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Like or Dislike:

**Questions and Challenges in the
Consulting Room of a 'Society 2.0'**

Introduction

The digital era has brought about many changes in the way we live, some of which have probably not been completely understood yet. It may be that for the first time the younger generations are more expert than those that have preceded them. The metaphor of digital natives consigns adults to the position of 'immigrants' in a foreign land (the digital world), and produces a real confusion of tongues. This rift between the generations may result in different outcomes: on the one hand, it may generate a fearful reaction which stigmatises certain increasingly pervasive phenomena, on the other, one may observe a complete denial of this generational gap tending to support the illusion of being able to nullify any differences.

According to communications scholar Marshall McLuhan (1964), the medium is the message, in the sense that the medium transforms the message and is able to produce psychological changes in the individual using it. However, the exact social and psychological ramifications of the digital era, to the extent that we are now talking about Society 2.0, is still an open question. One thing is certain: we are at a point of no-return. Reflection on these themes is a highly complex matter and the arguments put forward in the debate usually take the form of value judgements, which are fundamentally dichotomous. What is certain is that cyberspace plunges the user into a paradoxical experience of connection and disconnection in relation to the self and the other, leading to either creative or defensive outcomes, according to the way it is used (Kieffer, 2011).

This matter is still an open question in the psychoanalytic field, even if, generally, the prevailing tendency seems to be to mainly consider the defensive and potentially psychopathological dimension of the new technologies (Griffiths, 2012). Nevertheless, many recent authors have been opposing this tendency, highlighting a transitional aspect of these devices and clearly proposing optimism (Tisseron, 2004; 2012; Tisseron, Missonnier & Stora, 2006; Virole, 2012). However, in general, attitudes fluctuate widely between curiosity and suspicion.

Changes in society, changes in the psyche

At the moment psychoanalysts are thinking about how certain changes in society can lead to more profound changes in the individual's intra-psychic and relational organisation. On the basis of Touraine's considerations (1997), Kaës (2005, 2009) highlights the deep crisis in traditional social aspects such as roles, hierarchy and the institution of the family, which are seen as the effective guarantors of the functioning of society; any fracturing or restructuring of these aspects would significantly alter the 'guarantors' of psychic functioning (the so-called meta-psychic guarantors); that is to say they would modify the formation of the fundamental interdictions and inter-subjective contracts upon which a subject's psyche is based and structured.

Moreover, our present-day culture seems to be bringing to light new forms of psychopathology which can be understood if we allow for models of psychic functioning which see the mind as exposed to further types of conflict beyond the intra-psychic one (*ibid.*). Furthermore, changes in society in the direction of enhancing individualistic and hedonistic aspects, place human beings in the contradictory position of needing to re-establish a dimension of broader social relations; cyberspace and virtual reality may represent a surrogate solution to this quest, especially in younger age groups (Akhtar, 2011).

Virtual communities, however, radically differ from traditional communities in the patriarchal mould; instead, they display the functioning typical of brotherhoods (Forest, 2009), in which anti-authoritarianism is one of the predominant features: these communities branch out horizontally and consist of individuals who are all on an equal footing. Identity is amorphous and reaching out to an external third-party is considered problematic, if not superfluous. Such communities base themselves on controlling the relationship rather than on moral imperatives (*ibid.*). This form of regulation works by blocking or allowing communication, as in the case of 'banning', which is the only type of sanction or normative feature used by these communities.

The unrestricted circulation of messages seems to offer an antidote to the anxiety of solitude and being disconnected: something similar to the reassuring word pronounced to a child in the dark, enabling a sense of

contact through proof of the existence of the other, regardless of the content of the message. It would, however, be ingenuous to neglect the other side of the coin: besides the potential risks inherent in the use of the new technologies, these also offer new kinds of opportunity to young people (Tisseron, 2004), facilitating subjectification.

Some considerations on cyberspace in adolescence

One of the salient aspects of this phenomenon, among the many characterising the use of cyberspace in adolescence, is the question of identity formation. Trying out different identities and seeing how other people relate to them in the virtual world, allows young people to become more aware of certain less explored aspects of self. Nevertheless, in the digital world, identity is more subject to being influenced by the actions and reactions of others, with the paradoxical consequence of a diminished capacity to define one's own social identity.

