

Milk and Tears: A Very Difficult Beginning: The Assessment and Treatment of a Young Boy with Atypical Presentation

ABSTRACT

This article describes the assessment and treatment of Leo, a young boy who was seen in twice weekly psychotherapy for three years. The first part of the article presents the material obtained during the assessment process organized by following the framework of the 2001 version of the Provisional Diagnostic Profile (Davids et al., 2001). The second part addresses the main themes arising from the boy's treatment and reflects back on the initial diagnostic impressions following the assessment phase. We seek to illustrate the value of a thorough and detailed diagnostic framework in contrast to the limitations presented by the sole use of descriptive diagnostic criteria based on symptomatology.

Introduction

This article discusses the assessment and treatment of 5-year-old Leo, who I treated in twice weekly psychotherapy for three years. The first part of the article incorporates classical and contemporary psychoanalytic theory via the application of the diagnostic profile and emphasizes the relevance of early relational and attachment experiences in shaping a child's internal world and the development of sense of self. Both parents suffered traumatic losses that severely disrupted the parent-infant relationship seemingly hindering Leo's psychological development.

Leo presented as an atypical child with uneven development, who exhibited important deviations from the norm in the realm of self-development, capacity for object relatedness, and affect regulation. However, parallel to these difficulties, he exhibited above-average intellectual development. As treatment unfolded, thought problems and reality appraisal also became apparent. Specifically, as his seemingly autistic defenses abated and he became better able to relate, more psychotic processes and thoughts emerged.

The nature of Leo's clinical presentation made the process of diagnosis challenging. A year after I met Leo for my initial assessment of him and shortly before entering primary school, Leo was assessed by a child neuro-psychiatrist. He diagnosed Leo's difficulties as a "Global Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified" and recommended further specialized assessment along with psychotropic medication. Leo's parents refused the recommendations. Months later, the same psychiatrist suggested a more nuanced diagnosis, which seemed to better capture Leo's difficulties:

Multiple Complex Developmental Disorder (Cohen, Paul, & Volkmar, 1986). This diagnosis connects difficulties in a child's capacity to relate, in their capacity for affect regulation together with thought problems, difficulties in separating fantasy from reality, and bizarre behaviors and ideations.

It is known from recent research (Green, 2003) that development is influenced by the complex interplay of both genetic and environmental factors, and that the environment the infant encounters profoundly influences the development of the infant's brain, especially of the right part of the brain. From a Winnicottian perspective (Winnicott, 1960), this is the mother-infant context, in which mother and infant exist both in a state of merger and separateness. When the mother-infant relationship is "good enough," the infant emerges from this relational matrix with a separate sense of self, which is solidly rooted in his bodily feeling-states, where the skin acts as a membrane clearly separating inner and outer reality, self and other. For Leo, difficulties in these domains appeared, as treatment unfolded and were received and understood against the background of his early assessment. A very difficult beginning which continued to have reverberations both within the child and in his family had become the baseline and organizer for his development.

The latter section of this article looks at the main themes arising from Leo's treatment and reflects back on the initial clinical formulation developed following the assessment stage. In so doing, the importance of a thorough and detailed diagnostic process, as outlined in the profile and which Anna Freud thought was crucial for good treatment decisions and ultimately outcome as opposed to a merely descriptive diagnosis based on symptoms, will hopefully become evident.

The diagnostic profile is considered provisional in that the material can only be partial and to some degree hypothetical, making some psychological aspects only fully understandable as treatment unfolds. Both assessment and treatment material, as outlined in this article, can be considered as complimenting each other, helping to provide a clearer and more detailed picture of Leo's presentation today, and possibly shed further light on his developmental disarray.

[Provisional diagnostic profile](#)

The profile is based on material gleaned from school reports, observation of the child in school by the school's psychologist, parental interviews, and four assessment sessions with me.

Family constellation

Leo was the only child of two highly educated professional parents. His father was 12 years older than his mother. He seemed very fond of his younger wife, but also slightly patronizing, treating her as a “little girl” at times. He was an only child whose parents were deceased. From his adolescence onwards, father’s mother suffered from episodes of major depression, which involved periods of hospitalization and medication. Based on both parents’ description of the paternal grandmother’s illness, one gained the impression that her depression had psychotic features, involving episodes of derealization and depersonalization. She died shortly before Leo’s birth.

Leo’s mother was the oldest of three children. She had a brother and a sister to whom she was close, although her sister was now living abroad. Her mother died when Leo was less than 2 months old, while her father was involved in Leo’s daily care and was considered an important figure in the boy’s life.

Leo’s mother described herself as having been compliant, perfectionistic, and ambitious in her studies. She came across as highly anxious about Leo’s difficulties. Feelings of guilt about having damaged her baby were predominant, while his dad appeared more contained and with a tendency toward normalizing Leo’s behaviors.

A successful professional, Leo’s father had various hobbies and on weekends regularly tried to engage his son in his activities and to teach him skills. He was focused on Leo’s sporting achievements, which to him seemed to be a measure of his “sanity,” and he had a tendency to overlook Leo’s problems and difficulties to the point of denial.

Although from the outset of treatment Leo’s dad had openly expressed gratitude for my work with Leo, he also repeatedly asked to decrease the frequency of the sessions, and stopped attending parent-work sessions with various different excuses. He had been open about his wariness of psychological professionals, as in his mind they were linked with his mother’s psychiatric problems, which he still struggled to come to terms with.

