

Use of the Most Memorable Observation as a Technique for Understanding Choice of Parenting Style

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The most memorable observation is an Adlerian technique that employs autobiographical memory in the process of understanding the belief system of parents as it relates to choice of parenting style. This technique, developed by the writer a few years ago, has proven to be a powerful means of opening dialogue regarding possible alterations of parenting style.

Adlerian counseling theory and technique has demonstrated its value in helping parents understand the purposive nature of behavior, especially with regard to helping them comprehend how they may make misbehavior of children useful. Frequently, when the family counselor discloses a child's mistaken purpose or goal of behavior, parents will modify their response to the child's behavior with the aid of the encouraging counselor and knowledge of alternative parenting techniques.

Unfortunately, some parents find it difficult to adopt more effective parenting techniques because their goal of helping the child is compromised by their efforts to guard against falling into some assumed position of social inferiority. The most memorable observation is a technique that can help the counselor quickly identify what constitutes the negatively perceived behavior parents may be guarding against. Its use is not solely limited to parent consultation. It has also been used effectively to help teachers understand how their belief system influences them to choose problematic approaches to leadership and discipline of students. The mistaken thinking revealed in the most memorable observation has proven valuable in helping clients deal with other problems they have encountered, but the major thrust of this article is to explain the use of the most memorable observation with parenting.

Collection of the Observation

Given the selective nature of memory, it occurred to the writer some years ago to stimulate parents to offer an observation that could be used to reveal their private logic as it pertains to parenting. The specific approaches

found helpful to elicit these observations are now called the *most memorable observation*. To collect the most memorable observation, the counselor asks the following question:

Sometime in our early teenage years, or even in late preteen years, it seems very common for each of us to look around our family life and draw a conclusion about some aspect of life that appears to be important. Sometimes it is positive, "I really like this aspect of life in our family. When I get to be an adult I'd like it to be just this way in my own family." Often it is negative, "I don't like this at all. This is really distasteful. When I get to be an adult I am going to do everything I can to keep this from occurring in my family." What was it for you? As you think of life in your family about age 11, 12, 13 or so, what conclusion do you think you drew? It may have been positive, it may have been negative, or it may have been both.

Occasionally a client will begin to comment in a general way about life in his family during his early teens. The client may make general statements like, "Those were not good times for me" or, "Actually I thought my family got along pretty well." When this occurs it is useful to ask the client to be more specific. The therapist may respond with, "What was it about the situation that wasn't good?" or "What was it you saw or experienced that meant your family was getting along pretty well?"

The observation may consist of a memory of a specific incident, but, more commonly, it consists of a generalization the client drew about specific practices or aspects of the family atmosphere that were deemed positive and/or negative.

Typically, the practitioner asks for the most memorable observation after having first obtained information about the family constellation, the presenting problem, and some examples of the pattern of transaction between parents and children when they are faced with problems.

Most Memorable Observations Drawn from Counseling Sessions

The following six case-study illustrations are drawn from a videotape entitled "The Use of Most Memorable Observations in Counseling and Parent Consultation" (Walton, 1996).

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example One. The parents were concerned about six-year-old Sally, an only child who is regarded as a substantial disruption to order at school and who meets criteria for the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis.

When asked the most memorable observation question, her father replied:

Sure, I remember. You see, I came from a large family. My parents seemed to have time for everybody in the family except me. I promised myself when I got to be a father I would never let that happen to a child of mine.

The therapist interpreting this most memorable observation stated the father's basic belief: "Neglect is painful to a child. I would be remiss as a parent if I did not provide attention to my child."

The influence of overcompensation regarding this case might include ideas like: The amount of attention lavished on Sally made attention-getting behavior useful and greatly reduced opportunities for her to learn skills necessary for cooperative social interaction.

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example Two. Eleven-year-old Latanya was the third of eleven children. Her mother reported that Latanya was rebellious at home and school. The youngster met the criteria for oppositional defiant disorder diagnosis.

When asked the most memorable observation question, her mother replied: "My family was so disorganized. I thought, 'when I have a family of my own, we're going to have some organization.'"

The therapist interpreting this most memorable observation stated the mother's basic belief: "I cannot tolerate disorganization in my home. I would be remiss as a parent if I did not organize the household."

The influence of overcompensation regarding this case might include ideas like: The amount of organization thrust upon Latanya was perceived by her as overcontrol. Her resistance and defiance towards her mother and some teachers was a response to this perception.

