Instructor’s Manual
for
OBJECT RELATIONS THERAPY
WITH
JILL SAVEGE SCHARFF, MD
from the series
PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH THE EXPERTS
with hosts
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by
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&
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The Instructor’s Manual accompanies the DVD Object Relations Therapy with Jill Savege Scharff, MD (Institutional/Instructor’s Version). Video available at www.psychotherapy.net.

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Instructor’s Manual for Object Relations Therapy with Jill Savege Scharff, MD

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# Instructor’s Manual for

**OBJECT RELATIONS THERAPY**

WITH **JILL SAVEGE SCHARFF, MD**

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS
Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference; the next time you show the video you will have them available. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during the video and post-viewing.

2. PREPARE VIEWER’S BEFOREHAND
Share information with viewers from the section Scharff’s Approach to Object Relations Therapy so that they have a sense of where Scharff is coming from in this session and where she is going.

3. GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions provide ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussions and learning.

4. LET IT FLOW
Allow the session to play out some so viewers can appreciate the work over time instead of stopping the video too often. It is best to watch the video in its entirety since issues untouched in earlier parts often play out later. Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect! What do viewers think works and does not work in the session? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes and it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

5. REFLECT ON REFLECTIONS
In object relations therapy, the therapist’s inner process in relation to the client is one of the most important tools of the trade. After watching the video, hand out copies of Scharff’s Reflections on the Session, giving participants an inside view of the associations, reflections and other countertransferential reactions that go on for Scharff during her work with this client.
6. SUGGEST READINGS TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL
Assign readings from Suggestions for Further Readings and Websites prior to viewing. You can also time the video to coincide with other course or training materials on related topics.

7. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER
See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

8. ROLE-PLAY IDEAS
After watching the video, organize participants into pairs. Assign each group to role-play an individual therapy session using Scharff’s object relations therapy approach. The participants playing the client may resemble the client in the video, or you can create different scenarios, and you can even have pairs switch roles if time permits. After the role-plays, have the groups come together to discuss their experiences. First have the clients share their experiences, then have the therapists talk about their experiences in the session. Finally, open up a general discussion on what participants learned about object relations therapy.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one client; the entire group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session with the client. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion that explores what does and does not seem effective about Scharff’s approach.

9. WATCH THE EXPERT SERIES
This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application. Each video in the series presents a master therapist working with a real client who has real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Experts series (See the More Videos section for a complete list of the videos in
the series), you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.

**More Videos with this Client:** In this video, Dr. Scharff works with a client named Phil. Phil is featured as a client in another video in this *Experts* series: *Family Systems Therapy with Kenneth V. Hardy, PhD.* It can be particularly enlightening for viewers to watch these two therapists work with the same client to see how their styles, personalities and theoretical orientations play out differently. If you have viewers write a **Reaction Paper** – see number 7, above – you can ask them to also address what differences they notice in how Scharff and Hardy work with Phil, and how these differences affect the outcomes of the two sessions.

**Therapy Theories and Models:** A theory is a framework that helps us understand something or explains how something works. Just as there are many different people and personalities, there are different theories of understanding how people live and how change occurs, each with its own guidelines for understanding and procedures for operation. The primary differences between these theories are related to the relative importance each theory places on cognitive (thinking), behavioral (doing), and affective (feeling) factors. We might also add the roles of the interpersonal, family, social, cultural and political worlds. And finally, to what extent does the theory focus on problems vs. solutions, the past, the present and/or the future?

Other videos in the series use different therapeutic models. We can reflect upon the differences among these models by exploring the following questions:

- How does the model explain the therapeutic process?
- What assumptions does the model imply about the purpose of therapy?
- How is theory translated into practice in real-life situations?
- What is the role of the therapist?
- How does the therapist build an alliance with the client(s)?
- What outcomes are associated with successful therapy?
10. PERSPECTIVE ON VIDEOS AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE THERAPIST

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists or clients in videos may be nervous, putting their best foot forward, or trying to show mistakes and how to deal with them. Therapists may also move more quickly than is typical in everyday practice to demonstrate a technique. The personal style of a therapist is often as important as their techniques and theories. Thus, while we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, participants must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

*A NOTE ON PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Because this video contains an actual therapy session, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the client who has courageously shared his personal life with us.
Scharff’s Approach to Object Relations Therapy

The term object relations refers to the internal psychic structures of self that develop during our earliest attachment relationships. Object relations theory is an outgrowth of psychoanalytic theory and offers an understanding of unconscious process, both as a significant aspect of our early development and as a continuing dynamic played out over the course of a lifetime. For object relations psychotherapist Jill Scharff, MD, the infant’s primary need is to be in relationship. Within the relationship with the primary caregiver(s) the infant learns to relate to the world, and to construct meaning. Our continued development is organized around the dynamic of this early experience of relationship.

