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A Longitudinal Observation of a Toddler and Her Parents – A Psychoanalytic Perspective

Where there is 'good enough mothering' and a 'secure base' to return to, the normal process of separation-individuation can take place. This is reflected on within the context of a longitudinal observation of a toddler between the age of 18 months and two years old.

“Only if there is a good-enough mother does the infant start on a process of development that is personal and real” (Winnicott, 1965, p.17).

This quotation by Winnicott in one of his key papers on the early mother-infant relationship captures for me the essence of the relationship between a mother and child dyad who I had the pleasure of observing in a toddler group during my time as a Masters student, over a seven-month period. The

observations took place on a weekly basis, with each observation lasting one hour and a half. I began my observations of Alice (pseudonym) when she was 1 year 6 months old and I finished observing her just after her second birthday. During this period I observed Alice with both her mother and father.

Alice was an attractive little girl with angelic like features who wore beautifully presented outfits. On my first encounter with Alice I was instantly attracted to her excitement and interest in the

world around her. Despite being slightly unsteady on her feet she was walking with confidence and her language was also beginning to emerge. Alice appeared to be a typical ‘practicing’ toddler and I was drawn to observing her, excited to see her continued developments through toddlerhood.

In the below sections, vignettes from these observations are presented, interspersed with my own reflections, informed by psychoanalytic theory.

Observations of Alice

One of the first things I noticed when observing Alice was of her particular interest in babies and in playing with prams and baby dolls.

Alice was sitting by the snack table eating pieces of mandarin. She turned her body and looked over at the leader, who was sitting in the corner of the room holding another child’s baby brother (6 months old). The leader noticed Alice looking over and said to her, “look Alice, it’s a real baby”. Alice stood up from her chair and walked over. She stood herself in front of the leader and looked at the baby. After a few seconds of looking at him she mumbled the name “Alice” whilst pointing her hand towards her chest and whilst still looking at him. The leader replied, “Yes, you are Alice”. Alice stood for a little while longer, then turned and walked away. (1 year 6 months)

Alice clearly showed her interest in a ‘real’ baby, a baby boy who accompanied his mother and older sibling to the group. When the group leader acknowledged her interest in the baby Alice stopped eating at the snack table and moved so that she was standing facing him. What was particularly striking was the way in which Alice seemed to introduce herself to the baby by saying her own name whilst pointing to herself. This suggests that she had some sense of self and that she was able to see herself as her own individual. The ability to distinguish oneself as independent from the outside world comes with ego development, something which is greatly aided by the onset of language development, as it helps a child to communicate with the environment and to form connections between their thoughts (Anna Freud, 1992).

Winnicott (1971) asserts that it is also through the act of playing that a child is able to discover their sense of self and to express their ‘true self’. Play in Winnicott’s view develops out of the ‘potential space’ that forms between a mother and child at a time when separateness has been initiated (Winnicott, 1953; 1968) and that a child’s capacity for play is dependent on a ‘good enough’ and ‘holding’ environment (Winnicott, 1968).

Alice regularly used toy prams and baby dolls in her play and she seemed to enjoy playing the role of a mum, holding the dolls whilst playing with other toys, stroking their heads, tending to them and pushing them around in their prams.

Alice was pushing a toy pram with a baby doll from the far end of the room. She stopped pushing the pram, picked up the baby doll and stood facing her father, holding the doll at a slight angle before making a mumbled noise. Her father asks her, “What’s wrong Alice?” Alice repeats the same noise and her father asks her “Does the baby need its nappy changed?” Alice tilts her head and nods whilst looking at her father. The leader says to Alice, “Should I go and fetch a nappy for the baby?” and once again Alice nods. The assistant walks over and takes Alice by the hand and leads her to the carpet. Alice drops the doll to the floor and the assistant kneels down and takes the clothes off the baby doll. The leader brings a nappy over and hands it to Alice. Alice sits down on the carpet, pulls the nappy apart slightly and brings it up to her nose. She places the nappy down on the doll’s tummy and picks up the doll’s baby grow and tries to put it on the doll. Alice then picks up the doll, stands up and walks away holding it (1 year 7 months).

Here Alice seemed to want to play the role of a mum, pushing her doll in a pram before wanting to change its nappy. It was interesting to see how she brought the nappy up to her nose, as if she was trying to smell it. This is perhaps something she has seen her mother and/or father do whilst changing her own nappy and she may therefore be identifying with and imitating them in her own play as a mother. Alice’s use of her father, the leader, and the assistant in helping and facilitating her play suggests that she sees adults around her as helpful.

The concept of the 'representational world' (Sandler & Rosenblatt, 1962; 1987) proposes that with ego development a child's experiences of the external world and of external objects gradually become represented internally in a meaningful and organised way, which then acts as a template for what to expect from future interactions. It is likely that Alice has experienced her parents and other adults as helpful in the past. As seen in this observation Alice is communicating to her father by mumbling a noise and by nodding her head and her father is receptive in trying to work out what it is she wants.

