A Hyerarchy for Clinical Interpretation

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Introduction

Research (Feldman et al, 1958; Kurland, 1956) indicates that 30-60 per cent of clients who present themselves for psychotherapy "dropout" by the sixth session. "Lack of motivation" is commonly used as an after-the-fact explanation for failure in psychotherapy. There is ample evidence that therapists prefer well-motivated clients and select them where possible. The term well-motivated not only refers to a desire to change but also implies a desire to change in ways that are congruent with the aims of the therapist. In short, the client is asked to accommodate the therapist, and if he does not, he is referred to as "unmotivated" or "resistant" by the therapist. Many have noted the prevalence of this attitude today (Whiteley, 1967). On the other hand, Dreikurs (1961) finds that ". . . therapy will progress when the goals of the patient and the goals of the therapist are in line with each other" (p. 81). And he suggests that any resistance is due to a discrepancy between the goals of the therapist and his client so that no cooperation is possible. For Dreikurs unless a basic for cooperation can be established, no cooperation can be expected; and consequently, no progress in therapy will be possible.

But how does one establish a basic for cooperation at the onset of treatment and maintain it throughout the treatment? Some therapists intuitively come to know this while most others have had to be content with a trial-and-error approach. It is the purpose of this paper to examine a hierarchy of goals, stages of moral development, that a therapist might systematically use to establish a basis for cooperation or rapport and to aid in phrasing effective clinical interpretations.

A Hierarchy of Goals

Lawrence Kohlberg (1968, 1970, 1971) following the tradition of Dewey and Piaget has done considerable research on levels of moral development. His cognitive-developmental approach to moral development focuses on the forms and structures of thought, rather than on the content of the moral judgment. Kohlberg and his colleagues have identified three levels of moral development, each of which is divided into two stages. Levels are defined in terms of the degree to which the rules of culture have been internalized and the extent to which moral judgment is separated from the dictates of authority. Each stage is more differentiated, more

integrated in itself, and more general or universal than any preceding stage. The following is a description of the stages:

Preconventional Level: moral value resides in external things rather than in persons or standards:

Stage 1: Orientation toward punishment and unquestioning deference to superior power. The physical consequences of action, regardless of their human meaning or value, determine its goodness or badness.

Stage 2: Right action consists of that which instrumentally satisfies one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others. Human relations are viewed in terms like those of the marketplace. Elements of fairness, of reciprocity, and of equal sharing are present; but they are always interpreted in a physical, pragmatic way. Reciprocity is a matter of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" not of loyalty, gratitude, or justice.

Conventional Level: moral value resides in maintaining the conventional order and the expectations of others.

Stage 3: Good-boy--good-girl orientation. Good behavior is that which pleases or helps others and is approved by them. There is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is majority or "natural" behavior. Behavior is often judged by intention: "he means well" becomes important for the first time and is overused as by Charlie Brown in *Peanuts*. One seeks approval by being "nice."

Stage 4: Orientation toward authority, fixed rules, and the maintenance of the social order. Right behavior consists of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the given social order for its own sake.

Postconventional Level: moral vlaue resides in conformity by the self to shared or sharable standards, rights, or duties:

Stage 5: A social-contract orientation, generally with legalistic and utilitarian overtones. Right action tends to be defined in terms of general rights and in terms of standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by the whole society. There is a clear awareness of the relativism of personal values and opinions and a corresponding emphasis upon procedural rules for reaching consensus. Aside from what is constitutionally and democratically agreed upon, right or wrong is a matter of personal "values" and "opinion". The result is an emphasis upon the "legal point of view" but with an emphasis upon the possibility of changing law in terms of rational considerations of social utility, rather than freezing it in the

terms of Stage 4 "law and order." Outside the legal realm, free agreement and contract are the binding elements of obligation. This is the "official" morality of American government and finds its ground in the thought of the writers of the Constitution.

