

Psychology – Injunctions and Attributions

Psychology helps explain some of the thoughts and actions of the characters in my books. In my writing, I don't always harken back to childhood development for them, but I like to slip in an understanding of why they behave as they do.

Often our beliefs, motivations, and perhaps most importantly, our behaviors grow out of our family environments, experienced in childhood. And more often than not, the childhood factors that influence us are unconscious. I will certainly agree that not all actions, not all the time, and not all people are driven by such forces. After all, there is something to be said for the nature side of the nature/nurture question. Some are just born to be pre-disposed to particular courses of action. But I would argue that how we are raised, the messages we receive, what we observe, hear, and experience, chiefly from our parents, is one of the largest determinant of the life paths most of us follow. These patterns are called scripts.

There are other factors that can deeply affect a growing child of course. The most fundamental is the provision of safety and nurturance as experienced by the child. This is part of what we mean by parental love and, when present and consistent, children grow up feeling safe make more independent choices as adults. But when absent or inconsistent, they can spend a lifetime searching for it.

Another critical influence is the validation of the child as a separate individual, with their own ideas and feelings. This is known as differentiation, becoming a person, separate from the parents, and it is essential to a child's growth. But differentiation, safety and nurturance are topics for future essays. In this post, I will talk about messages, i.e., scripts.

So what are some of these life-forming messages? In a field of psychology called Transactional Analysis, there are two categories.

Injunctions are prohibitions or negative commands from a parent (often outside their awareness). They are expressions of disappointment, frustration, anxiety and unhappiness which come out of the parent's own pain. For example: Don't argue; Don't be you (the sex you are); Don't be a child; Don't grow; Don't make it; Don't be important; Don't be close; Don't belong. Children who receive these negative messages often fulfil them as adults.

Then there are **attributions**. An attribution tells the child what he or she is, must do, or must be. Unlike injunctions, which are limiting, attributions load the child with what is expected or wanted of him or her. Their content may be positive or negative. The child is told what he is. For example: You are stupid, You are my little girl, You're the smart one, You're very musical, etc. These are examples of attributions spoken directly to the child. They also affect the child if he/she overhears the parent telling them to others, e.g. My Janie is my prettiest daughter.

Let me add that not all parents manifest difficult messages like these to their children. But many, if not most, do. The power of these messages depends in large part on how they are delivered and how often they are delivered. The more emotion included with messages like these, the more power they have, and the more rooted they become in the child's psyche. "You are stupid" accompanied by a harsh tone and a smack is much different than those same words accompanied by a smile and a hug. The more forceful a message, the more it differs from the child's actual wishes, the more destructive it will be to that child in later life.

All right, how does this all relate to my writing? As I have indicated, I think we are frequently the product of our parents' injunctions and attributions. Our family environment, the messages we receive during childhood, often explain subsequent deviant, destructive, and anti-social behavior. So, without getting pedantic, I like to occasionally explain the source of some of my characters' behaviors. I think that makes them more interesting and believable.