

On Lowenfeld and Child Psychology

By Thérèse Woodcock

Department of Psychiatry, Developmental Psychiatry Section

University of Cambridge

Talk given on 2nd July 1993

This morning I wish to explore with you Margaret Lowenfeld's view of psychotherapy, particularly psychotherapy with children.

As always I want to start from personal experience, yours, mine and others.

1. Pen and paper: Start with the number 4 we have all heard it said that 2 and 2 makes 4, think of as many ways as you can to arrive at that number. (Go around and write on board)

Now, when it comes to being face to face with a child, it is a somewhat similar situation. That is, you may have some general principles of development and health as you have about mathematical calculations, but you have as yet to discover how this child has come to be in your presence now. Because, for the child, growing up is like being asked to get to 4 (here, I am simplifying hugely) - and as we have just seen in our little exercise, the child has many choices.

2. When we were doing that mini exercise just now, you will have noticed several things: there were some basic sums which most if not everyone will have thought of, but there were some which some people and not others did think of, and there were a few which possibly no one else had thought of.

My next question, therefore, is how do ideas, thoughts, all kinds of thoughts, come into peoples' minds? Are there any limitations, apart from the limitation of talent?

Whilst on the subject of arithmetic. I would like to quote from Albert Einstein. His view of himself and his work was very much circumscribed by his view of God. Here, I would like to quote him directly from the biography by Ronald Clark - p. 33 – That is why he was unable to accept The (Heisenberg) Uncertainty Principle inherent in the Theory of Quantum Mechanics, which, and here again I quote Clark - p. 325-326, So history and personal belief come together to influence what is an acceptable thought.

This is important in relation to our attempts to understand individual people, both in regard to our own beliefs as well as that of the people we hope to help. We need to acknowledge that our Truth may obscure our view of the Truth of the other. In this connection, I would like to recount a delightful but true story: An ethnobotanist called Richard Schultes, the Emeritus Director of the Harvard Botanical Museum, had spent many years studying the Amazonian Indians' use of plants for medicinal and religious purposes. He was with the Waika Indians when he heard that the Americans had landed on the moon. Schultes knew that the Waika believe that when they die their souls go to the moon. So Schultes expected them to be very excited by the moon landing. But all they said was: "How lucky for the astronauts. They will have nice people like us to welcome them".

So what is an astonishing and extraordinary event for some can seem to be mundane and ordinary for others. Although we have the same kind of emotions, what arouses those emotions can be very different.

Now I would like to introduce one final simile. A person's life has sometimes been compared to the course of a river, it has a Source, it flows, develops, it runs its course and finally merges indistinguishably into a larger piece of water. Let us take a closer look at this picture. Let us enlarge the picture. When we include the landscape through which the river runs, we may legitimately begin to wonder how much the valley was shaped by the river and how much the river was shaped by the hill. Can one tell which is which; one from the other? When the river finally reaches the delta plain, when one looks at the river at its mouth, can one predict what the course had been?

Given what we have been thinking about so far it must have become apparent that the most crucial factor in psychotherapy is in Communication: in the way, a child finds expression of himself. Lowenfeld's view is that Play is a child's natural medium of expression. Lowenfeld defined Play in childhood as any activity the child is engaged in which is self-motivated. So, Play is not a formal activity which occurs either at specific times or in certain locations. Nor does it only happen when toys are involved. For children, Play is NOT a rest from the business of life, as it tends to have become for adults, Play, for children IS the business of life.

Einstein was known to hold the view that children ask fundamental questions about the world around them; and he attributed the formulation of his Theory of Relativity to the fact that he had continued to ask himself questions about space and time only children ask. As a child, he used to imagine what it would be like to ride on a sunbeam, and that, he said, was the origin of his Theory. Children see the world fresh and through a child's eye new ways of thinking about our world arise.

One of the reasons why Lowenfeld thought we should make great effort to understand what children's play is about is her belief that there is a connection between the play of children and the life of adults. She regarded "play as an essential function of the passage from immaturity to emotional maturity". It is through play that we work on our views formed since infancy of the world around us. Unless we had adequate opportunities to play out, to realise the contents of our interior life in our childhood, our infantile reality will continue to inform our adult action, the consequences of which could be far reaching.

And one of the major consequences of this belief is also one of her major contributions to child psychotherapy, indeed to psychotherapy altogether, that is the inventions of mediums of expression, of capturing it in a form which could be explored in order for it to be understood. These are known as the Mosaics and the World Technique, or Sandplay in Japan and America. In order to put these special expressive tools in the context of Lowenfeld's overall philosophy, I would now like to describe the kind of place her Institute of Child Psychology was and how it functioned as a child psychotherapy centre.

[Description of ICP]

Case from ICP: Let us take aggression. I want to tell you about one child and how his aggression was transformed through play at Lowenfeld's Institute.

A child of 5 - referred for anti-social behaviour, shouting and biting children and grown-ups alike, unable to concentrate, disruptive and disobedient; referred at the end of his first term at Infant School, with threats of suspension or expulsion on his head. Very active, charging about the playrooms, but showing good physical co-ordination in his movements. His sandplay consisted of filling and emptying, and then dashing off to something else, constantly on the move until one day, on his third visit, he stayed in the water room long enough to discover, with both of us safely covered, he could flood the floor, squirt the ceiling, spray the walls. He delighted in the use of the hose and spent twenty minutes doing this. The next few sessions he spent longer and longer in the water room. He became increasingly engaged in watching the results of his own manipulation of the hose and the tap. His interest shifted from delighting in the unrestrained power of the water to his own ability to control the force of the water. i.e. he began to control the shape and direction of the water and watch the effect of his own actions. Later, he would go from the water play to get out some Lego or Bayko to construct buildings of various kinds. He was seen for a total of 10 sessions. School reported that although he was still an active child, he was no longer aggressive and learning well; he was participating appropriately in and out of the classroom.