Dealing with Interpersonal Conflict

Insight Develops Spontaneously If the Permissiveness of the Counseling Relationship Is Real and If Emotional Release Has Been Achieved

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IN a social order beset with recurring crises the social scientist must keep asking one question. Can we learn to handle constructively the tensions, frictions, antagonisms, and fears which divide social and cultural groups into warring camps? Never has there been such a need for sound and creative social research based upon all that we know in social psychology and related fields. Even at best there may not be time enough to find a satisfactory answer to so pressing a problem.

In this atmosphere of urgency, all of us, I am sure, feel the desire to contribute whatever knowledge is pertinent from our own fields of practice and research. It is my intention to try to present some of the findings and principles from that type of individual psychotherapy with which I am most familiar and to point out some of the implications which these findings would seem to have for situations of social conflict.

The central thesis of this discussion may be presented very briefly. It is this: In therapeutic work with individuals, inner conflicts and interpersonal conflicts are clearly resolved by client-centered psychotherapy in a manner which can be explained only by a reformulation of certain significant psychological principles. There is reason to believe that these principles may have implication for group and social conflicts as well as individual conflict situations.

In amplifying this thesis let us first have clearly in mind the type of situation with which we are dealing in individual therapy. Therapeutic work deals always with conflicts. The individual is always pulled in two directions, or has contradictory desires, or finds himself in conflict with the desires of others. He is not unified in his impulses, nor integrated in his direction. A superficial classification of these conflicts might be made which would divide the "inner" conflicts from

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those which involve conflict in interpersonal relations.

An example of a number of inner conflicts may be taken from the first interview with a young woman twenty years of age. Put in her own words, some of these conflicts are as follows:

I can't seem to find myself.

Sometimes I feel superior, but then again I'm way down.

It's an effort for me to walk down the street.

I've lost faith in everything.

I don't like to attempt things.

I feel inferior.

I can't act natural.

I don't feel there's any reason to go on living.

I feel life is passing me by.

Every obstacle is too big for me.

I can't feel real love for anybody.

I'm very selfish.

It should be clear that while many of the above are made as statements, conflict is clearly implied. "I don't like to attempt things" is followed by the implication "but I wish that I might." Or, "I'm very selfish" is followed by the unspoken "but I wish I were not."

Inner conflicts such as these are very frequent and highly significant, but for the purposes of this discussion are less important than those conflicts which involve others. Let us examine a few statements, by clients themselves, expressing such interpersonal conflict.

MISS WINKLER: [*in a low, flat voice*] A person can't spend a lifetime hating someone as badly and as completely as I hate my mother [*her voice rises and becomes more emphatic*] and not have it tear their nerves to pieces. As long as I can remember I have hated her and wished she would die!

Such deep bitterness of feeling against parents is not often found, but lesser degrees are common. The feeling of resentment toward well-meaning domination by parents is expressed by this young lady:

MISS TAYLOR: I was overseen by my father or mother. I was told about everything . . . . Everyone in my home town knew Dad, knew just how strict he was. If I had a date, he'd know all about it before I got home. I just feel as though everyone is telling just what I'm doing. Everybody is just so—always watching.

COUNSELOR: Always spying.

MISS TAYLOR: I've had that feeling. Even now. When I was a freshman, I let my hair grow long and people said, "Does your dad allow you to do that?" I don't know what he would say if he knew the truth. People think I'm just a perfect child—Dad made me that. Ever since I was a young child, I've always been left under his hands. My parents always did my thinking for me.

COUNSELOR: You've been pretty much under the domination of your parents.

MISS TAYLOR: When I'm home, I'm under their power. If I went home, I'd fall right back into it.

The interpersonal conflict may also have an emotional tone of suspicion and distrust. A very deeply maladjusted man tells of his difficulty with his wife:

MR. WINN: We've been quarreling a lot. She's been carrying on with another man, and I've got plenty of evidence to prove it. He's a man who lives next door, see, and I know that he comes to see my wife after I leave in the morning. She doesn't think I can prove it, but I've got an airtight case against her.

COUNSELOR: You're sure she is carrying on with this man, and you know you can prove it.

MR. WINN: My wife claims I imagine all this, and she went to my boss and made lots of trouble for me by

saying I was raving mad. But I know what she's doing—[*goes on with other details*].

