

## Special Article - Psychopathology in Older Adults

# Premise of Attachment Failure in Child Exposed to Domestic Violence

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## Abstract

Violence is a destructive force in inter-subjective relationships; a child who is exposed to domestic violence is a spectator of a relational disorder, a shocking relationship between two people who influence him both through their behaviours and their speech. When parents are violent, the child sees his attachment figures fail in their main functions, which are to protect him and give him security. We have followed in clinical evaluation research children exposed to domestic violence. The objective was to identify the effects of exposure to violence between parents on the attachment link. The main question raised is to what extent does exposure to domestic violence affect the quality of the attachment bond? We have proceeded with an improvised method that we call Squiggle-history. This a game without rules in which a child draws hears stories and invents a story in turn. The stories we collected focus on themes of rejection, abandonment, privatisation, loss, murder, and rescue. The stories told by the children reflect the importance of an experience of security and their ability to build a stable relationship with attachment figures. The attachment insecurity also affects the identifications of the subject – the identification process seems altered.

**Keywords:** Attachment; Exposure to domestic violence; Insecure link; Squiggle-stories; Family drawing

## Introduction

The problematic of child exposed to domestic violence is a comorbid psychopathological core, these traumatized, insecure, terrified children, with upset temporo-spatial cues, have very diverse behavioral disorders (opposition, aggressiveness, provocation), language disorders (stuttering, delayed language acquisition), somatization (diabetes, eating behavior disorder). Our starting Assumptions address the issue of security of the link between the child and his parents, to what extent attachment to parents depends on secure attachment between parents link security between the parents is important in establishing the bond with his parents.

The concept of security in the attachment has an important place in the problem of exposure to domestic violence. It is elementary in the quality of attachment that the child builds with his parent. This security is defined by the fact of having reliable and trusting relationship that can function as a secure basis to security against unforeseen events (separation, trauma, violence ...). Exposure to domestic violence causes insecurity and does not allow the child to invest an attachment figure.

I therefore wish to advance the following hypothesis: safety of the child's attachment is not only associated with the quality of the relationship with parents, but also to the perception that the child has on the quality of the relationship between his parents.

### The attachment, Clinical notions: behavior or drive?

Attachment theory and psychoanalysis, in a broad sense, have something in common; they are investigating the link child/parent. We do not intend to go into epistemological details (debate) but we

bear a major interest in a matter of complementarity of these two views. First, D. Anzieu [1] evokes an attachment drive, a concept which, according to him, can build a joint bridge between the two theories. D. Anzieu was part of the imaginary symposium of Zazzo [2], he said in this context that attachment provides additional elements to the psychoanalytic technique. According to him, the objective of the symposium of Zazzo was to allow a discussion on the principles likely to base a theory of affectivity, its future development relating to the vision of attachment leads to the idea that there would be in attachment a non-libidinal instinctual fulfillment, independent from the investment of erogenous zones. It is therefore a specific impulse that is not entirely sexual and partially self-conservative.

In other words, the attachment impulse is a secondary libidinal auto-conservative impulse which aims to meet the need for protection, comfort and support, its function is to invest the self-representation and object.

P. Fonagy [3] argues in his approach that the attachment theory and psychoanalytic theory can enrich one another; he exposed the different currents of psychoanalysis (Freud, Klein-Bion, Stern ...) and their common points with the attachment theory. Inspired by psychoanalysis, he introduced the concept of mentalizing in attachment theory, defined as the process by which we realize that having a spirit interferes with our experience of the world, and highlights the link between mentalizing abilities in babies and attachment, he claims that the mentalizing abilities of abused children are limited, then he uses this concept with major concepts of psychopathology including limit states where he assimilates the Paris psychosomatic school work which, in turn, was the first to introduce

the concept of mentalizing in psychiatric literature according to the words of Fonagy [4], this concept is central to the psychosomatic functioning which explains that the failure of fantasy activity is inherent in somatization. C. Dejours [5], at this point, praised the attachment theory and his interest in understanding the somatoform disorders. Finally, B. Golse [6] believes that the articulation of the two theories is possible through the concept of attachment drive, defined as a holistic instinct of self-preservation which is based in part on the criteria of attachment: (1) the exchange of smiles, (2) the strength of the portage, (3) the warm embrace, (4) the softness of touch and (5) the interaction of sensory and motor signals during breastfeeding. These criteria, according to Anzieu, are essential for understanding the affective disorders through the self-skin and mental envelopes.

