Rituals, icons, and imaginary: a dialogue between anthropology and psychotherapy

Rituales, iconos e imaginario: un diálogo entre antropología y psicoterapia

Raffaele Menarini[1] 🔘, Domenico Agresta[1]* 🔘

1. Centro Studi di Psicologia e Psicosomatica Clinica — Pescara, Italy.
*Corresponding author: mimmoag@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This work presents a connection and an interpretation between psychotherapy and anthropology studies considering a common field in the experience of the ritual as a process of transformation and the rituality of the setting. Based on the assumption that the ritual is the set and the setting is the representation of it, in terms of creation and observation of foundation myth, we can observe the complexity inside the therapeutic relation and the function of imaginary, the matrix and myth, as well as reflect on them.

Keywords: Ritual; Icons; Groups; Imaginary; Myth.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta una conexión y una interpretación entre la psicoterapia y los estudios de antropología considerando un campo común en la experiencia del ritual como proceso de transformación y la ritualidad del setting. Partiendo del supuesto de que el ritual es el conjunto y el entorno es la representación de este, en términos de creación y observación del mito fundacional, podemos observar la complejidad dentro de la relación terapéutica y la función de lo imaginario, la matriz y el mito, así como reflexionar sobre ellos.

Palabras clave: Ritual; Iconos; Grupos; Imaginario; Mito.

Rituals

The relationship between mythical knowledge and social relationship knowledge is given by the emotional dimension of the ritual. Every social event is connected to a set of rituals called ceremonies. According to Van Gennep (2012), rituals constitute the basis for the social group, a foundation that in semicivilized peoples is of magic-religious kind. The social group is seen as an emotional expression. Therefore, it is represented as movement: in space (the social group moving across territories); in time (seasonal changes, moon phases, other phases seen in nature); in the body (pregnancy, childbirth, childhood, adolescence, adult life, old age, death); in society (baptism, circumcision, engagement, wedding, funeral). For Van Gennep (2012), the movements are a source of personality distress: with their control over a person's emotions, rituals have a hold on such distress.

In other words, rituals are seen as a way of containing the impetuous flow of emotion usually linked to important transformations in space, time, body and society. As for personality, distress defines cultural identity, the shape of all cultural changes: geographical borders or the influence of a person, environmental modifications, demographic increases and decreases, scientific discoveries and technological innovations, changes in the political, economic, legal, religious field. However, it is also about the definition of the sources of legitimation of power, economic and organizational renovation, cultural adaptation and cultural processes, epidemics, crime, deviance, wars, intercultural conflicts.

In semi-civilized societies, cultural change is represented and envisaged by rituals. Rituals can also be defined as a pure act, imbued with transformative power. The value of the ritual and cultural identity are related. Through rituals, cultural identity is conceived in terms of status and role.

The icon of the Divine Child[1] and the *dramatis persona*[2]

Social action is strictly linked with the collective representation of rituals. From this point of view, action can be defined as mutual influence between actors; the actors move towards the action, they influence each other and observe the influence itself. Role is the way in which an actor chooses the behavior in the logic mechanisms of influence.

According to Jacob Moreno (2017), the actors of a psychodrama become co-actors by observing the influence they have on each other. By playing their role, the co-actor recreates the role itself, and every new interpretation asserts itself as the space of oneself. In other words, the Divine Child represents the unification of the various shapes or phenomenology of the self. It constitutes their representation in the present time despite the variety of possible roles. The Divine Child is the founder of parental identity; it is symbol of all family images: it is the mother, father, children, brothers, grandparents, and so on. *Dramatis persona* of family roles, the Divine Child is fundamentally an interpreter. At birth, the icon is a pre-conception of the social event, and therefore it contains the interpretation of the event itself at the level of symbolic structure. The icon is an intentional unsaturated form which by interpreting the hypotheses of mutual influence produces the social relationship in the sense of ritual dramatization.

The associative complexes become interactive interpretations: the *dramatis persona* is the movement of an interaction made visible by rituals. The analogical action of the icon implies a movement towards an action full of emotional value. The emotions expressed by the ritual are those of love and hate; just think of the rituals of engagement, marriage, war, and death sentence. For Bion (1970), love and hate are the essential emotions connected to knowledge (K function).

