Instrumental Aggression in Adolescence

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Adolescence as a time of transition and crisis

It is during puberty – from the Latin *pubesco*, to become adult – that a process of psycho-physical growth taking a child into adulthood begins. This process brings about substantial physical, cognitive and emotional changes that cause a situation of crisis, the crisis of adolescence, which has both behavioural and relational consequences on the teenager. Some psychoanalysts, with reference to libido theory, attribute this crisis to a change in the libido in adolescence. I'd like to quote the following extract from Anna Freud (1936) – one of the main proponents of this theory – where she describes some aspects of adolescent behaviour:

Adolescents are excessively egoistic, regarding themselves as the center of the universe and sole object of interest, and yet at no time in later life are they capable of so much self-sacrifice and devotion. They form the most passionate love relations, only to break them off as abruptly as they began them. On the one hand, they throw themselves enthusiastically into the life of the community and, on the other, they have an overpowering longing for solitude. They oscillate between blind submission to some self-chosen leader and defiant rebellion against any and every authority. They are selfish and materially minded and at the same time full of lofty idealism. They are ascetic but will suddenly plunge into instinctual indulgence of the most primitive character. At times their behaviour to other people is rough and inconsiderate, yet they themselves are extremely touchy. Their moods veer between light-hearted optimism and the blackest pessimism. Sometimes they will work with indefatigable enthusiasm and at other times they are sluggish and apathetic. (pp. 137-138)

Anna Freud maintains that these phenomena are caused by an increase in *cathexis* (energy) which takes place during puberty, with the result that the id becomes stronger and the ego weaker, thus modifying the ego-id relation. This, according to Anna Freud, „…. is the first recapitulation of the infantile sexual period" (p.139).

The criticisms of this theory are well-known and it is not necessary to go into them here, so I will limit myself to two observations. First, on the basis of my clinical experience, I do not believe that there is such a thing as *psychic energy* in Freud's sense, that is, as a form of human behaviour that derives from intrapsychic forces subject to the laws of conservation and transformation of energy as in physics. In my opinion, the concept of *psychic energy* is a reification in the physical concept of *energy* of a positive and productive mental state in individuals who have high self-esteem, a sense of their own worth, belief in their abilities and who feel they are efficient, competent, able to intervene in life and to make the effort necessary to overcome difficulties, who believe in the future and so on. It is this mental condition that leads us to say that a person has a certain energy

Secondly, if we follow the internal logic of libido theory, it might make sense to maintain

that a strengthening of the id and therefore of instinct, can make an individual more selfish or can satisfy primitive impulses. However, it seems to me to be contradictory to then say that a weakening of the ego can bring about a spirit of sacrifice or even the need for mystical practices leading to an austere and contemplative way of life and a detachment from the world and from instincts. Anna Freud sees teenage behaviour as swinging from one extreme to the other, contradictory and unpredictable, in order to underline how the only logical consequence of the postulated dominance of the id, seen as irrational and uncontrollable, is contradictory and unpredictable behaviour.

From the extract quoted above, it is possible to understand the reasons for this behaviour, if we focus on the new reality that the adolescent is experiencing. Yet, as the history of human knowledge shows, when we observe any phenomenon, we have a strong tendency to be very much conditioned by what we believe we know about it and we find what we expect to find. It took the genius of Darwin (1859) to enable us to see living things as the final result of a slow process of natural selection and not as immutable creatures of God (creationism). Nature manifests itself in a chaotic way, it is complex and difficult for us to understand and this clashes with our need for certainty and stability. Knowledge, with its implications of predictability, reassures us. Thus we seek to impose order on things, to simplify and systematise them, and in so doing we behave rather like Procustes[1], laying out and adjusting the phenomena we are studying on the bed of our own theories. In other words, we use the tool that happens to be most handy at the time, with the risk, as Maslow (1966) pointed out, if the only tool available is a hammer, everything is treated as if it were a nail. We can reduce the risk of error by using all the tools we are familiar with and believe to be appropriate for solving a given problem (eclecticism).

Returning to our main theme, I believe that the reasons for the crisis that adolescents experi-

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[1] The mythological son of Poseidon whose nickname was Damastes. Procustes was a robber who laid travelers on a bed and made them fit it by cutting off their limbs or stretching them.

ence center around two factors: firstly, biological and cognitive-affective maturity, which places adolescents in a new situation, both internal (psycho-biological) and external (social) provoking conflict, anxiety, worry, uncertainty and ambivalence. Moreover, because of this new maturity, teenagers are more able than ever before to achieve their negative and positive – conscious and unconscious – potentialities as human beings. Because of their genetic programming, they are now called upon to carry out the functions vital to survival in complete autonomy, without the protection of their parents. Fromm (1960) believes that

> „The content of the unconscious, then, is neither the good or the evil, the rational nor the irrational; it is both; it all that is human" (p. 58).

