

HATTIE THE MARIONETTE

A CASE STUDY

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On the first day of school I entered a classroom with thirty new students. The twelve-year old girls, just transferred to the Junior High School did not know me and I introduced myself as their home-room teacher. I told them that I would teach German, history, geography, and singing. In trying to get acquainted with my new family, I chatted with them about their new experience and our mutual expectations, encouraging remarks and responses, and observing carefully the reactions of our informal discussion.

Hattie sat in the third row on the left side of the room. She sat crouched, obviously hiding herself behind the girl sitting in front of her. It was definite that she did not want to be bothered. She did not seem to look at me, but there was a sudden quick glance out of her very dark eyes that seemed to ask, "Who is this new ogre there on the platform?" When she caught my eyes, she shrank away. My interest was aroused, and after a few minutes I managed to address her personally. I wanted to see how she would behave while answering a simple question and giving her name. The answer did not require any academic knowledge and was to be given with a "yes" or "no."

Hattie hesitated for a second, then got up with a distinct suddenness, I might say with a jerk of her whole body, lifting her head with another jerk following the first one. She answered with a hoarse voice in a somewhat forced way. Then she sat down quickly with the same peculiar suddenness.

I noticed that her classmates, as far as they knew her from their former school, looked at each other in a kind of meaningful solidarity. Suddenly I realized that Hattie reminded me of the doll in Offenbach's opera **Tales of Hoffmann**, but this was still a vague idea; I didn't know exactly how to account for it. Hattie was physically very well developed, an attractive girl with well-proportioned face and body. However, there was some strange lack of expression in her face - - and suddenly I knew it! She **was** a doll, she had no expression, no life; she seemed to be as artificial as the doll in the opera mentioned. I was startled at the strength of this impression.

During the following recess I lingered, hoping for a chance to observe more. The students had left their room and were walking around in the hallways, mostly in groups, chatting and laughing. Hattie was alone. However, she seemed to be more

alive than when in the classroom. When she was running, she kept her head cocked and took small steps. I thought, it is as if she does not move through her own power. Now my vague idea won definite shape. Hattie presented the picture of a marionette. She acted, moved, by virtue of somebody else; she was, so to speak, a mechanism, a mechanical toy. Who stood behind the toy? Who pulled the wires? The nearest possible answer was the mother, but there was as yet no proof for such an assumption. Further, what bearing might this physical, this motor behavior, have on the mentality of the girl? During the following lessons I noticed that Hattie often made grimaces, that she didn't take part at all in our discussions, and that she was unable to keep pace with the other students when writing notes.

I tried to construct a first outline of Hattie's mentality. I expected her mental development to be of the same "marionette" character which she presented externally, as physical behavior is closely related and interrelated with all other aspects of the personality. Somebody - or "somebodies" - was pulling the "strings of her mind." She could be expected to learn under regimentation, I reasoned, but hardly to be capable of independent judgment or of initiative of any kind. The behavior which she displayed was so very different from the average that it would strike any observer as abnormal. I overheard Hattie's classmates talking about her as being abnormal, and it did not take more than two days for her different teachers to be united in the opinion that "obviously Hattie was feeble-minded and belonged in a school for subnormal pupils. Unheard of, and definitely a crime that she was to go on in a school for normal students! Something would have to be done about it!"

"Obviously Hattie was feeble-minded!" — Was this the right diagnosis? I had serious doubts. Alfred Adler had taught that feeble-minded individuals in most cases had been unable to develop a definite pattern of life; that diagnosis meant detection of whether the individual was striving for a goal and had developed a pattern of life according to this goal. As far as I could see, Hattie had developed a definite pattern of life which seemed to be consistent and logical; logical, however, in the sense of Hattie's "private" logic.

My next step was to look up Hattie's school record. A record was kept for each child from the first to the last day of school. It was a booklet subdivided into several divisions. The first one contained birth data, etc. The next one, all available health information on the family and the child, was kept up to date by the school physician and his assisting social worker. All other parts of the record were to be filled out by the teachers. The next part contained all report cards and attendance records. The

next one was the most important one: a description of the child in psychological terms, unfortunately developed at a time when such descriptions - - in the sense of Ernest Mach's philosophy - divided the human mind into faculties of sensation, perception, memory, imagination, will, etc., and did not make a presentation of the personality as a **Gestalt**, a totality. Thus this psychological record gave only an incomplete picture of the personality. The next part was dedicated to the problem of vocation. Attached to this record was the "Parent's Questionnaire," a series of simple questions answered by the parents after the child had started school, questions concerning the social and family background of the child, his physical, mental, emotional and social development, special experiences, and abilities etc. In answering these questions, each parent was assisted by the teacher of the child.

