



# **COMMUNICATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY ADAPTED FOR THE PSYCHODYNAMIC GROUP SETTING**

## **IN THE TREATMENT OF PATHOLOGICAL INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY**

**Di Rubbo R, Sogaro E, Pallanti S.**

# Main Topics

- Contribution of Theory of Dynamic Complex Systems: Identity and Group Process
- The Communicative Approach and The Communicative Evolutive Model: Classes of relationship
- Conscious and Unconscious: which one is the wiser?
- Communicative Evolutive Psychodynamic Psychotherapy in Group setting: a Clinical Vignette
- Case report

# Identity

- The two main approaches to personal identity propose criteria based on bodily continuity and on psychological continuity
- An alternative view, however, denies that there is a self that exists over time. Bundle theory holds that we are nothing more than a collection of mental states
- Or Personal identity is over time based in memory?(Oliver Sacks “ A question of identity”, 1985)
- Some recent modular accounts of mind, however, suggest that separate mental processes without conscious connections are involved in producing intentional activity, despite (and contrary to) the apparent unity of mind.



# Theory of Dynamic Complex Systems: Identity

Identity could be seen as an *emergent property* characterized by:

- Possession of some common essence
- Special stability
- Space-time continuity
- A special unity relation among their parts: cohesion which determine the resistance of the system to external and internal fluctuation that might disrupt its integrity at least until a certain point.

# Psychodynamic Group Issues

- Group process occurs continuously at, at least, two levels: the first is *conscious* and the second is *unconscious*. To understand group process is a crucial function in group psychotherapy because it is a crucial instrument for the therapists to modulate their intervention in order to reinforce evolutive, therapeutic forces, and modulate involutive, anti-therapeutic ones.

(Lieberman, Miles and Yalom, 1973; Ward and Litchy, 2004)

- Importance of having a clear idea about the difference among the therapeutic and the antitherapeutic work which is done moment by moment, by the group as a whole, by the single member and also by the therapists.
- Therapeutic factors (Yalom, 1970)
- Two pan theoretical processes have gained considerable empirical and clinical-theoretical support as predictors of successful treatment outcome: interpersonal feed-back) and the therapeutic alliance (Burlingame et al., 2004; Yalom e Leszcz, 2005; Joyce et al, 2007)

# Group Evolutive Process in the light of Complexity Theory

- There have been many fewer application of complexity theory to research on psychotherapy groups.
- Formal research on groups began with the Hawthorne experimental studies of small work groups in an electrical factory, started during the economic boom of the twenties, and concluding at the height of the Depression in the thirties (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939).
- Later research on groups after the War focused on this self-organisation ability of groups.
- With Cumming and Collier (2005), we could give an adequate operative specification of a complex system as follows: 1) the system components, which can be defined in varying degrees of detail; 2) the relationships between system components; 3) the spatial scale and spatial constancy at which the definition is applicable; 4) the temporal scale at which the definition is applicable, and 5) the author's perspective on the question of identity through time.

# Communicative Evolutive Model of Psychotherapy

- The Communicative Evolutive Model (CEM) is based on the study of complexity and then applies the complexity to interpersonal relationships.
- The initial area where complexity has been applied is that of the relationship of individual psychotherapy (Meacci, 1999)
- then in social areas (Meacci, 1996, 1997, 2002), labour relationships areas (Meacci, Mardaràs, 2005)
- then was expanded within the relationship of group psychotherapy (Di Rubbo, Sogaro, Pallanti, 2005)

# Classes of relationship according to Communicative Evolutive Model:



From the perspective of the Communicative Evolutive Model there are **FIVE MAJOR CLASSES** of relationships established between human beings.



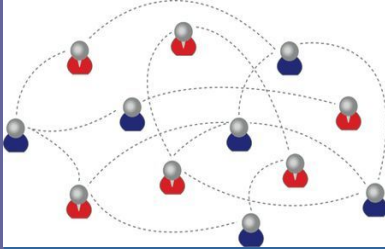
Each class includes several different types of relationships which have in common the existential objective and functional location of the participants.



