

Intuition and Children: The Experience of Psychologists Working with Children

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Abstract

Intuition and Children: The Experience of Psychologists Working With Children Many developmental psychologists posit that children are naturally intuitive and scientific. This research examines the development of intuition in children in the context of psychotherapy. In addition, the researcher investigates the proposition that there is a difference in intuitive capacity between children who have experienced severe trauma and those who experience mild or normal levels of trauma. It is suggested that children who experienced severe trauma have increased pathology and decreased intuitive capacity and exhibit behavioral manifestations of intuition in a skewed, hyper vigilant, and sensitive manner.

Utilizing the phenomenological method a group of child psychotherapists were interviewed on their experience of children and intuition. Their attitudes, beliefs and experiences were expressed and transcribed. Participant data was coded into natural meaning units and defined as essential and aggregate descriptions.

Results suggest that intuition correlates with mutual emotional and cognitive responses in the psychologist. Children demonstrate that they intuitively know what they need to work on, where to go, and what path to follow. In addition, children seem to have a greater capacity for intuition when a mother is present in their life (both psychologically and physically). These results further suggest that there is a relationship between intuition and transference, and that the intuitive response in the child relates to progress in therapy.

It was found that children who demonstrated increased intuitive capacity are likely to have experienced decreased levels of trauma. This was demonstrated in the therapeutic relationship in their play and language, and through increased curiosity, talkativeness and the ability to have healthier levels of internal and external affective regulation.

Keywords: *Dynamic Regulation; trauma; intuition; pathology; affective regulation; balance*

Abbreviations

None known to be explained.

Introduction

Intuition is a way of comprehending perceptions in terms of past experiences, present possibilities, future goals, and unconscious processes. Intuitive children integrate new information, often including unconscious material, quickly and automatically. Definitions of

intuition vary, and clinical psychologists have attempted to explain intuitive knowledge in terms of subliminal perception, suggesting that intuition is being aware of things that we are perceiving below the threshold of conscious perception. Mindfulness evolves into and proceeds in both external and internal dimensions along lines that are intuitive. This bare attentiveness allows for an outflowing of appreciation and wonder of the present moment. When this turns inward, its functions expand to include grist for the mill of intuition. Freud once commented on this when he was addressing a group of physicians who wished to practice psychoanalysis. He advised them to keep their unconscious processes open and to maintain a measure of “calm, quiet attentiveness—of evenly hovering attention” (Freud, 1911/1959, p. 324) [4].

Purpose Statement

Intuition is a specialized knowledge. Intuitive methods have been disguised in the last decades in a multitude of ways. Because much of the usefulness and necessity of intuition has been forgotten, intuitive methods need to be reintroduced. Children desire and deserve to have the opportunity to nourish the operative activities that facilitate healthy growth and success throughout each developmental stage. Some educators have taken advantage of the intuitive method and applied them in their work.

There is a need to use intuition to deepen the therapy process and honor children by interacting and meeting them at each developmental phase. Children have the capacity to reinvent science and not only repeat what people tell them to do. Children’s development is wholly intertwined with their social environment. Thus, children are working to balance the internal social influences with the external society of individuals.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study is to understand, discover, and inquire about the psychologists’ experience of working with children in relation to intuition. My research focus is on the personal experiences of eight psychologists who work with children at the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center and the children they see in the clinic one to five times per week. These children range from 5 years of age to 12 years of age, with a minimum of 1 year of psychotherapy experience. The psychotherapists have a minimum of 1 year of clinical experience.

Relevance of the topic for clinical psychology

A literature search found no studies that examined the process of understanding the child’s experience of intuition. The field of psychology could greatly benefit from a more concrete definition of intuition from an implicit perspective. Some studies have been done on intuition, including the book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. It discusses the way we understand the world within and how we think without thinking about choices that seem to be made in an instant and that are not actually as simple as they seem, Gladwell (2005) [6] uses the term *rapid cognition* (p. 1) instead of intuition. Irving Kirsch’s (Kirsch and Lynn, 1999) [12] work on automatic processes discusses “the unbearable automaticity of behavior” (Bargh, 1992, p. 18) [1]. Bargh’s belief is that all behavior, including novel and intentional behavior, is initiated automatically. He also explored how psychotherapeutic approaches promote beneficial change through focusing on the automatic effects of response expectancies.