As an object relations therapist, Scharff is interested in creating a safe psychological space and prefers an unscripted process where she can follow changes in affect. She stays intensely focused on the process of the therapeutic relationship and notices how her own internal objects reverberate with the patient. Her countertransference provides direction for working with the internal life of the patient and guides her interventions. For Scharff, the process of the therapeutic relationship provides the context from which psychological work can proceed.

Generally speaking, object relations therapy is a long-term process and requires a committed and motivated patient. However, the concept of object relations can be useful in any type of therapy. The focus is not just symptom relief but change that sustains over time, including a decrease in self-defeating behavior and a more adaptive sense of internal object relations. Because object relations therapy has its basis in the understanding of relationship it is also well suited for work with couples and groups. In these contexts the focus would include the interplay of internal objects between the couple, or among the group members.
Reaction Paper for Classes and Training

Video: *Object Relations Therapy with Jill Savege Scharff, MD*

- **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
- **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards, or use the questions as a way to approach the discussion. Respond to each question below.
- **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be brief and concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief reaction paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What stands out in how Scharff works with this client? Note any key or turning point interventions. What important points did you learn about object relations therapy?

2. **What I found most helpful:** What was most beneficial to you as a therapist about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/strategies did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working? Explore these questions.

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently than Scharff in the therapy session in the video? Be specific in what different approaches, strategies and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy in the video? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?
Suggestions for Further Readings, Websites and Videos

**BOOKS**


WEB RESOURCES
Psychotherapy.net Interviews with Owen Renik and Otto Kernberg on psychoanalysis
   wwwpsychotherapy.net
The International Psychotherapy Institute
   www.theipi.org
Psychoanalytic Psychology
   www.apa.org/journals/pap/homepage.html
The Melanie Klein Trust
   www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk

RELATED VIDEOS AVAILABLE AT WWW.PSYCHOTHERAPY.NET
Object Relations Child Therapy
   – David Scharff
Family Systems Therapy with Kenneth V. Hardy, PhD
   -Kenneth V. Hardy
Time Limited Dynamic Psychotherapy
   – Hanna Levenson
Discussion Questions

Professors, training directors and facilitators may use a few or all of these discussion questions keyed to certain elements of the video or those issues most relevant to the viewers.

SCHARFF’S APPROACH

1. **Context:** Scharff’s idea of context has to do with establishing a relationship of safety, and she indicates that this safe holding relationship is like the arms of a mother holding a baby. Does this metaphor make sense to you, or not? How so? Do you see your work in this way?

2. **Focus:** One of Scharff’s goals with Phil is to have moments of focus where they have direct, eye-to-eye contact. Are you aware of having direct eye-to-eye contact with your clients? What do you experience as a clinician during these moments? Do you join Scharff in finding these moments particularly valuable?

3. **Therapist as Object:** Scharff states she wants to offer herself as an object to be used by the client. How do you understand this idea? What might that mean to you to offer yourself as an object to be used by your clients?

PSYCHOTHERAPY SESSION

4. **Following the Affect:** Phil’s affect changes when Scharff asks him about his relationship with his mother. Do you agree with Scharff that these moments could signal a deeper issue or conflict? How might you have worked differently than Scharff around Phil’s affect?

5. **Body Language:** Early in the session Phil shifts in his seat and has a lot of eye movement. Do you agree with Scharff’s decision not to address this behavior at the time? Why or why not? Do you usually comment on a client’s body language in the course of a session?
6. **Value of the Symptom:** Scharff asks Phil if he has a legacy of being a “screw up.” Phil laughs and smiles when he responds. What do you think is going on in this exchange? Do you agree with Scharff that this symptom is a sign of underlying conflict? If not, how do you understand the value of the symptom?