Hattie's record was definitely discouraging - entirely negative. Taken literally it would seem that Hattie did not possess any abilities; had a very short span of attention and concentration, no memory, no learning ability, no imagination, no reasoning power; that she was socially immature, had no display of emotions, was a withdrawing type of personality, etc. Her report cards contained poor marks in all subjects but conduct. Several times she had failed at the end of the first term, but was always promoted at the end of the year, although her passing was always a dubious matter. In an interview with Hattie's previous teacher, it was revealed that her promotions could only be achieved through coaching at home.

The record on her physical development showed that she had had scarlet fever in first grade and had been out of school for several months. There were no bad after-effects, hearing and eyesight were normal. Still, Hattie had missed the time when the foundations for reading, writing, and arithmetic were laid. Looking through the Parent's Questionnaire it struck me, remembering Hattie's hoarse voice, that her mother six years ago had stated that the little girl had a nice voice and sang very well. The school record did not show any evidence of this musical ability; on the contrary it reported that Hattie did not want to sing with the girls, and that her marks in singing were poor.

I invited Hattie's mother for an interview. She was a shy woman who seemed to be easily discouraged. Hattie was so much younger than her two sisters (twenty and twenty-two years old), that she lived like an only child. The characteristics of an only child were accentuated in her case because not only the parents but the older sisters, too, concentrated their attention on her. Even more than this, since a two-year old brother had died just before Hattie's birth, she had been immensely spoiled by her

mother and by all members of the family. She demanded her mother's presence everywhere and at every hour. Mother had to sit at the crib and to hold her hand until she, the baby, fell asleep. Mother still fed and dressed Hattie when she went to grade school. The child had never been alone and had never played by herself. The sisters and their friends played with her, doing everything for her. Such home conditions explained sufficiently Hattie's typical retarded development. She did not talk until she was three and a half years old. A child whose wishes are anticipated has no need to talk. A child who is dressed, always played with, who never makes a decision for himself, who never puts his toys away, will not develop skill, reasoning power, imagination, responsibility, sense of order. The father was a business man whose business took him out of town frequently. He was only passively interested in the guidance and education of the children ("That's my wife's job"). He was, however, attached to his family and concerned about Hattie's difficulties. But he did not consider them as very serious. "There are thousands of poor students. Children sometimes have queer habits. They grow out of it. Probably her mother should be more strict!"

Hattie, as easily could be imagined, had been a very pretty little girl, much admired by all members of the family and their friends. The girls taught her the songs then in fashion (no nursery rhymes or children's songs), and those songs, mostly daring love songs, sounded so funny out of the mouth of tiny Hattie that she won an overwhelming success with each performance.

It is easily seen that Hattie lacked the important preparation of the pre-school period (the "pre-training" as it was called by Alfred Adler) that is needed for most of the later achievements. However, she learned **one** thing exceedingly well:

to focus the attention and interest of her environment on herself.

She had never attended kindergarten. Hattie took piano lessons, but showed little interest in them and made slow progress.

The first days of school must have marked a sad experience for Hattie. She found herself in a group of approximately thirty little girls, and for the first time nobody made any fuss over her. Moreover, it soon became evident that she could not meet the simple demands made on the average first-grader. She could not handle her pencil and paper, could not arrange her books and school satchel, and she expected - in accordance with her experience - to be helped with everything. Sooner or later she had to accept the first reproofs or even punishments, while she had been conditioned to receive only praise and admiration. At

the same time the other little girls seemed to fulfill the expectations of the teacher, and the teacher seemed to be pleased with them. Hattie felt confused and thwarted. Something was wrong. As Hattie was not a psychologist, she certainly could not know that her failure was mainly due to her lack of pre-training. She also was not able to formulate the following conclusion, but she **experienced** it, and was deeply convinced of its truth; so deeply that this conviction could not be shaken, and determined her future attitude toward life. This conclusion was:

The other children are smart, I am dumb. I cannot do things by myself, I need to be helped. The teacher wants me to do things alone. I don't like it; I don't like school! I want to be home, home with Mother. Mother helps me.

Let us remember that Hattie was conditioned to be the center of attention, and we will understand why and how she developed her peculiar motor behavior and grimacing. It was one way of adjustment, enabling her to satisfy her need for attention, and a perfect expression and illustration of her dependence in full accordance with her individual pattern of life.

In Vienna, it was not usual to test children. Today I naturally would have administered an intelligence test. Then I assumed that Hattie was of low intelligence. Yet I felt that her conviction of her stupidity operated as a block and prevented her successful studying, even if coached. And I felt sure that the child was **not** feeble-minded. Her life pattern was built up with well aimed logic, although her goal was based on a mistake. ("I am dumb, I cannot do things by myself.")

