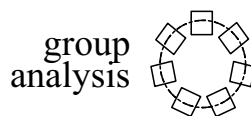


## Article



# Emergency at sea. Wading through the chaos of emotions

*Diletta Del Bono*

*This article draws attention to the advantages of applying the theoretical model of the experiential group in particularly critical conditions, such as those dictated by a state of emergency, as a means of addressing an urgent need by putting up a sort of decompression chamber for emotional residues derived from the difficult and sometimes extreme work situations experienced by the participants.*

*The shared participation in the unwholesome experience unites and creates familial bonds, and is infectious, giving back a universal language for the encounter with other cultures that are unknown to us. Not only that, the state of emergency gives rise to another form of language, the language of meaningful action, where doing as an institutional practice—acting together to save human lives—allows the structuring and consolidation of a sense of identity to which the strong ‘esprit de corps’ emerges, also told by the crew as the experiential groups bears witness.*

*Key words: complex multilayer, experiential group, emergency, reception, contagion*

Why and how we have survived up to now I do not know, but since we have, we can begin our thinking process at whatever moment between being born and the present. (Bion, 1974)

## Introduction

This work stems from some of my thoughts herein reported following a pilot project of psychological support on board an emergency rescue ship in the Sicilian Channel.

The organization behind the project is not mentioned for reasons of privacy<sup>1</sup>. For the very same reasons, which are also related to the current European policies in place, I have chosen to omit some parts of the project concerning the actual reception of migrants and to focus mainly on the group experience.

I decide to accept the job and to get on board, feeling first and foremost called upon to act and compelled to give my own personal contribution, however small, to the problem of immigration that today takes the semblance of an apocalyptic exodus and of an emergency with no end in sight. The migrants' journey usually lasts for months if not years. Extreme traumas such as torture are an experience that unites them along the migratory route. Many of them have survived violence and shipwrecks and often witnessed the death of a loved one or a traveling companion. The challenge therefore is to be able to make thinkable this plight that speaks of war, death, imprisonment, hunger and fear.

In keeping with my training I propose to get the many actors playing their part in the life on board the rescue ship involved, whether they be the single individual, the small group, the organizations concerned, or the migrants themselves. In order to come to grips with a movement of such complexity in its entirety, it is important to look at it from a unified and globalizing psychoanalytic perspective, which would enable one to observe and give meaning to what is happening within it. In other words, this means thinking and constructing a setting—i.e. the *Multilayer Setting* (Margherita, 2012)—configured as a container sufficiently strong as to be able to tolerate and modulate this catastrophe, and sufficiently elastic to simultaneously organize the different groups and the different points of view that are here involved (crew, groups of rescuers, groups of health workers, groups in rubber dinghies, groups of migrants, groups of smugglers and traffickers, social and health institutions, political organizations, etc.).

The *Complex Multilayer* theory (Margherita, 2012) shines a light upon the existence of complex concentric interrelations between the different levels of the observed context—i.e. individual, group, institutional, social—and how each level affects the other. *Communication* between the different levels therefore becomes a focal point for therapy.

The project presented here is, for the sake of clarity, divided into two distinct and targeted interventions: one for the onboard personnel, and one for the migrants, always keeping in mind that individual interventions interacting with each other, promote the well-being within the ship context.

### **The group with the ship's crew**

As I make my way onto the ship I am overcome by mixed emotions of excitement and curiosity about the new experience and by the desire to put myself to the test in a world that is all but unfamiliar to me.

In less than two days at sea, far away from family and the customary technological means of communication, this world, at first unknown to me, begins to transform itself into a large, welcoming and affective family. In my first explorations, full of analytical curiosity, I notice that in this large family there are several *subgroups* organized not only by their competencies and duties, but also by their sharing of certain spaces such as the canteen and accommodation quarters.

The crew that works on a ship is specialized in different areas and organized hierarchically. There is a commander, who coordinates the subordinates and is also the person responsible for them, followed by the second in command. Finally, the nautical tradition distinguishes the officers from the crew that together make up the entire naval company. The crew, in addition to being expected to owe obedience to their superiors and to scrupulously follow the directives imparted by them, are required to work in synergy and co-operation to ensure the safety of the ship.

