



Infant Care in Winnicottian Thought in the Light of Concrete Psychoanalytic Psychology

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to demonstrate and debate, in the light of concrete psychoanalytic psychology, a current contradiction in Winnicottian thought expressed by the coexistence of two visions over infant care and motherhood. The reflections on the matter are shown in three sections. Firstly, concrete psychoanalytic psychology as a theoretical framework is set. Secondly, explanation and details on the contradiction of Winnicottian thinking about infant care and motherhood are discussed. Thirdly, from the perspective of specific psychoanalytic psychology, a viewpoint of Winnicott's text was elaborated, integrating it with Lukacs' ontology of social existence. Finally, the possibility of placing psychoanalytic knowledge at the service of initiatives for social transformations aimed at overcoming essentialist views on motherhood is indicated.

Key words: childcare; motherhood; concrete psychoanalytic psychology; D. W. Winnicott

1. Introduction

In this text, we set out to demonstrate and debate a contradiction regarding childcare and motherhood in D. W. Winnicott's texts, which we found from a reading guided by concrete psychoanalytic psychology (Bleger, 1964/1984). This contradiction is clearly caused by the coexistence of two different perspectives on this phenomenon, and the study of this viewpoint is reasonable because it reflects two contradictory ways of dealing with the situation of women, one of which is the root of many social ills, and the other can serve as a foundation, pointing out the possibility of overcoming these ills in a constructive and healthy way.

2. Presentation of the Perspective of Concrete Psychoanalytic Psychology

We have chosen to begin our presentation by introducing concrete psychoanalytic psychology, and the theoretical-methodological perspective we have adopted. This is a theoretical framework that emerged from the proposition formulated by Georges Politzer (1928/2004) to create a concrete psychology. Celebrating the emergence of psychoanalysis as a science capable of viewing psychological facts in the first person, as drama, and in the sense of lived experience, the philosopher concludes that if Freud's knowledge could be critically cleansed of its metapsychological theorizing, which wrongly objectifies the psyche as an instrument, it could produce a psychoanalytic psychology that would revolutionize the human scientific field.

José Bleger (1958, 1963/1984, 1964/1984), an Argentine psychoanalyst who was deeply involved in the creation of

a new psychoanalytic psychology, committed to promoting the mental health of the population, and not just the individual psychoanalysis of the intellectualized middle class in private practice, was enchanted by Politzer's idea (1928/2004). However, he realized that it would be necessary to work on conceptual precision so that a concrete psychoanalytic psychology could replace metapsychology, which he did by satisfactorily sustaining the intersection of a philosophically dialectical vision with a psychoanalytic theoretical-methodological perspective. In this way, he proposed new concepts, sought epistemological foundations and detailed a body of knowledge that contributed to a significant proportion of mental health workers, including psychologists, becoming more aware of the social function of their profession in Latin America.

A concrete psychology would necessarily start from the acts of concrete human beings, with a view to understanding their affective-emotional meanings. Initially, adopting the terminology of the Hungarian philosopher, Bleger (1958) understood that the new discipline would aim to study living as drama, that is, as lived experience. He later adopted the term *conduct* to refer to the object of psychology study, following the definition of Daniel Lagache (1948/1986), a prestigious professor who took up the chair of psychology at the Sorbonne in 1947. However, *conduct* is conceived by Bleger (1963/1984) as a phenomenon that is always situated in socio-cultural terms:

Conduct is always a manifestation of the human being in a socio-cultural context and therefore has properties that do not appear or do not exist at the biological level. In this sense, when studying humans as living beings at the level of other living beings, all biology resorts to an artifice to a certain extent, because it abstracts from the very particular and unique condition of humans among all living beings. When studying organs and their physiology, or apparatuses and functions, we resort to an artifice of fragmentation and elementarization of a very complex reality, difficult to capture as a unit (Bleger, 1963/1984, p.65).

