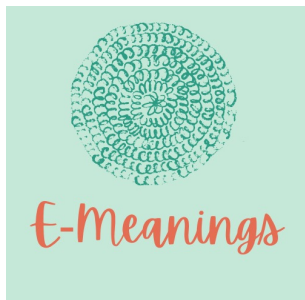




What happens when the family system encounters the work system and the school system during a pandemic?

Part 2

What happens when the family system encounters the work system and the school system during a pandemic?

Learning and working during lockdown

Welcome to the second in our series of three articles reflecting on our E-Meanings project, undertaken in the UK & Ireland, and in parallel in Italy, during the spring 2020 lockdown, and concluding in September 2020. Our project looked to examine the intersection of the family, work, and home-schooling systems during this first lockdown. In the first article, we introduced the project, and examined some of the emerging differences and opportunities presenting in both groups.

This article focuses on the group participants' experiences of learning and working during lockdown, and the challenges faced by both parents and children during this time.

Working during lockdown: from unthought rules to uncertainty

The experience of working parents during the Covid-19 lockdown has been characterised by a complex contrast of emotions - a product of encountering a new way of cohabiting. Family systems are often characterised by a denial of unconsciously accepted rules of the game (Carli & Paniccia, 2000). These rules push away a 'strange' element for the survival of the system.

Confronted with the fast/global changes which have characterised the Covid-19 lockdown, parents have had to find many new roles. Parents also have had to integrate these new roles very quickly. In a short space of time, parents have been 'asked' to form a new working-from-home identity alongside a new parenthood identity and therefore renegotiate the often 'unthought rules of the game' within family relationships.

The challenges of addressing the complex demands of lockdown, and to integrate the work, family, and home-schooling systems, resulted in many participants expressing feelings of inadequacy. These expressions took the form of a swing between a sense of omnipotence and impotence. The feelings also produced a sense of idealisation - taking the form of the group criticising themselves or criticising the experience of reflecting together.

We reflect that the difficult group dynamics mirrored the difficulty of managing the complicated, intersections of the family, work and home-schooling systems that our project examined. Participants may have felt a subtle fear of being criticised themselves - by teachers, their family, neighbours, or their boss. This difficult to identify fear was expressed back into the group, sometimes via the consultants.

This swing between omnipotence and impotence expressed itself during several sessions; we were confronted with the *idealised bubble* where the family felt defended against two key *enemies*; 'the virus', and also the fear of uncertainty. This sense of a *bubble* was strongly brought by fathers in the IRL/UK group.

Lockdown messaging in the UK shifted during our project, and feelings of protection and idealisation may be considered as reactions to the change in demands from citizens, in order to minimise the spread of Covid-19. The initially strong message of '*stay at home*' represented a norm, and evoked emotions of protection and isolation. In contrast, the latter message of '*stay alert*' implies a sense of self-responsibility and self-authorisation.

The challenging and changing passage as our participant's navigated these demands was strongly felt in the groups. In our second session in the UK, (which coincided with the change in messaging), one participant's drawing, illustrated the outdoors and felt very pertinent (*see figure 1, below*).

The tree seemed to represent a protected exterior *bubble*, and we made the association, in the group, of a representation of an empty city full of contrast in this sketch - a whirlwind ushering uncertain change, and an unbalanced and dangerous catapult, on the verge of moving. We felt the pain of the transition was well represented in this sketch; vulnerability was perhaps represented by the precarious stack of wood waiting to be knocked over by the pendulum/wind.