Referral

Leo, age 5 years and 2 months, was referred for an assessment by the school psychologist because of his “strange behaviors,” namely an inability to play

with other children with whom he interacted only in an aggressive way, as well as difficulties in managing his chaotic and impulsive behavior in the nursery setting. In the nursery, he was often agitated, seemed confused and overwhelmed, unable to participate in any shared routine. He swore and made references to death and murder.

The school psychologist reported that Leo used to produce very elaborated and at times bizarre and aggressive comments toward other children, such as: “I will give this new born baby a nice beating so he will cry, or a cat so that it will bite him”; “I will stick the fork in your eyes so that you will not see, you will fall, hurt yourself and go to hospital”; and “small children have to go back to nothingness, and I have to go back to nothingness.”

After observation in the nursery, the school psychologist described a child in trouble, who talked about floods and damage to his house, who was aggressive and spiteful toward other children, and who at some point built a sort of cocoon, with curtains and cloths to make a protective and containing den for himself. It was also reported that Leo was obsessed with road traffic signs. Initially, there were concerns that he was in the autistic spectrum.

Description of the child

Leo looked much younger than his age; at 5, he looked like a 3-year-old. He was extremely thin and short, with a large head and face populated by blond hair and big brown eyes. He had an unusual, fragile appearance resembling a “little old man.” He appeared well cared for and was usually dressed in neat and fashionable clothes.

Leo’s nursery teacher described him as seeming to be unaware of his body; feeling neither hot, cold nor pain. He was clumsy in his running, but very quick in disappearing from view: loving to hide behind doors and corners. He tended to elicit warm feelings from the adults around him, especially his teachers, and protectiveness and affection from the little girls in his class. At the time of referral he seldom made eye contact and remained expressionless, though now his big brown eyes seem to draw one in and are often sparkling with mischief. At the same time, though, his gaze could be distant and vacant.

Initially I experienced difficulties in the counter-transference in feeling connected emotionally to this boy. However, this quickly changed into a more maternal wish to protect and care for him as for a much younger child. By the last assessment session this had progressed into an urge to take care of him whilst he sought to communicate the danger and anxiety he felt inside himself, as if I had picked up the urgency that he be “found” psychically.

Environmental factors

Leo was born between the deaths of both of his grandmothers. He was born at 8 months gestation by a caesarean section, five days after the death of his paternal grandmother. In the mother's mind his premature birth seemed to be precipitated by her shock and pain at the death of the paternal grandmother, who had been ill throughout the pregnancy.

Following the death of her mother-in-law, to whom she felt very close, Leo's mother lost her own mother to cancer when Leo was 1.5 months old. When speaking about that time, she movingly recalled her dying mother urging her, from her hospital bed, to go back home to attend to her baby. She said, "I fed him milk and tears. I remember how some days I wondered how I would get to the end of the day," poignantly describing how Leo's early care felt embedded into an emotional climate of loss, grieving, and lack of pleasure in her newborn baby.

Soon after Leo's birth, father encouraged mother to resume their previous life as a couple including going on sport vacations, denying to a certain extent their suffering and their newly acquired parental role. Perhaps this was an indication of Leo's father's wish to take flight from the loss of both grandmothers. Father's insistence of reaffirming the parental relationship away from Leo also might suggest his unconscious hostility toward the baby. This hostility was also evident in his ambivalence in recognizing the child's difficulties and vulnerability and his avoidant approach to parent work.

Although it was evident that Leo's father was unable to provide emotional comfort and containment for his wife, he claimed to have a "maternal role" in the family by being actively involved in Leo's early care by bathing him and putting him to bed.

It can be hypothesized that for both mother and father the loss of their own mothers was difficult to process and defensive maneuvers were set in place to ward-off psychic pain during the crucial time of becoming parents themselves. These included manic defences such as over investment in returning to the way things were before the pregnancy and denial of the pain of mourning. It is possible that the normal processes of mourning their own status as children, which is necessary to make the transition into parenthood, was curtailed by the actual loss of their mothers.

A key environmental factor to be considered in Leo's early life was maternal grieving and depression, which probably interfered with mother's capacity to be attuned to her baby's needs and communications. It has been widely recognized (Main & Hesse, 1993) that recent or unprocessed losses in the parent negatively interfere with the baby's optimal development and are likely to result in disorganized attachment in the child.

A live-in nanny moved in with the family when Leo was 7 months old and cared for Leo after mother went back to work. The nanny left when Leo was 2 years old because the mother suddenly realized she was depressive and had problems of her own. The nanny's departure was described as a big loss for Leo, who seemed lost without her for days.

Leo's developmental history was indicative of a child who struggled with staying on the path of progressive development from early in his life. Feeding and weaning were difficult, he was slow, had poor appetite, and was a very selective eater. Perhaps an indication of a lack of appetite for life that, we might speculate, was fueled by annihilation anxiety. It is likely that his early feeds were imbued with indigestible maternal emotions and projections. As mother said, he was "fed with milk and tears." Later on, his teacher described mealtime in the nursery as a "nightmare"; he would not sit with the other children and would only eat dry food and crackers, seemingly not chewing but moving the food with his tongue, and swallowing the food in big lumps. This might indicate Leo's early inhibition with ordinary oral aggression.

