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Defense, Communication, and Experiencing of Self In Psychotherapy

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Defense, Communication, and Experiencing of Self In Psychotherapy

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This paper is an attempt to conceptualize the role of defensive behaviors within the interpersonal situation of psychotherapy, to place these behaviors within a wider context of motivation and personality development, and to suggest the interaction of defensive behaviors with communication.

Psychotherapists vary along a continuum in their attitudes toward whatever behaviors they define as defensive within the therapeutic interaction. In their theoretical statements, this variation seems rather narrow, and they seem to share a basic assumption that such behaviors are an aspect of resistance to the therapy and obstacles to personality change.

Actually, the variation in attitudes can be seen to be much richer when one looks more concretely at psychotherapists' approaches to the removal of defensive behaviors. The actual approaches to defensive behaviors vary from one extreme of an attack to another extreme of gentleness in removal. The therapist who attacks defensive behaviors is likely to demand that the person consciously understand them, and the therapist who is gentle with defensive behaviors is likely to be less interested in an intellectual kind of insight. The distribution of contemporary psychotherapists is probably skewed toward the gentler pole, with the view that defensive behaviors are functionally important to the person's psychological economy at the moment. Again, however, the assumption is that defensive behaviors serve the maintenance of the status quo.

There is an extreme gentle approach to the removal of those expressions which are diagnosed on the spot by the therapist as defensive, and it reflects the most tolerant attitude toward them. This approach can be described, in oversimplified terms, as prescribing that defensive behaviors should be accepted, and that when the psychotherapeutic interaction is successful through other kinds of behaviors, the person's need for them will decrease. He will eventually drop them as a crutch no longer necessary to his revised personality structure.

So it seems that at one end of the continuum, defensive expressions are to be relatively attacked and at the other end, they are to be relatively ignored. The highest value for movement, or change, in psychotherapy that ever seems to be attributed to defensive behaviors is an external one. When they are conceived of as interpretable pathology, they can provide useful information about the person's dynamics.

The position of this paper is: 1) That defensive behaviors in the interaction may be viewed as attempted, although perhaps confused, intended communication with the therapist; 2) That such communicative-defensive behaviors in psychotherapy are a specific, special instance of a more general drive and process of personality maturation through relatedness; and 3) That the actual, final functioning and effect of those behaviors depends, pragmatically, considerably on the therapist's attitude toward them.

The verbal productions of interpersonally withdrawn schizophrenics are sometimes viewed as having both a defensive value to the person and an accidental (as it were) communicative value to the therapist. The difference in the present point of view is that the communicative value of defensive behaviors within a therapeutic interaction, generally, is seen to be not by accident but by a self-therapeutic motivation; by intention, though not necessarily conscious. In other words, the person always hopes, in varying degrees of unawareness, and confusion, that his behaviors will be understood by the therapist as to the feelings carried by them. He wishes the therapist to understand the feelings in the behaviors so that by exposing himself into the interaction with the therapist, he, himself, will experience an improved assimilation of what he feels.

Taking an oversimplified and external view of the person, this formulation means that any defensive behavior in the interaction is always serving both defensive *and* communicative needs; that the person is attempting to deal with the feeling in a way that will both hide it from his own and his therapist's *clear* awareness and, yet, keep it available, or potentially aware, within himself and available and potentially understandable within the interaction. In other words, *defensive behaviors within the interaction can be considered to be as much opposed to repression as they have been considered to be opposed to awareness.*

Looking from within the person, the present formulation means that defensive behavior in the interaction is an attempt, against fear, of a person to experience an aspect of himself as clearly (fully, deeply) as he can at that moment; and by the act of doing so within the special, unusually communicative relationship, to be pushing at the limits on clarity of the present organization of personality. In other words, by doing this in relationship to another person, by exposing this process closely to another person, the person in psychotherapy hopes to experience it more deeply than before and loosen the present organization of personality to permit more interaction among his own feelings.

The therapeutic situation does not immediately involve all dimensions, or modes, of self experience. It focuses on the experiencing of self-in-relationship-to-the-therapist. Any attempt to communicate with the therapist then, is a part of, or can be considered as synonomous with, an attempt of the person to experience himself-in-relationship-to-the-therapist. The only pure resistance to therapy, then, would be a total removal from the therapist, both psychologically and physically. Even then, the psychological part of the combined removal is often more difficult than it seems, once the person has built up a communicating relationship with his therapist. He has then opened himself up to his therapist, and he carries this experience of self-in-relationship away with him.

