

## A time for interpellation: initial interviews with children and their parents

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*"...no truth can anticipate what is bearable to know."<sup>1</sup>*

J. Lacan

Psychoanalysts are of course aware that the first interviews with a person seeking possible analysis are particularly valuable. The reasoning behind this assertion will vary according to one's theoretical-clinical position. The need to formulate a differential diagnosis between neurosis, psychosis and perversion is one of the main reasons, along with evaluating the conditions of each subject in order to carry out an analysis.

Given that psychoanalysis originated more than a century ago, it is important to consider its effects on our culture and specifically, on the parents that come to our offices. What do they expect from an analyst? Guidelines for raising their children? To be evaluated as parents? To place their child in the hands of someone qualified? To fulfill a referral as with any other type of test or analysis? And, how can we as analysts position ourselves with relation to them?

The various ways we have of referring to the initial encounters can give us some idea of our position with respect to these questions.

The **consultation**, a term inherited from the practice of medicine, tends to end with the doctor's **prescription**. Both terms reinforce the idea that the person consulted possesses a specialized knowledge and is therefore qualified to issue the appropriate recommendation. It seems that in the past several years, the use of this term has spread among analysts, perhaps coinciding with the expansion of the prepaid health care business.

Bion stresses the need to clearly mark the differences between medicine and psychoanalysis given that, for him, the gap between the two is unbridgeable. One of the differences the author emphasizes is that in psychoanalysis the patient must suffer in order to undergo analysis while in medicine this is an unnecessary requirement. Do analysts issue prescriptions in the same sense as doctors? Do we possess a knowledge that allows us to indicate the correct path to follow? Do we truly believe that there exists a predetermined

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<sup>1</sup> Lacan, J. (1964-1965). Seminar 12: *Problemas Cruciales para el Psicoanálisis*, Class 17 from 06/10/65, unpublished.

path? In the clear difference that Agamben establishes between science and human experience, he asserts: "*While scientific experience is indeed the construction of a sure road (of a methodos, a path) to knowledge, the quest, instead, is the recognition that the absence of a road (the aporia) is the only experience possible for man.*"(p34-35) Agamben (2001)<sup>2</sup>

At our current clinic we receive a considerable amount of consultations by parents who are there following the recommendation of someone else: a school, a pediatrician, or a judge. Often parents are simply there to carry out the order they have received without feeling implicated in the child's discomfort, sometimes detected by the person who recommended the consultation. However, the act of being listened to can bring them to listen to the unique meaning of their suffering, allowing them to begin their own journey. The "order" is converted into a desire to know more about the discomfort that has brought them to the consultation.

We will now consider the expression **preliminary** interview. The term comes from the Latin *liminar* or "pertaining to the beginning" which implies that something will follow. The interviews will be a first step leading to what is really important: the analysis.

Why do we assume that the interview must lead to an analysis? While Freud evaluated the potential of a person before carrying out an analytic experience, at times I have the impression that we start from the assumption that it wouldn't be a bad idea for anyone to undergo psychoanalysis, as if it were an absolute Good. If the person being interviewed does not agree, we tend to assume they are choosing the wrong path.

Before issuing this judgment, have we stopped to consider the consequences an analysis might have for the person in question? Where does this belief in the existence of a guaranteed path come from? Might it have some consequence on the child if the analyst assumes the position of possessing the truth when this position belongs to the parents?

Regarding this idea, Winnicott remarks, "*...I find it bad to let the parents feel that analysis is their salvation. ... I mean that one must avoid giving the impression: 'Yes, psycho-analysis will cure him, that is to say, will make him as you want him, without any more effort on your part'*" (p111-2) Winnicott<sup>3</sup> (1957).

Although this statement may convey the idea that analysis can make a child the way the parents want him, it is not coherent with Winnicott's intentions. Rather, his intent is to resist the idea of analysis as a path towards salvation while at the same time, emphasizing the necessity for parents to participate in the changes that the analysis of a child will bring about.

If we understand the interviews not as the anticipation of something that will take place in the future, but rather as something that is "happening", that is *unfolding* in a present

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<sup>2</sup> Agamben, G. (2001): *Infancia e Historia*. Buenos Aires, AH Editora.

