



Emotions as practice: Anna Freud's child psychoanalysis and thinking—doing children's emotional geographies



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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces Anna Freud's early writing from the perspective of the theory and practice of children's emotional geographies. Discussing especially Freud's view on the theory of defence mechanisms and her early arguments with Melanie Klein about the nature of the child's mind, it explores how children's emotions can be approached beyond children's own representational accounts of their emotional experiences. The paper advocates an engagement with Anna Freud's work and psychoanalysis that would account for different forms of knowledge produced in the intersubjective processes of research and for the significance of the relationships with child participants.

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1. A conundrum of children's emotional geographies

During my doctoral research, I came to explore the significance of friendship and peer relationships for children's practices¹ in a small deprived neighbourhood of Bratislava, Slovakia.² The research involved a twelve-month ethnography during which I worked with a local community centre in the position of a detached youth worker. This service was a regular youth work provision, primarily on the streets of the neighbourhood, and the nature of the contact with children aged 5–14 varied and responded to children's immediate needs, requirements and expectations. Meeting the agenda of the centre, work with children usually consisted of play and entertaining activities, but also included individual and group advisory, counselling and crisis interventions.

Peter (11) and Martin (9) were brothers³ with whom I spent a lot of time on the street. They moved to the neighbourhood a few years before I began the research and they now lived with their parents and other siblings in a small flat. Two attributes were notable about the boys: their extraordinary compassion for each other juxtaposed with a reluctance to express feelings. Peter was very protective of his younger brother while also kind and considerate, and Martin was equally dedicated and appreciative of Peter's care. The brothers usually hung out together, with Martin in particular rarely going out without Peter. However, they seldom talked about their feelings, at most giving just short evasive replies such as: 'I'm fine' or 'it's ok'. When they talked about their experiences, the boys emphasised conflicts with all kinds of authorities and how they enjoyed breaking rules. Only rarely did Peter or Martin mention being appreciated by someone else, and if they did acknowledge this, they usually sought to terminate the conversation quickly.

After a few months, Peter was taken away from the family for his involvement in a series of felonies with a group of friends. For the next few weeks, Martin was only rarely seen on the street, usually

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¹ I acknowledge the diverse usage of the term 'practices' in the contemporary literature (Schatzki, 2001). The research in question operated with an intentionally broad and open definition of practices as the 'ongoing mix of human activities that make up the richness of everyday social life' (Painter, 2000: 242) or, more profoundly, 'a series of actions that are governed by practical intelligibility and performed in interconnected, local settings' (Schatzki, 1988: 244).

² See Blazek (2011a, 2011b) for more details.

³ For the purpose of anonymity I changed the children's names. I keep their family situations and other personal circumstances intentionally vague throughout the paper but no deceptive information is given. I state children's real age at the time of our encounter while their gender might or might not have been changed.

just passing by and not paying attention to anyone else. It took some time before we made contact again, and while Martin began spending time on the street with his other older brother, he more often showed up alone.

Martin was slightly more outspoken now – it had been Peter who used to be more active in our conversations before – but he was still very cautious of talking about himself and especially about his feelings. He preferred to turn attention to other people, including myself, or to activities where we did not speak, enjoying the simplicity of strolls or observations of the neighbourhood where we avoided other children. After a couple of weeks, I asked Martin about Peter. Martin just snapped: “He’s fine!” and refused to talk any further. For some time, he deflected my attempts to talk about Peter, although with less anger; but one day Martin told me more about how sad Peter was in the juvenile centre, how he struggled to get on with the staff, how he cried, and how he missed his home and family.

From this moment, Martin talked about his brother frequently and regularly and he often initiated such conversations. Yet, I noticed that Martin often revealed new information about Peter even when I knew from his mother that no family member had been in touch within that period and Martin had no means to have heard from Peter. Some of his news even contradicted the stories that Martin’s mother and other siblings told me and my colleagues about Peter. A few weeks later, a colleague of mine suggested that by speaking about Peter, Martin could have been actually talking about himself.