7. **Family Secrets:** What did you notice about the process whereby Phil comes to reveal the family secret of his mother’s abortion? How did you react to the way Scharff talked to Phil about his mother’s abortion? How might you respond in the session?

8. **Countertransference:** Scharff tells Phil she’s had the feeling that he keeps her at bay and also shares her experience of him at the end of the session. Did you find this use of countertransference effective or detrimental here? How do you use your countertransference in your work with clients and what feelings emerge when you do?

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

9. **Object Relations Theory:** Scharff states that theory fulfills her intellectual needs and provides her with support and context. How does your theoretical orientation inform your work? What do you think of Carlson’s comment and Scharff’s response regarding whether or not the session was structured?

10. **Personal Reaction:** How would you feel about being Scharff’s client? Do you feel an alliance could be made and that she would be effective with you? How so?

11. **Future Work?** In Scharff’s analysis, Phil’s need to defend from his mother’s “jabs” would be an important theme for future work. What do you think of this idea? What kinds of things would be important for you in considering ongoing treatment with Phil?
Psychotherapy.net

Complete Transcript of Object Relations Therapy with Jill Savege Scharff, MD

Note to facilitators: You will find chapter markers on the DVD at five-minute intervals so that you may easily skip to desired points in the video. Throughout the pre-session discussion section of the transcript, Scharff’s Approach below, we indicate on-screen minute markers that correspond with those that appear at the bottom right corner of the DVD on screen.

SCHARFF’S APPROACH

1-1

Jon Carlson: Diane, let’s talk about Object Relations Theory today.

Diane Kjos: You know, the term “Object Relations” almost seems more confusing to me than really helpful. But as I understand it, this, the object, it really means the other, and so it relates or it focuses on relationships with other people and early development, and how we get our needs filled through other people.

Carlson: It’s my understanding that the therapist is also part of that need fulfillment process by providing the client with the psychological nurturing—at least part of it—that they didn’t receive in early infancy and childhood. How does this relate to other theories?

Kjos: Well, it’s really an outgrowth of psychoanalytic and probably is most closely related to that.

Carlson: Kind of the work of Sigmund Freud and his colleagues. Why don’t we invite our guest, Jill Scharff, and learn some more about this important theory. Welcome, Jill.

Jill Scharff: Yes, thank you, Jon. Nice to see you. Thank you.

1-2

Carlson: Diane and I were just starting the discussion about object relations theory and object relations psychotherapy. Can you tell us a
little bit about just what that is?

**Scharff:** Well, yes. As Diane was saying earlier, it is a branch of psychoanalytic theory. It was developed from analysts interested in the interaction between themselves and the client or patient. So it does very much value that interpersonal process, yes. It also—as, I think, you, Jon, mentioned—it deals very much with early development.

And the term “object relations,” I have to agree, is a horrible term. It was invented by Fairbairn, who’s one of the most consistent theorists in the area, and a very respectful person. He wanted to stay true to Freud, the originator and the founder of psychoanalysis, who talked about the other as the object of the infant’s drives.

Now, in object relations theory we’re not thinking about drives as the basis for human motivation. We’re thinking about the infant’s need—yes, the other, the object is the other that fulfills the needs—but it’s the need, not for tension release, not for meeting sexual drives or aggressive instincts, but the other who will provide two, important things. Number one, context. Number two, focus.

1-3

**Carlson:** What do you mean by context and focus?

**Kjos:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** Well, context is that arms around, holding relationship that the mother provides for the baby and a relationship of security, in which the baby can go on being in a relaxed way. And secondly, focus means that direct, eye-to-eye relationship that she offers, in which the infant learns to do, relate, experience and then think about the experience.

1-4

**Kjos:** Even look for approval and so forth by looking at that.

**Scharff:** Well, in that context and focus together, the mother or mothering person, be it housekeeper, babysitter, father, sibling, aunt, grandparent, whoever—is offering the child attachment, an attachment relationship, one in which the child will experience meaning.
We think of infant’s primary need as the need to be in a relationship. It’s a need for relatedness. I think it’s obvious because without a mother, an infant’s nothing. Without care, they just die; they can’t survive.

Carlson: So how does this work in therapy? How do you use those theoretical…?

