

Faeton – The Difficulty of a Psychic Birth of an Adopted Adolescent

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Keywords: adoption, adolescence, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, psychic birth

Abstract: The author characterises the psychological situation of an adolescent, that has been adopted. She uses the idea of Sonne (1998) of a “psychological abortion” to show the difficulty of such an adolescent in his or her search of identity and in the process of psychic separation from the primary objects. The fact, that the adopted child has internal mental representations of two pairs of parents – biological parents and adopted parents plays an important role in his or her development. The author shows the difficulty of the “psychic birth of an adopted adolescent” using clinical material from a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy of an adolescent adopted girl. The myth of Faeton – the son of the Sun-God Helios has been chosen as an illustration of the problems of an adopted child as he or she reaches adolescence.

Zusammenfassung: *Faeton – die Schwierigkeiten der psychischen Geburt eines Adoptivkindes im Jugendalter.* Die Autorin beschreibt die psychologische Situation eines adoptierten Kindes im Jugendalter. Sie benutzt die Idee von Sonne (1998) der “psychologischen Abortion” um die Schwierigkeiten eines Jugendlichen in der Suche nach der Identität und in dem Prozeß der psychischen Trennung von den Primärobjekten zu verdeutlichen. Ein adoptiertes Kind hat innere psychische Repräsentanzen von zwei Paaren von Eltern: der biologischen Eltern und der Adoptiveltern. Diese Tatsache spielt eine wichtige Rolle in dem Prozeß der psychischen Entwicklung des Kindes. Die Autorin zeigt die Schwierigkeiten der “psychischen Geburt” eines Adoptivkindes im Jugendalter an Hand von klinischem Material aus der psychoanalytisch orientierten Psychotherapie eines adoptierten Mädchens in der Adoleszenz. Der Mythos von Faeton – der Sohn von Sonnengott Helios ist hier gewählt worden um die Probleme eines Adoptivkindes in der Adoleszenz zu illustrieren.

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The Myth of Faeton

In the greek mythology (Schwab 1984) Faeton was seen as a tragic figure. As a son of the Sun-God Helios and the mortal Klymene he appeared one day in front of his father asking him for a proof that he is the son of god. The people on earth laughed at him, they said that his father was unknown. Helios hugged his son

and heedless promised him to fulfill his every wish. Faeton said that he would like to chaise his father's chariot. The terrified god warned his son, he begged him to change his plans. He knew that unexperienced Faeton would not manage the impulsive horses. The young man didn't listen, he got on the chariot and soon afterwards the tragedy took place. The horses ran away, the sun burned down large parts of the Earth and Faeton himself – died.

I have chosen the Faeton's myth to illustrate the psychological situation of an adopted child who reaches adolescence, because it shows, I think, the most essential problems of such a child.

According to Sonne (1998) adopted adolescents, quite often, go through a kind of trauma, which he called "a psychological abortion". This kind of psychic experience happens when the adolescents try to find informations about their origin, their biological roots and, for some reason or another, they fail to achieve this.

Helios, as it was said before, was trying to protect his son from experiencing the painful trauma of this kind, he was hopelessly trying to help him in the search of his identity. This attempt did not work – Faeton died and his world died. Perhaps the father and the son were not mature enough for this test, perhaps Faeton lived too long with the conviction, that his biological father was unknown, or perhaps, in some sense, his mother failed in her role?

The Psychological Situation of an Adopted Child

As Winnicott (1990) puts it: "the adopted children experience during adolescence more difficulties in comparison with other children" (p. 170).

The adopted children, when they reach adolescence, are very often already aware that they are adopted. Much earlier in their *self-representations*¹ there is a perception of themselves as abandoned children. As Green (1990) puts it, the phantasy of being deserted is connected with the idea of being worthless. According to Hodges (1990) "in adoption we are dealing with an additional set of inner representations. These are representations which 'represent' no object that the child has actually experienced: they are the representations of the biological parents" (p. 62).

The main problem around which the phantasies and conflicts of both the parents and the child concentrate, is that the child has two pairs of parents – biological parents and adoptive parents (Schier, 1998). In such a situation one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence, that is the psychic separation from the primary objects (Blos 1962) seems to be quite difficult.

Case 1 – Ola

I want to illustrate now that, what I call "the difficulty of a psychic birth of an adopted adolescent" using my own clinical material.

