



Research Article

Evidence of Reparation as a Defense Mechanism in a Girl Diagnosed With Autistic Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract: This research aimed to identify and understand the using of reparation defense mechanism, as stated by Psychoanalysis, present in a child with autism, during school interactions. A 8-year-old autistic girl was observed in school while interacting with her mediator, in a primary school in São Paulo state in Brazil. The interactions were systematically described and qualitatively analyzed, with the focus in moments when the girl made use of reparation, in clear movements of acting, blaming herself and trying to restores damages caused by her attitudes. The analysis showed that reparation, as a defense mechanism, present in many situations, can be observed even in autistic spectrum disorder children.

Keywords: autism, reparation, mediation.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism as a topic is very relevant nowadays, due to the multiplicity of symptoms children present. Some children are verbal, others are not; some interact with peers, others do not; some are within their age, concerning developmental milestones, others are no. That diversity directly interferes with diagnosis and this is a factor that increases the number of children diagnosed as autistic (Dora, Marinho, Pereira Filho, 2006). According to DSM-5 (APA, 2013), Autistic Spectrum Disorder individuals present consistent disadvantage in communication and social interaction, restrict and repetitive behavior patterns, interests or activities. However, a trustful diagnosis is based upon a deep investigation of the patient's history, including reports from the carers, clinical observations, and a self-report, if possible. Leo Kanner, in 1943, was a pioneer, discussing the mother's role in autism, referring to those mothers as cold, or not caring. Melanie Klein (1965) explained autism as a development inhibition, when anguish derived from a conflict between pulsions of life and death. Frances Tustin (1990) has assumed the existence of a psychogenic constitution in autism, not opposed to the possibility of organic manifestations of the disorder. In this perspective, autism is considered as a defense against an excessive stimulation not mediated by the mother, and, as such, a defense against confusion and disintegration; the individual searches for protection through an autistic barrier (Tustin, 1981, 1990). Winnicott (1986) states the importance of the maternal function in newborn babies, in order to enable him/her to integrate and develop, as the infant's development is intrinsically related to the mother's emotional state. Consequently, if a mother cannot attend to the infant's innate adaptation tendencies, psychological illness may be installed, meaning a stalling in development. Tustin (1990) suggest that autistic states are related to an absence in awareness of psychological existence, subsisting only in a physical level. Autistic children are afraid of

not being able to exist. The sensation of not being inside the own body creates a panic reaction when confronted to the awareness of being separated from the mother's body. The lacking of sense of existence is more painful than the risk of death, as death provides a feeling of body permanence; the threaten of annihilation is the worst, as it leads to the extinction of the psychological meaning of existence.

It is quite common to observe situations when the individual, motivated by many different factors, attack a given object and feel guilty afterwards. Due to guilt and remorse, the person exalts the same object, previously the victim of hate and destruction. Reparation is a process structured in this perspective, when the subject tries to restore something that was damaged by him/herself (Klein, 1937/1998). According to Melanie Klein (1937/1998), depressive position is marked by the moment when there is an important change in infant-mother relation, as the infant sees the mother as a complete object, identifying with this complete, real and loved person. During the depressive position, the infant suffer anxiety due to the fear that his/her own impulses may destroy the loved mother. Feelings of aggression and hate appear and, fearing the destruction of the loved object, the infant experiences guilt. Understanding that the good and bad object are one, reparation appears, as an attempt of lessen guilt (Lopes, 2010). Klein (1937/1998) believes that impulsive feelings of destruction are present since birth; thus tendencies of reparation are essential to allow normal processes of overcoming depressive position in infants. Elaboration of depressive position is completed when the infant interiorizes the object of love. Therefore, reparation is the moment when the subject faces the need to repair the damages caused by his/her sadism. During those moments, fantasies are created, such as to bring back to life what is dead, to find what was lost, to protect mother's integrity against attack of bad objects. When integrity is restored to the object of love, reparation occurs. The success of

the mechanism of reparation supposes the victory of pulsions of life against death (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2016).

This research aimed to understand the mechanism of reparation and the possibility of its use in autistic people, discussing this defense mechanisms and the results in a Psychoanalytical viewpoint.

METHODS

This qualitative ethnographic research was conducted in a private school, in a São Paulo state county country town. It was part of a larger investigation on autism and inclusion, being approved by the Ethics Committee (n. 0087.0.272.000-10).

Participants of this study were an eight-year-old girl, named "B", diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and her mediator, a 5th year Psychology undergraduate student. In Brazilian school system a mediator is normally an undergraduate student, who is hired to help children with special needs/disabilities to follow mainstream schooling, during classroom hours, attending to all the needs, and intervening when there is a problem.