Although Leo cried until he vomited when the parents left him with the nanny after settling in nursery, 2-year-old Leo showed no separation anxiety, and was very passive. For example, if he fell he just waited to be picked up by someone. He did not express any preference nor did he take initiative. This could be seen as his reaction to loss or maybe as an ongoing expression of a lack of agency over his feelings and body. His passivity may indicate a reversal of affects: massive turning away from his ordinary toddler aggression, which then was expressed in relation to other children.

There was a lack of detail in his parents' narrative regarding his transition into toddlerhood, or even of his reaction to mother's return to work, which suggests the parents' de-cathexis following the handover to the nanny. Leo's physical growth was irregular during the first year and he was described as "hypotonic" by the pediatrician. He did not crawl but walked at 18 months. His first words appeared at 12 months, and he was toilet trained at 2 years and 6 months.

During his toddlerhood he was often ill with bronchitis, and was admitted into hospital twice with gastro-enteritis. He had sleeping difficulties throughout infancy, which continued until referral. He suffered from nocturnal enuresis and woke screaming several times a night, but violently refused to be held and comforted by his mother.

Psychic development

Object relations

Quality of attachment

Leo's attachment appeared insecure. He did not seek comfort when distressed and could not be comforted by his mother. He showed no separation anxiety when he first saw me, and never returned to seek his mother. At school when asked what frightened him, he replied that he was scared of his mom. In his play, mother was represented as depriving, punitive, and inconsistent. For example, mother would get angry because the little boy wanted a road sign "which was fixed to the road with nails." First she would punish him, and then bring a gift. The parent was represented as absent, abandoning and unable to provide comfort, while the child was represented as always alone and in danger. Inconsistent, unpredictable, and frightening maternal care has been associated with a disorganised/disoriented attachment style (Main & Hesse, 1993).

The child's sense of safety and object relations

No evidence of an internal background of safety from which to explore the world, both physical and social was found. In the assessment sessions, Leo made striking high-pitched alarm sounds from time to time, and suddenly froze upon hearing a noise, as if an external sound amplified an internal terror. In addition, whilst playing with the doll's house and human figures he put the small boy figure on the bed next to the window and the "warning" road sign (!) next to it in order to warn the boy that he could fall out of the window. This suggests un-integrated islands of functioning and a self-holding rather than identification with a safety-generating object.

Leo's obsession with road traffic signs was confirmed in the assessment when he repeatedly asked for them. These can be seen as fetishist objects, a kind of distortion of transitional objects indicating the pathology at the point of moving from early merger to separating. These objects seemed to scaffold Leo's sense of self by replacing some ego functions to provide him with some sense of safety.

Self-development

Self-representation

In the first and in the second sessions, Leo started his play in the doll's house by stating that the light was broken. The image of the broken light suggests that something crucial felt missing, or damaged both in the environment and in the self. According to attachment theory, an insecure attachment can lead to a poor and unworthy sense of self (Bowlby, 1988). Bad and damaged objects appeared consistently in Leo's assessment material, and later in the treatment. In the last assessment session Leo was able to communicate his internal predicament more clearly and more

powerfully. This was reflected also in my counter-transference, which changed into strong feelings of alarm and urgency:

A powerful earthquake shook the doll's house and all its content fell out, slowly but inexorably. Leo then got up, chose a piece of paper and a black felt-tip pen. He drew a square with crosses [(Figure 1)] inside it, and then asked me if I knew what road sign it was. I guessed it was to signal a junction. "No," he said, "It is a difficult one . . . beware of the cemetery." His communication had the effect of making me freeze, sending a chill down my spine. He went to the toys again, chose a gate, opened and closed it, saying that it was automatic. Then he chose a small plastic igloo and the Eskimo toy figures. He set the toy trees upright on the floor and, mimicking the sound of an electric sawing machine, proceeded to chop all the trees down in a meticulous and relentless way, crashing the Eskimos under the trees, and then pushing some plastic stones on top of them with a digger. In contrast to the content of the play, his affective tone remained flat, as if the anxiety that he kept split-off was fully transferred to me through projective identification.

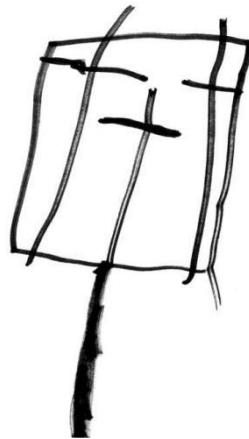


Figure 1

In this sequence of play, Leo seemed to represent the catastrophe of his babyhood: the impingement of the mother's emotional state during his infancy, which shook and crashed his developing sense of self. The image of the cemetery powerfully evoked an emotional landscape contaminated with dead objects and nameless dreads, as did the choice of the icy igloo, which conveyed a sense of a frozen core. Coming into contact with these images and feelings seemed to give rise to aggression, and the chopping of the trees can be seen both as the aggression toward the threatening bad object, and the representation of his damaged, annihilated, lifeless sense of self subjectively perceived as an aggressive act.

Superego

Leo's play suggested the emergence of a harsh superego, primitive and not internalized. There was no evidence to suggest that Leo experienced concern for others and felt able to take reparative action. Furthermore, the reported behavior at school and at home indicated no age-appropriate capacity to refrain from acting out sadistic impulses.

