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Intersubjective aspects of Susan Isaacs' developmental theory: From the mother-infant relationship to peer group activities

Introduction

It is now generally accepted that English object relation theorists had a strong impact on the intersubjective turn in psychoanalysis (Ávila, 2014). These psychoanalytic pioneers – such as Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, Ronald Fairbairn and Wilfred Bion – developed a different object relation approach to the human psyche with a distinctive terminology. Despite their diverse approaches, they primarily focused on the psychological aspects of the intense bodily-emotional relation between mother and child and the formation of internal objects. These two questions were common subject matters of their scientific work, which could be recognised as crucial steps towards a relational perspective within the psychoanalytic community.

In the 1930s, a new and unique observational perspective was added to this psychoanalytic discourse by Susan Isaacs, a young female psychoanalyst and educator. She was one of the first analysts to extend the range of her psychoanalytically oriented child observations from Bálint's¹ “mysterious children's room” to the institutions of early childhood education (Bálint, 1932). Thanks to her innovation, she was able to examine the object relation between mother and child simultaneously with the dynamics of the infant's peer relationships. In this new context, she investigated what determined the child's emotional attachment towards her mother – especially the nature of his internal parental representations –, his behaviour in peer groups and the quality of his play activities, social and cognitive development. Isaacs also turned attention to how the child's interpersonal experiences within a nursery community influenced his unconscious phantasies related to her primary caregiver.

¹ Alice Bálint was a member of the Budapest School of psychoanalysis and received her psychoanalytic training with Hanns Sachs and Sándor Ferenczi. She was interested in the early relationship between mother and child. She also tried to integrate psychoanalysis into the pedagogy (Borgos, 2018).

Few attempts have been made to investigate Susan Isaacs' completely new psychoanalytic and educational inquiries.² Therefore, this paper provides a brief introduction to Isaacs' ideas on the social and intellectual development of children, with particular regard to the significance of peer relationships. The essay is built on Isaacs' observational data and her psychoanalytic interpretation of children's spontaneous gifts and their imaginative play activities within the nursery community. There is a growing body of research on both phenomena in modern intersubjective discourse (Göncü 1993a, 1993b; Hahn, 1998; Ramires, 2016).

The intellectual background of Susan Isaacs

Isaacs presumed that peer relationships have particular psychological functions in childhood. Several of her studies have explored this question, for instance *The Nursery Years* (1929/1949), *Intellectual Growth of Young Children* (1930/1950), *Social Development of Young Children* (1933/1952), *The Nursery as a Community* (1936/1952) and *The Educational Value of the Nursery School* (1937/1948). Isaacs' enthusiasm about nursery education and the pedagogical value of play probably derived from her early intellectual impressions at the University of Manchester, where she learnt about Froebelian principles.

Most of the studies pay relatively little attention to how Isaacs' early educational milieu made an intellectual impact on her scientific orientation. She started her studies in 1908 at the University of Manchester (Graham, 2008, 7.) to become a teacher of young children. At the time, Grace Owen, who was a Froebelian revisionist, gave lectures at the institution till 1910. Later, Owen became one of the founders of the British Nursery School Movement (Lascarides and Hinitz, 2000, 118.). Isaacs was introduced to the educational philosophy of Friedrich Froebel by Owen when she was studying in Manchester (Giardiello, 2013, 98.).

According to Froebel's educational concept, spontaneous play activities had a decisive role in the intellectual and moral development of individuals. Froebel considered play as an essential and intrinsic need of the child, as well as a universal and earliest form of learning. He observed that children use play as a tool for adaptation because they usually mirror their life struggles in their free play activities. They are unconsciously looking for obstacles in an attempt to strengthen their problem-solving skills (Polito, 1996, 166.). Froebel also examined object manipulations in pretend plays and tried to understand the symbolic meaning of used objects (Russell and Aldridge, 2009, 3.). He established the Play and Activity Institute in 1937, which was the first prototype of modern kindergarten. Three years later, he renamed it as 'children's garden' where toddlers could learn about the order of nature through play activities (Ransbury, 1982, 104.).