The purpose of the current study is twofold. The first is to investigate the process of how children access intuition and figuring out ways to access intuition to allow the fostering of a child’s sense of intuition as it develops. The second aim is to identify the essential and unique elements of the psychologists’ approach to working with children and intuition. Intuition in children is of concern to clinical psychology because it is difficult to measure the phenomenon we call intuition, to know where it comes from, when it works, and when it fails us. In the past few years, there has been a wave of interest in findings such as Gladwell’s (2005) [6] book *Blink*. Myers (2002) [15], in *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*, found that thought processes powerfully determine aspects of how we perceive, react, and make moral decisions in our life. He found that when abused, children see an angry face on a computer screen, they produce brain waves that are longer lasting and dramatically stronger than nonabused children.

Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton University psychologist, received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002 for his work on intuitive versus rational thought and its impact on economic decision making. Kahneman (2003) [10] studied intuitive judgment and decision making

in the context of two related concepts: (a) an analysis of accessibility, the ease with which thoughts come to mind; and (b) a distinction between effortless intuition and deliberate reasoning. He found that intuitive thoughts, like percepts, are highly accessible, and explains prospect theory, framing effects, the heuristic process of attribute substitution, and the characteristic biases. A cognitive psychologist at Yale University, John Bargh, calls intuition “automatic processing” (1992, p. 462) [1]. His belief is that there are automatic influences on behavioral and psychological processes. These researchers are working on defining intuition and finding when the phenomenon of intuition works or fails us and what it really is us (Bargh, 1992) [1].

Materials and Methods

Methodology

Research Approach

This study addresses the following research question: What is the experience of psychologists working with the intuitive processes of children? The study approaches the research question from a phenomenological research orientation, investigating and analyzing the lived experience of psychotherapists and their experience of children who are in therapy and who experience intuition. The experience of intuition is something we access daily, some of us with greater ease and awareness and others in a less conscious way.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research is the “process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1994, p. 15) [2]. A phenomenological qualitative approach to science aspires to report the philosophical perspective of the lived experience, to focus on a single phenomenon, and to extract themes to understand the structure of experience. The phenomenological method captures meaning through confronting experience directly and without bias. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) [3] define qualitative research as “multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means the researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2).

Phenomenology supports the healing effect of connecting with our experience. Husserl (1913/1931) [9] felt that we are dealing with a disease of modern time that describes a deep sense of loss of perspective and disconnection in our approach to research. Phenomenological research strives to discover and recognize in-depth the lived experience using nonintrusive, noninterpretive descriptions through the use of diverse methods. These include interviews, discussions, and participant observations. The goal of phenomenological qualitative research is to develop rich depictions of experience while being true to the meaning distinctively given by participants. Qualitative research is a complex, holistic picture that takes the reader into multiple dimensions of a problem or issue and displays it in all of its complexity. (Creswell, 1994, p. 15).

Overall, the characteristics of qualitative research include (a) a natural setting as a source of data, (b) the researcher is a key instrument of data collection, (c) data is collected as words or pictures, (d) outcome as process rather than product, (e) analysis of data inductively, (f) attention to particulars, (g) focus on participants’ perspectives (their meaning), and (h) use of expression language and persuasion by reason. Phenomenology attempts to get beyond the immediately experienced meanings in order to articulate the prereflective level of lived meaning to make the invisible visible (Kvale, 1996, p. 53) [13].

This study is a “‘caring interaction’ (a sophisticated network organization of various messages from clients and pieces of knowledge in the related field of which may be issued from the persons who care for them)” (Katai, Kawakami, Shiose, and Notsu, 2001, p. 279) [11]. The use of phenomenological data analysis was used to compile the data (Moustakas, 1994) [14]. Husserl (1913/1931) [9] emphasizes many essential elements of phenomenological research. Researchers are searching for the essence and underlying meaning of experience that emphasizes an intentionality of consciousness, where there is a respect for the inward and outward perspectives based on memory,

image, and meaning (Moustakas, 1994) [14]. Phenomenology is the logos of phenomenon/phenomena. Logos is the translation from speaking and phenomenon is translated as what appears. Phenomenology is being attentive to the speaking of the world and a practice of being naïve again. Children are a naturally born phenomenon, thus being complementary to the research using phenomenological as its research method. Phenomenology and intuition are intertwining in a place of reverie, which provides the capacity to idle away time without being concerned. It is a fidelity to experience, and it transforms space into place through a person's action.

Assumptions

Phenomenology's main approach is to "suspend all judgments and utilize the 'natural attitude'" (Husserl, 1913/1931, p. 110) [9]. Husserl calls this suspension an epoche. We are not separating reality by objects and subjects and this, therefore, shifts the Cartesian duality toward a deeper meaning of an object that surfaces in consciousness (Creswell, 1994). The main essence during the collected interviews is to strive towards an attitude of openness that allows a deeper understanding to emerge during the interview process. There is a focus on the nuances of the participants' worlds as they share their own lived experience. The researcher states any preconceptions, agendas, or bias they might have toward the phenomenon. This ensures that the researcher's own hypothesis or agenda will not be imposed on the verbatim testimony, and it is done through maintaining an attitude of openness at all times. Recognizing assumptions and being respectful of them grants the researcher the ability to discover all aspects of the phenomenon.

