



INFANTILE AUTISM

Assist. Prof. Dr. Zihniye OKRAY
European University of Lefke, Psychology Department, Lefke, TRNC
zokray@eul.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Infantile autism phenomenon is like an abyss in literature. It was very confusing what to add and what to eliminate in trying to explain autism. This paper aims to explain infantile autism in psychoanalytic fashion. In this paper infantile autism explanations will be limited to the history of autism and psychoanalytic counterparts of the infantile autism and Houzel's two articles called 'The Nest Of Babies' and 'The Psychoanalysis of Infantile Autism'. This paper can be divided into 4 major parts: Autism before Leo Kanner, Leo Kanner and Infantile Autism, Psychoanalytic Theory of Infantile Autism including Melanie Klein, Frances Tustin, Donald Meltzer, Didier Houzel.

Key words: infantile autism, Kanner, Houzel, Klein, psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

i- Autism Before Kanner

Hugh Blair was the first case who was a son of Scottish landowner, appeared in court in 1747 for a decision on his mental capacity to contract a marriage at the age of 39. According to Uta Frith's analysis of the case Hugh Blair has severe retardation and abnormality of language including echolalia, at school he replies with both question and answer. He has obsessive and repetitive behavior included odd motor mannerisms, always sitting on the same seat in church and insisting that domestic objects retained their same places.

John Haslam in his book named 'Observations on Madness and Melancholy' wrote a chapter called 'Cases of Insane Children' in 1809. He described 7 years of boy who had had infantile convulsions, slow to walk and very late to talk. In hospital he was inattentive and restless. He had a poor grasp of distance, attempting to reach the ceiling. He seen again at the age of 13, his language ability had progressed but he spoke of himself in the third person. He was solitary, and had a number of obsessive preoccupations (10, 16, 17).

'The wild boy of Aveyron' Victor's fame was rests upon Jean Itard's dedicated attempts to educate him. Victor was found in the woods at the age of 11-12 in 1789. When he was found Victor's gaze was shifting and expressionless, he was insensitive to loud or pleasing noise, he only made guttural sounds, he rocked to and front. Victor had a good memory and a great sense of order. Within 9 months he learned to match letters of the alphabet. Itard was worked with him for 5 years and at the end of this work he had learned to distinguish emotions expressed by different tones of voice, used objects imaginatively but his spoken language never progressed beyond meaningless monosyllables. Itard devoted his life to work with mute children and his teaching methods are still relevant today in the education of children with autism, language and intellectual disabilities (6, 7).



Heller's 'Dementia Infantilis' a condition now recognized as disintegrative disorder. In Heller's work he reported children who was normally developed normally until their age of 3rd or 4th year when a regression occurred affecting first mood with irritability, anxiety, negativity and temper outburst, within a few months all language and self care skills were lost while motor functions were preserved, the children had tic-like movements. He also like Itard does not describe early infantile autism (10, 16).

De Sanctis' described 3 children with ages 6, 7 and 10 whom one seems to have had mental retardation with autistic features and two had been traumatized and deprived with the name of Dementia Praecocissima (10, 16).

ii-Leo Kanner And Infantile Autism

In 1943 Leo Kanner was the first researcher who describes autism in his paper named 'Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact' and he suggests the term 'early infantile autism' for terminological identification of the condition. Early infantile autism in this paper described as ' the characteristic features consist of profound withdrawal from contact with people, an obsessive desire for the preservation of sameness, a skillful relation to objects, the retention of an intelligent and pensive physiognomy, and either mutism or the kind of language that does not seem intended to serve the purpose of interpersonal communication (10, 13, 20).

We can divide his work into 3 major parts. Papers between 1943-1954, 1955-56 and 1958-73. At the beginning of his work he considered psychopathology mostly but he changed his point of view to neurological reasons in following years. In his researches he used psychometric tools not projective techniques. During his researches he found the autistic children pay attention the geometrical figures and he started to search intensely with this issue. Again during in his work he always worked with parents of autistic children too (12, 21).