Isaacs graduated in philosophy at the University of Manchester in 1913, and one year later, she achieved a degree in psychology at the University of Cambridge. In the

² Interestingly, the most important analysis on Susan Isaacs' theoretical work was made by a relational psychoanalyst, Thomas Ogden (Ogden, 2011).

late 1910s, she started to get engaged in psychoanalysis. In 1919, she underwent analysis, first with John Carl Flügel, and then continued it with Otto Rank in 1921. In 1927, she had a further analysis with Joan Riviere (Graham, 2008, 7–21.).

Isaacs was a leader of a progressive experimental school called the Malting House School from 1924 to 1927 in Cambridge. The founder's original intention was to enrich modern pedagogical methodologies with psychoanalytic perspectives.³ This educational work provided an opportunity to record interactions under the influence of group dynamics. Her 'Kleinian turn' could be dated to 1925 when Melanie Klein made a visit to the Malting House School (Graham, 2008, 6–17.). Klein was the first to recognise the therapeutic value of play in the analysis of children (Ramires, 2016). According to her, play is a result of symbol formation like dreams, and it expresses unconscious wishes and anxieties (Segal, 1957/1981).

Isaacs also maintained an intellectual relationship with the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget. After Isaacs had visited Maison des Petits in Geneva⁴, Piaget observed her research at the Malting House School in 1927. Despite their different opinions on cognitive development, they greatly respected each other's scientific commitment. Isaacs reviewed three papers by Jean Piaget: *The Child's Conception of the World* (1929), *The Child's Conception of Causality* (1931) and *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (1934). Therefore, she has a sound knowledge of Piaget's genetic epistemology.

The psychological value of the nursery school

Isaacs took the psychological consequences of children's interpersonal peer relationships more seriously than any other object relation theorist did. The social interactions could help the child emotionally differentiate and separate from the mother and reduce the intensity of destructive unconscious phantasies.

Isaacs argued that the active interest in and inquiry towards external objects depend on the measure of anxiety caused by infantile destructive phantasies. For example, the birth of a new baby in the family can cause severe sibling jealousy and rivalry. This situation can easily intensify the child's unconscious hostile wishes towards the new family member.⁵ Because of his aggressive phantasies, he starts to fear the loss of maternal care and love, which paralyzes his ability to inquire.⁶ Isaacs presented the following case on this phenomenon:

“Phineas (3, 11) would not take off his hat and coat and gloves for a long time this morning. He sat, with them on, on the edge of the platform in a very quiet and subdued mood, and did not for a long time join any of the other children's

³ However, the adaptation of psychoanalysis in educational practice was questionable.

⁴ Maison des Petits was an experimental nursery in Geneva, where Jean Piaget did his early observations on the cognitive development of children (Beatty, 2009, 446).

⁵ Because of jealousy, the child wants to remove the new baby from the family. Because of his hostile wishes, he begins to feel guilt and starts to fear maternal punishment.

⁶ Isaacs said that it could be easily harmful when someone is sent off to the nursery school right after when a new baby was born in a family. Parents should take into account this reaction because the child probably interprets it as a punishment of his hostile wishes (Isaacs, 1930; 1933).

occupations, nor show any of his usual interests. This occurred every morning for about a week. Several times each morning he asked, 'Is it time to go home yet?', although in the ordinary way he is reluctant to go, and far too absorbed in his pursuits to think of the end of the morning. This week he has also been much more engaged on, leaving it every few minutes to take up theirs in a listless way, and then coming back to his own. After about a week, he returned to his usual self again. This has coincided with the birth of a baby brother (the third child in the family)." (Isaacs, 1930, 103.)

Therefore, Isaacs argued that one of the most significant tasks of nursery education is to help children deal with their anxiety adaptively. She said that other common behavioural difficulties – like feeding problems, bowel and urinary incontinence, childhood phobias, temper tantrums, night terrors – could not be solved only by pedagogical methods. The child also needs several occasions to freely engage with other children (Isaacs, 1937, 56.). In these situations, the child can measure his capability of emotional and bodily control. The positive feedback from companions is essential to gain self-confidence because it confirms the good object/mother within him. The child has to learn not only to trust his own power but also other's friendly intentions. He realises that many feelings and thoughts can be actively shared with peers. This understanding builds the main pillars of co-operative social life and creative-artistic activities (Isaacs, 1937, 58.).

