
INTERPRETING THE PAST

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Interpreting the past, making sense of it, is important because it is through the relevance one gives aspects of the pasts and sees meaning in them how the past exerts an influence on the present.

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Introduction

The past is past. From a factual perspective it can no longer change. However, the past exerts an influence on the present through the emotions and thoughts we attach to aspects of the past. The experience of the past is subjective and can be different among people who had identical experiences. It contains information, in addition to the information about the events, which mirrors the individual perspective, the values, needs and aspirations of the individual. Thus, one can find important clues about core attributes of oneself in the past.

Many forms of psychotherapy largely ignore the past, prominently among them cognitive behavioral therapy, even though the birth moment of psychotherapy was moving the spotlight from a medical explanation in the past to a psychological one in the past. Psychoanalysis was maybe the first treatment form which acknowledged the past as an important determinant of a patient's well-being in the present. But rather than only seeing the past as an explanation for the present, it also acknowledged that change in the present is possible by working with the past. Another important element was that communication between therapist and patient would be both exploration tool and instrument for change.

When we talk about the past we mean the past as it is experienced by the patient. While it is questionable that there can ever be a truly objective version of the past, the subjective experience of the past is the bundle of information which contains various memories which all have their informational sources in the nervous system, such as an emotion, a thought or the perception from a sensory organ. Ultimately a lot of the information comes from external events or interactions with other people, but as the brain processes this information it is combined in new way, and new information is also added. Distilling out what is added and change by the individual gives invaluable clues to a better understanding of the individual.

Psychotherapy requires new insights and new perspectives, which in turn require an insight and understanding for the own basic parameters, such as values, needs and aspirations, as well as how one processes information. This then allows to bring about change, which usually comes out of communication, the meaningful interactions between therapist and patient.

Basic Parameters

Needs, values and aspirations, one's life experiences and the beliefs and perspectives of others influence how one experiences the present, which is stored in memory and will become the past. Since past experiences have an affect on one's present perspective, thoughts and behavior, past experiences can thereby have a cumulative effect on the future. This can explain how patterns of thinking and acting can become entrenched to an extent that are no longer accessible to self-regulation.

In psychotherapy, it is important to separate the own basic parameters, one's needs, values and aspirations from those of others. Since humans live in a huge communication web, this may not be so easy, and some of the own basic parameters may be inseparable from those of those held by close family members, for

example. However, trying to do so is an important step in defining the own individuality, and this requires an appreciation of the past, which contains much of the information which is needed for the process.

‘Issues’

‘Issues’ means that there is an urge to resolve a conflict. They are often brought about by wishes and feelings we have that seem in conflict with the world around us. If we live in a mythical happy place, where we can pursue what we truly want and need, we would not have any ‘issues’. As we grow older, many of our earlier strategies that seemed to work in getting what we need and want in the past no longer seem to work. We need new strategies, which might include anything from the way we interact with others to how we identify what we ourselves truly value and want in the world. Often, we might think that we know what we want, only to find on deeper reflection that we are trying to please someone else.

Why is a resolution of ‘issues’ needed? One important reason is that the past, the present and the future all have to make sense. If something makes sense, it means that it fits into the individual theory of one’s life story, that it can be understood within this framework. One not necessarily has to understand why an external event occurred, but one may need to understand one’s own reactions to it. As life moves on, understanding how one builds one’s life story gives a greater sense of control, which can lead to a greater sense of safety but also to more motivation and innovation.

Rather than actual past events which lead to internal conflicts and ‘issues’, it is the emotional and cognitive interpretation in the present which determines whether there is an unresolved conflict. A new perspective and a new way of seeing things may therefore be all that is needed to resolve an ‘issue’. An actual change of the factual past, which would be impossible anyway, is thus not needed. Since emotional conflicts and similar issues often tend to maintain anxiety in individuals predisposed to anxiety, psychotherapy for this condition needs to include the past in the treatment scheme. In communication-focused therapy (CFT), as it was developed by the author, work with the past primarily happens through reflection and insight into communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2010, 2017)

Separating own from others’ issues

Feeling sad or angry when talking to another person may mean that unpleasant experiences from one’s own past are triggered, but it could also be the case that the other person experiences these emotions, which are then felt by anyone he or she talks to. Being able to separate one’s own emotions from someone else’s is an important step in regaining a connection with oneself and the own emotions. One may feel sad, angry or upset not as a result of an own unresolved issue, but because of an issue or issues the other person has. Through communication one can separate one’s own from the issues of others. Observing and reflecting on communication patterns makes it clear where the emotional conflicts and other issues from the past are.

Since the past only plays a role in the present to the extent one assigns a value and importance to it, how and whether individuals assign a special relevance and a value to past events, thoughts, actions and feelings determines the impact of the past in the present. The assignment process is in turn influenced by how assignments were made in the past and whether there are pressures or barriers to change it. Through communication internal or external, for example in a psychotherapeutic setting, one can reevaluate one's assignment patterns and strategies.

