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PERSONALITY STUDIES OF THREE-YEAR-OLDS

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INTRODUCTION

There is no need to expatiate upon the lack of scientific information about the mental life of small children. The fact is only too well known. With our growing belief that the experiences of early childhood have a powerful and permanent effect on character and personality, the lack of knowledge about the mental capacities and types of reaction of very young children seems an even more serious omission. Furthermore, we are becoming more and more disturbed by the fact that the care and training of children up to five years is still exclusively in the hands of mothers who come, without specific training, to a task so important that it may determine the success or failure of their children before the organized agencies of the community for the training of children touch them at all. So keen is the realization becoming of the danger of making no provision for the study or training of very young children, either directly or through the training of mothers, that it seems probable that the next large new development of the educational system may take the form of some type of provision for this lack.

If training for all young children, or for all mothers, potential or actual, is to be provided by the community, it is obvious that the public-school system is the only agency adequate to the task. It is possible for private agencies, however, to carry out experiments which may demonstrate

¹ The physical examinations referred to in this paper were made by Dr. C. A. Wilson of Detroit. The laboratory tests of blood and urine were made by Dr. Paul G. Woolley at the National Pathological Laboratories. The mental examinations were given by Miss Elizabeth Cleveland, working at the school laboratory under the direction of the writer. The records of behavior were made by the college students, and various members of the staff who came in contact with the children.

both the value and the practicability of new educational ventures. The Merrill-Palmer School of Detroit is undertaking an experiment in which the two purposes of providing suitable training for young children, and of developing courses of training in the care and management of young children for prospective mothers are made to supplement one another. A nursery school for children between a year and a half and five years of age has been established, and a course of training in the care and management of young children for college students. The college girls who are in residence get their practice work in health and nutrition, and in the psychology and training of young children by acting as assistants in the nursery school. The children in the school are in immediate charge of Miss Emma Henton, from the Gipsy Hill Training College in London. Miss Henton was in charge of the nursery school established at the college under the provisions of the Fisher Act.

Under the plan of organization, each of the thirty children in the school becomes the subject of as careful a study of personality as we find it possible to make. Every child has a complete physical examination, and as thorough a mental examination as we can make with the imperfect tools now at command. In each case a personal history of the child, and a brief family history is recorded. Continuous records of height, weight, feeding, and types of reaction under varied conditions are kept. Needless to say each child stands out as a personality as distinct to those who take the pains to know him well, as adult acquaintances, though we hope not so immutable.

The following studies of two of the three-year-old children in the school are offered first for publication because they seem to us interesting examples of the kind of experience in young childhood which is frequently held responsible for warped, or even pathological types of personality later on.

MARY JANE

Case of Phobia in a Three-year-old Child

Age: Mary Jane entered the school in January, 1922, when she was three years and eight months old.

Physical Condition: Mary Jane's physical condition was perfect. The doctor rated her in the highest class for general condition. Her standards of height and weight were both above those of her age. The Wassermann test was negative and blood count and urine analysis showed no deviations from normal.

Mental Development: On the Stanford Revision of the Binet scale Mary Jane had an intelligence quotient of 133. Her rating on a series of performance tests was in the one hundredth percentile for her age in two of them, in the ninetieth percentile in a third, and in the sixtieth percentile in a fourth. These performance tests were standardized in the laboratory of the Merrill-Palmer School, and will be published soon.

Appearance: Mary Jane is a large, very healthy looking child with fair curls, blue eyes, a round rosy face, and a winning smile that frequently displays her white teeth.

Character and Disposition: Her most outstanding characteristic was her constant happiness, good temper and coöperative spirit. There was never a conflict of any sort with Mary Jane at the school. She was always ready to help with the work and join in the plays. In the little tasks of the school she was competent and reliable. She always knew exactly what she wanted to do when the choice of work was left to her and she stuck to one task until it was finished. Her father reported that she was frequently stubborn at home, but, although she was so very positive in her plans and ideas, we did not find her stubborn at school. She sometimes failed to obey immediately but was never really resistant to reasonable demands. Mary Jane showed signs of being in a certain sense rather nervous. In telling a story she frequently trembled with excitement and her hands shook. It was noticeable that her hands shook when threading beads, but she was never irritable. Her control of her body was excellent. She had a good sense of rhythm and could march or skip to music more accurately than most of the children.