Research Methodology

The research examined the lived experience of intuition. The study's intent is not to characterize the nature of or to uncover facts, but to get deeper into what it is like for people who are going through this state. This art of understanding creates an approach to the research method that uses transference of the researcher to the topic; the researcher and topic are together in the imaginal field, and this allows imagination to participate in the work. This study utilizes open-ended questions to gather data, uses words to describe phenomena, recognizes the importance of context, uses an inductive analytic process, and verifies results by systematically checking them against raw data (Hill, Thompson, and Williams, 1997) [8].

The research method that is the most compatible and that captures the essence of experience is the best match for studying intuition and children. This study utilizes the lived experience of the psychologists' experience of working with the intuitive processes of children. The research criteria include (a) coherence of the results, (b) representativeness of the sample, (c) trustworthiness of the method, (d) testimonial validity, (e) replicability across samples, and (f) applicability of the results. The author will discuss implications for practice, research, and training (Hill et al., 1997) [8].

Each participant's verbatim testimony follows Giorgi's (1985) [5] methodology of identifying core theories and the essence of meanings that arise when data is being collected for the study. This encourages the psychologist to explore the participants' experience during the interviews. Then, transcribing the phenomenological data from the videotape allows each testimony to be reread to obtain an overall gestalt. The interview information gathered was saved into data files for organization and sharing the information. Phenomenological data analysis goes through the methodology of reduction by analyzing specific statements and themes to search for all possible meanings. The interview transcripts were read, margin notes were made, and initial codes formed. The researcher's experience relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain an overall gestalt. A description is provided of the meaning of the experience for the researcher. Then statements of meaning were found and listed, and meaning units were made into group statements.

Moustakas (1994) [14] breaks down the reporting approach for phenomenology that encompasses research procedures, significant statements, meanings of statements, themes of meanings, and an exhaustive description of phenomenon. Other essential philosophical tenets include returning to the Greek conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom, to suspend all judgments with a "natural attitude" called epoche, and have an intentionality of consciousness.

Participants

The focus of my research was on the personal experiences of psychologists. Eight psychologists who work with children were enlisted for participation in this study. Participants were recruited from the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center in Los Angeles, California. To facilitate the recruitment process, James Incorvaia, PhD, of the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center, invited psychologists to participate.

The psychologists were required to hold a doctoral degree in clinical psychology or an equivalent psychologically prepared appointment. They also were required to have had 1 year of clinical experience working with children. The criteria for participation included the psychologists' psychological ability and keenness to discuss their experience as well as their availability for follow-up questions. They were supervised on their caseload and seeing children at the center one to three times per week. These children ranged from 5 to 12 years of age and they were proscribed as not being psychotic or suffering from a pervasive developmental disorder. Prior to the initial interview, a letter of invitation to participate in this study was sent (see Appendix B). Subjects were also requested to read and sign an informed consent (see Appendix B).

Research Procedures

A clinical psychology doctoral candidate served as the interviewer for all eight interviews for this study. A pilot interview conducted, and the input from those interviews was used to help the interviewer determine an interview protocol for content and clarity. The participants for this study were recruited from the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center in Los Angeles, California. I met with the Clinical Director and the Director of Training to determine whether the subjects fit the participation criteria. Once a fit were determined, I informed the subject of the participation requirements via a letter of invitation. If the subject agreed to participate in the study, a mutually acceptable time and location was determined for a meeting to conduct the interview. Relevant forms were signed prior to the interview, including the Ethics Committee Approval (Appendix A), the Letter of Invitation/Informed Consent (Appendix B), and Consent Form (Interview Project) (Appendix C). The participants met in their office on the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center campus, where they were interviewed in a semistructured setting for approximately 90-120 minutes. The protocol included asking participants to openly discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

Each interview began with the same questions in order to work to understand the participants in more depth, thereby leading to a deeper understanding of their lived experience. Each psychologist was interviewed individually and given a copy of the definition of intuition used in the study and also of each question they would be asked in their interview. The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed by the principal investigator. The hope was to allow the psychologists to elaborate on their experiences for the duration of the interview. All of the questions of the interview emphasized the children's intuitive capacities with the psychologist they are talking to or playing with in a therapeutic setting and not necessarily other parts of their past experiences. The closing questions focused on how each psychologist was affected by the interview and what suggestions or input they each had. This included how the questions could have been asked differently for future studies.

