How Does Analytic Child Therapy Inform Adult Treatment?: A Discussion of Hilke's "Miss Nicht"

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Iris Hilke's case provides us with elegant descriptions of the delicate and subtle ways in which the therapist picks up and draws on the nonverbal, cross-modal nodes of communication used by this child. She describes in nuanced detail the tentative "dance" that evolves in the work with therapist, mother, and child. This discussion invites us to imagine that Lily (Miss Nicht) never had the benefits of her treatment with Iris Hilke as a child, and to imagine that, instead, she is only now entering into analysis as an adult. We observe the tribulations of an imagined adult analysis of Miss Nicht, noting that her childhood rageful outbursts have hardened in adulthood into a chronically angry aversiveness. She is still struggling in her relational world with the terrible issue of having to choose between "Power and Surrender."

In presenting this clinical material, Dr. Hilke offers us a view of child work that effectively provides some potential answers to the question, "How does analytic child therapy inform adult treatment?" This kind of case presentation is rare, I believe, in that she does not get bogged down in theoretical constructs, but simply tells us, in nuanced detail, what happened between herself and this child. She also includes information about what happened between herself and Lily's mother. But most important, she shares with us her own responses that were triggered in the interactions.

One intriguing facet of this case material is that it invites us to think about it from many different perspectives. Dr. Hilke has provided us with gorgeous descriptions of the delicate and subtle ways in which dances, songs, and games of Peek-a-boo and Hide-and-Seek were negotiated. These "ways of being with" or "schemas of self with other" as Stern (1985) put it, are new for Lily and are coconstructed with Dr. Hilke. In this way, it is possible to chart the evolution of the "Positive New Attachment" (Shane, Shane, and Gales, 1997) that is clearly emerging by the end of her narrative.

To help us think about our central question, I suggest that we imagine that Lily, Miss Nicht, never did receive, as a child, the benefits of her treatment with Dr. Hilke. Let us imagine instead that she is only now entering into analysis as an adult. Let us imagine ourselves into the analytic situation of the grown-up Miss Nicht and her analyst. We can safely assume that, without the early intervention of treatment with Dr. Hilke, Lily the adult has never been able to sustain satisfying relationships in her life or work, and that her rageful childhood outbursts and need for tight control have hardened in adulthood into an irritable obduracity. She carries within her a chronic and vigilant aversiveness that is expressed mainly by antagonism but also at times by withdrawal (Lichtenberg, 1989). Furthermore, she is still struggling in her relational world with the terrible issue of having to choose between "Power and Surrender." She lives an isolated existence, avoiding or sabotaging any possibilities for meaningful or even superficial relationships. Hence, she is still using her chronic "Nicht!" to manage her panic and fear when she feels threatened, only now it is expressed in whatever adult form has emerged from her ongoing developmental experiences.

As analyst and patient get down to work, what might transpire between them? In the evolving transference with her analyst, Lily is terrified of losing herself in this new relationship. Her invariant organizing principals (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984) would dictate that she must, at all costs, control those with whom she comes into close contact; otherwise, her screaming "Nicht!" equivalent will be invoked. Her expectancies dictate that she must battle frantically to protect herself from the threat of intimacy.

Lily's analyst must find ways to listen empathically to her and to manage himself in the face of her transferential rage and fear. He must also cope with the thwarting and suppression of his own subjective experiences and self-object needs, particularly the need to feel effective and helpful. In those darker moments that can assail the best of us, her analyst might even find himself fantasizing about ridding himself of her, or perhaps of metaphorically killing her, like Lily's mother. Lily, the adult, has developed little or no
capacity for self-reflection. She cannot mentalize ( Fonagy et al., 2002). That is, she cannot think herself into the mind of the other. She cannot reflect on how another may be experiencing her. Neither has she developed the related capacity of “autobiographical competence” (Holmes, 1993). In other words, she cannot construct a coherent story about her experiences—a crucially important developmental task, normally begun before the first 18 months of life (Stern, 1985).

