

Review of

Infant Therapy, Inger Thormann and Inger Poulsen, Hans Reitzels Forlag, 2013

Inger Thormann and Inger Poulsen have co-authored *Infant Therapy* – a wonderful little book about the development and implementation of infant therapy in Denmark.

The authors have worked individually with infants, young children and their families for many years, Inger Thorman as a psychologist at Skodsborg Observation and Treatment Centre, and Inger Poulsen as director and therapist at the Family House in Horsens. The two met while pursuing their mutual interest: the refinement of a treatment method developed in Paris by the French paediatrician and psychoanalyst Francoise Dolto, primarily in the 1950s. Francoise Dolto and her protégé, the child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Caroline Eliacheff, are the key sources of inspiration for the two authors in the development of infant therapy in Denmark.

The book is published by Hans Reitzels Forlag with a cover sketch by Ib Spang Olsen – so already on the cover, the book illustrates the natural vulnerability of the infant and the gentleness that must be applied to everything in such a young child's world. The illustration is symbolic of

the theme of the book: that the heart, as the seat of empathy, is the starting point for this therapeutic method.

The first part of the book is a presentation of the theoretical foundation of infant therapy, first and foremost Françoise Dolto and her protégé, Caroline Eliacheff. The authors also summarise their own professional background as well as the work they are both currently doing with infant therapy on a daily basis – illustrated with numerous detailed examples of therapy with infants and young children.

For Dolto and Eliacheff as well as for the two authors, it is self-evident that the infant must be protected and at the same time encouraged developmentally. It is all about striking the right balance, and the young child is so vulnerable and fragile that its perception of itself, and of reality, is easily distorted by traumatic experience; a split occurs in the child's way of absorbing these experiences, a displacement within the symbolisation process – so that, even when the child's world rights itself, and everything returns to normal, an old fissure or displacement in the symbolisation process may continue to disrupt the child's growth and development. This is where infant therapy comes in, offering the possibility of restitution. Infant therapy releases early trauma by attaching words to a child's pain, which the therapist is able to imagine via empathic work with the child's traumatic history, and thus offers renewed hope for the future.

Infant Therapy is centred on practice, the application of theories in practical, clinical work – this is therapy that takes place in an

extraordinarily vulnerable therapeutic space, and as such it is a delicate and sensitive process that requires planning in the greatest detail. I imagine that this is the reason why the book is marked by a certain “punctiliousness” – every detail and consideration is described, and in this way, the authors capture some of the atmosphere that arises in the therapeutic space when an authentic meeting occurs between a traumatised, tense or listless young child and a therapist.

Many have spoken of the magic of these moments, and the authors occasionally employ this term as well – but at the same time, thankfully, they offer other explanations aside from magic to explain what happens in a therapeutic encounter, partly with reference to Daniel Stern’s “present moments”, which have the potential to develop into “moments of meeting”, and partly with reference to Susan Hart’s neuropsychological explanation model.

So even though infant therapy may seem magical, it is in fact a craft, which, with training, can be elevated to an almost artistic level.

One might ask, as some actually have, what use do we have for old psychoanalytical approaches today, since the conditions for personal development are so different from the days of Freud – or even Dolto? And my answer – reinforced by my experience with infant therapy – would be that we need it, because certain of life’s phenomena – trauma, for example – affect the mind and/or the brain independently of personality and daily conditions. Trauma affects our basic existential conditions and is therefore beyond time and place with regard to the experience itself and the traces it leaves behind. It follows that the work of Freud, Bowlby, Dolto, Eliacheff and Stern is important as a

point of departure for the work we do today, supplemented, naturally, by all of the subsequently acquired knowledge, including the vast amount of new science on brain function. These new insights are also reflected in the book with the inclusion of modern neuropsychology, represented by Susan Hart, who has bridged the gap between neuropsychology and infant therapy in exemplary fashion.

Infant psychotherapy is relatively new in Denmark and has, surprisingly, been met with scepticism by the academic world.

Infant therapy is a practice field and a method that does not lend itself to a positivistic scientific “evidentiary formula,” but at the same time, the method should have no trouble gaining scientific recognition, as each session is thoroughly prepared by a team (including the family, among others), and the messages are clearly articulated and written down prior to the actual session. After each session, the child’s responses are analysed to determine how they may be understood and employed in the continuing therapeutic effort and in the child’s daily life.

In this sense, infant therapy is not magical at all. It is a method for a thorough, systematic and purposeful effort to achieve an authentic therapeutic encounter where concrete, precise messages can facilitate the possibility of change that emerges in the moment of meeting.

Infant therapy takes a neutral, pragmatic approach without ambitions on behalf of the child and with respect for the child’s life process. It is based on the old psychoanalytical notion that therapy delivers one from trauma via an empathic and precise communication of the truth about the pain in the child’s history of trauma. Early intervention also

means that the distortions of reality or the displacement in the symbolisation process that Dolto speaks of can be resolved as quickly as possible to help child return to a more typical development.

The many examples in the book underscore the broad scope of infant therapy. We hear about young children from vastly different circumstances and with a wide range of trauma histories – and the central focus of the therapy is always on telling the child's story, the painful core of the trauma, so precisely that the communication can release the pain and inspire or support a genuine hope for the future in the child.

The examples suggest that when that balance is maintained, therapy does help, and one characteristic of infant therapy is its immediate effect: there is almost always a direct reaction from the child during the therapy session as well as a delayed reaction. As in other forms of therapy, the delayed reaction may take the form of a potentially worrying intensification of symptoms, but due to the high level of parental/caregiver information and involvement that is part of the therapeutic method, these delayed reactions are interwoven into the therapy process over time.

In the second part of the book, the authors focus on the potential of the method with older children and adults, where it is often employed in conjunction with other activities such as sand play, drawing and modelling clay (which Dolto also used with older children).

In addition, the authors discuss the usefulness of the method as a tool for both interdisciplinary communication and dialogue/efforts outside the therapy field. For example, the method applied in infant therapy has proven useful in helping educators and social workers be more

precise and specific in everyday communication with children and in explaining difficult or complex concepts or decisions to children.

Infant therapy may be of particular importance for adopted children or other children who have experienced a separation from their birth parents, sometimes under circumstances where they do not even know their birth parents' names. Infant therapy places the child into the original triad with the biological parents that is the original point of departure for all of us.

Infant Therapy is a practical and accessible presentation of Dolto and Eliacheff's works, theory and practice as well as the contributions of other pioneer theorists in the field. The book will be a source of inspiration for psychologists and psychotherapists as well as other professionals who work with children and families. In addition to its specific focus on infant therapy, the book also reminds us how important it is to be gentle, thorough and respectful when working with children.

Definitely an important book for anyone who focuses – or wishes to focus – on what is in the best interest of the child.

Conni Gregersen

Master of Psychology

Supervisor and specialist in psychotherapy

Psykologerne i Kalifornia

Issortarfimmut 1b

3900 Nuuk

Greenland

Tel.: +299 537 751

conni@greennet.gl

www.psykologi.gl