1-5

Scharff: Well, as a therapist, I am thinking, number one, of offering a context of safety. So in an interview, you won’t find me going for the jugular. I’m not interested in that. I’m interested in creating a space that the person can move into in their own time. And then, secondly, I’m going to offer myself as an object to be used, someone that they can relate to in a direct way through good eye-to-eye contact, where they can experience me as a new edition of an old object. I can be that nasty aspect of their controlling mother, or I can be that very exciting father that they had, or… I want to be in a neutral enough position that they can imagine me to be any way that they need to.

Kjos: So in that context, you’re sort of holding them in a secure place where then they can do that. Is that…?

1-6

Scharff: Yes. And the context allows you to be buffeted around a bit without it wrecking the therapeutic relationship. The therapeutic relationship is really the essence of the whole thing. It’s primary; it’s the basis for the work and it’s the place in which therapeutic action will produce change.

Kjos: What about cultural issues or differences there between, say, you and the client? How does that…?

Scharff: Well, I think object relations theory bridges race, gender, nationality, whatever. To me, it’s a rather universal way of looking at things. But in that situation where, say, I’m a white, middle-aged therapist, educated therapist, and I’m dealing with someone who is, let’s say, black, uneducated or whatever, what I’m going to work with is that difference between us and how I am perceived, what it is like
for them to come to a setting where they expect to get understanding from me. They certainly can’t assume it on the basis of similarity of background. So they have to test it out. And I think the only way to test it is to experience me as I am and also to be able to talk about their fears and fantasies regarding me as an object. I’ll be like other objects of my class.

1-7

**Kjos:** Okay. So you can be tested out then?

**Scharff:** Yeah.

**Carlson:** Is there some type of client or clientele that this works best with?

**Scharff:** It only works with people who are interested in psychological understanding.

**Carlson:** You have to be quite motivated.

**Scharff:** You have to be motivated, yeah.

**Carlson:** So this wouldn’t work for some of today’s mandated clients that the courts send to us to talk with?

**Scharff:** Well, if they respond to the relationship that’s offered, yeah, it’s going to work out all right. But it’s not a quick way of doing things. It’s not a way that isolates a symptom and says, “Okay, let’s just deal with that, and get rid of that.” We don’t value that. We value the symptom as a sign of an underlying conflict that relates to the whole of the personality, and it’s that that I’d be interested in working with. Over time.

1-8

**Carlson:** Okay, yeah. So it’s not, it’s not a brief therapy.

**Scharff:** It’s not a short-term thing. Although, if you’re working in a short-term situation, I myself would prefer to work in the same way I always do, in the sense that I’d offer the client an in-depth experience of what could be possible rather than go along with the illusion that you can get rid of something in a session or two, and that’s all that’s needed.
It sometimes is all that’s needed, for people with just a developmental crisis. But it’s not all that’s needed for anyone who is really up against some self-defeating process.

1-9

**Carlson:** That’s kind of refreshing. It sounds like it’s not for everybody. It’s for a certain type of person who really wants a more longer term, permanent change.

**Scharff:** Yes. That’s what it’s for.

**Kjos:** Well, what about groups or couples or families?

1-10

**Scharff:** Well, that’s what I like about object relations theory. Since it was derived from study of a relationship, it transfers beautifully across the modalities. Couples, families, groups, and communities, as a matter of fact.

It’s a theory that holds that the… Let’s start with the individual personality. Individual personality is formed in interaction with a significant other. Experience is taken inside the self. Unpleasant aspects of the experience is split off from good aspects and repressed into unconsciousness, where it’s divided up into two categories, one being the very rejecting aspect of unpleasant experience and the other being the exciting, the painfully exciting aspect that creates too much longing. And along with the repressed objects goes that part of the self that was in relation to those objects plus the feelings that connected them. So it’s a theory that says dealing with experience, taken inside, creates psychic structures at different levels of consciousness, all of them in dynamic relation. So you’ve got a cybernetic view of the interior space, the interior mental space. And then, inside you’ve got a part of the ego or a part of the self-relating to the object and the affects that connect them.