Relationship to bodily self and drives

Use of the body

Leo's fragile appearance and lack of muscular strength, together with what was reported by the nursery teacher of his being seemingly unaware of his body (feeling neither hot nor cold, and not perceiving pain indicate no unit status and failure of integration of primitive sensorial experiences). This appeared to be linked to Leo's hypotonic state as a young infant. It was possible to hypothesise that Leo had not achieved integration of psychosoma, what Winnicott (1949) called "unit status," which is achieved early in infancy through maternal holding and handling.

Sexual development and psychosexual status

Feeding difficulties in babyhood indicate problems in the oral phase that were still present and were also evident in a more general lack of appetite and curiosity for the world around him. Aggression was mainly expressed through the mouth in using words to attack the other, though chewing was inhibited, suggesting strong ambivalence expressed at the oral level.

Toilet training was reported within the norm, although nocturnal enuresis was still present. The meaning of Leo's nocturnal enuresis could be linked to his unconscious wish to relate to mother as a young infant, and to his lack of self-boundaries. Possibly, Leo's enuresis could also be understood as a discharge of aggression through the body, a manifestation of Leo's ambivalence toward his object.

Leo's sexual development had not reached the phallic-oedipal stage expected for his age. There was little indication of a healthy narcissistic investment of the body or that a capacity to represent a triangular relationship had been reached.

Aggression

Aggression was pervasive and expressed mainly via the mouth through strikingly sadistic verbalizations and insults. It had been hypothesized that his turning away from ordinary toddler aggression came out at a later stage

in relation to peers. Leo's pervasive aggression seemed to be a serious challenge to his developmental progress. Possibly, Leo's nocturnal enuresis could also be understood as a discharge of aggression through the body, a manifestation of Leo's ambivalence toward his object.

Ego functions/general development

Physical apparatus subserving ego functions

The ego seemed not to be properly rooted in the body, as there was evidence of lack of muscular tone in infancy and failure to perceive bodily feelings properly. However, Leo's ego apparatus seemed intact in terms of memory, motility and language.

Basic psychological functions

Leo's ego development appeared uneven. He was able to use language in a sophisticated way and his play was rich and imaginative. However, it was not clear at the end of the assessment sessions whether Leo could truly symbolize since there were indications of concrete thinking and of his functioning in a symbolic-equation mode rather than symbolic representation.

Cognitive development

No cognitive assessment was available at the time of referral, however a year later a cognitive assessment resulted in an average intelligence. There was evidence of obsessional thinking which often got in the way of so badly needed flexibility in the context of peers and family.

Modification of omnipotence

Leo's fantasy world seemed to obscure reality. Evidence of this could be found in his aggression toward other children who were perceived, through projection, as hostile and therefore warranting attack. It was not clear within the confine of this assessment whether Leo could fully distinguish between pretend and reality.

Play

Leo used play to convey his internal world in a very effective way. His capacity to play coupled with the absence of a third position and problems around separation, indicated unevenness and disharmony in his development. However, a question could be posed about whether Leo's play was a truly symbolic representation, or whether Leo was functioning more at a concrete level, as described by Segal (1950): at the level of "symbolic equation," where there is a denial of the distinction between self and object, which

profoundly distorts and alters the sense of reality. In this context, Leo's attachment to his objects—the traffic signs—can be seen as a failure to locate play, in the in-between area of “illusion,” and to use them as transitional objects. The strength and peculiarity of my emotional response to Leo's play, involving a profoundly disturbing sinister feeling experienced also at a bodily level, may also be indicative of the concrete and nonsymbolic quality of his play and communication.

Defense organization

Leo's defense organization did not provide him with a sense of safety to enable him to cope with internal and external dangers effectively. He had a tendency to either withdraw from contact or to attack. Primitive defenses such as splitting, projection, and avoidance were often employed.

Anxiety

Anxiety was pervasive and disorganizing. There was no evidence that Leo had learned to use signal anxiety to trigger age appropriate adaptive defences. Anxiety was represented in catastrophic fantasies of annihilation and disintegration. The source of his anxiety was possibly very primitive. Without clear distinction between self and object, fear of loss of the object equates with loss of sense of self, which can subjectively be experienced as annihilation anxiety. Moreover, for Leo anxiety appeared to be also caused by the fear of being invaded and flooded by external impingement. The anxiety remained split off and was projected onto the other. However, anxiety was also expressed at a bodily level where flight-fight-freezing responses suggest early relational traumatic experiences of feeling dropped and forgotten that had not been integrated.

Affects

There was little evidence to suggest that Leo could distinguish between different affect states or was able to regulate affects effectively. Affects were cut off perhaps to manage how threatening and disorganizing they felt.

Diagnostic statement

Leo was a worrying little boy whose development was seriously at risk. He had great difficulties in his capacity to relate, to participate and connect with others in mutual, reciprocal, and pleasurable relationships.

Leo had at his disposal primitive and inadequate defenses to help him cope with internal and external stressor, which often resulted in his inability to regulate affects and impulses effectively. Primitive anxieties appeared to interfere with, and disrupt his sense “of going on being,” giving rise to

extreme defenses and unmodulated aggression, which in turn further hamper his progressive development.

Painful events in the perinatal period possibly had interfered with the parents' pleasurable investment on their first baby-son, casting a shadow on Leo's sense of being a valuable and lovable child. It was possible that a hereditary predisposition and vulnerability in the child—as there was mental illness in the family line—coupled with a far from optimal early environment led to Leo's atypical presentation.

