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SOME MENTAL HYGIENE ASPECTS OF WORK WITH FOREIGN BORN PARENTS

Helen P. Taussig

Department of Child Hygiene, Newark

We are all familiar with the basic mental hygiene concepts of the emotional growth of the child: the early attachment to the mother who does everything for the child, the introduction of other members of the family into the child's life and with it his broadening of interests and diffusing of affections. He gradually emerges from the home into the community and translates his family relationships into other relationships outside the home. He develops powers and potentialities within himself which in time afford him a greater self-dependence and consequent greater independence of those outside himself. The early complete dependence on the mother, however, was satisfying and pleasurable and there is always a certain tendency or urge to regress to that earlier and more comfortable state. There is a constant struggle between the desire to remain dependent and the desire to become independent. Each gain toward independence constitutes a step in the process of growing up.

Maturity, the end product of growing up, implies adaptability. The individual who has achieved a degree of self-dependence will find it easier to adjust to a new invironment and new set of standards than will the individual who has remained totally dependent. The former, being relatively free, can leave the old and take up the new with comparatively little conflict. The latter clings to the old and adjusts to the new with greater difficulty, often failing completely. We may say that the relative difficulty of adjustment to the new environment is in part dependent upon the degree of adjustment to the old environment.

We so often say that a particular experience in a person's life causes his mental, physical or moral breakdown, forgetting that many who meet similar difficult situations come through unscathed. We must consider what equipment one individual brings to a situation to enable him to meet it successfully and what another individual brings to it to cause failure and breakdown under the added stress. When we say therefore, that relative adjustment to the new environment is in part dependent upon the degree of adjustment to the old environment, we base our assertion on the fact that every experience in an individual's life tends to help or to hinder his growth and development. With this in mind, we approach the foreign family exactly as we approach the American family.

Walter, an eight year old American born child of American born parents, was indifferent in school, a day dreamer, and a poor student, although he had superior intelligence. The parents were intelligent professional people apparently eager to give their children every opportunity. The visiting teacher worked along in the dark until one day the mother burst forth with, "Oh, I hate all men! It makes me mad when I think of all the time you are giving to Walter, all the time I give to him, and all the time the teacher gives to him—and for what—a mere man!" Here the mother went back to her early relations with her own father and with her younger brother. Her mother's partiality to the brother, her father's indifference to the family, her brother's failure to make good, and the transference of her feelings for these men to her husband and her son. As far as this mother was concerned, Walter had to fail. He was a *mere man.*

John was the eight year old son of Hungarian parents, the youngest of three children. The parents were in no way companionable, each seeking affection and protection from the other—neither able to give it. The mother turned selfishly to her oldest son, the father to his work. The mother felt that the father was not affectionate like American husbands and fathers. She said she could not be demonstrative to her husband or show any warmth or feeling toward her son. As a consequence, John withdrew. He was afraid. He truanted from school because he did not like his teacher. He had never felt enough warmth and security in his own home to feel certain that it would still be waiting for him after his abseuce.

This mother was conscious of her foreign birth and that of her husband. She had set up as her ideal the family relationship she found in the American home she had lived in and in which she had been happy. Her mother died when she was a small child. Her father, who was cold and undemonstrative, remarried shortly after and she and her step-mother quarreled constantly. In adulthood she continued to seek that affection and security she had never known in childhood. How could she *give* when she herself *needed* so much? She sought in marriage a continuation of the security she had found in this American family, but her husband, an immature person himself, was unable to give it to her.

At first glance we might feel that here we have a first generation American problem. In both cases we have immature parents unable to play an adult role and children who are seeking affection and security from parents, who because of their own personal problems are unable to give it. In such cases we can see just enough of the mother's early experiences to be convinced that they would find an adult role difficult to achieve under any environmental circumstances. The roots of the difficulty go back far into the early experiences of the parents and emigration is just one small factor in the present problem.

In the "Ironbound" foreign section of Newark, for instance, Poles and Italians predominate, and Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Russians, Spaniards and Portuguese make up most of the rest of the population. Most of the men and many of the women work in the factories in the neighborhood. The corner saloon has moved its name from the front door but otherwise has taken on little disguise. Drinking is accepted and *reasonable* drunkenness little frowned upon. One child when asked if her father got drunk indignantly answered, "No," adding that "He drinks day and night but he never gets drunk."

The outstanding social problems in the district are poverty, congested living, gang life, lack of healthy recreational opportunities and drunkenness. One would indeed question how much these situations are due to problems peculiar to the immigrant. When we find behavior and personality problems here, we must not fail to consider how much they are intensified by these neighborhood conditions which surround the individual emotional situations developing within the family group.

