

## Obituary

# Nicolás Caparrós (1941-2021): A universal group analyst

Arturo Ezquerro

I met Nicolás Caparrós in August 1995, in Buenos Aires, at the XII Congress of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy. It was an honour for me to have him attend one of the seminars I gave on the antagonistic and complementary aspects of the Bionian and Foulkesian approaches to group therapy.

Nicolás was intrigued by the fact that I had recently completed my training at the Institute of Group Analysis, after conducting my group at the “rival” institution, the Tavistock Clinic in London. No student at the Institute had tried this experiment before since both models were considered mutually exclusive and incompatible. This view was the result not only of differences in therapeutic technique but also of a dynamic of complex political loyalties.

Nicolás had a profound capacity for integration and, in his conception of the group and group dynamics, he creatively used ideas from Enrique Pichón-Riviere, Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, René Kaës, Wilfred Bion and Siegmund Foulkes, among others. His interest in my hybrid experience as a student led the two of us to meet up, together with our respective partners (Isabel Sanfeliu and María Cañete), after the seminar. Nicolás and Isabel invited me to publish the work on Bion and Foulkes in the journal *Clínica y Análisis Grupal*, which Nicolás had co-created two decades earlier.

That was the beginning of a frequent, continuous and stimulating collaboration of articles, translations, virtual meetings, working lunches, conferences and books; which continued until his death. My intellectual bond with him became a professional bond and led to an affectional bond: Nicolás was a teacher, a colleague and a friend.

By chance of fate, Nicolás Caparrós was born in 1941 in Madrid, a city devastated by the Spanish Civil War, to a family with deep roots in Almería (Andalusia). He studied medicine from 1959 to 1964 with the intention of working in mental health. During his training as a psychiatrist, he drew on ideas from the antipsychiatry movement, as well as from existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism and psychoanalysis, especially Kleinian and Freudian.

One of his doctoral theses was on the evolution of Freud's thought, through the study of the correspondence that the father of psychoanalysis had throughout his professional life. Subsequently, Nicolás published four critical volumes based on elaborations from this PhD thesis.

In 1968, he worked as a clinical assistant at the Maudsley Hospital, in London, and became familiar with the radical treatment of psychotic patients at Kingsley Hall. Upon his return to Spain, one of his important achievements as a young doctor was the Headship of clinical services at the National Psychiatric Hospital of Leganés, where he contributed to the development of a culture of social psychiatry and democratic group therapy that humanized the treatment of chronic and marginalized patients.

From 1972 to 1974 he worked as a professor at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Buenos Aires. During his stay in Argentina, he met Pichón-Riviere and continued his psychoanalytic and group-analytic training.

Nicolás had an active teaching and institutional life. In 1975, he founded the Quipú Psychotherapy Group, of which he was director until 1998. This very year, he co-created Imago Psychoanalytic Clinic with Isabel Sanfeliu. In 1988, he co-founded with Juan Campos the Spanish Society for Psychotherapy Psychoanalysis and Group Development, (SEGPA), of which he was president from 1991 to 2000; he then became honorary president for life. The journal *Clínica y Análisis Grupal*, which had been launched in 1976, expanded its academic function to also become a political voice for SEGPA.

In his work as a psychoanalyst and group analyst, Nicolás was inspired by Pinchón-Riviere who proposed a “*teoría del vínculo*” (theory of the bond), in which the bond was defined as a particular relationship with an object or person, which leads to the establishment of a more or less stable behavioural pattern with the said object or person (both external and internal). This pattern tends to repeat itself automatically and unconsciously. Through the relationship with that person, a history of emotional ties determined in time and space is reproduced with different nuances.

Undoubtedly, this notion of the bond is very closely related to the concept of attachment that John Bowlby originally presented to the British Psychoanalytic Society in 1957 and later extended to his conception of group attachment.

With an eminently psychosocial approach to human development throughout the life cycle, the study of bonding and attachment relationships is a qualitative leap in psychoanalytic theories, which predominantly focused on intrapsychic processes.

Nicolás conceived the bond as a dynamic structure in continuous evolution, which encompasses both the subject and the object, with characteristics considered normal and some alterations interpreted as pathological. In turn, he developed his own theoretical framework and clinical approach, which he called *modelo analítico vincular* (analytical and bonding model) elaborated in two original volumes which he published in 1992.

