

International Review of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis
ISSN 2105-1038

N° 34-1/2026
Tribute to René Kaës

In conversation¹ with René Kaës* and Adele Nunziante Cesaro**

Question: Professor Kaës, your work on groups is well known here in Italy, too. It has largely been developed from the practice of group analysis established within CEFFRAP (Cercle d'Études Françaises pour la Formation et la Recherche Active en Psychologie [French Circle for the Formation and Research in Active Psychology], an organisation of which you are a member. One might say that it gave rise to the French School of psychoanalysis applied to groups. Could you briefly outline the activities and aims of CEFFRAP?

Kaës: CEFFRAP is an association founded in the early 1960s by Didier Anzieu. He brought together psychoanalysts and social psychologists who were interested in

* Psychoanalyst; Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Lyon; Member of CEFFRAP (French Circle for Training and Active Research in Psychology).

** Lecturer in Differential Psychology, Department of Relational and Communication Sciences, University of Naples.

This interview was first published under the title “A colloquio con René Kaës e Adele Nunziante Cesaro” in the *Rivista italiana di gruppoanalisi*, Vol. 11(1), 1987, pp. 93-99. We would like to thank Società Gruppoanalitica Italiana for granting us permission to publish the translation of this interview. The journal has changed its name and is now called *Antropoanalisi rivista on-line*.

Translated by Angeli Silvestri and edited by Ludovica Grassi

<https://doi.org/10.69093/AIPCF.2025.33.04> This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC BY\)](#).

¹ Editor's note: Interview conducted by Olimpia Matarazzo and Geppino Fiorenza, psychologists at the “La Ricerca Psicologica” study centre (Vico Cappuccinelle Attarsia 13, Naples), on the occasion of a seminar by Prof. Kaës, organised by Prof. Nunziante Cesaro at the University of Naples, in April 1985. The interview continued with a lively, in-depth exchange between R. Kaës and A. Nunziante Cesaro concerning theoretical and practical perspectives on training psychologists within university structures. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, this part has been omitted.



comparing their respective perspectives on group practice, particularly training groups. Around 1968, however, a more specifically psychoanalytic orientation emerged. It seemed to us that the psychosocial perspective essentially aimed to achieve a change in attitude among participants of a training group at the level of behaviour, norms, and conscious knowledge. The psychoanalytic approach, on the other hand, does not focus so much on acquiring knowledge, but rather on ensuring that the unconscious can manifest itself within a group and “surprise” each individual in their conscious and voluntary project of knowledge and transformation. In other words, we have gradually moved away from a directive approach to groups and group processes, adopting one that allows unconscious phenomena to emerge and be experienced and interpreted by group members themselves.

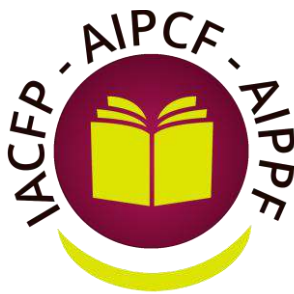
Throughout the crises that affect us as an institution, we seek to discern and explore a psychoanalytic perspective that examines group functioning and how individuals function within a group.

Question: Are the psychoanalytic categories developed within the dual framework of therapy sufficient to ‘think’ about what happens in a group, or is it necessary to rework them? In what sense?

Kaës: A first answer to this question might be that psychoanalytic theory enables us to understand what happens in a group to a certain extent because, as in all situations of existence, the unconscious is at work within the group. However, there are phenomena that have not been theorised within the framework of psychoanalysis because it was essentially constituted on the basis of a practice of individual treatment that excluded the group dimension from the intersubjective relationship. Freud founded psychoanalysis by ‘inventing’, starting with Dora’s treatment, a mechanism that shifts the intersubjective space within the subject. In the case of hysteria, the group is neutralised as a space of dramatisation, captation, domination and seduction by the apparatus that compels the hysteric to express herself verbally instead of staging her body for others in a space of representation.

His experience at the Salpêtrière with Charcot was probably one of the factors that enabled him to invent the apparatus of analysis, through which he brought about a conceptual and technical revolution, shifting the emphasis from external to internal representations.

Nunziante Cesaro: It seems to me, however, that the concept of transference accounts for the fact that, in individual treatment, the patient may occasionally have the therapist play out the various family members. The group is therefore also at play in the patient–analyst relationship: the patient’s group is projected onto the analyst, and the analyst’s internal group mobilises in countertransference. There is a risk that an inadequate understanding of this process may lead the analyst to “take sides” with



a member of the patient's group, thereby colluding with a figure from their own internal group.

