

Review Article

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I Am Françoise Dolto, I Am A Psychoanalyst And I Tell Children The Truth About Life

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Abstract

Based in the freudian psychoanalysis background, this article is a psychoanalyst's testimony of the way in which Françoise Dolto intervened with her very young patients at her Consultation. The method is the direct observation of the interaction between the therapist and the traumatized child. After have explained the modus operandi of the Dolto's Consultation, different clinical cases of psychotic's children are exposed. The conclusion is that psychoanalysis can be directly transmitted: the disciple observes the master's savoir-faire and actively participates to the cure's experience with a psychotic's child.

Keywords: Nursery, Analysts, Co-therapists, Interpretation, Unconscious, Inspiration.

Introduction

I would like to give a scientific testimony of the way in which Françoise Dolto worked with her youngest patients within the framework of her Consultation (private clinic) on Cujas Street, as well as to theorize on Dolto's technique, through the prism of my own experience.

After concluding my presentation, I would like to comment on an admirable photo of Dolto which synthesizes the core of what I have to pass on to you. I titled this photo *Dolto and the girl with the necklace* [1].

But let us first refer to the *Consultation* on Cujas Street. I keep a vivid memory of these incomparable analysis sessions carried out in the presence of a group of psychoanalysts I had the chance to belong to. I say: "analysis sessions" and not: "a presentation of the mentally ill" because, according to Dolto, the follow-up of the child she received represented a real analytical treatment, and not a psychotherapy [2].

From those years, I preciously keep the blue notebook where I used to jot down on the spot the most remarkable interpretations that Dolto addressed to her young patients, at the sessions' most intense moments. By its review, I came across the idea of making you hear some of these striking interpretations which produced decisive effects both on the young patients and on ourselves, the analysts who were present [3].

Before making you experience these unique moments where Dolto delivers her interpretation, I would like to tell you about the modus operandi of the Consultation, which was held in a small room at the 5th district of Paris, between 1985 and 1988. There, every Friday morning, Françoise Dolto received very young children, experiencing great psychological difficulties.

After having attended for thirty years her child psychiatry Consultation at Trousseau Hospital, she had insisted on resuming clinical work, but this time, exclusively dedicated to the children of a near-suburb nursery. Nurseries were temporary public institutions where the children who were victims of abandonment or abuse lived. These children, aged from a few months up to 4 years old, cut off from their family of origin, carried a painful, even a tragic past. They often arrived to the Consultation following serious mental disorders and were accompanied by a childcare assistant who remained present during the session, if the child requested it. Cures—generally quite short-termed—could last from one to two years, depending on the progress of the disorders and the length of the child's stay at the nursery. But the two original ideas of Françoise Dolto, which made her Consultation so original were, in principle, to psychoanalyze nursery children—this was rare in itself—and to introduce the active participation of a small group of experienced psychoanalysts—very much like co-therapists—within the cures themselves.

As a matter of fact, the analysts who attended the Consultation, were not beginners or passive observers. Nor were they psychoanalysts working exclusively with children. On the contrary, Françoise Dolto preferred to open her Consultation to practitioners working with adults. For her, it was essential to practice our profession with adult patients before facing the much more demanding work that analyzing children involved. I myself have recently explained to what extent psychoanalytic practice with children is far more delicate than working with adult neurotics. Indeed, the big mistake is to believe that children are easy to listen to, that it is enough to play together with them to produce a therapeutic effect. Instead of analyzing the child, many young colleagues play with the patient. But the analyst does not have to play just for the sake of playing, one must play to be able to analyze! We must not be fooled by the ease with which the young patient invites us to approach him. We could risk our attention being distracted from the main goal: to capture the unconscious of the child in front of us. In short, it is necessary to be an excellent adult psychoanalyst in to become a good child psychoanalyst. However, I should correct this formula. Strictly speaking, from a psychoanalytical point of view, we should not distinguish between adult psychoanalysis and child psychoanalysis. Why? Because, regardless of the age of the patient we receive, be it an old lady or an infant, it is always the child—the phantasmal child—that we listen to behind the complaint of the person who is suffering. All things considered, the best formula would be to state there is no adult, teenager, child, couple, or even family psychoanalyst as such; in fact, there is only one psychoanalyst, the psychoanalyst who works with the timelessness, with what is repeated and goes through the patient's life since his first emotional experiences as a child [4].