These elements allow us to think a transversal approach, psychoanalysis attachment theory, this approach is being tested in the work we have done with children exposed to domestic violence [7]. We developed a clinical technique for the evaluation of attachment of children exposed to domestic violence. The objective is to identify the effects of exposure to violence between parents on the attachment link.

## Method

This research took place during our practice at the shelter center for Women Victims of Violence, these centers are intended mainly for beaten women; they are offered social and economic assistance for their autonomy. We met children with their mothers, individually and collectively, at clinical interviews both anamnestic and diagnostic, the idea being that the attack on the mother figure is an attack of the child's attachment link to his mother.

We have chosen to illustrate our assumptions the case study, after the clinical method. The advantage of this method is its completeness, it allows us to trace the evolution of the individual while highlighting the important aspects of its development, through the interview with the mother we became aware of the involvement of these children in domestic violence; Indeed, some children are actively or passively involved in the violence, according to age, gender and preference vis-à-vis their parent. Situations have been found, in which they identify either to their father and in turn become the executioners or to their mother and engage in a process of victimhood. The case study can detect the length of domestic violence, the degree of exposure and involvement of children in the violence.

Preliminary discussions with the mother are essential to know the frequency and duration of violence, its intensity and nature (physical, verbal ...) and whether the child was physically abused in the violence cycles and identify the attitude of parents towards children when they engage in violence.

Domestic violence is certainly not without effect on victims. Battered mothers abused verbally and physically, have difficulties in exercising their maternal role, they would adopt control lines vis-à-vis of their child, incoherence mark the educational practice, they would show less warmth and less affection toward their children, said Coutanceau [8].

## Clinical Evaluation of Attachment: the Squiggle-Stories

Faced with the problem of exposure to domestic violence we

assume that the best method of consultation is based on the game, we found it difficult to work with speech with these children because they do not always speak; the subject of violence between parents is difficult to live and more difficult to express for the child, where the use of techniques that promote the symbolic expression, such as drawing and storytelling.

We called our method Squiggle-story, it is a role-playing method mainly based on drawings and storytelling (stories), drawing of the family is asked in this game, the involvement of the psychologist is important in this work, he participates in turn by drawings and telling stories. Widlöcher reminds us that drawing is a means of expression of the child; this linguistic and symbolic value is emphasized by many French authors like Dolto (1984), Lefebvre (1996), Widlöcher (1998), Wallon (2001) Royer (2005) and long before, by Luis Corman (1967) inventor of the Family drawing. Next to the drawing, we invited the child to invent a story, this procedure has been inspired to us by Winnicott's work on Squiggle.

## The Tool "Story Told"

The method is to ask the child to tell a story, this approach is inspired by the clinic of the narrative. When a child tells a story, he is highly influenced by his environment, Winnicott through the concept of transitional area said that between objective reality and subjective reality there is the middle area, place of symbolic anchoring and source of creativity, from this point of view, child stories are part of this process, Winnicott [9,10] put it this way: "This intermediate area of experience, which is not questioned about its belonging to internal or external reality, constitutes the largest part of the experience of the child. It will survive throughout life, in the internal experimentation mode that characterizes the arts, religion, imaginary life, creative scientific work." P. 49

The narrative is part of a creative process, the child who tells a story called on his experiences. The set of this method is to invite the child to tell a story, he invents, freely and instantaneously with no thematic focus, a different story to him and with his creative faculty. From the point of view of attachment, the ability to tell a coherent story falls under the attachment security, internalized representations are the basis for the construction of the sense of security. Therefore, the quality and style of the story told by the child are rooted in the relational security. Lebovici [11] clearly agrees: "Regardless of age, it is important to remember, these are the correlations between the narrative and the type of attachment patterns, which means that the Self verbal or narrative is rooted in part in the security of attachment procedures but also, conversely, that the subsequent psychic safety depends on the quality of the narrative and verbalization".

