Obsessional situations of interactions in families of four and more people

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Introduction

Mother-baby relationships have been studied in natural conditions (Stern 1974; Fogel, 1991), as well as with the help of various observational paradigms such as the «Strange Situation» (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters et al., 1978) or the «Still Face» (Tronick, Als, Adamson et al. 1978; Tronick, 1989). Then, in turn, father-baby interactions have been studied using similar paradigms (Lamb, 1976; Parke, 1978; Yogman, 1981). The goal of all these observations was to understand the influence of parents on the development of the child and they have allowed us to foreground the links between disturbances in the interactions between parent and child and deviations in the affective and cognitive development of the child (Sameroff & Emde, 1989).

The studies of parent-child pairs have produced much but they cannot isolate the contribution of the family as such. According to the principles of the systemic theory, the family should be considered as a unit in itself, following its own course and having its own particularities. The experience of the child with both its parents cannot be reduced to the sum of its experiences with each parent. When they are both together with her there emerges a new dynamic that gives specific qualities to their interactions. Family functioning should be taken into consideration, when it comes to the understanding of the child’s development (Parke, 1988; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1988; Mc Hale, Kuersten & Lauretti, 1996; Mc Hale & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1999; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Emde, 1991), and, on occasion, the creation of a pathological progression (Bowen, 1972; Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978; Jacobvitz & al, 2004).

The ‘Lausanne Trilogue Play’ has been perfected to study, as its name suggests, three-way family interactions. In this semi-standardised situation, the parents are invited to play with their child following a four-part scenario. One parent plays with the child watched by the other; then they reverse their roles; all three play together; finally, it is the child’s turn to be talk together. This situation allows the observation of coordination and sharing of affects among father, mother and child (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Frascarolo & Corboz-Warnery, 1998; Corboz-Warnery, Fivaz-Depeursinge, Gertsch-Bettens et al., 1993) in all possible permutations of the trio. In addition to the triadic system, several sub-systems may be analyzed: the co-parental couple (the parents in their interactions with the child), the parental sub-systems (the father-child and mother-child dyads) and finally the marital dyad (husband and wife talking in front of the baby). Different versions have been conceived to adapt to the emergence of new abilities in the baby, such as the manipulation of toys and, later, the appearance of language. It is ideal for the study of communication between parents and child (Favez & al., 2006; Favez, Abbet & Frascarolo, 2006). One may even study the transition to parenthood as there is also a version of the LTP for use before birth in which the future parents play with a doll representing the expected baby.

However, as its name implies, the LTP is valid only for three people. Since many families include several children, it is important to create appropriate situations that permit continued observation of the family after the birth of younger children, in order to capture the emerging qualities of the family system. Thanks to such situations, we may follow longitudinally, by observing the expansion of the family, not only those systems and sub-systems already mentioned, but also the interactions at the heart of sibling relationships that are important in social development (Tilmans-Ostyn & Meynickens-Fourez, 1999). The Lausanne Family Play (LFP) situation, as well as the Picnic Game (Frascarolo & Favez, 2005), in which the family is invited to play out a picnic, have been designed to satisfy...
Situations of family games

1. The ‘Lausanne Family Play’

The ‘Lausanne Family Play’ (LFP), a situation inspired by the ‘Lausanne Trilogue Play’ (Fivaz-Depeursinge, & Corboz-Warnery, 1999), was conceived to permit the observation, analysis and evaluation of the interactions at the heart of families with more than one child. It is suitable for children from the time when they are able to sit upright in a high chair and up to 12-13 years of age (given that the required activity is a game with toys). The parents and their children are installed in a semi-circle around a circular table. The parents are seated opposite each other on a diagonal and the children are divided between them in a semi-circle. The children’s chairs are suited to their development (high chair, normal chair).

The technical equipment is made up of three cameras; the first (general view) records the whole family to observe the posture and body orientation of the different family members as well as the distances between them (whether they lean toward each other or not), the second films one parent and half of the children and finally the third films the other parent and the other half of the children. These partial shots, closer up than the general view, allow the rough capture of facial expressions. The three recordings are synchronised and compressed into a single image. The scenario is as follows.

We invite you to play as a family, as you normally do, by following these instructions: in the first part one of the parents plays with the children while the other is simply present; after a while you will reverse the roles, the parent who was simply present will play with the children while the other is simply present. After a moment, you will all play together. Finally, in the fourth and last part, the parents will talk together and the children, for their part, will continue to play. You will decide when to pass from one part to the next. Usually this all takes about a quarter of an hour. You will signal to us when you have finished.