Ola was 13, when she was reported to the psychoanalytic treatment, because of generalized aggressive behaviors and problems at school by having at the same

¹ I define the self-representation after Sandler, Rosenblatt, (1962) as an "organisation that represents the person as he consciously and unconsciously perceives himself, and which forms an integral part of the representational world" (p. 134).

time high level of intellectual potential. As Huth (1983) puts it, the adopted children are very often reported to the psychotherapy because of disturbances in their behavior and quite seldom because of neurotic conflicts. It is connected with the special place that the instinctual life of the children plays in their families. Many authors (Wieder 1978; Brinich 1980; Sherick 1983) think that adoptive parents can have a phantasy that they have stolen the child from someone else. In biological parents, the child is a part of them, in adoptive parents, the child is a part of someone else. The biological parents can cathect the child with narcissistic libido, for adoptive parents the child is a continuous evidence of their infertility. Parents could have big problems with accepting the instinctual life of the children, which could be a sign of their “bad” (it means, biological) blood.

Ola demonstrated behaviors that could be called “negativism”, she didn’t answer teachers’ questions, she ignored her peers. She didn’t have any social contacts at school. At home, she was quick to take offence, very often she locked herself in her room and cried.

Ola brought a toy to the first meeting with me. It was a small pink mouse, which she painted in several versions on a piece of paper. She didn’t comment on her paintings. On my questions the girl was answering “through” the mouse, so that I had quite often the feeling that I talk with a small, few-years-old child². During the contact with Ola, I had to think about my experiences in work with selective mute patients, who very often communicate their wishes through the figures of animals (Schier 1997, 2000).

In my first encounters with Ola’s parents (they always came together to the meetings) I felt huge latent aggression of the mother towards her daughter. I was struck by the total difference in their physical appearance. Ola was tall blond girl with green eyes, her mother was dark-haired small person fighting with her obesity. Ola was adopted when she was 6 months old, her adoptive parents had only a few pieces of informations about her biological parents.

“We didn’t want to know anything, it was not interesting to us”, said the mother and continued: “It was only important to us, that Ola became legally our daughter”. The reasons why Ola’s parents could not have their own children were not known, they didn’t try to find them out, they didn’t undergo any special medical treatment. At the end of Ola’s psychotherapy, which lasted approximately one year, her mother admitted that: “She didn’t want to know, who was infertile – her husband or herself – if they knew it, they could blame the partner”. The attitude of Ola’s parents, mostly her mother, to the facts (concerning both the girl’s past and the cause of infertility) showed me, that in the family dynamics the phantasy and the reality were mixed up and that the knowledge about the external reality was denied. These features, which were dominant in the family structure explained, to some extent, the regressive attitude of the girl toward the world. She was like a little child with pink mouse, who didn’t want to know and to understand anything.

Winnicott says (1990): “The worst thing is the secret and the mixture of phantasy and reality that stems out of it. It is a burden to the child that the latent feelings like love, aggression, indignation, disgust are within his or hers reach, but

² Müller-Brühn (1997) describes the process of psychoanalysis of 8-year old adopted girl, in which a small plastic dog played a very important role. For a long time in her treatment the patient talked about her own feelings by naming the emotions of the toy-dog.

they cannot be experienced. When an emotion cannot be experienced, it cannot be mastered" (p. 173).

Ola's parents didn't undertake the work of mourning over their "unborn" biological child. Schall-Bayermann (1997) says, that "... if infertility is not worked through, it is the main cause of problems in experiencing adoption and the phantasies linked to it" (p. 256).

Ola at the beginning of the treatment, was in a situation of Faeton, who didn't know his past. Faeton was left alone through the years with the lack of knowledge; he didn't get much support from his mother, so he had to look for help to his father-god. Similarly, in Ola's case, she couldn't turn with her questions and doubts about her past to her mother, because she seemed not to be ready for such a confrontation.

Ola was coming eagerly to the therapeutic meetings, each time proceeded by a long farewell ritual with her mother. They were exchanging affections, they talked "baby talk". I understood Ola's behavior as a reparation's trial, that in some way, should be for the mother a compensation for the separation. I have seen it also as a way to deal with aggression, both the one, that was projected by Ola on the object and the one, coming from her mother, which was connected with a big narcissistic injury, caused by the necessity to give a child under the care of a specialist, in this case, the psychotherapist (Schier 1999)

Case 2 – Karol

At this point I thought about another adopted child, Karol, who started his psychoanalytic treatment at the age of ten (Schier 1998). Karol was adopted when he was one year old, he came from Asia, his adoptive parents were European. His mother told me, that when she first saw Karol and their gazes crossed, she "knew that nothing good would come out of this". I had to think not only about the force of the projection of the mother's hostile impulses, but also about the strength of her anxiety. This anxiety, was, among others, responsible for the fact, that in the mental representation of the child, in the mind of his mother, the negative features prevailed and that this representation of the object came into being, before the mother really got to know her child. Karol's mother interpreted a lot of his behaviors in terms of the "different culture" he came from. Her son's intensive crying, long time after adoption, she explained as connected to the fact, that his first care-giver in Asia, was taking him to the temple late at night. This experience determined, according to the adopted mother, for many years, her son's rhythm of activity at day and night. A long lasting, preliminary work with the mother (as Norman (1994) proposes it) was necessary to "win" her for the psychoanalytic treatment of her son.