Another issue raised by the relationship between cyberspace and adolescents, is that of drives. In puberty, the sensorial and perceptive dimensions are brought to centre stage once more through specific, new inputs defined by Gutton and Bouchet (2004) as archaic genital. Thus the adolescent might be trying to control and articulate the increased sensitivity to sensory perceptions through the use of technological means. In effect, the adolescent is attempting, through mastery of the various perceptive and sensorial stimuli associated with new technology, to dominate the excitement originating in his or her own body. The adolescent who immerses his/her self in cyberspace is not seeking to be absorbed by a plethora of stimuli, but is rather seeking proof of being able to remain firmly in control of them at all times.

Thirdly, the early adolescent, lacking the processes of symbolisation, representation and sublimation, can see the use of cyberspace as the first opportunity for psychic representation (Botella & Botella, 2001) of those aspects of the adolescent's psychic and corporeal functioning which he/she experiences with amazement and surprise, or anxiety and preoccupation. These non-represented elements are not only linked to a body overwhelmed by sensations, emotions and drives, but

also to the void associated to the absence of the object, resulting from the process of separation-individuation at this stage (Blos, 1962), which is potentially traumatic because of the impulses of disinvestment and detachment. Nonetheless, as Monniello (2014) effectively points out, the protraction of excessive reliance on both the sensorial and the perceptual processes may delay and even paralyse the psychic processes of representation of genitality. However, the close support of a psychoanalyst providing the adolescent with an intersubjective dimension based on a commonly-held sensoriality may gradually stimulate the activity of personal fantasising, initially perceived in the other and later internalised.

Cyberspace in the adolescent patient setting

Based on the above, it can be postulated that it is precisely through immersion in the visual and sound effects of digital devices that the early adolescent, within a therapeutic setting, may be able to discover both sensorial traces belonging to the experience with the primary objects and indications of new objects which are beginning to emerge, as well as the various aspects and states of the Self in flux. In particular, the visual images appearing on the screen with which the adolescent can interact, and which, for this reason, can become found-created images, enable representation and, therefore, a kind of containment which can be shared with the therapist and which can stimulate the psychic work of symbolisation.

The use of digital devices in the analytic setting, can therefore acquire meaning, promote insight and elaboration by fostering the processes of subjectification (Cahn, 1998, 2009), through listening, sharing and the interpretative function of the therapist. However, the therapist will have to face "working in situations of limited differentiation from the primary object, and of psychic functioning dominated by the sensorial and the perceptive in which conflict is, however, barely tolerable by reason of a lack of stable investment in self" (Monniello, 2014).

Of course, an analytic encounter is therapeutic when it allows for an exchange between the therapist and the patient resulting in dialogue and in the patient's finding room for reflection on self. However, in those

cases where there is evident difficulty in using verbal language as the means of narrating oneself, then it is possible to use, during the session, a technological medium in which the patient is emotionally invested and which may therefore represent parts of the patient's self.

In fact, adolescence in itself implies dynamics of peripheralisation and externalisation of the psychic life which, through the use of the external reality of cyberspace in the session, contribute to the creation of an extended psychic space (Jeammet, 1992). It is precisely through sharing the experience of new technologies with the therapist in the therapeutic space that transitions come about between internal and external, between body and mind, between past and present and future, and that processes of integration and subjectification can be activated.

Clinical vignettes

For the purpose of aiding reflection on what has been said so far, there will now follow some extracts from clinical material in which the patient brought a technological device to the session. The diverse situations will be commented on in order to illustrate different ways of conceiving this material in therapy.

Marco

Twelve-year old Marco was referred for therapy because of learning difficulties and a tendency to isolate himself. He moves slowly around the room during the consultation, looking all around; he briefly stops at the toy box and lightly fingers some of the ones on top. He then directs his attention to the white sheets of paper lying on the desk and, with a pencil, begins to sketch a figure that never takes shape. He drops into the armchair, almost collapsing, and whispers: "everything seems empty".

The therapist comments that he is trying to find his own way to express himself, but perhaps he is no longer used to playing with toys or drawing and talking is difficult.

For a moment his expression comes to life and he comments: "that's exactly it ... I'm bored". For a while he remains in a state of hesitation, of expectation. Then he takes his Nintendo DS out of his pocket and begins to play a Pokemon video game commenting that he no longer collects the cards although his mother continues to buy them for him, as though he were still a little boy. However, he still likes to play the Pokemon video games.