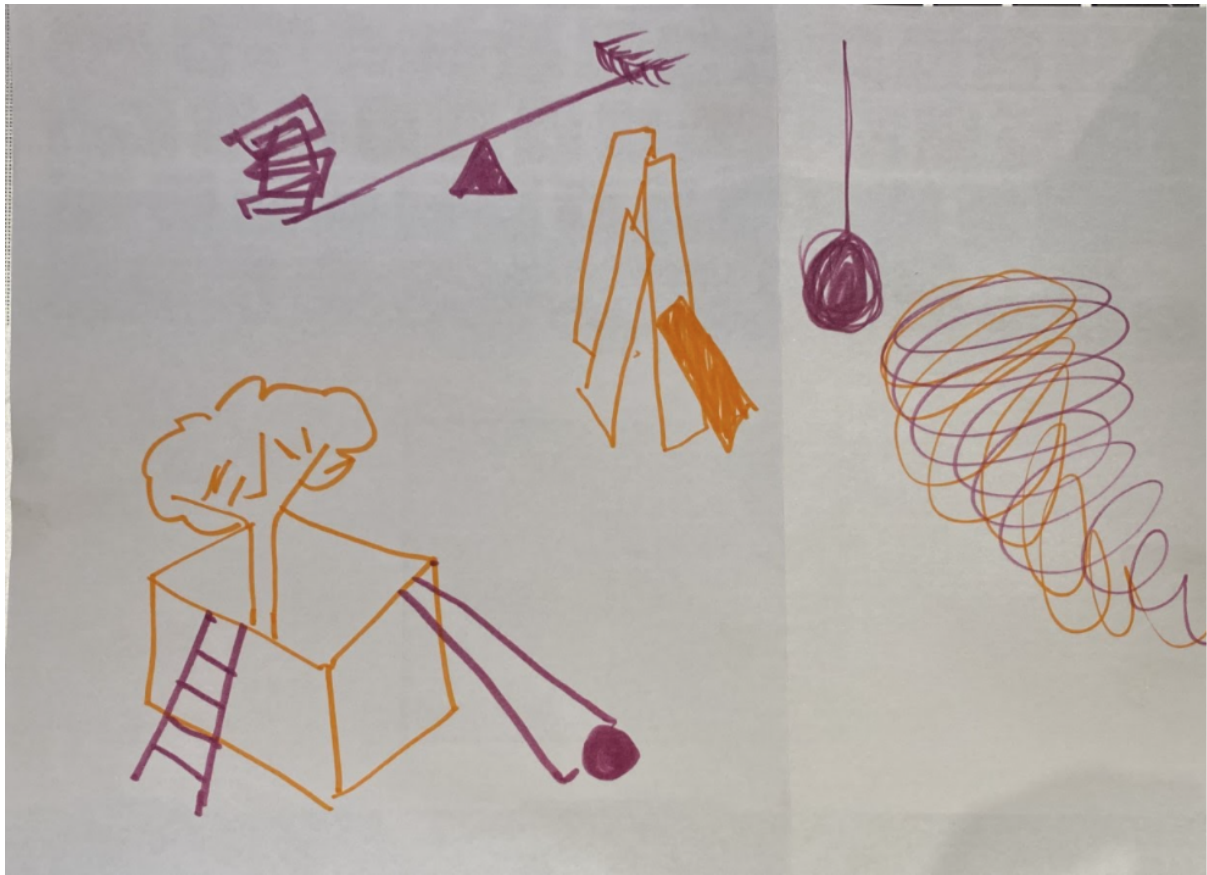


Figure 1: The illustration of the first lockdown experience in London

A second drawing illustrated the difficulty of choosing which direction to take; the dilemma of school re-opening, returning to work in the office, and of assimilating new identities into a 'new normal' (see *figure 2, below*). In the session, we reflected a feeling of a vortex being created, one which yet somehow manages to keep the three systems apart, as they finish their journey from 'me' going in whichever direction they choose.