Some toys are provided: a family of lions (the lion, the lioness and as many cubs as there are children in the family), a family of ducks (idem) and as many dummy portable telephones as members of the family.

If the LFP is being used for research purposes, it is recommended to request...
achieving a task (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999). The evaluation is made, then, on the basis of seven scales; 1 – participation (inclusion of partners), 2 – role organization (regard for the scenario and of parents’ roles versus those of children), 3 – focalisation (sharing of a common centre of interest and co-construction of games), 4 – family warmth (sharing of affects), 5 – communication mistakes and their resolution, 6 – co-parental co-ordination and, finally, 7 – child’s involvement.

2. The Picnic Game (JPN) (PNG)

A large carpet (about 4m x 4m) defines the picnic area in which are arranged a table, as many chairs as members of the family, a large and stable bench, a big basket containing a toy teaset and as many toy sacks as there are children (see Figure 2). The parents receive the following instructions:

We ask you to play at going on a picnic. Imagine that you arrive with your children in a park. The green carpet defines the area of grass that you may use. Organize yourselves as you wish to prepare the picnic. Then you have the picnic. There are some toys and you may use everything that is available. You are asked to tidy everything away when you are finished. Take your time, usually about a quarter of an hour. Call me when you are finished.

Any family can play the PNG, whatever the number of children and their respective ages. One camera is sufficient for recording it, but several may be used. This situation may be filmed at home but, in that case, standardization may be weaker.

This situation requires of the family a playful and creative attitude, but it also includes some day-to-day tasks like setting the table and tidying toys. The framework provided is extremely flexible. Only the spatial limits are clearly defined. Everything else is in the hands of the family.

The evaluation is carried out in two ways. First in a clinical way by answering the following questions:

1) Participation: are all family members included?

2) Distribution of leadership: do parents frame the interactions or do the children take control? How do the parents share leadership? Do we observe parentification?

3) Structure of the task: are the different parts of the game distinguishable (for example preparing the picnic, setting the table, having the picnic, and so on)? In other words, does the game tell a whole story or is it chaotic? Does the game present originality? Are the family members creative?

4) Fluidity versus rigidity in the management of parents, parent-child(ren) and child(ren) sub-unit(s). Are several configurations observable throughout the game according to different tasks or is one mainly observed? For example, mother taking care of the youngster while father takes care of the older child during...
the picnic as well as during play or are they all together most of the time, versus several configurations fluently changed according to various tasks?

5) Co-parenting: do parents work together and support each other in their parental tasks? Or do they work in parallel? Or are competition or hostility observable?

6) Marital relationships. Given the influence of the quality of marital relationships on family interaction, we look for marital couple relationships inside family activities. Do parents share moments of intimacy with positive affects as marital partners besides being parents or, when they speak to each other, is it only in a parental context? Do they directly speak to each other or is it always via the children?

7) Limit setting. Are the parents rather lax, authoritative or authoritarian? Do they set clear limits and make the children respect them?

8) Family warmth. Do family members share positive affects, do they express their affection to each other? Are all members of the family giving and/or receiving positives affects or are some of them rather excluded or cold?

9) Autonomy of the child(ren) sub-system. Are the children constantly under parents attention, of their own will or because the parents tend to control them, or do they have their own space and activities?

Afterwards The PicNic Game may be the object of coding with the help of the RE-PAS, a system of evaluation on several scales by Likert in five points taken from clinical evaluation.

**Illustrations, family games**

We are now going to give a summary description of two LFPs and two PNGs so as to illustrate the different facets of family interactions as they may be observed with these two tools.

1. Lausanne Family Play, functional interactions (father, mother, 6 year old daughter Lara and 13 month old son John)

Having looked at the available toys, the mother proposes telling a story by enacting a role-playing game. She is the director of the zoo, John her assistant and Lara in charge of the lions. She starts the game by telephoning her daughter to order some lions. She integrates the behaviour of the youngest into the game (for example, when he touches the ducks, she says « He’s asking if you have ducks too »). While Lara deals with the lions, the mother explains to the little one what has happened. The daughter then telephones her back to tell that she is there, at the bars with the lions. The mother says she is coming. The daughter turns toward John and explains the situation. In this way the mother takes care alternatively of each of them, while keeping the guiding thread of the story and inviting exchanges between them.

