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# Reflection group devices in university education as a mental health promotion strategy

Dispositivos de reflexión grupal en la formación universitaria como estrategia de promoción de salud mental

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#### ORIGINAL ARTICLE

#### **KEYWORDS**

prop up, university education, reflection groups, healthy links Summary: University studies are crossed by a social environment that makes it difficult to meet others and joint reflection; a context that often tends to the isolation and removal of critical thinking. Faced with this, since 2013 we have developed a working device with workshops and reflection groups with students from Psychology Degree. These devices seek to develop feelings of permanence and belonging to the University, stimulate tolerance, respect, participation, social and institutional commitment, promoting the achievement of ethical and responsible professional subjectivity. In this paper we propose to qualitatively analyze the characteristics of the group ties that were generated within this intervention. To this end, we analyze the participant observation records made from 2013 to 2019. We find that these groups in university offer a prop up that is vitally important to go through the uncertainties inherent to entering the faculty, the vicissitudes of studies and vocational crises that may appear. With others, we find that students discover alternative ways to deal with discomfort and create possibilities that allow them to find a healthier way to deal with the challenges of studying.

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PALABRAS CLAVE apuntalamiento, formación universitaria, grupos de reflexión, vínculos saludables

Resumen: La formación universitaria se ve atravesada por las características de un entorno social que dificulta el encuentro con otros y la reflexión conjunta, un contexto que tiende al aislamiento y a la destitución del pensamiento crítico. Frente a esto, desde el 2013 desarrollamos talleres y grupos de reflexión para estudiantes de la Carrera de Psicología en la Universidad Católica de Córdoba (Argentina). Con estos dispositivos se busca desarrollar sentimientos de permanencia y pertenencia a la Universidad, estimular la tolerancia, la participación y el compromiso social e institucional propiciando el logro de una subjetividad profesional ética y responsable. En este artículo se describen cualitativamente las características de los vínculos grupales que se generaron durante dicha intervención. Para tal fin, se analizaron los registros de observación realizados desde 2013 hasta el 2019. Encontramos que los grupos de reflexión ofrecieron un apuntalamiento psíquico para transitar las incertidumbres propias del ingreso a la facultad, las vicisitudes en los estudios y sus crisis vocacionales. En el encuentro con otro, los estudiantes descubrieron formas alternativas de enfrentar el malestar y crearon posibilidades de acción para lidiar de un modo más saludable con desafíos que se les imponen.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The research from which this work emerges, originates from an intervention project, that we've carried out from 2013 to the present now (2020): group reflection spaces in Psychology Career of the Catholic University of Córdoba<sup>2</sup>. About this experience, we propose to investigate and analyze the dimensions that process group's go through in the university studies and its relation with the promotion of student's mental health.

We understand the university education as a complex process that is part of the construction of citizenship. Its final goal it's to train citizens for the society and the common good (Meirieu, 2006; Guendel, 2009). "Educating is transforming" holds Ana Quiroga (2004, p.7), and, therefore, to build a subjectivity that allows us thinking in a Project of collective will.

This is especially important in the training of future psychologists, who we can name, with Frigeiro and Korinfeld (2017), as part of "bonding jobs". Jobs that involve ways of investigating, understanding, interpreting and interfering in a permanent movement, that puts into play the dialectic of "in between", of accompaniment, to

think and tackle together what happens in certain territories and facing certain problems.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> These spaces are framed in University's Responsibility Project of Internal Well-being: "Reflection studies in university education. Integration and well-being for students of Psychology Degree promoted by groups" and in inside of the reflection groups made in the university subject for couples, family and groups. These group meeting spaces have voluntarily assistance and they are currently made throughout the the years of the career. For more information, see Edelman & Kordon (1996); Bernard (2006); Muzlera et al (2012).