From the outset, I have the impression that this type of organization creates family micro-systems which, if on the one hand seem to communicate in an exemplary way with a sort of universal language that binds and creates *brotherly* ties during emergencies caused by SAR<sup>2</sup> events, on the other they seem to adopt, just as the migrants hosted on board, specific dialects and cultures, dictated perhaps by the close cohabitation of some *sub-groups* in circumscribed areas of the ship.

With this in mind, I thought of getting the crew involved resorting to the *experiential group* model. An operational characteristic of the model is the group's own examination of the group itself, with the focus on the lived experience shared by the participants. The experiential group '... is the space-time of the crossing of experiences, and as they cross it turns into learning that ultimately confers to the single

individuals the tools for the encounter with other and new group forms' (Brunori and Tenerini, 2017). As well as making it easier to recognize group phenomena the model facilitates the development of a greater capacity for co-operation within a social situation, even in extreme emotional conditions (Corrao, 1982; Kaës, 1976).

This short introductory note shows that the *experiential group* proposed here could indeed take on the role of *communicative* facilitator between the various host sub-groups on the ship. A group already there, waiting only to be nominated and constituted by a *setting* with well-defined *times* and *spaces*.

A *time* which goes beyond both the moments of ordinary work or emergency, (SAR-events), and the activities of a playful nature, distinctive of the free time. A *space*, where the group can engage in sharing strong emotional experiences in order to develop a greater capacity for co-operation within complex social situations. A *place* understood both as a physical and concrete space which, as an *away place*, can perform the function of decompression chamber of *emotional residues* derived from difficult and sometimes extreme work situations, taking care of the emotional events related to the institutional life.

With that in mind, I make the assumption that the participants of the group are able to take charge of the institutional mandate. I also assume that the ideas of foundation and identity of the group are strongly based on the *historical* qualities of the institution with its founding myths. We could therefore think that the members of the group, in the capacity of institutional representatives, are delegated to deal with the unconscious *things* that pervade the field.

Indeed, as after every SAR event, I notice there is a greater turnout of participants to the group, as if there is an urgent need to find a place of gathering—a *decompression chamber*—to defuse those intense emotional experiences.

Participation in the group as already mentioned is on a voluntary basis. The group is open, anyone can join in regardless of the role of office and the function performed (commander, officers, crew, health workers); the commander is there to ensure that the group is provided with a protected space, a space-place, which is assigned to us every day from 4.00pm to 5.30pm, unless there are other types of priority interventions in progress.

The commander will participate in only one of the meetings, the third, entitled '*fathers and Sons*', of which I shall now give a short summary.

The commander takes the floor and seems to want to share some of his mood with great generosity. He recounts the first two days of navigation, as of melancholic and gloomy days; he misses his loved ones. Then, with the passage of time, this initial melancholy wanes, until it becomes more and more immaterial. He feels embarrassed about this detachment, which he does not like, as it makes him feel bad. I think back to the events of the last meeting and I refer to the intervention of L. who used an analogy to explain the role that the captain plays on the ship. The captain is akin to a paternal figure, the father who sets out well-defined laws and rules. The second in command is a maternal figure, the caring mother who takes care of her children. Two distinct functions that cooperate and work in synergy.

I think of how, from this point of view, the captain being the head of a family can take on the role of father of the crew, which guarantees laws and rules to their children, promoting their consolidation of an 'esprit de corps'. I report these thoughts to the group.

In a relaxed atmosphere working by associations the group members talk about their own children. A nostalgic atmosphere hangs over the meeting due to an awareness of not being able to give them the time they need. An increasingly uncertain time, given by the sudden changes in programme on the ship; it is, after all, a time of emergency.

C. says how proud he is of his boys, outstanding in school, in sport, in dance and in music. Visibly moved, he describes the hard and long struggle faced to obtain the adoption of his African children. This struggle, rewarded by great satisfaction, but not without pain, would seem to retrace the *historical memory* of the ship, engaged for years in the difficult rescue operations of men, women and thousands of migrant children. I suppose that C. through the *ritual of story-telling* is unwittingly taking charge of the mandate itself. I also surmise that some of the critical issues that emerged from the emotional experience of the group experience would seem to be due to a lack of *information* and communication of the institutional mandate, as shown by the painful emotional experience of uncertainty suffered by the crew.

The state of emergency, dictated by the migratory flow and by the SAR events, causes an official and pre-established calendar concerning the departure and return dates of the ship to be cast aside, putting the stability of the '*institutional guarantor*' into jeopardy.

