Hide and seek: To be found as a corrective emotional experience

In this paper I will describe specific challenges in the treatment of an emotionally disconnected patient. For the benefit of creating a “facilitating environment” in the maturational process (Winnicott, 1965/2007) the interpreting and exploratory mode of communication was held in the background for some periods during the therapeutic process – especially during the “impasse-periods”. Empathic listening as an important principle (Kohut, 1977) also supports the idea of a facilitating environment, but how to listen empathically when the verbal communication tends to be quite reduced? What else can analysts do besides interpreting the flow of free associations and the empathic listening to free associations? A central question rose for me: What else could “facilitating” mean in terms of therapeutic action?

The main aim in this discussed treatment was to look for different ways to keep the developmental process ongoing and to avoid the loss of connection. Besides listening what the patient was talking about the reading of what the patient was showing turned out to be an important road to move on in the therapeutic process.

Appearances of a disconnected self

Sam, a 30 year old artist, began his treatment four years ago after separation from his girlfriend, with whom he lived together for one year. It was his initiative to separate. Though relating to someone his isolated inner state, feelings of deep emptiness and senselessness grew threatening. Sam started relationships usually with a lot of interest and excitement, but sooner or later he lost the connection and felt into a deep depressive state. Also in our relationship we had a similar rhythm of high intensity at the beginning and a lot of engagement from Sam; the process shifted after two years to a less talking and blocked state, that made both of us feel caught in an impasse.

Sam suffered from disturbances in his self caused by the lack of being represented in the mind of his parents - an unavailable, preoccupied, neglecting and busy mother and a predominantly absent father. The father left the family when he was a baby. He kept contact to the family, but for professional reasons the father could not afford to live in an undefined private state. He started in parallel with another family. Sam and his brother became the “hidden” children. They still don’t exist in their father’s curriculum. The attachment figures he developed could be described as insecure. Sam remembers his overwhelming feelings of panic, desperation and helplessness when mother had to go to work or to travel. These feelings were strengthened by his regular disappointment that mother did not take much notice of him when she returned. Places, where separating is an issue, as e.g. a railway station is, caused panic feelings in him.
Sam’s early experiences formed at least his current pathological conviction ‘nobody really wants to know what is in me’. The tremendous desire at the beginning of treatment to find someone and to be found by a woman was one central issue, but Sam’s negative expectations were regularly confirmed. His overwhelming desire and fantasies about how to find someone where connected with “actions”, with doing something, to catch the attention, interest and appreciation. Even at the age of eight years this pattern started to play out: he felt attracted by a girl in his class. In trying to get her interest and attention, he threatened her quite aggressively. The girl avoided any further contact to him, and Sam felt shocked about her reaction. Aggressive actions provided so much vitality for him and made him feel good, that he could not imagine that one could experience him differently. He expected to gain appreciation, idealization and love and what he got is rejection.

Aggressive encounters with his brother were an important source of vitalization and stimulation too. At the age of 16 the brother moved out into his own flat. And in parallel Sam decided to stop his regular aggressive encounters after he got involved into some school troubles. At school he had turned a water pipe slightly on, so that nobody took notice of the dropping pipe. After the weekend the water was poured out and reached other classes – a tremendous damage. Not knowing why he did this, he was at least scared about his own destructive capacity. With this shift all his vitality dried up. Isolation and self control seemed to be the safest place for him.

**Transforming objects as a source of vitality**

In actions but also in using physical objects Sam gained a sense of feeling vital and effective, as the center of initiative (Stern, 1995). Moreover, Sam developed a peculiar ability in creating and transforming objects. These activities provided stimulating vital feelings too, but without the necessity of relating to human beings. This could be also seen as an attempt to control his world to make it predictable, safe and secure. Lachmann (2011) suggests that these procedures are based on prematurely required self-regulation but without having an interactive regulation with an available caregiver.

