The Process of Identification, in the Adlerian Sense, as Used in Interviewing in a Public Health Setting[1]

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The greater part of this paper is the transcription from a recording of a first interview in a Mothers' Counseling Service. This is consistent with Dr. Alfred Adler's reiterated admonition that we use actual cases as much as possible in teaching. Thus such inferences, assumptions, deductions and concepts as we may use may become more meaningful in terms of actual experience. Such a technique seems to me to be as valuable for the clarification of my own thinking as it is for that of my students.

The Division of Mental Hygiene in the Baltimore City Health Department is concerned with fostering and maintaining the emotional health of the pre-school child. With this goal in mind, a continuous program of in-service education for public health nurses is carried on through seminars, pre-natal counseling, parent group discussions, consultation service and a limited program including demonstration and supervision in interviewing in well child clinics. Such demonstration programs obviously also involve direct service to the community as does the Mothers' Counseling Service, carried on in connection with pre-natal and well child clinics.

In observing the interviewing techniques of public health nurses in well child clinics, I have been impressed by the fact that the focus of attention is usually so strongly concentrated on the infant that the mother, as a person, frequently seems not to impinge upon the nurse at all. Concentrating on the intake interview, we have tried to correct this felt weakness by redirecting the interviewer's attention to the mother of the child being enrolled. The nurse is helped first to note more carefully the mother's general appearance, posture, speech, manner of approach, handling of her infant, and such. Furthermore, as

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identifying data, such as the mother's age and name before marriage, are elicited, she is encouraged to talk about her own home background in childhood. Success in such a brief interview, in obtaining further material, much of which may deal with the mother's own feelings in the past and in the present situation, may well be dependent largely on the interviewer's ability to identify with the individual mother. We have our own shorthand for recording the mother's position in the family constellation. On certain of our records you may read that Mrs. Smith, nee Mary Jones, is one squared or two cubed or 18 to the 18th power. These figures, so incomprehensible when mathematically read, become sociologically as well as psychologically significant when we understand that 1 with the exponent 2 means simply that Mary Jones was the first born of two children or, in the two following examples, the second of 3 or the youngest of 18. Such information has, if it has accomplished no more, served at least to awaken the nurse's interest in the mother as an individual and has already given the more skilled interviewer some clue as to the personality pattern of the interviewee.

The situation in our Mothers' Counseling Service is somewhat different since the mother is referred because she is already aware of a given problem, regardless of the fact that this problem is rarely, if ever, found to be her real difficulty. Here, again, perhaps to an even greater degree, it becomes essential to seek identification with the mother through an understanding of the personality pattern which gives meaning to her feelings, to her thoughts, to her total behavior. But the situation is similar in that our goal, which involves the emotional health of the child, is to be attained, if at all, through the parent. The parent, however, can best help the child if she has some understanding (if we may use this word in an effective as well as a cognitive sense) some understanding of, some feeling for what motivates the child's behavior. In short, if to some degree, identification with him takes place. Many parents apparently achieve such emotional and intellectual understanding without special help. Others seem to need assistance in verbalizing their own feelings. They may then consider them more objectively and use them in order to gain increased insight into the child's actions, that is to say to identify with him more completely.

The transcription which follows was selected not because it seemed particularly "good" or "bad" or illustrated "directive" or "non-directive" techniques but simply because it seems clearly to illustrate this

point. The counselor's goal was to assist the mother in clarifying such of her emotional experiences as would enable her to have more insight into the feelings which apparently motivated much of her child's behavior.

Johnny's mother was referred through the doctor and nurse of our well baby clinic. She complained of the fact that two year old Johnny hit people, including the one month old baby, that he threw things and that he "pulled at his worm," by which she meant that he masturbated.

Mrs. Johnson willingly left the infant in the basinette in charge of her niece, and Johnny seemed very pleased when he saw all the brightly colored toys and had no difficulty in adjusting to the observer, in our playroom.

At first, Mrs. Johnson, a rather small woman with blond hair, freckles, and dressed in dungarees, sat on the edge of her chair but, as the interview progressed, she relaxed until, eventually, she was leaning comfortably in the arm chair provided for that purpose.