The term *emotion* derives from the French *émouvoir* (to move). In English language, the term *emotion* denotes in fact movement, while *move* and *moving* imply an emotional reaction. Move is also *film*, seen as a compound of moving images that provoke emotions, and it is interesting to notice how this space is purely visual.

In imaginative terms, the icon of the Divine Child is the image of a body: the body image. Therefore, the character is the interpreter of a single influence; the *dramatis persona* is a set of emotional movements that guide all characters.

As underlined by Hilmann (1988), the cultural consequences of the actions of the *puer* (or cultural futures) are wounds in the body. The cultural model itself is an eternal open wound; love and hate coexist in the body. The problem of the identity of the *puer* disguised as anguish is expressed by insanity, seen as the uncertainty of the Divine Child suspended between the omnipotence and omniscience of the gods and the intelligence of men: in short, between SuperEgo and Ego. Insanity stands for oddity, in the sense of a distortion of mutual influence, beyond the focal point of a shared interpretation.

The interpretation of the role that goes beyond the limit of a shared language (which makes the actors co-actors) translates into delirium; it is the moment in which the myth of origin is transformed into a therapeutic myth and the social group also becomes a therapeutic group. Therapeutic rituals concern the link between institution and etiology. It is about the dual meaning of the term *etiology*: the origin of culture, and the analysis of the causes of suffering.

The origin of culture is the icon of a cultural foundation: institution or subject of a constitutive style in the sense of desire for culture. For the Latins, *istitutio* also meant the inner world, and the institutions were precisely the beliefs that arose from that inner world. For the Romans, institution meant mundus or order of society: the same intentionality at the basis of the institution.

This means that all institutions characterizing a society derive from an existential creed expressed in rituals and myths of origin. This creed is a cognitive set which guides the members of a society to define the characteristics of their field of action in terms of mental events. The fundamental characteristic of the mental event is nothing more than the existence itself or the notion of being there (effectiveness). The representative place of the institution is the *imago*[3], while its place of action is the ritual. Imago and ritual are linked to cultural identity, seen as the originative moment of the institution itself.

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[1] Expression by which are designated all the mythological and theological figures that in different religions present the deity in the condition of a child, narrating the events connected with this state. In Greek mythology, in addition to Dionysus and Heracles, great Olympian deities such as Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes appear as divine child. The most recent interpretation of these myths tends to reject the idea of their biographical character (biography of gods), recognizing instead a symbolic meaning that leads directly into the sphere of origin, in the sense that the myth of childhood is a direct expression of the birth of a cosmos or order of which the deity is the image. Outside the Greek world, myths of divine child are detectable throughout the Mediterranean world, northern Eurasia, India, and Polynesia.

[2] The characters or actors in a drama. *Dramatis personae* serve as a marker in helping to identify the structure of functions and the position of each character in a fairy tale.

[3] Term introduced by C. G. Jung (1911), referring to an imago of maternal, paternal, fraternal, and has become in common use in psychoanalysis. Characterized as an unconscious representation or image, the imago is rather an imaginary schema, an unconscious prototype that specifically orients the way the subject perceives the other, that is, orients its projections. Formed on the basis of the child's earliest relations with the family environment, the imago should not, moreover, be regarded as a correlate of real figures, but has a phantasmatic character. Thus, a threatening and terrible parental imago may be matched by extremely mild real parents.

Therefore, the icon of *puer* regards identity as the foundation of both culture and personality. It corresponds to the foundation of the tribal space through the divine ancestor or to the creation of the city or again it coincides to the origin of the nation. The Creator Ancestor or Divine Child establishes the huge problem of the relationship between identity and creation. When creation means culture, the Ancestor is forced to immediately assume an identity, without which it could not manage the creation itself.

The myth of origin reflects the *noopathy*[4] weight and is associated with anguish or suffering located in the body. This weight identifies the foundation in etiological terms, in so far as it constitutes an archaic event underlying the symptomatology, and this event is constituted by original ghosts. According to Freud (1915), ghosts are associative structures expressed in thematic sequences and made visible in scenes; he uses the term *complex* to refer to these structures (e.g., Oedipus complex). Instead, for Jung (1980), complexes are removed contents and projected as *imago*.

Freud (1915) defined the ghosts of the primary scene (*Urszene*) as the original ghosts (*Urphantasien*) of the myth of origin: etiology. In etiology, the icon of the *puer* becomes a traumatic memory: the transformation of the imago into anamnesis.

