THE EMOTIONAL LIFE INTERVIEW

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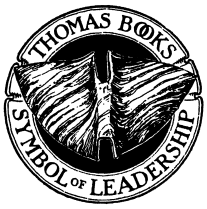
A Psychosocial Diagnostic and Therapeutic Procedure

By

HENRY DUPONT, PH.D.



CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 978-0-398-08756-2 (paper)
ISBN 978-0-398-08757-9 (ebook)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2013015612

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Printed in the United States of America
SM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dupont, Henry, 1921-
The emotional life interview : a psychosocial diagnostic and therapeutic procedure / by Henry Dupont, Ph.D.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-398-08756-2 (pbk.) -- ISBN 978-0-398-08757-9 (ebook)
1. Interviewing in psychiatry. 2. Interviewing in psychiatry--Case studies. 3. Mental illness--Diagnosis--Case studies. 4. Psychotherapy--Case studies. I. Title.
RC480.7.D87 2013
616.8900835--dc23

2013015612

INTRODUCTION

As a student of human development, I believe that a human infant becomes a human being in relationships with other human beings and in no other way. Then, too, I support Shotter's dictum that if we really want to understand ourselves, we must commit ourselves to a psychology that is a *moral science of action* rather than a natural science of behavior. According to Shotter, "Man's first need is the need to become a person (and that, throughout his life, it perhaps remains his deepest need)" (1975, p. 133).

As a child, that need would manifest itself as a need to be a boy or a girl as perceived in our culture, allowing, of course, for the fact that our ideas about gender are in transition. When I was just eight years old, I had an experience that challenged my identity as a boy. I'd like to share that experience with you.

The scene is Niagara, a little paper-mill town in Northern Wisconsin.

THE FIGHT

Lee and I were both eight years old; we were essentially healthy, growing boys but Lee was a bully. He verbally abused me, and hit or pushed me if I crossed him in any way. Several times upon being hit by Lee, I began to cry and ran or stumbled toward home. After one incident, when I was on my way home crying, I encountered my uncle, a high school student, who asked me, "What's wrong, Hank?"

Continuing to cry, I replied, "Lee hit me."

My uncle responded, "Well, hit him back!"

Not finding this helpful, I continued on home where I felt safe.

About a month later, it happened again. When I was on my way home crying, I again encountered my uncle. This time he said, "Hank, you're acting like a baby if you don't hit him back like I told you. You're not behaving like a real boy; you're behaving like a baby. You don't want to be a baby, do you, and so if he hits you again hit him back!"

This time, I got quiet as I continued on my way home for now I had something to think about. My uncle had shamed me. I was afraid of Lee and I knew that if I hit Lee back, there would be a fight, but was I a baby if I didn't fight Lee? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was going to have to hit Lee back. Gradually I saw myself doing it.

At that time I was watching cowboy movies quite often and I had seen what men do in a fight, so I practiced doing it in my mind. Next time I'll do it, I told myself. I had prepared a script for myself!

Then late one weekday afternoon in January it happened. There were several feet of snow and the side roads in our little community were all frozen over with ice and snow. Don, Lee, and I, along with several other boys, were sledding down this long side-street hill. No cars were using the street so we had it all to ourselves. I was using my sled, but because Lee did not have a sled of his own he was using Don's sled, which meant that Don seldom had a turn. Several of the other boys had sleds and we were all having fun. Down the hill we'd go. Then after the long trudge back up the hill, we'd go down the hill again.

Then, as it began to get dark, Don's mother called him to come home (Don's house was just off this side road so it was within easy calling distance). Don wanted to do as his mother commanded, but Lee wouldn't give Don his sled.

A little afraid but knowing that I had to do it, I said, "Lee, I think you should give Don his sled so he can go home."

Lee's response was true to form: "Hank, you should mind your own business. This is none of your business. You get that!"

Lee dropped Don's sled and walked toward me. "I'm gonna teach you a lesson," he said as he gave me a push.

As I stepped back, Lee moved toward me, clearly intending to push me or hit me again. I started to swing. My swings were clumsy haymakers, but I was actually a little taller than Lee so I was connecting with his head and face while his swings never really reached my face. Lee kept charging me so I kept swinging. I was scared at first, but then my fear turned to anger, and in no time at all, Lee's nose was bloody and he was soon aware that this was a different Hank who wasn't going to be bullied this time. His nose bleeding and his face somewhat battered, Lee just quit and trudged on home.

