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Some thoughts on the “new” latency age: Normality and psychopathology

PAOLA MORRA

Abstract

The author discusses some aspects of the impact of our changing society on the latency phase, while presenting a clinical case. At this age, children need a reliable environment, protecting them from sexual and aggressive overstimulation, as an essential condition for the work of latency to be carried out. As some authors point out, if post-Oedipal repression is hindered, children may be pushed towards an early, highly disruptive adolescence process. Strong and untimely anxieties may arise, requiring particular defensive and adaptive strategies. According to the author's experience, concerns about death may be observed, these not usually being expected at the latency age. In some children, these seem to promote an early process of intellectualization. The patient described here was a violent, self-harming child from a disturbed family. As soon as his psychic state improved with psychotherapy, he expressed anxiety about mortality as a general human condition and was able to reason on the concept of infinity at a quite abstract level. The significance of this observation is discussed from a developmental point of view.

Key words: *social changes, latency age, intellectualization, death anxiety*

In the last decade, I have observed an early emergence of concerns about death in some psychotherapy patients at the latency age: such concerns appear to be based on an unusual, realistic awareness of our finiteness, rather than on the persistence of archaic fantasies, and are therefore, in some ways, not in tune with their age group. These children try to work through their anxiety at an emotional and cognitive level, sometimes being uncommonly capable of abstract thinking, as I will show in the case that follows. They are, typically, hypersensitive boys and girls, in more or less severe conditions, coming from very unstable and disturbed families, which have been probably stimulating their sense of uncertainty. In some cases, I think that their working-through might indicate the early onset of a process of intellectualization (Freud, 1936). In my opinion, as this would not normally be expected before adolescence, such an early process deserves discussion. In particular, I wonder whether, and in which conditions, such a modality may support a healthy psychic development, or whether it is a mainly defensive strategy against pathological anxiety.

My patient's home and social environment had been inadequate since early childhood; more recently, his family had specifically failed in supporting the basic developmental process indicated by Sarnoff (1976) as the “work of latency.” Failure in this task is often seen in the families of our time. They are hyperstimulating, fluid in their framework and roles, and unable to untie their children from Oedipal and pre-Oedipal cathexes, the reason why they do not promote the development of intrapsychic structures. We frequently observe children, even “normal” ones (Freud, 1965), being pushed towards an early adolescence process, which seems to be built on quicksand (Denis, 2003; Guignard, 2011); their early sexualization and lack of coherent internal rules are going to hinder, rather than promote, the creative generational break that these children will later need in order to fully become adults. The pervasivity of digital devices can also become an important source of hyperstimulation in today's latency-age children, if not guided by adults to a correct use of this powerful instruments (Bergès-Bounes & Forget, 2017).¹

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¹I would like to thank one of the referees for their objection related to the influence of new technologies on childhood, which I consider as a highly relevant theme. This, however, was not an issue for my patient, who was rather exposed to unfiltered TV: like most Italian children in primary school who live outside big towns, he had no access to the Internet, and in our sessions, he never mentioned video-gaming.

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Although this picture may seem quite complex and discouraging, we have to ask ourselves which developmental skills these children may rely on to overcome such difficulties, and how the environment, and we as mature adults and psychotherapists, can support their growth.

Clinical material

Filippo is nine years old, and in the period here considered had been in psychotherapy with me for 18 months. He had also been under a child psychiatrist's care. He is the second-born child of a lower-middle-class couple in extreme distress, socially isolated, with no significant help from relatives and no cultural interests. The family lives in a small town in an agricultural area in Northern Italy. When I first met the child, his father, a cold and dismissive man, was filing for a divorce from the child's mother, who was a very disturbed woman. Until then, they had been violently fighting for a long time, and the father had many times left home, every time returning after a while. Filippo, who had always been a dysregulated child, had developed a serious conduct disorder with suicidal behavior since the end of nursery school. At school he was highly disruptive, inattentive, and apathetic: it was very difficult for his (female) teachers to handle him.

The relationship between Filippo and his mother was very intrusive and ambivalent, something that his father had not been able to counteract. Filippo was suffering from encopresis, and his mother washed him ritually when he became soiled. At the beginning of his therapy, Filippo actively tried to repeat this seductive pattern in the transference. Just before leaving the first session, in which he had built something with Lego bricks, destroying it soon after, he left me a note that I was supposed to read later on. He was smiling. When I unfolded the piece of paper, I read two words in capital letters: "SHIT WHORE." I was struck by the violence of this communication: I had suddenly become an unreliable and erotized mother, who had to clean up his mess. For a long time, I observed a rapid swing between a manic, manipulative attitude and a disorganized state that led Filippo to act out dangerously. After a few months of psychotherapy, Filippo had swallowed an entire box of aspirin for children as a form of "revenge against his mother" following a fight. He had

ended up in hospital, where his act was not taken seriously, and no one alerted me or the psychiatrist. One day, Filippo blindly ran away from a session right into the traffic, yanking his old grandmother, who was trying to stop him.