1-11

Then this whole subsystem is relating to the next subsystem of ego objects and affect. All of it relating to the conscious central self with its ideal object and feelings of satisfaction. So then, when that
person meets another person constructed similarly, they interact at the conscious and unconscious levels where, you know, I might become, since I’m the invited speaker, I might become your exciting object on this occasion, and you might experience me as painfully exciting, creating longing to understand more than can be satisfied in a short session. Or you might experience me as an ideal object that generates feelings of satisfaction because you feel you get something, or you might experience me as a rejecting object that doesn’t really want to tell you about the stuff that I’m interested in. You see?

But it’s a mutual thing. You, at the same time, you’re objects for me.

1-12

Kjos: Okay.

Scharff: And the same in a marriage, the two personalities get together on the basis of the unconscious fit between these internal object relations. In a group, people connect as a sort of subgroup formation because of that… I want to say connect with each other spontaneously guided as they are by shared internal objects.

Carlson: Okay. Well, you may have mentioned this. And I’m not sure if I’ve got it. If people come in, how do you change your presentation for the different clients who come in? I mean, is this one of these one-size-fits-all approaches?

1-13

Scharff: Well… Some things are constant. I mean, the wish to create the psychological space: you’re going to do that with who ever. Now, because all clients are different, I mean, even if they might look the same or have similar backgrounds, the internal space is definitely different. It’s more a case of just allowing your internal object relations to reverberate with those of the person who comes to meet you. So you’re trying to keep in an impartial position, a neutral position, if you like, and allow them to affect you. That’s the main thing. You’re not consciously saying, “Well, I’ll be more talkative with this person,” or, “I’ll be this or that with that person.” Say, “I’m just going to be myself in my usual accepting, somewhat restrained way so that the focus is on them, not on me, and the work will be done on the way that we interact, how we’re affecting
each other.” That’s what’s going to be my focus.

1-14

Carlson: You’re following their lead?

Scharff: Yes, definitely. Following their lead and especially following their affect. I’m looking for those moments of hesitation, the times when a little smile breaks out or tears in the eye. To me, affect is a signal of a deeper issue. Conflict, maybe, or an earlier experience that’s not metabolized. A wish, perhaps, that relates to me. And those I’m going to follow.

Kjos: I hear a lot of the excitement in your voice as you talk about this.

Scharff: Yes.

Kjos: How did you get to being an object relations therapist? Kind of what brought you to this point?

1-15

Scharff: Okay. Well, I started as a psychiatric trainee in a traditional mental hospital doing the ECT and the drugs and the… such. And then, on the one hand, I worked in a therapeutic community day hospital, and at the same time, I was in individual supervision with an analyst. Now, none of these things connected whatsoever. I had to split myself into three parts to be a good trainee for each of the people I was working for. And then, I suddenly realized that a lecture given by Jack Sullivan, in which he talked about object relations theory really made sense. I said, “Well, this is what’s going to tie together all the different aspects of my experience. This helps me see how the individual personality is expressed in relation to the group and the therapeutic community, and it lets me see how the mental hospital administration relates to the therapeutic community day hospital, and how the individual patient relates to the group.” In other words, it is a bridging theory. Pulled it all together for me, and I guess I do feel pretty excited about the explanatory power of this theory. I hope I’m able to get it across to you in this brief time.
Kjos: Oh, yeah.

Carlson: Yeah. All those sounds exciting, but does it work? I mean, is there a research base for this that seems to support this kind of work?

Scharff: Yeah. Do you know, I don’t know of research—I certainly am not a researcher, and I’m not really up on the research, especially outcome studies. I think that’s an area of weakness in our whole field. Outcome studies certainly are showing that psychotherapy is effective and that longer term treatment is more effective than short-term treatment, that drug therapy alone is not adequate and needs to have a relationship built into the medication aspects. But separating out analytic therapy from object relations therapy, I am not aware of studies doing that.

Carlson: So some of the dynamic therapies, though, do seem to show permanent change over time.

Scharff: Yes.

Carlson: And you would just see object relations as part of that whole model.

Scharff: Part of that. Yeah. Yeah.

I think when you see me working, you probably won’t notice much difference between the way I talk to someone and the way some other dynamic therapist would talk to someone. The difference is probably in how I’m thinking, what I’m making of it, how I conceptualize what is going on, which we’ll get a chance to share later.

Carlson: Like what you choose to attend to and what you choose just to let go by.

