

On Lowenfeld and Playtherapy

by

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An Abstract

Play is central to a child's life. Lowenfeld believed that play is a child's natural medium of expression and communication. This led her to develop psychotherapeutic techniques that engaged the child through play.

There will be a description of how her child psychotherapy training institute functioned as a treatment centre. A short treatment case which exemplifies this unique child-centred form of psychotherapy will be presented.

Today 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 and mine.

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 of arithmetic, but you have as yet to discover how this child has come to be in your presence now. Let us imagine that the number 4 is what we adults, professionals and society at large have in mind as the symbolic representation of a healthy mature person. So, for the child, growing up is like being expected to get to 4 (here, I am simplifying hugely) - and as we have just seen, there are many routes to this goal. In real life of course, this goal is neither stated nor static, nor is it uniform for all children within any given culture. So what we are talking about here is not only a symbolic representation of an expectation parents and society have, but also an idiosyncratic event as well as a transient phenomenon.

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 or intelligence? Is there any link between: our experiences, how we process these experiences and what We think and feel? If so, how do we, both as children and as adults, translate our inner selves to the outside world and back again?

What Then is a Thought?

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 was 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, in the case of Einstein, 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.**

Unique Personal Profile

Now I would like to introduce one simile. A person's life has sometimes been compared to the course of a river, it has a source, it flows and 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?

Let us use this simile to try to represent ourselves: I would like you all to liken your own lives so far to the course of a river. Please mark along the course events, moments, anything that stands out as being in some way important, significant or memorable. [Time for this]

What do you think you will find if you compared your profile with that of the people sitting next to you? To the rest of the group?

All this is by way of an introduction to thinking about how we express ourselves, OUR INDIVIDUAL SELVES, how we communicate with each.

Play, Psychotherapy and ICP

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 efforts 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" (Play in Childhood, p232 in 1991 edition). It is through play that we work on our views of the world around us, formed since infancy. 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.

Lowenfeld Mosaics and World Technique

One of the major consequences of this belief of Lowenfeld's, 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 briefly the kind of place her Institute of Child Psychology was and how it functioned as a child psychotherapy centre.

Description of ICP

Case 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, for shouting at and biting children and grown-ups alike, for being unable to concentrate and for being disruptive and disobedient. He was referred at the end of his first term at Infant School, with threats of suspension or expulsion on his head. The picture of a whirlwind, he was a very active boy, 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, or 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; that is, 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 ten 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.

I wonder if anyone would offer an explanation of what happened with this boy?

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