Constructing parenthood, building blind child identity

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Summary
The human being, as a social being, only becomes a subject with their own identity when they have another object of relationship. The individual psyche of the child takes place in the different groups where they belong: family and community. First of all, the parents, and then social community, dream about the child, think about the child, look at and hear them, and give them identity. In this sense, to work hand in hand with the parental couple and the community is a key point in order for the infant to become a distinguished, autonomous and unique child.

In my brief presentation “Constructing parenthood, building blind child identity”, I’d like to exchange ideas, reflect, and share with you, all the questions that I have been working with for the last thirty some years. This is the reason why the title of the conference was so inviting.

How blind people construct their identity to have more visibility in a society for everyone.

My first idea is obvious, the child, before being blind is a child like any other. Too often we attribute and continue attributing the blindness as an explanation of the development of the infant with this deficit. Even today, we talk about the psychic development of the child through his neurophysiological function. And with the medical logic -we are still more in a medical model than a physiologic one- “a diagnose, a prognostic”. It excessively simplifies the complex mental process with which the child becomes an individual. And that could disable the child more than benefit him. It’s true that he is born with a deficit of physiologic functions or body structures which will form part of his singularity. His development will take place through different sensorial roots, his development will continue in more or less different accessible ways.

Nobody disagrees with this, but what I would like to talk about is how the child constructs his own identity. In my point of view, the child
constructs his identity, basically, with the internalization of interpersonal experiences with others. The human beings are, before anything else, social and emotional beings. I think this identity is constructed through constant interactions with the relation the child has with his external world and the representations and personifications of his internal world. Between the impact that his experiences have on him and how he metabolizes them. All of this is the same whether the child is blind or not.

This identity is constructed with the framework of the family. The family is the first group, the basic group, the child’s first emotional environment to grow. Then the school, the community. The family, like Thomas, a Bion follower, says, is a very special group that has institutionalized the function or job of being a parental matrix with two inconsciences systems inside. One a continent, parental system, and secondly the contents, the child’s system. The continents and contents are in a stable, symmetric relationship. The family, from this point of view, is a structure which participates and gives shape to the minds of each of its’ members. Above all, in infants. From this idea, the continent or parental system, the parents -no matter what type of couple they are- the couple, mother and father, thanks to their reverie capacity, their adult contention capacity, dream about the child, think about the child, look at and hear him and give him own identity. They construct the first emotional framework needed in order to grow. The parents give the child, in a conscious, but also unconscious way, a certain kind of capabilities with more or less autonomy as a subject. They are more or less capable of differentiating themselves from the child. It is very important that the parents feel that their child is a different being from them.

The parents represent the child, both internally and externally, and these representations are projected through the child. The child introjects these representations through his personal process of identification with his caregivers. In other words, the child constructs his capacities depending on how others see him and how they internally represent him.

Like Pérez Sánchez, a Esther Bick follower, says the parents do all of this, with the active participation of the child from birth. The real continent, the matrix of growth, is the dynamic interplay between the mother, father and new born. It’s not only the mother’s reverie capacity, but also the father’s reverie capacity and above all, what I find most important, is the new born’s reverie capacity. We are
referring to the new born’s autonomy. Like Donald Meltzer says that the new born is capable of finding an external intelligence. An external intelligence with which the child is able to identify. In this sense, the mother is not only a breast feeder but also an external intelligence. The new born transforms its’ first experiences into thoughts thanks to the contentional capacity of the parents with the child’s autonomy. The autonomy of the baby is stimulating for the formation of parenthood. The sensorial experiences metabolized through the relation with the parents are personal and social model. That personal and social model is what enables the child to learn to integrate himself with social experiences and not be dominated by internal sensations. This metabolic experience process with somebody else is a never ending, lifelong process.

Everything that we have seen up to now is also valid for families and children with blindness. The blind child is a child like any other, and the blind child’s family is also a family like any other.

Different studies and our observations, show that blind children look for, an active way to communicate with their caregivers through gestures and vocal expressions. From birth, children are motivated to interact with others. At the same time, we see how blind children are demotivated when the parents do not respond to their demands. That is when we see the difficulty to construct a secure attachment when the emotional environment does not respond in an emotional way. That way, the parental function of security and support is lost. Different studies and our observations also show the complexity in the formation of the first family group of this parental process, above all, when a health issue such as blindness can be a threat and cause excessive anxiety. This excessive anxiety stops and blocks the thinking capacity, reverie capacity. And if this happens, an unwanted atmosphere of desperation installs itself in the family.

For these reasons, I believe that our attention should be focused on the family, the parental partner and their parenthood process and not (only) on the child:

• We must give priority to the care of the parental couple during the maturative process of the child. From birth to...at least 11, 12, 13 years of age, when the child finds another relationship so that the parents are no longer the child’s identification object in order to introject.
• We must think together with the parents about their own parenthood in order to empower the parenthood patterns. Parents need to feel secure so that the child can identify himself with them.

• We must reflect together with the parents about the emotional aspects in their relationship with their children in order to answer the infants difficulties.

• We must put the visual deficit in a reasonable place, a place that does not interfere with the child’s growth, not in the growth of the child or any of the family members.

So, We have a big responsibility to work with the parents. As professionals, we are a continent for the parents, a continent that makes the introjection and projection processes easier, a continent that liberates the parents’ suffering so that they can focus more on raising their child. Like the parents do with their child, professionals (we) also dream about the parents, think about the parents, look at and hear them, listen to, answer and above all, and most importantly, we give the parents an identity. Therefore, the parents can be parents in their own way. We let them be. We don’t think for them but we think about them and with them. Like Michael Balint showed us, from this phychic state of thinking of the other we can create the opportunity so that parents and the child can learn and grow from their own experiences. I believe, that, this way we are helping the child develop a strong identity, to have better visibility and to form an active part in a sighted world.