Thus, adolescents have a much wider and more complex range of behaviour available to them than children, some experienced for the first time and in new situations. Often youngsters do not know how to behave, what role to play, what position to take, and so their actions inevitably lose that linearity typical of previous developmental stages.

Conflict experienced by the adolescent

Let us now look in more detail what happens to a young person as they enter adolescence. In order to do this, I'd like to turn to Piaget's theory of genetics. Piaget divides human ontogenesis into evolutionary stages that are linked to genetically programmed processes of maturity. So at any given moment of development, an individual can only take up from his or her environment that which the level of maturity reached allows. The passage from one stage to the next takes place through the mechanisms of *assimilation* and *accommodation*. The teenager who is about to become an adult has to *assimilate* new situations and experiences while trying to modify (*accommodate*) his or her previous mental schemata. This process inevitably leads to a situation of conflict as, on the one hand, the tendency to recycle old patterns remains, while on the other, this new reality requires new solutions. The process by which the new is metabolised and integrated into previous schemata

is what Piaget calls *equilibration*: when a new equilibrium is reached, the passage to the next stage of development has been achieved.

From a cognitive point of view, the adolescent acquires new abilities. *Hypothetic-deductive* thought appears, clearly in correlation with the new cortical connections that are forming. It is interesting to note that the branching process of nerve cells (*dendrites*), which connects the various areas of the cerebral cortex, is particularly active in this period, at least till the age of 17, more or less the same age at which the process of cerebral myelination is completed. Now the adolescent no longer sees reality passively, but rather, interprets it according to frames of references, acquires a critical spirit and is able to realise that his or her behaviour is not always the result of conscious motivations. Moreover, he or she is ever more able to carry out mental operations that transcend reality, that is, he or she is capable of *abstract intellectual thought.*

Maturity obviously also concerns the emotional level. The drive towards autonomy, implying the de-idealisation of parents, consolidates individuality and identity. During this phase, the search for a personal frame of orientation and devotion becomes very important since, according to Fromm (1973) it is on this that the ability of an individual to act and his or her sense of identity depend. Erikson (1950), who has also made an important contribution to the study of identity, maintains that identity can still be modified in adulthood, even if it is formed during the early stages of development. However, if young people are unable to express themselves in various areas, such as emotions, sexuality, work and so on, they may remain uncertain as to their own identity. Lewin (1965) calls the adolescent '*marginal man*' insofar as he or she is no longer a child nor yet an adult. Nevertheless, adolescents like to be thought of as adults, whereas adults, including parents, are more attracted by their childlike side and tend to treat them more like children. Some parents repress the fact that their child is growing up and therefore do not give the input necessary to make him or her autonomous. Alternatively, they treat their child like an adult in words only, while all their behaviour conveys the opposite

message, *double bind* (Bateson et al. 1956). In the most serious cases, the teenager remains incestuously fixated to the mother and is unable to progress, to open up to the new reality (Fromm, 1964). On the other hand, the search for autonomy can create ambivalence in young people, who may unconsciously experience the detachment from their parents as a loss, also because relationships outside the family create tension, conflict, frustration and anxiety. In any case, the significant relationships change: the teenager tries to enter into a peer group and to establish intimate relationships, especially with a *best friend* (Sullivan, 1953) with whom to share thoughts, anxieties, fears and confidences, not only to confirm his or her own identity and beliefs, but also to change erroneous ideas about him or herself and personality distortions created during the previous period.

The questions to which adolescents are seeking answers are those such as Who am I? Am I really who I believe myself to be? What will I be capable of doing with my life? What job do I want to do? Will I find the love of my life? And so on. It is reflections such as these that lead to the end of self-illusions and inevitably bring about a change in the perception of self and of others. This situation of uncertainty and confusion, together with the anatomical and physiological changes taking place, disorients the teenager and leads to unstable and contradictory behaviour.

Adolescents try to face this new reality with the resources available to them – innate and acquired – and to find a key to open the door to the adult world, a world they are beginning to explore, which they are curious about, but which they see as full of risks.