Isaacs thought that the modern nuclear institution of family could not provide these relationships adequately to the child because of social and economic reasons. She argued for the psychological value of pre-primary education, but she was also critical about its methodology. She set up special criteria of quality nursery education because the institutional schooling system could not guarantee proper experiences by itself. According to Isaacs, the task of the nursery school is the following: "providing the right materials and the right opportunities for the child's own normal impulses to skill and achievement, thus giving him a profound reassurance against his inner doubts and difficulties and depressions" (Isaacs, 1936, 193.). Her psychoanalytic investigations and pedagogical experiences convinced her that children who participate in pre-primary education often have more advanced social-emotional and cognitive skills than those who do not.

The significance of gift and services among children

The unconscious meaning of giving a gift is a recurrent topic in psychoanalytic discourse. Sigmund Freud highlighted its connection to the anal phase. Freud wrote that the child's first *gift* to his parents is his defecation. Therefore, when a child gains some control over his digestive system, he has to choose between narcissism and object-loving. In Freud's view, giving a gift between patient and analyst is a natural phenomenon in the analytic process (Freud, 1917). Melanie Klein focused on its anal-sadistic aspects and defined it as an attempt of reparation (Klein, 1937/2002). Recent researches also worked on this question, but those studies examined the meaning of

gifts in two main fields. On the one hand, there are psychological explorations, which focused on the therapeutic consequences of gifts (Kritzberg, 1980). On the other hand, only a few works elaborated on this topic in an anthropological-sociological perspective (Stephen, 2000).

Through her educational work, Isaacs observed the spontaneous gesture of giving among children several times. She also examined that those mutual gifts or services will be more reciprocal with time. Isaacs argued that the process of giving is a universal psychological need. In this context, the gift is not always an object but it represents interpersonal contacts like assistance and help. Adult patients' analysis supported the idea that the fundamental meaning of receiving a gift is being loved and being lovable. At a conscious level, the gift can be decoded as a sign of love but it also has an unconscious symbolic meaning. The decoding of the situation is rooted in the child's early relationship with the mother or caregiver.

The new-born infant lacks physical and verbal skills. His world is absolute because he does not have any perception of time either. He depends on the presence of the caregiver's breast and its generosity. Therefore, his first evidence – or 'gift' – of love and safety is the mother's nurturing breast.⁷ Despite the mother's most careful intention to nursing, the baby will always feel some degree of frustration. His immature cognitive abilities do not enable him to perceive the mother as a whole object yet. Consequently, he splits his mother into two opposite objects: one good, who is a nurturer, and one bad, who starves him.⁸ The introjection of the good object serves as the basis of self-confidence. The capacity of giving and receiving a gift is a symbolic proof for the child that he deserves to be loved (Isaacs, 1936; 1937).⁹

Isaacs also observed that the receiver returns the favour most of the time. In Isaacs' interpretation, these phenomena are rooted in the child's wish to be competent like his parents, as illustrated in the following case:

“[this wish] still clearer in Dan's response to Harold's gift of a single toy rail. When Harold said it was for Dan, the latter replied, 'I'll bring one for Harold then. I know what it will be – a *big large* engine.' Dan was thus giving a much more magnificent present than he was receiving.” (Isaacs, 1933, 274.)

If he can give away a 'big large engine', he is not a powerless infant anymore. It confirms that he is strong enough to nourish others like the omnipotent parental figures, and it also means that he is protected from deprivation. In *Social Development of Young Children*, Isaacs presented another example of offering services to others:

“We have the same situation when Harold generously offers to pull the others around the room on the blanket-boat. He obviously got great pleasure from being able (powerful enough) to be unselfish, to pull the rug with the others on it. In doing so, he became the omnipotent and loving father, they, the children made

⁷ It also explains why it is so traumatic when someone is being robbed. It is not just about loss of money or material objects, but unconsciously also means the loss of the breast. Thus, being robbed is equivalent to the total destruction of the individual (Isaacs, 1933, 273).

