

Observation, Application and Research: The Pikler Paradigm

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The therapeutic atmosphere of the Pikler-Loczy Institute is embedded in the idea of giving up using power over infants. The difficulty that we have in giving up any idea of exercising power over children is to some extent related to our fundamental ambivalence towards the child who, we fear, we may ourselves have been in our own past.

The child who we really were is buried deeply in our mind and remains relatively inaccessible. This is due to the infantile amnesia that covers the initial stages of development and is the result also of all the deferred / retroactive transformations that are constantly modifying our memory traces, including the earliest ones that we have.

The child we would like to have been does not give us much trouble, given that he or she bears the mark of idealization, which tends to put a gloss on that particular image.

It is therefore the child we fear that we may have been who is much more of a hindrance: the feeble child, the ignorant child, the helpless child, the fearful child, the passive child... all kinds of representations that we project onto the infant who is at present in our care and who creates in us the fear that he or she will be unable to deal with this or that kind of problem.

Children's maltreatment has many faces, including direct aggression, denial of their existence, not taking into account their basic needs.

Direct abuse -- physical, mental or sexual -- does, of course, exist, although we hope that it is relatively infrequent.

Denial of a child's existence is no doubt less spectacular than out-and-out rejection or direct hostility, but it may occur more often; it clearly represents a significant narcissistic impingement that weighs heavily on the child's future development.

The most subtle and widespread form of abuse, however, is neglect, or the failure to take the child's basic needs into account. One example would be the fundamental need that all infants have: to make use of their own skills, in the presence of an adult who lets them do their own exploring, at their own rhythm, while supporting them with his or her attentive, watchful and respectful presence.

That element lies at the very heart of the thinking that is so much part of the Pikler-Loczy Institute. It corresponds to the aim of the kind of observation which is practised there and which, as we are all aware, is a core feature of the "therapeutic atmosphere" specific to the work carried out in the Pikler-Loczy Institute.

Yet it is precisely that element which is under so much threat from the culture prevalent in contemporary society with its three criteria: expertise (which disqualifies the parents), rapidity (which undermines endogenous processes and developmental rhythms) and results (whereby qualitative learning processes are supplanted by a purely quantitative evaluation of performance). That threefold approach is completely at variance with the one adopted in the Pikler-Loczy Institute.

The Pikler-Loczy approach to infant observation that puts the infant in an environment suited to his or her needs and capacities (even and especially in an institutional context), should be given full credit for its uniqueness; indeed, it respects the infant's internal developmental rhythm in order to facilitate the acquisition of psychomotor capacities that are both well-balanced and deep-seated (every gardener knows that, if you want to make a plant grow, it is no use just pulling on its leaves !); it gives the child freedom of movement on the physical level, thus foreshadowing the freedom that will later be a feature of the mental sphere; and it pays close attention to the way in which each infant's progress depends on his or her own personal characteristics.

The ability to "be beside" the infant without encroaching upon any initiatives that he or she may take means too that these children are supported all through their instinctual drive development, that any aggressive outbursts which they may have can be transformed so as to acquire a real degree of socialization (based on giving up any idea of controlling other people), and that they can have a true sense of agency

as regards their own development.

It is therefore quite clear that the Pikler-Loczy observation technique shares with the method invented by Esther Bick such elements as containment, empathy and transformation -- indeed, it would perhaps be worthwhile to attempt to draw up a model of these characteristic features with reference to Bion's work.

Be that as it may, such an attitude on the part of adults is by far the best guarantee that any idea of using power over the infant will be given up -- and this, thanks to the confidence that the adult has in the child, because that confidence implies that we will not project onto him or her the retrospective fantasy of our own failures or shortcomings.

Adam Phillips's work on the "three negative capabilities", which, he argues, are a characteristic feature of human beings -- the ability to tolerate a sense of perplexity, of feeling lost and of helplessness -- can help us to set up a relationship with the infant that could be described as a respectful "absence of power" over him or her. Consequently, we may be able to support the infant as his or her creativity begins to emerge.

It is that potentiality for emerging creativity that I wish to emphasize in this Symposium on the work being carried out in the Pikler-Loczy Institute. I would like to thank my fellow colleagues for having contributed to that goal in such an intelligent and sensitive manner.

References

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