The transcription does not start at the outset of the interview. Something like five minutes passed before the machine started to record what was being said. In this time, Mrs. Johnson spontaneously told the interviewer that she was having a hard time with Johnny. The family had all been going through a bad period since the fire. Questioned, Mrs. Johnson said that last November, there had been a big fire in their home. Possibly, the consultant had read about it in the papers. A puppy belonging to Johnny had been lost in the fire and he had been frightened as had the rest of the family. He evidently had remembered about the fire because every time they passed the site of the old house, he asked for his puppy. Billy was born about one month later. She had been very sick and had been rushed to the hospital. The fire had been a very frightening thing. For a time, her mother-in-law believed that a son, who was visiting, was in the burning house, but it turned out that he was not and that only the little dog had been left there.

The transcript begins:

Counsellor—What are you doing about a home now?
Mother—We have an apartment on 10th Street. It is only three rooms. I think half of Johnny's trouble is he don't get out enough. I can't take him out because of the baby. Johnny's real selfish. He'll play with

somebody but he's got toys too, but no matter what he's got he wants what the other child's got all the time. And then it worries me how he pulls at people's ears.
Counsellor—When did you first notice Johnny pulling people's ears?
Mother—It began about three weeks ago.
Counsellor—What do you think makes him do that?
Mother—I can't tell you. I don't know why he does it.
Counsellor—Have you any ideas why he might be doing it?
Mother—No, I don't know why he does it.
Counsellor—When you said something about his being nervous, do you mean he acts nervous? How?
Mother—Yes, when you call him or something, he'll jump from you, you know?
Counsellor—Since when have you noticed that?
Mother—I don't know if it was when I was in the hospital or not. Maybe when I was in the hospital, his father and grandmother got after him a little. That is the only thing I can think of. He never was nervous like that before.
Counsellor—He was never like that before?
Mother—(definitely) No indeed, he wasn't.
Counsellor—Was he like that right after the fire?
Mother—Yeah! Right after the fire. Yeah, right after the fire he was nervous and we had to call our doctor in.
Counsellor—How did he show he was nervous?
Mother—He'd cry and he'd shake and he'd wanter hug you. He'd fall asleep and he'd wake up crying, you know? We called the doctor to find out what was wrong with him. He gave him some kind of little white pills.
Counsellor—What kind of nervousness do you think this was? Was it the kind of nervousness you think of as being part of a sickness or was it more like being scared? How did you explain it?
Mother—I think it was more like being scared.
Counsellor—More like being scared! You felt Johnny was scared?
Mother—Yeah, when he would go home at night, you know, he was crying and he would shake like and I would go hug him and he was all right.
Counsellor—Did that help?
Mother—Yeah, and that hurts my feelings because I think maybe I caused his being like that.

Counsellor—How could you have caused that?
Mother—Well, Big Johnny and I get after him. Sometimes he gets a beating. You know there is a new baby.
Counsellor—You don't think that is good for him—the beatings?
Mother—I think when he does anything wrong—I don't know. It's funny about that.
Counsellor—Well now, are you saying to me that you think you help him more when you hug him than when you beat him?
Mother—Well, I never—I only beat him when he does something wrong.
Counsellor—Mhm!
Mother—Like when he picks up something and throws it like that I smack him for it.
Counsellor—Mhm!
Mother—Like when he lays on the floor and when he stomps his feet, I smack him. I holler at him.
Counsellor—Is this helping a lot, this smacking?
Mother—(definitely) No, ma'm. It don't do no good. You smack him and he thinks you're playing with him and he'll sit and cry a coupl'a minutes. Then he'll pick up something, no matter what's on the floor, the ash tray or what, he'll pick it up and throw it at you.
Counsellor—Do you think maybe he doesn't know why you're smacking him?
Mother—Well, my mother says when you're smacking him, tell him what you're smacking him for. If he does something wrong, smack him, like when he does something wrong.
Counsellor—Does he know all the words you do? Does he understand all the words you use?
Mother—I'll say, "Johnny, don't!" But he goes right on throwing.
Counsellor—Even if you smack him?
Mother—Yes, he'll insist if its the last thing there, he'll throw that at you and if you slap him, sometimes he'll slap back at you.
Counsellor—Does that seem funny to you?
Mother—No, I slap him right back.
Counsellor—I used a bad word there. When I said funny, I meant strange. You know how the girls say do you mean funny-ha-ha or funny-peculiar. I meant funny peculiar. Does it seem to you peculiar for a two-year old to slap back at you after you slap him? Does that seem to you very unusual?