<sup>3</sup> Winnicott, D. (1957): *Escritos de Pediatría y Psicoanálisis*. Buenos Aires, Paidós, 1958.

moment without a fixed course, the steps effectively taken could have their own value. This can be lost if we are focused on the goal of establishing an analysis at any cost. If we value psychoanalysis we should make an effort to keep open the possibility of another consultation, whether it be with another analyst or at another point in time.

These issues become more complex when children are involved, given the place they occupy in the family structure. Any decision must inevitably affect other family members.

We can consider the place of the child from several different angles; the child as the embodiment of the ego ideal of the parents, for instance, designed to plug up the lack in the other. The expressions "*may he not suffer what I've suffered*" and "*may he be able to do what I have not*" clearly reveal the narcissistic ambitions of a son who possesses rather than lacks. The illusion of completeness persists and can find its bastion in "His Majesty the Baby". In consultations concerning behavioral disorders, it is sometimes possible to detect a hidden approval in one of the parents, whether it be the pleasure produced by the perpetuation of an identifiable characteristic in their child ("*he's like me*") or the impossible ideal they desire for themselves. As Freud points out, two of the possible object choices of the narcissistic type are to love in the other what one is or what one wishes to be. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the metaphor "*niña del ojo*"<sup>4</sup> meaning pupil of the eye, an expression used in several languages. The *Etymological Dictionary of the Spanish Language* (1976)<sup>5</sup> explains that the expression comes from the fact that the image of the person speaking can be seen reflected in the eye of the listener. Even in Araucanian they call this the "person or child of the eye". Language expresses in a metaphor the complex psychoanalytic theorization regarding the place of the child and the role of the gaze in the psychic structure.

Parents may come to see us for multiple and very complex reasons, possibly compelled to by the school or a pediatrician. They may be depressed or annoyed by the disappointment they feel with respect to their child or scared by the child's violence or their own. They may approach us out of feelings of guilt or impotence when faced with physical conditions that do not respond to medication, or may come for other more explicit or implicit reasons. All of this is accompanied, in some cases, by *suffering*, considered by Bion as a condition for analysis (1974).<sup>6</sup> Although Bion does not develop this idea extensively, it is clearly linked to tolerating the absence that the word evokes and allows us to take a closer look at the convergence of these two concepts.

*Suffering* as a requisite for analysis is not a reference to a masochistic condition, nor does its importance lie in feeling or not feeling an emotion. The term chosen by the author could suggest a passive position. On the other hand, it also indicates the importance of

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<sup>4</sup> Translator's note: Since "niña" in Spanish means both "pupil" (of the eye) and "girl", this expression can be read literally as "the pupil/girl of the eye". In English the closest equivalent is "the apple of one's eye".

<sup>5</sup> Corominas, J. (1976): *Breve Diccionario Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana*. Madrid, Ed. Gredos

<sup>6</sup> Bion, W.: *Atención e interpretación*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 1974, p. 16.

*discovering* the pain and wanting to know more about it, understanding it before eliminating it. We can envision the interviews as a time for the pain to become subjectified. Only then can we question to whom we should attribute knowledge regarding this suffering.

The most difficult situations to manage in the practice of psychoanalysis are those in which the child continues to be the drive-object of the mother, condemned to a passivity that inhibits detachment and therefore, his or her constitution as a subject. Where the concern or anger of the parents clearly reveals itself, the attentive analyst can perceive a structure in which the lack is plugged by a child, object of desire of the mother. *"It can be useful to remember that psychotherapies are often discontinued because the child is doing better ... The treatments do not progress or are interrupted in one way or another, just at the moment in which they approach the limits of what the family is capable of undertaking"* Ortigues (1987)<sup>7</sup>. In these cases the analytic intervention will initially focus on evaluating the possibility that the mother has of relinquishing, which would allow the child to transition out of this place.

On one occasion, I listen attentively to a mother who has come to me truly worried and suffering the violent behavior of Caesar, her eldest child. I ask her something regarding the youngest of her three children. However, instead of saying his name, I refer to him as "Octavius", a name that has no relation to his real one. The woman looks at me with a mix of surprise and irritation and corrects my mistake. I automatically reproach myself for not listening attentively enough. However, thanks to my experience as an analyst, I overcome the disapproval and think there must be some truth in that slip.