Home Background: The child is of Norwegian descent on both sides, though she herself and her mother were born in

this country and her father came here as a child. Her father is a doctor and her mother was a trained nurse before her marriage. Her grandparents were merchants and farmers. At the time of her entrance, Mary Jane was a first and an only child. Her parents are exceedingly interested in Mary Jane, and devoted to her, and on the whole wise in their management.

History of the Development of the Phobia: On March 7, when Mary Jane was three years and ten months old and had been about six weeks in the school, she stood at the top of a flight of stairs one day after the other children had gone down and began to cry. When one of the college students went up to find out what was the matter she insisted that she was afraid to come down the stairs and must have someone take her hand and walk next to the railing. Her eyes looked panic stricken and she trembled. When asked what she was afraid of she pointed to the two spindles of the railing nearest the top post. The only reason she could give for being afraid was that there wasn't any curtain. The child had been up and down these same stairs several times a day every day since entering the school and we were totally at a loss to account for this sudden intense fear. Much to our surprise the fear lasted for about four weeks. Day after day Mary Jane stood at the top after the other children had gone down, full of fear and distress and totally unable to force herself to descend the familiar straircase. She kept repeating amid her tears—"I can come up all right. I am not afraid to come up, but I can't go down. I am afraid to go down." The genuineness of her distress and her inability to understand what had caused it seemed unmistakable to us. We did everything we could think of to overcome it. We talked to the child about the railing and told her it was there to help her and keep her from falling. We finally got her to touch it herself, though it was evidently a fearful ordeal, and gradually by coming down with her and urging and encouraging her we got her to the point where she could come down with comparatively little trepidation. Her mother was totally at a loss to account for the situation. During this

period she displayed the same type of fear of a similar banister which she encountered in a department store when her mother was with her. At the end of about four weeks, when we felt that her fear was in a large measure conquered, a vacation of over a week occurred. Since that time the child has apparently completely overcome the trouble.

We were totally at a loss to explain the situation. Our only theory at first was that something had happened to frighten or disturb her when she happened to be looking at that part of the banister, but since she could not explain it and no one was with her at the moment, we were somewhat hopeless about finding out what had really happened. It then occurred to us that possibly the history of the development of phobias in adults might lend some clue this case. In adults the condition seems to be connected with suppressed ideas related to sex. We then recalled the fact that about two weeks after Mary Jane entered the school, on February 7, a baby brother had been born. Mary Jane had talked about the baby at school most affectionately and had displayed a great interest in him. Her mother reported that she seemed delighted with him and had displayed no trace of jealousy. One day when I was in the nursery she came up to me and began talking about the birth of the baby. She said, "When mother went to the hospital she didn't have the baby and when she came back she had it." She repeated this several times with a rather strained look on her face and I felt sure that the whole problem of the baby's birth had worried her. It suddenly occurred to us that her fear of the stairs might be in some way connected with the event of the baby's birth and her experiences in connection with it. Accordingly I sent for her mother to inquire the details. Her mother told me that the baby was born in a hospital and that Mary Jane, on her way to school, was brought to the hospital by her father to see the baby each morning. I inquired whether she went up or down stairs at the hospital and her mother replied that she never walked up stairs because they always came up in an elevator, but that they frequently walked down stairs after