Stage 6: Orientation toward the decisions of conscience and toward self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency. These principles are abstract and ethical (the Golden Rule, the categorical imperative); they are not concrete moral rules like the Ten Commandments. Instead, they are universal princples of justice, of the reciprocity and equality of human rights, and of respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons. (Kohlberg, 1968)

In short, at the various stages, action is motivated by:
stage 1: the avoidance of punishment;
stage 2: the desire for reward or benefit;
stage 3: the anticipation of disapproval by others;
stage 4: the anticipation of dishonor and guilt over concrete harm done to others;
stage 5: concern for maintaining the respect of equals, community, and self;
stage 6: conscience and universal principles.

Extensive cross-cultural research has indicated that an individual's moral thinking will be at a single stage at one time regardless of the specific content of the moral issue. The findings also indicate that although rate or speed of development varies from one group to the next, the order of development through the stages is consistent across groups, suggesting that there are universal principles underlying the development of moral judgment.

Kohlberg's (1968, 1970, 1971) research indicates that principles of moral reason cannot be taught directly. The evidence supports the view that the child employs thinking that is self-generated and that changes gradually in a step-wise fashion. Furthermore, Kohlberg has found that it is not possible to get children to comprehend stages of thinking more than one step beyond their own. However, Turiel (1969) indicates that a teacher can stimulate change toward the spontaneous use of the next stage if she can help the child experience and understand the inadequacies of his own way of thinking. This can be achieved by a number of methods, but in any case communications at the stage directly above the child's own induce the greatest conflict and are the most successful in stimulating change. Kohlberg and Turiel (1971) have summarized what the teacher must do to be effective in stimulating growth: 1) have knowledge of the child's level of thought; 2) match the child's level by communicating at the level directly above; 3) focus on reasoning; and 4) help the child experience the type of conflict that leads to an awareness of the greater adequacy of the next stage.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development seem akin to the notion of developing social interest. For Adler, social interest implied cooperation, responsibility, belonging, empathy, and social cohesiveness (Adler, 1956). Ideally, "social interest is based on the desire to offer rather than to take and on a concern for the interest of the primary group and finally of all mankind". Thus, the notion of social interest parallels postconventional moral thinking as described in stages 5 and 6. Just as social interest was for Adler the desire of the individual to participate in society, so the stages of moral development are for Kohlberg the measure of an individual's participation in terms of justice. For both Adler and Kohlberg cognitions or beliefs about justice or social interest are the basis for activating behavior and changing it. Dreikurs (1961) has suggested that in all therapy systems there is a change in the client's value system, and this reorientation is a moral rehabilitation. Thus, if one views therapy as a process of developing social interest, then Kohlberg's cognitive developmental view may be helpful to therapists in better grasping the dimensions of rapport and interpretation.

Application to Psychotherapy

Although Kohlberg's stages of moral development and the schema for stimulating growth were developed within an educational context, there may be some application to psychotherapy. To that end this section will discuss one means of utilizing Kohlberg's formulation in developing rapport and phrasing interpretations; a practical example will be discussed in the next section of the paper.

Kohlberg and Turiel's four point plan for stimulating moral growth (knowledge; communication; reasoning; and contradiction) is a strategy quite similar to that used in many insight therapies. The therapist can easily become aware of his client's level of thinking by examining his life style focusing on client movement. The early recollections give an indication of how the client acts as a result of his biased apperceptions about life and himself. Certainly, if the therapist can recognize the level of the client's thinking, and can accept it, there is a basis for cooperation or rapport.

Matching the client's level of communicating at the stage directly above should expedite the client's acceptance of the therapist's interpretations. Research (Spiessman, 1959; Dittman, 1952) has suggested that movement in therapy is associated with an "intermediate level" of interpretation as compared with a "superficial"--reflection of feeling--or "deep" interpretations. When interpretations are too "deep", the interpretation may serve as an aversive stimulus that arouses anxiety and resistance to a degree that interferes with the therapeutic process. (Meltzoff and Kornrich, 1970). In terms of Kohlberg's hierarchy, it would seem that an interpretation that is more than one level above the client's present stage may be considered a "deep" interpretation, while an interpretation that is one level above would be a "moderate" interpretation. This is not to say that the "deep" interpretation is in any way incorrect, but rather that it is not appropriate at the present time for that particular client. Furthermore, this view of resistance to interpretation is consistent with Kohlberg's

research on the reaction of children, college students, and prisoners to communications involving judgments two levels or more above them.