After a while, the mother announces a transition by saying that she is calling the lion-tamer and she telephones the father. The father accepts the role given him by the mother and continues the game by proposing to give the lions a bath. Then father and daughter make the lions enter in a truck using the ducks as baits. They deal with the animals then the father announces a transition by proposing to telephone the director. Lara telephones her mother and invites her to come with John.

The mother approves and begins the stage where they all play together. After a moment of sharing over what the father and daughter have done in the preceding stage, there is a moment of hesitation when they don’t know quite what to do. The father asks for help in staging a circus act with the lions. The mother proposes that they jump over the ducks. The three get started and work together to prepare a show. They laugh together over a « failure ». John follows attentively and becomes excited. They reach a moment of affective sharing between the four. Then the mother announces a transition by telling Lara « You are going to play by yourself for a moment ». The father confirms this and adds « You can play with your brother ». The parents give all the toys to the children.

The discussion between the parents starts with difficulty but after a moment they start an exchange about the coming evening. The father proposes finishing the game and, as the mother approves, he calls the consultant.

Analysis: game clearly structured, clear framework given by the parents, the four parts are executed distinctly, integration of the two children, story jointly constructed by the parents and the elder child, the four partners achieve moments of affective sharing.

2. Lausanne Family Play, problematic interactions (father, mother, two sons – Jack (eight) and Tom (four))

The father announces that he is starting and asks Jack to name the animals. Tom
tries to draw his mother’s attention but
she stands still and does not respond.
The father quickly runs out of ideas but
doesn’t enter into the game proposed by
the elder child (to stack up the lions). He
tries to telephone Tom who does not reply
but tries again to include the mother. The
father quickly gives way to the mother
with a discouraged tone: « OK then, go
ahead ». The mother enters into the game
asking the children what they would like
to do. Without waiting for their replies,
she proposes that they sing. Jack starts
but the mother doesn’t listen and plays
at telephoning with Tom. Jack starts a
fight among the lions who are trying to
eat the ducks next to Tom. The children
stage a battle between the animals that
the mother attempts to calm. The father
intervenes to say that the children should
play by themselves. Jack recalls the
instructions by emphasising that they
should now all play together. So, they
play with the animals staging battles and
rescues. The parents insist on the fact that
it is the lion parents who should protect
the little ones. After a moment, Jack recalls
that the parents should talk together. The
parents comply but keep looking at the
boys who play, each by himself.

Analysis: The parents have difficulty in
setting the framework and respecting the
scenario (if the recall of the instructions
by the elder child). Both father and mother
have difficulty in initiating games with the
children but they manage when they all
play together. Co-parenting shows some
gaps but is not competitive.

3. Picnic, functional
interactions (father, mother,
daughter Sarah (six and a half),
son Terry (three and a half).

The parents announce that they are going
on a picnic by car. They start off side
by side and invite the children to get in the
back and all four go forward together.
Having arrived, they hold hands to cross
the road. The father proposes seeking
out a good spot. The mother points out
one where there is a bench beside the
lake. The father suggests that the mother
prepares the picnic while he takes care of
the children. The mother prefers leaving
them to play by themselves while they
prepare the picnic together. The father
agrees and they enjoy themselves. The
children discover the toys in the bags
and from time to time show the parents
what they have found. The father asks the
children if they would like to go swimming
in the lake. Sarah takes off her sandals
for swimming, puts on her swimsuit and asks
her father for her armbands. He blows
them up and puts them on. He does
the same for Terry. He tells them to give
their mother a kiss before going into the
lake, which they do. The mother says she
wants them to put on some sun cream,
the daughter fetches it and the father
reminds them not to forget their noses.
Sarah dives into the water. Terry copies
her and the father joins in. They swim
together and the mother wavelengths to them.
When they get out of the water, the father
shakes himself dry and gives the children
towels to dry themselves. The mother
announces that everything is ready and
they can start eating. The children come
and sit down around the tablecloth. The
father gives everyone something to drink
and proposes a toast to the pleasure of
being there. The mother says the coffee is
very good. The mother serves everyone
some chicken, salad and pasta. They wish
each other « bon appétit » and then eat.
Afterwards the parents say it is time to go
home and they all start tidying up. The
father concludes by saying that the picnic
was delicious and they had a good day.

Analysis: The game, rich in symbols,
tells a coherent story. Each member of
the family fulfils a role. The parents are
coordinated and support each other. There
are moments of affect sharing among all
of them.