In this time of strong social transformation, marked by uncertainty and intense fractures in bonding abilities, young people are building new ways of performing, of living in educational institutions and of building inter-subjectivity (Bauman 2007,2011; Benasayag & Schmit,2010). From the experience gathered, we find that the transit through the university studies is strongly impregnated by own characteristics of an individualistic social context, that makes difficult the possibility of generate ideals outside those bound to consumption (Bleichmar, 2011). As Jasiner (2019) holds, a world where "objects are created to cover lack, discomfort and emptiness; they are established with things, with others and with oneself toxic links, that is, the immediacy and search for fulfillment" (p.35).

This time of crisis has deep implications in the construction of subjectivity, among which we can highlight the alterations referring to life trajectories and the ability to carry out projects. Different characteristics of time has the effects a stripping of senses of the present, a rejection of the importance of history and a lack of hope in relation to the future (Benasayag & Schmit, 2010; Edelman, Kordon & Pachuk, 2018). Jasiner (2019) meanwhile, talks about the impatience as the significant of the time: go from words to things, from the desire to the facts and, therefore, the author mentions "its eliminated any delay, it can hardly register a space for fantasy and the subject stays out of the lane of desire, in the neglect of acting that propose enjoy without limits" (p.36).

In this sense, we find ourselves in a time of fragile belongings and affiliations, that weaken the foundations on which it builds rules and prescriptions such as those that it did regulate the social relationships in modernity. Faced with this, the links also go into crisis, becoming imprecise, paradoxical and contradictory (Edelman, Kordon & Pachuk, 2018).

Bleichmar (2010) defined as process of dismantling subjectivity to the effects that the process initiated by the civil-military dictatorship had in our country and reinforced in the 90's with the deepening of neoliberal policies. For the author, they established "(...) desconstruction <sup>3</sup> processes in the previous ways of subjectivity that it didn't necessarily explode, but were leaving remains of permanent erosion (...)" (Bleichmar, 2010,p.14). For this, she will say that the dictatorship was also an attempting of demolish an altruistic subjectivity, with aspirations of a historical project based on the values of the common good, social justice and equal opportunities.

Following Kaës's poses (2014), we can say that the weakening of the social meta-frames and the crisis of narcissist<sup>4</sup> contract generated a massive psychic de-shoring, leaving the subjects

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The author says "descontruction", instead of deconstruction, to make a difference from Jacques Derrida's expression.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The concept it's originally developed by Piera Aulagnier (Castoriadis-Aulagnier, 1997) and then Kaës took a close look at the term. For a development story of the concept see (Jaroslavsky, 2008).

in a state of helplessness, distress and uncertainty. Zelmanovich (2003) defines the effects that this weakening of the social fabric has on subjectivity, the fragility of the discourses that they support and regulate the social tie, as a kind of helplessness: a symbolic kind. Meanwhile, the own uncertainty of the contingencies of living with others, are added those generated by this degradation of social meanings that allows the subject to deal with reality.

Faced with this scenario of lack of support and symbolic resources, the demands for the group devices have been increasing. This is because of groups constitute a place for the construction of subjective production where it puts in play the identifications, the insertion and social belongings are processed, and the propping up of the subject in critical situations is favored (Edelman & Kordon, 1996; Kaës, 1981;2010). In the first place, because as Freud maintained (2010), the collectives creations represent common projections that arise before the experience of helplessness, which gives it the place to the help and protection. Besides, the group allows an experience of re-shoring of those that didn't make it to build as psychic reality (Bernard, et Al., 2002). That is, like counterpart of aspects of social context that isolate and dismiss the reflection, the groups offer a possibility of helplessness, of generate conditions for the critical reflection y promoting a transformation in subjectives positions. Intervening with group approaches, as the author maintains, is bordering on emptiness and discomfort, producing new links and connections (Jasiner, 2019).