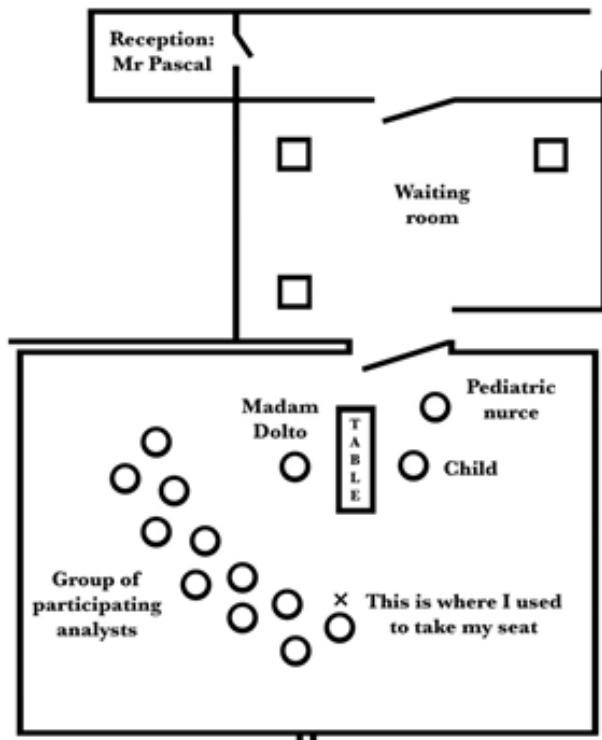


Figure 1: Plan of the Consultation on Cujas street.

The Consultation on Cujas street

But let us go back to the Consultation on Cujas Street. I would now like to show you the plan of the room where Françoise Dolto used to receive her little patients.

You can see on the plan that Mrs Dolto and the child were seated opposite one another, on either side of the table. Sometimes the little patient was accompanied by a pediatric nurse. The participating analysts sat behind Dolto. I marked with a cross the chair where I often used to take a seat.

The framework of the Consultation also included the waiting room with its two children's stools and its toy box containing dolls and soft toys.

Next to the waiting room, there was the office of Mr. Pascal, responsible for the reception of children and mothering women; he warned us of the arrival of the little patients who followed one another every half hour. The sessions were interrupted by a break during which we exchanged with Françoise Dolto our impressions on the analytical dialogue she had just held with the child.

On the table were placed various objects I want to detail [5]. There were sheets of paper, a case of large felt-tip pens, a bowl full of plasticine, an old metal cookie tin filled with trinkets such as a wooden ruler, round-tipped scissors, a real-life bunch of keys, a chain, two small knives, one for modeling and a sharper one, a small mirror, a whistle and colored pencils whose leads were always broken, and which Françoise Dolto often sharpened with an Opinel (small French knife) she pulled out from her purse. With this gesture—sharpening the pencil—she indicated to the child that each one had to take care of the task due to them. She encouraged the child to devote himself to his own drawing or to his modeling. I am thinking of a little patient, Laetitia, who suffered from what is called "pseudo-debility", which implies she behaved like a baby when she was already a 5-year-old. She constantly sought the attention of Mrs Dolto and asked her for comments on her drawings. Françoise Dolto then took the pencils with the broken lead and began to sharpen them. When Laetitia became too insistent, she replied: "Listen, make your drawing! Everyone should do what they have to do: I sharpen; you, you draw your dream!" [6].

We, the analysts who attended the Consultation, were active participants in the child's treatment. We were active, when, for instance, the little patient, encouraged by Mrs Dolto, addressed one of us or the whole group [7]. We were also active when, upon entering or leaving the room, the child greeted us "Good morning", and we replied. On welcoming a child who came for the first time, Françoise Dolto often explained our presence in these terms: "You see, these gentlemen and ladies are going to work with you in order to make you happy." At a certain moment of a session and at Dolto's request, it also happened to find us singing in chorus a rhyme like *Au clair de la lune* (In the moonlight). Sometimes it was only the men who had to sing; in other cases, all the voices echoed in unison. But, in any case, won over by the thrill of this shared vibration, we felt in direct contact with the unconscious of this child who was sitting there, in front of us, surprised to hear us sing. It was as if Dolto, by asking us to sing, knew that at this precise moment of the session, our voices would spark in the child the reassuring sensa-

tions he/she had not experienced as a baby [8]. Certainly, this little boy or this little girl had never known the warmth aroused by the sweetness of a maternal voice, by the authority of a fatherly voice, and above all, the warmth of the reassuring dialogue between two parental voices, father and mother, responding to one another in the imagination of a thriving child. Here, I will not hesitate to say that—while it is true that our voices stimulated the child—it was actually Dolto herself, her own unconscious, which, through our means, reached and revived the faded self of the deprived child [9].