The observations of the interactions between the girl and the mediator lasted one year and were conducted during daily activities in school, being registered in a field diary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The observations registered were analyzed, focusing in various situations when reparation could be detectable.

In the beginning of the year, as the mediator was assigned, B. was very interactive. She showed high abilities concerning the school activities, such as quantities, writing, interactions with other children, displaying affectionate attitudes, such as kissing and hugging. Her relation with the mediator was affectionate, without aggression.

Situation 1:

When the second semester started, another pupil was introduced in the class, and the mediator had to share her attention with both of them. The boy has cerebral palsy and has more difficulties to follow classroom activities.

From that moment on, B. wanted to do the same activities as the boy, even though she was told that she didn't need those resources. When denied those activities, she refused to do hers: her handwriting reverted to the level of scribbles, her behavior changed drastically, hitting peers, as well as taking off her own clothes, screaming at the mediator, saying she hated her.

Following those events, she didn't go to school. Her mother went to school and said B. didn't want to return to school, saying people were too disappointed at her. Those words mean that B. was experiencing guilty, which is fundamental to reparation (Laplanche & Pontalis, 2016).

The girl's attitudes can be explained first as an attempt to attack the object (her mediator), once she is not getting attention the way she used to get before. As soon as she realizes that the loved object may be damaged, she feels guilt and tries to repair it (Lopes, 2010). This reparation was observed in her attitudes, when returning to school: B. hugged and kissed the mediator, saying she loved her, and performed all the school activities correctly, opposite to the previous week. Hence, she tried to extol the same object, victim of her attacks, as explained by Klein (1937/1998).

Situation 2:

Some weeks afterwards, conflicts appeared again, and B. refused to comply to the school rules. However, after a weekend, she arrived in school saying she loved the mediator, and

was sorry for her previous behaviors. The ambivalence of feelings, love and hate, bring guilt, and the need for reparation (Klein, 1937/1998): she causes conflicts, then she tries to repair those, through expressions of love.

Situation 3:

A very relevant situation happened when B. hurt herself, biting her own fingers to the point of bleeding, and cut her gums with the identity card. When she directs her aggressive behaviors to herself, she understands that the external environment is connected to her and, doing so, she tries to affect the mediator, who represents that environment (Klein, 1937/1998). The mediator explained that she didn't need to hurt herself to call the attention, neither to regress in her abilities to get support as her disabled peer. She was offered more complex activities and complied to the classroom rules, although constantly requesting the presence of the mediator. Apparently, that intervention helped B. to deal with her sadism, using reparation to fix the damage caused by her sadism (Klein, 1937/1998).

Situation 4:

One day, B. saw when the mediator got a chocolate from another child; she immediately asked for it and ate it. Next day, returning to school, she apologized for having eaten the chocolate. At first, she desired something that wasn't hers and tried to primitively and orally introject something that belongs to the other. She realized that she took away something that belonged to her loved object, and used reparation, apologizing for having eaten the chocolate. Klein (1937/1998) states that the individual attacks the object, taking away something that belongs to it, and afterwards begins the movement of reparation.

Situation 5:

The teacher informed the class that "*we are going to lose the mediator*" (her contract was going to be terminated, with the end of the term). B. didn't question the meaning of that assertion, or asked the mediator about the future. However, she started to show regression again. Some weeks later, she said the mediator that she wanted to be her. When questioned, B. said that it was because the mediator could have a baby inside her. It could be considered that B. wish to be cared for, as a baby in total dependence. B. needs a sufficient good environment, adapted to her needs, as a sufficient good mother, vital for the infant's psychological health (Winnicott, 1986).

CONCLUSION

Reparation is a complex defense mechanism, as it is necessary to be aware of the damaged caused to the other, feel guilt and just after that, repair that damage. Based on that, identifying such a mechanism in an autistic child means to understand that, although a deficit of reciprocity may exist, as diagnostic manuals assert, it doesn't turn an autistic alienated from the world.

From the results, a regression was observed, creating a huge difference between the way the girl was and how she behaved during a period of dissatisfaction in school. It can be hypothesized that the child, noticing that a triangular situation was created, had to share her relationship, feeling threatened in her affection.

The sharing of the mediator was an institutional demand. Therefore, it is important to consider the role of the environment configuration in the development of a child with special needs. It is fundamental to think about conditions offered for adapting those children in school. A disadvantageous condition in the environment might cause hindrances.

Basically, this research aimed to show that a person's subjectivity and potentialities must be prioritized, independently of any level of damages.

Finally, a child with autism is a person who lives, desires, constitutes him/herself and integrates in time and space. As such, a child with autism must be considered in his/her unity, not only as a shadow of a disorder.

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