Though often the deepest feelings are directed toward members of the family, conflict attitudes may be held, of course, toward others. One veteran, now employed in industry, expresses antagonism toward a supervisor:

MR. HUDSON: Now take today for instance. Everything seemed to go wrong. The job I was on didn't turn out right, and the foreman got mad, and then I got mad as hell at him. It was all I could do to control myself. I wanted to pick up a wrench and I—well—I almost wanted to *kill* him. That's *bad*.

To give another example of conflict in an industrial setting, a fragment of an interview with a union official may be cited:

COUNSELOR: (Mentions labor relations work.)

UNION OFFICIAL: My advice to you is to stay the hell out of it. Management people are a bunch of "so and so's." They're as bad as some of the faction leaders in the union. I tell you it's dog-eat-dog, and nobody gets a damn thing done but to give each other worries and headaches.

COUNSELOR: You feel that both management and union people are no good, and you'd advise me not to get mixed in it.

UNION OFFICIAL: Damn right! You're not a bad guy as I know you now, but if you go into management you'll either become a bastard like the rest of them, or you'll get fired.

THE REASON for presenting so many illustrations of interpersonal conflict in individual therapy is to press home one point. The attitudes uncovered in individual therapy (hatred, bitterness, resentment, fear, rebellion against authority, distrust, and suspicion) are the very attitudes expressed in social conflict—in race problems, industrial warfare, religious discrimination, and international disputes.

What happens, essentially and psychologically, to these interpersonal attitudes during the process of individual therapy? Can Miss Winkler lose her hatred for her mother? Can Miss Taylor resolve her resentment for her dominating father? Is it possible that Mr. Winn can ever trust his wife? Can industrial workers alter antagonistic attitudes toward supervisors? Is it possible, in short, that a basic change in attitudes can occur through any known procedure?

Briefly, the answer is that such changes do occur through the therapeutic process of client-centered therapy. Basically, the principles of the client-centered approach are simple, complex though the skills may be in practice. Essentially, changes in basic personality structure, in attitudes, and in the individual's concept of himself may be brought about through a therapeutic process in which the counselor's role is best described by the terms warmth, permissiveness, acceptance, understanding, and nondirectiveness. He bases his work upon his own warm interest in others. He creates a relationship in which the client comes gradually to feel that any expression of attitude, real or false, shallow or deep, socially acceptable or taboo, is permitted. His reaction to the attitudes and feelings expressed is one of acceptance, a willingness for the person to be what he is, to feel what he feels. It is a reaction of empathy, frequently verbalized in responses which reflect and show understanding of attitudes expressed. His work is permeated by an unwillingness to use any procedure or technique which would guide the client

or intervene in his affairs. It is a positive conviction that the client has the capacity of responsible choice. Throughout, the counselor's role is that of a catalytic agent, not a forceful reagent. He does not guide or interpret, or persuade or suggest. He creates an atmosphere in which the client can gradually come to be himself.

It is in this atmosphere that the tendency of the individual to be mature, to desire harmonious relations with others, to be responsible and independent, comes to the fore. It is this latent capacity, released by the unusually permissive aspects of the counseling relationship, which provides the motivation for the change which occurs.

What happens, then, in this type of therapeutic situation, to the negative interpersonal attitudes which we have described? Some of the steps in the process are not new, but thoroughly familiar. Others have not been examined with the care which they deserve. In the following sections the various phases and characteristics of this process of change in interpersonal attitudes will be considered.

IN situations of interpersonal conflict such as described above, the first step toward solution is the release of tension. The outpouring of negative feelings is known to be the most prominent feature of the beginning of psychotherapy, and this emotional release reduces the distortion in attitudes which a defensive adjustment has required. Clients not infrequently comment on the difference it makes in their attitudes when they find they can express themselves freely. A fragment of the first interview with Mr. Hudson, whose murderous attitudes have been cited above, will illustrate this point:

MR. H.: You know, I hated those men [in the army] so much I could kill them. I would just think of all the things I'd like to do to them. Maybe that's not right, but that's the way I felt.

COUNSELOR: You feel a little guilty about these intense feelings of hatred, but they were there nevertheless.

MR. H.: Yes—in fact [*pause*] I just about did kill a fellow. We got in a fight [*tells details of the quarrel*], and I hit him with a wrench. I guess I went out of my head.

COUNSELOR: You feel you lost control of your emotions for a while.