An interesting sidelight that demonstrates the use of the creative self in action is the fact that Latanya's two older siblings responded positively to their mother's effort to organize them and put her in their service to the extent that it became debilitating to the development of their own self-sufficiency.

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example Three. The parents were primarily concerned with ten-year-old George, who, along with his two brothers, John (age 17) and Will (age 14), met the criteria for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. George and Will frequently manifested explosive and sometimes violent use of their tempers. The boys were followed by sister Susie, age 7, who responded to her perception of the unfairness of life with pouting and tears.

When asked the most memorable observation question, their mother replied, "There was this incredible loneliness as a child. I thought I would never have children. No one was there for me or with me."

The father's response to the most memorable observation question was, "I remember my eye was shot out when I was age 11. My life was very controlled, and my father could be absolutely controlling, even tyrannical. I hated things to be out of my control. I remember the wonderful feeling of being in my boat with my dog at the beach."

The therapist interpreting the mother's most memorable observation stated, "I can barely tolerate the thought of a child being lonely and without a parent being there for him and with him. I would be remiss as a parent if I failed to provide help and comfort to my children." The therapist's interpretation of the father's memorable observation was: "Loss of control is dangerous and frightening. I will go to any lengths to try to maintain control of a situation."

The influence of overcompensation on the parents as it pertains to this case might include ideas like: Mother's desire to be "there" for the children resulted in her providing incredible amounts of service and attention. Father's desire to guard against being out of control led him to assume much too much responsibility for decision-making and to react explosively and violently when children disobeyed.

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example Four. A mother was concerned about her ten-year-old son, Fred. Fred had a twin sister and another sister two years younger. Fred was referred for counseling by the school counselor for being "out of control and the worst kid in the school."

When asked the most memorable observation question, his mother replied, "My mother is a big woman. She told you what to do and you do it. She's in your face if you don't and 'smack'. She's in your face all the time. There was a lot of screaming and shouting. I thought, 'I will never do that to my children.'" The therapist interpreting the mother's most memorable observation made the following comments: "To use physical or verbal force to control children is terribly distasteful. I would be remiss as a parent if I forced my will upon my children."

The influence on the mother's parenting style of the overcompensation that resulted from her most memorable observation made her almost totally unwilling to be firm, to enforce limits, and say "no" to her children. When this possibility was suggested to her she replied, "Absolutely! The kids only have to say 'Gee, you're mean to us Mom' and I absolutely give in."

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example Five. The parents were concerned about their eight-year-old son, Dan, who was

described as highly aggressive. Dan's older sister, age 10, was described as covertly resistant. Dan met the criteria for the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder diagnosis as well as the criteria for oppositional defiant disorder.

When asked the most memorable observation question, the mother replied, "I was compliant, afraid of my father who came on very strong. He'd use a belt on me. I tried to please them, but I got tired of life being out of my control." The father's response to the most memorable observation question was, "I could go on forever. I didn't see my father and mother much. I was left with a baby sitter, my brother. The power was in his hands. He'd smack me around a lot, beat me every day, but I'd keep coming back at him. He was five years older than me"

The counselor interpreting the mother's most memorable observation made the following comments: "It is extremely distasteful to spend life worrying about pleasing others. As a parent, I will see that I no longer am in a weak situation." And interpreting the father's memorable observation, the therapist offered, "I'll be damned if I will be controlled by others. As a parent, I will be the one doing the controlling."

In this family, the influence of overcompensation on the mother was that she was determined to be assertive. The father agreed with the psychologist's interpretation that "he'd be damned if anyone was going to dominate him." The parents agreed that, as parents, they were "a force to be reckoned with." She conceded that she had taken on the role of a major league nagger, and he acknowledged that he was called upon when the heavy artillery was needed.

Most Memorable Observation Technique: Case Study Example Six. The mother was concerned about her daughter, Janie, age eight, "who will not do her work and can't follow directions. She always is moving and tries to get her way. She wants me to sit with her and help her do her homework." Janie's behavior met the criteria for the attention deficit hyperactivity diagnosis as did her twelve-year-old brother's. The brother was not considered a behavior problem but did not want to continue to take Ritalin.

The mother's response to the most memorable observation question was, "I remember the role my mother played. She was a maid to everyone." (She broke into tears.)