In his article 'The conception of wholes and parts in early infantile autism', he said that autistic children show a peculiar type of obsessiveness that forces them to postulate imperiously a static, unchanged environment. Any modification meets with perplexity and major discomfort. The patients find security in sameness; a security that very tenuous because changes do occur constantly and the children are therefore threatened perpetually and try tensely to ward off this threat to their security (15).

In 1971 he wrote an article 'Follow-up Study of eleven autistic children originally reported in 1943' and he mentioned an increasing tendency to tackle the whole problem through a multidisciplinary collaboration. He also states genetic investigations are begun to conduct and he suggests new insights can be gained with ethological experiences (12).

iii- Autism In Psychoanalysis

In psychoanalysis the word autism has two meanings. The first meaning refers to the investment of a person's psychic energy in his/ her own delusions, which prevents the person from investing in the outside world. The second -which I am going to try to explain in this paper- refers to an absence of development of communication with others beginning in the earliest infancy (8).



In fact the word autism first enters the psychiatric vocabulary by Eugen Bleuler in 1911 in his description of schizophrenia. For Bleuler the autism of schizophrenia is a shutting-in of the subject in an impenetrable, incommunicable world, closed in on itself, made up of unorganized delusional elements to which all the subject's disposable mental energy is attached (8).

From the developmental psychopathology viewpoint, the story of the development of self-other relations begins in the earliest months of life, when infants apprehend and copy certain of the facial and manual actions of other people and adjust to the interactive style of their caregiver. Then towards the end of the first year, infants relate to others' actions and attitudes with reference to a shared world, for example by showing things to others and making requests, imitating others' actions on objects and engaging in social referencing. Then between the middle and the end of the second year children show conceptual understanding of self and other, like adjusting their actions to the needs and feelings of others, referring to themselves as 'I' and addressing others as 'you' and talking about their own and others' mental states. This reflects child's growing theory of mind (6).

But I have to mention that from the psychoanalytic view point the formation of self and other starts from *in utero*. (8) Many clinicians have noted the importance of traumatic events in the case histories of children with autism, whether these occur in utero or in the child's early life or whether they exert their influence through trans-generational transmission (15). Suzanne Maiello in her paper 'The sound object' suggests that the sound of the mother's voice alternating with silence gives the child a proto-experience in utero of both presence and absence. Mother's voice is recognized, proffered and distinguished from other voices after birth. Maiello hypothesizes that the fetus is exposed to both sonic continuity and discontinuity, because the bodily noises are continuous but the mother's voice is intermittent. She focuses on the sense of absence created by the silence of the mother's voice rather than the presence produced by the sound of her voice because she is trying to elucidate how the preconception of an object is formed. There the Bion's theory of thinking helped her to conceptualize her theory. It is the disappearance that makes possible a proto-experience of absence. The silence releases the fetus' listening ear from its primary sonic oneness and stimulates the creation of a thought to bridge the gap. This intra-uterine thought becomes the sound-object (preconception) that prepares the fetus to know its mother/breast after birth (19). The Cyril case of Houzel showed us the mother's mental states are important in prenatal stage. Cyril's mother found it difficult to experience herself as a good container for her baby (7, 8).

Melanie Klein's 'The importance of symbol formation in the development of ego' article written in 1930 she described a case which she called him Dick, was a typical case of infantile autism. Dick described by Klein as 'he had let his nurse go without manifesting any emotions, follow Klein with a complete indifference, he run in the therapy room to and fro without any aim or purpose. She states that sometimes Dick run around her acting as if she was a piece of furniture herself. Dick's expression of his eyes and face were fixated and lacking in interest'. (8) Melanie Klein put the oedipal conflict earlier onset than Freud with starting in the second half of the first year of infant's life. The psychopathological evidences of the treatment of autistic child go more primitive levels that Freud and Klein had described (5, 8).

Donald Meltzer's contributions to infantile autism are as follows:

- i- Explorations in Autism (1975): Based on a longitudinal study of several autistic children who had been treated during some 10 years by a close-knit group of therapists all trained in the psychoanalytic method of work with children as developed by Klein. In this book he describes the psychology of autistic states especially in terms dimensionality. According to Meltzer



description the autistic child when confronted with intense and forceful emotions, as being drawn to letting his mental organization passively fall to pieces.