## The Drawing of the Family

Attachment is a primary affective processes beginner in the very first moments of life, so it belongs to the realm of archaic affects (rage, distress, anguish, hatred ...) transplanted bodily and part of the body image. The idea is that the attachment is represented as part of the body and therefore the drawing style, or indiscriminately expressed in the drawing of each character.

Kaplan and Main [12] develop a family drawing analysis system in reference to the attachment theory. They offer criteria under which reflects the attachment in the family drawing: the degree of

movement present in the characters, the character individuation, the fullness of the human form, the quality of the smiles, the size of the characters, centration on the sheet of paper, the overall impression of vulnerability or invulnerability. Based on these criteria the types of attachment (secure, insecure, disorganized / disoriented, avoiding / ambivalent) have been emerged.

Several researchers approve Kaplan and Main method. The first two studies demonstrate the relevance of the family drawing for exploration of attachment representations. The research by Pianta, Longmaid and Ferguson [13] appears in their article "Attachment-based classifications of children's family drawings; psychometric properties and relations with children's adjustment in kindergarten." It aims to evaluate the attachment of children enrolled in kindergarten. This study was conducted over two hundred American children aged five to seven, and from various social categories. The result is that children judged with secure attachment are more noticed for their skills and sociability than children judged with insecure attachment. The drawing of the family is compared to an evaluation system of teachers on the functioning of the class Teacher - children Rating Scale; they are considered reliable 80%, drawing of the family is compatible with notes for teachers on the attitudes of children in class.

Fury, Carlson & Sroufe evaluated by the drawing of the family, the attachment of American children eight and nine years old, from diverse ethnic origins and considered high risk. The objective is to improve the Kaplan and Main classification numbers. For the anxious/avoidant attachment, lack of individuation is reflected in the drawing of the family by the act of drawing the child away from his mother, the omission results in the descendant arms close to the body, the exaggerated faces, lack of colors or disguise of the family. The criteria are to be taken as a whole for a good understanding of the drawing. In order to focus on the clinical aspects of the attachment we apply to the analysis of this work the method of Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe for the analysis of psychodynamic aspects, interpretation takes a non-affirmative hypothetical value, this subjective aspect is associated with the story of the subject and it remains to check with the interview. The authors of this approach (Widlöcher, Walloon, Dolto) emphasize the projection in the drawing, the meaning of a drawing may not be accurate, it requires a global vision of the three values: projective, narrative, expressive. Dolto insisted that we cannot interpret the child's word over his drawing [14].

## Clinical Case

The proposed method is based on qualitative methods, playful workshop helped to collect subjective data that we present in a clinical case.

### The child Assia: "The tearing," 5 years and a half, educated in kindergarten, alternating guardianship

On arrival at my office she rushes toward me (in my arms), physical contact occurs before the verbal contact, the emotional need seems so intense, the deficiency was quickly expressed. She began to watch the games room, toys, puzzles, and a small table and chairs. In the presence of her mother we settle down and I ask her if she agrees that we played together drawing, formulating the request of the family drawing. She stated asking me with remarkable ease language:

"I would need beige", "look, I do not exceed", "I forgot to draw the feet", "It is beige", "I know whistling loud", "and She broke her leg." After drawing a female character, she draws the sky into pieces, sun and a star! For other characters of her family she said: "There is only one."

I was led during these meetings to be part of the game by drawing and telling stories to Assia, we exchanged during the meeting with no word on the violence suffered or seen. Later, after we made a puzzle, I ask Assia to tell me a story, a story she loves. She was then, as usual, excited, and began:

I note that the mother interrupted the story of her daughter by telling her that it is a witch who wants to kill the children, but Assia insists and resumes her theme: mom wants to kill her children. The mother seems preoccupied and distressed by this position.