Mother—No.
Counsellor—It doesn't?
Mother—No, I see other children do that.
Counsellor—You feel that's kind of natural?
Mother—Yes, that's natural; but that ear pulling—
Counsellor—Well, maybe we'll never entirely understand why he does that. But you think it is what you call a nervous habit and you think it is the kind of nervousness that comes out of being scared?
Mother—That's what I think.
Counsellor—Now maybe we should try to find out how he's been scared. You talk about the fire, that could have scared him a lot, couldn't it?
Mother—Yes. That even scared me.
Counsellor—Did he have any nervous habits before that?
Mother—He used to bite all the time, bite—but he kind of growed out of it. We used to smack him and bite back. You know whoever he bit would bite him back.
Counsellor—Mhm!
Mother—Now once in a while he does it.
Counsellor—But not as much? Maybe he is beginning to understand some things. He is learning that it is dangerous for him to do that, so he is doing other things. About his treatment of the baby. Do you think it is peculiar that he doesn't like the baby?
Mother—Other people say their children like the baby. My sister's children like the new baby.
Counsellor—How many sisters do you have?
Mother—Four married sisters and one unmarried.
Counsellor—Any brothers?
Mother—One brother.
Counsellor—Where are you in the family? Are you the oldest or the youngest or somewhere in the middle like say the third from the oldest?
Mother—Oh, I'm (pauses as she counts on her fingers) third from the baby.
Counsellor—Have you ever heard people talk about their older children being jealous of the younger ones?
Mother—Just my sister-in-law, my brother's wife.
Counsellor—Tell me something about your own family. What was the name of your youngest sister?

Mother—Barbara.
Counsellor—How much older are you than Barbara?
Mother—Four years.
Counsellor—Then you were four years old when Barbara was born. You don't remember how you felt then, do you? When you were growing up, did you quarrel?
Mother—No, but we used to argue a lot.
Counsellor—Does that seem to you very unusual?
Mother—No.
Counsellor—It doesn't? It seems to you natural, you mean, that you and your sister should argue and fight?
Mother—Well, I don't know if it's natural, but we still argue and fight.
Counsellor—Do you think you're very different from children in other families?
Mother—No, I don't think so.
Counsellor—I don't think so, either. That's sisters and brothers in families together.
Mother—My husband's family—they are five years apart—and they act like friends, not like sisters and brothers.
Counsellor—Well, that is very smart what you just said (chuckling) "They act like friends, not like sisters and brothers." So you don't think sisters and brothers always get on so well together?
Mother—I don't think so.
Counsellor—Do you think it is possible that they might have a feeling —maybe like jealousy toward each other but that they still love each other?
Mother—Yeah, I feel that way about one of my sisters. When I was sixteen, I was jealous of her.
Counsellor—How did you feel when you were three and she was brought home for the first time?
Mother—I don't know.
Counsellor—Do you suppose that the way you felt when you were just a baby might have something to do with the way you felt about her when you were older.
Mother—Could be!
Counsellor—Could it be?
Mother—They make over the one more than they make over the other.

Mother—Yeah.
Counsellor—Can you remember anything about her—your sister?
Mother—As old as she is now, my mother makes over her more—her and my brother make over her more.
Counsellor—Do you think Johnny could be going through anything like that?
Mother—Not with me! I—I take him—when I hold the baby, I hold Johnny, too, you know. Yeah! And I say come here and watch Mommy give brother the bottle. But Big Johnny, when he holds the baby, he tells little Johnny to get away while he has the baby.
Counsellor—Well, a Daddy is important too, isn't he?
Mother—Yes, ma'm.
Counsellor—And do you suppose a fellow of Johnny's age might make some mistakes, might think that his Daddy doesn't love him any more?
Mother—Well, Big Johnny says that he is going to raise Johnny like he was raised, and that's not right. I don't think it's fair at all. When he was raised, he was five years apart from his sister. His father—he took all the beatings.
Counsellor—Does your husband feel that the beatings helped him?
Mother—He says he's thankful for the beatings he took. He says they kept him from reform school. His brother is thirteen and he gets away with everything. No matter what he does, he gets away with it.
Counsellor—Do you suppose that Johnny might be having some feelings like that—that baby Billy is getting away with everything? The baby isn't getting any beating, is he?
Mother—(definitely) No, he isn't.
Counsellor—And the baby cries and he wets and he's messy (laughter) and he doesn't get any beatings. Do you think that Johnny might be kind of mixed up?
Mother—I guess so.
Counsellor—What do you think of a two-year old child's mind? Do you think they think the way we do?
Mother—(doubtfully) No!
Counsellor—Can they even talk the way we can?
Mother—(with more assurance) No, ma'm!
Counsellor—I don't think we can expect them to think quite the way we can and maybe some of the scoldings and the beatings he's getting are helping to get him mixed up. Just telling him words why he's

being slapped may not make it clear to him (at this point, there is a long silence).