Bleger (1963/1984) believed that all human sciences have a common research object - *conduct*, which is defined as the specific manifestation of human behavior in a socio-cultural context. Therefore, he decided to retain the concept of "drama" to limit the approach of psychology to studying behavior, that is, to view behavior as a life experience. The method is viewing behavior as a drama.

Starting from the concreteness of inter-human events, the author criticizes reifying theories, according to which the human being is endowed with a psychic apparatus crossed by energies. In other words, he resolutely rejects Freudian metapsychology, which gives rise to the idea that the unconscious does not correspond to an area of the psychic apparatus or unconscious parts of the ego, but is an intersubjective dimension existentially inhabited by people. In his view, every human act, symptomatic or not, would be a *bond par excellence*, emerging from humanly produced fields of affective-emotional meaning. These fields, in turn, would always be inserted in macro-social contexts, with which they would be in constant and inevitable interaction. In this sense, concrete psychoanalytic psychology corresponds to a link-relational theorization (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

However, it is worth pointing out that, insofar as it consists of a theoretical-methodological elaboration based on a dialectical materialist perspective, concrete psychoanalytic psychology differs from most relational theorizing, because it takes into account macro-social contexts, and does not limit itself to thinking of the social as limited to the family register. This is a very important aspect when we are interested in studying suffering that is socially determined by structural issues such as classism, racism and hierarchical gender relations. In fact, from Politzer's (1928/2004) pioneering work, through Bleger's developments, to the present day, concrete psychoanalytic psychology has remained faithful to the ontology of social being, as explained by Lukács (1968/2013).

According to Lukacs' ontology of social existence, many authors, including Lessa (2015), have facilitated our research on it. The fundamental difference between the three domains of existence that Bleger (1963/1984) has considered is the

inorganic sphere, the organic sphere and the social sphere. It is in the social sphere that we can exist as individuals and not just as organisms, which we also are. Therefore, we can understand the biological functions of the human body based on the legitimacy that all living organisms obey, but this way we cannot achieve features, qualities, and assertions that only exist in human conditions, and these features, qualities, or assertions are only realized in the realm of social existence. Therefore, if we attempt to understand people from the perspective of life experience, that is, from the perspective of drama, we must penetrate into the ontological realm of social existence, because individual uniqueness is itself a social phenomenon that arises only in this realm of existence.

3. A Contradiction in Winnicott's Thinking

Supported by a reading based on concrete psychoanalytic psychology, we have come to distinguish the existence of a contradiction between two strands present in Winnicott's text. The first strand corresponds to a view strongly affected by biological reductionism, insofar as it consists of the idea that the mother is the best carer for her children. The second strand consists of a vision of human nature that foresees the possibility of realizing potentialities that do not exist in the inorganic and organic spheres. In the presence of favorable micro and macro-social environments, these potentialities would be realized in the form of capacities that move in the ethical direction of recognizing the humanity of the other human being, which invoke care, respect and solidarity. The contradiction is therefore expressed to the extent that maternal care would obviously be a particular case of something that, being part of human nature, takes place in the social sphere and not in the organic sphere of being.

Based on the first strand, that is to say, the one that considers the care exercised by the mother to be biologically determined, Winnicott (1945/2000, 1968/1988) came to postulate the occurrence of a special psychological state, which affected women at the end of pregnancy and lasted for a few weeks after childbirth, which he referred to as primary maternal preoccupation. This phenomenon, which would facilitate becoming a good enough mother, would be based on a process of identification between the mother and the newborn. Primary maternal preoccupation would favor the establishment of an attunement with the baby, whose needs would thus be more easily perceived and met.

This psychological state of the mother would be characterized by her withdrawing from other social interests in order to devote herself almost exclusively to her child. According to Winnicott (1945/2000, 1968/1988), if she hadn't given birth, the mother in this condition would easily have received a psychiatric diagnosis.

In view of the concept of primary maternal concern, Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) point out that, from a Winnicottian perspective, the mother's psychic alteration is rooted in the biological processes of evolution of the human species. According to the authors, the Winnicottian text describes a mother absorbed and identified with her baby through symbiotic fantasies, so that we would be facing a natural adaptive trait, which would favor child development and, therefore, the survival of the species.