MR. H.: You know, I seem to get relief by just getting this out. You're the first person I've told that to.

COUNSELOR: It helps to talk about these things that you have been keeping to yourself.

Another phase of the total process of resolution of conflicts is the exploration of attitudes. Little by little, as the noncritical and accepting nature of the relationship is realized, the client dares to push his thinking further into areas which he has not fully investigated on a conscious level. He begins to bring into the picture elements which he has previously been reluctant to consider, or has denied completely. It should be mentioned here that our experience would justify no sharp lines of delineation between conscious and unconscious material. There are instead imperceptible gradations from material which is fully conscious and has been previously expressed, to material which has been fully conscious but never expressed, to material which is dimly realized but never fully admitted to consciousness or expressed, to material which has been definitely denied any conscious recognition.

It is upon these varying degrees of dimness that the process of exploration throws light. Often the client realizes that he is exploring his own at-

titudes, and comments upon his discoveries by saying, "I never thought of it that way before." Such an instance is here quoted from an early interview with a client who had many difficulties in social adjustment:

> I used to think at times that it was a good thing I was reserved, but now I realize that my reservedness was actually caused by vindictiveness. If people do something to me, I try to put some vindictive thing on to them. That's the first time I ever thought of it in that way. . . . . I tend, I suppose, to blame others for my own inadequacies.

This same process of exploration of attitudes seems to be a part of the small group handling of adjustment difficulties. In a college class conducted along basically non-directive lines, a student early in the course turns in a statement which clearly indicates the beginning of the desire to explore his whole situation more deeply:

> Something has happened to me in the past two sessions. I feel angry and stupid about not taking part in the class discussion. I have experienced a greater feeling of uncertainty and insecurity about myself. But at the same time, I have a desire to find out why. In my last paper I said I didn't feel I had anything to add to the class discussion. I do feel I want to ask questions, but I experience what Plant calls a "panicky-anxiety state," which blots out anything I think about. I hope the feeling will pass away.

In similar fashion a group of mothers, with an accepting leader skilled in therapeutic methods, begins to explore the possibility that many of the difficulties lie within themselves, rather than in their children. One mother gains courage to bring into the group her deeper feeling toward her daughter—"Well, she had no business coming along when she did. We didn't want her." This attitude of rejection is successfully handled in the group.

It does not seem at all impossible that, with a permissive type of leader, a management group could begin to discuss not only its superficial antagonisms toward labor unions, but such deeper fears as fear of loss of power and the basic hostilities felt by individual members. Likewise a union group, similarly conducted, might begin to explore the many unadmitted reasons behind a given strike, in addition to the obvious and publicized ones. A classroom group could, if the leader was a sufficiently accepting person, examine its real attitudes toward school tasks and toward each other. Certainly this exploration of feelings and motivations plays a significant part in the resolution of conflicts, and seems to apply to group as well as to individual situations.

THE NEXT phase is a crucial one, the development of a conscious awareness of needs, motives, and satisfactions. This is customarily referred to as the development of insight, but for our present purposes I should like to dissect the process and discuss its characteristic aspects.

The client who has been permitted freely to explore his attitudes without any need for defensiveness can gradually admit to conscious consideration various elements from the shadowed areas which he has been unable to inspect before. As the area of conscious awareness widens, he begins to understand more and more incidents in his life, and gradually to recognize the significant patterns of his behavior.

Mr. Winn, whose accusations against his wife were quoted earlier, begins to arrive at a very different understanding of the pattern of relationship as he finds himself understood and accepted, accusations and all, and is thus freed to talk out all the related emotional

issues. In the third interview he gives the following material:

MR. WINN: [*Tells of boyhood experiences which made him doubt his sexual adequacy, and in which he was told he couldn't have children or even get married. Then after marriage*] . . . I started right in to treat her meaner than dirt. I got to calling her all sorts of names. I got fears that I couldn't measure up [sexually]. I sold her on the idea that I was no good . . . . I realize now that she loved me devotedly. All those things that I've thought of her, the names I've called her and all, were really in me. (Later) I've driven her to what she's done. She'll go from bad to worse if she's not helped.

As he has been able to admit elements of the situation previously denied, he begins to achieve a much truer understanding of his own part in the picture, coming to see that he has been deeply at fault.

