiveness. Just as at birth we can talk about the setting of the psyche in the body, in adolescence is the body which requires the attention of the mind (Ferrari, 1992).

Egle Laufer (2002) discusses the distinction between body as internal object that represents the libidinal body, and the body image based on sensory experience.

The libidinal body is linked to memories of the early mother-child interactions, while the image is constructed from sensory experiences. In normal situations, these two aspects come together in the body as internal object. In dysfunctional situations - according to Egle Laufer- there is a split in the integration source of evil or hatred

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solutions by the body itself or by some of its aspects. A lot of feelings so as to integrate (or, conversely, the terror of them) will then be able to characterize the successive stages of growth, particularly in adolescence.

The emergence of adolescence will impose the loss of child's body, and the child who has had difficulties with the primary relationships will react trying to keep the "omnipotent phantom of union or merger with the idealized and preoedipal mother body" (Laufer, 2012).

From the beginning, the sensory experiences related to the hearing, to sight, to smell, to touch, to be touched, the body temperature, need maternal care to become integrated. Thus, a complex process begins and it will lead to the personalization and to the distinction of the ego and the non-ego, to the delimitation of the border itself.

Piera Aulagnier argues that reality will be seen, enjoyed and heard processed by the body that represents "a relational mediator" between the psyche and the world, and between two psyches (De Mijolla, 1998, p. 22) and it will give rise or to a needs bearer body or to a desires bearer or receiver body.

In an interesting study, Elsa Schmid-Kitsikis underlines the importance of sensuality. An early disorder of this experience "keeps the child in a state of excitement and the adolescents in a catastrophic experience in the presence of every form of penetration, sexual, verbal or relational (2005, p. 393).

Thanks to the relationship with the other, to the mother's care, "sensuality encompasses and puts the sensoriality and the desire together" (2005, p. 395).

This experience generated by the relationship and the pleasure with the other<sup>1</sup> is placed, therefore, at the junction between the autoeroticism and the objectal relationship and in this it finds a meaning and delimitation.

The experience of sensuality is characterized, then, by these two aspects: one towards the inner world and the other towards the external world and to the other beyond the ego.

### **But what happens in adolescence?**

New sensations, never before experienced, emerge in adolescence and they have to do with the new event of the pubertal changes: the hormonal impregnation, the new muscles, the new physical height, the sexual maturation and the new experiences related to the menarche, the pubic hair and the sexual initiation. The latter, in particular,

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship with the other is central to favoring the process of the integration of sensations and the development of a healthy sensuality. (Aulagnier, Meltzer, Winnicott).

allows, and especially in the adolescence, new sensations connected with the experience of internal organs (Laufer, 2002; Nicolò, 2011).

Returning to the debate between continuity and discontinuity in adolescence, we can consider that they excite either new sensoriality or sensuality that emerge at that age and that are inserted on old and new experiences ... and other experiences (adolescents) "visit again" those precedents and, particularly, the most originary. Other phenomenon, usual in adolescence, will also be added to all this: the reactivation of polymorphous perverse dispositions, which are also related to the activation of Oedipus and are characterized by bisexual confusions (Meltzer, 1973).

The relative anxiety about the definition of gender identity in this period may be the expression of an objectal choice or of associated problems with gender identity, but may also be linked to the vicissitudes of the identifications, or to the passivity so feared by the teenager. These are part of the "evolution from child homoeroticism to puberty" (Gutton, 2002), but may also be expressions of an early and extensive regression. Those that Meltzer called zonal confusions (mouth-vagina-anus, and after nipple-tongue-feces combinations), which the child had learned to distinguish, burst into puberty sometimes accompanied by an idealization of confusion (Meltzer, 1973). These phenomena can sometimes be organized in a kind of transitional perversions (Cahn, 1991; Bonnet, 2006; Nicolò, 2009), which show the struggle that the teen is doing in defining himself, and they are also facilitated by the regular recomposition of the Superego, which in this period of life is not an available ally in this struggle (Freud, 1936). They need a careful evaluation, and we must distinguish between a perverse acting out and the fantasies and the daydreams of perverse content that often fill the mental space of these adolescents.

Some of these acting out are ways of experiencing reality and of experiencing oneself, but sometimes they show the temporary or permanent failure of the fight in the fantasy and they are another step toward the perverse immobilization or the psychotic problems.