Ola – Having a Name

Returning to Ola. During first months of the treatment, the patient was talking “about the mouse”, mostly in the context of its activity, e.g. she was saying that “the mouse was in the park”, or “the mouse has a lot of homework to do”. I was trying to link, in my interpretations, the stories about the mouse with the emotional experiences of the girl. I found as very significant the moment, when Ola, after a few months of the treatment, came in and said: “The mouse has now a name, it is called ‘Puszek’ (eng. ‘powder puff’)”. It was evident, that we began to focus in our work on the issue of identity, of “giving names” (Zalewska (1998) writes about the importance of finding a “title” in the process of understanding the meaning of psychic mechanisms). In Polish language “Puszek” means something that is very fragile, something that can be quite easily blown away, e.g. by the wind. It is also masculine. I had to think about that in light of what I knew from Ola’s adoptive mother. She was determined to have a girl, because, as she put it, “she wouldn’t manage a boy”. Her husband didn’t have any independent opinion on this matter. I understood that Ola together with her biological maturation starts the confrontation with the problem of femininity and, in some way, indirectly, she poses the question, whether if she were a boy, she would have been accepted by the adoptive parents. I think that here a similar mechanism was operating, to the one, described by Schaal-Bayermann (1997). According to that author, the adopted children through their aggressive behaviors and provocations try, all the time, to work on their uncertainty by “answering” for themselves the question, whether or not they could be rejected by their adoptive parents in the way they were rejected, in the past, by the biological parents. The name for the toy-mouse, was on one hand, an attempt to create a stable ego-identity; on the other, it was a sign of an increase of the anxiety. Erickson (1997) saw the processes characterising adolescence on the continuum: “identity” vs “role confusion”.

During the next few weeks of treatment Puszek (which Ola didn’t bring to the sessions anymore) started to “have” different emotions. Ola was saying, e.g.: “Puszek was quite angry because the girls at school were laughing at me” or “There was a storm, my mother and me with Puszek, all of us, we were horrified”. The role of the small plush toy was located somewhere between being a sort of a transitional object and a part of self of the patient. In Ola’s contact with me there was more place for transference interpretations. When I didn’t gratify her needs, she was quite angry at me and hide herself behind the curtain, from where she screamed at me. In that behavior I saw, on the one hand, the work on the object constancy, which means here, the wish of a very small child to be found by the mother, on the other hand, an attempt of an adolescent girl to manage her anger and hostility. Once the patient said: “I cannot look at you, when I am angry with you. I saw the sculpture of the Kraków’s dragoon, I know that it could kill with his look”.

During one of the sessions Ola made a picture, which she took home. On that picture there were figures of two adult women; one smaller than the other. They were totally united, the smaller one partly inside the bigger one. Ola said: “A mother in a mother”. In my countertransference I was very moved by this picture, I understood that at this moment the patient regressed to that psychic level of emotional experience, which Sonne (1998) calls the “prenatal trauma”. The girl

was trying to link her phantasies about her own pregnancy and birth with the fact of having two mothers – the biological mother and the adopted mother.

At that time Ola's mother was talking about the fact, that the girl was more open towards her. Ola started to talk about her experiences at school, about her friends. Simultaneously, she expressed her wishes and feelings more often at home. The parents managed with large difficulty those situations, when Ola was unsatisfied and angry. They were blaming "the therapy" for this. Unfortunately, they were not ready to understand and analyze the psychic life of their daughter. I connected this with the fear of being rejected.

Blum (1983) says that: "The adoptive parents fear of being rejected is often a projection of their own and their parents original preference for a natural child" (p. 148).

During that time Ola went for a short trip with her class, where she made friends with a girl, whose parents were getting a divorce. I understood that the choice was a narcissistic one; the choice of a friend who could be for the patient a mirror of her own feelings, conflicts and fears.

Before a break in the treatment, which lasted for two weeks, after one year of psychotherapy, Ola drew a picture, where there was a group of animals in the woods. A rabbit, as a cartoon figure, was saying: "I will miss you" and in the other place: "I will stay here". I interpreted that picture in the context of the break in the treatment and in terms of the continuity of our contact.

