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INTRODUCTION TO “NOTE ON THE CHILD”

Daniel Roy

Jacques Lacan wrote the “Note on the Child” in 1969 at the request of Jenny Aubry, a paediatrician who headed a hospital unit in paediatrics, and a psychoanalyst member of the École Freudienne de Paris. This fundamental text lays the foundations for child analysis in the Lacanian orientation. It was first known to French readers as two separate notes, before being brought together, as they are in the English version here, when Jacques-Alain Miller edited the *Autres écrits* collection in 2001. Prior to Jacques-Alain Miller’s careful revision, these two texts, taken as distinct from each other, produced a disjunction between two elements that precisely need to be considered together in the analytic practice with children: on the one hand, the family structure; and on the other, the child’s symptom.

What are the main axes of the “Note”?

1. Lacan does not shy away from placing the family in a category that precludes all forms of idealisation. It has a “function of residue” in the evolution of societies. This gives psychoanalysts a lot of freedom when it comes to accepting the most diverse family configurations.
2. For it is on this residue that rests a necessary function that is “irreducible” to any subjective constitution: transmission. To the question of what is passed on in a family, Lacan’s answer is *an embodied desire*, not an anonymous one.
3. This is what gives way to a diffraction into two avenues for this embodied desire: the path of lack, and the path of the name. The distinction made here by Lacan between the function of the mother and the function of the father makes no claims as to the gendered identity of whoever comes to embody these functions.
4. The only truth that a family can give a child is a transmission operating on the vectors of lack and name. It is an enigmatic, “symptomatic” truth, always falling short of a response that would say what the transmission of life is.

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5. In this respect, Lacan takes a decisive step, which I earlier said was foundational for child analysis: the child's symptom is a response to the symptomatic truth at the heart of the family structure. To understand the symptom as the child's subjective response to the enigmatic opacity harboured by his or her family is far from the genetic, biological, or even psychological causality this symptom is sometimes said to stem from!
6. The distinction that Lacan develops in the rest of the "Note" remains extremely rich and fertile from a clinical point of view, as has often been commented upon: on the one hand, the symptom represents "the truth of the family couple"; on the other hand, the symptom "arises from the subjectivity of the mother". Let's note one particular aspect here: the "family couple" appears like one of the possible modalities for the incarnation of desire in its double function of lack and law. The other modality designates the fact that it is the child him/herself who incarnates the object of the fantasy: "the child saturates the mode of lack whereby (the mother's) desire is particularised." If there is no longer any transmission of lack, what remains of desire? There remains a capricious law against which the child's symptom is essentially a defence.
6. Following the thread of his deciphering of what I call "embodied structure"; at the end of the text Lacan emphasises the "somatic symptom" insofar as it comes to augment, for a mother or father, the child's "requirement to be protected". Lacan underlines that here lies an open road for a mother or a father to misrecognise the truth of her or his desire, and for the child, to incarnate the place of an object. The ever-expanding category of "children with special needs" requires that psychoanalysts and mental health practitioners in the analytic orientation should not shy away from the two faces of the truth of the child's symptom: a vocal response to the truth of the family couple, and a mute response to the place of object that every subject occupies when they come into the world.

Translated by Nicolas Boileau