The other kids were happy to see the *bully* finally beaten by one of us and were vocal in their praise, "You did it, man! You gave Lee a bloody nose and he quit!"

The incident involved a lot of feelings. At first, I had been afraid, ashamed, afraid again, and then angry; now I experienced a real sense of relief. "I did it," I said to myself with at least a bit of pride. I'm pleased that I can say that my anger was a controlled anger. When he quit, I quit; I didn't go on and beat

him up. I went to look for my uncle.

Much to my surprise, two weeks later on a Sunday afternoon, Lee appeared at our back door and asked me to go for a hike with him. He said he wanted to show me his hideout back in the woods. At first, I was a little wary, but something in his manner won me over so I agreed to go with him.

We trudged through the snow, which was at least two feet deep; it was crusted on top and soft underneath making it hard to walk. Into the woods we hiked, and then across a broad field, a pasture actually, and then into the woods again. A short way into the woods there was a kind of snow house with walls of snow and a lower branch of a pine tree as its roof. It was about four feet square with mounds of snow that served as a place to sit.

Once settled inside, Lee produced a cigarette and matches so we sat and smoked the cigarette (my first) and enjoyed the quiet of the woods and warmth of the hideout. There was little conversation and no mention of the fight. It was late afternoon and would soon get dark, so we stayed there only about a half hour.

On the way home that afternoon, nothing was said until Lee got to where he would turn off to go home. With an, "I'll see you," we parted. Lee never threatened me again, and for the remaining five months that I lived in Niagara we were friends.

I heard later that Lee lived with his father and older brother who ran a beer joint at the other end of town. There was no mention of a mother, so I guessed that Lee was subjected to some pretty harsh discipline.

This part of the story puts Lee's life in some perspective and helps us to understand why he was a bully. Actually, he was a good kid living a rough life, and he had a little hideout where he could get away from it all. I've often wondered what happened to him.

So I had a problem. Lee would hit me and I would start to cry and run home. When I told my uncle that Lee hit me so that was why I was crying and going home, he shamed me and said I was acting like a baby. Nobody likes to feel ashamed so what could I do? Well, my uncle said I should hit him back. I knew that if I did that, there would be a fight. I wasn't sure I wanted that, but if I wanted my uncle to stop shaming me, I'd have to do it, so there was a fight. The consequence was a positive one – Lee and I became friends.

I share this story to show that when emotional life events are represented in thought, they become narratives or stories that capture the essential meaning in the incident or event.

My uncle shamed me: Was I a baby or a real boy?

Lee's problem was physical abuse, which contributed to his being a bully.

This story and its outcome became for me a way of thinking about feelings, emotions, and relationships, which made psychology a compelling interest for me even as a child. Is it any wonder then that clinical psychology became in-

teresting to me as a profession?

After obtaining a B.S. in psychology and economics at Lawrence University, I sought graduate work in psychology at the University of Delaware where I was introduced to *Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Rogers, 1942) and to the nondirective approach to *Play Therapy* (Axline, 1947).

After receiving my M.S., I was given an appointment to teach human development in the College of Education and to provide therapy to children as a member of the staff of the Psychological Services Center. There I had my first experience providing psychotherapy and I became interested in the role of feelings and emotions as a motivating force in human behavior.

Thus began my long journey that culminated in the creation of the Emotional Life Interview (ELI).

My purpose in writing this book is to introduce my fellow mental health professionals to this emotional life psychosocial procedure that can contribute so much to the treatment of those with mental health problems. I believe that this book should be required reading for all clinical and counseling psychologists, clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and primary care providers.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the teachers (Theodore Landsman, John Withal, Julius Seeman, and Nicholas Hobbs) who introduced me to the client- and child-centered perspective that made psychotherapy such an interesting and satisfying experience. Ted and Nick became mentors – Ted at the University of Delaware and Nick at George Peabody College for Teachers. Ted was my first counselor and the director of my masters' study and Nick was my major professor at Peabody and the director of my doctoral thesis. They were both empathic, kind, and caring. John was a supervisor and colleague at the University of Delaware and Jules was a counselor and teacher at Peabody. I was very fortunate to have these very good people in my life at such a critical time in my development.