Our adult Miss Nicht’s negativity, isolation, and terror of intimacy keep her analyst constantly at bay. However, in my imagined scenario, she has told her analyst of one very early memory that is vividly available to her. In this memory, she is a very small child, sitting on her mother’s lap in a dimly lit room. She thinks they are waiting for something or someone. They seem to have been waiting for a very long time. Lily recalls that, in this scene, she is restless and crying. But her mother does not speak to her or look at her. Her face is turned away, and she does not respond to Lily’s increasingly frantic cries. Lily remembers trying to hold on to her mother’s face and forcibly turn it toward her own. But her mother’s eyes are blank. She seems lifeless and unable to move. Lily screams, but her mother remains silent, her body limp, as she waits.

Lily’s analyst might use this memory to construct a model scene (Lichtenberg, 1989) that would epitomize one of Lily’s schemas of self-with others and that could provide the analyst with a glimpse into the ambivalent attachment that shaped her early development (Ainsworth et al., 1978). From this fragment of memory, the analyst might be able to reconstruct something of Lily’s experience of being with her mother. This schema, the psychic organization that underlies the model scene, might help her analyst to understand something about the pathological attachment pattern that is now being played out in her experience of being with her analyst. However, Lily’s analyst finds that nothing he can say, as he tries to reconstruct something of the desperation of that early experience, is accepted. Comments and inquiries about Lily’s possibly rageful feelings toward her depressed and unresponsive mother, and her despair and hurt at her absent father, are angrily rejected. Expressions of empathic understanding make no dent in her self-protective armor. They seem instead to somehow provoke her, leaving the analysis at an impasse and the analyst feeling hopeless and powerless. In short, the analyst of Miss Nicht the adult could find it truly challenging to get past his patient’s hard crust of negativity, now calcified into the angry, controlling woman on the couch. He may find it impossible to see past the “monster” her mother saw to the terrified being within. Perhaps the analyst of the adult Lily would benefit from knowing how Dr. Hilke worked with Miss Nicht, the child.

Let us compare for a moment the imaginary interactions I have just outlined with the actual treatment Lily received. I am going to invite Lily’s adult analyst to join us now as we enter what Stern (2004) called “the micro-momentary world of implicit happenings” and look closely at some early sequences in Dr. Hilke’s work with Lily. Dr. Hilke allows us to observe her first gentle response to the tiny, nuanced, gestural cue initiated by Lily. Dr. Hilke noticed that the child moved her forefinger, ever so slightly, and she very carefully responded with a similar movement of her own finger, thereby initiating their first mutually constructed piece of play, “their first shy dancing steps together.” We note that no words are used between them. Indeed, we are told that Lily did not use any words other than “Nicht!” for many weeks into treatment. Neither could she, for several weeks, get off her mother’s lap. I want to focus on what I believe to be a pivotal moment in Lily’s therapy. This is the third session described so poignantly by Dr. Hilke, in which Lily, for the first time, uses words, gets off her mother’s lap, and begins to play with Dr. Hilke, physically separate from her mother. This first expression of autonomy, of Lily’s dawning capacity to experience herself as both influential and competent, captures a crucial shift in the treatment.

The session is replete with examples of the subtle cross-modal, nonverbal, spontaneously enacted interactions that characterize this treatment. It also contains all the essential elements of good dramatic improvisation. But what is actually going on between child and therapist? Looking at Dr. Hilke’s description of this session, we can see her sensitive attunement to the subtle change in Lily’s “Nicht!” on that day. Dr. Hilke picks up that there is something slightly different, “provocative,” in Lily’s tone. She takes up the word as if it were a fascinating new toy, repeating and turning-taking with Lily, playing with the intensity and volume, and in true improvisational style, she adds something new and interesting to the scene: a slightly lower tone. Lily is “stunned.” But she is not deterred. She vigorously takes up the game, playing and trying to echo Dr. Hilke’s tone. Soon, the two are composing a song together. Here we have the good fortune of witnessing the magic of truly spontaneous creativity at work, a “now moment” seized (Stern, 1998), and a wonderful depiction of vocal matching—what Beebe and others have described as “vocal competence” (Beebe et al., 1988). Dr. Hilke echoes the child’s distress call, but she modifies it, allowing Lily to experience something quite new for her: attuned playful responsiveness and, one must guess, her first positive
experience of self and mutual