These objects which he elaborated within considerable artistic talents have become a dominant way of communicating with the outside world, and also within the treatment process. Sam invited me to find him in his objects like in a “hide-and-seek” game. But as Winnicott formulated the risk in that: “It is a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in which it is joy to be hidden but disaster not (to) be found.” (Winnicott, 1965/2007, p.186).

Winnicott’s concept of the role of play and the transitional space supported my interventions to allow the objects of his outside world to enter the treatment. The adult equivalent of the transitional phenomena of infancy and childhood is in Winnicott’s terms the man’s cultural life. The “intermediate form of communication that slides out of playing into cultural experience of every kind” (p.188) entered the analytic treatment on different
levels: in some enactments and in a special place outside the treatment but close to my practice, where he marked a creative “playground”. Sam used this cultural sphere to communicate his isolated inner state; words did not work for him to reach that sphere. Later on Sam’s cultural world became also the potential space, where developmental steps finally appeared.

**Using “objects” to connect**

The hide-and-seek pattern has shaped our interactions within the therapeutic setting. Sam hid himself in different ways: At the beginning of treatment he used a rigidly structured way to talk about himself, often rejecting queries of the analyst or he got lost in obsessive going in the circle with words; after about two years of treatment he fell more and more into silence, showed a lot of distance, sometimes persecuted by sarcastic remarks. I call this period the “dry-period” or “impasse-period”, because most of the energy, stimulation, initiative had to come from my side. His affection by my attempts to enliven him was low. In this impasse-period I used to take up every hint, partly non-verbal, directing me to some useful information, as physical objects and “environments” which could be meaningful.

With these hints to physical objects Sam was showing me something rather than telling me about it. The overture for this kind of enactment very early in treatment was Sam’s invitation to his exhibition, which I followed.

**Pictures about Abandonment**

Sam’s presented art showed abandoned places and buildings, where humans left their marks on. Obviously Sam was expressing his disconnected and empty self state in his pictures. Abandonment became afterwards a headline of our work too. But during his guide through his show he pointed to one picture in saying: “In this scene I intervened and changed something. Guess what it is!” This was a very lively and humorous interplay, what we rarely had during treatment. His excitement about this game was stimulating both of us. Later on the game hide-and-seek was not always underlined by stimulating interactions, but also shaped by disappointment, emptiness and disorientation.

The use of the issue “abandonment” as a metaphor in the treatment and to explore how this issue evolved in his childhood brought up a lot of stories and memories, but at least it turned into an intellectual discussion “about” him without emotional connections. Interpreting what he showed me in “his objects” did not enrich our sessions. My interpretations about abandonment and disconnection were replied with “aha, hmm, could be…” and did not lead to an opening and developing process. During long “dry” periods his creative objects helped me to keep my attempts “to find him” ongoing. While interpreting did not bring us further, the implicit level of relating, of trying so hard to reach him, might have given Sam a distinct feeling of safety and of an ongoing interest about who he is and what he is feeling.
What he enacted in the dry periods was to move from the painful “feeling abandoned” to the oppositional pole on the same axis “to be the abandoner”. In parallel he also avoided and even refused to have any contact to his mother.

Later on in treatment he stopped making photographs. His interest in abandoned places diminished, he introduced new “objects”, objects, where he had an active and intervening role. He discovered a public meadow with fruit trees (we called it “apple tree meadow”) close to my practice where he went, before or after our sessions. This meadow became the new object or environment where he was showing and indirectly telling me something about him and his development. But this happened outside; what he brought in were e.g. dirty shoes, glasses of jam he made from the fruit trees, a knapsack with a seesaw for “his” meadow or once a severe allergic reaction after sitting in the spring meadow. In this sense he brought in a lot of material and I learned to pick it up in order to use these informations for the treatment process.