The Reenactment of a "Psychological Abortion"

After the break, totally unexpected, Ola's mother phoned me, saying that her daughter would not be coming to the psychotherapy anymore, because the girl "does not see any sense in it". On my request there was one, last meeting with Ola, she didn't say a word, she just sat in front of me very angry, like a stranger. In my countertransference I had a feeling of a very rapid and painful loss, an emotion, that Sonne (1998) called "psychological abortion". I understood the strength and violence of the patient's emotions, the feelings she had to protect herself from. I understood also that after the experience of some closeness with me before the break, I changed in the transference into a bad object. Brinich (1990) says that behind the wish of an adopted child, to be adopted by an analyst (I explained in this way the declaration of the rabbit: "I will stay here") hides the phantasy that the analyst is, in reality, the biological parent. This phantasy shows the need of the child to keep in his/hers self – representation the image of himself or herself as a desired, wanted child. Ola was not able yet, to integrate the good and bad aspects of the self and object (Schier 1998), the splitting mechanisms were at work. She didn't also have enough support from her mother.

Schall-Bayermann (1997) says that without the support from the parents in some phases of development of transference, there exists a danger of the therapy to be broken off. She formulates it as follows: "At some point in the treatment the child experiences the analyst as the strong, ready to adopt mother-rescuer. The child directs the hostility towards the adoptive mother, who is experienced, irrationally, as the hated, biological mother, that did abandon the child. The transference changes quite often, and when the analyst becomes the hated, abandoning,

biological mother, the child clings to the adoptive mother, who – with negative consequences for the therapy – can encourage the child to return to her” (pp. 272f.).

From the conversation with the parents I learned that during the break in the treatment two important events happened. Ola found in the drawer the love letters from her parents’ past and secretly made copies of them. She also spend a weekend alone with her father and experienced some closeness to him. The parents interpreted the behavior of their daughter, in the matter of “letters”, as a robbery and were not able to accept my explanations that it was linked to the girl’s search for identity and the continuity in time and that she very much wanted to know the past of her parents. As the mother was talking about the time Ola spent with her father, she exploded and screamed: “She will take away from me everything that I have”. I was trying to show the mother her own fears connected with the development and maturation of her daughter and her rivalry with the daughter associated to them. The mother has always had problems in talking to the girl about the issues concerning femininity, physical appearance and clothes. As she formulated it herself, the conversations with the daughter had the form of a “technical instruction” in matters of the menstruation.

As Winnicott (1990) puts it, the adoptive parents have in common with the stepparents, that: “the identification with the child does not reach such deep levels as the identification with the natural child” (p. 174).

The tenderness between Ola and her father, her mother interpreted as a danger to the relationship with her husband, as a possibility of separation and abandonment. To preserve the “good” part of the relation with her daughter, she, in some way, had to support her in her decision to break off the treatment. The “bad” part was projected, by both – mother and daughter – in me. It seemed to me, that Ola’s parents didn’t solve their oedipal problems, they were not at the stage, that Kernberg (1995) sees as such, that characterises the resolution of the adolescents’ conflicts. He writes: “Under optimal circumstances, tolerance of genital and pregenital, polymorphous perverse infantile impulses permits their integration as part of the changing experiences of the self, and the infantile prohibitions against sexual strivings toward the oedipal objects are simultaneously reconfirmed” (p. 176).

My further attempts to continue the work with Ola’s family failed. Huth (1983) assumes that the adoptive parents are generally less ready than other parents to undertake their own psychotherapeutic treatment. The fact alone, that, they have an adopted child has the value of a symptom, and a child becomes its carrier.

The Faeton’s myth ends tragically. The father does not understand the anxiety of his son concerning his identity and self-esteem, typical for the crisis of adolescence and allows the conflict of the son to be acted out. The permission to chaise the chariot should have had a value of a proof that Faeton was accepted by his father. Similarly, in Ola’s case – her mother did not help the girl to overcome her negative transference and unconsciously supported the breaking off the psychotherapeutic treatment of her daughter. Fortunately, Ola’ story does not have a tragic ending. Approximately six months after the interruption of the girl’s therapy, her mother phoned me asking for psychotherapeutic help for herself. She decided to undertake her own treatment, expressing her motivation as follows:

“I don’t want my daughter to go through the same things I had to go through”. Ola’s mother recognised that she has to learn, at first, herself how to “chaise the chariot of the God of Sun”, e.g. how to manage her emotional and instinctual life. Only after that, she would be able to pass on her knowledge to her daughter, not leaving her by herself, as it has happened with Helios and his son – Faeton.

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