Procedures for gathering data

Data gathering is an iterative process that follows the contrast and comparison of participants' meanings with one another to produce a social construct. In order to standardize the procedure, during the meeting with each participant the following steps were explained in order for them to have full knowledge of the participation requirements.

1. The participant reviewed the letter of invitation and informed consent form (Appendix B).
2. The researcher then asked the participant whether they had any questions regarding the study and the informed consent form.
3. The participant then gave back the signed informed consent form.
4. The researcher explained the definition of intuition and the focus of the study and then asked to hear the participant's definition of intuition.

5. The researcher then asked if the participant or subject was ready to begin answering the interview questions.
6. The participant received typed copies of the interview questions to supplement the verbal questions.

Procedures for analyzing data

Data gathering was from the psychologists' semistructured set of interviews. The psychologists' observations and lived experience of the presentation and use of intuition in the child during the sessions served as the primary data analyzed. Themes and meaning units from the sessions provided a source for coding the interviews. Data analysis followed using standard procedures. After reviewing the data, an analysis occurred of the themes of the interviews to create a synthesis. The analysis defines a mixture of themes and recognizes the participants' experience. Natural meaning units define their relationship to the topic in transforming the information into themes and any further elaboration. These meaning units were then broken down into domains, core ideas, and cross-analysis. To ensure credibility, verbatim statements were thoroughly reviewed, and the participants were given the opportunity to examine the information and determine the accuracy of the themes and inferences.

Results and Discussion

An Overview of the Significant Findings

A thoughtful, comprehensive, well-integrated discussion of the meaning or significance of these findings and themes has been woven into a complete description of what conditions are necessary for intuition to emerge. As the research indicates, children have a way of knowing of what is important to work on and a sense of where their problems are or what the issues are in their life. An individual's intuition is related to defensiveness and projection and is congenital (built in like temperament). The psychologists shared their sense of a child's capacity for intuition and how it varies with defensiveness. It was also found how regression and the effects of trauma affected intuitive capacity. An emotional fit between psychologist and child was found to affect the ways in which the child accepts the interpretation. There was diversity in each participant's sense of what intuition is and that it is not easily defined; it is monomythic and monocular.

Jean Piaget is still considered by many educational systems to be the leader in understanding human development. All of his contributions to psychology were made from existential phenomenological research, as was done in this study. The way we conceive science in our world has been leaving behind observation as a research method for rigid laboratory methods. Researching the lived experience of children from the psychologist's perspective weaves together the existential of lived space, time, body, and the relationship to others. Human science research of development is a mosaic of many facets that deserve to be studied with respect to the individual and collective experiences as well as using the observations of expert scientists. Piaget defined children's social levels of sensory contact and developmental milestones. His concept of accommodation and assimilation cycles relates to the levels of integration and homeostasis internally and externally. A child's ability to utilize intuition provides accurate and appropriate conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships (Piaget, 1929/1967, p. 215) [17]. Piaget (1945/1951) [18] felt that the balance of assimilation and accommodation moves each of us toward equilibrium of the two. As children transform to grow rather than act defensively, creativity is abundant and flourishing. The child then is operating in the world as a natural scientist.

Intuition is the ability to organize and integrate internal schemas and external stimuli in a process that results in a sudden knowledge that carries a conviction of truth based on experience and acquired through sensory contact with another. It also has components of understanding the world and what is around us, without always being able to put it into words. It is the ability to be attuned to oneself and be able to understand and know how to recognize this sensitivity.

The relationship between psychologist and child involves an intention on the part of the psychologist to work toward the emotional health of the child. In considering the many facets that are involved in accomplishing this, it is essential to acknowledge our attitude and beliefs. In therapy, the transference emerges and there is a hope of understanding as well as intimacy, rejection, and yearning. This process displaces the previous external relationships of importance from the child's past onto the psychologist. These factors remind us

of the need to not fall into routine and restrained ways of relating to the patient or child and to continue to search for *aletheia* (truth) (Van Manen, 1990) [20]. *Aletheia* in the human sciences is seen as something that is hidden or needs to be uncovered and shared through personal experiences or understandings.

Conclusion

My journey to understand children and intuition began many years ago. It is a culmination beginning at or before my birth, learned through socialization, including years of education and personal experience. The strong yearning to understand children and how they relate to others from psychoanalytic and neuropsychological perspectives provided the soundboard necessary for future studies and applications of this dissertation research. A combination of personal experiences is paired with those of the psychologists and children who were part of this study, and those who may find guidance or possible enlightenment through the findings of this study. I feel extremely proud to have had the opportunity to work with psychologists at the internationally acclaimed Reiss-Davis Child Study Center as well as to integrate depth and clinical psychological viewpoints learned from Pacifica Graduate Institute [16] into a gently woven tapestry of personal experiences and helpful, applicable findings.