According to Winnicott (1945/2000), the state of primary maternal concern would guarantee the child's mental health, since maternal withdrawal would favour the baby's emotional maturation in the most primitive phases, during which the processes of integration, personalization and realization take place. Any maternal failures, in this initial phase of the baby's absolute dependence on the mother, could cause significant damage, such as autism and infantile psychoses, which could develop even in organically healthy children.

In Winnicott's works, the ability of mothers to perceive the needs of their babies is highly valued. However, it seems necessary to consider the cultural background behind the emergence of the primary maternal preconception theory. Aching (2017) correctly pointed out that psychoanalysts seem to work with mothers of married women who adopt sexual division of labor, which is effective among women who do not face poverty, as poverty forces women to supplement their husbands'

income. Zavaglia (2020) recalled that the psychoanalytic practices in Britain in the last century benefited from the imperial power of the Victorian era, so cultural practices in Britain, including those related to parenting and motherhood, were undoubtedly imagined to be superior.

One last point is worth mentioning. As we know, Freudian pessimism harmonized with the belief that every love bond, including maternal love, was based on identificatory processes. As such, since the individual is basically selfish, they would only be able to love if they deluded themselves, confusing the loved one with themselves. Winnicott (1971/1975) seems to have taken a more optimistic stance, believing in the possibility of people developing their capacities creatively when favored by sufficiently good human environments. However, he also mentioned several times (Winnicott, 1945/2000) that the mother's entry into an altered psychological state would favor the care of the newborn because it would facilitate the mother's identification with the baby. As Aiello-Vaisberg (2006) ponders, mothers view their children as another individual and become sensitive to their needs for care and it was this author who realized the importance of children being able to see themselves under the gaze of their mothers, who see their uniqueness and singularity (Winnicott, 1971/1975) - a possibility not explicitly considered or hypothesized.

The second part of Venicott's thought, which is also a part that we must pay attention to here, is about the concept of human creative potential. In a favorable environment, this potential can guide human development capabilities, such as recognizing the human nature of others. This is a basic requirement for overcoming violence and oppression against individuals and groups to achieve a complete humanization transformation of the world we live in. This vision can adapt to the particularity of the ontological field of social existence, which is the space where humans create their own lives and where the ability to take action (i.e. actively participate in the process of transforming themselves and the world) occurs.

Addressing the Winnicottian conception of human nature, Plastino (2012) states that this is accomplished with fullness in the care of the other. That is, caring would define us as human, existing in all as potential, which would materialize in favorable environments. We can thus understand the importance of the human environment, where people coexist and where the drama of life unfolds. People are increasingly realizing that humans can act actively and creatively in the environment, which means they have the ability to make creative and transformative gestures. This is because humans are not simply organisms that do not instinctively respond to environmental stimuli based on the legitimacy of the organic field, but rather a subject whose subjectivity is composed of the environment, which in turn is composed of complex, simultaneous, and contradictory movements between subjects (Winnicott, 1945/2000, 1952/2000).

We realize, in this second strand, that what we call the meaning of life corresponds to a dimension of human life that can only be found in the sphere of the social being. If we can define the organic sphere as the one in which the reproduction of the same occurs only when we enter the specifically social and human world, we are confronted with the production of the different, of the new which is, in a precise sense, the fruit of the creative capacity. Winnicott (1971/1975, p.102): "We find that individuals live creatively and feel that life deserves to be lived, or that they cannot live creatively and have doubts about the value of living."

Insofar as health is related to feeling alive and real (Winnicott, 1971/1975), the potential to become people in general, and not just babies, is directly linked to being sufficiently welcomed by the environment (Aiello-Vaisberg, 2017). In other words, if we survive, like other mammals, we only live as people if we have been cared for and can be cared for. Therefore, in order to continuously welcome human infants and those in other stages of the developmental cycle to the world, as this demand never stops, it is necessary to consider the fundamental respect for their human nature in order to achieve personal creativity. In other words, human creativity can only occur creatively when the environment provides careful, supportive and ethical support. This condition is not determined by biology, but is generated by human coexistence.