⁸ Splitting is the central attribute of Melanie Klein's paranoid-schizoid position.

good by the good father's gifts. He became the sort of father to them that he would have his own father be to him." (Isaacs, 1933, 274.)

This spontaneous sense of togetherness strengthens his belief that it is possible to become a good parent. It is a significant process because personal responsibility and competence in social skills cannot be formed without the introjection of the good object (Isaacs, 1933).

The importance of imaginative play

Symbolic or imaginative play refers to a wide variety of make-believe activities, for instance, role-playing, dressing up, object substitution or nonliteral actions. This type of play generally appears at two years of age. From the age of three to five, a progression can be seen in the liveliness of free dramatic play (Isaacs, 1937, 67.). The psychological nature of play has always been a crucial question in psychoanalytic discourse. Melanie Klein was one of the first pioneers to elaborate a new theoretical and methodological framework, based on the application of play in her analytical work with children. According to Klein, play is a variety of symbol formation, which is a necessary function in ego development. The other important theoretician was Donald Winnicott, who pointed out that play is a transitional phenomenon that makes a connection between subjective reality and the objective world. Isaacs focused less on therapeutic applications than Klein or Winnicott. She was rather interested in its developmental and educational purposes.

However, the play was a core idea in Isaacs' educational and theoretical work, and only a few attempts have been made to investigate her contribution to this topic. Winnicott was the first to use the term 'potential space', but in *Intellectual Development of Young Children*, Isaacs drew attention to the transitional nature of imaginative play before Winnicott. She wrote that it can be seen as a bridge connecting the world of unconscious phantasies with conscious thinking (Isaacs, 1930, 107.).

One of the most important functions of make-believe play is to relieve anxiety. Through free play, children can externalise their inner destructive wishes and phantasies. In this procedure, the child is similar to an artist who projects his wishes and fears into a work of art. This process is significant in the cases of childhood phobias. Phobias are a defence mechanism against the child's anxiety relating to her destructive forces. In free play, the child does not displace her infantile phantasies to an external object – for example to animals – anymore but visualises and dramatizes them in his play activities. According to Isaacs, thanks to nursery education, the occurrence of childhood phobias decreases.

Although Isaacs was engaged in the object-relational framework, she also gave attention to mental processes that outlined cognitive functions like recognition, shifting and planning. She did not just examine the unconscious meaning of peer pretend play but emphasised its intellectual consequences as well. She presupposed a connection between imaginative play and making a hypothesis. Children can recall

details of experiences, which can help them solve emotional or intellectual problems that occur in the present (Isaacs, 1930, 104). This mental process is similar to the evoking of future situations when children construct an 'as-if' hypothesis. Isaacs considered these early mental experiments as a prototype of adult scientific reasoning: "Jessica (4,0) and Lena (4,2) were building castles in the sand, and told Mrs. I. that they were going to 'build castles as high as the sky'. But Jessica soon added, 'If we did, the aeroplanes would knock them down.'" (Isaacs, 1930, 106.).

However much thought and phantasy merge, this does not confuse the child to distinguish one from the other. On the contrary, dramatic play develops a sense of time and reality as it can be seen in the following example:

"The children had made 'a house at the sea-side', and at lunch-time, asked whether they 'could have their dinner in a café at the sea-side'. Mrs. I. agreed, and they asked her, 'Will you be the waiter?' After the meal, Priscilla said, and Dan and the others at once supported her, 'In a café, you don't do your own washing up, do you?' (There had long been the arrangement that each child was responsible for washing his own crockery after the mid-day meal.) Mrs. I. agreed to this, and as she was 'the waiter', she carried the play through and did the washing-up. (On many days later, they wanted to have dinner 'in a café', so as to avoid the washing-up; Mrs. I. only occasionally agreed.)" (Isaacs, 1930, 108.)