Not all young people manage to develop their own well-defined identity. They are not helped by the incredibly strong pressure exerted by the dominant value system and the mass media that transmit these values. Moreover, the action of the latter is increasingly alienating, compared to authentic human values. Italian children spend an average of more than three hours a day in front of the television; they are 'brought up' more by television than by their parents. It is no coincidence that Kohut (1985) maintains that more and more people are show-

ing signs of deficit of self, given that today's parents have little time to dedicate to their children, to the extent that children have unsatisfactory empathic relationships and see the light of the television screen more often than they see the light of their mother's eyes. Sartori (2002) laments the fact that the younger generations read less and less, noting that *homo sapiens* is being replaced by *homo videns* since we are targeted with images right from childhood. We are entertained by images, images teach us, they are used to give a passive and ready-made vision of the world. Young people thus do not develop a critical attitude towards reality and they risk losing the ability to reflect, to understand and to discern good from evil.

In brief, when adolescents are capable of living their own lives independently and in a well-balanced manner, and when they also respect both themselves and others, then they have reached adulthood. However, the possibility of emerging from the crisis of adolescence depends very much on previous experiences during childhood. The individual reaches adolescence already with a certain image of self and of others (Bowlby, 1973). The more positive this image is, the easier integration into adulthood will be. Accidents along the way, determining a distortion of the personality, make this transition more difficult.

The use of instrumental aggression among young people.

Some writers attribute aggressive behaviour to a deficit of personality. According to Kohut, aggressiveness is a result of narcissistic anger, of the disgregation of the self, which leads to its fragmentation. For Sullivan (1953), and also for Bowlby (1973), children who experience a hostile family environment are afraid, feel isolated, threatened, impotent and unable to defend themselves. This extreme frustration leads to deep emotional scars and these children do not develop the ability to contain themselves. At the same time the anger and pain caused by these scars continue to act; anxiety underlies their behaviour. In attempting to adapt to this hostile environment, children may, amongst other strategies, turn to aggressive behaviour.

I would like now to go into more detail on the concept of aggressiveness in Fromm (1973). Fromm talks about a type of aggression that he calls *instrumental aggression,* of which, in my opinion, adolescents make frequent use. Fromm defines aggressiveness as a form of behaviour which aims at harming living organisms or things and which can be divided into malignant (destructive) or benign (adaptive). Fromm uses the literature on neuropsychology to show how only adaptive aggressiveness has a corresponding organic level, a substratum of impulses and behaviour aimed at defending *vital interests* necessary for survival and therefore genetically structured: these are the so-called four Fs „feeding, fighting, fleeing and … the performance of sexual activities." (P.D. Maclean, 1958, in Fromm, 1973, p.136). In the case of human beings, Fromm makes no distinction between biological and cultural needs when he talks about *vital interests.*

Instrumental aggression is a type of defensive aggression. Although it does not have an organic correlate, it does have the aim of reaching an objective that is seen as necessary or desirable. Fromm is aware of the ambiguity of these two terms and maintains that they can best be conceptualized with reference to an aspect of today's western social character: *greed.* According to Fromm (ibid.:282)

> „Greed is one of the strongest non-instinctive passions in man, and it is clearly a symptom of physical dysfunctioning, of inner emptiness and a lack of a center within oneself. It is a pathological manifestation of the failure to develop fully […] it is well-known that overeating, which is one form of greed, is frequently caused by states of depression; or that compulsive buying is one attempt to escape from a depressed mood. […] Greed is a passion – that is to say, it is charged with energy and relentlessly drives a person towards the attainment of his goals."

Clearly, it is not only greed that leads to the use of this form of aggressiveness. Greed is only one of human beings' many passions; one way among many that a fragile personality has of reacting. In my opinion, it represents a degenera-

tion or a shift of the human drive to self-assertion. During the crisis of adolescence there is less tolerance of anxiety and frustrations; action tends to take precedence over thought and verbal expression. Some adolescents who have experienced impotence and anger do not confine themselves to expressing their aggressiveness only in their fantasies or dreams, but may resort to this type of aggressiveness to reach any objective. They may attack their parents verbally in order to have more freedom or to get what they want; they may steal money from their parents in order to buy consumer goods; or they may resort to more extreme forms of aggressiveness, as I've been able to observe in patients suffering from anorexia. Although not the only cause of anorexia, the refusal to eat is an unconscious way of attacking both one's own body - identified with that of the mother – and one's father, in order to attract his attention by making him worry and making him pay for his psychological absence and for being emotionally insubstantial. Another extreme form of aggressiveness is that of attempted suicide, the real aim of which is not to die but frighten someone or force their hand in fulfilling some objective. Krietman (1969, 1970, in Bowlby, 1973: p. 271) calls these *parasuicides*. Other forms of aggressive behaviour are directed against people outside the family, such as fighting as a form of self-assertion, shoplifting or gang violence in which an individual takes part in order to be a member of the group and not feel excluded.