Based on Pichón Riviere's foundational contributions (1987;1997) in Argentina, Bion's (1962) in Britain, and then Anzieu's (1974) and Kaës (1981;1992;1993;2005;2010) in France, diverse theoretical models were created to explain group phenomena<sup>5</sup>: theoretical references that refer to dynamic and complex conceptions, from which it is possible to think about the subject, his links, the institutions and the culture in permanent exchange, like interwening plot threads, they knot, un-knot and shows empty points, assembling at every moment a singular and situational configuration (Puget, Bernard, Games, Chaves & Romero, 1982; Bernard et. Al, 2002; Bernard, 2006; Jasiner, 2008; Edelman, Kordon & Pachuk, 2018). In this way, group and institution are resignified, because the first one is enrolled in an institutional system, in the same way that the institution signs up and survive in the groups (Edelman & Kordon, 2002; Fernández, 1987,2007; Pintos & Zanghellini, 2011; Frigeiro & Korinfeld, 2017).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For an historical track of the contributions of psychoanalysis to the group camp, see: Fernández (1989); Pavlovsky & De Brasi (2000); Bernard *et al.* (2002).

In dialogue with these conceptualizations, a series of proposals for the implementation of group work devices begins in Argentina, among which stands up the Reflexion Group devicewhose precursor is Alejo Dellarosa (1979) with his creation and application to the formation of therapist group. Bernard (2006) defines this device as a place for the application to the psychoanalytic theory to investigate and modify the impacted produced by unconscious processes in the task and in the structuring of group roles. The aim is to make visible and address the intersubjective dimension, referring to what the group generates in it's members, and not so much in the individual experiences they bring to the group based on their personal experiences.

Since then, this device start to being used as a valuable intercession and research tool, whose first important systematization we find it in the experiences collected in the post of the Argentine Association of Psychoanalysis and Group Psychotherapy magazine (1989). Its proliferation is related to it's ability to re-articulate according to different area of application: social and community (as the development carried forward by Lucila Edelman and Diana Krodon [2005] with groups that were affected by the last military dictatorship), labor (see in this regard the work of a reference on this topic, Marina Selvatici [2008]) and pedagogical (as a paradigmatic case of the Reflection Group Program for the Learning in the Faculty of Psychology in the National University of Mar del Plata [Zanghellini, 2009] and the one carried out in the National University of Córdoba [Gigena, 2009]).

As it can confirm, the implementation of Reflexion Groups in university education spaces benefits the students comprehensive formation, while promoting the multiplication of looks and the proliferation of possible senses, that enrich the confirm of professional and student identity (Gigena, 2009). Besides, it promotes the integrity and the connection between subjective experiences -most of it connected to troubled unconscious- and the learning processes. As they point out (Lambrisca & Morales, 2015), these subjective aspects can lead to alienation processes that prevent learning, so the possibility of transformation and change implies, necessarily, a look into the subjective implications throughout the groups.

In consideration of these backgrounds and theoretical references, we propose to investigate what happens at link level in the processes that unfolding in the groupings between the university students of the Psychology degree. For that, we'll describe the group process that the students do in the university journey, for then analyze the intersubjectives phenomena that are produced within reflection groups and its impact in the promotion of mental health in the context previously described.

#### 1. Methodological aspects.

From the perspective of relational psychoalnalysis, we made a qualitative analysis of what happens in the reflection group devices, looking for interrogate what happens not to the isolated individuals understood as "social atoms", but looking at the "in between" (Najmanovich, 2019). One of the consequences of this epistemology is that the investigation involves necessarily a look towards the groups and institutions that are part of it. Not as a set of isolated subjects, but as a part of a plot that has density (Najmanovich, 2019).

The building of information was based on the registration of participant observation of the reflection group spaces. These spaces were made in a systematic and sustained way, three or four times a year. Its attendance was voluntarily and the participation vary between 10 and 60 students. Students of every year of the Catholic University of Córdoba participated. In total, the time period investigated is 7 years: 2013-2019.