The basic assumption, then, is that a deeply, affectively communicating relationship gives any expression within it a special, different significance; and that the person defending himself is acting in his realization of this. The experience of defending oneself in interaction with a person from whom one feels an active, caring understanding has a potentially great therapeutic, clarifying impact. But this is by definition in interaction, and the impact depends upon the psychotherapist. It is facilitated by the quality of that therapist's understanding. (That the dimensions of understanding are complex is implied, but not at issue here.) And this impact, or self-experience, is severely limited, if the therapist withdraws his active, caring attempts to understand, and turns his attention to only the defensive (in the traditional use of the term) aspects of the behavior.

When defensive behaviors are viewed as attempts at self-experiencing, parallels suggest themselves in broader contexts, in behaviors often called escaping and often called integrative, but always of a reliable individual and cultural demand. To begin with, a less closely interpersonal attempt at self-experiencing can be speculated in the appreciation of those art forms which vividly deal with basic problems in human inter-relatedness. The impact on the audience of a drama may be deep, and an individual member of the audience may gain a better assimilation of what he himself feels about the portrayed problems from the self-experience which the drama provoked and to which he extended himself, depending on his openness. Perhaps much of maturation derives from similar attempts at self-experience, more or less direct.

Going further with this point of view suggests that people seek out and interpret situations for the experiencing of themselves, and clarification of their feelings, which the situations afford. This is always self-in-relationship, or in a particular determining context; and what it is in relationship to varies from natural objects to people and social situations in increasing degrees of intimacy. As the focus moves from natural objects, past symbolic or artistic interpersonal situations, to direct human relationships, the potentiality increases for a two-way communication which can enhance the self-experiencing.

An example of a social situation rich in opportunities for self-experiencing, with communication, is the residential college. The student leaves home and experiments with new roles in interaction with other students doing the same.

To get gradually more deliberately therapeutic, however, we move to group work which particularly encourages role experimentations and deals with much behavioral groping, or experimentation, which a psychotherapist might call defensive. Then further, into experiences in actual therapy. Play therapy and residential treatment for children are quite behaviorally oriented. They regard behavioral groping as potentially integrative self-experiencing, and their therapists attempt to facilitate behavioral groping.

Group psychotherapy, especially with adolescents and children, deals constructively with much acting-out which an individual adult therapist might call defensive. It may be for that reason that group therapy is also often more helpful for adolescents than an individual adult therapist. But that is another subject and is treated elsewhere.[1] The important point here is that the psychotherapies introduce into self-experiencing a new element which makes psychotherapy unique among the various life situations: the two-way communication about the desire for self-experience and clarification which is afforded by the contractual focus of two persons upon one person's self. In play therapy, behavior occurs within a specially structured relationship which can give it communicative value. And in group therapy, behavior is extended into a setting where there is an agreed-upon, conscious focus on inter-personal problems and experimentation.

Although not so behavioral, individual adult psychotherapy shares the contractual focus of two people on one person's self; and it facilitates self-experiencing by giving, like play and group psychotherapy, an active, personal receiving response to the individual's expressions. In other words, regarding, or receiving a person's expressions, or self-experiencing, as communication about that person's self *enables* the self-experiencing to be communicative and thus increases its clarifying or self-communicative power to the person himself, and supports him in facing further self-experiencing of which he was previously too fearful.

In the light of this kind of theory, it becomes understandable why defensive behaviors in this unique life situation of psychotherapy have a different impact on the person himself than they do in any other situation. It can be said that the difficult experiencing, or "non-sharing," is shared. It also becomes understandable that viewing the behavior only as defensive hinders the process of self-exploration; because that psychotherapist behavior denies, and therefore destroys, the context of communication. But the context of potential communication is not destroyed, and is, in fact, reasserted when the therapist, if he cannot understand, admits his human difficulty in understanding.

Finally, it should be considered that viewing defensive behaviors as hopeful communication and self-experience does not in itself indicate particular therapeutic techniques. It indicates an attitude within which specific responses would be determined by the therapist's basic values within himself about the person's experiencing. What restriction this view does make on the therapist is that for communication to be successful, a mutual language must be found, and this is probably always a compromise, or creation, within human limitations, between the person's idiosyncratic manner of experiencing himself and his psychotherapist's own idiosyncratic manner of self-experience. The present point of view is directed toward enhancing this mutual language. (End)

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