A case of instrumental aggression

A patient of mine, whom I will call Enrico, was 17 when his mother contacted me and asked me to accept him for therapy. His mother was worried because, since becoming an adolescent, Enrico had changed completely. Previously, he had always been a 'good boy', but suddenly he had become rebellious and aggressive: he attacked his parents verbally, he stole money from them, he started shoplifting, he fought with his peers. He also stopped studying and spent long hours shut up in his room with his friends, listening to music and smoking cannabis until late into the night. During my meeting with his mother, I got the idea that she was an anxious person, very

weak and overprotective, a judgment that was later confirmed during therapy. Enrico's parents separated when he was 7 years old, at the instigation of his mother, who threw his father out of the house. A few years later, the patient's father went to live with another woman, with whom he had a daughter. The patient described his father as „a frustrated, obsessive and interfering neurotic."

Enrico was very anxious, his behaviour was manic, decidedly narcissistic and he never stopped speaking. He often repeated that he had been a 'good boy' until he was 13, but that he had suddenly decided he did not want to be a 'good young man too'. Since childhood he had heard his parents arguing; their characters were incompatible but the arguments were also caused by differences of opinion about how to bring up their son. Enrico said „My mother was too good to me, she always let me do everything I wanted, she left me free and hardly ever told me off. My father was the opposite, always getting at me, telling me off for everything, correcting me all the time. He always interfered in everything I did and even now I'm older he still expects to plan my life for me."

Amongst other things, the analysis showed how, because of their personality defects, the patient's parents had not allowed him to structure a cohesive self. The father, with his anxiety and his overbearing and unresponsive character, gave the patient clear messages that he was not accepted, making him insecure, anxious and with very low self-esteem. The mother, especially with her overprotectiveness, did not know how to respond to her son in a *vital* way. This means that she did not give him what Kohut (1974) calls *optimum non-traumatic frustrations,* which, repeated over time and internalized are structured in the child's self, making him or her capable of taking over certain parental functions. An empathic relationship with parents and optimum frustrations are the *conditio sine qua non* for the formation of a healthy personality. Sullivan (1953) also expresses a similar concept when he points out that a low level of distress is functional to the healthy development of the child, since it prepares him or her to tolerate the inexorable frustrations of interpersonal relationships. However, Enrico's childhood contained

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none of this; his parents always stepped in for him in moments of difficulty; in a sense they were living in his place and the fragile self-esteem, which is the result, did not allow him to tolerate the excessive anxiety caused by the responsibilities, conflicts and frustrations that he was experiencing in adolescence, leading him to react aggressively.

Ever since childhood, Enrico had been angry about his parents' separation but he had always repressed this anger and had never been able to express it. I was struck by the fact that during our first session, the first thing he said to me, very firmly, was „let's get one thing clear right from the start. I know that you doctors think that when parents split up it creates problems for their children. Well, it wasn't like that for me, I didn't suffer from it at all, so there's no point in us talking about it". Nevertheless, when he became aware of his anger, he said that for a long time he had had the idea that it was his fault his parents split up because they often argued over him and so he felt guilty. He had always hoped, deep down, that they would get back together again, at least until his little sister was born. He was 13, and at the same time he decided he was no longer going to be a 'good young man'. In fact, he admitted that when his sister was born, he felt even angrier towards his parents: towards his father because, by having another child it was clear to Enrico that his father did not love him so much and would never go back to his mother; towards his mother because she had thrown his father out and was therefore responsible for the separation.

Enrico's aggressiveness was thus aimed both at asserting himself, trying to take command of his new reality as an adolescent and to feel powerful so as not to be aware of his inner emptiness, and also at punishing his parents for separating and for how he felt they had treated him.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show how an adolescent, whose primary relationships have left him with a damaged self, has, unfortunately, a much greater tendency to react aggressively in situations of conflict than a young person with a normally healthy self.

I realise that what I have said about aggressiveness is by no means exhaustive, but I have chosen to focus only on the psychological aspects. I have not considered socio-economic factors, which are also important in motivating, or at least triggering aggressive behaviour in adolescents and which would undoubtedly merit another paper.

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