

THE AXOLOTL PROJECT: A NEW INTEGRATED GROUP SETTING
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The Axolotl Project is a semi-residential setting addressed to teenagers and young adults in a small group context, aimed at psychological support in study difficulties, in continuity with each individual psychotherapeutic process.

Why is learning at the heart of our project? We consider scholastic success as an evolutionary goal for teenagers and young adults to deal with, which is frequently accompanied by several forms of discomfort. In fact, we find that negative reinforcements and narcissistic mortifications coming from school failure can hinder young people to invest all their resources in the psychotherapeutic process. That's the reason why the most important purpose of this project is to integrate personal needs, which go hand in hand with psychotherapy and include formative success, with group dynamics. However, there are other more specific goals, like preventing school dropout, or offering psychoeducative support aimed at improving self-consciousness of personal difficulties, improving self-esteem and self-efficacy, and managing performance anxiety. Axolotl also gives the opportunity to experience social relationships in a protected setting; this aspect is essential to deal with relational difficulties, which are widespread in our clinical practice nowadays. We therefore provide a protected context where one can experiment their social skills without all the risks of the outside world; where we try to enhance their ability to stay in a group, to relate well to others, respecting the rules, the group and the shared space. Finally, we provide a holding of affective states and manage possible emotional crises.

But why did we choose the axolotl as the symbol of this project? The axolotl is an amphibian that can make a complete metamorphosis if his usual aquatic habitat can no longer guarantee its survival. In this way, it becomes able to live on earth. Furthermore, it can fully regenerate organs and limbs. This is actually the wish for our patients: that they could learn how to adapt themselves in adverse and complex situations.

Let's now approach the Group Analytic analysis of the Axolotl Project, which I'm about to introduce under Foulkes' methodological triad of Structure, Process and Content.

Starting from Structure, we will analyse it on three observation points: participants, timing and space.

Axolotl is a small group, composed of two conductors and a varying number of users, from 3 to 8. It is an open group: new members can join at any moment of the year.

However, before every new entry there is a preliminary phase composed of various steps. First of all, the clinical team gathers to assess the reasons for this referral, the patient's needs, the diagnostic characteristics of the case, in order to predict if there can be a match with the group structure at that moment (e.g., age, personality disorders, etc...). If the clinical team agrees on the entrance in Axolotl, the process can start. Firstly, the future member meets the project coordinator and the group representative conductor. Then, one or more individual meetings with a group conductor are proposed, in order to explore the patient's difficulties in studying and to foster the creation of a relationship; this last point is aimed to already have a bond with a conductor at the moment of entering the group. Finally, the new participant has an introductory meeting with the other conductor before joining the group.

But how is Axolotl carried out? Focusing on timing, it takes place 3 times per week of 3 hours each, for a total of 9 hours per week. The semi-residential setting promotes the holding function of the project.

As regards meeting structure, we start with welcoming and observing the general condition of the group, sharing everyone's state and feelings. In a second moment, we organise the length of time in which we can support each participant in the one-to-one, according to individual needs and urgencies; then we start with study. An hour and a half after beginning, we have a break: the whole group stays together, so that it is a further opportunity for socialising, strengthening the bond between members and observing group dynamics. After break time, we have a second phase of study, shorter than the previous, because we consider the physiological decline of energies and cognitive resources in the participants. Finally, there's a moment of sharing about how the meeting has gone and greetings.

Concerning space, instead, the most used setting is in person. This is the usual structure; the number of tables varies with the number of participants, one each. They are always free to choose where to sit, but we notice the tendency to maintain a constant trend. The only exception is the main desk with its so-called "thrones": bigger and more comfortable office chairs. The group established that only the first arriving at the meeting can sit on them, creating a deserving criterion, part of group culture. During the meeting, the conductors move through the tables and sit next to the participant who needs their support.