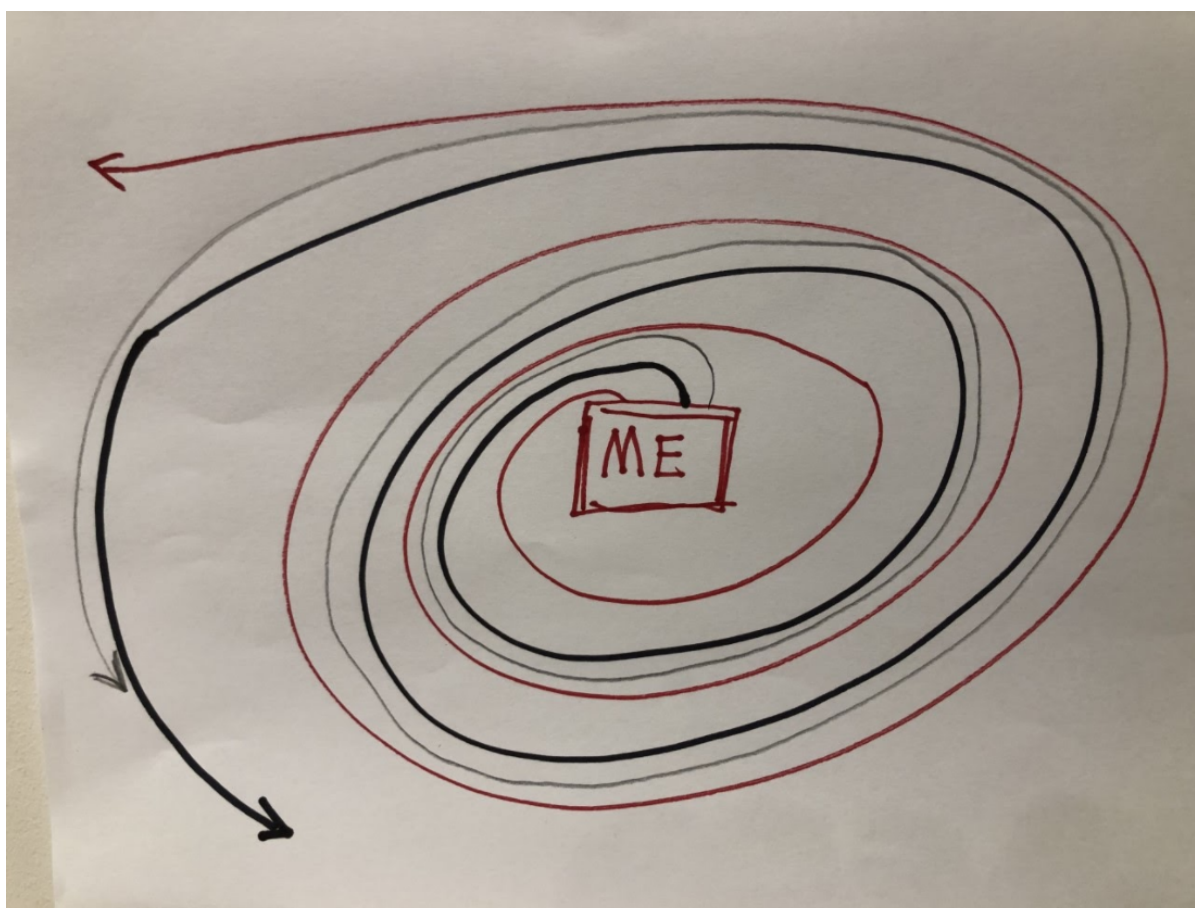


Figure 2: The dilemma presented by managing the intersection of the family, work and home-schooling systems, represented by the three arrows

Findings from the Italian Workshop

In contrast with the UK/IRL group, a feeling of impotence characterised the first session with the Italian mothers. This group brought the challenge of taking up the role of teacher to the session. This difficult role could also be connected to the urge to contain the complex emotional experience for their children. For many children, the loss of the school system was very difficult. They missed the school network, the teacher/pupil relationship, and the socialisation, and rhythm of the school day. What began as a temporary measure, became a complex task for parents, adding to the task of working from home, doing schoolwork, and looking after the family.

In the first Italian workshop, participants were discovering and confronting their experience. This group was more explicit than the IRL/UK group. The group activated many feelings of guilt and envy within fellow participants. Some of the participants felt guilty for being seen to be perhaps having had a 'nice time' during lockdown. Or, alternatively, they were envious for not having 'had a good

time'. The *split* of the experiences between *good* and *bad* (Klein, 1946) was so strong that it was also difficult for us to initially make sense of it.

This sense of a strong polarisation challenged group participation during the rest of the project. Mothers from the south of Italy struggled most during the workshop, highlighting a social conflict that the pandemic has accentuated in the different Italian territories. The sense that the virus migrated from the north to the south had activated a feeling of anger. During the first workshop, we felt feelings of blame being expressed by mothers from the south, towards mothers from the north of Italy. These feelings prevented the group from establishing a safe space for the exploration of the here and now experiences. These overwhelming feelings of anger inhibited group thinking, and partially prevented participants from engaging in the reflective part of the workshops.

Anxiety and anger can prevent individuals and groups from working through their issues and challenges. In order for workshops to find new spaces for exploration, creating a safe space is key; but this can be challenging when society is experiencing unsafe times. Our systems-psychodynamic facilitation of the groups is focused on building a sense of curiosity to explore issues that are difficult; we focus on building a sense of psychological safety.

Working through uncertainty whilst reflecting about group dynamics, gave participants the opportunity to both hold uncertainty, *and* find their desire to deeply examine their situation. This allowed both individuals, and the group, to find a new perspective on their experiences. It also allowed the participants an opportunity to recognise their experiences mirrored in others, building a sense of shared meaning.

School at home

As discussed in the first article, the school system felt quite different in the two cultures. Schools, even less than workplaces, were generally not prepared to shift their learning to online platforms at the outbreak of the virus. Teachers who are used to having students together in one classroom have to adapt their program, and teaching methods. They have had to take on new roles and form new relationships with both parents and pupils.

Alongside this process of parents forming new roles and relationships, the school system and the family system encountered each other for the first time, forming a complex and almost unknown new reality.