Leo's developmental history suggested a disorganized/disoriented attachment style. His sense of self appeared damaged and possibly incorporated features of parental hostility. Similarly, his representation of the other was suffused with aggression. In Leo's developmental history there was evidence of early disturbance, such as feeding and sleeping difficulties, passivity, all suggestive of early relational difficulties, and possibly early relational trauma (Schoore, 2010). Leo's symptomatology as a young child included avoidance, compliance and restricted affect which might be indicative of primitive dissociative states employed to ward off unbearable states of anxiety (arousal).

The content of Leo's play, the quality of his anxiety, his uneconomical and primitive defense mechanisms, as well as his way of relating, all seemed to point to a very primitive level of disturbance which negatively affected the structuring of his personality, leading to important defects in his ego structure, his sense of self, and his capacity for object relations.

Leo's development appeared uneven, with islands of functioning that were not integrated leading to a sporadic capacity to relate. There also appeared to be a wish to communicate his internal predicament and possibly a desire to find help and, therefore, a wish to progress in his development.

Recommendations

For all the above reasons developmental psychoanalytic psychotherapy was recommended. It was also recommended that the parents be offered a space in which to think about Leo and his difficulties and foster their potential to meet Leo's needs in an appropriate way.

Furthermore, liaison with the school was recommended in order to implement educational strategies that could increase Leo's capacity to take part in school and benefit from its environment.

Treatment

Introduction

Leo's once weekly treatment started immediately after his assessment, as his parents recognised his difficulties and accepted the need for help. They also agreed to increase the frequency of his sessions to twice weekly after the summer break, which was two months later.

Catastrophe

As observed in the assessment sessions, Leo took interest in the doll's house and human figures and mainly played with these during the first months of therapy, alternating this activity with spontaneous drawing.

Leo's play would regularly end with a powerful tsunami, earthquake, or flood, which would destroy the house and the people in it. In this play, Leo appeared to represent the object/self that does not survive, where the anxiety—which he kept split off to keep himself safe from the impingement of the other—was forcefully projected onto me. As hypothesised in the diagnostic profile, Leo's play, although it appeared to be symbolic, evoked in me powerful feelings of anxiety of a catastrophic nature related to feelings of being submerged or invaded by internal and external dangers, as if the “pretend” quality of the play was not firmly established for him.

Leo would talk continuously throughout his playing and drawing activities, describing what he was doing through a monotonous running commentary, but he also began to use his eyes to contact me, holding my gaze for increasing lengths of time. There seemed to be a need to control me coupled with a wish that I could also tolerate and take in his communication. During this initial period Leo would also, almost casually, lean on me or put his hand on my arm, searching for physical contact resembling of a much younger child.

My comments during this initial phase were aimed at reassuring him that I was there, that I was listening and thinking about what he was trying to convey. I would verbalize the feelings of fear and worry that the people within the house would experience while awaiting the arrival of an impending tsunami, or when they were caught by an unexpected wave. I also verbalized the feelings of shock, despair, and sadness that everything they possessed had been damaged or destroyed, helping Leo to begin to recognize and then distinguish between different affective states. Gradually, I started to introduce the idea that actions could be taken to protect the house, the people, and their belongings from these catastrophes. For example, windows and doors could be closed, and people could be moved to safer places. Leo began to respond by following my lead. After the tsunami, earthquake, or flood, he would inspect the house and the roof, which as time went by seemed to become more robust. One day, after inspecting the house, he thoughtfully said that the rain had slid off and there were only minor cracks on the roof. If the house represented his sense of himself, perhaps he

also felt better equipped to withstand his anxiety, without feeling flooded by it.

Another feature of Leo's play involved the removal of old, broken, or damaged objects, and expired food from the doll's house, which I understood to mean his need to get rid of bad internal objects and bad or damaged parts of the self, which he then fenced off or locked inside the garage. He used a baby word to indicate food, which felt like a poignant representation of his early feeding experiences, which, as hypothesized in the profile, were rendered toxic by indigestible maternal feelings and projections.

The theme of annihilation also appeared in his drawings. After a short phase of only drawing road traffic signs, he began to draw monochromatic boats using grey, brown, or black felt-tip pens. He often drew storms and big waves covering the boat and the passengers (Figure 2), but soon he began to draw the "skin" of the seats using a yellow felt-tip pen (Figure 3), taking a lot of care in making sure that the skin was not cracked, broken, or old (the same word is used in Italian for both "leather" and "skin").

The appearance of the skin in Leo's material felt very significant, as many authors emphasize its function of containment and differentiation. Anzieu's concept of the skin-ego (1989) describes a mental representation that is formed on the basis of the child's experience of the surface of his body and its use as a vessel of mental contents. According to Anzieu, the ego encloses the psychic apparatus, just as the skin encloses the body. The skin is an interface between inside and outside and is the foundation of the container/contained relationship. Drawing on Winnicott's theory of emotional development, Anzieu (1989) suggests that, in the early phases of life, the function of the skin-ego is taken on by maternal holding and handling.