I therefore venture to ask her if "my" mistake makes her think of anything. *"The only thing that occurs to me is that Octavius is also the name of a Roman Emperor"*, she replies.

In addition to the feeling of relief at once again recognizing the disconcertedness caused by the emergence of the unconscious, the reasons behind the choice of this name also came to light, truly denoting the place of Emperor. Caesar intended to keep his Empire at any cost, even violence and despotism.

Despite the request of some parents, occasionally children emphatically reject the involvement of the analyst, exhibiting a strong fixation, generally to the mother. We have several possibilities when confronted with this situation. We can carry on with the parents' request despite the child's negative or, we can consider the refusal as the absence of a demand and therefore conclude that it is not the right moment for intervention. Between these two positions, exists a third: deciphering the meaning of the rejection before making a decision.

On some occasions and for varying reasons, the child experiences the analysis as a threat to the preservation of the parental figures, essential to his or her constitution as a

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<sup>7</sup> Ortigues, M. y C.: *Cómo se Decide una Psicoterapia de Niños*, Buenos Aires, Gedisa, 1987, p.35

subject. One possibility is that we find ourselves faced with the extreme fragility of one of the parents, where the child is actually supporting the parent and sustaining him with excessive distress, investing him with a power he doesn't have.

This is the case of three-year-old Germán who has a severe speech disorder. It was remarkable how the child managed to place the mother between the two of us, even going so far as to "disappear" by falling asleep in some of our meetings. Even though she was undergoing her own therapy, he insisted in making a place for her in our sessions by assuring that she was the one to speak. The interviews began to produce questions with respect to her son, reestablishing him as a being separate from herself. The mother's story clarified the meaning of the desperate, even occasionally violent, attachment. He would sit on top of her, take her face in his hands and turn it towards him so she would look at him, gave her insistently repeated orders, including that she speak to me, and when she didn't obey, he hit and kicked furiously. These signs which could be understood as expressions of an extreme possessiveness, an absolute intolerance for separation and differentiation, turned out to be an appeal to the Other.

On one occasion in which he managed to pass off the speaking to his mother by falling asleep, she mentioned that she had been asking herself about why her child was so difficult and relating that to the fact that during the first two years of his life, she and his father had spent significant time under the effects of marihuana and, on some occasions, harder drugs.

What is the value of what the mother recounted? Its value lies neither its confessional tone nor in having discovered **the origin** of Germán's distress. The reproaches the mother made on her own did not contribute to changing the situation. On the contrary, they led her to give in to all of her son's demands as the super-ego's compensatory command. This, in turn, confined him to a space he could only break out of through angry attacks, increasing his feelings of guilt.

These spectacular confrontations left the child, once again, without a differentiated Other to whom to turn. How could Germán be expected to move towards separation through the foundation of language if he was desperately fighting for the place of the son who was attempting to create it through his own impossibilities?

A child is essentially a son, in the best of cases, and therefore rooted in the parental relationship, on which his birth as a subject was dependent. This is why it is necessary to carefully evaluate situations in which the child, impotent, is supporting the couple or one of the parents. We must consider their potential for changing the role given to the child.

The interviews can allow the establishment of differentiated places in the Oedipal complex or the adult-child categories, as Meltzer would say, not a minor thing in the process of constructing the subject.

At other times, the Oedipal confrontation becomes so violent and, at the same time, so hidden, that even the slightest distancing is experienced as a threat of abandonment. The analyst can represent a danger to the imperative need for reassurance of the constant presence of the both loved and hated other.

Natalia was unable to stay at kindergarten without her mother. Their relationship appeared to be idyllic, arriving at my door laughing and playing games. The difficulty of separation in the school environment was the only issue that clouded their relationship. The girl gave no sign of being angry at her mother. Unlike Germán, her inability to separate was clearly located in the Oedipal triangulation. Natalia covered up the desire to exclude her mother while on the other hand, and precisely for this reason, she made a scene of motherly desire to keep close the one who rewarded her with so much satisfaction.