*(MG Meacci, 1996)*



# Communicative Evolutionary Model: Classes of relationship

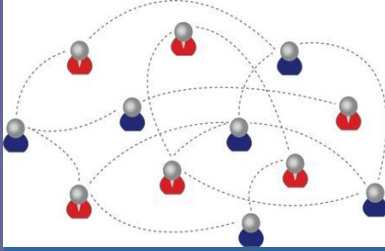


**CLASS 2:** is the class in which all participants are at the same time *Protagonists (P)* and the *Necessary Conditions (NC)* for the evolution of the relationship itself. The class prototype is the couple's relationship in which the objective of the relationship is the evolution and enrichment of the relation, other relations in this class are friendships and in general all peer groups. In this class, all participants are experts.



**CLASS 3:** is the class in which the objective existence of the relation is a "thing" out of the relationship. The aim of relation is neither P nor the relationship between the participants but the realization of a task / job / product. All participants work as experts in different fields of work. Every leader is the NC for the product, while other experts are operating conditions required to achieve the product.

# Communicative Evolutionary Model: Classes of relationship

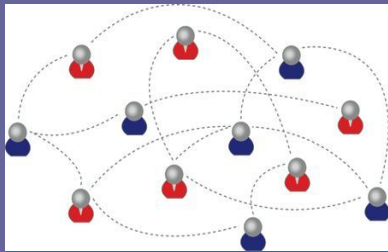


**CLASS 4:** in this class the person is the P of the processes evolution and is also the NC for such processes take place. “Take care of yourself“ is appropriate for this class relation. To take care for life processes. This is placed as the 4th class of relationship because the person’s care of his worlds (health care, affective, cognitive, social and perhaps spiritual world) is a complex task that is acquired in adulthood, when other classes of relationship have already begun to unfold for some time.




**CLASS 5:** in this class all the members are co-NC for the evolution of a supra-P that is the corporation, company or country in which members are enrolled. It is the kind of relationship that is more complex and with more distortions in its current achievements.

# Communicative Evolutionary Model: Classes of relationship



**CLASS 1:** one or more of the participants is the *Protagonist* (P) of the evolutionary processes that emerge precisely because of that relationship, while the other participant is a Necessary Condition (NC) for which these processes take place. The prototype of this class is the relationships between children and parents. Other relationships of the same class are: student / teacher, patient / therapist, city / social institutions



The behaviour of babies/children as well as those of the Protagonists/inexperts are bound by the behaviour of the mother and in general by the behaviours of all their "NC / experts." There is a particular constraint that requires the inexperts to grant their behaviour to those of their experts given by complex configuration of hyper-perceptiveness, hyper-reactivity, hyper-receptivity, **suggestion**. This configuration allows the inexperts to acquire the principles of organization quickly and totally. It prevents "distractions" that would threaten their survival. **Learning is not an option but an obligation.**

This "state of suggestibility" is a factor which enhances the Protagonist's ability to learn but also explains the extreme vulnerability of the Protagonist to psychic trauma.

# The organizing organization: the “Personal Border”

In the human the process of learning or acquisition of interactional principles of organization, creates "an unconscious mental organizing organization". The CEM named it Personal Border (PB).

The **Personal Border** in humans is self-perpetuating and self-poietic and it is the organization that allows individual evolution precisely because, despite receiving the principles of organization from the outside, his own organization is made from inside (self-organizing ). PB is the natural antagonist of the state of suggestibility. From “suggestionability” to “possibility of suggestion”.

The PB is an organization that organizes relations with the outside and among the components inside. That is to say that it defines not only the external spaces and the different classes of relationships, but also the internal spaces, internal functions, allowing the appropriate articulation of spaces and functions.

Due to the emergence of Personal Border every human individual is in itself a  
Complex System.

*(MG Meacci, 1996)*

# Dynamic Complex Systems features in Group Dynamics

- **Self-organization** of the system towards more complex states of organization
- **Self-disorganization** or disruption of the dynamic equilibrium maintaining disorganization within certain limits that prevent the destruction of the system.
- **Existence of chaotic attractors** i.e. points that attract the organization.
- **Autopoiesis**, the system is continually creating its own components.
- **Self-control**, the system is able to modulate the changes so that its different internal states are maintained within parameters compatible with the permanence of the system itself.
- **Self-perpetuation**, the organization, the system maintains its identity throughout numerous internal and external disturbances, at least until up to the limit of its tolerability.
- **Auto-repair**: the organization is able to repair some "wounds organizational "caused by any external or internal disturbance.
- The system creates **emergent properties** that depend on the global state of organization of that time.
- **Unpredictability**: the emergence of features and new properties that are not predictable because they are only slightly related to the previous state of organization

# Theory of Dynamic Complex Systems: Self-organization

Self-organization is an attempt by a system to follow the path of least resistance to energy flows through the system and reduces the power requirements to maintain the system.