If however the adolescent gradually get to live nice and affective loving and sexual experiences at this age, this contributes to his growth because it confirms him in the acceptance of himself thanks to the experience with the other; in possession of a body different from the parent one, it allows him a further step towards the integration of the new sensuality and of the functioning of his sexual body.

### **The integrated body, the enemy and persecutory body**

In adolescence, once again, as in the beginning of life, the teenager must narcissistically reinvest his body, symbolically reappropriate it. The balance between

these new experiences, the excitement quota and the ability to contain it and / or of representing such experiences is very important, since a plus of excitement can generate defenses against the experimentation of these new aspects.

A split between sensoriality and sensuality can be verified, or even an excess of excitement makes him assume a traumatic valence to these experiences.

The adolescence as an enzyme that activates the functioning of specific stages will not be able to explain, under these conditions, its organizational and reorganizing ability of mental functioning, and the threat of being destroyed then becomes consistent.

At this point, "it's as if" the reality of the body itself took a persecutory meaning (Laufer, 2002). But also the other and the other's gaze may become persecutory. The body becomes strange and, as Gutton (2003) says, the re-negation "of the real" lived as sensory coming from the body, inevitably, alters the reality examination. From there, it is the same reality to be denied.

The teen feels bothered by new sensations, and, particularly, by sensual ones. He feels them coming from the outside and, especially, from the inside. These sensations can be pleasant, intriguing, seductive, but also solid, horrific, embarrassing and intrusive if one does not have the ability to modulate, to integrate, to begin to process them.

The teenager may enter into a standstill situation, unable to choose between the fear of the prepubescent body abandonment and integration of the new sexed body, because this also means the loss of a safe and protective object with the parent, the confrontation with the incestuous and aggressive desires. Then, it will be present the terror to lose control of the body and its counterpart, which means losing the control of his mind.

This is one of the reasons for psychotic beginnings in the late years of the adolescence, while other challenges -such as the renewal of the typical mourning processes of growth (the developmental mourning) and the integration of aggressiveness - characterize the evolutionary works of this period and they contribute in determining these problems. And this is also one of the advantages of studying the typical processes in adolescence, as it allows us to better understand the psychotic problem, the reasons for its outburst.

The fact is that in adolescence, the preconscious - cap zone that regulates the changes between the inner world and the external reality- becomes "more transparent and more fragile" (Guignard, 1996) and it is precisely this transparency which consents us to see, unpretentiously, what happens in the restructuring internal world of the adolescent.

### **Acting on the body, acting with the body**

The effort to define identity, as happens in today's society, increases the need to cling to the body to protect oneself from reality and gives importance to action and the acting out that are replaced in the process of symbolization. The acts substitute thinking, reflecting, verbalizing. An experience that we could define as pushed to the limit -and that characterizes our teens today- is represented by fleeting and superficial, momentary and brief sexual experiences. These ways, which can be defined as "neo-sexuality", are not a prelude to a sentimental relationship but they are a purpose in themselves. Very often they are consumed in an afternoon and they have a connection with the group to which the adolescent belongs. They allow experiencing feelings and they take the form of prologue when talking with others. The teen grants a privilege to sensations instead of living a relationship with the other, with its richness, but also with its natural limits. With such behavior, the teen splits sensuality from sexuality (Nicolò, 2009) and, from this derives the privilege of sensoriality at the expense of thinking and at the expense of the affections.

In most cases with a good evolution, these operations are experimentations, that in a proudly way, may also allow the teen to face the anxiety of the loss of the body and childhood *relationships*.

But sometimes there is a kind of emotional dissociation from the body. The body becomes a "talking point", a "source of sensations" not integrated into the mind and therefore into the teenager's subjectivity under construction.

The teenager looks at himself as external to himself, he is the observer of himself and he exists in the feelings, in the sensations he experiences on the skin surface, viewed from the outside or lived from the sensory level.