Children are an inspiration and should be honored, appreciated, and valued if we are to ever find world peace and treat one another with dignity and respect. As the years have gone by, so many of my personal experiences have lent a hand to this research study. The birth of my son allowed for first-hand experiences of the mother-child bond and attachment and the crucial developmental milestones and how they appear. Personal traumas were reevaluated and placed on a continuum of a spectrum that facilitated healing. Therefore, the application of the dissertation onto my own life and those who I have or will clinically work with is immensely fruitful. My goal is to turn this research into a book that can be clearly and simply applied and understood in working with the therapeutic process related to healthy development of children. This study has given me the opportunity to see the wide variety of realities we are all experiencing and how they interconnect on many levels. Intuitive and intuitiveness relate to each of us as individuals and collectively. My ancestors call out to me, and the messages that they are sending are important enough to them to transcend time. The root of the Hebrew word *Bet-Nun-Heh* (built) is very similar to the word *Bet-Yod-Nun-Heh*, meaning intuition. It also translates to understanding and insight. My ancestors are sending me the things that they have learned in their lives, and principles that include ethics, caring, sensitivity, patience, and understanding of how things evolve and grow.

It is important to know and understand how and why people function the way they do. How does our brain work? How does trauma affect children? Will there be a way to apply it globally? This intuitive love for humanity and inherent optimism permeates into both making it unique and estimable. Those thoughts and feelings were taken from notes written in the beginning phases of determining what was essential about me studying intuition and children. As destiny would have it, the privilege was given to me to have the opportunity to work with psychologists at the Louis B. Mayer Research and Treatment Center at the Reiss-Davis Child Study Center to understand first hand how children progress in therapy via intuitive capacity of the psychologist.

My analysis gathered from the interviews has been organized into themes that were woven throughout all of those psychologists interviewed. The findings were as follows: Intuition may have a mutual aspect, coupled with emotional or cognitive responses in the psychologist. Children demonstrate a greater capacity for intuition when there is a mother present in their life (both psychologically and physically). The appearance of intuitive response in the child does relate to progress in therapy. The intuitive response in the child relates to increased curiosity. Transference responses are intuitively based, vibrant, colorful, sensory information creators that facilitate an emotional connection, unconscious processing, and the energy for the transference in the therapeutic relationship. Intuition is an unconscious knowing that children will follow the direction toward healing and know unconsciously where issues are and demonstrate this in their play; children intuitively know what they need to do. Children demonstrate that they know where to go and what path to follow (Grotstein's Truth Drive) [7]. Intuition and transference are not separated.

Living a life of increased intentional learning, which is based on a combination of experience, problem definition, and action, brings us towards a transitioning of beliefs. The more uncertain an individual feels, the more defensive their tools are to justify, rationalize, and explain another's views. Intuitive capacity ultimately provides for responsibility (response able) for a child and the psychologist's life in their ability to make healthy, balanced choices. Self-awareness is a foundation of psychological health and well-being. The therapeutic transference supports the child's intuitive capacity with an intention that allows for relaxation, time, silence, honesty, receptivity, sensitivity, nonverbal play, trust, openness, courage, acceptance, love, nonattachment to our set beliefs, daily practice, support, and enjoyment. Intuition results in an alpha brain-wave rhythm of "eight to thirteen cycles per second" and "is associated with a state of relaxed, diffuse awareness" (Vaughn, 1979, p. 95) [21-23].

Intuition requires a transformation via alpha-function that translates into a depth oriented, complex approach in the way a psychologist relates to their patient. This study looked at the lived experience of the psychologist working with their own and the child's intuition via transference. The healing that can take place lies within physical, intrapsychic, physiological, neurological, conscious/subconscious/unconscious, collective, and psychological homeostasis. Psychotherapy can facilitate this through the corrective emotional experience and reconfiguring of our central nervous system to respond to stress and trauma in new, intuitive ways. This strengthens both the child's development as well as the psychologist's internal and external health toward reparative acts. It is an honor to have the experience of working with those in witnessing my own personal healing throughout this journey. In understanding myself, I can be a better psychologist, mother, individual, and part of the collective unconscious. Spreading waves of intuition sends peaceful, healing reverberations toward our journey in this world and within each of us.

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Conflict of Interest

None known to exist.

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