4. Picnic, problematic
interactions (father, mother, daughter six,
Jennifer, and son of three, Mark)

The father and the children settle down on
the carpet and the mother asks if it is wet.
The father replies that it is a little damp but
alright. The mother gets out Mark’s toys
while the father sets the table and Jennifer
occupies herself. The father starts to serve
food and holds out a plate to his daughter
who lets it fall. The father cries out « you’ve
dropped everything ». The little one says
« no, nothing fell down ». Then she refuses
the plate that her father offers her again
saying that she doesn’t want any salad. She
takes a plate and goes to serve herself
something else. The father then offers
the plate to the mother. She takes it but
makes a disgusted face « it’s a bit wasted,
this salad » and there is an exchange of
smiles between mother and daughter. The
father serves Mark but he doesn’t take the
plate and carries on playing. Jennifer takes
some coffee and says it is rather strong.
The mother says the coffee isn’t for her
and tries to take the cup away but the
daughter says it is hers and the mother
leaves her alone. The mother asks if there
is some dessert and the father suggests
gathering some strawberries but the
mother replies that it is too hot. Jennifer
takes her swimming stuff and sets out to
swim. When the mother tells her not to put
her head under the water, that is what she
does. The mother declares that everything
needs to be tidied up but Mark refuses to
help. The father tells the mother that there
is no hurry. When they leave, the mother
doesn’t want Jennifer to carry the basket
with the dishes but she doesn’t take heed.
The mother insists and demands that the
father not let her carry it because it is very
heavy. The father says « it’s not important »
and doesn’t intervene.

Analysis: The game tells a rich, coherent
story but the younger child is not always
integrated. Several conflicts emerge and
a mother-daughter coalition against the
father can be seen. Co-parenting is weakly
coordinated or even conflicting with
uncertain limit setting. There is no sharing
of affects among them all.

These four contrasting descriptions show
the richness of observation that can be
achieved in these semi-standardized and
complementary situations concerning the
information they provide.

Discussion

Although both situations are play-based,
inviting shared pleasure and creativity,
they present important differences. The
LFP provides a relatively constrained
framework: the table and chairs as well
as the closely defined positioning of the
partners (parents on each side of the
children) determine the distances between
partners and, partly, their orientation.
Again, a scenario defines everyone’s roles
(active or third-party observer) and the
partners with whom they interact in each
part. Only the content of the game is left
up to the family’s imagination, even if
the toys are imposed. By contrast, in the
JPN the framework is much more free
since the partners are invited to organize
themselves as they wish; they prepare
the picnic they want; the meal may be
taken on the ground, on the bench or at
the table, before or after a phase of play
with the toys. The partners settle beside
whomever they wish and move around as
they choose. And so on. Again, the PNG
is based on a real life situation but strongly
formalized which allows observation of the
habits of the family (setting the table,
tidying, eating etc.)

Remember too that there is no lower age
limit for the PNG whereas the LFP requires
that the youngest children are able to
sit upright (in a high chair). Finally, it is
difficult to stage an LFP with more than
three children which is not the case with
the PNG in which one can even include
grandparents or other family members.
Overall therefore, the LFP offers a more rigid framework for interaction than does the PNG. This stricter framework is more suitable for some families than for others and allows us to see how a family may cope with the adaptation to a constrained framework which can be stressful. For some of them, the scenario and the obligatory body position (seated) appears as a limiting obstacle that prevents the game from unfolding. For others, who manage to overcome these limitations, exchanges unfold at verbal and expressive levels and the family members manage to enjoy themselves—which demonstrates good flexibility in a family system that manages to adapt to new situations. However, it should be noted that, on the contrary, some families presenting difficulties in coordinating themselves seem to benefit from the imposed framework as guidance that structures their games. In this case, the situation gives valuable information about the family's resources and its ability to improve its functioning when the offered context is structured.

With its «pretend» aspect, the PNG is greatly appreciated by certain families who manage to draw back from the context of observation and let themselves play and enjoy themselves together, but less by others who are perhaps more embarrassed to play act or ill at ease with symbolic games.

The perspectives of these two games are also quite different. Given that, in the PNG the families have freedom of movement and positioning, the images are more generic and close-ups unreliable. On the contrary, in the LFP closer views may allow coding of gaze and emotion more easily.

During video feedback the respective content of the LFP and PNG facilitate the start of discussion of different subjects; with the openness of daily life (task sharing, meal-time rituals, limit-setting for children etc.) offered by the PNG and the window on symbolic games and the capacity to share pleasure given by the LFP.

These particularities, specific to the two games, emphasize that they are complementary and offer a sound basis for using them together as much for clinical as for research evaluation.

References