Marco describes to the therapist what he's doing and the characters that appear on the screen; then he becomes progressively absorbed in this activity, becoming silent and concentrated, while the therapist stays next to him in a discreet and attentive way.

The therapist formulates the hypothesis that by using the video game during the session Marco is adopting a defensive mechanism, not only because he has difficulty in regulating the proximity-distance in the relationship, but also, because of a tendency to fill up the emptiness he feels with familiar and habitual sensations, movements and images. The lack of meaning and representation that the boy perceives together with his disorientation in the here and now are characteristic of the developmental passage of puberty, when physical and psychic alterations begin to be vaguely and disturbingly experienced. Reference is being made to the unsettling dynamic state of the pre-pubertal boy effectively described by Sapio (2008) as the *no longer and not yet*: no longer totally dependent on the primary objects and not yet sufficiently autonomous, no longer completely identified with them and not yet separated, no longer a child and not yet an adolescent. In a defensive mode of functioning the tendency is to avoid the pain of separation and the absence of the object which compromises the adolescent's ability to symbolise and introject.

It is interesting to consider that during the session Marco re-emerges from his state of total absorption and tells the therapist, unexpectedly and spontaneously, that some of the Pokemon evolve, growing in size and strength, while others remain the same and show no sign of change.

Tuning into the theme of the evolution-non-evolution of the Pokemon, the therapist attempts to enlarge on Marco's comment by hinting at the desire for and fear of growing up, and the urge for change and the security of staying the same.

Marco, getting excited, asks: "do you like video games? Do you have any? Do you play with them? Well, not now because you're grown up but at my age? I think you did, maybe you played with Games Cube or the first DS".

In this way Marco is prompting the therapist to re-encounter his own puberty, his own adolescence, in order to find genuine acceptance and reflection in him. In this way they begin to discuss the evolution over time of video games and the successive modifications in the Nintendo console. In their shared experience they begin to explore the themes of sameness and otherness, union and separation, identity and change. These themes will, in the course of the therapy, enable the creation of further narratives of experience capable of promoting the articulation of self and of the relationship; this will allow Marco to realise the absence of the object, open up to the experience of mourning and, as a result, to the possibility of symbolising.

Franco

Franco is seventeen and was referred to the therapist because of attention deficit and difficulties in relating to his peers; most of the time when he is studying, whether at school or at home, Franco is totally absorbed in his daydreams to such an extent that he has been named "the dreaming poet". Endowed with a special talent for music, he can play a number of instruments proficiently and gives live performances with his band as well as performing on social networks. He maintains several active profiles (Facebook, Instagram) and a channel on YouTube where he publishes his videos, but he seems obsessed by the number of views, likes, dislikes and comments he gets from his followers. The therapist reflects on how, what may seem to Franco to be a need, in fact comes at a high price as it involves a disquieting kind of reciprocity; being in control at the cost of being controlled.

During the first session the young man identifies the start of his difficulties with the onset of puberty at

age thirteen when he changed schools from one based on few rules and creativity to another characterised by a more "classical" approach to education: Franco feels inadequately prepared to respond to the demands made on him in the new environment which he perceives as urgent and pressing. Alongside this he begins to manifest excessive anxiety about his physical appearance accompanied by persecutory experiences: he is afraid of being photographed and filmed by his companions in embarrassing situations and also that his physical defects are being "fixed" on video and in photos which are then posted on Facebook or YouTube. Franco's anxieties seem to be preventing him from establishing meaningful relationships with his peers in which he can feel welcomed and accepted. Franco also spends many hours checking out the Facebook pages and YouTube channels of his friends in order to reassure himself that they do not contain any images of him. The therapist thinks that Franco's use of social networks implies a narcissistic fragility, which puts him at risk of distancing reality. Continuity and omnipresence are characteristics of cyberspace which can contribute to the fetishist use of social media, feeding into fantasies of the continuity of the object and omnipotent control of it; it is important to note that in the most extreme cases, this determines a lack of engagement with external reality and hyper-investment in the fetish that substitutes for it.

Despite the feelings of disquiet that Franco's remarks produce in the therapist, it appears that the young man is immediately posing a forceful question: will the therapeutic space be able to accommodate the more embarrassing aspects linked to the sexual body he experiences as monstrous, as well as the more infantile, grandiose or idealised aspects? The therapist, at this early stage of the treatment, by means of a mirroring functioning, aims to promote investment in and recognition of the self, even as a body.