Figure 2

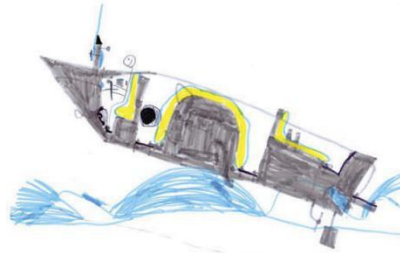


Figure3

Leo's preoccupation with both cracked and broken skin, and his quest for new and unbroken skin, appeared to confirm what was hypothesized at the diagnostic stage: a vulnerability at the level of his very early emotional development, where maternal holding and handling had not been "good enough," which interfered with the process of establishing a coherent and integrated body-mind unity. How this vulnerability reflected on Leo's sense of self, on his ego functioning and ultimately on his appreciation of reality became clearer as treatment went on.

Although at this stage Leo had become better able to relate in the therapy, he also appeared to take flight from reality, and for several months he seemed to live in a world of his own making. Lots of imaginary friends appeared, he would spend most of his time pretending to be making and spraying poisons at other children in the nursery, or at me. He would often appear "psychotic" and out of control both in the sessions and at school, and at this stage he was assessed by a child psychiatrist, who diagnosed a "Global Developmental Disorder not Otherwise Specified" and arranged special educational needs support for him in school.

Leo no longer wanted to be called by his name, but only accepted being called by a diminutive form of his real name; later on he gave himself several different names and surnames. He firmly maintained that he was an old man—possibly identifying with his grandfather as the most benign figure in his family life. His age, which often changed, oscillated between 54 and 75. His endless talk concerned only what he did with his "imaginary" friends, one of which helped him make road signs. He spoke with them either on imaginary telephones or as if they were in the room with us. He devised poison-spraying machines, opened and closed imaginary doors to his poison-lab, or tipped and threw everything around the room. He

vehemently refused any reference to his real life and identity, and would react with anger when his imaginary world was challenged. The pretend quality of his play was lost at this stage so everything felt real for Leo. It seemed that Leo had entered a separate psychic world without the ability to keep in contact with ordinary reality, a world that was functioning at the level of symbolic equation in which his ideas and feelings did not feel representational but a direct replica of reality. In my counter-transference I registered despair and helplessness, probably the very feelings Leo tried to keep at bay.

Winnicott (1945) relates childhood imaginary companions to the process of personalisation, stating that they are not simple fantasy constructions but that they are sometimes other selves of a highly primitive type: “this very primitive and magical creation of imaginary companions is easily used as a defence, as it magically by-passes all the anxieties associated with incorporation, digestion, retention and expulsion”.

Being more in contact with the “other” (the therapist in the transference) made Leo feel more vulnerable and his imaginary world seemed to be the solution he found to protect himself from his vulnerability and dependency. Relating felt too dangerous to Leo because his aggression made him perceive the other as a menace that had to be attacked with his “bad internal poisons.”

It is possible to speculate that because of his early experience of having been impinged upon his relationship with the “other” remained a persecutory one. In Winnicottian terms, Leo appeared to be functioning at the level of primitive dependency where there is no recognition of otherness and so he was “relating through identification” as described by Winnicott in his paper “Use of an Object” (1968).

Construction and use of subjective objects

As treatment progressed, we started to learn how to survive and manage moments of anger, terror, and overwhelming anxiety. Out of Leo’s chaotic and violent material, a new activity began to take shape. For a large part of our sessions we were busy assembling electronic objects, such as computers, radios, speakers, and other gadgets: we made them out of cardboard boxes, paper, sticky tape, and string. These objects had buttons and volume control levels, and were linked together through a complex network of cables and extensions made of string. These objects became very important for Leo and were later replicated in both the house and the school. He would often arrive for sessions loaded with big boxes that he had made at home. He spent entire sessions making loud rhythmical electronic sounds with his voice (or songs made of swear words), “trying out” different volumes, showing concern about the volume being so high that it could break the speaker, and

asking me what the right (safe) volume was. The function of these objects, at this stage of the therapy, seemed to be that of containing, regulating, and controlling affects and impulses that made the self always feel under the threat of fragmentation, and testing whether I could take in, tolerate and modulate what came into me without being overwhelmed and destroyed by it.

It is possible to speculate that Leo's thin psychic skin made him also vulnerable to very primitive sensorial experiences that he could not regulate, which he experienced as overwhelming and disorganizing. His voice and the rhythmic sounds he produced appeared to have the function of soothing and containing him, and providing him with a sense of coherence experienced at a bodily level.

Anzieu's concept of the "sound envelope" (1989) may illustrate the function of Leo's use of his voice and the function of his objects. Whereas Winnicott (1971) underlines the importance of the mirroring function of the mother's face based on visual signals, Anzieu hypothesizes a more precocious existence of a sound mirror, or of a hearing-sound skin, and of its function for the acquisition of the capacity to signify and then to symbolize. The sound envelope is one of the earliest of the many skins by which the child is surrounded. It is a metaphorical skin formed by the echoing interchanges between the mother's voice and the child's own sounds. Through the introjection of the universe made of sounds, the self is formed as a pre-individual psychic cavity that has a core of unity and identity. Anzieu suggests that at this very early stage of development there is no clear distinction between the tactile and the auditory sensations: they are experienced as soothing and containing contours of the voice.

Maiello (2001) suggests that the rhythmical aspects of reality can serve as a bridge between "the primary state of unstructured fusional unity" and "the first fleeting awareness of separateness" (2001, p. 191) without which symbolic mental activity cannot take place. The significance of rhythm is in the regular alternation of a beat and a pause, combining presence and absence in a temporal dimension.

