

# Becoming an Adolescent: a Body Changes in the Field of the Family\*

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## Abstract

This article aims to explore the psychological changes that arise during the process of becoming an adolescent. During this period, the family plays an important role in the (re)construction of the adolescent's internal world, being an extended mental space which may include the expression of dreams, phantasies, and desires. The concept of the "field", as developed by Ferro (2007/2011), is used in order to be able to understand the adolescent's ongoing changes; these changes are very evident in his/her physical body, and the adolescent now has new object(s) with new aims that are enrolled in a family's dynamics. The clinical setting offers a privileged space in which to reveal changes present during this period of growth. Accordingly, we illustrate the value of applying the concept of the field to the process of adolescent growth by describing a clinical situation in which ideas about body and family are seen in dynamic interaction and in a relationship of intersubjectivity and co-construction.

*Key words:* adolescence, field, family, body.

## INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of the dynamics of the psychological processes of adolescent development is based on three concepts. Firstly, Bion's (1965/1982) notion of transformation enables us to describe the relationship between meeting and communication involving subject and object, and between object and subject, as the (re)creation of new objects, endowed with new characteristics and qualities. Secondly, Braconnier's (1985) concept of "processes of transformation" describes the continuity, the connection, and the passage of processes that have already occurred with others that are still developing. Thirdly, Bollas's concept of the "transformational object" (1989, 2011) explains the internalisation of the transformation process as a fundamental condition for psychological growth, revealing the creative process.

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Adolescence is conceived as a developmental period. During this period, several changes take place, important mental functions are constituted and renewed, new objects are (re)created, and the self is (re)built through a dynamic of approach and withdrawal with others in a process where strong oppositions, splits, and intense projective identifications are present (Marques, 1999).

The clinical context is the "field" of excellence in the illustration of psychological changes that occur during the process of becoming an adolescent. We have chosen as an example the case of a troubled fifteen-year-old, brought by his family for treatment at the clinic. The family dynamics revealed there demonstrated for us the importance of a theoretical understanding of the body's role in communicating the development of the self, the ongoing process of family dynamics, and the co-construction that operates between transference and countertransference in the therapeutic field.

The adolescent in transformation is part of a family, whose function it is to contain the tension inherent in that transformation. This means that the membership of an adolescent in a family environment involves the whole family group in the process; that is to say the entire adolescence is also a family adolescence (Benghozi, 2010). The transformation that takes place during this process occurs in the dynamic between the adolescent and his or her family, generating a space of (re)creation. We call this meeting place the "field" (Ferro, 2006/2009). It is understood as an intra and intersubjective sharing place, and is endowed with its own features. Here a dynamic game, dominated by projective identification, enables the creation of a mental space for transformation, in which the contents emerge, working as a container, generating new senses and meanings, and revealing the process of growth in progress.

The concept of the field assists our understanding of the psychological changes involved in becoming an adolescent, together with our thinking about the continual oscillation that alternates between a constant opening up to meaning and the inevitable closing down of meaning (Ferro, 2007/2011). Becoming an adolescent can be thought of as a dynamic process of growth and mental expansion, recalling Bion's recognition of the importance of learning from experience. It can also be understood in Caper's description of the ". . . work of a sculptor, that is not clear at the beginning, but that emerges during the process of creation . . . the artist transforms his material in a process that expresses his vision" (Caper, 2009, p. 48).

Included in the field are family dynamics, which both shape the changes in the adolescent and are shaped by the adolescent. Therefore, this field can be seen as being a place where all worlds may open up as a result of a spatial and temporal meeting, inhabited as it is by the present and the past, and because it also looks to the future.

The field has a breathing pattern of its own: the inhalation signals the arrival within the *field* of lumps of unthinkability; the exhalation phase signals the collapse that follows any saturated interpretation and which reduces it to a point in preparation for future expansion. Needless to say, this is a constant movement. (Ferro, 2007/2011, p. 65)

For Ferro (2002), the field translates unconscious changes through narratives, which work as vehicles for transforming phantasies that are unconsciously shared, so potentiating the creation of new meanings. During adolescence, these dreams and phantasies are greatly expanded. Thus, in order to understand the processes that are under construction during this period, we use the adolescent's co-narratives. They allow us to access, to know, and make known the psychological processes involved in the growth, since they are generating changes and processing new meanings (Ferro, 1999/2000).