regulation (Beebe, 1986). Perhaps we could postulate that, for Lily with Dr. Hilke that day, an alternative schema of self-with other was cocreated, an experience that could open the door to new relational possibilities: differently organized RIGS (Representations of Interactions that have become Generalized) (Stern, 1985), an alternative internal working model (Bowby, 1971). These interventions are beautiful demonstrations of the complexity of nonverbal, cross-modal techniques commonly used in therapy with children that facilitate communication.

Stern et al. (1998) made a significant contribution to our thinking about what is curative in adult psychoanalytic work with their innovative concept of the “something more than interpretation” in the therapeutic encounter. They proposed that the therapeutic process is improvisational in nature and that the “something more” resides in interactional intersubjective process that gives rise to changes in “implicit relational knowing” in the “relational procedural domain” (p. 903). Stern (2004) has since significantly developed and revised this concept, focusing on the importance of nonverbal communication in psychotherapy and its role in contributing to “Present Moments” in therapy as well as everyday life.

Child therapists are familiar with working in the nonverbal realm and in the realm of “procedural or implicit knowledge.” Nonverbal interaction in therapy with children dictates that information is most often communicated at the procedural level. This results in a high level of mutual affective engagement between therapist and child and is the architect of powerful therapeutic action. Furthermore, playfulness and spontaneity, playing and staying within the metaphor chosen by the child, are intrinsic to child therapy and in turn offer a wide repertoire for the therapist to find the meaning of the child’s communications.

What is it that we could take from this work that might help the analyst who is trying to treat an adult Miss Nicht? We might hope that this material could bring an increased awareness of the nonverbal dimension of the analytic relationship. For this particular patient, a more sensitive attunement to her nonverbal communications could be crucial. The analyst might also acquire an increased capacity for spontaneity: an expanded repertoire of responsiveness and a variety of possible, creative ways of engaging with Lily. Adult therapists have been offered new and important insights into their patients’ early development by the important contributions that have emerged in attachment theory literature (Bowby, 1969; Beebe 1986; Stern et al., 1998; Fonagy et al., 2002; Stern, 2004). This body of knowledge has added greatly to the expansion and deepening of the analyst’s understanding of the realm of implicit knowledge and its impact on ongoing relationships, including the therapeutic relationship. We child therapists have the luxury of actually witnessing the attachment and relational patterns as they are played out between parent and child. We do not have to rely on reconstructions. An acquaintance with all that Dr. Hilke saw and experienced of Lily as a child might help the adult analyst to see beyond the aversive behavior that Lily the adult has put in place to fend off the intolerable vulnerability, shame, and panic that constantly threaten to overwhelm her. With these new insights and the expansion and enhancement of his repertoire of possible interventions, the analyst might manage to prevail over the inevitable feelings of humiliation, injury, and ineffectiveness that have been the result of Lily’s hostile rejection.

This case beautifully illustrates the ways in which adult analysis can become informed and possibly transformed by child analysis. That first “finger dance” between Dr. Hilke and Lily will, one hopes, come to epitomize a new and different schema of self-with other for Miss Nicht. For our imaginary adult Lily, we can hope for the same. Not only through the expansion of her analyst’s repertoire of nonverbal modes of communication, but also, let us hope, through a more creative and spontaneous use of himself in their analytic journey together.