The result is increasing information complexity, organization, but increasing order and stability as well.

Internal conditions like component interactions and the existence of attractors are the source of the possibility of self-organization.

Nonetheless, it is internal conditions that lead to the individuation that we call “self”. The special properties of the fluctuations that make self-organization possible are the proto-selves that organize into individuated selves by the process of self-organization, it is not unreasonable to say that they organise themselves.

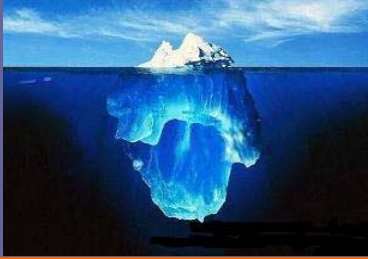
# Communicative Approach and Communicative Evolutive Psychotherapy

We present a particular theoretical framework which is Robert Langs' Communicative Approach integrated with Meacci's model of psychotherapy based on complex evolutionary systems, which we adapted for the psychodynamic group setting and that we use in leading groups.

The specific psychotherapeutic model and techniques we are presenting are masterly described in Robert Langs' papers and books and in Maria Gina Meacci's works.

(Langs 1976, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1985, 1988, and later works; Meacci 1996, 1999).





# Conscious and Unconscious: which one is the wiser?

Contrary to Freudian vision of the unconscious as the closed place of distorted fantasies, Communicative Approach (R.Langs, 1976) sees the unconscious system as the place of unbearable truth. Patients' unconscious communications, become a highly reliable picture of unconscious meanings of the interactions, especially of how therapists' monitor and safeguard the work oriented boundaries, run the frame, ensure that the members' experience is safe, are able to build a predictable and reliable container with an internal space for psychological work to occur

According to the Communicative Evolutive Model the unconscious perceptions of patients provide reliable data because the unconscious system is made up of perceptual functions intact. Reactions to correct perceptions, may be abnormal only in the form, as they trigger trees of traumatic associations. Because of the need to fragment / segregate awareness of traumatic interventions of NC through the barrier of repression, the conscious system suffers mutilation of its functions, which makes it less wise and clear compared to the unconscious system.

(MG Meacci, 1996)



# The “here and now” of the therapeutic interaction.

Communicative therapists listen systematically to narratives and try to connect these themes of the narratives to a trigger which is active, generated, in the therapeutic situation.

The decoded communications say a lot about the group process, why symptoms now appear, why the group is now suffering or subtly changing the task, acting out against the ground rules, for instance of promptness or regular attendance, why a dyad is created, or a sub-group, why confidentiality is not respected, and so on.

Decoding narratives in the light of the here and now is a valuable instrument for the therapists to validate every kind of intervention they do, to create a therapeutic relationship as appropriate as possible to the unconscious necessity of the group, in which the system-group, can develop the principles of self-organization.



# Therapist as Necessary Condition

The Protagonist acquires unconsciously the organizing principles underlying behaviors of the NC.

For this reason, the NC must **ADHERE** strictly to the organizing proposal of the relationship, showing the consistency between the organizing principles of his behavior and those he made explicit in the the organizing proposal of the therapeutic relationship.

# Therapeutic relationship and Self-organization

- The outcome of the System may differ depending on relatively small differences in starting conditions: rules, boundaries, setting.
- All verbal intervention "spontaneous" of the therapist (ie those not required by the patient) tend to be destructive to the process of self-organization of the patient, even if they are appropriate interpretations. They are destructive because they lead to the block of self-organization.

The problem is "how to provide" the principles of social-mental organization so as to allow the subject to self-organize on them. In other words, the fundamental problem of the people who serve as "a necessary condition " is "how to provide" their protagonists the principles of organization, without intervening directly in the process of learning theme. Infact if the NC, directly interferes, the process of acquiring organizational principles would be determined from the outside, that would be straight-organized, preventing development which is always necessarily independent.

# Therapist's verbal interventions

- When the patient asks questions\* directly to the therapist.
- When in the patient's narrative, appear **THREE SPECIFIC ELEMENTS:**
  - a) something the therapist has said or done:
  - b) free association specifically related to something said or done by the therapist;
  - c) block or symptoms or events happened to the patient.