Scharff: Yes. Well, there’s some conscious choice going on—

Carlson: Respond to as well as…”

Scharff: But “respond to” might be closer to it. I do try not to be too directive of myself or of the patient or client. I’m just trying to let things develop and tolerate chaos. I’m kind of interested in the positive
value of chaos, allowing meaning to emerge from experience at the
time when it’s ready.

1-18

Kjos: Kind of leads us into the demonstration we’ll be moving towards
in a few minutes.

Carlson: Yeah.

Kjos: Are there particular things we should be watching for in this.
This is you working with Phil, and…

Scharff: Okay.

Kjos: How did you see your role in this? And what should we be
looking for as we watch this video?

1-19

Scharff: Well, watch for context. Watch for focus. And for the purpose
of the discussion, I’d particularly like to talk about how you felt in
response to Phil, and we’ll talk about how I felt in response to Phil,
and that will be my guiding path. I’m thinking in terms of my counter
transference, my reaction to his personality, his material, his way of
talking, his way of relating to me, as giving me evidence to work with
him on his internal life.

I look for the way that he deals with me, how comfortable does he
seem to be with me, how tuned into me is he, how withholding of
parts of himself is he. Does he seem to regard me as a re-addition of an
old figure in his life? Or am I free of those burdens? How open is he?
How does he use his symptoms? Does he use them to exclude me or to
draw me in, throw me off the track? Or help me understand him?

Carlson: What a lot of good questions. As you enter in an interview
like with Phil, what would your goals be? I mean, is there a process
that you follow? Are there steps-by-steps, or things that you’re going to
be sure and cover?

Scharff: Well, look, if it were an assessment, yes. I want to be sure in
an assessment I, first of all, get a sense of the man, a, you know, the
feel of being in the room with him, yes.
Carlson: Right.

Scharff: And I’d want to know a bit about his family background. But I’m not going to ask for it. I’m just going to take what he gives me as it emerges. I would like to, of course, I’d like to have a dream, but a lot of people aren’t going to give you a dream in the first session. I like to know about his current living situation, his work goals, his concept of the past, his present, and his views for the future, what he’s aiming at. You know, in general, I want to know those things. In an assessment, I would cover, I would ask about his sexual relationship and so on. Well, in a TV studio arrangement, I’m not going to ask. If it comes up, yes, we’ll discuss it, but I’m not going to probe or ask about things that might be embarrassing or difficult for someone.

My first goal is do no harm. It’s the old Hippocratic Oath. And allow people to present what they wish in that first interview. Now, in therapy, if it’s an ongoing therapy, it’s different. You have a sense. You’ve built a relationship. You have authority to move into painful areas, because a person’s coming to you for help. You can’t help by just sitting there waiting for things to come up. You have to go after material that’s being defended against when you feel the relationship can tolerate it. So you won’t see me doing that with Phil. Not really going after things.

Carlson: So, again, the goals that you really want to accomplish: can you highlight those? I’m not sure that I understood that. I mean, there’s some things you’re going to do in an assessment interview, and find out where the person is at now and where they’ve been and where they’re going.

Scharff: Yes.

Carlson: But with this, are there particular things? You’re going to provide this safe holding environment.

Scharff: Yes, definitely. And allow myself to be there as an object to
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be used. That you will see with Phil, yeah. But in this type of interview, I’m not trying to do an assessment, because I know he’s worked with other people. I’m not trying to do therapy because he’ll never see me again. I’m just trying to do kind of an open space meeting, see what comes up.

Carlson: Well, let’s get on and watch this.

Scharff: Okay.

PSYCHOTHERAPY SESSION

Scharff: Okay, Phil.

Phil: Hi there.

Scharff: Hi. I’m open to discussing whatever is on your mind.

Phil: Stress is a good thing. I feel just overwhelmed right now. I have a month worth of classes left and probably about two months of work left, it feels like. So I’m not very good right now at budgeting my time and figuring out when stuff needs to be done, and it’s just, it’s just frustrating. A few of us in some other…. A group of us that have the same classes and it seems that we’re all overwhelmed right now. I’ve got a test tonight after this and I know I’ve studied for it and I’m fairly prepared, but then I’ve got a test tomorrow night that I’ve totally not prepared for and stuff like that. It’s just getting to me that, the amount of work, it seems….

