

Ferrante's Transformational Field: Limits, Spaces, and the Play Self

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Limiting boundaries may be experienced in the form of class lines, gender lines, or racial lines. In contrast, a transitional space, or bi-personal field, may be created by an analytic dyad to facilitate play, repair, and developmental growth. These two bounded spaces serve very different functions for those within them - either limiting or facilitating growth. We will apply this idea to a study of a novel and to a clinical family case seen at a psychodynamic community mental health center in Chicago.

Paula Heimann's often quoted question "who is speaking?" when we listen to our patients takes special significance with our child patients who symbolize their troubles in part through play. In play, we more easily assume a difference, a gap, between the true self and the director/narrator of the action. This distance provides the safety to freely express without fear of consequence, without fear of causing actual harm to others. When we are "just playing" we can learn about ourselves in a virtual space, shedding constraints on our growth. We can never fully create ourselves because some of our ingredients are inherited, and some lie outside our consciousness. But we can steer our development when we have self-knowledge and freedom.

We can define the PLAY SELF as an actively created derivative of the True Self that stands in opposition to the False Self.

Rather than constructed as an adjustment to the other as the False Self is, the Play Self is constructed in the presence of another in a concerted effort to create and to discover and develop the Self. We can locate the Play Self in the Transitional Space described by Winnicott, or as a figure in the field as elaborated by Ferro and others.

Although most adults are out of practice in pretend play, many nevertheless can achieve playfulness through creative activities in the arts, in their business, or in some other activity. Development of a Play Self can introduce greater freedom in the creative process.

Performance roles in music, theater, dance are possibilities. Another is writing with a pseudonym.

Elena Ferrante is the pseudonym of an Italian writer best known for her Neapolitan Quartet - a series of four novels about two women from Naples. *Frantumaglia*, a non-fiction collection, reprints several of her interviews in which she addresses her choice to write this way. She notes that in writing she frees herself of "the text that was pestering me." [p. 59] Once the writing enters the marketplace, she need not suffer the consequences of its effect on the reader, "so that those who are disgusted by the story that is told and those who are excited by it cannot, in a mistaken logical step, be disgusted or excited by me as well." [p.59] Following Heimann, Ferrante observes, "when one makes a creative work, one is inhabited by others [objects]...But when one stops writing one becomes oneself again." Her admonition that journalists ought to focus on books and their content rather than the personalities of the author, supports a sense of confidentiality that provides her freedom to truly express herself. She is protected from the intrusions of others sorting through the material to interpret how the novel might reflect her private life. She concludes "writing with the knowledge that I don't have to appear [on television, or for interviews] provides a place of absolute creative freedom."

The theme of creative growth in a bounded space is elaborated in her 2012 novel *L'Amica Geniale* [My Brilliant Friend]. The first part of the book - Childhood - relates the growing relationship between two girls - Lena and Lila. Lena narrates, and relates tales of her classmate Lila, who though creative acts and aggressive moves, manages to grow in status in the community.

For example, when their classmates acted just "a little bad...[and] only when the teacher...couldn't see us," Lila would toss ink-soaked strips of blotting paper at others. When sent to the office, Lila, instead of being severely punished, is discovered to have taught herself to read at age six. She earns the high praise of her teacher, who seemed to perceive a connection between Lila's brilliance and her refusal to take limits seriously. Lena observes that Lila transcends these limits by finding clever ways to break them - that "every prohibition lost substance in her presence. She knew how to go beyond the limit

without ever suffering the consequences. In the end people gave in...Every disobedient act contained breathtaking possibilities."

Looking ahead to her future, Lena imagined two possible paths. She could follow her mother, who always seems held back by pains in her legs, and felt conflicted about providing Lena emotional support and support of her education. But "If I kept up with [Lila], at her pace, mother's limp which had entered my brain and couldn't come out, would stop threatening me."

Lila reaches a similar conclusion about her family, observing that her mother will not support her growth. When her father asks why they need to pay the teacher to tutor her in Latin so she can be admitted to middle school, Lila's mother responds "so she'll be better off, and we'll be worse." Her father recognized "that she was the most intelligent person in the neighborhood," but "it didn't enter into his view of the world that she should continue to go to school. Nor did it fall within his economic possibilities."