It was whilst observing Alice together with her mother for the first time at age 1 year 8 months, that I noticed Alice using play as a means of moving away from her mother, perhaps as a way of asserting some independence and separateness. For the most part Alice's mother appeared to remain a respectful distance away, allowing Alice to fully explore independently.

Alice was riding in the toy car across the room, whilst waving her hand and saying "bubbye". She first waved to the assistant and then to her mother and the leader. The leader was setting up the snack table in the corner of the room and said to Alice, "Alice, do you want to come over for a snack?" Alice stopped to the side of the snack table. Alice's mother stands up from the chair she is sitting in and walks over to Alice. She asks Alice if she wants to come out of the car. Alice pushes the car door open and steps out. She looks over to the snack table. She then turns back to the car, re-opens the door and steps back inside. Her mother says to her, "Don't you want to go and have a snack?" The leader picks up a jug of juice, shows it to Alice and says, "Alice, do you want some juice?" Alice re-opens the car door and steps out. With one leg still in the car she looks again to the snack table. She then steps out of the car fully and walks over to the table and sits down (1 year 8 months).

Alice appeared to be enjoying her ability to freely move around the room on her own in the toy car. It seemed as if she was using the car as a means to physically practice separateness from her mother in a playful way. Not only was Alice physically moving away, but she was also verbalising the se-

paration by saying "bye, bye". This may have perhaps helped Alice to feel a sense of control over the situation. Alice seemed to also be asserting some control and autonomy in deciding whether to go to the snack table. Despite both her mother and the group leader asking her what she wanted it appeared as if Alice wanted to make the decision for herself.

Alice's behaviour seems to be characteristic of the 'practicing phase' in Mahler's separation-individuation theory. When a child is beginning to develop an awareness of their separateness, "the child concentrates on practicing and mastering his own skills and autonomous (independent of other or mother) capacities" (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 2000, p.71). The development of language becomes important at the beginning of separation, with a two-fold function of both facilitating the separation-individuation process and also helping a child to symbolically regain union and togetherness at a time of object loss (Stern, 1985). This may explain Alice's use of language when moving away from her mother in the toy car and as I continued observing Alice I noticed her increasing development and use of language.

After having watched Alice seeming to want to move away from her mother in her play I observed a change in her behaviour towards her mother. Rather than moving away from her mother Alice appeared to want to re-gain closeness and rather than independently going about her play she seemed to want her mother's help with things.

Alice was riding in the toy car across the room, with her mother walking next to her. Alice stopped the car in the centre of the room and struggled slightly in her seat before looking over the right side of the car. Her mother says to her, "Try the other side Alice". Alice looks over to the other side of the car before continuing to ride the car. A couple of seconds later she stops the car again and lets out a cry. The leader who is sitting at the play-doh table with another child (1 year, 5 months) calls over to Alice saying, "Oh no Alice, is there a toy in your way?" Alice's mother picks up the toy (a baby teether toy) and hands it to Alice, who takes it and starts to chew on it before handing it back to her mother. Her mother places the

toy in the sink, and Alice continues to ride the car to the play kitchen area. Her mother comes over saying, “Alice, don’t forget to look at the cake” before helping Alice to climb out of the car. Alice walks over to the toy cake, picks up a toy knife and starts to cut into the cake. Struggling with it she lets out a cry. Her mother comes over and helps her with the cutting before asking Alice if they should sing Happy Birthday. Alice responds with a nod and an “umm” sound. Alice’s mother starts to sing Happy Birthday, before asking if the candles should be blown out. Alice’s mother then proceeds to blow out the candles on the cake (1 year 9 months).

Alice was sitting at the snack table eating grapes from her plate. Her mother was sitting at the other side of the table looking on. Her mother then looked over at another child’s baby brother (9 months old) who was sitting on his own on the carpet. She stands up and walks over to him and starts to play with him. Alice looks over to where her mother is and starts to struggle and move off her chair. The leader asks Alice if she is ok. Alice doesn’t reply and instead slides off her chair and walks over to her mother. Alice lets out an “umm” sound. Her mother looks at her, takes hold of her hand and walks back with her to the snack table. The leader remarks, “Oh I see, Alice wanted you here with her. She was probably wondering what is mummy doing playing with another baby?” (1 year 9 months)

In both of these observations and within the same group session Alice seemed to want to regain closeness with her mother, wanting her mother to remain nearby. It appeared as if Alice was struggling with her newfound independence, crying whenever she was unable to do something, needing the help of her mother. She seemed to want to regress back to a younger self, such as when she took hold of the baby toy and started chewing on it and Alice’s mother at times had to help initiate Alice’s play, such as in suggesting to Alice to play with the toy cake. Alice’s world no longer seemed to be her “oyster” (Mahler et al, 2000, p.78) and she seemed to no longer be enjoying a “love affair

with the world” (Greenacre, 1957, p.57). Alice similarly seemed anxious when her mother left her at the snack table to go and play with another child and she may have felt some slight rivalry for her mother’s attention.