Daniele

Daniele is a sixteen-year old with serious difficulties in socialisation and performance related anxiety. The boy immerses himself in daydreams to an extent which risks distracting him from the present moment and from reality. He is obsessed by the idea of wanting to remain connected to infancy and tends to discredit those in his age group, cynically describing any really adolescent aspect and using such contemptuous

terms as “corruption” and “depravity” to refer to the experiences of other boys he knows. He often indulges in grandiose fantasies about himself and his future. In the course of the therapeutic process, during a session in his second year of therapy (three sessions a week), Daniele gets out his smartphone and surfs the internet for an app which will allow him to simulate the working of an old video game device that he used to use as a child. He then tries to install one of his favourite video games from that time, in which it was possible to make fantastic creatures fight controlling their every move at will. As Tisseron (2004) points out, the use of social networks and video games enables someone to escape temporarily from an unbearable situation. Daniele’s fantasies seem to be an attempt to evade an anxiety, which he is, at the time, unable to symbolise. Out of the blue, Daniele affirms that certain childhood experiences are extremely important and can impress themselves on a child’s mind, for instance promoting creativity. Immediately afterwards, he goes on to describe a version of the game slightly different to the one he is looking for, which, in Japan, supposedly caused serious harm since the background music was capable of making children psychically unstable to such a point that they committed suicide. Having found the video game he was looking for, Daniele begins playing without involving the therapist and progressively isolating himself. The therapist is at that point in contact with feelings of solitude, anger and impotence. Once he finishes the game, Daniele again starts to talk to the therapist as though nothing had happened. A short time later he has an outburst of rage when he realises that he has failed to save the game. After this, and still during the session, he begins to use an app on his smart phone which enables him to transform everything the camera focuses on into a drawing. This time, however, he does involve the therapist in his activity by asking him if there is a problem with remaining attached to his childish self. At that point, the therapist, who up until then had allowed Daniele to play by remaining in silent expectation, can reconstruct for the boy the mental functioning that was at play in the session: his withdrawing from the relationship, regressing to an infantile functioning full of omnipotent fantasies (manipulating the characters whose destiny he controls), to then revert to feelings of impotence and extreme frustration when his state of withdrawal makes him unable to manage reality (forgetting to save the game). This profound frustration induces him to re-immersing himself in fantasies of omnipotent control by his action of digitalising reality

through the app on his smart phone. Daniele’s acting-in will enable him, through the therapist’s verbalisation, to render thinkable modes of primitive functioning which would otherwise not be easily accessible to the boy.

Marina

A fourteen-year old girl, Marina presents clear signs of social inhibition underpinned by a deep core of depression. Marina’s “entrance” into adolescence proves to be particularly arduous: her unelaborated mourning for the death of her father, when she was five, and her identification with her depressed mother, are hindering the investment and integration of her sexual body, recognition of her own desire and that of the other, as well as the processes of subjectification. Marina appears to be stuck on the “edge” of adolescence.

The progressive “silent” investment that is created in the relationship over the course of the first year of twice weekly therapeutic sessions, provokes the first movements inside a psychic dynamic which is “frozen”.

In an extended transfer, Marina begins to show interest in Paolo, a classmate, who, however, treats her as an inferior, with indifference and disdain.

At this stage, a number of questions confront the therapist: does Marina find in Paolo a specular attitude to her own attitude with regard to the opposite sex? Has she “chosen” a boy who corresponds to her strong unconscious feelings of guilt at detaching her psychic investment from her “dead father” and her “depressed mother”? Does the re-introduction and re-creation of feelings of depression in the context of the therapeutic setting serve defensively to “cool down” the climate of lively emotion which is beginning to be felt in the consulting room?

A significant turning point along the therapeutic route is reached when internet makes its appearance in Marina’s life and is introduced into the analytic setting, a kind of found-created space, a “medium” which helps to create a transitional area (between the inner and outer worlds and also between self and the therapist). The girl begins to log onto and use a social network called “Ask.fm” one of whose functions allows you to contact other users anonymously or not. In fact, its forum and chat rooms allow you to interact differently

from in reality by admitting anonymity and allowing you the possibility of withdrawing at any time you please. This need not be read simply and solely as an inability to form a relationship in a normal way, but also as an attempt to establish contact with the Other at one's own pace.