In such a case scenario the *uncertainty*, like the rising of a poisonous and insidious silent gas, would be likely to contaminate the institutional container causing the crew to live in a state of significant emotional distress. In addition to this, such a predicament appears to trigger

emotions like anguish, fear, reluctance and anger. Anger expressed in the form of foreigner-phobia or xenophobia, fear of the stranger, of the alien mentality, of the disease, which could *infect* the whole ship.

The meeting, entitled '*explosion and contagion*', is well suited to represent this aspect. An immediate discontent emerges, perhaps dictated by yesterday's SAR event.

It is A. who addresses the session next. He expresses his disappointment concerning the SAR events. T. empathizes with him animatedly, protesting with anger against the hard work done after the events. The fully-staffed crew, among the various functions performed, in addition to the rescue—has to clean, decontaminate and disinfect the areas of the ship allocated for reception—from the dirt and from the migrants' *excrement*. A sort of *contamination frenzy* abounds, which is accompanied by the terror of contracting diseases, bringing them back into the bosom of one's own family. They harbor resentment against the system, the authorities, the institutions, which seem no longer to be able to guarantee them any security. Security that seems to fail not only for the terror of *being contaminated* or the explosion of a virus, but also for real explosions, such as those due to hypothetical terrorist attacks or the imagined explosion of a boat of migrants. T. explains how the non-existent navigation rules, dictated by the smugglers, frequently put not only the life of the migrants, but also that of the crew—appointed to carry out the rescue operations—in danger. In most cases, the boats are loaded with fuel and the idea of being under the threat of explosions is not completely far-fetched.

T.'s contribution momentarily throws the session into a state of chaos. The language of the group takes the form of *logorrhea*. Words seem to overflow like a flooding river and leave no room for any form of creative thought. *Paranoia* enters the scene. The other, the foreigner, is no longer accepted but feared as an enemy in fight. Personally, I feel confused and invaded by objects overburdened with violence, rage and fury.

Incidentally, it is well known that in order to protect itself from the *paranoid anguish* triggered by the confusion of the unknown, the institution could turn the internal persecutor into an external enemy. *The institution has in practice among its various mandates that of managing and processing the disturber, the new, the different, the otherness.*

Near the end, after a short spell of silence, someone remembers a touching moment concerning the events of the previous day, namely the choral singing improvised by the crew to reassure the women

during their rescue and then adds: 'We don't have anything against them, but against this European way of doing business . . . it's all about money'.

Moreover, *the strong spirit of interdependence and the team's togetherness*, which characterize the crew of a ship, act as a counter-balance to the critical situations described above, helping the transformation of the darkest emotions and passions.

The fourth meeting entitled '*reluctance ↔ reception*' begins with voice being given to an acute discomfort. The group, in a sort of ritualized repetition, describes the filth, faeces, blood, vomit and whatever else it is they are forced to clean up after each SAR event. The working group seems to regress to the state of a primitive group, which is fierce and cruel. Anger takes over and the *contamination frenzy* returns with a vengeance. Humanity and compassion seem to have vanished into thin air, but the fleetingness of the moment is broken by the intervention of M. who does not agree with the group, remembering that one of the goals of the mission is to save lives; he then adds 'it isn't their fault'.

The group, in *fight-flight* basic assumption (Bion, 1961), fiercely attacks M. who is enacting roles that have been split, projected and rejected by the group.

I suppose that in order to open up to the otherness and the acceptance of other cultures the group has had to go through a morbid process that involves *being infected*. The following quote by Corrente concurs with that: 'In this sense I think of the disease that once disseminated in the field . . . spreads like a plague, of which we all get infected, so the so-called individual disease, if any existed, becomes 'socialized' in the field . . . Without dissemination and contamination, a cure cannot be found' (Corrente, 2014).

I try my best and just about manage to control the turmoil of the moment, urging M. to carry on. Gasping for air, with a knot in his throat and his eyes full of tears, M. says that in every child rescued he sees his own children away from home—*just this in itself is worth all the sacrifices made so far*.

That split-second of strong emotional involvement *infects* everyone. Having being moved, the group agrees with M., who with his intervention seems to have triggered a transformative process of identification.

Thus, fear, reluctance and rage give way to reassurance, hospitality and compassion, as to mark the beginning of a reparative and cohesive process of fragmented parts.

These same principles of solidarity and collaboration seem to have opened the door to the birth of a shared culture of hospitality, fostering the onset of a process of integration through the opening of a dialogue which, *proceeding through the chaos of emotions*, gets the different and complex sub-groups that are hosted on the ship involved.

