THE VALUE OF EARLY MEMORIES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

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In recent years there has been a good deal of interest in developing more efficient techniques of psychotherapy which are based on psychoanalytic concepts. Comprehensive planning of treatment in accordance with the needs of the patient has been considered an essential feature of such "brief psychoanalytic therapy." To prepare a rational therapeutic plan the therapist must usually arrive at a meaningful psychodynamic formulation of the case at the beginning of treatment. One of the techniques that the writers have found useful in achieving early psychodynamic understanding is that of eliciting the earliest childhood memories of patients during the diagnostic period. Patients are asked directly for their earliest recollections during intake interviews, and in the exploratory phase of psychotherapy. In instances in which the patient gives only one memory, he is asked if there are any others; and further memories are usually elicited. In the dynamic understanding of these memories, attention is paid to the sequence and relationships of the memories as well as to the content. Any spontaneous comments (associations) on the memory are also noted and treated as part of the memory.

Early memories form a spectrum ranging from true and factual experiences to complete fantasy. Regardless of the validity of the content, the memories may help in understanding the dynamic structure of the personality. It must be stressed that early memories are of the greatest clinical usefulness when integrated in the total psychiatric anamnesis rather than treated as isolated phenomena. They often reflect the patient's principal unconscious conflicts, and may refer to emotionally traumatic childhood experiences, the patient's main ego defenses and at times to transference trends. When early memories are elicited during interviews with patients who are presented at graduate and undergraduate teaching seminars, they have provided valuable ready illustrations of psychodynamic patterns.

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Review of the psychiatric literature of the past 30 years reveals only a few studies of earliest recollections. Most of these stem from Freud’s elucidation of the concept of screen memories. Freud observed that some earliest childhood recollections were of indifferent events that could not have produced any strong emotional effect. This contrasted with most adult and childhood memories which are of emotionally significant experiences. He reported an investigation of such an emotionally indifferent recollection and demonstrated that it was actually a screen memory representing a compromised expression of repressed instinctual wishes. Freud suggested that “screening” occurs to some extent in all childhood recollections, and believed that the essential emotional experiences of childhood are preserved in screen memories.

Rapaport notes that the contribution of psychoanalysis to the theory of memory concerns forgetting or the non-emergence into consciousness through repression; the mechanisms encountered in the analysis of forgetting are the same that perform the dream work and these constitute specific memory functions. It might thus appear theoretically correct to analyze earliest memory in the same manner as dreams. However it must be recognized that the dream occurs in light sleep when ego control is weakened, whereas the earliest memory is produced by the awake individual in a setting of stronger ego control. It is possible therefore that different information is obtained from early memories than from dreams.

Several psychological investigations of the manifest content of earliest memories have been conducted in groups of “normal” adults and children. These studies reveal that the majority of earliest memories were of unpleasant experiences. Blonsky cites Adler as having indicated that the earliest memory gives a picture of how the patient solves important life problems. Adler believed that the earliest memory provided a simple way of uncovering the feelings of inferiority which he held to be of basic importance. Stern reported the usefulness of early memories in understanding the dynamics of children with psychiatric illnesses.

Schachtel defines memory as a function of the living personality which can be understood only as a capacity for the organization and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears and interests. This definition emphasizes the close relationship between current personality functioning and the memory picture which an individual retains of