María, who is a sophomore in high school, hides her continuous search for sexuality from her parents. But, among peers, she does not differentiate between one and the other. It's like if she continually played a game of seduction. The group in which she speaks about this is extremely important. But, at the end, her sexual activity does not give her any pleasure; it is a continuous acting, a divided situation that keeps the excitement but denies the affectivity. She is aware of everything she is doing only indirectly when, at school, people begin to speak badly of her. She wonders why this happens. She is amazed seeing the reactions of anger and jealousy of one of her boyfriends, the only one with whom she had tried to have a relationship of different quality.

### **The skin as registration surface**

One of the most common examples of these difficulties of integration is the frequent occurrence of piercings, tattoos, burns and self-cutting.

On the one hand, these demonstrations send us to the subject of our look about ourselves and that of the other about us. Sometimes that appearance confirms the identity and sometimes offers a contrasting image. We can then see the search for identity that the teen is making through, for example, the way he attends the session and his frequent and bizarre makeover. To look at oneself into the other's eyes, to look at oneself in order to exist and to get to know oneself are, sometimes, sides of the same coin. But we are not talking only about the way of dressing. We can also talk about the use of the skin.

"There is no doubt that in this period the skin surface assumes, in its role of erogenous zone, a multiple role in the growth of the child" (Freud, A., 1936).

The same Sigmund Freud (1922) said: "The ego can be considered as a psychic projection of the body surface" (Freud, 1922, pp 488-489.). The skin, with the sensations it causes, is internalized as container (Bick, 1968) and, as stated by both Freud and Anzieu, performs defensive functions of paraexcitation, marks the border with the outside world, represents a " registration surface" of all those fantasies, conflicts and anxieties that, having not found - to paraphrase Anzieu (1985) - a words' packaging, search in the skin a packaging that, in some way, could signify them...

Below these phenomena that redirect to multiple, personal, group, sociological and anthropological meanings (Le Breton, 2004) may hide different dynamics.

The adolescents themselves ascribe them different meanings. I would distinguish two categories of marking on the skin. The first -and most common- the skin functions as a screen for the teenager projections and towards symbolization. In this case, tattoos and piercings have a proto-symbolic pregnancy; they are, as Catherine Chabert (2000) says- "attempts of figuration" in the sense that they seem to be halfway "between the conscious and the unconscious intentionality" and, at the same time, they represent "a defense and a processing".

In other teens, however, we are faced with more complex situations, such as self-cutting, which, much more than we could think, has been spread in certain teenager groups. In some of these patients, "it is to inflict themselves a real suffering wrapping and an attempt to restore the skin container function not exercised by the mother or the environment (...)" (Anzieu, 1985, p. 246). The intention is to self-create that primitive holding severely damaged from the origin.

In severe cases, the body is split and it is treated as an external and foreign object, or in other cases, even the resource of injuring oneself, cutting oneself, gives a sense of existence and reality. The latter cases should call attention to the analyst, because there hatred by the split body is revealed, and, sometimes, they are prodromes of attacks to the own body or, what is more serious, suicide attempts.

### **When does the breakdown explode?**

We can hypothesize that the breakdown explodes when the teen is not capable of integrating this storm of new sensations generated by the body, subject and object of new sexual and sensual drives. But not only that! These new sensations threaten in fact a personality that has inside an integration never fully experienced before, but also some basis identity problems, coming out of its latent state, are revealed in this period. We are naturally describing a **scenario with several entries**. The triggering of the breakdown finds in the body one of its main points of failure and the clotting moment of many other vicissitudes, as the impossibility of establishing flexible boundaries of the self and building the own individualization, the transgenerational dynamics, the alienating identifications, the failure of the protective screen, the inability to make the mourning of the parental objects, in short, all them, obstacles to the subjectivation (Cahn, 1991, p. 103). In these cases, it can be generated a psychosis-inducing collusion between a current difficulty where the sensory and sexual storm is one of the most important events, and a primary narcissistic fragility (Cahn, 1991, p. 264).

Indeed, to allow the adolescence to be able to operate in mind and to overcome the developmental tasks it will be crucial:

1) The previous experiences of cohesion of the self through the experiences of sensory integration and of sensual relationships mentioned above.

2) The amount of excitement to find at that time (the current trauma).

3) The ability to think these new experiences. The teenager will be challenged to operate again that "imaginative processing of somatic parts, feelings and functions" that the psyche is for Winnicott (1949, p. 292). It will be challenged to be able to figure and symbolize these new feelings, these new excitements.