The therapist offered the following interpretation of the most memorable observation, "A good woman lays down her life for her family, but the thought of the weakness of such a role is more than I can take at times."

The mother's belief system had influenced her to be a servant to her family, even a martyr, but she resented the role she had accepted. She provided service in an effort to be good enough, but she hated it and frequently erupted into anger, yelling and screaming.

Interpretation of the Most Memorable Observation

The negative observations a client makes reveal situations, circumstances, or perhaps even a particular kind of problem that the client strives to guard against in the life of the present family. The positive observations reveal what the client is striving to accomplish, while also alerting the counselor to what would constitute a position of inferiority in the mind of the client, that is; the absence of the positive quality or circumstances. This absence is the situation the client guards against.

These ideas that the counselor is able to identify are not just random thoughts. The most memorable observation technique allows the counselor to go to the heart of the private logic of the client as it relates to the choice of parenting style and technique. If the counselor is accurate in his interpretation, the client usually will readily agree to the interpretation. A second means of validating accuracy will be the relationship the counselor is able to see between the situation the client guards against and the presenting problem cited at the outset of counseling.

When interpreting the most memorable observation, the counselor can encourage the client by pointing out the reasonableness of the client's choice of parenting style and technique, given the situation the client so strongly wishes to avoid. The mother or father's effort is either to help the family avoid what they have experienced so negatively, or to help the family avoid missing out on a situation that the parent has concluded is extremely valuable.

Practice has demonstrated it is highly encouraging to disclose a parent's most memorable observation to children or teenagers in the family. The effort is not to excuse the parent for mistaken approaches to parenting, but rather to create an empathic bond between child and parent when a child is helped to understand how reasonable it has been for the parent to guard against the occurrence of a situation the parent has pictured so negatively. The family is thus in a much improved position to work cooperatively toward common objectives.

Three Types of Compensations. Typically, parents are given to making three troublesome compensations. In type one, the parent overemphasizes the likelihood of occurrence of the situation guarded against. In type two, the parent overemphasizes the negative influence of the situation if it should occur. In type three, the parent underestimates his or her ability to deal with the situation in an effective problem-solving way if it should occur.

Given the client's propensity to make the types of mistakes cited previously, it behooves the practitioner to give attention to the following guidelines

in order to help the parent-client modify parenting techniques based upon mistaken thinking.

Guidelines. First, the practitioner should encourage the client by pointing out that the same style that takes us to our successes also leads us to our difficulties. For example, a mother may recognize that she makes some contributions in life through her kindness to fellow human beings, but as a parent she may have become a doormat for her children because of her unwillingness to set limits that she fears will be construed as unkind.

Second, cooperatively with client, the therapist can find specific examples of the client's overemphasizing the likelihood of occurrence of the situation guarded against, and/or overemphasizing how bad it will be if that situation does occur. One of the important roles of the therapist is that of a teacher. The therapist can use the techniques he or she has refined to teach clients how they involve themselves in the relatively common phenomenon of helping to bring about situations they guard against. The client may be invited to make note of these concrete manifestations of mistaken thinking in action as an exercise toward progress. Even if the client only spots mistaken behavior in retrospect, such an accomplishment is vital for movement toward new behavior—toward understanding the relationship between choice and problems experienced in the family.

Third, the client must be helped to develop a repertoire of techniques to deal with challenging situations. Once the client understands how choice of parenting style is related to belief system, learning and implementing helpful parenting techniques becomes more meaningful. By showing the client how use of the techniques can help bring about the desired scenario, the therapist can stimulate the client to be encouraged and motivated to implement the newly learned techniques. For example, by setting limits for a child instead of giving in, the parent can help the child learn to respect the concerns of fellow humans, thus resulting in more instances of the cooperative, kind behavior which the parent had previously sought in mistaken ways. The therapist might show the parent who guards against loss of control how much less likely it is for her to feel she has no positive influence upon loved ones when she discards dominating, coercive behavior and substitutes techniques that have established their value for winning the cooperation of children and adolescents.

The most memorable observation technique has proven so powerful and requires so little time to implement that the writer now routinely makes it part of the psychological investigation.

Reference

Walton, F. X. (Producer & Director). (1996). The use of most memorable observations in counseling and parent consultation [Video]. (Available from Adlerian Child Care Books, P.O. Box 210206, Columbia, SC 29211)