The overdetermination of the symptom allowed Natalia to please her mother by not separating from her but, on the other hand, obligated her to spend her whole morning at the kindergarten, preventing her from doing anything else. Precisely in satisfying the maternal Other, she introduced a distance between her and her mother, breaking the illusion of perfection. This discomfort produced a certain degree of rejection on the part of her mother.

According to Lacan, "**to be rejected** would be, in this sense, to save oneself from being devoured by one's partenaire"<sup>8</sup>. Lacan (1967) In fact, in our first meeting, one of the first things this girl said was, "Tomorrow I'm going to be happier because I'm going to be free from my house, I'm going to sleep at my cousin's house", while she drew an enormous head with a tiny mouth. These movements towards separation were followed by periods of intense "clinginess" towards her mother. The act of separation was inevitably subjectivized as guilt linked to the Oedipal struggle. To alleviate this guilt, she would once again alienate herself in the mother, thus producing a never-ending cycle. Given that children are naturally in the process of constituting themselves as subjects, we may see these scenes often, especially in cases in which we intervene in moments in which the separation-alienation dialectic is being played out with intensity. This can lead to the establishment of a new position in the structure, implying a painful separation for both children and parents.

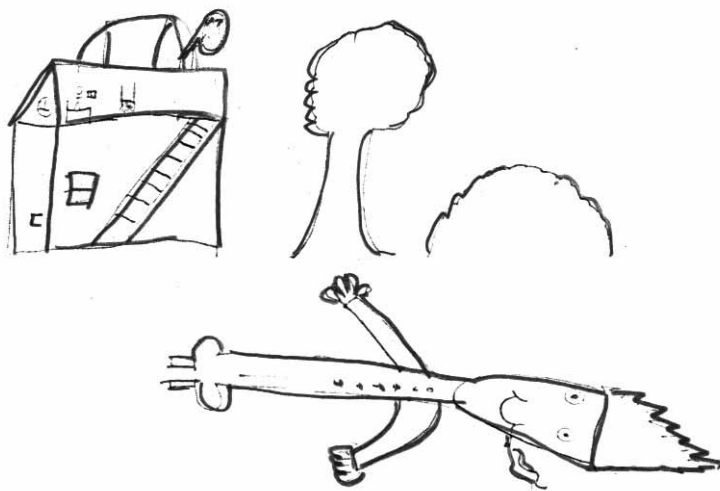


Lacan, J. (1966-67). Seminar 14: "La lógica del fantasma", class 18 from 5/10/67, unpublished.

Although we know that children's issues are not always linked to parental figures, in some cases the child is trapped in an imaginary relation with the mother while the paternal role has not managed to develop to sufficiently permit movement towards another subjective position.

10-year-old Tomás was brought to my office by his parents, on the insistence of his school, because he was failing despite his excellent potential. In the first interview, the mother told me about the death of her father, mentioning that *"the day of the funeral, Tomás began to walk"*. While taking notes, I write *"the day of the funeral, Tomás died"*, quickly crossing it out and correcting myself with a certain degree of horror. Paying little attention to my mistake, I continue with the interview as if nothing had happened. Despite this, or perhaps precisely because of my forgetting, I hear the child say, *"When I think I'm going to be a farmer or a butcher, or that I'm going to drive a garbage truck, I don't want to grow up"*. What prevented Tomás from dreaming of something he might value? What condemned him to the nightmare of being something he didn't want to be? Something smelled as bad as the garbage truck. It wasn't normal to hear a child expressing his desire not to grow up because of a fear of having to become something he didn't find value in. The answer to the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" tends to be where the ideal is rooted... I began to get the picture of a child destined to fail. His mother had told me about the failure of her father: *"I can't fault him a thing because he was an excellent person who lost everything he inherited but gave us the best of himself"*.

At the same time, the child was being evaluated by an Educational Psychologist<sup>9</sup> whom I contacted and who told me about a "strange" drawing. She had asked Tomás to draw a house, a tree and a person. He drew the first two with the sheet of paper lengthwise and then turned it vertically and drew a man smoking.



<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Lic. Matilde Pérez for providing me with this material.