A positive daydream of Sam could be used as a model scene: He is sitting in the tram reading a newspaper. There is a woman close to him and suddenly getting notice of him, watching him curiously and fascinated about his elegant and beautiful way to read the newspaper, to move the pages, etc. This model scene implies the desire to be found – but also the need to feel appreciated in just being in silence, without doing something. Somehow I found myself in the imaginary woman looking at him curiously, without any response from his side except his hidden excitement.

At the end of some dry sessions sometimes he smiled with a mixture of appreciation and sarcasm: “Well done! You really work hard to reach me”. And sometimes I sighed exhausted: “Puh, it’s so hard to come through to you!” and he smiled gently.

The challenge not to give up connecting

To get a feeling about the way our conversation was formed, I will give you a vignette. This vignette will also show how I tried to keep the process ongoing and how fruitless the interpreting mode has been, when the patient was not yet ready; or as Winnicott (1971/2005, p. 68) has put it: “Interpretation when the patient has no capacity to play is simply not useful, or causes confusion.”

Vignette “I don’t remember”

Sam arrives as usual: a polite, skeptical and distanced greeting, a handshake with cold hands. After putting off his shoes, he enters therapy room, looking around (curious if something is new in here) and sits down on the floor. He starts to prepare himself physically – he rubs his hands, he rubs his face, he moves his eyes and his face to wake up, he yawns, and then he is ready to look at me, waiting to see what I will provide. (For a long period I used to ask him, how he feels today, what he wants to talk about, if there is something left over from our meeting before, etc. But I stopped doing that because of less effect on him, so I tried to find
new ways to encourage him to engage mentally and emotionally. I tried to address directly what I can see right now).

T: (reading his face) today you don’t look so tired.
S: Hmh...(yawning) but I am.
T: Oh, but somehow you look different than you usually do when you are tired. You look friendlier, almost cheerful, not so low... (I focus on that different quality of tiredness)
S: Ah, yes, could be.
T: How does it feel for you?
S: ...its ok, yes, I feel ok.
T: (knowing how disconnected he is from his feelings, I try to keep the issue upright) When you say, you feel ok, that means pretty much for you. You don’t easily allow yourself an up mood ...”ok” seems to mean: I feel good...
S: Yes, could be. ...Well, my girlfriend (with whom he is now living together since almost two years) asked me why I don’t like to celebrate my birthday.
T: (glad, that something is opening) And...what did you tell her?
S: When I decide to celebrate my birthday, I follow a spontaneous feeling... But when I have organized everything and the celebration starts.... I don’t have this feeling anymore, it’s gone, so.... And then I seem only to celebrate the celebration....not my birthday...do you understand? It does not make any sense for me – to celebrate the celebration...
T: So, you lose the sense and the feeling for what you intended to do....
S: Yes, could be...
(I have the feeling he wants me to follow into his attempt of theorizing the birthday issue. The first two years treatment I joined in, but rarely reached a starting point for further inquiry, so I was looking for a way to get us concrete, to get out of the philosophy... I tried to open up into another direction)
T: When was the last time that you celebrated your birthday?
S: This was 5 years ago.
T: How was it?
S: I invited some friends of Katherine (a former girlfriend) and me; I had just recently got to know them. They had been very nice, so I invited them for dinner.
T: You enjoyed the presence of nice people at your birthday party....
S: Hmh, well, it was just nice with them...it has nothing to do with the birthday...
T: (I felt, as if he wants me to give up the inquiry, in defining what’s important, after opening up a little bit he pushed me aside. I insisted to stay in that issue, in order not to lose him, but also with growing annoyance about so much blocking).
You invited them for birthday, not for any other day. It seems your birthday has some significance for you...
S: Could be... (Silence)
(I felt that this “could be” leads to the end of the issue, so I tried again to keep it ongoing....and to be concrete)
T: Did your father call you this time to congratulate for your birthday?
S: I don’t remember.
T: Hmh? What do you mean, you don’t remember?
S: I don’t remember....
T: Do you mean, you don’t remember whether you got a message on your mailbox; or you don’t remember that you talked to him...or....
S: I am not sure, I just don’t know, but he could have called me. And that would be ok for me.

