

The Nature and Use of The Lowenfeld World Technique in Work with Children and Adults

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A. Introduction

During the last six weeks of my stay in the United States I have had occasion to meet and hear about certain uses to which part of my world apparatus is being put as a test for traits of temperament and personality which diverge so widely from the uses for which this equipment was devised that they cause me considerable anxiety. It is not that I disapprove of batteries of tests or have any desire to restrict the use of any material that I have devised, but that I am anxious that my whole research and therapeutic method, of which this equipment is a part, should not be misunderstood or distorted when part of the equipment is borrowed and adapted to a different purpose.

My primary concern is the investigation of a relatively unexplored aspect of children's thought and sensorial experience and the devising of techniques and equipment to make this exploration possible.

The puzzle of man's forgetfulness of his childhood. has for long years exercised a fascination over writers and poets.

Not in utter forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come...

wrote Wordsworth, and the autobiographical shelves of our libraries are filled with volumes in which the writer tries to recapture the “feel” and quality of his early experiences. There is a common consent in these writers that there is a vividness in the earlier experiences of childhood, which is never recaptured in later life, and much modern art is concerned with an attempt to recapture once more the naivete of childhood.

When Freud set out to pierce the curtain that hung between his neurotic patients’ awareness of their motives and the actual facts of their behaviour, it was this amnesia for the events and experiences of childhood that particularly riveted his attention. When he succeeded in opening the doors that barred out that region, the scene that was disclosed bore no relation to the poet’s intuition. Infancy and childhood were seen to be periods dominated by forces whose influence extended throughout life, although an awareness of their existence did not reach consciousness, and that, moreover, this failure to remember arose from the very nature of the forces themselves and their un- acceptability within the structure of the culture in which the child grows up.

Through the use of specialized techniques Freud was able to trace the development of these forces from their earliest forms of manifestation through to their expressions in adult life. Anna Freud and Melanie Klein and their pupils have devoted their effort to the reverse process, to building up a picture of these actual forces *in statu nascendi*.

The picture that emerges in this way contains little or nothing of the poet’s description, yet it is difficult to rid one’s mind of a haunting feeling that somehow something here is true. How is it to be put to the test? Which is the correct view of infantile experience? Or are both true? Is the earlier view quite incorrect, or is it a screen memory to hide a more painful truth from view? This doubt has been well voiced by Schachtel in his paper “On Memory and Childhood Amnesia” (2). “The incompatibility,” he writes, “of early childhood experiences with the categories and organization of adult memory is to a large extent due to what I call the conventionalization of adult memory,” and in the pages which follow he works out in detail the consequences of this conception.

Interesting as this statement is, it remains a theoretical conception, unless its contentions can be tested, and means be found by which direct contact can be made with the interior experiences of children in terms which allow of direct and repeated study.

In the years immediately preceding 1929 I set myself to design an instrument which would accomplish that end, and a paper published in 1939 entitled "The World Pictures of Children" (1) sets out the course of the endeavour.

At that time, I described the task as follows:

A child does not think linearly as the adult is capable of doing; thought, feeling, concept, and memory are all inextricably interwoven. A child's thought is fluid, and movement can take place upon several planes at once. An apparatus therefore which will give a child power to express his ideas and feelings must be independent of skill and must be capable of the representation of thoughts simultaneously and in several planes at once, must allow of representation of movement and yet be sufficiently circumscribed to make a complete whole, must combine elements of touch and sensation as well as sight.

B. The Apparatus

After much thought on this subject, I finally designed a piece of apparatus which seemed to fulfil these conditions. This consists essentially of a metal tray, three inches deep, painted blue inside, and set upon a table at waist height to the user. With this tray are provided sand, preferably of two colours, in sufficient quantity to make quite high erections possible within the tray, and a good supply of water. The exact optimum size and shape of the tray will probably be found to vary in different countries and should be in harmony with the proportions of notebooks, typing paper, etc., in general use. (It is convenient for manipulation often to have the metal tray as a lining to a wooden one, in the ends of which handles are fitted for easy shifting of the tray.) For use with this tray, a cabinet of shelves is provided on which (or within which) is a large collection of small objects, representing the ordinary people and objects found in the

world around. There is no formula for these, as a good deal depends upon what is available in the country in which the apparatus is being used, but the following is a classified list of the items that should appear in any collection.

PEOPLE: Divide into Types:

1. *Ordinary*, men, women and children in ordinary and city clothes, country people, and laborers and workmen with tools; police men and women; farmers and farmers' wives. (All figures of whatever kind should include figures sitting as well as standing and if soldiers, should contain also running and lying figures.)
2. *Military*, all ordinary sorts of soldiers, guns and tanks. If possible, some soldiers should be added from a country not known to the children, because many battles staged are between "unknown" adversaries, and care should at all points be taken to prevent a slide into an ordinary little boy's "playing with soldiers".
3. *Special*, this class includes circus figures, witches and gnomes, and people of other cultures, such as Eskimo, Chinese, etc.

Houses- These should contain large houses and small, shops, stations, churches, schools, and any other type of building that can be obtained.

Trees- There should be as many varieties as possible, large and small, bushes and hedges, and if possible "jungle" trees.

Fences- These are important and should be in large quantity and include gates and bridges.

ANIMALS: Divide into Wild and Tame

1. *Wild* should include the timid as well as the fierce animals, and as many types as possible, including wild birds.

2. *Tame* includes farm animals and birds, several sorts of horses, domestic animals and “young” of each species wherever possible. Where the sexes differ in appearance, it is important to have both.

TRANSPORT: *Divide into Types:*

1. *Road*. Here there should be represented the form of transport most usual on the country's roads, but the fascination of unfamiliar toys makes the addition of some of these wise.

