
THE SECRET WORLDS OF ADULTS AND CHILDREN

by

John Stear

This piece has been written specifically in response to certain ideas regarding the creation of a secret world in children, and is based mainly on my own experience and observation of children and adults.

"Children" is used here to mean young persons who are functioning before the stage of "formal concrete operations" in thought, described by Piaget. This is by no means a sharply outlined developmental phase and the age at which is reached varies between individuals, in general before the ages of 9 to 12.

The processes inherent in any creation of a "reality view" are loosely compatible with the "worlds" or systems of "personal constructs" proposed by G.R. Kelly. However, this view has evolved without recourse to the specific terminology of Kelly's theory.

In the case of interaction between adults and children a tendency is for 'secret' worlds to arise as a mutual and logical response to the interactive content.

Adults often converse between themselves using concepts which are unfamiliar to the child, technical concepts an obvious example. The terms with which technical concepts

are expressed are often learned late in life by the adult, often as a specific result of training for an occupation or exposure to unusual circumstances (eg. specific therapeutic models which use a specialised language).

This idea of unfamiliar concepts can be extended quite naturally to the field of 'relationships'. The adult has encountered a number of interrelationship possibilities amongst adults which will often be quite unknown to the child.

The difference here exists in the fact that although the adult has 'experienced' the subtleties and possibilities of these relationships, an adequate language has not been formulated to deal with them. Adults themselves may be confused where emotional or sexual themes arise, partly as a result of what I will term "generational tradition". In other words the specific thematic confusion will often be passed on the children of succeeding generations in some form.

This idea will be explored more thoroughly in another piece of work but for the present it will be used as a stated assumption.

When adults are talking and a child is present and wishing to participate in

the interchange, the child may be given responses which may be subsumed under the general title "Oh - Isn't he cute! "

The actual responses may include variants such as "You're really too young to understand, dear", "Can't you get on with something else while we're talking?", "Mind your own business" or simply "Shut up!"

It is almost certain that in most cases of this kind, a psychological distortion is occurring in the mind of the adult whereby his internalised confusion is being projected onto the child.

Thus the "actual" form of the general statement is something more like "I don't really understand what we're talking about, so there is no chance that you're going to!" Children intuitively "grasp" that the adult is being "exclusive" and "protective", and generalize that their own experience of adults have a "secret" world which they are excluded from for an incomprehensible reason (though an undefined part of their total being also "grasps" the element of confusion that lies behind the adult stance).

The child will then, either by himself or in company with other children, begin to form "secret worlds", which will operate exclusively from adult worlds and will signify to the child that in some sense he is "growing up" - achieving mental independence.

Adults may regard this process with favour as it releases them from uncomfortable interactions with the child. Each generation can now justify their own "worlds" on the

basis of the existence of the other. The long term manifestations of this policy finds colloquial recognition in the term "generation gap" - a term which acknowledges the "fact" that old and young will never be able to understand each other.

In the micro-society of the family it manifests over years of adolescence as a tension between the young and the old which is released (but not resolved) when the children leave home.

The mistrust engendered by this process permeates everywhere in Western Culture. Adults connive in the field of shared and formal operations in thought which are generally projected on to the material world of objects. However, the existence of the secret worlds of childhood are not only concealed from other adults, but are even concealed from the Self.

Only a breakdown of belief in the existing way that we function in society may enable special situation such as therapy or self-exploration that can reveal the existence of this fantastic muddle.

Antithesis

Trust must be engendered between children and significant adults by allowing the child to enter fully into the adult world. Adults must realise that their own conditioning is likely to encourage the construction of secret worlds, and must take all steps possible to investigate the way this happens.

And children should have the situation explained to them.

The work of such educationalists as John Holt and Rachel Pinney can be seen as the practical application of re-entry procedures into the exclusive worlds of children and adults. Generally, children will remain more flexible, and more ready to lower the barriers of their secret worlds.

However it will take an adult initiative to reverse the existing situation. This will need loving persistence and will call for an increased sensitivity to the "shape" of the child's thought. It will require patience and a readiness to listen to the words of the child, which may be far more rich in meaning than the

equivalent adult conversation.

Know thyself to know others
Know others to know thyself

The rewards are beyond measure.

Bibliography

D. Bannister - The Evolution of Personal Constructs"

John Holt - "How Children Learn" and "How Children Fail" - Penguin

K. Lowell - "An Introduction to Human Development" Macmillan-1971

COURSES AND CONFERENCES

Basic Training Course in Individual Psychotherapy; Location, Bath. Leaders Peter Hawkins, Alix Pirani, Judy Ryde. Information from 01794 5191: 0225 833657

Counselling Course in Bath with Judy Ryde, Anthony Elman, Peter Hawkins. Details: 0225 833657

Love and Sexuality - First European Residential Training. 19th July - 1st August, in Sierra Nevada near Granada, Southern Spain. Details from the Institute for Channel Clearing, 70 Westwood Park, Forest Hill, London SE23 3QH. (01) 699 2066

F.D.J. BRITAIN - July 26 - August 2 - The thirteenth cross-cultural summer workshop on the person-centred approach to working with individuals and groups. Fatima House Conference Centre, Coodham, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland.

AHP Annual Conference. Vision and Reality at Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire. Details, offers of presentations and bookings to: Judith Furner, AHP Conference (S&S), 63 Vicarage Road, Hastings, TN34 3LZ. (0424) 436637