The corporal icon defines the etiology in its guise of the original trauma: the *puer* is now Dionysus. Dionysus is a *dramatis persona* connected to the creation of men through the Titans, and his cult of (orphism) is connected to the origin of tragedy and philosophical thought. In tragedy, etiology was identified with blind necessity, completely outside of ethics, and the norm of justice. Dionysus is the epidemic god who decides the fate of Thebes in Bacchae by Euripide.

The affective modulation is an expression of *phren* (emotional soul) in terms of *pathos* or the insurgence of affect in the representation. The root word of the term *pathos* is *path*, and it indicates both suffering and the identification of emotions. In medicine, the same word *root* indicates disease, but also therapy (for example, homeopathy); *noopathy* means sense of being sick. Therefore, it means etiology. While the theriomorphic icon indicates *noopoiesis*, the incessant creation of cultural sense by the Divine Child, the corporal icon designates the identity of the etiology.

Jung (1980) has developed a conception regarding dreams in terms of a representation through images of an "intrapsychic drama"; therefore, the dream is seen as a symbol and works as a mediator that facilitates interaction and integration of different aspects of the psychic apparatus; it is a compensation for existing imbalances in the intrapsychic outline.

Seen as symbolic mediators, dreams are active forms that ritualize the transformations of the personality in terms of parts of the Self. As observed in the rituals analyzed by Van Gennep (2012), we can describe environmental and naturalistic icons, both of characters and body parts. The quality of the corporal icons indicates thoughts of the Self-regarding etiology: the *body image* expresses the memory of the traumatic origin of the Self, as for identity trauma means reflection on suffering of being there.

The translation and the passage between the visible and the invisible—the semiophoric function of the dream—occur with the creation of the theme of the matrix in its form and identification of oneiric icons (in the experience of the *dramatis persona*), that is of mental objects which express the psychic intentionality of dreamers (Agresta, 2019). As icons are mental events, they are potential symbols (Amaro, 1997).

In fact, in our point of view, every social group builds and creates rites and myths of origin with the aims of establishing, representing, and controlling its own identity. The rite of passage represents the possibility for a people/group/individual to define its own anthropopoiesis[5] and the way for the researcher to define its anthropopoietic function (Agresta, 2019). As a consequence, the study of a rite of passage in a social group or in psychotherapy is nothing more than the question which we ask ourselves when faced with the close and well-defined relationship of the impossibility to answer the problem of life and death except in terms of the study of the group, the psychosomatic dimension and hence the collective imaginary.

For example, De Martino (2002, p. 669-670) states:

> The fundamental constitution of being is not being in the world but having to be in the world. [...] The worldliness of being refers to having to be in worldliness, having to be according to a community project of being. [...] The catastrophe of the worldly does not therefore appear in analysis as a way of being in the world, but as a permanent threat, sometimes dominated and resolute, sometimes triumphant.

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[4] *Noopoiesis* (sense-making) is the essential prerogative of thought and myth and is identified in the totemic spirit. This spirit operating in the virtual time of origins involves the problem of the unknown that transcends us. The unconscious aspect of the mind: the creative potential of unconscious thought.

[5] The term anthropopoiesis is an anthropological concept that indicates the various processes of self-construction of the social individual, particularly from the point of view of the modification of the socialized body, as well as the various processes of construction of the cultural heritage of each human group. Agresta (2015) defines an anthropopoiesis of mental or immaginary as a mental process to constitute the formation of a foundational imaginary composed of the dreamer's original and family matrix in the group mental field.

Icons avoid the disintegration of the transgenerational (Giovannini & Menarini, 2004), favoring the transition from mental continuity with the familiar psychic world to mental discontinuity with the same, necessary for the development of an Otherness, that is the discovery of what is different in me. The group presents itself, in this phase, as another matrix, with its history, different from the identical history brought by the individual, at the basis of immutability of mental distress. The group becomes the site of the emergence of a more authentic Self, which no longer needs masks or to project his own Otherness (diversity) from the original matrix on a world of images both distant and close to one's own unconscious that produces them.

Tragedy and etiological rituals

The original ghosts (the imaginary of this process) or traumatic scenes are fundamentally trauma rituals with the aim of enacting the etiology. In ancient Greece, etiology was also the suffering of institution and therefore presence of suffering in the city. The etiological trauma (sign of suffering) unravels at two levels:

- Individual: in the original scene, the original ghosts enact the trauma from which derives the etiology of the symptom;
- Institutional: the founding moment of the city (institution) is marked by corporal suffering (child sacrificial ritual).