The girls both realize on their own that they will never get what they need from their families, and turn to each other. They dream of becoming wealthy and decide to become novelists. While Lena is studying for exams, Lila writes a novel herself, titled *The Blue Fairy*. When their teacher learns that Lila will not be continuing in her studies, she offers Lila no encouragement and advises Lena to focus on her own development.

Rivalry develops further as Lila plans for the pair "to skip school and cross the boundaries of our neighborhood" for a day at the beach. Lena's initial reaction is that she is not yet ready or even interested. Yet once in the city she feels greater freedom, and realizes she does feel ready. The next day she discovers that Lila's plan was for Lena to get in such trouble that she would not be allowed to move ahead in school and surpass Lila.

The pair begin to realize how the creative capacities they developed in childhood must be adjusted and adapted to their external limits if they are to continue to grow. For example, Lena explains to Lila that Lila can't change the fact that she is not advancing to middle school by simply telling everyone that she is. In the novel's second part - *Adolescence* - the girls leave child's play behind. In contrast to her first, failed attempt at a transformative

object - The Blue Fairy novel - Lila designs an exquisite pair of shoes that wins her the attention of the eldest son in the neighborhood's richest and most powerful family, setting her up for financial and social advancement.

Another pair of children - three year old Diego and seven year old Monica - were brought to our community mental health center by their mother, Ursula. The children's father had to leave the country three years ago, and will need to stay across the US border for seven years if he wants to return legally. The family faces a legal and political limit - a national boundary - and its consequent rules and prohibitions. This is the limit that can not be changed in therapy. The question is how to live within this limit and perhaps transcend it. To oppose it directly would be ineffective at best. and could result in permanent separation at worst.

The children suffer from feelings of loss and separation. Monica was refusing to go to school, and Diego would not participate in toilet training, and they both wanted to sleep in their mother's bed. It seemed to us they were protesting separation, and were not secure enough to move toward more age-appropriate independent functioning.

The family met with a graduate trainee for 5 months. In the therapy space, the children were able to communicate their pain symbolically in ways that were not overwhelming to their mother. Monica expressed memories of times with her father in drawings, and written poetry. Diego played hide and seek games, asking his mother to search for and find his stuffed animal in the room.

The children used toy furniture and building blocks to construct safe walls behind which they could live, or walls that could contain their angry feelings. They tried to share the materials but came into conflict because they had very different ideas. Diego said he was making a "bad guy house" which was inhabited by guys who "hit and kick." Monica created a very orderly interior and cried when Diego would try to remove any piece.

The children used rule based games to negotiate their relationship to limits. When they decided to play chess, Monica took control and told Diego how he would and would not

be able to move. She took the role of the harsh limiter, and he experienced a lack of agency in making any moves. He grew frustrated and threw his pieces across the room, screaming and crying. His mother comforted him and later he built a very tall "bad guy house" with Lego pieces while Monica continued to play her version of chess in which she would win. Over several sessions Monica would change the rules in a number of different games so that she would defeat her brother, who felt confused and frustrated. Monica was experiencing mastery over the imposed loss in her family, but at Diego's expense. He would lose his temper and Ursula would comfort him, but not address what was happening between the children.

The therapist helped Ursula to address the children's play with each other, and Ursula established that the children would not change the rules to defeat their sibling. The children were able to adapt to this prohibition that did not simply limit their behavior, but established a value that they would not hurt each other. The children began to request a new game, one that required teams. Each child was paired with an adult. But when Monica's team began to win, she and Diego decided that they would join a team together, and thus were both able to win against the adults, who did not get upset about losing a game.

Diego complied when it would mean a win for him, even though it was not easy for him to leave his mother's team. The children now seemed to be collaborating in their symbolic management and mastery of limits and obstacles.

The capacity to play is the capacity to create in the freedom of a bounded space. It is learned in childhood, in a relationship with another, and produces resilience and an increased likelihood of transcending imposed limits and boundaries. We know that play and other therapies can resolve internal conflict, rework unhealthy object relations, support ego and depressive position functioning as well as self coherence. We can also see that in literature, in the clinic, and in the community, psychotherapeutic work builds flexible symbolic capacities that are needed to confront the the social and political limits imposed on our patients young and old.