Finally, when the idea of the field is considered as part of the container-contained relationship, it allows the creation of an intersubjective dynamic and a space of co-construction, and further reveals the dynamics inherent in the transformational process of becoming adolescent. This enables us to consider, not only how bodily changes occur in the family context, but also how family dynamics shape these bodily changes.

### THE BODY IN THE FAMILY'S FIELD

Among the numerous changes concurrent with adolescence, bodily changes are an imperative of growth that stir up mental pain (Waddell, 1998). For Matha (2010), the body offers itself for several functions: as a space for play, and a vehicle for expression, for both the internal and the external worlds; as the place of experimentation in which to destroy and to build; as the intermediate object, representing an expression and communication area; and as a "mirror place".

The body of the adolescent "becomes", being, at one and the same time, a known and unknown object, in which the never-ending changes and new experiences will become new container-contained relationships. Thus, the process of learning from experience, which includes the dynamic between the known and the unknown, leads to a new mental reconfiguration (Lombardi, 2005).

These bodily changes are shaped in and shape the family dynamics. For Eigner (2005/2013), the representations of the body are engendered in the family, and it is in the family that the inter-connecting links are woven. This process taking place in the family is visible in the body of the adolescent. In the family dynamic, the body's representation will be manifested both by things that are allowed and others that are prohibited. The body does not exist as a lonely and isolated entity, as it always exists in

intersubjective connections, that can be understood as a network of mental traits, which are sometimes archaic. Thus, one person's recognition is given by the other; this implies a recognition of the other, with her or his special features. A similar reciprocal process happens with the body, which is intersected by all of these intersubjective dimensions.

Bodily changes at adolescence introduce the notion of the unknown, compared with the knowns that were already present in the "field" of the family. This introduces conflict in the family's stability, raising the need for readjustment in family dynamics. According to Puget and Berenstein (1993), for the adolescent the existence of a stable relationship is essential in time and space. Through this stable relationship, it will be possible to conceptualise a real external body that is factual and limited, as opposed to a symbolic body, which, because it is formed by desire, is thus unlimited, and only permits mental representations through fantasy, within the limits of the body.

We can further understand this body-family dynamic, using Bion's (1962a/1991) concepts. These address the dynamic and intersubjective relationship that is established between the self and the other during the process of becoming an adolescent, and which can be seen through the links that foster growth (Love [L], Hate [H], and Knowledge [K]). In family dynamics, this process can be perceived in the transition between the known and the unknown, so allowing learning from experience, and in the need to transform the exchanges of conflict (-L, -H and -K), that occur between the adolescent and his family. In these ways the family shapes the adolescent's change and growth, while at the same time family is shaped by the adolescent.

The body of the adolescent emerges as a place through which we can access an understanding of the psychological processes under construction, once it is able to interpret the adolescent's successive movements of closeness and distance from the family. In the field of the family, we find both acceptance and rejection of this process of growth. The oscillation in feelings implies changes in synchrony in the family dynamics that lead to changes and complexity in interpersonal relationships.

### **THE THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER ON THE FIELD**

The dynamic relationship of becoming an adolescent within a family can be conceived as an extended mental space that is dynamic in its (re)creation and co-construction. The concept of unconscious images of the bodies of the individual, the family, and of the social group has been described in Benghozi's conceptualisation of a "genealogical mesh container" (2010). It uses the metaphor of Russian dolls for the various levels of containment that generate reciprocal support between the individual

contained, the family, and the social group, creating a dynamic of co-construction, and allowing the formation of a stable framework.

Ferro's concept of the field (1999/2000) also proposes a function of (re)signification that generates a creative and a co-constructive process. The therapeutic encounter is a privileged place for commenting on the particular features present in this co-construction between the adolescent and the family.