Perhaps because the neighborhood is predominately foreign the foreign birth of the parents does not in itself take on the aspect of a problem to the child. It takes, however a tremendous amount of security to surmount being different, regardless of the real values involved. A Polish boy entered school there under one name and later changed to another. He explained that where they lived in Pennsylvania there were no Polish families and they changed to an American name. When they came to this Polish community they changed back to their original Polish name. Here one meets constantly such remarks as: "Her mother didn't want her to marry a Portuguese, she wanted her to marry some decent fellow, a Pole." One fourteen year old Polish girl was preparing the visiting teacher for a disappointment in meeting her mother. "She has very dark skin and looks Italian—but otherwise she looks all right." And in describing a neighbor, the same child said with some disdain, "She's Irish or Yankee, or you know, something like that." Remarks such as these, would indicate that nationality has a great deal of significance for the individual—that being foreign means something specific to him. However, it is just one factor in the individual's experience and its significance to him depends upon the sum total of all his experiences.

Every experience in the life of an individual is related to every other experience in his life. When we think of the immigrant, then, we must not fail to question what went before to cause emigration and upon what previous experiences that individual builds after he has emigrated. The very fact of immigration, to be sure, is an experience affecting vitally the life of the immigrant—but it is only one increment in the cumulative effect of all his life's experiences.

Mr. S. ran away from Russia at an early age to avoid service in the army. He wandered through England for several years before he finally landed in America. He is an intelligent man with some education—is a skilled workman, interested in music, plays the violin and sings. Up to the present he has spent most of his life running away from difficult situations. Can we be surprised to learn that in this country, he works periodically, has lost interest in his music, drinks to excess and has little or no interest in his family?

His wife left Russia during the Russian revolution. Her father was implicated in the revolution and was brought to trial. She, a girl of twenty-one, pleaded guilty to her father's offense and was sentenced to exile in Siberia. In telling of all her troubles and worries, including the death by accident of a fifteen months old baby, Mrs. S. showed no emotion except when she spoke of her parting from her father. At this point she broke down and cried. She left a lover behind in Russia and was determined when she came to America that she would never marry. When she was thirty, she met Mr. S. and was so sorry for him because he had no home, that she decided to marry him. This decision, however, was not made until her former lover came to her in a dream and urged it. The children of this union are problems—first generation American problems!

Perhaps this is an extreme example but serves to illustrate how the fact of emigration of the parents, while definitely a causative factor in the emotional development of their children, is merely one consideration in the development of a situation already well determined.

We might meet the situation of an Italian or Syrian girl trying to free herself from the close ties of her home. We do not conclude that an Italian or Syrian father never gives his daughter any freedom. Instead we must consider that we have an adolescent girl, struggling with the problem of growing up a father impending her progress by his need to keep her a child. In his own home, to which he apparently still clings, the girls were not allowed the freedom sanctioned in this country. His desire to keep his daughter under his control is intensified no doubt by his Italian upbringing. But if we are to understand this present situation, we must see it in terms of what the father, in the light of his own background, has brought to it.

We may try to find more common interests for husband and wife, thus releasing some of the necessity for the father's centering so much of his emotional life in his daughter. We may find friends and interests for the father outside the family; we may find more absorbing work interests for him; or we may go more deeply into his fundamental needs, attempting to change his reactions and attitudes at their sources. In any case, we plan our treatment of the problem as an individual situation rather than a national or racial situation.

The relative difficulty of adjustment to the new environment is dependent in part upon the degree of adjustment to the old environment. But at the same time we must consider the standards of

maturity set by the old in comparison with the standard of maturity set by the new.

The peasant family lives in a small rural community where civilization is still not too intense. The family is the most important economic and social unit. The father is the head of the family and the owner and ruler of the other members of the household. His authority is supreme and respected. The women are housewives and obedient servants of the master of the house. Marriages are planned and made by the father and the choice of those involved is not considered.

When a peasant family emigrates to the American city it is immediately thrown into a civilization that is more highly developed and complicated. Therefore, no matter how good an adjustment the immigrant has made to his simple peasant environment at home, he will have a difficult readjustment to make when he reaches the new one calling for more mature development.

We do not ask a child to grow up all at once. We do not insist that he suddenly leave the protection of his family and plunge into a parentless community. In school, for instance, he starts with the kindergarten where the teacher has time and patience to give him attention at least approximating his mother's—where independence is gradually developed and not forced upon him. But we find individual differences. We find the child who makes this adjustment less easily than the average. We cannot deal with him in general terms. We must consider that he is a five year old clinging more strongly than most children of his age, and we must study his development and growth in order to understand how best to help him make this necessary step in the process of growing up.

In a like manner we must recognize that all peasant immigrants are faced, by the very fact of immigration, with a difficult problem of adjustment that in most cases, demands more maturity than was demanded by any previous adjustment. At the same time we must be aware of the factors in the case of some individuals which make this adjustment more difficult than the mere fact immigration would warrant.

In approaching the child of the foreign born parent from the mental hygiene point of view, we do not ignore the complicating circumstances of the American child with foreign parents—we do not underestimate the value of a knowledge and understanding of the parents' background, customs and standards, but we evaluate them in terms of what they mean to this particular individual rather than what they mean to a particular nation.