Whilst watching these interactions I felt sorry for Alice, sensing her despair at not quite coping with her independence. It felt as if she wanted to succeed in her independence, but just not quite managing it. I felt pleased to see her mother responding to her in an attuned way, aiding Alice when she needed help with her play and acknowledging that Alice wanted her to come back and sit with her at the snack table. She seemed to be able to ‘contain’ (Bion, 1962) Alice’s perhaps ambivalent and frustrating feelings.

Alice’s change in behaviour seems to relate to Mahler’s ‘Rapprochement phase’ (Mahler et al, 2000). With a child’s increasing awareness of their separateness, separation anxiety kicks in and they begin to show concern with their mother’s whereabouts, seeking her closeness and wanting to share with her their experiences (Mahler et al, 2000). Mahler states that during this phase, “one cannot emphasise too strongly the importance of the optimal emotional availability of the mother” (Mahler et al, 2000, p.77).

Alice’s mother seemed to be able to perform this function, remaining emotionally available to Alice as she continued to show a struggle with her separateness.

Alice’s mother is holding another child’s baby brother (10 months old). Alice walks past and her mother calls her over to come and play with her and the baby. Alice walks over and kneels down. Alice’s mother looks towards Alice, smiles and says, “Look Alice, it’s a real baby”. Alice shuffles her knees closer, leans in close towards the baby and touches his nose with her finger. Her mother smiles and repeats the same action, touching the baby’s nose with her finger whilst saying the word, “beep”. Alice then seems to want to pick the baby up and to hold him, but her mother tells her, “No, you can’t hold him, only grown-ups can hold babies”. Alice turns and seats herself on the carpet with her back to her mother and the baby. She turns back around and tries to seat herself on her

mother's lap, but she struggles to get on. She starts to play with one of the toy drums lying on the carpet. Her mother reciprocates and plays with a second drum. They play for a few seconds before Alice drops the drumsticks, re-attempting to seat herself on her mother's lap. She manages to seat herself on one side. Whilst seated Alice pushes her legs out in front of her before tapping her feet up and down whilst uttering, "uhhh". Her mother soon realises that Alice wants to take her shoes off, so she reaches out and helps Alice to take them off. Alice then curls her legs in closer on her mother's lap and smiles and her mother cuddles up closer (1 year 10 months).

Although Alice at first didn't seem too worried about her mother holding another child, joining her mother in playing with him and showing interest in him, Alice seemed to want to regress back into being a baby herself by trying to seat herself on her mother's lap. I found it interesting that this happened after Alice had been told that she was not allowed to hold the baby and that only grown-ups were allowed to hold babies. Alternatively, this may have also been because she felt a sense of rivalry with the other child over her mother.

I felt happy that Alice's mother was able to engage Alice in her play with the baby. Perhaps guessing that Alice would feel some jealousy, she called her over to join their play. She also acknowledged and facilitated Alice's need for closeness by making room for her on her lap, helping Alice to take off her shoes so that she could cuddle in closer.

After this I once again observed Alice with her father.

Alice is playing by the kitchen area with the toy telephones. She picks up the red telephone, holding it up to her ear and says the word "hello". She continues to mutter some other words before saying the word "Ben" a few times. The leader who is seated nearby comments, "Is that Ben? Is that your brother Ben?" Alice then carries the phone over to her father who is seated close to the entrance door. She holds the phone up towards him and he takes hold of it. He holds it to his ear and says, "Hello Ben, me and Alice will be coming to fetch you from nursery soon, so we will be seeing you soon and I will be bring-

ing a treat with me". Alice picks up a baby doll from the floor and holds it up towards her father. Her father who is still holding the phone to his ear says, "Oh the baby wants to speak to you Ben". He takes hold of the baby and holds the phone up to the baby's ear for a little while before holding the phone back up to his own ear, saying "bye, bye Ben". Alice's father hands the phone back to Alice who walks away and puts the phone back in the kitchen area (1 year 10 months).

I felt more relaxed watching Alice with her father, sensing that Alice herself was more relaxed in her father's presence. With her father present it felt as if Alice was able to regain her ability to play freely. He remained seated in the same seat, which may have given Alice a sense of comfort and security, knowing that she could return to him whenever she needed to. When prompted by Alice holding the toy telephone up towards him, he joined in on her play and included the baby doll when once again prompted by Alice holding the doll towards him. It seemed Alice and her father were co-creating a story.

