



AXLINE'S CASE STUDY OF DIBS (1964)

Aim: To see if the use of Axline's play therapy could help Dibs

Axline's (1964) aim was to help Dibs, a small child locked in his own world. His behaviour troubled teachers at the private school he was attending, and so they asked Axline, a clinical psychologist if she could help. Her aim was to help Dibs find a way to express himself and to 'unlock' his personality. The entire case study is easy to read and has been published in a book by Penguin Books. The book is called *Dibs in Search of Self*.

One key thing to note is that this case study was not done by Axline to provide evidence of the Psychodynamic Approach, nor does it even mention any Freudian concepts or anything to do with the psychosexual theory.

Background

Dibs was referred to Axline when he was five years old because he was displaying a range of disturbed behaviour. At school, he played alone, attacking other children that tried to interact with him, and becoming particularly violent with adults when anyone tried to take him home. His father was a scientist and his mother a surgeon who had given up practice when he was born. Dibs' parents had not wanted children and saw his birth as having ruined the mother's career and as an annoyance to the father. They resented the boy and found it hard to relate to him. He had a younger sister with whom there seemed to be no problems, although she was sent away to school at an early age.

Dibs' parents thought that his problems were due to a biological issue, such as brain damage or retardation, but his teachers believed he could be suffering from some sort of emotional-behavioural disorder.

Procedure

After watching Dibs in the classroom, Axline gained permission from his mother to conduct weekly **play therapy** sessions with the boy. During these sessions, Dibs' behaviour was observed and notes were taken. The data that are analysed would come mainly from these sessions. However, Dibs' mother also visited Axline, who then had other data to draw upon. In the main, Axline did not ask questions, she waited for input from Dibs, the school and parents.

Axline allowed Dibs to say or do whatever he felt comfortable with. She did not interpret what he said or wanted, to ensure that she did not push his thoughts or actions into a specific direction dictated by herself. She wanted Dibs to discover his own personality.

Case description

When the therapy began, Dibs' behaviour was unmanageable and difficult for both the family and the school. Not wanting to go home was one of the main difficulties. At school, he hid under desks or crawled around the edge of the room and did not mix with children or teachers. He looked at books and turned the pages at a speed that suggested he might be reading them, but the teachers were unable to tell if he could read or not.

However, throughout the therapy, it was discovered that Dibs was actually a very intelligent and gifted child. His speech was mature, and he could read, write and spell well in advance for his age. It took the duration of the therapy to reveal Dibs' abilities. Eventually, he moved to a school for gifted children where he thrived.

As it turned out, the main problem for Dibs seemed to be the excessive testing and teaching by his mother, who expected him to always answer correctly and to learn the order of things. Another problem was his father's apparent lack of love for him and his pressure on him not to be 'stupid'.

An example of speech recorded by Dibs, when playing with finer paints, is "Oh come away Dibs. It is a very silly kind of paint. Come away!" This was one example which showed something about the relationship Dibs had with his father. A further example occurred in the play therapy. Dibs buried a toy soldier, which he referred to as 'Papa', in the sand and built a mountain of sand over it so that it would remain buried. Additionally, Dibs would often lock the Papa soldier away.

Dibs frequently mentioned his disliking of locked doors and walls.

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Case analysis

Axline did not interpret Dibs' words during the therapy sessions as she wanted him to work through his feelings himself. She does not mention the psychodynamic approach in the case study, but Dibs' behaviour could be interpreted in terms of the id, the ego and the superego. The id part of his personality was the demanding part which needed gratification. This was overpowered by the superego, the controlling part. The ego should have balanced these demands, but it was overwhelmed and therefore not able to do so.

Axline felt it important to tell Dibs the truth and not make promises that might not materialise, and to not impose any ideas on him. This is because, for example, the play therapy sessions lasted for an hour each time, so she would warn Dibs when there was five minutes remaining and tell him that was when he would be leaving her. This is because when he was told to go home, he would have a tantrum and hide under the desk. This gave him a chance to prepare himself for leaving.

The focus on not liking to be locked away is real, rather than symbolic, because it refers to when Dibs' father used to lock him in his room. Burying the Papa soldier seems to translate to Dibs getting rid of his father, to whom Dibs would usually show anger – and that anger was real, and extreme. The mother and sister had their own dolls too for Dibs to play with. The mother doll and sister doll would be placed, not buried, so the anger was less extreme, but Dibs still exhibited some anger towards them. Dibs would refer to the dolls as the "father, mother and sister dolls" so the symbolism there was not hidden.

There was no mention of the Oedipus complex in the case study, and Axline does not suggest that this is what could have been the case, but Dibs was around five years of age during the study, and so the Oedipus complex could be used to explain these actions from a psychodynamic viewpoint.

Part of the solution to the problems came about when the parents realised they had a part to play and took an active part in the 'healing'. Dibs' mother started to teach him to read, even though he had been able to do so from the age of two, because she feared that he was not mentally able. This overstimulation Dibs was being forced to experience was part of the problem. The mother's relationship with the boy improved whenever she showed him that she loved him, and stopped testing his abilities all the time. The boy's relationship with the father improved when the father eventually showed Dibs that he loved him and listened to him.

The term **catharsis** is used to describe the bringing of repressed ideas into the consciousness. This can be applied to the case study of Dibs because it can help to explain how the play therapy worked. He seemed to go home a happier child and eventually found the balance he needed.

Conclusions

The three parts of Freud's personality model can be used to help analyse Dibs, but the Oedipus complex is not really helpful because the problems were real, not symbolic. However, the problems could be argued to be locked away in the unconscious. The play therapy allowed Dibs to act out his fears and frustrations. By acting them out, he seemed to get rid of them. This cathartic effect seemed to be effective because Dibs went home a happier child and found the balance he needed. Axline refers to this as Dibs finding his 'self'. His parents helped the process by working through some of their fears about Dibs' abilities and their own problems, and then focusing on aiding the healing process of Dibs.

Evaluation

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| ✓ qualitative, detailed data, including Dibs' actual words are provided | ✗ difficult to test for reliability as Dibs will never be the same again so the study cannot be replicated |
| ✓ uses many different research methods (e.g. interviews, observations and play therapy) so there is an opportunity to test for validity | ✗ difficult to apply theory to the study (although there are links to certain features, e.g. the role of the unconscious, the need to allow catharsis and the appropriateness of the id, ego and superego) |