There was no way to confirm this with Martin directly. He still fiercely refused any attention towards his own feelings, and when he talked about his experiences in the neighbourhood or in the school, he emphasised his “wrongdoings” again and again, and avoided any notice of his achievements or of being appreciated. Taking his stories about Peter as accounts of Martin’s own life, though, gave me some leads around which I built my interpretations and these informed my actions towards him. For instance, I took Martin’s stories of Peter’s new friends as a reference to Martin’s emerging relationships with a couple of children I knew from the neighbourhood. Martin talked about Peter’s excitement for finding new friends in the juvenile centre and how they shared certain interests, but also about Peter’s hesitation to trust them as much as he trusted Martin. I took these stories as an expression of Martin’s feelings and uncertainties about his own relationships with children in the neighbourhood and in turn, I could pay attention to mundane moments of interactions between Martin and other children in activities and games which I, as a detached youth worker, could impact and this facilitated a safer environment in which Martin could explore his new relationships and the emotions associated with them. Martin also talked about Peter’s feelings for his parents, emphasising how he felt sorry for being able to spend very little time with them. In this case, our talks even shifted to Martin revealing cautiously his own feelings. He emphasised how he wished to spend more time with his parents, especially with his father. While the reason for Peter’s lack of time with his family was his detention in the juvenile centre, Martin’s dejection came from the fact that his parents worked late, and gave their children less time and attention than Martin wished for. Even though we did not address any possible solutions to this – Martin still refused to go to such a depth – understanding Martin’s feelings about the family situation helped inform the work of the community centre staff with the family as a whole.

The story of Martin and Peter at that time seemed to support my conclusions about the uppermost significance of children’s relations with their siblings for their daily practices in this neighbourhood and about how any sudden rupture was of great difficulty

to them. However, I found it difficult to integrate this story into my overall interpretative framework. Most troubling to the analysis was that I had no direct evidence from Martin – he never explicitly expressed to me his feelings over Peter or his new friends to me. He did not discuss his struggles after Peter was gone or his uncertainties with developing new relationships a few months later. All I had was a detailed personal and family history of Martin and Peter, and an interpretation that often contradicted Martin’s explicit statements, such as when he said that he was ‘fine’ and it was Peter who was unhappy.

In searching for a way to resolve the discord between my interpretations and Martin’s statements and reflections, I looked towards various literature. Some of the writings concerned with the barriers between feelings and interpretations, particularly between the researched and researcher or between children and adults, were of some help. Various authors for instance argue that adults cannot entirely comprehend children’s words and worlds so that the two need to be seen as largely unbridgeable (Jones, 2001, 2003; Philo, 2003; Sibley, 1991). There is also the vast literature informed by non-representational theory, which suggests that it is not possible for human beings to grasp fully what we experience, feel and do, and even less to communicate it to other people in our common language (Anderson and Harrison, 2011; Horton and Kraftl, 2006a, 2006b; Thrift, 1997). Intriguing as these two trajectories were, I did not find them satisfying. Was Martin’s reference to Peter just a perfectly understandable figure of a child’s world, which I could not translate to my adult sense of what constituted the “truth”? Or should I have avoided taking Martin’s “child” subjectivity as accounting entirely for the emotional scene of our encounters and for how I understood them? Did the absence of Martin’s own feelings in his words come from his inability to apprehend or express them, or was it rather his reluctance to do so? Is it possible, that Martin’s feelings about his brother’s absence and new children arriving were there, right with him, clear and expressible, but for some reason he just did not disclose them?

The second kind of literature that appeared valuable touched upon my detached youth worker positionality and to its entrenchment in Martin’s social space. As a practitioner based in the community centre, my role was not simply to explore children’s worlds and generate research knowledge. I was part of an intentional, motivated and professionally framed set of activities, relationships and processes that gave priority to supporting children through a specific set of methods and through developing particular kinds of relationships.⁴ Thus, when I interpreted Martin’s story about Peter’s uncertainty in relation to new friendship as Martin’s own insecurity, my task was to focus on supporting him in his interactions with the children he befriended by helping him find an environment and activities where he would feel safe with these children and where their relationships could thrive. During this period, I was perhaps the closest contact that Martin had in the community centre; he was very keen to spend time together and increasingly opened up to me as our time together progressed and intensified. When I contemplated Martin’s decision to talk about his world *at all*, to move beyond not mentioning Peter, and to begin articulating his feelings towards his parents to me, I questioned whether this could be explained by some intrinsic feature of *our relationship*, something I had said or done or, on the contrary, by something I *avoided* doing or saying? Were the relational bond and our history of interactions (in a way extraordinary for Martin) in any way significant for what I came to know

⁴ See Blazek and Hraňová (2012) and Blazek and Lemešová (2011) for more details on the research approach.

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