4) Currently present and not only in the past, the response of the other will be crucial. The response of the father, the teacher, the classmate, the group, the couple and therefore also of the analyst can be revealed crucial. Again, the other will be involved in his containment capabilities, of duplication (mirroring function) of "*reverie*". In my experience, psychotic organizations are always placed inside a traumatic organization of psychotic bonds that characterize the origin of the subject even before

birth. They are pathological bonds characterized by an incestuous quality (Racamier), intrusive, with pathological and pathogenic identifications with an object that drives crazy (Garcia Badaracco), conditioned by transgenerational mandates neither unprocessed nor processable.

The myth of Narcissus and Echo seems to be the representation of this process where the indifference in front of the relationship with the other prevails, and the sensory disorganization that leads to the transformation of the body. As everyone knows, Narcissus, in love with his own image and unable to love others more than himself, falls into the water, killing himself, and he becomes a flower, precisely the narcissus. Similarly, Echo, in love with him but unrequited, according to a version of the myth, is transformed into a rock -and in another version in a sound, precisely in the echo-. In both a kind of sensory disintegration and a corporeal dismantling operates. In the myth, also amazes the absence of the other and of his look: Narcissus looking at the water for the first time does not see other but himself. Nobody has served him as mirror ever before. He will not be able to recognize himself in his identity.

In other situations, the teenager takes refuge in the body as the last bastion in order to exist. Trying to circumscribe the process, some adolescents have a tough struggle. We can see it in a short clinical fragment.

Juan is seventeen years old and goes across Italy because he thinks his ears are dropped. He is operated in a city in the center of the country. After, he has an operation of the nasal septum, but his anguish continues: now he is focused in the eyes. Classmates and girls do not have a good relationship with him because of these physical defects. He thinks he has fixed eyes that his gaze is limited, but be careful of saying that perhaps he is talking about another kind of look. An eye doctor of a small Piedmontese town receives him once a month. The patient goes from the south. He makes him do some exercises of "eye movement reeducation" which seem to contain his distress. Meanwhile, he makes trips that move him away from their parents that are distressed and understand that they must tolerate this bizarre behavior.

To what is due this dismorphophobic symptom?

We could talk here of the existence of "psychotic islands" (Rosenfeld, 1998) which may be concentrated in an organ and thus to be protected from the invasion of the psychotic panic. Or instead, are we facing...?

1) ... a lived body as ugly, imperfect, that exposes the ugliness of the self to the world, his inability, your powerlessness? (Lemma, 2012)

2) ... or Juan is confronted with an idealized and unattainable body?



3) ... or to invest in a special way that part of the body is trying to operate a kind of reappropriation?

In any case, it draws the attention this sort of inverse itinerary with which the patient explores his sense organs, separating them increasingly in the cure, as an anticipation of a wider disintegration that he seeks to avoid and from which he seeks to protect himself, concentrating in one organ at a time and concretely.

But we can also attend the demonstration of more serious disorders such as this case that was discussed in supervision. Surely this is a very serious teenager who has made a long and effective medicine treatment for the first two years and difficult parents' psychotherapy.

Alberto has a difficult life since her premature birth. The mother, who receives him with a depressive illness and the emergence of an autoimmune disease, died when Alberto reaches ten years old, but the funeral was hidden for him. Besides his stutter as a child, Alberto surprises by a kind of anesthesia that characterizes his body. When he was a very little child his arm became fractured, but he returned home almost without asking for help. The indifference towards his body is also noted when he neglects a serious infection with pus that is noticed only by the others. After the wife's death, Alberto's father has a very close relationship with him until the moment he decides to marry a woman who sees the difficulties of Alberto, who is already seventeen years old. A few months after the marriage, a car accident, which produces the fear of death for the entire family, precipitates the following situation. Fantasies with a persecutory background about the father and his partner appear. Alberto started a treatment.

Outside the extended family environment, Alberto has no friends, while he successfully attends the university. After a year of the onset of the therapeutic work, Alberto has a new crisis triggered by another accident, psychological this time. The father's wife, Juana, casually sees a video on the Internet where Alberto, playing, imitates -precisely him, always gentle and uninhibited - a scene of the rape of a colleague. Juana rebuked him and Alberto's defense was useless, explaining that it was a staging of the friend who participated in a consensual way.