This is the usual setting, but Axolotl never stops! Pandemic lockdowns pushed us to adjust it, so that we had to introduce the online mode. The change was problematic at the beginning, but we co-built up in the group new ways of keeping in touch and keeping the relational bond strong. For example, we adjusted meeting structures to the setting: we used to take longer moments of sharing, at the beginning, before and after the break and at the end. We guaranteed the individual support through using breakout rooms, dividing them in smaller groups. Splitting criteria were based on study needs and other variables that could facilitate the conduction of every subgroup, such as relational quality between members and educational level (which needs different kinds of support). Moreover,

conductors were constantly in touch in case of crisis, in order to overcome the lack of direct contact. The online setting is surely challenging: there is no body-to-body contact; we had difficulties in focusing on the whole group, there was a tendency to get absorbed in the individual work; furthermore, breaktime was not shared. On the other hand, this kind of setting provides an expansion of the group structure, including everyone's life space, and the observation of what everyone decides to show off and how much to let the rest of the group in.

Nowadays, we use a mixed mode if anyone is unable to come, e.g., if there's a positive case to Covid or if anyone is ill or on holidays but still wants to participate in the meeting. For a certain time, it also happened that a participant was always online, because he suffered from social withdrawal. In this modality, at the beginning we keep the laptop on the main desk and all members gather in front of it. Subsequently, when individual work with someone is needed, we move to a separate desk so as not to disturb the one sitting on the throne; if it's not necessary, we use to keep the laptop on the desk, with cameras turned on on both sides. Regarding sound, when we're working with someone online, we tend not to use headphones so we can always be aware of what happens in the group. Mixed mode, anyway, presents some issues, such as the possible lack of participation for the ones at home; breaks are not shared; and, when a member undergoes a crisis, they tend to focus on themselves, causing group fragmentation and making inclusion harder. On the other hand, it fosters relational continuity, and consequently enhances the strength of the group cohesion and its holding function.

After analysing its structural characteristics, we now enter in the Process of Axolotl, analysing its communicative levels.

The current layer is the most used and includes the sharing of informative aspects, news, study updates and events from outside the group.

Transfereential communicative exchanges, instead, can be observed both in the entire group and in one-to-one. As conductors, we often assume a "parental" role for the participants, while the other members a "fraternal" role. For example, the "siblings" are sometimes loved, but often hated or envied; at times, they ask us to defend them from others, because of teasing by "older brothers", who could act in a dysregulated way in the relationship. Therefore, primary family's dynamics can be reactivated in the group. Another example: a participant who usually has difficulties in managing triangulations with parents, shows the same scheme with the conductors, tending to adopt a one-on-one relation with us.

Sometimes we observe divisions in the group that make it harder to perceive it as a cohesive wholeness: in these cases, the splitting defence mechanism is operating, hence the group is on a projective level of communication. So, it happens that, at times, members create closed subgroups that do not communicate between each other; it can also happen that a single member isolates and splits himself from the group.

The Axolotl added value is to get to a primordial level of communication, which passes through the body. As a matter of fact, we use an integrated model, which includes what

we call *Somatic Competence*: the ability to observe and come into contact with what the body communicates, trying to make these sensations conscious and explicit, in order to become able to use this information to adapt to the environment and the relationships with others.

According to the Somatic Competence model, the central focus is the here and now overall state of patients, with a specific attention to bodily state. Especially when an object, like study, mediates the relationship with patients, it is necessary to understand if sufficient conditions are present to start and to keep activities going. Body's observation is a starting point: a dysregulated body does not allow "to stay" on task or in the group. When the body is in a state of hyper or hypo activation or freezing, all the mind-body energies are employed on a primary needs level. More complex levels, as relational and intrapsychic ones, result to be momentaneous switched off, neither considerate nor considerable. In such circumstances, therefore, we work to balance these states, trying to regulate arousal level. The goal is to restore homeostasis and a sense of comfort. Examples of dysregulated states could be exhaustion, anxiety, panic, or sadness. If participants join the group in these conditions, we welcome them, trying to tune into their state, starting from what they feel in their bodies, because, as said before, top-down elaboration levels are not in function and talking is often not possible. So, we hold them, fostering a relationship-based regulation.