The main thing was to convince Hattie that she was not stupid. I realized that there was a long way to go, and that words were futile. Only some experienced success would make it possible for Hattie gradually to discard her conviction, to revise her pattern of life, to develop a constructive way of adjustment, and to give up her marionette-movements.

I have never found an individual who was not able to achieve **something**, but in Hattie's case I almost despaired. I reviewed the collected data and decided to employ Hattie's (doubtful!) musical ability. I hoped that sufficiently stimulated and encouraged, this ability might wake up from the slumber into which it had fallen more than six years ago. A success would open the way for a more direct attack on the problem.

I appealed to the other teachers asking them to give Hattie some "time" of one to three months. During this period she should not be newly discouraged through low marks and re-proofs. Whenever possible, she should experience encourage-

ment, praise, recognition. No teacher was to stress this attitude, as Hattie should not become aware of an exceptional condition. I also attempted to improve Hattie's position in her classroom community. In Hattie's absence I presented the case and was fortunate in winning the cooperation of the girls. I tried to make the individual students as well as the group as a whole responsible for Hattie's improvement in group relationship. Further, I had a private talk with one of Hattie's classmates, a natural, intelligent girl, gay, sociable, well liked. I asked her if she would like to help Hattie by trying to become her friend, and also to cooperate with me in a special project concerning Hattie. The girl was willing. The special project was that Hattie should teach her new friend at home the alto voice of a simple song. This should be Hattie's first social contribution. Up to then, she had always received, never given.

During the next singing lesson the girls were told that they were to sing the alto voice, and they discussed the involved difficulties, especially that it was hard to stick to the key and not to go off and join involuntarily with the sopranos. I suggested that a good singer should **lead** the alto group, singing loudly and pronouncing well. While I was drumming the simple tune of the alto with one finger on the piano, I asked Hattie to become this leader, as "she was a good singer." Hattie was surprised, but did not object. By now everybody knew the tune, as I had drummed it several times. However, we did **not** sing it. On the contrary, I suggested that Hattie should not only practice the alto voice at home with the piano, but should also teach it to Anne; then we would have, thanks to Hattie's efforts, **two** leaders and probably would have no serious difficulties.

The result was surprising. Hattie came well prepared to the next class. She had "trained" her friend, and did her part better than could be expected.

This success was recognized in class and carefully used in order to reach further accomplishments. Yet up to now I had not attempted to **talk** with Hattie of her difficulties. I had only prepared for such talks.

Two months after school had started, Hattie was carrying some notebooks upstairs into my room. While we were walking upstairs I chatted of her friendship with Anne, and of her splendid help with the singing class. Hattie seemed to be pleased. Lightly I remarked that I had heard that she had not been so good in singing in grade school. "Why?" I asked her. "You are such a good singer." Hattie: "**I could not sing then.**"

Now I had my starting point.

Very carefully, and only in small "doses," I made her see how she herself had developed her success in singing. (Remem-

ber when you taught Anne? How often did you **play** the tune? How often did you sing it together?" and so forth).

This first interview did not take more than a few minutes. The results were startling. Hattie moved more naturally, even her voice did not sound so hoarse as she did not talk in such a forced way. Of course, it was not the interview alone, but many factors together - the changed school atmosphere, the friendly attitude of her classmates, the cooperation of her home - which were responsible for Hattie's improvement.

After a few days I had another informal talk with Hattie. I used one of the daily class events as a starting point, steering the conversation carefully to the problem which I had planned to attack: her first school experience and her conviction of her stupidity. Again, as later on, I used the method of helping her **to find and to state her errors herself**. We talked of arithmetic, using her new experience with singing as a criterion. She found that she had never tried real hard, and never for a long period of time, as she "could not do it." It was necessary to show her with tactfulness her lack of preparation. I stressed the possibility of making up for it.

In agreement with the parents whom I met every week for an interview, I had introduced into the matter a tutor who was to handle, in close cooperation with all other parts of the treatment, the difficult job of filling the gaps in Hattie's academic knowledge. This tutoring, carefully planned and supervised, was essentially different from the useless or even dangerous tutoring experience in Hattie's grade-school years. Hattie worked with this student just one hour every afternoon, and needed help for three terms (one year and a half).

The short interviews with Hattie continued throughout the year. She was never told what to do, but always helped to win insight into her problems and to make her own decisions. Thus her erroneous pattern of life was corrected, her self confidence built up and strengthened, her outlook changed.

Hattie had been "feeble-minded" (pseudo-feeble-minded) for six years! She became an average student with normal behavior within one year and a half. She loved music, improved greatly in her piano-playing, and was the recognized music expert of her classroom. She lost her jerky movements, even her hoarse voice.

She stayed with us four years. When she left she was a well liked girl, rather quiet but sociable, her academic standing a little above average. She learned millinery, and two years later opened a smart little shop of her own, which she managed successfully.