Alberto begins to be in a bad condition: in a session after a weekend, he tells that "Friday, after getting into bed, he had the impression of being overcome by a lot of thoughts. They are persistent and they are out of control until the moment he feels a force is released from him, a heat coming from the bottom of his belly, to the right, and up to the heart. After, he experiences a great tachycardia. It stands up with fear of dying, he calls his father and he asks him to help him to go back to bed so as to calm himself down. In the following days he does not go out his house, but he is recovering

slowly; he has a seemingly safer behavior that allows him to pursue sports training with the cousin and he changes his Facebook page, where it appears as passionate about wrestling.

This will be the appearance of a decompensation that will debut in the following weeks, when checking in the mirror a disharmony of his body related to the right side functioning. Objects fall from his hand; he feels less strength on the right side of the body, which "goes almost for itself". He continues saying that he feels within himself male and female parts of the body, but separated, and he will have the fantasy of an encounter with a girl known to him, not really achievable. These themes will evolve into a clear psychotic episode that will gradually withdraw, during which he claims to get her pregnant. Currently, Alberto continues his psychotherapy and he attends successfully the university".

The discussion of this serious case allows me to illustrate the dynamics so far mentioned. The absence of the weekend had awakened the anguish of separation and of loss and had left him alone. Alberto has being discovered in his sexual fantasies and in his aggressive character (the violation). He cannot separate them or deny them. It is a second trauma: the father's wife, representative of all Oedipal incestuous fantasies, tells him severely off. Juana can represent either the superego prohibition as the incestuous mother, object of desire that terrifies him. But it is also shown the relevant pressure that we see placed in the level of the body sensations that seem foreign to him.

He thinks he becomes again a little boy that goes to the mother to return to her bed. The erotic or potentially erotic body thus becomes a child's body. To use an expression of Piera Aulagnier, we see the regression from a desire body to a necessity body. Because of this, he tries many defenses. The first is a defensive splitting that seems to go not only over his mind but also over his body from the right part, opposite to the left part. But this mechanism is not very viable.

In a short period of time, heterosexual impulses and those homosexual toward the father rush quickly. We must add the never processed mother's mourning, a mourning that has already been stolen from him. He cannot have a woman, thus he becomes a woman; he is unable to accept the mother's mourning, he becomes the woman that his mother had been. But luckily (so to speak) he has a way to defend himself of the total decompensation. Placement occurs in the soma of his masculine and feminine aspects that he feels placed in the lower belly. Feelings and excitements of his sexuated body are re-read and resignified inside his somatic disperception.

### **What had happened?**

The bodily changes experienced in an uncontrollably way are soon transformed into a "pseudo hallucination" quickly accompanied by a tachycardia that scares him; an anguish of imminent death it is enough to urge him waking his father.

De Masi (2012) states that "hallucinations are precisely a derivative of the sensory use of the mind that, in this case, produces perceptions self-generated by the withdrawal in the own body (...). The child destined to become a psychotic does not use his own mind to understand the world but to produce pleasurable sensory images."

Is the perception of his excited body that has given rise to a fanciful theory that has lost touch with reality? Or has been the psychotic organization the one that made him feel the heat invading his body?

Being male and female at the same time, he is the omnipotent bisexual, the prepubescent boy that is not defined but that is also the lost maternal object from which he cannot be differentiated. He avoids being at the same time, whether the child in latency age who has lost his mother, whether the adolescent overcome by sexual arousal and the evolutionary needs, whether the neonate who could not find in the sick mother the containment and the necessary care for the continued integration process of sensations and sensuality.

For Alberto, and for other patients like him, the body as internal object has undergone a menace in its constitution because of early maternal deprivation, and this has also had an influence on the consecutive Oedipus processing. In a complex situation like this, many failures have been taking place quickly; the integration of the body is one of them.

At the same time, in adolescence is typical the possibility of the opening of a new foundation of the identity. In adolescence, unlike in other stages of life, games can be reopened and we can attend dramatic chronicities, but also to amazing changes or to restructurations of personality or, in other cases, to defensive reorganizations useful for survival. But on the other hand, Freud had taught it to us when, recounting the delirium and the dream of Gradiva by Jensen, he carefully described us all these vicissitudes.