About the ethical safeguards, the necessary were taken to keep the identity of who participated in the investigation -both subjects and groups-, modifying the information that can show names, origin, activities that the subject practices, as well as the date on which the registration was made.

#### 2. Results.

The entry to university implies to the students to face the inherent crises to the own changes for the incorporation to a new institution. The reflection group devices enables the exchange and processing of problems attached to this passage from high school to college. Allows the emergence of reflections that range from the difficulties that makes them perceive themselves as university students—"I don't see myself with books" (Freshman student)—to the first projections that emerge about a professional future.

In this context of transition, the students shows a precise difficulty: "The hard thing is the gap between high school and college. You aren't mentally prepared to assimilate a content of 500 pages. And that worries today. You don't know how to organize" (Freshman student). It is observed that this passage generates an identity gap: stop being something to start being in a different way not knowing which is going to be. "The hard thing", in student's words, express the tension between old learning strategies and passing through educational institutions, and those that the new context imposes. But, also, this comment is related to the demand of mental work that this new scenario involves in other dimensions beyond the "formal educational": to enter the university it's necessary dwell new roles, achieve habits, learn to relate with others, deal with new problems and create different network. Definitely, it's necessary to be able to think ourselves as subject in a

new group, in a different institution and involved with a larger social context (enough characteristics to call it a moment of "crisis").

The first time in this university journey entails huge challenges: create new bondings, not only with students but with teachers, with knowledge, institution and the city. In this way, a work of mourning for the lost and the known emerges, and the confrontation to fears and uncertainties regarding the chosen vocation and life project. On the other hand, the feelings of loneliness and uprooted appears in the participants, linked to their places of origin and their family; the fear, appears too, for not being able to accomplish their own expectations and from their environment when it comes to "being a college student".

A main difference in this topic is between those that are from Córdoba city and those that are from outskirts. In the case of those that continue living in the same city, the familiar-familiar gradually gives way to the new challenges that university membership imposes. But, the problems are in the shock-tension that this new belonging produces in the previous ones (family or friendships from high school): "I stay in the library because at my house I can't study. I have to help my little brother, chat to my family, My aunt that comes to visit us and I want to study" (Freshman student). That is, the new university student role force the subject to reformulate the roles and the previous ways of belongings.

This change not only affects the students, but it has a intersubjective dimension (in this family case). As the coordinator tags in one of her studies: "The change it's not only got you, it is also for the family". Thereby, the reflection groups allows to start visualize the complexity of the process, that it don't shortens what happens in each one of them as isolated beings, but also to their link networks.

In contrast to this, the students that come from another city, that have different difficulties related to duels, from other conditions: "It is hard when you come from another place. It's a huge change. Become independent and starting to live by yourself" (Freshman student). For these subjects, the distance is sometimes abruptness and, in the best case, speeds the integration to new belongings that can have several starting points: "Most of the times we need company to makes us feel more relief. We are from the same town. One explains to the other what she doesn't know or doesn't understand. It goes too fast" (Freshman student). This story shows up a clear description of what Kaës (1993) calls psychism's de-shoring in the process they are living in, just like a mutual support request with others, different than family, another one that is going through the same thing.

This difference, like many others that university groups go through, it can make difficult the integration processes, or it can enrich it while transform into operational differences. For example, in reflection groups are showing up possibilities: those that aren't from Córdoba can lean on the family of local mate's whereas, those that are from outskirts or another province, can offer meeting places outside the family scope.

In this manner, the group devices implemented allow to highlight what joins them together, it ties them to this new task, but also the students in group situation are enabled to the recognition of the difference that stops building an obstacle for the bonding and it can turn into a possibility of mutual recognition and support. The students outlines: "it's good if he likes it, he helps me" (Freshman student).