(9 years ago Sam asked his father to stop calling every birthday and every Christmas. ‘This is just an obligation for you, and I don’t want that anymore’, he told his father. And his father stopped calling after having a conflict about that.)
T: In case your father would actually have called, would you have been pleased about that? (looking again for some more feelings than “ok”)
S: Pleased is too much, it would have been ok.
T: What made it feel ok for you this year?
S: Well, we had quite nice contact in this year...
T: Would you like to tell me more about that?
S: I haven’t told you yet?
T: No, we did not yet talk about it (very often he does not tell significant episodes in his life to me).
S: (suddenly very lively) I met him at an event at a sound installation. I was there because I am interested in this kind of art, and he was there because of his obligation (duties) as an art sponsor....That was quite funny. We stood side by side, we met my accident... when people passed by, he introduced me.....strange and amusing... (smiling)
T: What is it, strange and amusing?
S: Just funny......
T: He introduced you in saying “this is my son”?
S: No, he said, this is Mr. S... (still friendly and lively)
T: Oh..... (I thought I touched a sensitive point and was expecting some strong reaction)
S: That’s ok, nothing bad in that... I mean, if my friends would pass by and I would have to introduce him - that would be embarrassing.... I would feel ashamed for my father, he is well known, he is a conservative, and my friends and I aren’t.
T: Well, now it seems to be the other way around for you – you imagine hiding your father, as he did once with you. Is this what makes you feel strange and amusing?
S: (moving his head) ...could be.....yes...good....hmh... (rubbing his chin thinking intensely)...
(This kind of moving the head is a usual blocker of our conversation. He starts to think, stops to talk, and something is cut off. It gives me the feeling of being “abandoned”, our connection is cut off.

Sam is looking at the clock – like he often does when the impulse to run away is overwhelming him or when he decides to finish the hour.
T: You feel like leaving? We have some minutes left.
S: (laughing) Yes, but I don’t know what to say.
T: Again this “cut off” feeling?
S: Yeah…. I would love to walk, or run, or move….that’s why I think about leaving. Not because I don’t want to be here, but I long for moving. And sitting around makes me annoyed….

With this vignette I show how the flow of a session goes even when there is an issue involved, like the birthday issue. For many periods we hardly could find an issue and the hours where really tough. One risk in the “hide and seek” game is that the finding actions from the therapist might be sensed as pursuing the patient. With the story of an isolated and under stimulated child in the background the risk to lose him seemed much higher to me than the risk to pursue.

**Showing rather than talking – a door out of the impasse**

**Vignette: „How can you know what I feel? “**

In the impasse-period Sam and I were involved in different issues. One issue was sickness. It started in winter time. In my view Sam did not wear clothes which were warm enough for all degrees of coldness. There are not great seasonal differences of Sam’s clothes, maybe one layer more or less. This wintertime Sam had to cancel some hours, or he came into the hours with a cold. I started to address the issue “sickness”. 

On a cold December day he entered the practice with ice-cold hand and a running nose.

T: Oh, so cold hands...

S: Yes, always...

T: You were sick last week, and you don’t feel much better now?

S: It’s ok. I don’t want to be sick and staying at home. It’s so boring.

T: It’s so boring, because you can’t work, walk, and move along…you feel blocked.

S: Yes, that’s really the worst thing, being sick.

T: (I thought that’s paradox: he does not want to be sick, and he does not do much to protect and care for himself) Hmh, when you came in, you had cold hands. What about one more warming layer in your clothes, or even gloves?

S: My clothes are warm enough (irritated)!

T: Well, your hands don’t feel like warm enough. There might be a connection to your flu last week.