Reevaluating these assignment strategies can improve interpersonal communication and relationships. An awareness and appreciation for how one assigns relevance and value to past events gives more control in the present and reduces anxiety and fears. However, it can lead to imbalances and difficulties in a relationship, however, if one partner does the work, while the other does not. As one partner develops awareness and insight into the dynamics of an issue and can see it as unrelated to the relationship, the other partner might interpret this as a distancing from the relationship if that partner cannot distinguish the issue from the relationship.

Communication

Unfortunately, in many interactions, especially fights and confrontations, most people do not really talk about the underlying emotions, such as 'hurt' and 'disappointment', but about the issues on the surface. "You are wrong about how to select our kid's school" "No, you are" etc. The underlying issues may actually be the hurt experienced from bullying at school in one parent's past experience and the anger from never being good enough for one's father in the other parent's past experience. Only when talking about the underlying 'issues' is a real resolution possible, which may require a third person observer, such as a therapist or a very good friend.

Communication is the exchange of meaningful messages, and through communication we see meaning and make sense of ourselves and others. As the past has an impact on how individuals communicate in the present, the past influences how one makes meaning of the present, the past and the future. However, since communication is the mediator in this process and also subject to reflection and understanding, it can be altered. This is usually a gradual process and does not happen from one day to the next, but if one reflects on and develops an awareness for it, change is bound to happen. This then effectively changes the past as experienced by the individual.

Resolution as a Process

Resolving an issue in the past depends on its quality. Emotional conflicts are often resolved by an awareness of the emotions involved. If one could not experience anger over abusive treatment or neglect as a child out of fear that one might lose the parent one depended on, or one actually lost a parent but did not allow oneself to feel anger as well as sadness, getting a sense for all the emotions involved in the past can lead to resolution quite quickly. Reconnection with one's emotions should not entail a re-traumatization but a

connection with oneself in all emotional qualities. It may, for example, be helpful to reconnect with the needs, wishes and aspirations one had as a child. This can lead to a reconnection which resolves the emotional conflict without the need to go back in time.

If the emotion is guilt or shame, external communication can help resolve the emotional remnant from the past. Meaningful communication, whether in a therapeutic session or with a wronged person or others, often deals with these emotions effectively. Essentially, they are a signal to communicate, although they may feel like an inducement to withdraw socially. When it comes to guilt and shame it is also important to separate the other person's issues from one's own. This can also be best achieved through a mix of internal communication (reflection) and external communication with others.

Fear

Many people are afraid to deal with their issues. We all see our issues – on some level, but this does not mean we act on them. Unfortunately, the exclusive focus in many places on cognitive behavioral therapy models with their emphasis on the present has pushed into the unconscious some important insights from psychodynamic psychotherapy. One of those insights, which is clearly reflected in everyday clinical work, is that the past matters to the extent that it has emotional significance in the present. Emotions are linked to experiences in memory, just as any pieces of information can be linked, and understanding these associations and emotional assignments to specific memories is an important step in resolving them.

Putting to rest troubling intrapsychic dynamics from the past means becoming aware of the differences between a situation in the present and an experience in the past. This in turn requires enough awareness of how one experienced the past to consciously observe the associations which have so long been subconscious. As already mentioned, gaining the necessary awareness and insight does not require actually seeing oneself in a traumatic situation, but getting a sense for oneself as a child or adolescent, for example, in non-traumatic situations to understand the own wishes, values and aspirations. From there it is then far less traumatic to try to unravel the traumatizing situation, which should involve a clear understanding that the other person had issues, which one did not cause and may never understand. Accepting that a complete explanation for another person's, or sometimes one's own, behavior may be elusive can be difficult, but can be liberating.

Life Story

Humans need the sense of wholeness about the story of their lives. 'Things have to make sense in the greater scheme of things', and especially so does one's life. However, this also requires that we integrate our life experiences into our mental representation of our life's narrative. We can do this by talking about our life with someone else, such as a therapist, who can provide feedback on our story making process.

Values, Interests, Aspirations

Real change means it fits into the dynamics of one's life over time. If change does not fit with one's basic values and aspirations, it will not last long. However, identifying one's values and genuine interests requires accepting all facets of one's past life because it is also in the more difficult moments where they shine and become apparent.

Timeline

The past is the past and the future has not happened yet. Dealing with one's issue should not retraumatize or make someone feel worse. Rather, it is about taking a more reflective look at what happened. If others do not treat us well, we often tend to start with ourselves, asking if we did something wrong. Children see the world as a magical place with themselves at the centre and equipped with magical powers. This often translates into adult life as seeing oneself as the cause for the emotional states of others. However, in reality a far better explanation is that we all are individuals with 'issues', the other person and ourselves included, and that we only have some direct control over our own emotions. A human being who deals with her or his own issues achieves greater happiness and makes the world a better place for all of us.

Change

Once there is awareness and insight, a change in perspective is almost automatic, as is the process of change. Awareness and insight make it impossible not to change. Fears may intervene to slow down the process, but with the right amount of internal and external communication they are relatively easy to overcome. As pointed out above, this communication should be meaningful in the sense that it contains messages which are novel enough to cause change.



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