I felt full of warmth watching Alice and her father, feeling the love, comfort and security, which Alice herself may have also been feeling. Alice's father was available at a time when she seemed to be experiencing difficulty in her separateness from her mother, perhaps bringing a sense of calmness. According to Abelin the father's role is important during the separation-individuation process, as "the father becomes aligned with reality, not yet as a source of constraint and frustration, but rather as a buttress for playful and adaptive mastery" (Abelin, 1971, p.249).

I observed Alice for the last few times just after her second birthday. When observing her these times I noticed a significant change. Alice was looking more mature in her appearance, her language had developed so that she was now saying three worded sentences, and I noticed how she spent time quietly observing the scene around her from a distance. Alice now appeared more confident and less worried about her separateness from her mother and she was once again actively practicing it.

Alice is outside in the garden pushing a baby doll in one of the toy prams. She begins to push the pram around the side path of the

toddler group hut before stopping. She then turns, looks towards her mother and calls, “mamma come”. Her mother comes and follows her as she continues to push her pram around the side path of the hut. Alice pushes her pram faster as she moves around the hut and her mother can be heard shouting jokily “Alice you’re going faster and faster, wait for me”. Alice continues to push her pram around the hut a few times and her mother continues to follow after her. Alice then stops pushing her pram and stands looking at everyone in the front garden. The leader who is setting up the snack table asks, “Alice, do you want to come and have a snack?” Alice doesn’t say anything for a few seconds before shouting “no” and she then continues to push her pram around the side of the hut, calling, “mamma come”. Her mother follows her saying, “Alice don’t you want to go and have a snack?” Alice stops pushing her pram and her mother comes to stand next to her and asks her again, “Should we go and have a snack at the snack table? We can bring baby along”. Alice utters “umm” and they both walk over to join the others at the snack table (2 years 3 weeks).

I had similarly watched Alice push her pram around the toddler group hut a couple of weeks before this and similar to here Alice had asked her mother to come with her. Despite Alice now showing an enjoyment in her separateness it seemed as if she still required her mother’s company and reassurance when venturing somewhere new and on her own. I noticed however that she seemed more confident on this occasion, pushing her pram faster and further away from her mother, creating a wider gap, as she circled the hut. This may perhaps have been because the route around the hut was no longer new and unusual. Alternatively, the continuous circuiting of the hut may have been Alice’s way of mastering it.

Alice seemed to be using this play, as a means of practicing her separateness. With Alice’s newfound enjoyment of her separateness her mother was the one being left behind, which she verbalised when shouting, “wait for me”. Erna Furman proposed that, “the child’s ability to grow up effectively, yet with appropriate concern for the pa-

rents and appreciation of them, depends to a considerable extent on the parents’, and especially the mother’s ability to be there to be left” (Furman, 1982, p.19). Despite Alice’s mother probably feeling some sadness in Alice moving away from her she seemed at ease, allowing Alice to fully grasp her independence. I couldn’t help however feeling as if I was also being left behind, as I observed Alice for this final time.

Conclusion

As my time observing Alice came to an end I realised why I had been drawn to observing her. Not only was it exciting to see her developments through toddlerhood, it was also a joy to watch how at ease both of Alice’s parents were in their parenting of her. They seemed to me to be providing Alice with a “good enough” environment and a ‘secure base’ from which she could explore from and return to for co-regulation. I found myself identifying with Alice’s sense of security, her sense of feeling loved by both of her parents, and her ability to fully express her ‘true self’.

I observed Alice move through what seemed to me to be a ‘normal’ development through toddlerhood and process of separation-individuation. Her language development seemed to coincide with her growing separateness and the use of the dolls, prams, and the toy car in her play seemed to be a means for Alice to practice her separateness. As in any process of separation-individuation Alice showed some struggle in dealing with her separateness. I felt she managed to get through this struggle however by the presence of two well attuned and facilitating parents.

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Sökord: Good-enough mother, Separation-Individuering, Longitudinell Observation, Lek, Containment, Språkutveckling, Ego Utveckling.

Abstract

This paper presents a series of observations and reflections of an 18-month old girl who was observed over a 7-month period in a toddler group setting.

It demonstrates how she was aided in her separation-individuation process by both of her parents who provided an environment of "good enough" mothering/parenting, which facilitated her ability to play, explore and learn during this phase of development.

Sammanfattning

Den här artikeln presenterar en serie observationer och reflektioner av en 18 månader gammal tjej som observerades under en 7-månadersperiod i en grupp för småbarn.

Det visar hur hon fick hjälp i sin separationsprocess av båda föräldrarna som gav en miljö med "tillräckligt bra" moderskap / föräldraskap, vilket underlättade hennes förmåga att spela, utforska och lära sig under denna utvecklingsfas.

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