References


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**Translations of Abstract**

El caso de Iris Hille nos proporciona una elegante descripción de las sutiles maneras en que la terapeuta recoge y pone sobre el tapete las formas no verbales e inter-modales de comunicación que esta niña utiliza. Hille describe a través de detalles sutiles la “danza” tentativa que va evolucionando en el trabajo entre terapeuta, madre y niña. Esta discusión nos invita a imaginar que Lily (la Sra. Nicht) nunca pudo beneficiarse de su tratamiento con Iris Hille como niña, y a imaginarse que, en cambio, ahora sólo puede entrar en análisis como adulta. Observamos las tribulaciones de un imaginado análisis de adultos de la Sra. Nicht, percibiendo como sus ataques de rabia de cuando niña se han ido cristificando en la edad adulta bajo la forma de un constante rechazo con enfado. Ella no deja de luchar en su mundo relacional con el terrible tema de tener que escoger entre “poder o rendición”

Le cas présenté par Iris Hille nous offre d’élégantes descriptions des manières subtiles et délicates par lesquelles la thérapeute identifie et fait appel aux modalités non verbales et croisées de communication utilisées par cet enfant. Elle décrit, par des détails nuancés, la danse hésitante qui se développe dans le travail avec la thérapeute, la mère et l’enfant. Cette discussion nous invite à imaginer que Lily (Mademoiselle Nichtig) n’a jamais pu bénéficier de son traitement avec Iris Hille comme enfant, mais plutôt d’imaginer qu’elle commence seulement maintenant son analyse comme adulte. Nous observons les tribulations de l’analyse adulte imaginée avec Mademoiselle Nichtig, notamment que les accès de rage de son enfance se sont durcis à l’âge adulte en une attitude aversive colérique chronique. Elle est toujours auxprises, dans son monde relationnel, avec le terrible dilemme d’avoir à choisir entre le pouvoir et l’abandon de soi.

Il caso di Iris Hille ci offre l’elegante descrizione dei modi delicati e sottili in cui la terapeuta coglie e utilizza le modalità trans-modali di comunicazione non verbale usate da questa bambina. La Hille descrive in dettaglio la “danza” che si evolve nel lavoro fra terapeuta, madre, bambina. Questa discussione ci invita a immaginare che Lily (Miss Nicht) non abbia beneficiato da bambina del trattamento con la dottoressa Hille, e a immaginare invece che arrivò in analisi solo ora da adulta. Osserviamo le tribolazioni di un’analisi immaginaria con Miss Nicht, le sue esplosioni rabbiose infantili si sono indurite nell’età adulta in una cronica avversività rabbiosa. Sta ancora lottando, nel suo mondo relazionale, con il terribile problema di dover scegliere fra “Potere e Abbandono.”

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Iris Hille’s Fall liefert uns eine elegante Beschreibung eines behutsamen und subtilen Weges, auf dem die Therapeutin die nonverbalen und cross-modalen Kommunikationsformen, die das Kind benutzt, aufgreift und nachzeichnet. Sie beschreibt detailliert den zaghaftheften Tanz, der sich in der Arbeit mit der Therapeutin, der Mutter und dem Kind entwickelt. Diese Diskussion lädt uns ein uns vorzustellen, wie es Lily (Fräulein Nicht), wenn sie als Kind nicht die Unterstützung erhalten hätte, die ihr durch die Behandlung mit Iris Hille zukam, ergangen wäre, und sie sich statt dessen als Erwachsene in eine Analyse begeben hätte. Wir beobachten das Leid einer angedachten Erwachsenen-Analyse von Fräulein Nicht und stellen dabei fest, dass sich die Wutausbrüche ihrer Kindheit im Erwachsenenalter in eine chronisch ärgerliche Aversion verhärret hätten. Sie würde immer noch mit ihrer Beziehungsumwelt kämpfen und müsste mit dem fürchterlichen Problem leben, zwischen Macht und
Kapitulation wählen zu müssen.

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