"Mom wants to kill her two children, she throws them into the forest ... because they were poor and they have nothing to eat ... Dad looks for the children in the forest ... children have found a treasure and became rich ... Dad killed Mom, children found their father and they lived happily."

The interviews with the mother confirm that violence started before the birth of Assia, pregnant she suffered the violence of her spouse.

## Drawing Analysis

### The separation

The drawing of the family seemed indicative of the emotional deprivation of the child, the drawing goes in all directions, the sky is above, the sunset down and a star is drawn in the middle. The character drawn in the center of the sheet is a female, she has a child looks, arms released into the air like wings. In addition, the lower body remains undifferentiated, with animal paws; the body is soft and gives the impression of decline or be ready to fall which means insecurity, or leaving her fall felt by the parent who expected protection, resulting in insecurity. The face is expressionless. The absence of the mouth could mean facing her silence about the violence between the parents.

The drawing of the family comes down to a single person and a single statement, Maryline, the family assistant. It is commonly said that children who suffered deficiency situations manifest attachment needs to people who have interest in them, it was the case with me; she threw herself and was clinging to me. The drawn character, she says, is the family assistant, A. Abraham think the first drawn character is the character of the subject's identifications, therefore, the girl, it seems, would identify with this assistant.

Assia has eliminated the remaining members of her family in the drawing, there is only the character of her identifications, invested character or family assistant. The latter said she is always warm and welcoming with Assia. Assia draw herself alone, which may be the expression of her solitude or a narcissistic withdrawal. Given the impossibility of investing parental images, violence between parents seem to have devastating effects on emotional relationships of the child to his parents.

### Parental failure: discord

Assia seeks limits, her expression "I do not overflow" perhaps the

assertion that during the sessions she finds limits to her behavioral outbursts. The mother keeps asking her whenever I give her a color pencil to say thank you. Assia does not and opposes it, she never thanked me, in fact, the problem of authority arises in families of children exposed to parental violence, the absence of the father joint guardianship, life in the shelter center do not allow the exercise of parental authority. Children exposed to domestic violence are not in a position to understand or accept violence as law. The framework allows psychic descent; children who lived in a chaotic environment are crushed by the superego activity. Freud [15] said: "The man who has violated a taboo becomes taboo himself because he possesses the dangerous faculty of encouraging others to follow his example. He arouses jealousy and envy: Why what is forbidden to others is allowed to him? He is therefore really contagious, so far as his example leads to imitation, and that is why he must himself be avoided [...] it is not appropriate to promote, encourage temptation." The Child witness of parental violence perceives that these models violate the law; he can, then, become, by identification, himself a model of transgressive law in which the other does not exist.

### The loss

The story told by Assia is directly inspired by her family background (although the story is derived from the popular tale Hansel and Gretel, she must have heard at home or at the kindergarten: if it is her fantasy Hansel and Gretel have no importance, psychoanalysis knows the children's fantasies about their fear of being devoured by the mother). She tells it here by offering her version and delivering her phantasms. The characters in Assia's story are those of her family, a father, a mother and two children, same configuration as her family. The story takes place between the house and the forest. The mother is described nasty wishing to kill her children by throwing them into the forest. The mother is experienced as "bad mother", disavowed, incapable of any feeling of love and tenderness; Assia's parental home is a hostile and poor place where love lacks. The theme of maternal rejection is the subject of her story, synonymous of abandonment.

### The insecure attachment

Signs of an anxious-insecure attachment appear in the lack of the background details. The family comes down to a single person outside the real family; it is drawn in a floating manner, ready to fall without expression of affects. Individuals with this type of attachment, intermediary between the deep insecurity and ambivalence, suffered situations interpreted by them as rejects from the parental figures. Thus, they adopt avoidance behavior to protect themselves if confronted with negative responses from the attachment figure.

The tendency to mask emotional distress or feel invulnerable is very high in patients with this type of attachment. Bailly [16], in his description of this type of attachment said: "Everything happens here as if the child had given up seeking love and protection from his parents. This attachment style would be the consequence of repeated rejection, abuse or extended stays in institution in adverse conditions." This can support the interpretation of the opposing attitudes of this child for her mother, she responds to the felt rejection by avoidance and opposition.