2. *Rail*. There should be several sizes of railroad cars, with open and closed cars and coal cars.

3. *River and Sea*. Boats of all kinds are important and should contain ordinary sea traffic and military traffic.

Street Signs - should be as varied as possible and include gasoline pumps, telephone boxes, etc.

Miscellaneous

As interest in this type of toy increases in the general population, so manufacturing firms tend to bring out new miniature items. These should be added, either to the relevant classification, or to the miscellaneous drawer. Such items include garden equipment, flowers, small pieces of domestic equipment: vacuum cleaners, school desks, lavatories, etc. For the complete expression of their interior thought, however, the children need less definite material, such as planks, blocks, broken parts of objects and people, plasticine, sticks and stones. Children are very definite in their use, once they have discovered the possibilities in the material, and will search until they find what they need.

C. Storage of the Material

One of the essentials of the apparatus and its use is that the toys themselves should not offer suggestions to the child, and that the child should not be overwhelmed by a multiplicity of choice. On the other hand, it is essential that there be a large quantity of material, so that "crowds" can be represented, or "a battle," or "a fierce jungle," etc., and each item in the above list should therefore exist in above five or six examples so that a feeling of richness is given to the child using the material, and all representations are facilitated. It is, however, important that the factor of suggestion be reduced to a minimum in the use of the material, and therefore the most satisfactory form of storage is a cabinet of drawers which pull out to their fullest extent but do not take completely out, and where one drawer must be shut up to allow the opening of the next. In ideal cases the whole should lock with a "roll top" front.

D. Presentation of The Material

It is wise when using the material for a number of children, or when it is in constant use, to keep two trays continuously available, one which is allowed to remain wet, and one dry. According to the age of the child using the apparatus, so the introduction is either (for preschool children) quite informal, consisting of nothing more than showing them the tray, sand and water, and telling them they may do something with it, to a fairly elaborate introduction to the sceptical adolescent. Here the analogy of the Japanese garden is very useful. Younger children are unlikely to want or to appreciate the smaller or special material and employ normally only the simple categories such as "people," "animals," "trains," "automobiles." Trees and houses of the simplest kind are sometimes selected but it is important that the adult keep unobtrusive control of the situation so that no wild handling or destructive play with this particular apparatus is possible. With older children each drawer is pulled out by the demonstrator in a casual manner, and its contents shown. The child is then told he can do anything he likes with the material on the tray.

E. Record

World material is unsuitable for use as a test of any sort, and apart from the single case of mentally defective children and very disturbed children, nothing valuable is likely to accrue from a first world. To get any value out of the material the user must find his way to an understanding of the possibilities of the material and gradually come to "find himself" in the medium, if it is to yield a really rich harvest. Careful record, therefore, of exactly what is done by each child at each use of the world material is very important, and this record must contain the maker's own description of it and his reaction to it, both in detail and as a whole. Record should be made at the time by the worker in cooperation with the child, a diagram being made in pencil. of the child's description and the world itself, each item in it being carefully noted. As soon as any observer sets out to make such a record, an immediate difficulty arises. Words used in their ordinary grammatical sense and construction do not express what has been created, something new is needed. To meet this need a series of terms have been invented, such as "a going-alongness" to describe worlds in which rail, road, and river transport are combined together on a track in the tray, which at one time is said by the maker to be a road and at another a river. Children use this apparatus in a very large number of different ways, and the main characteristic of their use, once the first strangeness of the material has worn off, is its unexpectedness. No object therefore, and no arrangement of objects, should be taken at its face value, but careful inquiry made of the child as to what exactly each object in the world is to be recorded as being. It is essential for the proper understanding of the nature and use of this technique that no interpretation be given by the therapist to the child. The purpose is to explore the as yet insufficiently known aspects of a child's inner experience. This can only be done through careful adherence to and study of the meanings and the connections that the child himself has made.

F. Discussion

As soon as even a minimum experience of this apparatus has been gained, three observations will be made:

1. That in children considerations of “reality, gravity,” or “common sense” are suspended. In instructing children it should be specifically said that any idea, whether likely or reasonable or not, should be taken (for example, putting trees upside down) and recorded.

2. That the mere fact of making a series of worlds, and having them recorded, in itself brings about amelioration in the disturbances and discomforts of some children.

3. That, when taken together, often a series of worlds will display a connected line of thought, with an interior logic of its own. It is because of the rich potentialities which experience has shown to be in the extended use of the apparatus that it is essential to realize that a first world is unlikely to yield any but superficial characteristics.

Through study of these worlds, and of other similar material, achieved through the use of other cognate pieces of technique, I have come to the conclusion that there exists an aspect of interior experience, not only in children, but persisting throughout life, which is of profound importance to man, but which has so far been insufficiently studied. This aspect is concerned with man’s sensorial and proprioceptive experience, his thoughts about them, and the affect which arises in response to the meanings that a child imputes to this aspect of his experience. It is this aspect of the interior life that the world material reveals. The special contribution of the method is that it makes it possible to study the way in which the particular individual using it has structured his own proprioceptive experience.

To achieve this end, however, it is essential that certain conditions be observed, namely:

1. A deep tray must be used as the basis of the apparatus.
2. It must be waist high to the individual, so that the "world" can be made in it with his hands.
3. There must be an ample supply of sand and water, so that the maker may model any type of contour, and place objects anywhere in or on this sandy base.
4. There must be a wide supply of objects in ample number, including many of each kind.
5. Understanding of any but the most superficial layers of a child's thought cannot be obtained from a first world, except in the case of mentally deficient or very seriously disturbed children.

References

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