- ii- The Apprehension of Beauty (1988): In this work Meltzer introduces the idea of the aesthetic conflict one which vividly describes the impact on the baby of experiencing the most beautiful thing in the world – the mother and the breast- and the frustration and humiliation of not being able to possess either. (3)

Meltzer describes as for him the "dismantling" psychic as the shape of refuge in one passive split of the sketch of the self according to the sensory axes. The consequences are dramatic there because for him, "the past in the autism is lost for the maturation " (16).

Frances Tustin is another important clinician and theorist in the infantile autism. Tustin has described autistic objects in her earliest work on childhood psychosis in her later writings she became increasingly interested in developing and exploring the related concept of autistic shapes (2).

Tustin's early autistic objects formulation (1972) is as follows:

- a- parts of the child's own body
- b- parts of the outside world experienced by the child as if they were his body

The autistic objects are to avoid awareness of psychological catastrophe. The autistic object is an object which is experienced as being totally 'me'. The function of the autistic object is to obviate completely any awareness of the 'not me' because it is felt to be unbearably threatening.

In later of her writing (1990) the evaluation of the autistic objects continues and she stresses autistic objects hard, physical nature and particularly those they are sensation dominated objects which she later re-named the term as autistic sensation objects. She comments on the functions of autistic objects as 'an outstanding characteristic of autistic object is that they are not used in terms of the function for which they were intended. From the realistic point of view they were used in a way which was useless and meaningless: from the child's point of view it became obvious that they were absolutely essential.'

Later she states that with the contribution of Anne Alvarez Tustin enlarge the concept of autistic objects as sometimes language can be an autistic object which blocks the communication instead of facilitating it (2). Tustin considered autism as a reaction that is specific to trauma. Maiello also has some adding to Tustin's description like 'Trauma can have both external and internal origins but in both cases it leads to what she described traumatic awareness of bodily separateness from the mother before their psychic apparatus was ready to take the strain'.

Also Tustin in 1994 added a new vocabulary in her writings; illusionary trauma. She observed illusory trauma in autistic children who seemed to experience the loss of the feeding mother as though, the entailed the loss of part of their own mouth (1).

One of the major contributions of Frances Tustin description of the failure of the containing function in autistic children due to a splitting between the masculine and feminine aspects of the containing object. The 'nest of babies' fantasy, highlighted the importance of imaginary brothers and sisters for autistic children by Frances Tustin. She described the two main stages in the treatment of autistic children (7).

- i- The child has no sense of having an internal psychic life and it is the analyst's task to revive this
- ii- They become aware of the fact that they do have a mind of their own, a mind that is quite distinct from any other person's.



What is the ‘nest of Babies’ fantasy according to Tustin?

The ‘nest of babies’ begin to appear at the start of this stage with the fantasies of rivalry. The ‘nest of babies’ fantasy is associated with the notion that there are special babies who are given special food. There is a fantasy that he is in competition with predatory rivals on the other side of the breast who wants to snatch the nipple away from him to take away his chance of life and sustenance. The ‘nest of babies’ fantasy develops when the child experiences rivalry too early in life. The autistic child has the premature awareness of bodily separateness from the instinctual gratification. The child is faced with a vast number of greedy, threatening mouths, the principal of paranoid anxiety. This anxiety lurks somewhere in the autistic black hole (7, 8).

The bisexuality of the psychic envelope is another term described by Tustin. The psychic envelope has the care-giving aspect of the mother as its principal foundation. The relationship between mother and the infant depends on the quality of her bisexual identifications. In order to function adequately the maternal elements have to be reinforced by paternal aspects if the psychic envelope is to have the necessary qualities. If this criterion satisfies the psychic envelope will have resilience and elasticity. On the other hand the psychic envelope must be solid and resistant. Masculine elements are penetrating and feminine elements are receptive (8).

iv- Didier Houzel

Before start the Houzel’s contributions to psychoanalysis of infantile autism I prefer to start with ‘Who is Didier Houzel?’