Assia has experienced violence between her parents at a young age; the mother confirms that violence began when she was pregnant with Assia. These violent behavior experienced during pregnancy

weaken the mother in her way to invest her fetus, and later the baby, the latter being welcomed in a world where violence is more present and urgent than love and security. Mother says: "They (the children) have never seen us happy." The child is therefore looking for an island of peace.

## Discussion

### The destruction of the link and the value of the other

This case allows to say that the consequences of exposure to domestic violence are harmful and have an impact on the relationship between the child and his parents. Symbolic expressions through drawing and stories show how important it is to focus on the Squiggles-story method. This method it highlights the heuristic value of the immediate consequences of exposure to violence between parents.

With regard to children exposed to domestic violence, the law is transgressed by the parent. The child who sees violence between his parents perceive their models flout the law, therefore, he becomes, by identification, himself a model of transgressive law in which the other does not exist. Violence between parents strengthens negativity the relationship, it involves the safety of the child attachment, which jeopardizes his identification process.

The clinical case shows how exposure to domestic violence hinders the child's ability to build a secure attachment bond. It is recognized that the security of attachment determines the future relationship of the child, insecurity in the relationship activates anxieties and fears of being rejected or abandoned. The story told shows that anxiety. I return back to the drawing of the family, the child is alone, vulnerable, fragile and threatened.

### Insecurity and "traumatic" attachment

The mother figure is the figure who suffers violence, symbolically, maternal and paternal figure argue the importance of fantasy value. From the perspective of attachment, the mother figure has the capacity to function, function equivalent to the protective functions of the parent. This function, which is, thenceforth, inadequate and unavailable weakens the system of protective shield. Feelings of rejection and abandonment which carry these children come from so inadequate protective mother figure and its inability to invest in her relationship with the child.

The feeling of insecurity in a supposed link may be the driver wire of future relations and also deleterious, Guedeny [17] the signal (and this according to Bowlby): "The children having had traumatic experiences of attachment in infancy move towards a register that (Bowlby) calls reversing parental controlling." "The attachment insecurity also has effects on the identifications of the subject, by role reversion when the child takes the position of the father, when he seeks to protect the family members, or when he mistreats others [18].

Violence between parents causes multiple cleavages in the child who is exposed to it. The mechanism of identification to the aggressor is discussed in studies on domestic violence, the children we met have a share of this assertion, but this mechanism leads to several issues. Identification with the mother's abusive father occurred in two forms: identification with the aggressor and identification with the powerful figure.

Exposure to domestic violence threatens the child's ability to build a secure and stable connection with the major attachment figures; this failure can produce pathological conditions in the act of the child. The organizing role of attachment is lost in favor of insecurity, the internal continuity of the instinctual life and relationship is seen later in the failures of their attachments.

We recommend a relational reconstruction work to secure the attachment bond to ensure that security is the main theme of the future relationship of the child.

## Conclusion

The approach taken in this work allowed us to come up to the immediate consequences on the child's attachment bond exposed to domestic violence, how attachment figures influence symbolization capabilities of link to others. This allowed us to think differently the role of the other in the constitution of the attachment bond. To try to understand how the child can or not attach to a violent parent figure and understand on what basis this figure is internalized.

We suggest that the need to focus on the attachment link to therapist in order to repair the damaging effects of domestic violence is relevant, so that the child feels safe in this link to enable him compensate without detaching the figures of attachment, the clinical case shows how important it is to offer a place for the child to hold onto.

The attachment of children exposed to domestic violence seems to have a traumatic look; the child uses rejection and avoidance to ensure his physical and mental integrity. The avoidant attachment allows the child to strengthen internal links but the risk it is impassable, he responds to any attempt to rapprochement by avoidance. From this premise, the support arrangements must focus on changing the attachment, work the negative representations of the link so that it is secure and allows separation.

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