This is the reason why I state we were, in fact, participating analysts; we were more than mere spectators of the analytic act, we were part of the act, and sometimes even guarantors of the analytic act. I say "guarantors of the act" because it sometimes occurred that Françoise, in the middle of a session, did not understand what was going on with the child and, invaded by doubt, questioned us aloud as a last resort.

Aïcha, Cursed By Her Mother

In this regard, I remember the poignant case of Aïcha. Aïcha was a severely psychotic little girl Dolto treated for two years. At every session, inconsolable Aïcha cried without ceasing: she entered the room crying, cried throughout the session and left crying without exception. Even before she crossed the door of 21 Cujas Street, we could already hear her in the street screaming her pain out, to the point that we all exclaimed: "Oh, there, it is Aïcha's time!" She was undoubtedly the most difficult patient to follow, but also to endure. The painful nature of these sessions was such that two colleagues in our group, torn by so much suffering in a small being, preferred to leave the Consultation for good. I clearly remember a session when Aïcha, in complete disarray, had thrown herself face down on the floor at a room's corner—as she often used to do—shouting and hammering the tiles with her head. Dolto immediately got up from her chair, walked to the back of the room, knelt beside the child, tried in vain to appease her and, helpless, confessed: "I no longer know what to say to you to help you..." Then, without hiding her helplessness, she turned around, and looking at us shrugging her shoulders, opened her hands as if apologizing for not knowing what to tell the child and asked us, to whisper to her the word that would stop the unbearable pain. This was a heart-breaking image I will never forget! [10].

You now understand why Dolto has been a teacher for so many of us. Because she was not afraid to show her weakness. She trusted her gut—even the feeling of weakness. The essence of what Dolto taught me is to trust our feelings as analysts, to work with our feelings, naturally on the condition that these feelings are constantly refined by clinical experience, strengthened by theory and corrected by supervision.

Yet, the same Françoise Dolto, who was capable of admitting her powerlessness, was also capable of finding the most suitable word, of bringing forward the right word, when needed, to appease her patient. In front of little Aïcha who, in another session, was still crying, banging her forehead on the ground, Dolto no longer showed helplessness. On the contrary, she pronounced this phrase which for me constitutes an interpretation model, the model of a word capable of dissolving Aïcha's deadly unconscious fantasy.

This word is the following: "You cry like an unhappy baby, unhappy like your mom! She too is an unhappy baby." I distinctly remember that ever since that day, Aïcha stopped crying and hurting herself. I have often thought that Dolto's interpretation had enabled Aïcha to understand, not intellectually but intuitively, emotionally, that her mother had not rejected her out of contempt, but further to her immaturity, out of an inability to take care of a child... to such an extent was she a sad baby herself [11].

I would like to dwell for a moment on this intervention by Dolto which I consider to be an effective interpretation of the unconscious fantasy little Aïcha was prey of. I think that by compulsively pounding the ground with her head, Aïcha was in the grip of a fantasy she enacted without realizing it. This fantasy was that of a scene Aïcha could not see, but which dominated her whole being. In this scene, her mother, a mother who, in fact, had been a drug addict and rejected her child resulting from a rape, this mother, as I was saying, was imagined by Aïcha as a mother screaming at her to disappear, ordering her to eliminate herself, to cease existing. By hitting the ground violently with her head, Aïcha was just blindly obeying the order of a mother perceived as a frightening monster [12].

In fact, by offering this interpretation, Dolto corrected and dispelled Aïcha's unconscious and lethal fantasy. It is as though by telling the girl that her mother was also an "unhappy baby", Dolto showed Aïcha that the monstrous mother screaming in her head was not her real mother. Despite it was true her real mother had abandoned her, it was out of great deprivation, and not out of cruelty that she did so.