At this moment, some experiences related to learning at college are paired to the unknown, a foreignness that shows up in the scene to mobilize the students. This is expressed in some phrases used by first-year students: "I don't know what an oral with a teacher is"; "Never owe a subject"; "It generates me more anxiety". We warned that the process of group reflection allows the individual worries resonate in the other members. They stop being one and become shared. About this interplay of resonances the students produce and exchange tool in the group. For example, in the face with anxiety generated by oral exams, a first-year student shared: "There are signs, you know how the teacher is".

We agree on Marini's work (2018), about the radical importance that peer links acquire in the university career. As the author sets out, the students, in their "study purpose" they build "group strategies" to face the challenge that university presents to them. These strategies, that are initiated in recognition of a common vocational election, allow to build between pairs to face the avatars and difficulties presented in the university field. We find that in reflection groups, students can plan and reconfigure some of these group strategies to "study" throughout the career.

With the career advancement, students face successive problems, sometimes very conflicted, in relation to permanence and belonging to the institution.

- It comes to me as a question: ¿How to integrate or unite this third year in my life?
- Don't feel alone. Something similar happens to me, it is like not being able to join college to life (Third year students).

On this path, after getting used to the new places and mates, another problems deploys in relation to the repercussions to be part of college and its integration with other aspects of its subjectivity: vicissitudes, in short, linked to personal growth and development.

Towards the last years of the career, with special emphasis from forth year, discomfort is manifested in relation to mates, teachers, university rules, etc. Like not every bond is just support and protection, there are also rivalries, conflicts, tensions that refer to the encounter with own and other's differences, with the power games in the bonding plots (Moscona, Mauer & Rezinsky, 2014). The team work looks limited when the fear, complain and resignation appears (Pintos & Zanghellini, 2011). Fears generated faced to the unknown. When these aren't recognized and they are covered up, they can obstruct the process of subjective responsibility, justifying like this the difficulties in the involvement as a student in front of the task and with others.

Fear often dress up as submission and obedience, making it difficult to build trust with others. "Fear covers intellectual life as a toxic cloud [...] With the installed fear, positions that defend against doubt and question are obstructed" (Pintos & Zanghellini, 2011, p. 95).

Complain, instead, involves rumination of discomfort, leaves no room for critical and creative thoughts to appear. The students refer in fifth year reflection group: "Why reflection? If later it doesn't change anything..." "We already said that this happened to the teacher but we are still the same". When the complaint floods the daily life of a student, not only produce indifference to the others, but also a victimize process, it doesn't involves the change possibilities, that gives unity feelings and loneliness distancing, based on that shared discomfort. A student of reflection group says: "That's it, we tried over the years, but if it didn't change before it won't change" (In relation with the organization of exams shift). Past and future are erased facing the complaint that refers to an eternal present of suffering perceived without alternatives or strategies to get about of them (Pintos & Zanghellini, 2011).

With the advancement of the career, the demand and commitment that university life implies are increasing, reaching the last years where the inclusion of pre-professional practices and the preparation of the final work challenges them to make clear the areas and topics related to their interests. Problems about their future as professionals and not as students appears: vocational decisions, labor, residency, whether continue studying or not,

under which theoretical affiliations, among other things. In a fifth year reflection group, the following debate took place:

- That is a thing that I reject, truly, I don't want to decide. I don't know what I want to do, I don't even know which branch I want to do.
- Besides there's a situation that affects us as a country, about the economy... ¿Which benefits me the most? ¿Should I stay or should I go?
- I have the intention to stay, but the thing is that I think investigation is my thing, and i don't know about here, I don't know what to do, because in my country, with everything that's going on with CONICET... Maybe it won't be good.
- I'm going to stay, in my province there are mental barriers that won't let me progress. I come from a very conservative province and they don't give people with disabilities places to work. My family wants me to go home, which I understand that, but I would like to study Psychology.

As we can see in this snatch of observation log, the meeting with the other gives a place to reflect about topics that sometimes gets hard to face alone ("it's a thing that I reject, truly, I don't want to decide"), but as the partner offers himself as a co-thinker of the experience, the problem seems more understandable, less anxious and the views on it multiplies, as well as possible solutions. In this way, the other as different, as alter (APPG, 2004), contribute newness, causes thought and widens the horizons insomuch as that it contribute different operational models (Rivière, 1997), as a consequence of the resonances and shared reflections.