Kaës: Certainly, but the concept of the inner group was developed precisely within the context of group analysis. Interestingly, Freud had theoretical insights expressed in group terms. For example, in a letter to Fliess in May 1897, he defined identification as “the plurality of psychic persons”. However, it took more than half a century to apply a group-theoretical reading to some of Freud's statements. This was made possible by changes in the analytical setting and practice whilst maintaining the same focus on listening to the unconscious. Personally, I have proposed an interpretation of what we might call the outlines of a group conception of psychism in Freud. In doing so, I reworked the concept of 'support' and the various features through which Freud thinks in group terms: identifications, primal phantasms, the ego, the second topic, and so on. Moreover, my research focuses on the group dimension of the individual that is actualised through group formations. These correspond, in a way, to two types of organisation:

- a) an organisation that could be described as structured like a system, with elements in a relationship of difference to one another and a law of composition and principle of transformation;
- (b) a structural dimension, such as the dimension of immediate communication without differentiation. This could be termed a relationship without a relationship, established even before the object of the relationship is formed, before conflict arises between subject and object, and before a structure is enacted.

Question: We would like to return to what you said earlier regarding Freud's invention of the analytical apparatus, which was founded on the exclusion of the group dimension – at least in its manifest form – from the patient–analyst relationship. We would like to ask you:

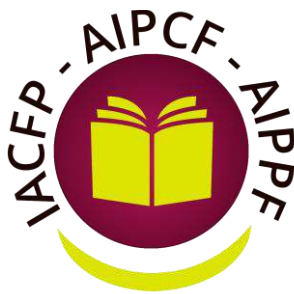
- (a) Whether this “removal” of the group dimension, which marks the birth of psychoanalysis in some way, has produced “symptomatic” manifestations in its subsequent development;*
- (b) Whether anything of this “removed” element returns when group phenomena are investigated psychoanalytically – that is, when one returns to thinking about the group by referring to a theory constituted on the basis of its exclusion.*

Kaës: I shall attempt to answer such a wide-ranging question as concisely as possible. The apparatus raises the issue of the adequacy of the theoretical object of psychoanalysis – the unconscious, its processes, its formations and its effects – in relation to the methodological approach that allows these formations to manifest themselves.



Michel Tort has highlighted how, unlike its method, the apparatus of psychoanalysis is oriented towards a therapeutic end, in the sense that it is suffering that motivates the request for analysis. However, if analysis is subordinated to a therapeutic or pedagogical aim, it becomes an ideology that aims to suppress the manifestations of the unconscious, such as slips of the tongue, suffering and symptoms. This contradiction must be recognised and accepted as intrinsic to psychoanalysis. It is perhaps even more pronounced when working with groups because they tend to set themselves a common, conscious objective that resists the manifestation of the unconscious and the redistribution of bonds on bases generally incompatible with the social order. The apparatus aims to support conscious therapeutic or training objectives, and the orientation of the various group methods tends to move in this direction. Restricting the discussion to training, a group of this type generally sets itself the conscious objective of understanding how it functions by implementing processes that foster its formation. However, the perspective from which I and CEFFRAP work is not to ensure that groups are formed, but rather to initiate and recognise the processes that contribute to forming a group.

The formation of a group for a specific purpose is an inherent aim of all institutional groups and is legitimate in itself – the university, for example, is constituted as a knowledge group. However, this is not the objective of psychoanalytic group work. Incidentally, CEFFRAP endures successive crises because it is perpetually caught between being an institution – which develops resistances and defences against the unconscious – and taking as its object the task of allowing the unconscious to manifest itself within the group setting. This creates a fundamentally contradictory situation, which is also characteristic of the psychoanalytic movement itself. To establish itself, the psychoanalytic institution had to suppress the investigation of unconscious mechanisms within the institution itself, in order to maintain orthodoxy in the setting and in psychoanalytic research, as Freud established it in treatment. This creates a contradiction: the institution has repressed that which, from the unconscious, might emerge and shatter its order – which is not that of the unconscious – whilst simultaneously being traversed and worked upon by the unconscious. This raises a point for reflection on the psychoanalytic movement and institution as a whole, and on the fact that all the splits and differentiations that have occurred within it in France have arisen precisely over issues concerning psychoanalytic transmission. This is understood as positive transmission of knowledge. Perhaps things might change if we consider that in psychoanalysis, it is not knowledge about the unconscious that is transmitted, but essentially the experience of lack – that which has emerged as lacking in the subject's history. If the psychoanalytic institution can function by conceiving of transmission as a lack, then it may be possible to work through the contradiction inherent in an institution that manages positive transmission. This would be a transmission by virtue of which analysts constitute themselves as subjects of the institution, without adequately



analysing the mobilisation of transference residues onto their own analyst, onto Freud, and onto the idealised psychoanalytic object in most cases.