Aïcha's cure ended positively. Little by little, instead of throwing herself on the ground and hurting herself, Aïcha consented to sit down at the table and agreed, most often in silence, to draw or to model her mortifying discomfort. After two years of treatment, freed from the monsters that had previously condemned her, and pacified, she became an ordinary little girl animated by life.

Dolto's Source Of Inspiration

In the face of such an effective interpretation as "You cry like an unhappy baby, unhappy like your mother! She too is an unhappy baby." the question arises. Such a question is valid for each and every of Dolto's notable intervention with the children she treated. Where did her inspiration come from? How did such simple, colorful and relevant words come to her mind? We will never be able to find an exact answer to this. To explain this thanks to her immense clinical experience would be too broad an answer. No, intending to understand where inspiration comes from, one still must place oneself at the heart of the relationship between Dolto and her little patient, which enables me to put forward the following hypothesis. But before its formulation, I would like to confess that during the sessions, sitting on the chair located near the table's end, I was placed in the front row not only to observe as closely as possible the little patient's manifestations and silences, but also and above all, to observe Dolto, in order to remain more sensitive than ever to her physical presence and her revealing spontaneity of what I have called the Instrumental Unconscious of the psychoanalyst.

So here is our hypothesis: inspired words spring up in Françoise

whenever she succeeds in concentrating, in emptying herself and in having access to the child's unconscious fantasy by relying on imagination and emotion. What does this mean? That during the psychoanalytical work with the concrete child of that session and, beyond that, with us, the group of participating analysts, Dolto consciously feels the emotion which makes the child sick and which the child cannot name. It is at this moment that Dolto addresses her little patient and, with suggestive, true and understandable words, shows to him/her the emotion experienced without knowing what is being felt. This means that when she speaks to the child, she speaks to him/her with her inimitable voice. A full, clear, vibrant voice that moves one to the point of tears, that awakens, stirs and soothes; a voice carrying the conviction of what it has to say and saying it on time. It is these simple and resonant words that I consider to be the best psychoanalytic interpretations, namely, words capable of modifying the patient's relationship with himself, even if he is a baby.

Interpretation is a word which reconciles the patient with himself and relieves him. Interpretation relieves because by receiving it, the patient—whether a child or an adult—discovers that there is someone in this world, the therapist, who has understood what he, the subject, has been deeply going through without being aware of it. As if, by hearing from someone else the pain gnawing at me, I felt relieved.

The Sayings Of Dolto

Here are some examples of the remarkable words that I collected in my blue notebook during the years at the Consultation. I remind you that I used to sit on the first chair on the right, located exactly at the table's level. It provided me with such a viewpoint that the table seemed like a tennis court where the thrilling game of an analysis session was played out. From all Dolto's words that I wrote down, I selected a few:

Speaking to a child who had not brought the small stone for the session's symbolic payment, she stated: "I won't see you next time if you don't bring your symbolic payment. Do you want it to be out of love for you that I offer this session to you? Well, no!" Here, Dolto reminds us that a psychoanalyst does not work out of love for the person who becomes a patient. Although we love our patients, we do not get attached to their person. Without any doubt, a psychoanalyst works out of love, but out of love for what he is supposed to do: going towards the other, diving inside him, grasping the anomaly that makes him suffer, translating it into words, de-dramatizing conflict and providing relief to the one who has trusted him. This is the signification of the mission for which he receives payment, and it is also in this sense that the analyst gets to know the joy of an accomplished task. This joy cannot be reduced to a simple self-love satisfaction, but points to the intimate feeling of having acted as one should, having favored the reconciliation of the patient with himself.

Let us take another example. Speaking to a 10-month-old baby sitting on the nursery assistant's lap and showing surprisingly skillful hands while kneading a piece of plasticine, Dolto sympathized: "It is very hard to be a baby when one is smart, isn't it?" Speaking that way, Dolto dissociated the immaturity of a baby and the tremendous intuitive knowledge this baby possessed, and which exceeded him.