In my mind, Leo seemed to be recreating primitive functions that had been disrupted or had never properly formed in order to be able to emerge into a world in which inner and outer reality, fantasy, and reality, I and You could all be properly felt as separate. In this process, as his therapist, I had to contain, modulate, and tune-in to his affective states and receive and contain his projections, much as a mother would do with an infant, and together we co-constructed these objects that seemed to represent and carry these functions, and that Leo seemed to experience as concrete extensions of

himself. These objects replaced the function of the road traffic signs, which, at this stage, no longer seemed to be of interest to Leo. However, although the use of the road signs appeared as an attempt to find directions and orientation in a sort of rigid, two-dimensional world, these new objects with their three-dimensional, interactive quality, seemed to be precursors of a developing mental space in which some control and modulation was possible, as well as some sense of agency.

As winter approached, Leo introduced a new activity: he became preoccupied with sealing windows with layers and layers of sticky tape to make sure no wind or cold could come in. We spent several weeks in this activity and used many rolls of tape. He continuously asked whether the windows were old or new, double or single glazed, weak or strong, and so forth. In parallel, in his drawings he applied double-glazing and seals to his boats to protect them from water coming in. His concerns about intrusions appeared to represent persecutory impingements that destroyed his true self. In his play, Leo appeared to be attempting to strengthen his ego in order to render it more impermeable to internal/external intrusions, as if mending and repairing his “psychic skin” such that his internal world could become more clearly differentiated from the external one; his self could become more clearly differentiated from the other; and relating could become a less threatening possibility.

During this period Leo also made some very nicely illustrated instruction books for electronic objects, such as a radio and a clock, with all the “dos and don’ts” (handle with care). These instruction books seemed to represent his wish for care and looking after, although he could not yet identify with being a little boy and found it safer to be represented by a hard, inanimate object. On one occasion he came in and pretended to trip on the rug and fall over, he was holding his box and made everything fall on the floor, something he had done many times before. He asked me whether people are more important than objects, mimicking letting go of the box in order to protect himself from getting hurt in the fall. Then he asked me who the most important person in the world was. After thinking for a while I answered that the most important people are the people we care about. Leo looked at me thoughtfully and said: “You are rather important . . . yes, rather. . .”

Mirroring

As the warm season approached, many of Leo’s sessions were spent out on the balcony where he started to stick his drawings on the wall and then to add messages for the neighbors. Gradually these messages changed from warnings into insults and bad words. Leo would be asking me what a certain person (a neighbor, or a passerby) would do or think if he shouted a particular swear word or insult loudly. Similarly, in his play with the doll

figures, he constantly asked me hypothetical questions about what a certain figure would do or think if another one did a particular thing. There was also a fair amount of provocation to see if I would stop him behaving naughtily and shouting bad words out of the window. However, I understood this endless questioning as his need to have parts of the self-mirrored back to him, so that he would know what kind of a boy he was. One day, when I explicitly interpreted this, Leo gave me a thoughtful look and a smile.

It appeared that at this stage Leo was beginning to develop a “theory of mind,” and with it he began to conceive of the other as having a mind that could have thoughts and feelings different from his own. It also appeared that Leo was starting to represent himself “in action” and capable of causing a contingent reaction from the other, although the relationship was most of the time imagined and represented in negative terms: his aggression still seemed to “poison” his capacity of being with others. Within the therapeutic relationship, inside and outside, at this stage, became more clearly differentiated for Leo, as had me and not me. Through the other it became possible for Leo to better regulate affects and differentiate thoughts. Leo appeared to be searching for a mirror within this new relationship. When Leo started seeing himself more clearly, he became able to symbolize and to represent in play the subjective experience of the psychic catastrophe and the psychotic world.

Autobiographical play

When Leo (then age 7) returned after the third summer holiday, the narrative of his play became more obviously autobiographical. For several weeks he played with boats brought from home and with the doll figures.

He represented himself skiing on water, being scared of the waves, and in conflict with his father who would not listen to the boy’s fear. The father “did not care, did not listen, and did not hear.” The little boy in the play became more and more “spiteful,” hiding on top of a rock where the father could never find him. After 30 years passed by, the father died. The little boy was triumphant. Leo could represent aggression and anger toward his father and the feelings of guilt that caused the little boy to be punished/killed. I spoke of my belief that the boy’s anger came from his experience of the father not listening to his fears on one hand and the boy’s wish to please the father despite his terror of the waves on the other. In response, Leo asked me to make the boy cry so much that his vocal cords broke.

In the following sessions the same theme and story line developed with the little boy skiing on water. As all the characters’ hostility toward the boy rose to a crescendo, a substitute teacher locked the boy in a safe with thick walls, forgetting the combination of the safe, which nobody could open anymore.

Leo played this scene across a number of sessions, trying to open the safe with all sorts of bombs and weapons. When he managed to free the boy from his “locked-away” state, the boy emerged into a world of bizarre and scary flying figures, witches, and Halloween monsters, which lived in a bewitched house surrounded by fierce animals. The play then became highly destructive, ending with Leo tearing the cardboard harbor to bits.