Despite his tendency to act out and put himself in danger, Filippo has always had excellent verbal skills. During one of our first sessions, he asked me: "Is God omnipotent? If so, he's evil. Otherwise, he wouldn't allow such bad things to happen in a family." I was unable to find a suitable reply to this airtight logic, quite scary in a child who was not even eight years old at that time. A deep hopelessness could be felt behind his cynicism.

After 18 months of very hard work, the child's symptoms are easing off and our relationship has become more playful. In the second-to-last session before the summer break, we play an iterative game, searching in turn for rhymes. As an illustration of this, Filippo draws small circles "connected by an arrow." "You see, you can add a new one ... and then a new one ..." He draws a long, tangled chain. "You go on like this, endlessly ... Like the universe ... but, listen, is the universe infinite?" I say that we do not know for sure, it might not be so. "Oh, then it would be like going round and round ... one turns around and never sees the end," he says.

I am aware of the significance of what Filippo says with respect to the transference: he is probably expressing his longing for an "endless" relationship. Nonetheless, I am surprised by his deep insight: he is thinking of an infinite path on a closed surface (let us think of a path on a spherical surface); as an aside, several models of universe are based on similar geometries (Luminet, 2001).² I say that some scientists believe it could be just like he suggests. "Are there infinite things that have a beginning? Like numbers starting from zero?" he asks. As I try to answer his question, Filippo stops listening; he howls like he has lost his speech. In the next session, the last one before the summer break, Filippo howls rhythmically with no interruption, like an animal. Then he writes down the "text" of his "song": it is the story of an orangutan living in a forest. He takes his song with him at the end of the session. For the first time, I can feel his sorrow and anxiety over our separation.

In the first session after the summer break, Filippo recalls the day he ran from our room and our last meetings. He has kept the text of the orangutan song. He draws a black house, "with no foundations,"

²In the second period of latency (Bornstein, 1951), children can understand the concept of mathematical infinity for discrete objects, such as natural numbers, as a result of an iterative process (Lakoff & Nuñez, 2000): this is what Filippo does when he says: "a new one ... and then a new one ... endlessly." But then he is taking two more steps: he is thinking on infinity in the continuous (a smooth path) and, more remarkably, he is intuitively understanding the possibility of setting an infinite path on a closed surface.

and a black sun. I comment that it is a very sad drawing; he says he is fed up with being nine years old, he’s looking forward to turning 10, he wants to have a party. I tell him that maybe he is also looking forward to growing up. “No, it’s because of the party”

I say that 10 years is an important birthday – it’s two digits. “What if it were one hundred?,” he asks. “One hundred digits? That’s impossible,” I say. “No, one hundred years! Three digits, it’s possible, right?,” he asks. Right, I say, it’s possible. “Do you know that some turtles can live up to 180 years? One that is born today could live until” (he calculates). Do you think that science will make us live forever?,” he asks. I tell him that we could have a long life, yes, but to live forever, I don’t think so. “Why?,” he asks. “Because that’s the way we are. We are mortal,” I tell him. “I don’t want to die, I’m scared,” he says. “We all are,” I reply. “Is it possible that someone *wants* to die?,” he inquires. And, after a pause: “Let’s say that someone loses his father. Can God make it so that for him nothing happened, and he is as happy as he was before?,” he adds. “Well, some people try to do this, but it’s crazy, it’s being blind to reality,” I tell him. “*Reality* ... that’s what it’s called?,” he says. “That’s what it’s called,” I confirm.

Discussion

In the above session, God is no longer a sadistic internal object, supporting the child’s own cynicism, contrary to earlier on. He is becoming an idealized object, the core of a protecting superego.

Filippo’s defensive omnipotence is decreasing. I want to stress that he is now trying to cope at a cognitive level as well with the theme of death, a theme that was presumably stimulated by our upcoming separation (our “chain of small circles” is *finite*) and by his father having left the family. He is now reasoning on the concept of infinity in a quite abstract way. His insight seems to bring together affective and cognitive aspects, searching for a symbolic containment to accommodate his death anxiety. This is a difficult and unstable search, where anxiety sometimes overflows, as the regressive sequence of the orangutan shows. There probably is also a defensive purpose in thinking of an infinite walk on a closed surface; nevertheless, Filippo has found a true intuitive solution to a problem. Reasoning on infinity helps Filippo to think and stop his acting-out, in an unusual and relevant way. His solution brings together mathematical forms and religious beliefs, as happened in early scientific thought: this was pointed out by Pauli in his essay in *The interpretation*

of nature and the psyche, co-authored with Jung (1955).