S: (annoyed) I don’t want to be sick, and I don’t want more clothes. Last week when I felt that I get fever I even decided to finish a physical work in my bathroom, a hard physical work. I just felt for doing that. (As if he wants to proof me, that he is not a week person). Even when I have pain in my throat I eat ice-cream, to proof that I am not sick.

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1 I would like to express my appreciation to Joseph Lichtenberg with whom I could discuss this case. And I am very grateful for his invaluable comments and suggestions.
T: To show yourself how strong you are, that coldness does not do any harm to you, or that even fever can’t stop you from working?
S: To show that I don’t accept sickness, because I just don’t like it, I can’t do anything, it’s boring. But why are we talking about that, it’s not important, not important for analysis at all.
T: Well, it I think it is important, everything what you are feeling, what you are thinking, what you are doing, what you are showing to me is important. You know, Sam, I would like to tell you, that I am in a dilemma. I notice that this issue is uncomfortable for you, it is irritating for you. I feel like a concerned mother who is worrying about your sickness, talking about how to dress up when the outside temperature is – 10 °C. But not addressing the whole area of body and sickness that you are bringing in here in “showing it” would seem as if I don’t care about you.
S: (embarrassed laughing) well, I see the dilemma. But, I don’t know…..yes, it is important for me that you perceive what’s going on in me. But, how do you notice when I am annoyed or irritated?
T: You show it in your face, in your body, how you stop talking, how you touch yourself on your head, how you move your legs in a soothing rhythm…..a lots of things, how you express yourself..
S: So, you think that other people can see that too?
T: I think so, yes. (Silence) How is it for you? You don’t like that?
S: No, it’s ok, but what makes me worry is that I really don’t feel it…..I think it would be very important for me when you talk to me like you did it today. Could you do that? (He seemed to be very touched and thoughtful)

The outcome of this interaction was amazing. We felt much closer to each other, livelier and it brought up many important issues which we could explore: the issue of manliness, being a tough guy, the desire for an idealized man to whom he could talk, and his sickness of neurodermitis since his childhood, which he never mentioned in two years. His aversive attitude towards thicker, warmer, heavier clothes is due to the high irritability of his skin. As a child the skin sensitivity was not diagnosed; he never was brought to a dermatologist by his mother. At the age of 20 he did it on his own, but felt hopeless to get any medical help.

The fruitful interaction described in this vignette above could be seen as an expansion of Sam’s mentalizing capacities. With the capacity to connect to his feelings through the eyes of the other, he also gained more introspective and empathic abilities too. There were times where Sam could not feel his tears coming into his eyes. This vignette also gives an example for a specific form of interaction, where the analyst was brought more directly onto the stage with the patient, but keeping the patient in the center of treatment. To insist primarily on empathic listening as the main therapeutic action would also have been too restrictive with lesser outcome in that case (Lichtenberg, 2012).
Developmental paths

Also outside the treatment some things started to change in Sam’s live and it is an ongoing process. Since two years Sam is living with a woman, which is the longest partnership he ever had. On the stage of “apple tree-meadow”, which he discovered close to my practice where he started first with harvesting fruits and transforming them to jam, juice, etc. he now is caring for the meadow and the trees (mowing, cutting, ...) them. He started to study landscape gardening at the University. From that point he moved on to apply for a landscape gardening program supported and financed by the European Union in order to cultivate useless and abandoned places in the city. His affiliation to colleagues or friends is increasing. He is more capable to regulate different interests or conflicts in the groups. On the stage of relating to his father there are also some growing connecting lines too.

The recurring experience to be “found” by the analyst has become a corrective emotional experience which supports an evolving sense in Sam of having a secure representation in the mind of his mirroring and responsive partner. This in turn has enhanced his feelings of being understood and appreciated, his feeling secure in attachment and at least his capacity of mentalizing and his empathic abilities expanded.

Literature


Lachmann, Frank (2011), Lecture given in Munich, 2011, Infant Research and Adult Treatment.