I understood this play to represent Leo’s encapsulated state and his coming out of it into a scary world that had no meaning to him. The characters in the play were more differentiated and there was a family structure, which for the first time clearly included the father figure. The father and son struggle was evocative of an Oedipal scenario, where the father is ambitious for his son, but is insensitive and denigrating. The little boy tried hard to meet the father’s expectations and to conceal his fears, but in order to do this he had to exert violence on himself. The experience of skiing on water amongst big waves, unsupported, holding onto a rope, and relying only on his own strength, possibly acted as a trigger to represent deeply seeded memories of his faulty infantile holding and precocious defenses. These were Leo’s first representations of early memories in the “locked away” state, which was possibly his response to overwhelming primitive fears in the absence of parental contingent responsiveness and affective attunement.

As hypothesized during the assessment stage, Leo dealt with his faulty parental holding through the development of uneconomical and primitive defenses, which distorted both his self-development in fundamental ways and his sense of reality, resulting in what appeared to be “psychotic” thinking and bizarre experiences. After these sessions he asked me several times what I would think if I saw “a flying house” or other unreal or bizarre things, as if sometimes he himself would be subjected to bizarre perceptive, perhaps visual, experiences. Importantly, following the play described above, Leo began to accept being called by his real name and began to talk spontaneously about school and about his homework. This increased adherence to reality was also observed in school and at home.

Leo played a game in which the doll’s house was being bombed by all sorts of conventional and atomic bombs, whilst making different alarm sounds with his voice, as though he could by now begin to distinguish between different degrees of danger. He put the people in an anti-atomic shelter and when the shelling stopped he asked me to make the people celebrate in the cemetery—by having a party. When I commented, puzzled, that celebrating in a cemetery was a strange thing, Leo stopped me and animatedly said, “No, no, they are celebrating because they are alive—make them come out of the house and celebrate!!” He added, “Only two old ladies died, and the house is not broken, there is only a little hole, and a few things that are broken—but not the people!” I quoted him as saying a long time before that people were

more important than things. As a response he threw another wooden bomb and actually broke a piece of furniture in the doll's house. He immediately denied breaking it, looking a bit apprehensive, anticipating an angry reaction from me. As I remained calm —verbalizing that he seemed afraid that I would get angry and pointing out that I was not going to because I knew he did not do it on purpose—Leo relaxed. Before leaving the room at the end of the session, he put some “reinforcements” and weights onto the house. His attempts at fixing things were a welcomed change and indication of movement towards the capacity for guilt and the desire for repair.

It was the first time that the image of the cemetery had re-appeared after the initial diagnostic sessions and I could not help wondering whether the two dead old ladies in the play represented the two dead grandmothers who shadowed Leo's early infancy, and that the celebration in the cemetery had something to do with Leo's psychic survival, which only left a “little hole” in his sense of self. It was also interesting how Leo had put me to a test: were people really more important than objects? Was he really more important to me than my toys?

Concluding remarks

An early developmental disturbance (possibly connected to mother's emotional state in the perinatal period) was at the root of Leo's difficulties. This hypothesis seems to find confirmation in the nature of Leo's material, as it presented itself in the course of his psychotherapy and in the inter-subjective processes and communication that took place between us.

Developmental psychoanalytic psychotherapy (Hurry, 1998) has been increasingly conceptualized as enabling direct access, regulation, and ultimately alteration of unconscious structures and restructuring “of interactive representations encoded in implicit-procedural memories” (Schoe, 2003, p. 45). This process is described in this article as repairing and strengthening Leo's psychic skin, which appeared “punctured and damaged.”

Through the permeability of Leo's skin the primary process seemed to penetrate and invade him from within and external forces to impinge from without. The psychotic outset is described by Grivois (1999) as the overflowing of preverbal and prereflective “emotional tissue” in which a terrifying anxiety that cannot be mentalized and transformed pushes the subject to organize extreme defensive styles in order to establish the minimal emotional quota.

The impossibility of Leo relying on his parents to contain his emotions and projections, and of discovering the self in the other's eyes, possibly led to Leo's incapacity to organize stable images of self and other and to develop a

capacity to mentalize (Fonagy & Target, 1997). It is possible that Leo turned to his father in the face of his mother's overwhelming state of mind and was met by father's lack of authenticity and covert hostility. As we got to know the father better, it became noticeable that communicating through double messages was an overarching feature of his "being with" Leo. Unfortunately, it was difficult to engage the parents in ongoing parent work, and although they were able to bring Leo regularly to his sessions, they could not do the same for themselves.

As Leo's psychotherapy continued, many of the themes described in this presentation reappeared periodically. Leo appeared more integrated and able to relate and play; however, there were still many questions about his future development that remain open throughout the treatment. The focus of this article was on highlighting the value of the initial formulations derived from the use of the diagnostic profile as a baseline, a framework from which to begin the process of meeting the child patient and his parents where they are. Our capacity to scaffold the treatment is founded in our way of organizing the evidence in front of us with the purpose of guiding our interventions and main clinical goals.

This article does not include the process of termination of this case, since it is an ongoing treatment. However, in the same way the diagnostic framework can help us to create a preliminary map of a child internal and external world at the beginning of the treatment so does it prove extremely helpful in determining when to begin the process of ending a treatment and evaluating gains and areas which still deserve attention or perhaps monitoring. Dimensional diagnosis as the one offered by Anna Freud's Profile affords the clinician the capacity to create a comprehensive picture of the child's internal and external world in contrast to the limitations of organizing a treatment based on a categorical diagnosis, a label which limits the exploration of both conscious and unconscious motivations for behavior.

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