Even when I do do stuff it seems like the pile left to be done hasn’t gotten any smaller so I don’t know. The good news that last week, I found out that I had…. I thought I had like seven credits left, or seven classes left to take before I graduate and I only have 12 credit hours, which is four classes left to take before I graduate. And it seems like I’ve been going to school forever and I just kind of want this semester to be over, and I kind of want more time to do my work and stuff like that. I don’t know if that’s a topic to talk about, but….

Scharff: Well, sure. What are you actually doing in your time? You’re coming here to school, but I know a lot of people who come here to school are also working.
Phil: Yeah. I have, I work about, about 29 hours a week, and I’m at school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I have some time while I’m here to do some work and it feels like on the weekends, I know I need to study but I haven’t been doing it. Well, I did it last weekend. I just don’t seem to get as much done as I would like. I have this computer class. We’ve got to do spreadsheets and stuff like that, and each assignment takes like six hours to do, and I’ve got like one, two, three… like five left before the end of the semester. And you know, some of us have talked to the professor, and she’s just like, “Well, I know they take a long time, but that’s why I didn’t give you too many.” It’s just like, man. I don’t know.

Scharff: Well, let us be clear. You’re not telling me it’s any harder for you than anybody else.

Phil: No.

Scharff: It’s not that you’re really slow at processing things.

Phil: No, I don’t think so.

Scharff: You, you have a lot else to do.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: And then plus you have to find time to do this and then, I heard you mention your wife earlier, so this means you actually have a family life that you have to invest in as well.

Phil: Yeah. Like last weekend, Saturday, we went up to Milwaukee and had some fun with some friends up there. Saturday night to a dinner/dance type thing. I felt kind of sick that day, and I got sick and then I slept from like Saturday night until like Monday morning. I slept pretty much like 36 hours, getting up to eat, and I was up maybe like five hours total in between time. And so I was pretty wiped out from that. And you know, I just didn’t want to get sick, and I wanted to have Sunday to study and instead I slept and stuff. These things that come up in life, I guess.

Scharff: Slept because you were ill or slept because of the cumulative tension?

Phil: I was ill. I was just sick.
Scharff: Because you were ill, you just lost that day.

Phil: Yes.

Scharff: Okay.

Phil: I had some sort of flu thing that seems like more than one person has around here.

Scharff: Well, you were planning to have some fun time with your wife.

Phil: Uh-huh.

Scharff: How is she taking this enormous workload that’s on you right now?

Phil: She’s encouraging me to take care of myself. You know, to study and also to, to have some sanity time, you know. We had scheduled that, like two months ago to do that so that was prior to getting overwhelmed, I guess. This weekend--my parents live up in Madison, Wisconsin, and my sister’s pregnant, and they’re having a shower for her. It’s like a co-ed baby shower. My mom asked me if I wanted to go, and I said, “Yeah,” and they rearranged the date for me so I could go, and it’s this Saturday, and I don’t want to go. You know, I’m just… Don’t want to go.

Scharff: You don’t want to go, or you can’t go?

Phil: I want to stay and study. I’d rather not travel six hours—three hours there, three hours back—and then however many hours. It’s Saturday night at 6:00 and I’ll probably leave at about noon on Saturday to go up there and then come back early Sunday morning. Stay at my parents’ house.

Scharff: But is that a loss to you or was a co-ed baby shower not like high on your list anyway?

Phil: I have no idea. I told my mom to leave it up to fate for the most part. I said, “Mom, the 29th is the day that I can be up there.” Because she wasn’t organizing it; somebody else was. I said, “Leave it up to fate. If I can go, I’ll go, and if you guys schedule it on a weekend that I can’t go, you know, that’s fine, too, you know.” It was originally scheduled for the 22nd and my mom got it rearranged for me so I could be up
there on the 29th.

Scharff: So now you have an obligation, you feel.

Phil: Yeah. It kind of feels like a pain in the ass right now.

Scharff: I see. Well, is your mom the kind of person you can explain the problem to?

Phil: Yeah, she’s not.

Scharff: Well, what would happen if you said to her, “I’m running out of time here. Can…”

Phil: Jeez. Dealing with my mom.

Scharff: Yeah. Tell me about your mom.