The ship, as it turns out, in addition to the crew and health workers, gives its welcome to another population, complex and varied in terms of origin, culture, language, history, affiliation and life path. It is the population of the migrant guests.

### **The work of receiving the migrants on board**

Once the migrants have boarded, the entire staff of the ship revolves around them to ensure, in addition to safety, medical and psychological support, the satisfaction of primary needs such as the comforts of food and water as well as toilet facilities. Women and children are welcomed and given shelter indoors, while the men stay outdoors. The pace of work dictated by the emergency is very rapid. Some arrive in precarious psycho-physical conditions. Confronting the sea brings with it both the hope for the end of an interminable journey and the signs of terror experienced in the dangers faced at sea, since most of them have no prior knowledge of these dangers and cannot swim. Very telling are the looks on their faces, sometimes lost in the void, sometimes full of suffering and anguish, and etched in the indelible scars they carry upon their features and/or psyche. Fragmentation, disorientation, fear, are elements that constantly accompany them and that seem to evoke the painful experience of *uncertainty*, the very thing suffered and put into words by the crew.

During the first three rescue operations we picked up and looked after about 130 people per event. Their stay on board did not last more than six hours, an inadequate amount of time to make a targeted psychological intervention feasible; enough time to 'receive' and gather important observations.

Vivid in my memories among them is a child, around five years old, with beautiful features and a well-groomed appearance. His serious, stunned and dazed look causes him to remain under my observation for longer than the others. We inflate a glove of blue latex, drawing a *smiley* on it; it looks funny, it looks like a puppet and we call it Charley. This simplest of actions is enough for my preoccupation to turn into a pleasant surprise. The serious expression on the



child's face now breaks into a smile, we make the balloon fly up in the air and start playing together.

*Charley* the balloon, in the guise of an imaginary saving friend, conceived and created for children in the here and now by the crew, promotes the birth of an emotional, empathic way to share and communicate. A way to share, such as the one just mentioned is fundamental to the *reception* process.

Again, I have seen women of different ethnic backgrounds, getting dehydrated, with symptoms of nausea and vomiting, probably due to a severe seasickness. Once hydrated and fed, it did not take much to encourage the formation of spontaneous groups to promote the birth of an enthralling musical choir. I abandoned myself to their singing, accompanying them with the clapping of my hands, in a soothing rhythmic harmony.

In conclusion, I would like to pause briefly on the last SAR event in which we rescued more than 1000 people (from boats and dinghies). The breakneck and incessant pace dictated by a rescue operation of this magnitude does not leave room for any set procedure that would provide for the needs of the moment. During that period of time (lasting more than 50 hours), each one of us contributes to the primary needs of the migrant guests of the ship, carrying out tasks which fall outside our competencies in order to bring everyone safe and sound onto the mainland (I myself have collaborated in the packaging and distribution of meals).

Requests by migrants (water, food, milk, diapers, blankets, use of toilets, medicine) in an event of this magnitude increase exponentially. Requests to which we do not know how and to what extent we can respond, other than through taking *collective action*—sometimes we do not even understand if they are requests for attention, recognition or calls for help elicited by real and compelling needs.

A new form of language enters the scene. It is the language of *significant action*, where *doing*—i.e. the act of working in concert to save human lives—paves the way for the formation of a strong sense of belonging. This is what, within the *macro-groupal complexity*, Margherita calls *acted-out interpretations* (2011a; 2011b), namely the interpretations that the group gives itself through its own *taking action*.

## Conclusions

Looking back to the initial quote by Bion, once on dry land I asked myself several times how it was possible to go through a

disembarking operation of such magnitude without suffering any wounds or injuries.

I do not know and cannot answer this question, but I can assume that in extreme emergency situations like this the group's experience, through the sharing of emotions, can unite, connect, and fraternize. The group creates a climate of collaboration and solidarity, a universal language made of looks and small gestures, a dialogue between cultures which, through the contagious process of contact, promotes the birth of a shared culture of acceptance—witness to the strong 'esprit de corps', which emerged and as told by the crew during the experiential groups.

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### Notes

1. All references to institutions and people engaged in real situations have been made unrecognizable for reasons of privacy.
2. *Search and rescue*—the term refers mainly to what happens in the Sicilian Channel during the migratory movements.

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