4. A Contradiction in the Light of Concrete Psychoanalytic Psychology

In order to reflect on the two strands of childcare from Winnicott's text, we drew on a work written by Bleger (1963/1984) for teaching purposes. In this work, Bleger applied the ontology of social existence in dialectical materialism, which was later explained by Lukács (1968/2013): the myth of natural persons, the myth of abstract people and the myth of people who exist outside of specific social conditions. These myths reflect an anthropological view that is very common in the Western world and has important consequences for psychology and psychopathology, both in research and in clinical practice, according to which sociability does not inaugurate a new sphere of being, but corresponds to a simple organic epiphenomenon that can be exhaustively studied by the natural sciences. Therefore, those who acknowledge that social existence clearly relies on organic life, just as organic life relies on the field of inorganic existence, believe that humans have the ability to create new modes of coexistence, and believe that myths are dangerous.

When we think of the human reducing it to its animal nature, without recognizing the leap that creates the ontology of the social being, we can even produce knowledge that can present a certain utility in the field of health. Considering life as a set of biochemical reactions that would put the body-machine into operation, we are also able to develop technologies important for human health.

On the other hand, when we think of the human as endowed with a human nature, which maintains dependence on the organic sphere, but is not reduced to it, we begin to consider life not only as a biological phenomenon, but also as an individual and/or collective biography, throughout which the human is created by realities and, simultaneously and paradoxically, creates realities. In this sense, culture and work, in the broadest sense of the term (Lessa, 2015), become creative gestures.

We can say that Bleger's perspective has allowed a unique use of Winnicott's thinking¹ to understand human acts in general and childcare in particular, since both Bleger (1963/1984) and Winnicott (1956/2000) value theorizing that maintains maximum proximity to the concreteness of clinical events, thus avoiding unproductive abstractions. On the other hand, both recognize the importance of the environment in realizing human potential, which is renewed with each birth, and that this environment is in fact the fruit of human behaviour, of human creative capacity. However, it is worth noting that Bleger (1958, 1964/1984), due to his ethical-political interests, places much greater emphasis on macro-social contexts, differing in this sense from Winnicott's position. This probably stems from his life circumstances, because while Bleger, the son of Jewish migrants, was aware of the difficulties experienced on the periphery of the capitalist system and became deeply committed as a Latin American, the latter practiced without knowing the social challenges he was spared in what was the most powerful imperialist country in the world.

When we think of childcare organized based on the exercise of motherhood in the nuclear family in patriarchal capitalist society, with the contribution of materialist feminism, new possibilities for understanding are opened up before us. From this perspective, the gender division of labor, which assigns paid productive activities to men while women are responsible for the daily reproduction of life without pay, is no exaggeration compared to the enslavement experienced by black people. Reproductive work includes the so-called domestic service, i.e. the work that used to be done at home to take care of children, the elderly and the sick, as well as craft activities, which are nowadays replaced by industries such as the production of food, clothing and cleaning products. None of these tasks, including raising children, are seen as work, but rather as actions through which female biology is prolonged (Federici, 2019), which is in line with the first strand of Winnicott's text, according to what we have pointed out here.

Combining psychoanalysis and feminist theories, Bueskens (2018) considers that the organization of capitalist patriarchal society places women in a clearly inferior position in relation to men, which generates important subjective

effects. One of these is what she calls "two modes of self", in other words, two types of lived experience. On the one hand, there would be an individualized self, which takes place in the public sphere and at work, and a maternal self, focused on caring for children, the family and maintaining the home. According to the author, the inclusion of women in the labor market, making them absent from home for several hours a day, has not been enough to adequately relocate responsibility for reproductive work, resulting in the situation known as the double working day.