At this level, the ritual constitutes the scenic dimension of the founding act of personal identity or institutional identity. The great development of the Greek genius involved the transformation and transposition of etiological rituals in tragedy. As mentioned before, the etiological rituals were also therapeutic rituals since the enacting of the etiology allowed the cultural management of the same.

Close to the theatre of the city of Epidaurus, there was an Asklepieion with a snake pit inside; the god of medicine, Asclepius, represented in fact the passage from the sacrificial ritual of insanity to its emotional staging in the polis. The tragedy is the ritual place of the polis, heir of the myths and of etiological and therapeutic rituals. Euripides enacts *pathos*, defining what many centuries later in psychology would be called temperament or character.

Characters of the tragedy summarize in themselves all the problems of the group of spectators. The events of the *dramatis persona* allocate the transpersonal as a space of tension between the SuperEgo and the Ego, represented by family ghosts emerging from the torn body of the *puer*. In tragedy, the body represents the dimension of a mask or *persona* (in Latin, *persona* means character). The latter is precisely a *dramatis persona*, who brings together the double that lies behind every character. The communicative dimension is called field. The Mask of Dionysus (Prosopon) or icon of the Divine Child is now property of the *persona* who establishes the polis on a ritual level.

The suffering identity of the institution can be found in a field characterized by the relationship between a group of spectators and group of characters. Like dream icons, characters ask to be represented, and the representation is inserted into a trans-scenic background as long as passes through both the characters and the spectators. The theatrical place is the polis, whose representative was the chorus.

At the origin of this, there was the Dionysian cult or group in a circle, in which the possessions of the god took place; in the ritual, in fact, the original ghosts are nothing more than possessions in the body. The ghostly family takes on the ritual guise of stage space, in which the dramatization of etiology or uncertainty of identity takes place. These rituals establish the therapeutic group, as a psychic network or Gestalt, in which the suffering of identity is shaped, as a passage between dissociation and reassociation of the personality: this state is represented by trance.

Roger Bastide (1976) linked together African possession rituals to the notion developed by G. Gurvitch of "de-structuring" and restructuring of character. The rituals are connected to the following phenomenology: ghost and concept of ancestor, possession and symptom. Possession is the enacting of insanity, which is possession of the metamorphic Divine Child, from whose malignant form emerges all the possessing family members.

Examples of possession are found in the Chinese *Hsieh Pin*, in the Haitian and Brazilian *Vudu*, in the Thonga and Yoruba cults and Bantu, in the Melanesian Cargo Cult, in Lycanthropy and demonic possession, in the Sardinian Assirbonadu and in the Apulian Tarantata. The possession ritual in tragedy becomes the relationship between spectator and *dramatis agersona*. The *Urszene* is now a Vorstellung (theatrical performance), and the possession is *Darstellung* or participation of the actor-spectator in the *Vorstellung* (acting). As an actor who acts, the Divine Child is a divine rascal or rather a trickster. In therapeutic rituals, the deep meaning of the Divine Child appears clearly: pure actor

or transformer endowed with symbol on, whose loss of identity is nothing other than the suspension between heaven and earth (SuperEgo and Ego) in which the persecutory family ghosts originate with the aim of keeping the discomfort of creation hermetically sealed.

Outside the circle of Dionysian rituals, Greek theater and therapeutic group ghosts become persecution or psychotic influence. The Divine Child has the task of maintaining the family ghosts he created purely as representations, scenes, ritualistic possessions; in short, frauds. The divine rascal is the mythological character of the trickster and is the one who brings creation into the world without ever go beyond the limit of theatrical representation, scenic effect, ritual, therapeutic group.

The trickster represents the problem of instability and suspension of identity of Mercury, expression (*Ausdruck*) of a visual thinking structure that encounters the mystery of animistic evasiveness (psychosis) of the cultural institution. The trickster is together death and rebirth, an alchemical *coniunctio* or a marriage between death and resurrection that generates the transmuted Mercury. Animistic evasiveness or psychosis (etymologically, psychosis has the same word root as soul and animation) transforms the actor into a possessed person without control on the dynamic instability of mood, and this instability can be characterized by hallucinations and perceptions delusional.