A seasoned therapist is likely to be aware of points three and four. He focuses on the kind of reasoning his client uses --- the private logic, as Dreikurs calls it--and can stimulate change by introducing a sense of contradiction and discrepancy by discussing the reasoning itself, showing its shortcomings, other alternatives, "spitting in the soup" etc. Theoretically therapy would continue until the client had reached stage 5 or 6, at which time the individual's thoughts and actions would bespeak social interest as described by Adler and others.

An Example

The following report of an actual interview exemplifies many of the points made in the previous sections of this paper. The interview took place in a psychotherapy practicum class. An eighteen year old male in "hippie" attire was interviewed with his mother by the instructor. The mother had been in therapy for some time with a student in the class, and since the student felt that the son played a major role in the mother's problem, he was asked to come to the interview. The mother was nearly incapacitated with guilt feelings and depression. Her son, Bob, seemed rather disinterested in the course of the interview and was content to let his mother do the talking. She said he was idealistic, wary of the "establishment", and constantly in trouble with the police--being jailed for participating in demonstrations, drug violations and other things. He was a "drop out" from high school, his job, and his family. His earliest recollection was: at age 2 "I was in an Italian bakery shop in my neighborhood, and I remember going into the back room and climbing on a pile of flour bags that had just been delivered. And I wouldn't come down when my mother or the baker called. It was fun." From this recollection and other information the instructor surmised that Bob's basic goal was: "Each should be able to do whatever he wants, whenever he wants". This, of course, characterizes stage 2 thinking. According to the theory, the only way to "reach" Bob would be to talk in terms of stage 2 and stage 3. When the instructor asked the therapy students to continue the interview, nothing happened except resistance. The two students who continued the interview asked questions and attempted interpretations that bespoke stage 4 and stage 5 thinking--for example, the question: "Bob, what does like require of us?" (Stage 4) had to be rephrased three times before Bob contemptuously answered: "World Peace." The instructor picked up the interview and said: "Bob, it sounds like you have a simple plan for world peace. Do you know what it is? Simple, everyone do what Bob wants, there won't be any discord as long as what everyone else does, doesn't interfere with what Bob wants to do. Then there can be peace. What do you think of that? (Stage 2)." The instructor had "reached" Bob. Bob then mentioned that he had been angry and wanted to kill a railroad policeman who had shot him in the leg as he was jumping a freight car. The instructor commented: "See what happens when people do whatever they want, they almost get killed, and then want to kill in return . . .It takes guts to live that way, I give you credit . . . You're like. He doesn't like it that they won't let him invade Laos and kill those people to achieve

world peace. All he wants to do is what he pleases, and why can't others see things his way . . . You're two of a kind". The instructor had "spit in Bob's soup" by making an analogy which was repulsive to him. The instructor continued, "All our world problems are based on this idea that a well meaning person is going to save the world . . . Are you going to add to this? (Stage 3)." With regard to the mother-son relationship, the instructor offered this interpretation: "Bob, you know that you and your mother really have a great relationship, there's real togetherness and respect. You know it seems like you do your part by getting into trouble, and she does her part by feeling guilty and depressed". (Stage 3). This remark, like the others, had "gotten through" to Bob.

Conclusion

Though the instructor had no knowledge of Kohlberg's work, he had been able to sense how to establish rapport and make "intermediate" level interpretations. For those who are less intuitive or who are in training, hierarchies and schemas, such as the one suggested by Kohlberg, need to be considered more fully by those in the helping professions.

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