In the therapeutic setting of family psychotherapy, the flow of transference and countertransference allows us to understand the relationship that the adolescent has with his body, and how it is that the family is viewed as the container of the psychological transformation undergone in the process of becoming an adolescent.

The relations that are "interwoven" in the dynamic transference-countertransference relationship in the *field* between the adolescent and himself, and between the adolescent and his family, illuminate the differentiation and the consolidation happening in the internal world. This makes the field a fertile place for psychological growth and for the broadening of the mind.

#### CASE ILLUSTRATION:

#### THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER

Paul, who is fifteen years old, comes to the session accompanied by his parents. He is tall and physically well built, but in the family he appears not to have a body. He sinks into a chair of the consulting room with a far-away look. From the outset, his parents are the ones who speak, describing as their main concerns the behaviour of their son that has changed in recent months; he has become physically and verbally aggressive, and has announced his homosexuality. An initial particular trait emerges in this family's dynamics; that is, to decide who generates the behaviour in whom, as is seen in a recent episode that is reported in the session:

Paul had decided to meet up with a friend with whom he had already been talking via social networks. Even though his parents did not support this idea, they took him to the agreed location, where there was an argument between Paul and his mother. As a result, the mother claims to have been assaulted by her son; the son says that he only hit her because she "mugged" him. He denies his mother's version of what happened.

Paul's story and insight into the family environment brought to light a second trait: there is no union between, nor integration of, all the family members. The family environment is made up of remoteness and detachment between all its members that is both emotional and physical.

Currently, the family at home comprises the mother, Paul, and Paul's twin sister, the father having left home six years before. There is no sharing between them of experiences or interests. Paul's history does not reveal anything significant during his childhood, except a strongly troubled family, their difficulties generated by his twin sister's serious health problems. The relationship between the twins is described as being occasionally understanding, with some fights, but with no physical aggression.

The father presents himself as a "storyteller", looking, whenever possible, for opportunities to pass on to his son any new knowledge, and to share educative experiences. He expresses an interest in the arts, and praises Paul's talent as a singer. Paul says that his father does not communicate with him at all; he has major doubts about "the arts", and does not recognise any great talent in himself.

The mother takes a role of the "questioning" one, making enormous demands on her son, and showing great dissatisfaction with what she considers to be his lack of responsibility, imposing on him her own way of living and being. Paul complains he is not seen, and not recognised, while trying, without success, to keep his mother at a distance.

Finally, another particular trait emerges in the family dynamics: the representation of the twins is that one is always the opposite of the other; yet there appear to be major difficulties in distinguishing between them. While one is presented as healthy, calm, obedient, and disciplined, the other is described in absolute counterpoint, as sick, busy, disobedient, and unruly. Paradoxically, however, the two children are represented as if they lack separate identities, and that they have not been endowed with their own characteristics; one, however, is perfect and the other imperfect.

For a better understanding of Paul's mental functioning we used the projective techniques: Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Through the analysis of Rorschach, it was possible to observe a degree of insistence on the logic of symmetry. Here, the representation of relationships is not performed between two, but between one and its unfolding, a double, which always appears as imperfect. We must not forget that, for Paul, asymmetry existed from birth; in early childhood, he was healthy and strong, while his twin sister was fragile and at risk of dying. Later, his sister became strong, studious, and organised, and he became lost and disorganised. The failure of internal resources reflects a profound change in his acquisition of perceptual reality, together with inconsistency, disarticulation, and dispersed and un-integrated elements. Paul's internal dynamics, as expressed in the TAT, reflect weakness in the representation of relating. The representation of the object reflects its incompleteness, with references to shadows that do not reflect the subject. When Paul represented relationships, he gave us an account, through his references to violence, of the impossibility of making connections; this emerged in his

use of themes of torture, addiction, and prostitution. He also referred to bizarre elements, such as houses with faces, and the sea with “ups and downs”.