The complex becomes *Stimmung* or experience of completely new meanings and unpredictable with respect to the action or rather with respect to the mutual influence between actors; the actor is now being at the center of threatening—or unfamiliar—maneuvers (*Unheimlich*, uncanny). This leads to delusional past (*Whanerleb nisse*). The *dramatis persona* or *double* that transferally unites the actors becomes a monstrous multiplicity of Self or a pit overflowing and deadly of snakes.

The psychological group presents itself as an animated group incapable of organizing itself in an interactive dramatization (Menarini & Montefiori, 2013). The institution characterized by the relationship between spectators and characters (co-actor principle) becomes an autistic psychotic field. Psychosis derives from processes linked to the autistic birth of the mental field; the presence itself of interaction is pure persecution, because it destroys mental space. Mythical knowledge or cultural mega-encyclopedia takes on the configuration of a black hole, an enormous gravitational mental center in which the field and its interactions tend to collapse.

Psychodrama and analytical psychology

In the context of Greek tragedy, it is possible to affirm a substantial equality between actor and person. In fact, person is an Etruscan term, later adopted by the Greeks, which refers etymologically to the mask (*phersu*) worn by tragic actors, a mask through which social acts were expressed; behind the mask anyone could speak, and any social action could take place.

What is important to underline in this regard is that in the Greek world social acts were the deepest acts since through tragedy they represented the social group itself, therefore the polis itself. Greek tragedy combined the relationship between men and gods and resolved the profound meaning of existence against destiny. The social actor is therefore *persona* in the sense of mask, and mask is whom gives voice to society through finalized acts; *persona* is practically a mask behind which someone speaks. In other words, it is possible to underline an equivalence between the concept of *persona* and the idea of social actor who is in possession of the mechanisms of socialization and acculturation.

The actor is therefore a *persona* recognized as such precisely because s/he is placed in an environment that favors socialization and the acculturation process. *Persona* becomes that way thanks to the fact of being born and placed in a socio-cultural environment. The first social cultural environment that a human being experiences and in which a persona is the womb, idiosyncratically characterized on the basis of the infinite ways through which it is possible to carry out a pregnancy and, consequently, make a first impression on the socio-economic and cultural environment. The characteristics belonging to the *persona* will therefore be directly related to characteristics (ways of feeling, thinking, acting) of the original environment that has constituted the socializing and acculturating substrate of the *persona* since conception.

The entry of the actor in his socio-cultural environment does not necessarily imply a passive and unilateral relationship with it. The *persona* also has in themselves an action to promote their socio-cultural environment, seen as the set of collective mental representations that are expressed and observable through thought, action, and feelings. Mental representations are at the basis of the interactions between actors; therefore, the relationship between actor and environment is a one-to-one relationship of mutual transformations in become.

The psychodramatic group, if it constitutes an environment that welcomes the actors (people) into it, is itself a complex set of psychological and mental representations carried out by people. Such mental representations are not only represented by the actors, but they can be also transformed at the same time as they are embodied. Group interaction is strongly characterized by mental representation, and mental representation is a collective representation.

St. Augustine was the first to identify that social actions are a product of the internal world and that they belong to the actor's order of its internal psychological representations. Unlike the previous intellectuals, the great philosopher highlighted how mental representations were not exclusive prerogative of the divine gods who would later delegate men to receive them and give them an operational value (social act).

Thanks to this original acquisition, nowadays we can assume that the group (environment), if seen from a purely sociological perspective, assumes the guise of a set of social actions, but from a psychological perspective it constitutes a set of mental representations enacted by *personae*. From a sociological point of view, the level of analysis of the group reality remains directly linked to the action; from a psychological point of view, we access a higher level of analysis from which the action is observed.

Moreover, from a psychological point of view, social actors (*personae*) put their transformative intervention in the social environment thanks to the mental representations of the socio-cultural environment itself, in an evident transformative circularity (Menarini, 2007). The set of actions enacted is the result of a complex set of more or less shared mental representations or, said in other words, the result of a ritualistic symbolic field. In this case, Jungian psychodrama is a type of psychodrama that uses the notions of analytical psychology to highlight the strongly emotional nature of mutual influences. In particular, cultural dissociation and reassociation at the basis of the interpretation of roles is connected to the Jungian problem of the symbol seen as unifier of opposites. The dissociated aspects are therefore linked to the archetype of the Shadow. The interpretation of the role would indicate a multiplicity of possibilities for action linked to the problem of cultural identity.