Entering the Content area, instead, we observed how the group matrix has changed over time (more than three years now), passing from a Foundation matrix to a Dynamic matrix. The group gradually increased its Cohesiveness, starting to think about itself as a whole. A key element is that the members do not consider the group as a place only for studying, but as a place where they can always find support and improvements in their inner state. Participants often come to Axolotl especially because their condition is very critical, both on the psychological and bodily level.

Group culture is another aspect. In addition to the above-mentioned "thrones", a cultural cornerstone is the concept of "joint effort": every member makes their own effort in participating having continuity and studying even if they do not want or feel to have the strength to do that, being in a psychotherapeutic process, respecting others, and their needs... This concept is related to Yalom's Universality, that concerns not being nor feeling alone in living one's own problems but doing it in a group.

A final point concerns memory: the group history that goes layering with every meeting.

How do these three cornerstones (Structure, Process and Content) interact with one another?

We observe interesting phenomena when we inform the group members about new entrances. We usually do that one week before, in order to give them time to gradually internalise the idea of a group widening, to talk about it in the group and in individual psychotherapy and to deal with worries and expectations. In this phase, before the actual entrance, we often notice changes in the group Process and Content. In a recent situation,

we observed that at the very moment of the announcement of the new entrance the group was astonished and silent, also because the structure had been quite steady in the previous months. In the following meetings, there were some adjustments in group dynamics and content. Firstly, a greater cohesiveness between the members: they spoke more to each other, and communication was more fluid; before that, instead, they used to speak more with the conductors and less between them. Also, the emotional atmosphere got better: the group was more cheerful and individual problems were lightened. Finally, memories of the group's history and culture rose more frequently. We could hypothesise that the arrival of a stranger pushes the group to increase cohesiveness in order to survive a frightening change; meanwhile, the group pretends everything is fine on the inside.

A peculiarity of Axolotl is that it is not an isolated group, but it is situated at the centre of a net made from a variety of subjects and elements always linked between each other. This net consists of group conductors, individual psychotherapists, psychoeducational tutors and, sometimes, psychiatrist or neuropsychiatrist.

These professionals work in synergy, with the purpose of creating a common mind by working on three aspects. First of all, following a common model: every member of the net shares the same therapeutic principles. Psychodynamic approach is the base of teamwork. Secondly, the constant information sharing in the net: professionals are always updated on what is happening to every single patient and to the group, so that the net keeps itself constantly alive. This happens on two levels: the wider one, corresponding to the whole net, that gets continually informed of unordinary events, like crises or new passages. On the group level, conductors confront each other on what has happened during every meeting, to create an integrated mind between us. This space, moreover, let us confront and reflect on our own emotive and countertransference experience, try to give sense to what happened and insert everything in the individual and group history. Thirdly, every week a supervision is established for the operators; depending on a single patient's needs, individual psychotherapists and tutors are invited to take part.

This net is essential also because Axolotl participants express and deposit different parts of their Self in every different setting; the creation of a common mind that unites every setting supports the patients' Self integration.

To conclude, why can Axolotl be considered as a new integrated group setting?

That's because it has multiple layers' stratification of complexity. Indeed, it can be defined as a working group, as long as study is the main activity, and it helps structuring and managing all the meetings. Actually, study is just a pretext, it has secondary relevance, as it provides us a way to come into contact with members' psychological discomfort and work on that from a therapeutic perspective. This level always integrates key points of individual psychotherapeutic processes with group therapeutic factors, such as Cohesiveness, Universality, sense of belonging. Besides, the group analytic model, as

shown in this presentation, provides means to analyse the group in all its facets. In the end, the Somatic Competence model fosters the inclusion of the body.

Therefore, Axolotl promotes a therapeutic process based on integration of different layers: working on study; observation, analysis and elaboration of individual, relational and group dynamics; and attention to the body.