Didier Houzel is a psychoanalyst, an honorary member of the French Psychoanalytic Association, and a child and an adolescent psychiatry professor at the Caen University (France). He is particularly interested in the psychiatry of very small infants and especially the ones with serious personality disorders (autism and childhood psychosis). In this area, he has developed treatment methods based on psychoanalysis, individual psychoanalytic treatment and psychoanalytic home observation (Esther Bick method). In 1980s he has received supervision from Donald Meltzer and Francis Tustin in London. In psychoanalysis, he has been mostly influenced by the post-Kleinian movement.

Didier Houzel is the author of many books and articles some of which are: *Dictionnaire de Psychopathologie de l'Enfant et de l'Adolescent* (directed by and in collobration with F. Moggio et M. Emmanuelli, Paris, PUF, 2000), *L'aube de la vie psychique* (Etudes psychanalytiques, Issy Les Moulineaux, 2002), *L'enfant, ses parents et le psychanalyste* (directed by and in collobration with C. Geissmann, Paris, Bayard, 2003), *Psychothérapies de l'enfant et de l'adolescent* (directed by and in collobration with C. Geissmann, Paris, Bayard, 2003), and *Le concept d'enveloppe psychique* (In Press, Paris, 2005) (4).

The rest of the paper is based on these two articles, ‘The ‘Nest of Babies’ Fantasy’ was published in the Journal of Child Psychotherapy in 2001 and ‘The Psychoanalysis of Infantile Autism’ was published in the same journal in 2004 (7, 8).

In his paper ‘The ‘nest of babies’ fantasy’ he presented a clinical illustration of a case Cyril according to the ‘nest of babies’ fantasy. And also he mentioned the same case. Cyril diagnosed as autistic spectrum



disorder. Cyril psychoanalytic treatment started when he was at the age of 3, his sessions schedule three sessions per week. His father holds an academic post, his mother also graduated from university. Cyril was the elder of two children; he has two years younger brother. Cyril was the first child of the family but his mother has 3 miscarriages before Cyril because of the uterine malformation. Cyril's mother have to lay down for the whole pregnancy, and she found it difficult to experience herself as a good container for her baby, she felt she posed such a threat to him that he had to protect himself against her. Cyril was a quite baby; he was breast-fed for 6 weeks. Cyril's motor development was slow he start to sit unaided about one year old and began walking when he was 22 months old. Cyril's mother became pregnant when he was 15 months of age, again she had some complications and had to hospitalize for the last month of pregnancy. She had depression after giving birth.

Symptoms of Cyril:

- his psycho-motor development was slow
- he had no speech
- he would bang his head on the floor or on the wall
- rock his body back and forth
- about 20 months of age his parents recognize he withdrawn himself from social contacts and closed himself on him
- he had stereotyped behavior like opening and closing doors
- he had no symbolic play
- He did not point things that he wants he use an adult hand to obtain it.

Cyril's Sessions:

Initial sessions:

- Scatter everything he could find in the therapy room. Then he wanted to bring things together and control the containers. He was interested in modeling-clay boxes and lids that covered these boxes. And the word 'lid' is the first word in the therapy room.

2 months later:

- He started interested in water. He used to play with hot water saying first 'warm' then 'it's warm'.
- After starting to play with water, he put his head against Houzel's stomach, after the interpretation leaned backwards Houzel holds him, then he turned round and put his back firmly against Houzel's body. After this he emptied all of the modeling-clay boxes and he wanted to leave.

The interpretation made by Houzel in this part of the therapy is as follows:

- i- Putting the head to stomach: ' A wish to get inside my stomach, like a baby in the mother's tummy'
- ii- Leaned backwards and holding of Houzel from preventing him to fall brought a fantasy of birth.
- iii- Putting his back against Houzel: Looking for support
- iv- Empting of modeling-clay boxes and wanted to leave: he may have had emptying me of everything, and wanted to leave interpreted as he felt I could be dangerous.