The distress of cultural identity enacted by rituals are eventually connected to Jungian concepts of *complex* and *imago*. In fact, the complexes determine the social action for which the associative structure of group thought becomes the *imago* of a role to be implemented. Cultural identity and the imago are therefore conceptually inseparable, and the Ego at the level of identity develops from an incessant process of identification of the events of cultural identity/*imago*. In other words, the roles to be enacted as *imago* are reflected by the Ego; the Ego through the different enacting roles taken—or reflected on itself—is funneled into the process of identification or subjectivity.

According to Jung (1980), the "transcendent function" expresses the possibility of assuming multiple and contradicting attitudes at both conscious and unconscious level.

Conclusion

Through ritual and by the constitution of imagery, we define a biopsychosociocultural field observable both in anthropological studies and in the experience of psychotherapy. The psychotherapeutic relationship is an equivalent of the psychosensory experience of the subject taking shape and experiencing the ritual to know the foundational myth. The correspondence of psychotherapy to the anthropological study and processes is not only based on the study of a mythopoetic equivalent such as the family matrix, for example, but also a constitution and creation, on an affective basis, of a new relational and therefore transformative experience, typical of the therapeutic relationship.

From our point of view, in fact, we can say that just as ritual stands as a tool for the creation and exploration of a collective phenomenon that enables the change of an individual from one sociocultural status to another, so psychotherapy enables the crossing of the limen as a release from a saturated and etiological imaginary. Through metaphor and the study of dream icons, *dramatis personae*, and the Divine Child, we apply the Bionian concept of "non-common sense." "To associate freely with one's chosen myths would then become a way for the analyst to practice his craft, to remain fit for his work. The choice of myth to use for this purpose would constitute an indication of his scientific affiliation" (Bion, 1996, p. 231).

For example, if we examine the Oedipus myth, the analyst might through free associations come to understand elements outside the structure of the myth as such and come to the discovery of elements characteristic of his own personality and experience, in this case with respect to the relationship with parents and the dynamics associated with them. The fundamental point of this treatment, which in my opinion contains in itself a great scientific insight, can be summarized in this quote: "this type of behavior [Bion is referring to the exercise of free associations developed through myth] differs from the commonly accepted idea of analysis" (Bion, 1996, p. 231).

> It is not about the use of conscious material to interpret the unconscious; it is about using the unconscious to interpret a conscious mental state associated with facts of which the analyst is aware of. Myth interpretation will give meaning to the feelings and known facts of the analyst's life, just as the study of a large-scale map can give meaning to natural elements of the landscape clearly visible to the traveler and enable him to realize the point at which he has reached of his journey (Bion, 1996, p. 241).

This function can be found in the icon of the Divine Child, whose different attitudes concern the foundation of values and of non-values in the origin of a culture. Then, mythopoesis takes place in the cultural identity crisis precisely at the myths of origin; therefore, the therapeutic ritual is involved in the cosmogony or cultural foundation of the psychological group. Rites of passage, cultural universe in development, dissociation and reassociation of personality, complexes, imago, icon, transcendent function define the processes, for example, of a Jungian psychodrama.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

Authors' contributions

Authors contributed equally for writing, review and editing the manuscript.

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About the authors

Raffaele Menarini is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, group analyst, has taught Clinical Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the Faculty of Medicine A. Gemelli, of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. He was a university professor of Dynamic Psychology at the University of Palermo. He held the chair of Dynamic Psychology in the Free University Maria SS. Assunta, in Rome, Italy. He introduced and developed bimodal analytical psychotherapy, which allows a synthesis of individual and group psychotherapy, mainly orienting his studies around the relationship between mind, brain and society.

Domenico Agresta is a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, group-analyst and psycho-oncologist. He has taught Social Dreaming and Group Dynamic at the Faculty of Psychology, University "G. D'Annunzio", Chieti-Pescara. Member of the Group Analytic Society (GASi) Management Committee, he is the chair of the GASi Scientific Committee. Director of Training at Scuola di Psicoterapia Conversazionale (Parma, Italy) and at Istituto di Psicoterapia Analitica Antropologica Esistenziale (Pescara, Italy). He works with social dreaming matrix studying rites of passage, religious rites, and cultural contexts connecting anthropology and ethnology and group-analysis.