

MIND IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Psychoanalytic voices to the challenges of our times


MENTE EN LA LÍNEA DE FUEGO

Voces psicoanalíticas ante los retos de nuestro tiempo




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IPA in the Community & the World Committees



Loibner, Elisabeth, Mag.a, was born in Vienna in 1976 and has lived in this beautiful city ever since. As a clinical psychologist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, she has worked in various psychiatric institutions and currently works mainly in private practice. In July 2022 she completed her training as an IPA psychoanalyst (Vienna Psychoanalytic Association). This essay is only her second publication, following a paper in a peer-reviewed psychoanalytic journal. Despite her structured nature, she loves to dive deep into inner worlds, letting herself drift in a timelessly intuitive way.

Loibner, Elisabeth, Mag.a, nació en Viena en 1976 y desde entonces vive en esta bella ciudad. Como psicóloga clínica y psicoterapeuta psicoanalítica, ha trabajado en varias instituciones psiquiátricas y actualmente trabaja principalmente en la práctica privada. En julio de 2022 completó su formación como psicoanalista de la IPA (Asociación Psicoanalítica de Viena). Este ensayo es su segunda publicación tras un artículo en una revista psicoanalítica revisada por pares. A pesar de su naturaleza estructurada, le encanta sumergirse profundamente en los mundos interiores, dejándose llevar por una intuición atemporal.



Kopffüßler* with Belly in the Middle

Elisabeth Loibner

The first time my niece drew a human being at my house, it was a so-called *Kopffüßler*, that is, a large circle with a face from which arms and legs grew. I asked curiously, "Where is the belly, anyway?" She looked at me seriously and replied, "The belly is in the middle, of course!" She picked up the pencil again and quite naturally drew a slightly smaller belly circle in the middle of the large head circle. At this point, I reflected on the fact that up to the age of three or four, head and belly are *one unity for all of us*. At that time, I was a patient in intensive psychoanalytic treatment and it was essential for me to recover my lost head-belly-unit. The possibility of a deep regression within psychoanalysis thawed the sense of my own identity that had previously been frozen. That was 14 years ago. Today it is only 14 days since I completed my IPA psychoanalytic training, at a time marked by pandemic, war, and environmental crises. Our world is unstable; I believe it would be healthier if self-responsible *Kopffüßler* with belly in the middle lived in it.

What does this original head-belly-unit mean, and how is it lost? Healthy toddlers laugh and cry all day, and both happen alternately. A child taking its first steps feels joy and laughs until it falls and gets hurt. Then it feels pain and cries. After letting go of the pain by crying, it gets up again and continues to walk. In a healthy childlike mode, feelings flow freely through the psyche; this is how the original head-belly-unit works. If the desire for loving connections is not adequately received and responded to, the child protects itself by suppressing its own emotions and adapting to the requirements. Pain associated with early relationship experiences is pushed into the unconscious even before it is felt. It continues to exist and drains energy. This is because with every suppression of negative feelings, all other areas of the psyche are suppressed as well: joy in everyday life, creativity, aspirations for the future, clear thinking skills, etc. The original unity, in which emotions can flow freely, is lost.

* *Kopffüßler* is a German technical term for a child's drawing (a tadpole drawing) in which the legs protrude directly from the head

How to recover the head-belly-unit that has been lost? By wanting to recover our painful feelings and fantasies that have been pushed away and that another part would rather not know about. To redock onto an early frozen development, it takes a trusting relationship within which, unlike in childhood, it seems safe enough to feel pain. This requires courage, time, and space. Nowadays it is normal to travel the longest distances within a very short time. A decelerated journey into one's own interior seems rather strange. Not only the journey to one's inner world is unfamiliar, but also the idea of reaching the destination through emotional work. We often use the intellect as a controlling organ of our psyche. Development involves more than intellectually understanding suppressed facts; unconscious truth is integrated when accompanying suppressed emotions are felt. Stagnation means not wanting to feel one's own pain. This is a legitimate position. Our rational mind can help to recognize it. It can also be used to *want* to feel.

14 years ago, my niece drew a Kopffüßler, and I was faced with feelings that had long been suppressed. I feared being overwhelmed by them. I felt ashamed. I was worried about what others might think of me. I was afraid of losing control. When I actually allowed myself to be overwhelmed, I was able to flourish and continue to grow. I experienced conditions that had been unbearable in my childhood and therefore could not yet be experienced, even though they had taken place long ago. All this happened in a separate therapeutic world, parallel to my external functioning mode. One part in me wanted to be recognized and seen above all; at the same time, another part in me wanted to create a new and better reality, in which my analyst played the leading role. In retrospect, we got stuck when she actively accepted my role attribution of a better mother. The search for truth lost its place in the deluded understanding that our connection was making up for real earlier disappointments.

It is not sufficient to return to the lost head-belly-unit and become a Kopffüßler with a belly in the middle. That is only the first vital half. The second necessary half is the enrichment of the childlike head-belly-unit with grown-up self-responsibility. After neediness, anxious steps of detachment are waiting for (inner) space. Healthy people are *self-responsible* Kopffüßler with belly in the middle. I only understood this second half after the painful separation from my analyst.

Is this not an absurdly difficult task, to go from being a newborn, completely without self-responsibility, to a totally self-responsible adult (i.e. *toward ourselves*)? In our earliest years, which shape our later life the most, we are highly dependent on our caregivers, who are responsible for us. Even if these persons have demonstrably harmed us, from some point on it is neither purposeful nor healthy to blame others for our suffering. Instead, we can turn to our own hidden parts.

Only after I had put my desire for the *actual* and therefore more loving truth above all else, even above the connection to the analyst, which had been illusory, did I arrive at myself. Transitions from illusion to disillusionment are upsetting. When I realized that development means wanting to feel my pain without acting on it, I began to recognize and regret emotionally my own unloving behaviour. After that, good changes happened automatically. Not only did I experience fear, anger und ultimately sadness, but in addition to being sad, I felt relief, joy, and clarity.

I immediately had my new private practice in mind when I visited the ramshackle rented flat. Mold at every window. Balcony doors in front of unkempt bushes growing wildly. A car-free alley, in the city centre, in a quiet courtyard. This is where I started my own business. I had barely any money, it was a risk. I felt as safe as I rarely had in the past. At the beginning of the renovation, I designed the small garden: a wooden deck, hydrangeas, a birdbath, a huge hammock, etc. My long-desired private open space. Then I created the consulting room, an extension of my body. As a psychoanalyst committed to the truth, I can give space to needy and destructive parts and remain as available as possible *to the same extent* for detaching and developing parts. Standing in the middle of this path, I want to continue as a self-responsible Kopffüßler with belly in the middle for the rest of my private life, and also to accompany others on their way there. Each individual psyche is part of our unstable world and part of its possible reshaping.