In the 'nest of babies' fantasy paper he discussed a distinction between autistic reactions and the autistic state (structure). In autistic reactions as manifested at times of separation, emotional deprivation or in infantile depression, the child usually manages to use transitional objects as objects that can be used as a vehicle for his projections and on which he can base imaginary scenarios that help mind to tolerate frustration. In autistic state every object is experienced as a rival baby who has the right to have



everything that the autistic child deprived. When the child acknowledges otherness and starts to become aware of his mental functioning, everything contained in the therapy room may be experienced as representing the rival babies that stay permanently inside the therapeutic setting.

After the first summer break: A new activity in the sessions:

- He emptied his box of toys, threw pens and pencils, climbs on to the table saying ‘big, big, big’ and in a subsequent session in the same scenario using the words of ‘grown-up’.
- After this scenario he draw several long lines, saying they were ‘little cats’, then throw the sheet of paper on the floor.

The interpretation made by Houzel of this change in the sessions as

- Wish to grow in to a big boy
- Drawing support from Houzel
- Little cats are the rival babies who Cyril wanted to chase them.

The next repetitive scenario was he started to empty his box and fill with water, put some toys in it and manipulate them. He seemed to feel that they were less of a threat as they were then to a considerable extent impregnated with this maternal element.

After seeing Houzel with walking with a women psychologist he start to ask questions about this women and then saying Houzel that he can break his feet, knees, legs etc and then ask to count with him. Then he picks the pencils up, asked the Houzel to sharpen them one by one then scatter all over the therapy room but this was the first time he picks them up. Then he takes three pencil and start to do a new drawing. Interpretation made by the Houzel for this last part of the session extract was Cyril is beginning to explore the world of the primal scene and sexuality. Maybe he is looking for his own masculine way within the triangulated universe.

Houzel’s psychoanalytic work with autistic children occur in several stages, each of which corresponds to a dominant transference modality. These four stages are:

- 1- Transference onto the container
- 2- Analysis of the infantile transference
- 3- The transference neurosis
- 4- The process that brings the analysis to a close

Now I am going to give some details about these stages.

- 1- Transference onto the container: Working through the transference onto the container leads to establishing stable frontiers for the self. It dominates the early stages of analysis. The child unloads his psychic states into the therapeutic situation in order to able to discover some way of integrating them, preserving them and being able to get in touch with them again. These are the containing function and the therapist put him/herself as a container by showing the child conveyed have been kept in mind and attempts are being made to bring them all together.
- 2- At the beginning of analysis the function of receptivity and integration is very important, the premature interpretations must be avoided to prevent the repetition premature psychic birth trauma in the analysis. In the bisexuality of the psychic envelope, the envelope must be the same containing object possesses feminine/maternal and masculine/paternal features in the correct proportions. In autistic syndrome the main problem is the pathology of otherness. To be able to differentiate oneself from other people, to establish a frontier between self and other implies in terms of distance, limits, differences and frustrations endowed with bisexual qualities combined in correct proportions.



In the therapy of autistic children it is mainly working-through in the counter transference that the psychoanalyst can help the child reintegrate split-off parts of psychic bisexuality in the containing object.

- 3- Analysis of the infantile transference: Analysis of the infantile transference leads to the stabilization of the internal world. The infantile transference is a way of representing relationships with others characterized both by trust and rival. In this phase, fantasies are particularly violent and resemble those fairy stories and comic strips that children seem to be fond of and sometimes enact through their nightmares.
- 4- The transference neurosis: The transference of neurosis leads to stabilization of sexual identity corresponds to the oedipal period as described by Freud. During this period the child establishes his or her sexual identity and representations of the attributes and roles of each sex. When the autistic children reaches this developmental stage, integration as far as states of mind are concerned. The great majority of autistic children never get as far as this phase or in very fragile extent. Stability as a criterion combined with developmental progress and creativity.
- 5- The process that brings the analysis to a close : The closing of the psychoanalytic therapy with an autistic child is when recognition not only that the child is adapting to new environments but also that he goes on making significant progress between sessions; particularly during in summer breaks. Stability as a criterion combined with developmental progress and creativity as in the transference of neurosis.

CONCLUSION

I think the autistic children have a deep pain in their psychic apparatus and by closing all of the gates to the external and internal world of communication and social contacts they try to protect themselves for both the rival babies waiting in the nest and also for the real rivals in the outside.

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