Nicolás pointed out that the analysis of the pathological bond that patients establish with other people can enable them to understand how it disturbs the normal structuring of the personality, and can help therapists decide the type of interventions which would correct the pathological bond more effectively with a view to promoting and protecting healthy personality development.

His approach to therapeutic groups, from this analytic and bonding model, privileged the relational aspects over the contents. Of course, the contents he dealt with preferentially were the consequences generated by the current relationships in the group.

In 1999, Nicolás contributed to a volume published by the International Library of Group Analysis, with an invigorating and original chapter on group psychotherapy of the psychoses. Here, he argued that healthy attachment relationships or affectional bonds are established after the individual has reached a sufficient degree of psychic separation, which allows for perceiving and accepting the other as different from oneself. Often, in many psychotic patients (and in some non-psychotic ones), this healthy developmental process has been disrupted early in life.

In his technique as a group psychotherapist, Nicolás was decidedly idiosyncratic, integrative and inclusive. We may say that he was a Bionian, intellectually, when it came to defining unconscious defence mechanisms.

However, his interventions within the group had a more distinct Foulkesian essence, as he put the emphasis on communication. Foulkes had sought to keep communication alive in his groups, to the point of considering it identical to the process of therapy itself. For Nicolás, communication generates the group, defines it and maintains it.

In 2004, Nicolás produced a comprehensive monographic volume on the origin and meaning of the group at multiple levels, with the contribution of several authors amongst whom I was fortunate to find myself. Based on anthropological studies and on the theory of evolution, Nicolás hypothesized that “the group created humankind”. This conception, which gave the book its title, is one of the many expressions of the intuitive quality and uniqueness of Nicolás's thinking.

Undoubtedly, from an evolutionary perspective, the human group gradually became an adaptive structure in the service of survival. We are social animals; our sociability and our group attachment progressed as responses that can maximise survival in the face of evolutionary pressures and threats, in a hostile and changing environment.

Nicolás's epistemological instinct led him to co-direct with Rafael Cruz Roche a monumental piece of work: *Journey to Complexity*. This is an unprecedented transdisciplinary adventure, through the sciences and arts that configure the current perspective of knowledge, through four volumes that cover different levels of integration, published in 2012 and 2013.

- The first volume addresses a level of physical integration: From the Big Bang to the origin of life.
- The second volume seeks a level of biological integration: From the origin of life to the emergence of the psyche.
- The third volume studies a level of psychic integration: The psyche. A hyper-complex process.
- The fourth volume explores a level of social integration: The complexity of the social. The fabric of life.

I have an existential debt to Nicolás for having involved me in this huge project, which is a solid and indelible exponent of his legacy.

In short, Nicolás has been a tremendously prolific and creative person, as a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, group analyst, writer and teacher. He published about 100 scientific articles and is the author or editor of 35 books. He contributed to the training of several generations of psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, group analysts and social workers in Spain and in Latin America.

His deep attachment to his origins, as a good son of Almeria, made him even explore the historical novel genre as a way of unleashing his curiosity about Al-Andalus, the reigning culture of his ancestors for eight centuries. We may say that, through his erudition, his magnanimity and his social awareness, Nicolás became a timeless caliph of psychoanalysis and group analysis. He was, indeed, a true polymath.

During the six long years of cruel fight against cancer, Nicolás continued to be a source of inspiration and a good role model to the very end. He never stopped sharing his encyclopaedic knowledge, his serene reflections and his humanism – as a beacon, an encouragement and a reward that keep on after his death.

For me, Nicolás has been a gift of life. In addition to his wisdom and his infectious creativity, he was a person who exuded generosity, affection, and loyalty.

Nicolás was fortunate to share his journey with Isabel Sanfeliu, his soul mate, his love, his secure base, his deep bond and his reliable attachment figure, during each and every one of the last 40 years of his life.

Isabel, with the beauty of her character, her therapeutic style, her intellectual, literary and organizational capacity, and her order within the complexity of a turbulent world, has been the perfect match that has given more meaning to the being of Nicolás.