Mother—I don't—I smack him when he does something wrong, but when I'm holding the baby I never get after him. You know when I hold the baby I hold him, too, but Big Johnny don't. That's it. If I could explain to Big Johnny, I'd be all right, you know. He holds the baby and he says, "Look, Johnny get away. Daddy's got the baby. Get over there and sit down. Stay while I got the baby." And little Johnny will say, "Daddy loves you."

Counsellor—You see, little Johnny is making a mistake. He thinks his Daddy loves only the baby. We know his Daddy loves him and he is trying to do the best he can for him, but maybe Johnny can't understand. Johnny has had a bad year. We don't know all the things that happened to him but we do know that he was in a very scarey fire and very upset, and then right after that he got upset again. Someone came into the home and seemed to be taking the love of his Mother and Father. Now if you suddenly had the feeling that the love of all your friends and your husband, the most important people in the world, was being taken away from you, and every time you cried about it, somebody hit you for it, do you think that would help?

Mother—No. (There is a long pause)

Counsellor—Well, isn't that something like the way that Johnny is behaving? He's not crying, but he's doing things to bring you back to him. Maybe he'd rather have you hit him than pay no attention to him.

Mother—Maybe that's why he does all those things, to get attention.

Counsellor—Why do you suppose an older boy like that is jealous of a baby? What's the baby done to him?

Mother—N-N-Nothing!

Counsellor—Well, what does he think the baby has done to him?

Mother—We pay more attention to the baby than we do to him, that's all.

Counsellor—He thinks the baby has taken his Mommy and Daddy away from him because his Mommy and Daddy never used to act like this before, did they?

Mother—(regretfully) No.

Counsellor—No! Whenever they were home, he was the baby and now here comes something else—I don't know just what it is—but I don't think my Daddy loves me any more. My Daddy used to hold

me and now he holds the baby and tells me to get away. Do you think maybe Johnny is kind of mixed up in his two-year old mind?
Mother—(rather positively) He could be.
Counsellor—He could be, couldn't he?
Mother—Yes, ma'm.
Counsellor—Well, now—(There is a pause) let's think about that a little bit. (Pause) You see, nobody can give you advice about your own child. You know more about your Johnny than I do. You've known him since, well, since nine months before he was born, haven't you? (The mother and counsellor are laughing together now). But sometimes we can be helped to understand why a child is acting the way he is. If you begin to question in your mind why Johnny is doing these things, it might help. You said to me while we were talking here that you think it's partly that he is scared.
Mother—That's what I think. There was the fire—
Counsellor—Well, and how about maybe that he's scared, too, that you don't love him any more? (pause)
Mother—Yeah, I never thought about that.
Counsellor—He feels pushed out by you and his Daddy, too. Often when a new baby comes into the family, when the mother is busy, the older child will turn to the Daddy, and we count on the Daddy to give a little more time to the older child. Now you might think that over and try a little experiment for yourself. You might say to yourself, "Now supposing Johnny's doing all these things because he's scared that we're going to leave him." The picture you've given me of this little boy looks like a scared little boy. Supposing we're right and he is scared, then what could we do to help him be less scared?
Mother—Comfort him, I guess.
Counsellor—Comfort him? Well, in what way?
Mother—Talk to him and hold him.
Counsellor—(doubtfully) Think you have time to do that?
Mother—I'd take time out to hold him, I guess.
Counsellor—Does the baby sleep enough hours so that you could take perhaps five or ten minutes to cuddle Johnny?
Mother—The baby sleeps all day.
Counsellor—Maybe you could do that. What else could you do with a child of two?
Mother—When I'm on the street, I buy Billy a toy, I buy one for Johnny, too. When I buy Billy a rattle, I say, "This is for you, this

is for your brother." When I buy for one, I buy for the other. I don't just buy for one alone.

Counsellor—Maybe you could get your husband to help you with this?