the visit because the elevator was not at hand. I inquired if she knew what kind of a staircase it was and she said that she did. The stairs were visible when her door was opened and she could frequently see Mary Jane and her father start down them. She described a staircase with a short flight of five or six steps at the top and a banister with upright posts at the side. This was exactly the situation with our stairs at the school. I was at once struck with the remembrance that Mary Jane had kept saying, "I can come up all right but I am afraid to go down." I also asked the mother whether they had talked with Mary Jane at home about the arrival of the baby. She said they had not mentioned it to her because they thought she was too young to understand about it. She and her husband had several times mentioned the fact that Mary Jane had never asked any questions about the baby's arrival. This set of circumstances seem to me conclusive in proving that the disturbance was due to her concern about the birth of the baby, the fact that in some way she had been made to feel that it was a topic on which she couldn't ask questions at home, and her continued anxiety about it. On coming out of her mother's room, with her mind full of anxiety and distress about the problem of the arrival of the baby which she did not dare voice, the first object which met her gaze was the staircase with its short flight of steps at the top and the upright posts of the banister. Her problem found no solution, but kept on distressing her in secret until it forced some sort of expression. Finding herself again in a situation so similar to that identified with her suppressed anxiety, suddenly and unaccountably to herself, gave rise to her experience of fear. I explained the matter to her mother who promised to talk to Mary Jane at once about the birth of her little brother, and to try to forestall possible future effects from this very vivid experience.

This is the second case of phobia in a young child which I have personally encountered. The other one I did not succeed in analyzing. A physician in Detroit who is a specialist in children's diseases told me that he had met with five or six cases of phobia in his practice among children

about three or four years of age. He seemed to have no theory to explain the phenomenon. We were particularly interested in being able to unravel at the time the type of experience in young childhood which is frequently held accountable for the development of mental abnormalities in later years. Very few individuals remember definitely events that occur between three and four and are therefore frequently quite unable to find the clue to their own difficulties without outside aid.

BOBBIE

A Case of Mother Complex

Age: On entering school in January, 1922, Bobbie was three years and six months old.

Physical Condition: Bobbie's physical condition was only good. He was above the standard of height and weight for his age, but was rated only 2 by the doctor. He had a previous rachitic history and had had one convulsion before his entrance to the school. During a school vacation, after he had entered, he had another convulsion which terrified his parents. They sent him to the Ford Hospital for a complete physical examination. The doctor reported that he found signs of a previous encephalitis. His Wassermann test was negative and the blood count and urine examination showed no abnormalities.

Mental Condition: On the Stanford Revision of the Binet Scale Bobbie had an intelligence quotient of 105. He failed in two of the four performance tests but since so many of the three-year-olds failed in these tests, this had no consequence other than to show that he was not very superior. In two of the performance tests he succeeded with ratings in the 60 and in the 80 percentile.

Appearance: Bobbie is a rather solemn little boy, large for his age, with a rather large head, stiff stubby light hair, and somewhat bulging forehead. He is awkward and rather unattractive.

Character and Disposition: Bobbie proved to be a difficult child—resistant to suggestion, uncoöperative and unable to play normally with the other children. He was greedy and

selfish. At table he stuffed food into his mouth with his hands, not caring what became of the rest just so his mouth was full. He fairly swallowed it whole. It was exceedingly difficult to interest Bobbie in the normal activities of children of his age. Neither was he interested in the other children. His attitude toward them was on the whole one of indifference, with occasional displays of hostility. He never seemed to have any projects of his own. His movements were awkward and rather poorly controlled. He had less sense of rhythm than most of the three-year-olds.

Home Background: Bobbie's parents had neither of them had any education beyond that of the elementary schools. His father is an unusually intelligent man who is superintendent of a large plant in the city. The mother was a factory operative before her marriage. His grandparents were all native born. They were farmers, artisans, and domestic servants. There was one other child in the family—a young baby.