Tomás expressed surprise and commented, "*It's strange I drew him with a cigarette because he's a soccer player*", and added "*I don't know why I made him there because I had room here*" (pointing next to the tree). His grandfather, the one who had been buried when he began to walk, died of throat cancer.

His surprise regarding his own work clearly indicates the direction we should take. Circumstances in his early childhood enabled the possibility that he inherit failure, an inheritance he accepts and rejects at the same time. The strong negation of the internal demands of the mother towards her own father had deafened her to those of Tomás<sup>10</sup>, maintaining in the present a past that she was unable to lay to rest.

The malaise of these children does not appear to have anything to do with their symptoms from a medical point of view. In psychoanalysis, the *symptom* takes on a particular meaning closely tied to the etymology of the word which comes from Greek and means "chance" and "to befall, to fall together with".<sup>11</sup>

We can associate the fall with an ego ousted from the throne of certainty when unable to decipher the enigma. In the case of children, where the symptoms demand an interpellation from the parents, it seems to act as a threat towards the latter. When they are not able to respond, malaise, like the Thebes' plague, sometimes brings them to an analyst, opening up the possibility of conceding a particular value to the discourse of the Other in deciphering the enigma represented by the symptom that also affects the parents. It is not simply any malaise but rather one that opens up the path to transference and enables the Other to intervene. We should therefore keep in mind that we see the parents in a moment of ambivalence with respect to the place they occupy.

It is important to remember that the parental role is essential in the formation of the subject. Our actions aim to preserve this role which, at the same time, is so seriously questioned in the present, especially by the parents who, hesitating, tend to accept recommendations from different areas.

The importance of avoiding prescriptions and instead conducting the interviews in a manner that opens them up to a request for analysis, lies in the fact that there is no "true" analysis that can endure without the parents' transference. Although the passive acceptance of a recommendation of analysis for the child appears to facilitate this, the effects will be apparent in the short-term. The analysis is likely either to be discontinued or, even worse, provoke a premature questioning of parental authority from the child, resulting in a distancing that could leave the child without the shelter of the Other, necessary in continuing on the path to the constitution of his or her self.

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<sup>10</sup> Due to an incorrect diagnosis by a speech therapist shortly after Tomás was born, his mother was tormented by the idea that Tomás was deaf.

<sup>11</sup> Corominas, J. : *Breve Diccionario Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana*, Madrid, Editorial Gredos, 1976.



The interviews with the parents cannot consist of simply taking down basic information it also requires the attentive listening of the analyst, with evenly spread attention and without the *a priori* establishment of the importance of one element or another in the discourse of the parents. We must listen without being blocked by preconceptions. In this way we establish our position as lacking knowledge of a certain path. This position in the interviews rewards the analyst with the products of the unconscious that allows them access to a knowledge, impossible to achieve through the intellect. In Lacan's own words, "*Anamnesis is not so much the things one remembers, but rather the constitution of amnesia or the return of the repressed which in the end, are exactly the same...*" Lacan (1967).<sup>12</sup>

When, in analysis, the unconscious emerges through a lapsus, an error or a mistake, we can trust that what is revealed is something *bearable to know* and not the anticipation of the truth.

Descriptors: Psychoanalysis with children – interviews – lapsus - psychoanalytical listening

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<sup>12</sup> Lacan, J. (1967-1968). Seminar 15: *El Acto Psicoanalítico*, class 3 from 11/29 /67, unpublished.

## Abstract

The present work investigates the role of initial interviews in psychoanalysis with children, establishing differences between a medical consultation and simple *anamnesis*. This difference takes place essentially through the opening or closing of the Unconscious.

It is for this reason that the first encounters between an analyst and the parents and/or children are particularly valuable in themselves.

The term *child* is interpreted as representing a particular place in a structure, taking into account the need of understanding the dynamics of this structure and the possibility that it may or may not resist a change in established relations.

The interviews may represent a time for the subjectivization of suffering, leading to the inclusion of the parents in the issues that bring them to the consultation.

The symptom that initiates the consultation implies the fall of the ego from the throne of certainty, unable to decipher the enigma. In the case of children, it threatens the omnipotence of the parents towards whom the interpellation implied by the symptom is directed.

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