I am deeply indebted to William Rhodes and William Morse for their interest in my work on the education of emotionally disturbed children.

My heartfelt thanks also go to Norman Sprinthall and his wife, Lois, and to Ralph Mosher for their interest in and support of my work in emotional development. While still at the University of Minnesota, Norm invited me to explain my work to his graduate students; two of them conducted research employing my ideas – Chisholm (1980) and Burke (Sprinthall & Burke, 1985). I met Ralph Mosher at a Lawrence Kohlberg moral development workshop; he became a mentor to me. When I identified the questions I thought I needed for the Emotional Life Interview (ELI), I flew from Atlanta to Boston to have lunch with him. His Parkinson's disease was already in an advanced stage, but he met with me anyway. After reviewing the questions for him, I'll never forget what he said: "Henry, I think you've got it now." It was the last time I saw him.

I also appreciate Eva Levine; I've never met her, but after she read an essay I wrote (Dupont, 2001), we had a number of e-mail conversations. When I shared the ELI with her, she had several interesting questions and suggestions. Later, she made me an informal member of her dissertation committee at Hofstra University.

Many thanks are also due to my friend and colleague, Mary Beth Wiles, who encouraged me again and again to write this book.

It is difficult to properly thank some people. For example, Lynne Grady has been so many things to me – therapist, colleague, critic, and friend. I give Lynne my heartfelt thanks. Wayne and Bonnie Penniman have been very supportive of my efforts throughout the development of the interview.

I am also very grateful to the children and adults who shared their emotional life stories with me. Although they were given fictitious names in this book, their stories are real.

My greatest appreciation, however, goes to my wife, Christine. Not only was she my typist and editor, but she also managed our lives so that I was free to study and write.

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CONTENTS

THE EMOTIONAL LIFE INTERVIEW

Chapter 1

FEELINGS, EMOTIONS, AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

After earning my M.S. in psychology from the University of Delaware, I received a joint appointment from its College of Education and Counseling Center. A play therapy room was created and furnished next to my office in the basement of the College of Education.

My duties included teaching one section of Human Growth and Development, and providing counseling and psychotherapy to university students and children living in the Newark and Wilmington communities. While working there, I saw three children with interesting mental health problems whose case history stories are provided below.

Bitsy was a four-year-old boy with separation anxiety; Mark was an 11-year-old boy with a learning disorder who was also depressed, and Beth was a 19-year-old girl with conversion paralysis of both hands and both legs. In each case, parents were involved in the child's pathology, so I involved them in the treatment.

Working with Bitsy, Mark, and Beth was actually my first experience providing psychotherapy and it showed me the power of feelings and emotions. During this experience, I had the guidance of Dr. John Withal, Director of the Psychological Services Center. Before this, I had had training and supervision in Rogerian nondirective therapy from Dr. Theodore Landsman.

BITSY

Bitsy was almost five years old and his parents called him Bitsy because he was smaller and less mature than the other children in the neighborhood. His father found Bitsy's immaturity disgusting and showed it. He was especially rejecting of Bitsy's behavior during mealtime. He also expressed his disgust with Bitsy for letting another boy bully him.

It seemed clear that Bitsy felt rejected by his father and he clung to his mother for security; he couldn't tolerate being separated from her. Recently they had left him in the hospital with pneumonia for a day or two they thought, but late the first night the hospital called: "You'd better pick him up; he hasn't stopped crying since you left him. We'll tell you what to do for him at home and we are, of course, on call."

After Bitsy recovered, he seemed even more determined to stay close to his mother.

Now his mother was very worried about whether he would be able to go to school, which he should be doing in less than a year.

The evidence suggested that Bitsy had a rather severe case of separation anxiety. As you will see, his treatment was psychological and he received no medication. I made an appointment to see Bitsy in the playroom next to my office to determine if I might help him.

"He won't be able to handle it," she told me on the telephone. "Just wait until I try to leave him at your office."

Bitsy and his mother appeared for the appointment I had given them. Bitsy was an appealing little boy with dark hair and eyes. He was neatly dressed, appeared to be shy and uneasy, and had a large Howdy Doody doll, which he carried by the neck in the crook of his arm. The doll's feet bounced on the floor as Bitsy walked.

