

The Application of Individual Psychology in a Criminal Case¹

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to show how a criminal case can be understood through Individual Psychology, and to show how the decision of the court can be influenced by such understanding.

(1) While I was director of the women's police force in a medium-sized city, a young woman was brought to trial for having strangled her mother-in-law. The case was puzzling because nothing unfavorable could be said about the woman and because she refused to talk. When I first saw her in the court prison she impressed me as a tall, good-looking woman between thirty and forty years; she was quiet and serious, carried herself erect, and showed no signs of psychological collapse. When I explained that I had not come to blame her, but to help her, her face lit up and it became possible to gain her confidence. It soon appeared that she was not very shaken by her crime and seemingly had no inner relationship to it; she experienced it more as the result of old oppression and suffering and did not realize the magnitude of the tragedy. What completely filled her was the fear that her cordial relation to her husband might now be disturbed or ended. Compared to this thought, even her interest in her two children vanished into the background. Later interviews with her husband showed that the two were very closely attached to one another. It was this relationship which the mother-in-law had for years tried to destroy through jealousy and, in the end, through open hatred against the daughter-in-law. No means had been too low to gain this end.

The husband had lived with his mother on a small piece of property which he, as the only son, was to inherit. He was very attached to this property and continued to live there with his wife after his marriage. The mother rejected the daughter-in-law even after the birth of the two children, and tortured her with continuous annoyances. The daughter-in-law kept her growing hatred bottled up inside herself. She did not want to disturb her husband with complaints when he returned home in the evening, fearing especially that this

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might affect or even destroy his love for her, which, from the start of their acquaintance had been the essence of her life. She felt clearly that every action of the mother-in-law was aimed at the destruction of this love. Eventually the husband realized the bad relationship between the two women who were both so close to him. Upon suggestions of friends he actually decided to move away with his family, but in the end he stayed when his mother threatened to sell the property and spend the money if he did move. Thus things remained as they had been, especially since the wife did not complain but merely became more quiet and secluded.

After the crime the husband was at first completely upset and estranged from his wife. But after I had had some long discussions with him he achieved an understanding of the context of his wife's life and again came close to her, particularly since he had to realize that he was not completely free from guilt. He saw that he had been too passive, had put his head in the sand, and was dominated by the fear of losing his tangible property.

A detailed exploration of the childhood of the woman showed especially her tendency to retire within herself. She grew up in simple but orderly circumstances. Her relationship to her parents was good; they were satisfied with her because she was usually so quiet. They had little time for their children's troubles and probably would not have had enough understanding. In school she had no special difficulties, although she was almost always without friends and preferred to evade anything disagreeable.

Among her sisters and brothers she had the middle position. As often among the middle children—oppressed from above and pushed from below—she inclined toward passivity even as a child. She seldom defended herself against the older siblings but rather tried to evade them. Toward the younger siblings she had no close attachment either; when they became impudent she usually gave in. However, she did admit that she had at times played practical jokes on her sisters and brothers which gave her a measure of relief, although the consequences often worried her.

From everything she reported about her life, extreme sensitivity became apparent again and again. Because of this oversensitivity she could find little human contact even as an adult. Once she did make such contact, however, the relationship was fairly good, although not too close. It seems that her stored-up feelings were directed entirely toward her beloved husband and remained there. Even after the birth

of her children, of whom she took devoted care, the husband took absolutely first place. She had no close relationships with her neighbors. From the start she did not have the courage to meet them, especially since she soon noticed that the mother-in-law spread unfavorable stories about her. Thus she withdrew into a shell and lived for her husband and children.

In summary, one might say that although before the crime this woman had probably never done anyone serious harm, she also never had much interest in others around her. Thus, she had done little on her side to win over the egotistical mother-in-law. By withdrawing into her shell upon every small attack she had apparently provoked the old woman more than she would have with an open and courageous show-down.

After a new malicious attack by the old woman, they happened to meet in the hall. The younger woman wanted to pass her silently. But then it happened! When the mother-in-law bent over to change her shoes, the younger woman pushed her down, impulsively reached for her throat and strangled the old woman who was already quite frail. When the accused later asserted that she could not understand how she could have done this, it was easy to believe, and the suspicion of premeditated murder was soon given up.

(2) After completing my exploration, I handed the state attorney a 15 page report which became instrumental in the trial. During a pause in the trial I asked the state attorney about his reaction to the report. It was more favorable than I had expected. When I asked him whether I could go over to the accused and shake her hand, he gladly gave me permission to do so. I shall never forget how her face lit up when she reached for my outstretched hand. The court was crowded with people full of hatred for the "murderess." When they saw that someone dared approach her in a friendly manner, they began to wonder. They were still more surprised when the state attorney subsequently read entire sections from my report. His summary of the case sounded more like that of the attorney for the defense. The two court physicians offered no opposition. They had not been able to establish contact with the accused and had only my report to go by.

The state attorney pleaded for a prison sentence of three years. The court was still more lenient and decided on two years. The public, too, which started out by being definitely hostile toward the accused, developed human understanding to the extent that there was no objection to the mild sentence.

Later, after I had been transferred to another city, a juvenile judge with whom I had been working for years told me that during all this time he had been guided in rendering sentences by my reports; i.e., he was guided in the sense of Individual Psychology. Furthermore, he stated that from these psychological reports he had adopted the point of view of Individual Psychology to such an extent that he was bringing up his three children in accordance with it and had done so with the best success. It should be noted that all this occurred during the Nazi period in Germany. This shows how far the persuasiveness of Individual Psychology can reach into the area of the legal courts, even under generally unfavorable circumstances.