The Internet, and social networks in particular, may not only provide a way of distancing oneself from certain affects, fantasies and preoccupations, but also a means of gradually confronting these in a reassuring way by apparently allowing a greater possibility of controlling them. In certain cases, for example, encounters on the Internet constitute a kind of complex learning process which allows the adolescent to gain progressive familiarity with the stages of the most feared and desired encounter, the romantic one.

To return to Marina, her use of "Ask.fm" seems to provide her with a "malleable medium", both concrete and virtual at the same time, as it allows her to contact Paolo maintaining her anonymity and temporarily removing the presence of a body which is experienced as inadequate and sometimes repugnant, and to control the motions of closeness and detachment and thus permit the emergence of feelings, emotions and thoughts from behind the excitement of a protective screen.

In this new and special place it is possible to carry out research, discovery and exploration of the Self and the Other, and also of the relationship between self and the other. On and through the Internet, the relationship between Marina and Paolo begins to acquire interest, pleasure and intimacy.

This is the stage at which the interpretive activity of the therapist intervenes respectfully "within the transference" and not by means of "transference interpretation". A second decisive moment is reached when Marina spontaneously decided to reveal her identity to Paolo, an identity which has come to life and assumed shape precisely through this specific experience, and which has been felt, reflected on and integrated within the therapeutic space. A revelation which also assumes the form of "self-revelation". Marina's initial feeling of incredulity at Paolo's positive reaction seems to be a manifestation of the discovery of being a source and object of desire for the Other, and also the discovery of

an incipient integration of the psyche and the body, a body "taking shape".

In the consulting room, as in Marina's inner world, a new stage has been reached, in which the Oedipal dynamic and all its associated emotions can be played out.

Conclusions

To summarise, among those working with adolescents, it is a common experience that looking at photos or videos together does not, in itself, bring about therapeutic change. The therapist has to try and show interest and curiosity, but also gradually to bring what happens in session to the level of narrative and meaning. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, he/she should not avoid getting involved in the use of technological devices given that the adolescent might not be able to reveal parts of self in any other way. On the other hand it is important, as therapists, to pay attention to the various aspects that such use implies in order to promote development and not collude with defensive or pathogenic actions.

It is particularly important, for the evolution of the therapeutic experience, that the therapist treating adolescents should assume the emotional and mental disposition highlighted by Novelletto (2009) – which allows him/her to detect, accept and interpret primitive functioning as an internal process, without focussing on the infantile dimension, but rather following the thread of the adolescent's present development, that is to say pubertal transformation and sustaining him/her in carrying it through.

What is required is to recognise a positive and creative use of new technologies while at the same time acknowledging their potentially psychopathological aspects. In order to achieve this, the therapist must succeed in constantly maintaining that "sufficiently good" distance which enables him/her, on the one hand, to avoid excessive identification with the adolescent, and, on the other, not to fall into the trap of the "professional hypocrisy" Ferenczi (1932) talks about, which, in this precise case, could be a false interest in video games or social networks and which the adolescent would detect immediately.

The difficulty in approaching the issue regarding

new technologies and their potential repercussions in the clinical and therapeutic field is attributable to two interwoven factors. The first of these can be traced to an epistemological attitude which tends to relegate to the background, if not altogether repudiate, external reality and its objects. To paraphrase Tisseron (1998), most clinicians manifest a striking resistance to pursue Freud's interest in everyday objects, and so with the sole exception of those "noble" artistic works that are commonly considered "noble", "plebeian" objects are snubbed.

The second factor, which concerns more generally the attitude of society and the adult world, is on a far deeper, unconscious level. Despite their widespread use, in reality, the new technologies remain outside of and unknown by the adult world except as regards their most superficial aspects and functions. On the contrary, they typify the adolescent's world reflecting in many respects its functioning. The adult's ambivalence in the face of these devices reflects fear of novelty, and of the unknown which adolescence inevitably brings with it.

Given these premises, it is up to psychoanalysis of adolescence to provide the most significant contribution in this matter, to provide, that is to say, the new maps required by psychoanalysis in order to be able to find its course in these psychic and social territories which are still unexplored and in continuous transformation.

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