Development of the 'Mother Complex': Bobbie was first brought to school by his father who reported the following conditions. The mother had lost one child previous to the birth of this one. She was a highly emotional and somewhat violent-tempered woman with no interests outside of her own home. When this child came she lavished all her affection on him. He was never away from her and she gave him a very unwise amount of petting and physical display of affection. When his father tried to interfere and secure some wiser discipline it led to family dissension with the result that apparently the boy was gradually set off against his father. The mother had very little real control over him, and when he began to get older and more troublesome she would say to him, "If you don't behave I will tell your father when he comes home and he will punish you." This, combined with the fact that whenever the father attempted any punishment the mother interfered in Bobbie's behalf, gradually produced a condition in the child which was most pronounced when he came to the school. What we noticed was that he was interested in nothing except securing atten-

tion and petting from some adult female. Neither the toys, occupational materials, nor the children interested him in the slightest. He would stand around watching the students until he saw one who seemed inclined to pet him and give him some attention; then he would hang on her skirts as long as he was allowed. Each new student or visitor who came to the school was the object of attacks from Bobbie. He whined and fretted and begged for attention all day. In the afternoon when it drew near the time for his father to come for him, Bobbie would frequently begin to say, with a look of complete conviction, "My daddy won't come for me; he won't come." This he would repeat over and over again until stopped. Occasionally he would vary this by beginning to chant, "My daddy's dead; my daddy's dead; my daddy's dead," over and over again. When his father finally appeared Bobbie would rush for him, grab his legs and begin to demand to be petted. This obviously annoyed his father and he would push him off.

Bobbie frequently remarked that he wished he could wear dresses and be a little girl and that he would like to be a woman when he grew up. When somewhat later the little girls in the school made up a game of playing bride and decked themselves with old lace curtains for bridal veils, Bobbie was very insistent that he wished to be a bride too, and utterly disgusted when the students were unable to make the bridal veil stick on his stubby hair. No other little boy in the school displayed any desire to play the part of bride.

We discovered by chance that he seemed to have a general distrust of men. One day he was taken to the house of one of the members of the staff to be brought to school by her. When he saw her brother in the house he appeared to be frightened and objected to going in because "There is a man in there" and demanded to know, in a somewhat hostile manner, who it was. He was told it was her brother, Fred, and that he liked little boys, but Bobbie would have nothing to do with him and clung to Miss Rodgers until Fred had left the house. Later he wished to know to whom the car in the garage belonged and when he was told it was Fred's he

again seemed alarmed and wanted to know if he had to be taken to school in Fred's car. He was obviously relieved when assured that he was to be taken on the bus.

He was allowed to sit at Miss Rodgers' desk while she was getting ready for school and was told that he might have some paper and a pencil (which were given him) but that he must not touch anything else. In spite of this injunction he played with a bottle of ink and spilled some. When Miss Rodgers discovered it and rebuked him for it his first words were, "Don't tell Fred, you won't tell Fred, will you?" When his attention was called to spots of ink on his clothing, he said, "That will come out with water."

In spite of his disgusting methods of eating, Bobbie was inclined to be very careful about his clothes, and was worried when he got them dirty. Since his mother did all of her own work, including the washing, she had doubtless put stress upon the virtue of keeping his clothes clean. Several times in the course of a day Bobbie was apt to ask if his clothes were dirty yet, or call attention to the fact that they were still clean. His efforts were really effective, and the end of a day usually found him noticeably cleaner in clothing than the other little boys. His preoccupation with cleanliness of clothing was one thing that prevented him from joining in many of the children's pursuits.

During the course of his stay of five months in the school, in spite of the fact of frequent periods of absence and rather irregular attendance, Bobbie improved very much. He got to the point where he could occupy himself independently with the toys or beads or clay modelling. His incessant demands for attention were abated and his food habits and habits of eating enormously improved. He seemed a fairly normal child at the end of the term, though his great preference for women and his dislike and distrust of men were still evident. Though his father had never failed a single time to come for him, Bobbie was still apt to begin his monotonous chant of "My daddy won't come, my daddy won't come," and occasionally, "My daddy's dead."

The fact that about the time of his entrance to the school

another baby was born into the family probably has much to do with Bobbie's improvement. His mother's time and attention and excessive emotional energy were turned off in part in another direction and Bobbie was somewhat freed from the incubus. It seems to us, however, that his character and disposition have been given a slant which it will be exceedingly difficult to overcome completely.