The mutual support produced in the bonding allows to face in a healthier way these challenges. The other underpins the abilities of tolerate frustration –"If the other could, ¿Why couldn't we?" (Freshman student talking about passing final exams)- and of develop thinking, instead of escape from reality. In this way, we can sense that group reflection devices facilitate the unfolding of this tension between more stereotypical ways to face the difficulties of reality and healthier ways.

Ultimately, we consider that, in this path, reflection with others leaves the balance of the dichotomous to complexity; a complexity of thought as building links.

Coordinator: - It seems to me that you are thinking if what happens to you comes from the outside or the inside, presented as a binarism.

- What happens is that anxiety makes you think things like this, it doesn't let you see the process.
- What we heard from the country is negativity, and I feel like they aren't going to give me a job. It seems to me that what happens in the inside joins with what happens outside.
- The problem is that you can't pause it, it keeps moving and moving... I guess we'll know things when we'll work.
- When I started the career I didn't think that it was going to go so fast. From being a student and then start to think about working. I don't know that much to start working.
- I still remember when I finished high school and this seems to me very difficult. Now I think about it and say "what a stupid thing", maybe from now on the same thing will happen with this moment.
- Sure, nor that it was our first crisis.
- With everything we talked about crises, people gets in that way and it looks like nothing good would happen to you.

We found that being with others in a device with these characteristics throughout the different years of the career, in addition to hold anxieties and uncertainties, enables a historization work. The students gives sense to a personal trajectory, but also a group one, narrating what it was high school to college transition. It builds together a story about the beginning, what it's going and will be, crossed by a social context that stops being of one, isolated being, and becomes shared.

In summary, we can say that since the entrance to the institution, the movement of students and between them makes a bonding experience that promotes the search of others. This research seems to mobilize, among other causes, like a way to go out from isolation and defenselessness to do prescribed tasks and also, for the enjoyment of being with others. This requires of a psychic work and a doing that implies building a new bonding experience for them (Marini, 2018).

In our task, this power is played in terms of promoting conditions of mayor mental health, well-being and promoting spaces where desire can circulate; but also in terms of empowerment and critical reflection.

#### 3. Final reflections.

In the process of university education, the subjects involved in the task of "studying" must do a series of fundamental psychic works to integrate in this new educational institution: impulse renunciation, narcissistic decentralizing that the membership of the whole supposes (Kaës, 2010), duel for the unknown, the development of tolerance among the loss of references and the conflicts that provokes the different thinking, just like the holding between some of trust (Gigena, 2009). Faced with this tasks, the reflection group devices make effects in mental health -even when there's no therapeutic aims-, while it affords support and psychic prop op to face the already said tasks.

The bond with others enables and invitate to the inscription of a break, of a pause, a delay time to be able to think, consider, expose ideas, discuss, learn from the own and other's. Thinking together promotes trust and, like Kaës points (2005), about the base of identification with the activity of another's thought, pleasant feelings are generated when discovering and solving those doubts together that as the fellow men possesses in a specific moment (Kaës, 2005).

Meanwhile, guarantee group spaces in the university education are an alternative way to face discomfort -other than individualism and immediacy-, knitting ties and promote the construction of a net that allows set up a space-time to be available, to think and reflect with others, and build together a care trajectory, mutual and learning nutrition (Najmanovich, 2019).

With reflection groups in the university career, we bet on the construction of an ethical and citizen professional that has solidarity as its main value, understood as doing with others (not for others) that enables the desire for life and autonomy (Puget, 2003). Ultimately, the aim is learning to process differences with others for, in terms of Bleichmar (2009), brace "an ethic of the like" that allows us to achieve "an ethic of power with others".

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