

## **On Lowenfeld and Projective Play Therapy General Overview**

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Dr Margaret Lowenfeld was one of the 20th century's great pioneers of child psychotherapy. Her distinctive contribution to the field was based on her view of the primacy of communication in therapy. both of our means of expression and how we understand another's communication.

Communication is a topical phenomenon, so perhaps we could begin by thinking about the substance of what people think they are doing when they are communicating within the therapeutic setting. Perhaps some of you would like to make some suggestions as to what we think we are most likely to want to communicate if we were wanting to talk to our friend, our counsellor, or our therapist?

(note suggestions)

When Lowenfeld began her work with children, she began by furnishing a large open plan room with all manner of toys and facilities (wet and dry sand trays. a multitude of miniature toys representing ordinary life and fantasy figures, paints and drawing materials, dolls, puppets. dressing up etc) and simply sat quietly in a corner of the room and watched What the children did.

From these observations and continuing subsequent work, Lowenfeld was able to formulate some original ideas, not only about the substance of the kind of communication we are now considering, but also about how babies think. This in the early thirties of the twentieth century was almost revolutionary.

So to return to your suggestions: as you have correctly identified, let me summarise it in one phrase: we are usually trying to communicate our thoughts and feelings about our personal experiences.

To ground our thinking in personal experience, I would like to suggest a short exercise: Would each of you please describe in words “the moment that you came into this room today.

(Elicit & discuss some of their responses)

What you will have noticed is: [1] that experience is global, multidimensional, simultaneous and idiosyncratic (utterly personal); [2] that the act of putting the experience into words required you to prioritise the complexities of an experience (ie putting words one after another to form a sentence) so that by this very act of prioritisation, you have had to create priorities which may not have existed in your experience; [3] that verbal language is linear, i.e. two dimensional and timebound, whereas personal experience is multidimensional, global and simultaneous. In other words, what is a moment of experience can take quite a bit of time to convey in words. [4] that it is undeniable that personal experience is private and idiosyncratic, whereas the vocabulary of verbal language is public and thus open to misinterpretation by others. Moreover, not only are words capable of different meanings, our use of them vary, not just from person to person, but from occasion to occasion by the same person.

## **Examples**

Lowenfeld realised that words could mislead as well as lead to understanding and so set out to try to find means whereby we, and particularly children, could more fully express ourselves. themselves.

This search was happily joined to the ideas she formulated from her observations of the children’s activities in the playroom she had set up for their use.

Through her observations (she was a physician with a research background) she came to understand that babies, possibly even before birth, were capable of thinking not in the way we adults conceive of thinking - verbal, logical, unemotional thinking, but thinking which involves all the senses. thinking through sensorial experience and is multidimensional, global, simultaneous and idiosyncratic. Neuroscientists from different perspectives are now beginning to be able to supply evidence for this theory of hers: her Theory of Protosystem Thinking.

And from that, it was a short step to realising that it means to access our personal experience were found, it would also be likely to be able to access this multidimensional, global, simultaneous and idiosyncratic thinking. It is also my contention that this Protosystem Thinking underpins not simply the mental life of infants and children, but of adult human beings too.

Hence children, adolescents and families who use the projective play materials provided (only the Mosaic and World Techniques are specific to Lowenfeld) are enabled to express themselves more fully by these means.

Lowenfeld's other distinctive contribution is her utter belief in the uniqueness of the individual, the personality, and the experiences, so that the meaning of the communication lies with the communicator not with the listener. It is that view, the personal theory of the communicator, rather than an interpretation from another's theory, which needs to be heard. And the workable solution has to be something which the communicator finds possible to adopt, which will define it as a solution.