"Howdy is coming to playschool, too," he said.

I invited Bitsy, his mother, and Howdy into the playroom. He propped Howdy up on the floor against the wall. I showed Bitsy the materials, toys, and sandbox, and told him that this was a place where he could play with whatever he wanted. There were just two rules: (1) he was not allowed to break the toys, and (2) he was not allowed to hit me.

Bitsy handled a number of the materials and toys tentatively. There were blocks and balls of various sizes, materials for painting and drawing, and a sandbox. As soon as he began playing in the sand with some

concentration, without saying a word, his mother left the playroom and sat down in the visitor's chair in my outer office.

When Bitsy realized she had left, he said, "That's all today," and he left the playroom to stand by his mother's side in my office. He left Howdy in the playroom. I invited them both back into the playroom and explained to his mother that if she wanted to go into my office where she could sit and read, she should tell us that she was going to do that.

Bitsy got involved with some drawing material, and after a short period of time his mother announced that she was going out to my office to sit and read. Bitsy made an effort to follow her. I assured him that she would be right out there and I left the door to the playroom open so he could see that she was close by. He returned to his drawing, but left it several times to make sure his mother was still in my office.

As they were leaving at the end of the hour, his mother said she had tried to get him to leave Howdy at home but that he had insisted that Howdy had to come, too. I told her not to be concerned, "Howdy is welcome at this playschool."

Bitsy was noticeably pleased.

At the next appointment, his mother told him she'd be sitting in my office while he was at playschool and left immediately after bringing him into the playroom. He quickly became involved with some finger painting materials. He painted the same nondescript form over and over, using different color paint each time. He checked several times to make sure his mother was there where she said she'd be.

Near the end of the session, I closed the playroom door, saying, "We are making a lot of noise and I'm closing the door so your mother doesn't have to hear us."

Bitsy was uneasy about the closed door between his mother and him, so he was glad to have playschool over that day.

With each session, Bitsy became more comfortable with his mother sitting in my office with the playroom door closed. Then one day he came without Howdy.

"Howdy's not big enough to come to playschool," he announced.

I finished the thought, "But you are big enough, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he replied.

Then he did a most interesting thing. He came to playschool with lunches for two. In each lunchbox there was a sandwich, an apple, potato chips, and something for us to drink. His mother said he insist-

ed on the lunches and she had called me early that morning to make sure it was okay. She had told me that mealtimes were an especially bad time with his father, who was always critical of how messy he was, so I knew that our having lunch together had some special meaning for him. I thought it might be some kind of test I had to pass.

We sat on the floor with our backs against the wall as we ate our lunch. He wasn't particularly messy, but near the end of the lunch, I noticed a wooden block lying near me (we had several sets of wooden blocks in the playroom) so I picked it up and tossed it across the room. Bitsy laughed. Then he found another block and tossed it across the room. I knew then that I had passed the test.

Shortly thereafter, his mother announced one day that she was going to visit a friend while he was at playschool. As she was leaving, he announced that a big boy lets his mother go visit while he's at playschool. She assured him that she would be there in my office waiting for him when he finished school.

He was a little anxious during that day's session; he went to the playroom door twice to look at the chair she usually sat in while he was in the playroom. Each time he reassured himself by saying, "She'll be there at the end of school."

I agreed, saying, "It makes you feel safe knowing that she'll be there."

"Yeah," he said.

She was there at the end of the hour.

From then on, Bitsy was comfortable with his mother being away while he was with me in the playroom, and he played with more concentration than he had in our earlier sessions. It was evident that he was no longer anxious when separated from his mother. He enjoyed finger painting; he could be messy, and he liked to experiment with colors. He also seemed to be playing with more confidence.

At the end of each session, after he finger painted, I'd help him wash his hands at the small sink we had in the playroom. Then one day he rejected my help, saying, "I can do this."

I replied, "You surely can. You can do a lot of things by yourself, can't you?"

He looked a little startled, but then said, "Yeah, I can."

Then one day he did a very interesting thing. We had several sets of small human figures in the playroom; he selected two male child figures and had one chase the other one all over the playroom – across