What is the difference between Filippo’s search and the emergence of scientific curiosity, which is usually observed during the latency phase? In my opinion, what we see here is not just the need to give an order to the world: the child’s own subjective position with respect to it is called into play, raising an existential question. We should remember that, following Piaget (1926), death as a universal and irreversible fact is understood during latency, and this understanding, as such, is essential in promoting cognitive development (namely, the notion of physical causality). Moreover, in this phase, following Denis (1979), children must face the first mourning-like process in life, due to the physiological abandonment of Oedipal parents. In healthy children, a developmental process should take place, leading from the understanding of death and the sense of loss experienced in latency, to the adolescent’s acute existential anxiety. But we may also think that a child who is exposed to real losses or to inadequacies in his parents finds it very hard to follow this “ideal” path.

When we first met, Filippo was overwhelmed by the loss of his father and the insufficiency and intrusions on the part of his mother; he was driven, as an effect of his pathology, to evacuate anxiety through projective identification and acting-out. In time, thanks to his therapy, he has become able to *think* of human precariousness and to find his own, intellectual way to cope with anxiety – a real attempt to go beyond death.

Anna Freud (see Sandler & Freud, 1985) sees the emergence of intellectualization in latency as a worrying sign as it may indicate, in her view, a schizoid personality. However, things could be somehow different in our times: if children are pushed towards adolescence, they most likely have a need to master excessive anxieties; this might require new efforts on the part of the ego, also at an intellectual level. Of course, this may lead to a pathological breakdown or to a false self. In my opinion, these efforts may only have a true developmental value if they are shared with an adult who is able to understand their emotional meaning. In this condition, I believe the early emergence of intellectualization may support an important structural and dynamic change.

Regarding this, I would like to add something about my discussion with Filippo regarding “reality.” It is hard for him to understand that no God can help him deny the loss of his father. His acceptance of an objective world as independent from his fantasies is perhaps unstable; still, he seems to be reflecting on the relationship between reality and wish fulfilment. In her 1994 paper “Phantasy and reality,” Hanna Segal describes the

interlinking of primary and secondary thought, which takes place in mature fantasizing. Here, thanks to the quality of symbolic processes, the fantasized wish fulfillment does not impair reality-testing. This theme is particularly relevant with respect to scientific and mathematical creativity. The great mathematician Henri Poincaré (1908) described the interaction of unconscious and conscious work in his own psychic functioning. In his view, the former is essential to promote a selective search for beautiful, “gratifying” forms; the latter is necessary to verify their consistency with reality.

Concluding remarks

Filippo is a very traumatized child, raised in a dysfunctional family. He had been dysregulated since early childhood and became frankly symptomatic around the age of six years. It is not clear to me whether something new was happening at home at that time. However, children with early relational disturbances may collapse when they reach that age as they lack the skills they need to enter the world outside the family and face new demands (Pine, 1988).

I have suggested that the social transformations of our time may relate to strong anxiety about human fragility in some latency-phase children. Sociological considerations cannot be taken as an explanation for intrapsychic conditions; rather, the latter can be sustained by a dysfunctioning of social structure, which also influences the symbolic frame for their expression. Reflecting on this theme, we must keep in mind a variety of socioeconomic situations, more or less advanced; in all cases, changes in social and cultural structures are too rapid to allow working-through within the time of a generation and, for this reason, become traumatic. With respect to this, less developed zones are more disadvantaged as they lack the resources and cultural tools that could help them cope with the loss of their past. My patient lives in an area where traditional institutions, solid enough until recent times, are falling apart. His social environment could not offer him, during his growth, any helpful resources: no extended family to contain his parents’ distress, no authoritative teachers to guide him in primary school. The paediatricians in the hospital did not understand the severity of his acting-out. The Church, having had a fundamental role in that area for centuries, has now lost ground, and Filippo could not rely on a community supporting him in his questioning about religion. In a broad sense, his environment suffers from a lack of paternal function and from a loss of social identity, mirroring and enhancing his own intrapsychic developmental failure.

Although, as I have pointed out, the universality of death is understood at the latency age, an acute and

painful awareness of human finiteness is not, at least in my experience, a common finding in “healthy” children, except in cases where they have suffered a bereavement. The ability to verbally express this anxiety may, in itself, already be considered as the outcome of a working-through process leading to abstract thought. In fact, it gives evidence of a certain degree of intrapsychic structuration. Perhaps the term “intellectualization,” which mainly underlines the defensive side of a psychic mechanism, is too narrow to express its possible relevance with respect to the creative process. For Filippo, the attempt to conceptualize mathematical infinity originated from an emotional need. Following Poincaré (1908), this is precisely what happens in mathematical invention, where emotions play a major role, no different from what we are used to seeing in artistic and literary creation.

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