Mother—I don't know. I don't want him to grow up like Raymond.

Counsellor—Raymond?

Mother—My brother-in-law. I don't want him to grow up like him. To tell you the truth, between you and I, I don't think he's in his right mind, I really don't.

Counsellor—Well, maybe not. But your Johnny is in his right mind.

Mother—He'll get a baby doll, as big as he is, and he'll hug it and kiss it just like it was a real girl.

Counsellor—Mhm.

Mother—And when my Johnny wants to play with the baby doll he got for Christmas, Big Johnny smacks him and tells him he can't have no baby doll. He don't want him to be like Raymond.

Counsellor—Well, I think perhaps Raymond is a separate problem. You know, we have little boys in nursery school and kindergarten; they like to play with baby dolls just as much as little girls do. We have baby dolls in the nursery here and we expect the little pre-school boys to play with them just as much as the little girls. They are playing at being Daddys. Maybe they are playing at being Mommys sometimes. (The mother laughs.) You see? And we have little boys and girls playing at being families and the little boy is the doctor or he's the policeman or he's the Daddy. I think you'll find that your Johnny wants to be very grown up; he wants to do all the things grown up people do in his house. Now, what do the grown up people do in his house?

Mother—What do you mean?

Counsellor—Well, what do they do? What are some of the things he's doing that he sees the older people doing?

Mother—Slap back! I slap at my husband all the time.

Counsellor—Do you think that might have something to do with it?

Mother—When I argue with Big Johnny, I get mad and I slap him. Maybe that's what it is. I slap Big Johnny and then he thinks he can do it.

Counsellor—Does that seem the natural thing for a smart little child to do?

Mother—Yes.

Counsellor—It does to me.
Mother—He does like either one of us.
Counsellor—Well, you see children learn by imitation. They do what they see done. And that's one of the things. He talks the way you do, he acts the way you do. He does it because he loves you and because he admires you and wants to grow up like you.
Mother—Well, see—Johnny and I—all the time—we wrastle, you know. I figure—well, I'm young—I'm not old and he'll come home from work in a good mood and we fool around and he'll wrastle with me. And maybe little Johnny thinks, "Well, Daddy wrastles, I can wrastle too." Like Saturday, Johnny came home and took all my bobby pins out and then little Johnny wanted to do it too.
Counsellor—Does that seem natural to you?
Mother—Yes.
Counsellor—He wants to do what his Daddy does. And you see, if his Daddy plays with the baby, maybe Johnny would like to play with a baby doll just like his Daddy plays with a baby.
Mother—Well, when I hold Billy, I'll say, "Johnny come over and watch Momma" and he'll pull up a chair and say "Mommy, hold too." He'll say, "Lap!" Now I let him hold the baby—I mean I hold him under him.
Counsellor—Yes.
Mother—But Big Johnny, he don't. My husband changed so much since the baby come.
Counsellor—Mhm!
Mother—Johnny was everything to him. Now it's the new baby.
Counsellor—Well I think Johnny's going through a very hard time and that he needs a lot of sympathy and understanding.
Mother—I ask my husband, "How do you feel toward little Johnny and Billy?" He'll say, "Well, Johnny's grown up. Johnny's big and he's mean. Billy is little and he doesn't do any harm."
Counsellor—But Johnny is only two.
Mother—That's all. He's only a baby, too.

The transcription ends here.

During the interview it was reported that Johnny played actively with the toys, spending some time with the "bang toy" on which he used his fist instead of the wooden hammer provided for the purpose but a good part of the time was spent in imaginative play with our

baby doll. He ignored the small chairs provided for the children and, with some difficulty, climbed into a large chair, cuddled the doll and "fed" it from the bottle.

It is not the purpose of this paper to follow the case further. Suffice it to say that apparently the mother (and, according to her, the father, too) showed Johnny more understanding and tenderness. At subsequent interviews he felt free to curl up in her lap and she seemed content while holding him. We might add that the dungarees were, at times, replaced by dresses and that she began to curl her hair.

As time passed, this mother was able to take a first basic step in the re-education of her child, not only through her increased acceptance of her own feminine mother-role but also through her newly acquired ability to identify with him as an older child in the family.

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"Individual Psychology is not a closed system but a very living —I had almost said fluid—method of thought which enables us to understand the relation of the individual to society in any frame of reference and at any time." F. C. CROOKSHANK