In this pretend play, the children engaged in the same imaginary situation. However, they also realised the real logical consequences of their narratives. The educator was an active participant in the children's make-believe play. As a result, the dramaturgy of the play was constructed together. It is noticeable that the teacher's role was contradictory. On the one hand, she represented an omnipotent, nourishing mother figure. On the other hand, she became somehow inferior with the acceptance of the waiter's role whose duty is to serve others. Through the mechanism of identification, the children allied against a powerful adult.

Play provides opportunities to compare past experiences to the present ones and the inner world to the outer world. When the child pretends to be someone else – mother, father or police officer – he reflects upon his real experiences and starts to make those characters more realistic. In this process, the playmates have a decisive role because they constantly react out to each other's ideas to form a shared representation.

Based on her recorded data, Isaacs criticised Jean Piaget's learning theory and his claims on cognitive developmental stages. She regarded the prevalence of egocentrism as problematic in the preoperational stage. Her observations confirmed that children's collective monologues are less frequent than Piaget thought. Isaacs also kept a record of children's soliloquies, but she defined them as a situational activity rather than a general attitude. It is unquestionable that young infants are less sociable and more egoistic than elderly people, but they are also capable of sociable behaviour in their shared play. According to her, social reference can be found even in common repetitive plays. Therefore, Isaacs supposed that the growth of social skills is a continuous process and the developmental stages are intertwined (Isaacs, 1930).

It has to be noted that Isaacs did not have an intention to develop a systematic theory of cognitive development like Jean Piaget. Her relevant statements and comments on this topic can be considered as a critical revision of Piaget's observational methods and conclusions. However, similarities can be seen between the way she explained the educational functions of active experiences and the Piagetian concepts of accommodation and assimilation. Furthermore, new interpretations connected her notion of children's inquiry to the mechanism of personal schemas (Hall, 2000, 155–156.).

New intersubjective interpretations

Isaacs used an object relational, rather than an intersubjective framework. Nevertheless, the consideration of both psychoanalytic and cognitive perspectives and the emphasis on the interpersonal nature of pretend play provided an opportunity for interesting comprehensions. New psychoanalytic and cognitive psychological investigations seem to affirm Isaacs' assumption that children's pretend plays have significant developmental purposes. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the mental functions of pretend play among psychologists (Berk and Meyers, 2013).

Modern research studies claim that pretend play improves children's emotional and language skills, cognitive flexibility and creativity. According to Gilmore (2011), imaginative play helps to regulate all emotional, intellectual and bodily changes, which occur in a phallic stage when a child has to deal with difficult object relations regarding the oedipal situation. Thus, this special type of play supports the child in entering into the latency period.

Imaginative play among children can be defined as an intersubjective process because the participants share a common recognition and understanding of the situation. The most important precondition of pretend play is the arrangement of reference points. The playmates have to make an agreement about the main attributes of roles. For example, when a family is dramatized, the characteristics of the mother, the father and the infant have to be clear (Göncü, 1993). They also have to reach a consensus about the symbolic meaning of objects in order to manipulate them in the same way.¹⁰ Therefore, the outcome of social pretend play depends on mutual communication and commitment. The narrative of the play has to be formed by peer cooperation (Gilmore, 2011).

Conclusion

Isaacs' observations demonstrate that dealing with anxiety caused by unconscious phantasies has significant pedagogical consequences. The child has to elaborate his infantile hostile wishes towards his parents to learn new skills. The task of pre-school

¹⁰ For instance, the chairs which they use in the play need to represent a ship for both participants.

institutions is to support this developmental process. Firstly, the nursery helps children separate from the emotionally overwhelmed family. The experiences with others can reduce the child's dependence on parental figures. Secondly, interpersonal peer relationships and spontaneous activities continuously relieve anxiety and frustration. Connections among children give fruitful opportunities to reality testing: comparing the inner world to the outer reality and phantasies to real intentions of individuals promotes the development of ego strength.

Isaacs frequently emphasised the need to utilise the cognitive and social potential of dramatic play (Isaacs, 1937, 69.). She also identified learning mechanisms through the observation of imaginative play among ordinary young children (Isaacs, 1930). Her numerous conclusions can be compared to the learning theory of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Therefore, Isaacs's recorded data and its analysis deserve more attention from both psychoanalysts and cognitive psychologists.

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