# Communicative Evolutive Psychodynamic Psychotherapy in Group setting

- CEPP-G is an adapted form of psychodynamic psychotherapy that maintains the central psychodynamic principles of the importance of unconscious mental dynamisms and free association.
- Psychotherapy Group sessions usually last 1½ hours and run weekly. Patients being treated in a 'slow open' group remain in therapy on average for about 2 and 3 years. The conductor's central tasks are to establish and maintain group boundaries and to foster an atmosphere of free and open communication, offering, mostly if requested by the members, comments/interpretations to the group as a whole. Otherwise they stay mostly silent.
- The group is seen as a whole; the interpretations are given to the group and not to the individual.

*(R.Di Rubbo, E.Sogaro, S.Pallanti, 2005 )*

# Communicative Evolutive Psychodynamic Psychotherapy in Group setting

Setting boundaries are:

- Patients were prepared for the group experience through an individual session.
- The session last for 1½ hours and runs once a week on the same day at the same time and in the same room. Delay of a member or of a therapist is not tolerated.
- Members should respect confidentiality and if possible not to meet each other outside the session. Aggressive behaviour in the session has to be avoided.
- Payment for the sessions is in advance at the first session and for all the sessions (attended or not by the single member) of the current month. Members are invited to call one of the therapists if unable to attend. After two sessions missed without calling, one of the therapists calls the absent member.
- The therapists are two, a psychiatrist experienced in the use of CEPP in both individual and group settings and a psychologist. One of the therapists interacts verbally with the members of the group while the other writes down the dynamic and doesn't verbally interact. Both of them must keep, of course, professional confidentiality.

# Clinical Vignette

The group, conducted over two years was made up of six patients, one patient dropped out after about 5 months.

Example of decoding in a communicative way a short interaction.

Beginning of the 16th session of group therapy, in 2010. As one of the therapists was 5 minutes late, the co-therapist decided not to lock the door of the therapy room. This was contrary to the ground rule of the setting that requires the door be absolutely closed, for everybody, at exactly 7.30 p.m. for the beginning of the session. The therapist who is now late he finds the door is unlocked so he decides (not respecting the ground rule) to enter anyhow, excusing himself with the members.

He is reassured by some members of the group: “so few minutes delay don't mean anything”, “we understand that doctors are so busy”, and so on.

The session begins with member A talking about *the renewal of his uncle's driving licence. He thinks that his uncle's disability makes it more and more dangerous for him to drive a car.* The member B tells him that *renewals, in cases of disability are made, luckily, only for 2 years. The uncle, anyhow, wisely decided not to drive when his disability got worse.* Member C tells a dream:

*“I am in my bed, I am sleeping. The bedroom door opens, I see a chink in the dark, then the door closes. I get scared and scream. My parents come to wake me up, because in the dream I was asking for help”.*

After a few seconds of silence, the patient told the therapist:

*“I am feeling very anxious ... But I can not understand why...Doctor, is it something you can help with?”*

# Conclusion

The change in the symptoms are strongly related to changes in the sense of personal identity and in the interpersonal dynamics of identity.

According to complex system theory, this change has to be coherent with the four points previously stressed (1) the complex system is defined by the nature of its components, (2) the relationships between system components to one another; (3) the maintenance of spatial continuity, and (4) the temporal continuity.

These four points are respected in the process in which the fundament of identity, the “personal border” (with its components, the organisational principles) is evolving through the time of therapy.

In fact what we think to be central in the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of identity is the fundamental, unconscious “structure” of the “Personal Border”.



# Conclusion

- We call the process of individuation the transformations that we observed in the course of two years in the Personal Border of each participant of the group. The change in identification (through disidentification from less adaptive organizational principles) is an emergent property. It stems from the acquisition of more adaptive relational principles of organization. These are the most important foundations of Personal Border, which is one of the most important foundation of the sense of personal identity, and, consequently, of behaviour.
- As the personal border is unconscious it is very important that the therapists focus their attention on their behaviour. But the therapists' behaviour is mostly unconscious; that's why the Communicative Evolutive Approach is so valuable: by stimulating the therapists to pay continuous attention to the patients' narratives (unconscious communications, according to Freud), to use the wisdom of the patients' unconscious to remain in the position of Necessary Condition and not to usurp the position of Protagonists

A photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore. The words "THANK YOU" are written in the sand in the foreground.

THANK YOU