Along the same lines, but this time addressing a 3-year-old boy, she told him: "I think your hands are very smart. They know how to make a fish, even if you do not know what a fish is. Your hands know how to draw on their own shapes that you don't know [13]. This type of intervention was very frequent in Dolto. She isolated a part of the body—here the hands—assigned to it a good or bad intention and when it was bad, as a striking hand, a biting mouth or a hitting foot, the personification of the part detached from the body enabled the therapist to address the child without accusing, humiliating or making him feel guilty. Here is an illustration. "It wasn't you who scratched your little brother, it was your hand! We must no longer let it do everything it wants!" Yet another illustration. Addressing a 2-year-old girl, victim of an attempted murder, who seemed numb, Dolto vigorously said: "Since you have decided to live, you must now live to the fullest!" And at another point in the session, as if to spur the little girl's desire to live, Dolto said to her: "Was it good that you were born?" In these two interventions, Dolto awakened and strengthened the part of the child's self that holds onto life.

As to a mute little girl who constantly turned her tongue in her mouth, Dolto interpreted: "Maybe the difficulty with your tongue is that you want to speak Greek like your daddy did." Notice the acuteness with which the therapist observes each gesture. The slightest movement of the body becomes important because it can lead the analyst to detect the child's unconscious fantasy. The fact that the little girl turned her tongue in her mouth meant for Dolto that the absent father was nonetheless still there, present in the mouth [14]. This is what we could call a father-daughter co-sensoriality which caged the child into a morbidly unhealthy sense of security, making her mute and preventing her from communicating with others.

Lastly, one further example. During a first-time interview with a 3-year-old boy, he asked her: "And you, what's your name?" To which she replied: "My name is Françoise Dolto. I am a psychoanalyst and I tell children the truth about life".

What a conviction! What a fervent conviction!

I would like to conclude by pointing out the different versions of Françoise Dolto I have kept present in my professional work and in my private life:

-Dolto, the Psychoanalyst, who knew how to silently plunge into the unconscious fantasy of her little patients to relieve them from suffering;

-Dolto, the Master, who encouraged us to trust our feelings as analysts and showed us the humility of always being ready to learn;

-and finally, Dolto, the Friend, who could be both worried and fearful. How many times, on the way leading us to Cujas Street, did she surprise me in the car by confiding to me her jitters about starting a new Consultation morning? If we consider that at the time Dolto was 78 years old and had spent a whole lifetime as an analyst, this stage fright was probably one of the secrets of his success as a clinician. In the face of the ordeal, at the Consultation's stage, her innocent anxiety was transformed into a powerful desire to go towards the child, to transport herself inside of him, to coincide with what was unique about him, and to speak to him. Fear became desire, and desire became words.

Comment on the photo

Dolto and the girl with the necklace



Figure 2: Michèle Brabo / Opale.

I would now like to comment on one of Dolto's most beautiful photographs because it shows her at work in her professional practice at Trousseau Hospital, in 1963. You can see her kneeling in a similar posture to the one I described when I referred to little Aïcha's case. If you watch her gaze, you immediately get the impression that she is trying to bridge the gap between her and a very young patient, probably psychotic. I say psychotic after perceiving her body's stiffness, a body as if carried by the legs of a puppet. Notice the tension at the top of the back and in the neck; and if I draw my attention to the head's tilting, I deduce that the jaw is probably dropping, as it is often the case with many dazed children. But the gesture that would eventually confirm my impression of psychosis, is that of the rigid hand gripping the necklace, as if it could tear it off but refraining from doing so.

If I may well continue my remark, hoping to stimulate you in the observation of your own patients, I could say, in reference to this hand clinging onto the necklace, that the girl was attracted, even obsessed by the sparkle of the pearls, while remaining indifferent to Dolto's face. What the girl was looking at was not Dolto but the necklace's brilliance.

Obviously, this gesture in the child would not have been possible if Dolto had not knelt down and placed herself within the girl's reach. Now I invite you to take a closer look at Dolto. She raises her head towards the child, looking at her and, without being in any way embarrassed by the girl's unusual attitude, as if she were to say: "You can hold the necklace but don't break it!"

I believe that this picture eloquently illustrates the moment in a session when the analyst, making himself completely available, humanizes the instinctual gesture of the child [15].

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that psychoanalysis can be directly transmitted: the disciple observes the master's savoir-faire and actively participates to the cure's experience and the patient's recovery.

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