We found that school cultures based on flexibility and openness were perceived better by parents than schools with more rigid cultures. Rigid culture schools created struggles in the schoolchildren, which were reproduced in parent-child home-schooling relationships. The group reflected that it was helpful if the parent could discuss their perception of the school's rigidity with the child, and to find the time to be open about their feelings of compliance with the school's online demands - especially if these seemed unrealistic or punitive.

School is not just a learning institution, it is also a system of belonging - a social system - and, as parents have struggled with integrating their working identities, so children may have found it challenging to adapt to online learning.

The function of creating a new system of belonging was mostly left to parents. In Italy, our project found that this task was left almost entirely to mums. Within the many images brought by the participants during the session, the image of *impastare* (an Italian expression for "putting one's hands in the flour") came up a lot in the sessions. *Impastare*/knead is to compress two elements into one new cohesive and integrated form - as in Donald Winnicott's child development theory (1965). In his child development theory, Winnicott describes the process of integration (bread) of children's psyche that starts from an unintegrated psychic state (the flour) and is facilitated by parents' presence and holding (the container/mixing bowl).

Kneading together elements to create a shared system

Bread (flour and water) is a primitive food, in that its constituent parts are very simple and connected to the earth. Bread is also produced by the act of kneading.

In Italy people stopped buying 'trendy/exotic' foods; there was a shift back to ancestral foods - and simple but very effective sources of nourishment. In this scenario, simplicity can be interpreted as a regression to primitive childhood experiences. Making bread with children is regaining the capacity to nurture in opposition to the sense of impotence felt in the teaching role.

Through simple and primitive activities, and getting stuck together in a small radius, parents and children were forced to find a new system of belonging. A theme emerged of parents regressing to a time of their own childhood, and forming a strong safety/dependency system, thereby integrating the family and home-schooling systems. This helped many parents to reconcile the demands of lockdown 1.0.

If in Italy we had the image of kneading bread, the UK/IRL group presented an immersive experience; for this group, this was an immersion in nature. The decision of the UK government to allow people to go out for exercise made a large impact on the working parent experience.

Nature became like a fantasy 'extra room' in the house, but also a supporting system. In Ireland and the UK, the opportunity to spend some time outdoors allowed parents and their children to also find in nature, a new system of belonging where they could discover a new way to learn and be together.

In contrast to the simplicity of Italian bread, in the UK/IRL, a sense of coming together wasn't so focused on tradition; cooking and coming together, it felt more of a novelty, with more exotic foods being emphasised. For instance, foods from Asia featured. These perhaps represented a fantasy of travel which was split off (Klein, 1946) from reality.

We connect an emancipatory desire in the cooking practice to the ambivalence expressed toward the school system. Although UK parents initially 'went along' with schoolteacher's home education requests, this receded. Parents became rebellious, taking ownership of their children's education - promoting reading over homework, and nature over zoom classes; this put them in conflict with the online, formal home-schooling system.

Our work touched on some aspects of the challenges of home-schooling and highlighted the importance of school as a system of belonging and social interaction. The Covid-19 outbreak offered a complex but rich opportunity to connect parents to their children's education, and to the purpose of the school system. From two systems somehow unknown to each other, both taken for granted, lockdown offered the possibility of a connection to be re-thought, and for new collaboration to be considered, e.g. what can emerge now that parents appreciate or can be critical of, the roles of teacher and school.

Conclusion

Our analysis highlighted the importance of creating a space for reflecting and integrating changing roles and new societal rules. Negotiating the demands of working from home and managing the home-schooling and family systems, centres on finding the capacity to adapt to change and the curiosity to make sense of the experience as learning one.

Organisations and education institutions are also tasked to create systems of belonging and participation of members with multiple memberships and associated identities. In order to achieve such a challenging task is it fundamental to focus on shared and negotiated objectives, and implicit and explicit co-living rules.

In the next - and last - article we will address how our findings came together and were moved by the desire to make this experience of the pandemic a valuable resource to a reflective consulting process.

About us:

E-meanings is a consulting group formed of three consultants from the UK, Ireland and Italy with skills and experiences in organisational change, social research and psychoanalysis. We share a systems-psychodynamic approach, and complement it with three perspectives: an affective neurosciences approach, a data and social psychological perspective, and a cognitive behavioural psychotherapeutic approach.

We offer consultation for individuals, groups, and organisations in transition and change, remote working, resilience, conflict resolution and more. If you or organisation are interested in discovering more about how we can help, please get in touch.

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