Question: In Italy, your work, which was published in France in 1976 under the title L'Appareil psychique groupal, appeared under the title L'Apparato pluripsichico. Could you briefly explain this concept?

Kaës: I have sought to account for what comes into play when individuals form a group. I have proposed that, from the perspective of unconscious processes, the group is constituted by a shared psychic formation that binds its members together. The concept of the 'group psychic apparatus' explains how each individual contributes to the formation of the group as a whole through unconscious processes that create a "coherence" within which boundaries are established and exchanges are made possible between individuals and between them and the group as an object of investment and shared representation. In my view, a group begins to function when certain psychic formations – which I have termed 'group psychic organisers' – are mobilised. These are the group's structural organisers, or psychic formations that operate within each individual and take on particular significance within the group bond. Examples include the "primordial phantasms", "the body image", "family complexes", and "the image of the Group Psychic Apparatus".

I have focused particularly on the structural and organisational significance of primal phantasms because they enable the subject to 'take a position' within a scenario. This allows for the permutation of roles and the formation of relational systems between subjects based on the phantasy "a child is being beaten", where the child can be the one who beats, the one being beaten, the father, the mother, and so on. Similarly, I believe that all primal phantasies have a group structure, as does the structure of object relations when considered not only as a relation to the object, but also as a relation to the object of the object.

Alongside structural organisers, it is also possible to identify genetic organisers that follow one another in the group's history, as Anzieu does. Personally, I am less interested in pursuing this line of enquiry because adopting a genetic perspective risks introducing norms into the description of a process. In contrast, a structural perspective does not require one to account for "progress", but rather allows one to highlight changes in structure and movement. My interest lies precisely in changes in structures, which distinguishes my approach from the Lacanian one, which identifies stable, unmodifiable elements in structures.

Question: What is the relationship between your conception of the group and those of Bion and Foulkes?

Kaës: Clearly, Bion, Foulkes, Ezriel, D. Napolitani and ourselves at CEFFRAP are all, in one way or another, seeking to account for the structuring of the group bond



and how it is organised. I place great emphasis on the correlation between what is constituted through intersubjective and transsubjective play, and internal psychic formations. In other words, I focus on the connection between group processes and individual psychic processes. I am essentially interested in understanding what, in the individual, is related to the group and makes them not only a “speaking being” (*parlêtre*), as Lacan puts it, but also a “groupal being”. I frequently use this formulation because it can be traced back to Freud’s own writings. For example, he says that identification is formed by the plurality of psychic persons and speaks of multiple personalities or ‘conglomerate persons’ in the formation of dreams, as well as the psychic work that brings about group formations.

Foulkes and Bion focus more on analysing the group as a whole. I am interested in this perspective too, but I also seek to apply what I learn from the group’s functioning to studying the structures of the individual subject. Why do I do this? Because I do not believe there is continuity between the group’s logic and that of the individual subject. I do not, of course, believe that there are two unconscious minds. Moreover, Freud himself emphasises this point when he states that individual psychology is a social psychology and when he argues that unconscious processes that have also been found in the *Individualseele*, or individual psyche, can be recognised in the *Massenseele*, or psyche of the masses, groups and institutions. Freud continually highlights the existence of both continuity and divergence between individual and collective logic. I am trying to work on these continuities and differences precisely. One of the differences to which D. Napolitani drew my attention in a 1972 text concerns the body and corporeality. The individual psychic apparatus is founded on the body, whereas the discourse and dreams that unfold within a group make the group a body. However, the group only has a body through the metaphor or metonymy of the body; it is the various forms it takes on that lead to the formation of a group spirit.

Question: This line of research, which seeks to identify group-related elements within the individual rather than equating the group with the individual, is interesting.

Kaës: I am convinced of the need to differentiate between group, family and institution levels, and at the same time, I am convinced of the need to conceive of the individual subject as traversed by these formations. I am interested in analysing the ways in which the unconscious operates within impersonal, transindividual formations such as Institution, Culture and Language, which become personalised in each person’s history. This is why I am interested in the unconscious transmission of psychic formations: transmission occurs through the unconscious, the constitution of the subject and relationships between subjects. In other words, we need to develop a theory that accounts for how the unconscious is transmitted not only vertically,



across generations, but also horizontally, through discourse and the institutions that underpin it.