If we link the views of Federici (2019) and Bueskens (2018) through Hirata (2004), we can understand that if the coordination of career and parenting continues to be seen as a problem for working women rather than others, then as a life experience for mothers in this particular socio-economic organization, the separation of the two selves (Bueskens, 2018) will remain relatively complete. We can see that this problem is solved in an abnormal way, as it takes advantage of the fact that women strongly desire economic independence, and according to different situations, it more or less implicitly claims that as long as reproductive work requires women's physiological ability, it is not a burden, thereby increasing the burden on women. Therefore, a psychological theoretical system that does not consider social determinants may not contribute to promoting more equitable, beneficial, and respected forms of social coexistence, as they hinder the correct equations for related issues. In this list, we include Winnicott's ideas on childcare as the first part. Of course, our criticism is not to attribute the anti-feminist intentions to a great writer, but to ask researchers and clinical doctors to rethink the relevant issues that seem to have not emerged with certain social changes.

The joys and sorrows of motherhood and childcare are experiences that happen in the social sphere and should not be confused with events that characterize the organic life of mammals. As a socially determined practice, it can be socially transformed. It is from this perspective that concrete psychoanalytic psychology is inserted, when it offers us the following statement: "(...) it seems important to us to start from the statement that psychology studies, or should study, real and concrete human beings" (Bleger, 1963/1984, p. 15). This vision generates courage and hope, since it is based on firm and fertile theoretical and epistemological soil, favoring concrete changes of existence, in addition to focusing, obviously, on clinical practices of caring for mothers (Granato, 2004).

Focusing on the second strand, which emphasizes creativity and the human potential for care, we believe that Winnicott's text provides the basis for thinking about an ethic of care that does not depend on gender but on the way we conceive of human nature as an expression of the ontology of social being (Lukács, 1968/2013). Thus, the second strand, which we study in this text, is aligned with an anthropology that combats inequalities and oppression in all its forms.

5. Final Considerations

The ethics of care, when not viewed as a solely feminine attribute but rather a human potential, enable us to comprehend human beings, regardless of age, as singular beings who develop and realize their potential when they are supported in humanized environments. For Winnicott (1971/1975), human beings are endowed with creative potentialities, in other words, potentialities that transform reality, the realization of which depends on the cultural environment. One of these potentialities is the ability to care for others, in other words, the ability to care. Being a trait of humanity, we conclude that this capacity is not exclusive to women, as both men and women share this potential, although most men in contemporary society are prevented from developing it to the full.

Plastino (2012) believes that it is highly relevant to understand that Winnicott's thinking differs enormously from the classic conceptions of the superego, in that he considers that ethical sentiment corresponds to the full recognition of the humanity of the other. This humanity is directly linked to both the need to give and receive care in the most varied behavioral forms, since human existence is coexistence. On the other hand, care presents itself differently in the various stages and circumstances of life, depending on whether we are dealing with babies, children, adolescents or the elderly,

with healthy, sick or disabled people, prepared or unprepared for specific tasks, and so on.

Given the extreme dependence of infants, their needs do need to be recognized, but in fact, biology does not prevent babies whose mothers are unable to breastfeed from receiving the same benefits from breast milk banks that collect donated women's milk (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Therefore, biologically speaking, the needs of embryos and fetuses for maternal hygiene are not the same as the needs for care after birth, which allows different cultural environments to adopt different parenting methods (Gottlieb & Deloache, 2016).

On the other hand, biological mothers also need to be cared for, that is, to acknowledge their humanity, and they have humanity with everyone. If we are still considering the special needs of women or mothers today, it is because we have not yet completed a transformation process, fortunately, this process is ongoing. Therefore, at this moment, recognizing the humanity of women and all groups who suffer from violence and discrimination is an extremely important issue, precisely because it is the antidote to the naturalization of motherhood.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Notes

1. The articulation of the demands of Blegerian psychoanalytic psychology with some Winnicottian theories has proved fruitful, both in the field of research and in terms of clinical practice. Through this articulation, the Being and Doing Clinical Style was created at the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, which takes the form of so-called differentiated frameworks (Ambrosio, 2013; Aiello-Vaisberg, 2004).

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