We know objectively and statistically that these expressions of insight are increasingly frequent once emotional release is achieved. The client becomes aware of the need which is being satisfied by his behavior. He is able to turn the light of conscious thinking upon the devices, often devious, by which he has been keeping a balance, often precarious, in his psychological economy. He draws together these isolated gleams of understanding into more generalized insights until he becomes fully aware of patterns of reaction which have characterized his behavior in many situations.

So important is this process of the dawning conscious awareness of patterns and motives that certain little-realized facts about it should be stressed:

(a) *Increasing the field of conscious awareness seems always to reveal the fact that conflict existed or was intensified because significant attitudes were prevented from coming into conscious consideration.* Mr. Winn's suspicion of his wife was at first intensified because he was denying that he had a part in creating the situation he suspected. Miss Taylor, whose resentment of her parents' domination seemed so fully justified, came finally to admit that she deeply desired to depend upon her parents and to have them exercise control over her:

MISS TAYLOR: [*She talks of the fact that while in college she is gradually coming to stand on her own feet.*] I feel that I could go on very easily becoming independent. Almost as easily as not. It's going home this summer that will be hard. It will be so easy to rely on my parents . . . . Oh—I'm not giving myself a chance. I can't rely on them all my life.

THE SAME principle probably holds in situations of social conflict. In every conflict which is deep or continuing, the persistence of the conflict is due to the fact that the surface elements are not the real bases of difficulty, and the real bases are not brought fully into conscious consideration. One has only to consider those group conflicts with which one is personally familiar to know that the issues which are discussed are like the part of an iceberg above water, whereas the deep-lying elements denied full conscious consideration are far larger and far more important.

(b) *Insight develops spontaneously if the permissiveness of the counseling relationship is real and if emotional release has been achieved.* The client has the capacity to come to a profound, accurate, and meaningful awareness of his own hidden motives and patterns. He will arrive at such an awareness,

to the extent that his situation requires it, if the therapist maintains the proper psychological atmosphere. This point requires stress because it stands in sharp contrast to the views held by psychoanalysts, who have consistently maintained that the client must be *given* such insight by the expert. Our case records deny this categorically. The client-centered therapist maintains that experience shows that the client can arrive at a richer, truer, more sensitive understanding of his own significant patterns than can possibly be given to him by a therapist. This is achieved in spite of the pain and discomfort which often accompanies these discoveries. The distrust of the individual's capacity, so characteristic of much psychoanalysis, appears on the basis of our experience to be unfounded.

(c) *The only patterns the client is likely to explore in client-centered therapy, and the only hidden motivations of which he achieves conscious recognition, are those which have a significant influence upon his present behavior.* The point is important because of the stress which some therapies, notably psychoanalysis, place upon past experience. Mr. Winn told of the boyhood experiences that made him regard himself as sexually inferior because those experiences had a direct bearing upon his present tendency to project his problems upon his wife. There were doubtless many other emotionally colored childhood experiences which he did not feel impelled to bring up, because they were not significantly connected with his present problem.

This is one of the reasons why the client-centered approach frequently achieves constructive results in a relatively short time. The client explores his present concerns, and gradually unearths related experiences and attitudes, both present and past. He does not embark upon a complete analysis of all his life's behavior, but finds his attention, without any conscious effort, focusing upon those aspects of his life which are relevant to his current mode of behaving. In a permissive situation his conversation turns inevitably to the areas of emotional discomfort.

This economy of client-centered therapy would seem to make it particularly suitable for group conflict situations. No attempt is made to analyze all aspects of each group member's behavior. Instead, the emotional release, the freer searching of attitudes, the growing conscious awareness of hitherto unsuspected motives are all related in pertinent fashion to the group's current concerns. Thus the process does not become so long and cumbersome as to prove impracticable.

(*This analysis of the therapeutic process and its applications to interpersonal conflict will be continued and completed in the next issue.*)

Self Acceptance

IT is always better to learn to bear with ourselves rather than to wage war against ourselves; and not to work our own inner difficulties into useless fantasies but to translate them into actual experience. Then at least we live and do not merely consume ourselves in fruitless conflicts. If men can be trained to look dispassionately at the lower side of their natures, it may be hoped that in this way they may also learn to understand and to love their fellow men better. To forswear hypocrisy and to adopt an attitude of tolerance towards oneself can only have good results for the just estimation of one's neighbour, since men are all too prone to transfer to their fellow men the injustice and violence that they do to their own natures.—C. G. JUNG.