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Going Deeper in Child Therapy© Beyond a Behavioral Focus

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A therapist in supervision presented the case of an 9 year-old girl in foster care. The foster mother -- her 3rd in 3 years -- reported that child had pushed another child and was expelled from school – for the 2nd time. She was put in foster care at age 5 due to neglect. Usually, she was talkative in therapy. But this time, she came into the session and sat quietly. It was unusual for her to start the session quite constricted and giving one-word answers to questions. The therapist asked me how to approach this girl.



Behind the wall of the child's reticence, where the therapist saw the wall, I saw a range of possible emotional and cognitive dynamics and potential hypotheses to explain both her hostile reaction at school and her constriction in the session. Having learned behavioral therapy for children on the autism spectrum and other approaches that work with overt behavior, we could understand why the therapist may have found the case situation baffling.

One of the most important skills to learn the first year in training is to delve into the entire context for the client's behavior, that is, the emotional, cognitive, fantasy, and historical life of clients:

- 1) to open and free the therapist's mind to all the data and to imagine the inner life of the client, the inner psychic dynamics, possible reactions
- 2) access and utilize one's related experiences, in depth, recalling the emotions and cognitions, as a sample, as it were, of how internal processes may work
- 3) access and utilize the related experiences of other clients – that is, one's clinical experience – in order to recall patterns, possible reactions, possible cognitions
- 4) observe to see what small cues the client may be giving – observe and perceive to find the client's meanings

So let's put these skills to work. We will hypothesize about this child's inner experience.

Supervision Interaction

In the waiting room, foster mother reports the girl is in trouble in school again. This is the 3rd foster home. Understand the girl usually talks and stopped hypothesis

Supervisor (S): So what could her reactions be to coming into the office after her foster mother told you about her aggressive behavior? What would she expect to happen next? Open your mind to all the possibilities.

Therapist (T): She could feel humiliated, ashamed.

S: What else?

T: Rejected, failure, embarrassed, shame.

S: Yes. So, you just focused on some emotions. Now for cognition: What possible message could she have abstracted from her parent telling you?

T: "I can't deal with you."

S: If she thought the parent implied that, what could possibly be her internalized message?

T; "I am unworthy, unlovable." "A bad kid."

Comments

We can imagine what a neglected child with damaged attachment, thinking no one takes care of me, unwanted (?) – could possibly think and feel.

Questioning that could open our minds to possibilities.

Here we have close-to-the-surface emotions. We don't want to stop there. We can go deeper.

Having the emotions nailed down, we want to also focus on cognition.

Now we are going for negatively-motivating cognitions.

Sounds deep, but it's more a surface or outward-facing belief.

S: Great. And what could be her reaction to that.
T: I'm not sure.
S: How about this? "I'll be sent away again. I'll be rejected and I'm not going to be kept?"
T: Exactly. So, she would be quiet because talking about the expulsion from school means being bad and so it could be another broken attachment. It's scary.
S: Now, you have it. Let's go into why? If you were expecting that you would be essentially dumped, what would that mean for you internally? Free your thoughts?
T: Abandoned? Left alone? Nowhere to go?
S: Exactly. We hypothesize the scheme: I will be abandoned. And what she would say about herself at this deeper level?
T: *No one wants me, so no one can be trusted.*
S: So what emotions would that potentially elicit?
T: Rage, sadness.
S: When you imagine feeling that way, at a deeper level, the self could feel *emptiness and aloneness*. Two of the deepest emotions.
So, then what would she possibly do?
T: Withdraw, be silent because she would think I would not want her.
S: Yes. This child does that. A different child might react differently. Or she might feel ashamed and not want to go there, and what is intrapsychically behind that, the deeper schema and affects.
But, you are not her foster parent who could abandon her. So, her reticence to tell you about her behavior could be transference projection. You have two choices here. 1) Transference Question: "I wonder what you thought I would think or say about that? 2) Potential Interpretation: "I wonder if you might have worried I could not want to deal with you, so you would be afraid to share anything that looks bad in your view." Here is an alternative. "You might be worried I will be disappointed like your foster mom was."

To these interpretations you could add "and that

This starts to move into interpersonal projections, which she validates though acting on her impulses and negative emotions. Others' reactions reinforce the deeper constellation of beliefs and emotions.

Here we go into a deeper layer of emotional reactions. The child may not be aware of them, but, if we are right, they are behind her fears and then, likely, her aggression.

These are two deep schemas, abandonment and distrust.

It's important to look at how the intrapsychic dynamic turned into "acting in," namely, action in the therapy (the silence at the outset of the session). That is Here-And-Now behavior to look at.

Ways to illicit any internal experiences – affects or schema – in the here-and-now transference responses.

would be so scary you would be quiet and not want to talk about what happened.”

T: I don't know what she might come up with then.

S: I'll give you another approach. It's called *Mediated Catharsis*. "I lot of kids if their foster mom were all focused on something a kid should not have done, like hitting, would be kind of _____ [scared, ashamed, embarrassed, worried]." To go even deeper, towards the deeper scheme, "I lot of kids if their foster mom were all focused on something a kid should not have done, like hitting, might think deep in their heart, I'm going to be thrown away again, and feel like being all alone."

T: My gut feeling is that fits how she feels. But she would not be able to bring that out. But down deep.

S: "Maybe even no one will ever want me." I'm not sure any deeper is needed now. This is not a rush; it could take quite a while. From a theory point of view, it brings up questions about her *felt sense* of the stability of the world, the world as a dangerous place, not to trust others, hostility to the self, her filter on her experiences limiting her learning and development, and the hidden and perhaps defended wish to be cared for, that not being a safe thought to ever act upon. That could be a big one. We can get to those hypotheses over time. First, let's see which of our hypotheses are correct or close.

T: So, looking at my notes, I start with something like "I wonder if you might feel embarrassed about what happened." If I don't get much, then I can try, "maybe even ashamed" or "afraid scared you might get sent away again." Just wait and see what emerges. Can I use puppets or drawing to have her play enact it in play?

S: Of course. If we can get some of this out in the safety of therapy and her not pull away, we may be able to get to the level where hostile behavior will drop out. Positive reinforcement at home for self-regulation and self-control and non-aggressive problem solving may help make it safer to get into

Trying to flesh out the cognitive structure and the affective dynamics.

Deeper schema

We would need more time and interaction to go into these deeper dynamics. We know some children would experience rapid stimulation of rage over maltreatment and the arousal of the pain of rejection, abandonment, or aloneness. That's another possible dynamic behind aggression. E.g., 'they make me ashamed or hurt and they should be punished.'

this deep material. And avoid punishment.
Punishment to children with dynamics at all like these equate to rejection and could elicit all these dynamics and more aggression. We might get superficial outward compliance without changing the inner life in the way we hope to.

The point of this process is for the therapist to learn to see beyond the manifest behavior to the latent meanings and possibilities behind it, to the observe and hypothesize. The article uses psychodynamic therapy, cognitive therapy, schema therapy, and behavioral therapy principles. A more complex article would go into the question of how to intervene to

*help the child achieve some awareness
reshape some of the beliefs and schemas
attribute what has happen to her to the people who caused it
overcome less mature defenses and move toward more mature ones
develop interpersonal security and trust*

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