As far as the complaints (of aggressiveness and homosexuality) are concerned, the aggression displayed by Paul seems to have emerged in response to toxicity generated by the splitting employed in the family dynamic, whereby he and his sister were placed as polar opposites. The aggressive symptom seems to express a despair about knowing who is who: who am I with you, who are you with me? This dynamic, according to the perspective of Benghozi’s genealogical mesh (2010), revealed a lack of support in the containment of the growing individual, leading to the appearance of symptoms in the family. The understanding of its meaning in the family dynamics can be perceived in the family’s narrative in which it is contained, expressing their shared unconscious fantasy (Ferro, 2002).

Paul’s homosexuality seems to come down to a double belonging to both female and male, as if it were an unfolding. This again placed him in comparison with a double, as imperfect, asymmetric, and without the possibility of integration and reconciliation, with an intolerance of closeness, and without access to a differentiated awareness; in other words, in an endless membership of a no man’s land.

Paul’s homosexuality was formed by his family’s dynamics. His father and mother were not connected as a parental couple, leading each one to have a different belief about their son, and causing Paul to oscillate in his self-representation and in his affiliation as an adolescent boy. Thus is it was impossible for him to know about or to subscribe to a maternal or a paternal lineage.

Paul seemed to have given up all hope of finding a place in his family, to have a place of his own near to his father and mother that would allow him to have his own subjectivity. Having had to give up his parents it led him to search for a place next to his sister, resulting in an increase in conflict between them, because of his need to appropriate her female characteristics.

Ultimately, as an expression of his endless searches for a self, and for a body, alongside his involvement in the family dynamics, symptoms of anorexia-bulimia emerged: Paul ranged between not eating anything, and devouring everything that he vomited soon after. The turbulence of these symptoms seemed to express the non-existence of a self and of a body, and of failure in the family’s dynamics. Paul ranged between being full and being empty, which was expressed in the family context by his being recognised and not being recognised, existing differently and not existing. With such characteristics of endless searches for a differentiated self, with a body that fills and empties without vital nutrients, we see the search for the reversion link with the other, one who is sought, but volatilises. Paul

was faced with, what Benghozi (2010) describes as, a family that presents itself as a battered “weakened container”, one that does not allow the containment of developmental changes. This led to the appearance of symptoms that are no more than the manifestation of the failure of the container, the expression of its toxic content.

Paul reacted against the instability present in his family’s dynamics and against his parents’ switching between excessive closeness and distance. He reacted through his body with the symptom of anorexia-bulimia, showing through his body his feelings about the family. Oscillation was a constant feature in his internal dynamics, reflected in oscillations between opposites—between being full and being empty, between being feminine and being masculine.

In the therapeutic field, all of these elements were revealed through the transference and countertransference relationship. In the transference, Paul brought confusing elements, in the way he related to others and how he understood the world around him. In the therapeutic field, through the therapeutic relationship we built, it was possible to clarify Paul’s place, helping him to go beyond his pre-existing reference points, and enabling him to find new meaning in respect of his place in the family and in the world.

Throughout the process there was a fundamental need to preserve the therapeutic field from the family’s constant attacks. This meant detoxifying that field, while at the same time it was providing Paul with an existence. With the emergence of new meanings in his internal world, it began to be possible to for him to build a place in which to grow and engage in the process of becoming an adolescent. The pathological elements that obstructed growth and knowledge, (–L, –H, and –K) gave way progressively in the field to the establishment of new relationships, endowed with new meaning and favouring psychological growth (L, H, and K). All this allowed a more cohesive becoming, and promoted the development of an extended psychological space and the enhancement of the differentiated self-other.

## CONCLUSION

The use of the concept of the field to understand what it means to become adolescent allows a better appreciation and explanation of the ongoing changes during this period of development through the placing of them in a container–contained kind of relationship. This approach also provides a better explanation of the dynamic of the intra and inter-psychic processes in an extended mental space.

Clinical practice greatly benefits from these theoretical developments, since they provide an understanding closer to the essence of the process of



becoming an adolescent. During this period the body reveals the family dynamics, while at the same time, the family dynamics change the body. Thus a reversibility operates between body-field and family-field. In addition, the therapist holds in mind the dynamic of the body-family-field that is involved in the processes of growth. The development of these processes is only made possible in the therapeutic field.

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