Phil: It’s just easier just to go. I don’t know. It’s easier just to go than try to deal with talking to my mom, I think, right now. Sometimes I have a good relationship with my mom, and I can be able to be up front with her like that. And sometimes it just doesn’t work that way. I don’t know if it’s my side or her side. I kind of am real hesitant about talking to her and then I get my back up against the wall, and then I blurt stuff out and it sounds like I’m like giving orders or being cold or rude. That’s how she takes it. Before any of that, that’s how I think she’s going to take it, so then I’m just like, “Well, this is how it’s going to sound anyway, so…” I’d rather just get it out there. And then it hurts her feelings sometimes. I just hate hurting my mom’s feelings. It’s not up there on my list of fun things to do. So, for this weekend, even though I don’t want to go, it’d be easiest to--easiest for me, in my mind at least--to go. I don’t know if that’s just me not wanting to study or me…

Scharff: So you’d rather take the stress of running out of time to study than face the stress of upsetting your mother.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: She must be a formidable person when she’s upset.

Phil: No, she’s not.

Scharff: Does she fall apart?

Phil: No.
Scharff: Or does she give you a guilt trip? How does she make you feel this way?

Phil: I feel guilty. I don’t know if she gives it or if I make it, but I feel guilty.

Scharff: But do you feel she has a particular need of you? Are you a special child to her?

Phil: Well, I’m her youngest kid. My sister and myself, yeah.

Scharff: And you’re the only boy.

Phil: Mm-hmm.

Scharff: And you don’t live in Wisconsin.

Phil: No.

Scharff: And your sister does.

Phil: Yes.

Scharff: And how often does your mother like to see you?

Phil: Last summer she saw me at least once a month. During school, it’s less than that. My parents came down here at the beginning of the month for that awards assembly that we were talking about before. I invited them down. And that was only the second time. I’ve lived down here for a year and a half, almost two years. It will be two years in August. That’s the second time that my parents came down together. I forget when the last time I was up there. I was up there a couple of times this semester, just for the day.

Scharff: Well, although you’re terribly out of time, I take it you must actually be doing all right grade-wise.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: If you then get an award. The award is sort of a scholarship, you said?

Phil: Yeah. I’ve got two scholarships and I got a list of awards: National Scholar. I don’t know what they were. I was on the dean’s list the past two semesters.

Scharff: What do you mean you don’t know what they were?
Phil: I was on the dean’s list twice. I was, two scholarships…

Scharff: For what.

Phil: Money scholarships that I applied for.

Scharff: For current courses or for future?

Phil: For current.

Scharff: Okay.

Phil: I applied and I had filled the requirements of…

Scharff: You had the qualifications.

Phil: The qualifications of grade point average and financial need, and I applied.

So I got two of those. There’s some other stuff that I don’t know what the… I got a little plaque and it says all this cool stuff on it that I got.

Scharff: What does it say?

Phil: I just told you. I don’t remember everything.

Scharff: Well, I’m very interested in that. You don’t remember because it doesn’t…

Phil: National Merit Scholar Award. I don’t know. There were like four or five things on there. Two of them were dean’s list. Two of them were the scholarships, and there might be two other ones, one or two other ones. National All American Scholar. Not National Merit Scholar. I don’t know.

Scharff: That’s very interesting that you don’t know what it is.

Phil: It wasn’t like…

Scharff: Maybe you don’t know how big a deal it is. Or you don’t want to know how big a deal it is.

Phil: No, it was a big deal. It was pretty cool.

Scharff: It sounds like a pretty big deal to me.

Phil: Yeah, well…

Scharff: But I have a feeling you’re kind of blowing it off, like “don’t
get too interested in this.”

Do you think I’m sounding too much like a mother?

**Phil:** No.

**Scharff:** Wanting to know about your successes?

**Phil:** No. I just don’t know what they are. The ones that meant a lot to me, I know what they are, but I just got something in the mail today that I briefly looked at and put aside. I was nominated by somebody here at the school to…. I think it was All American Scholar, and I have to respond by May 7, May 9, something like that. I just put it aside, and I’ll look at it later.

**Scharff:** So there’s a huge contrast then in the accolades that are falling upon you - you don’t even know what they are - on the one hand, and this feeling that you’ll never get through this semester. Trimester, I think here it is.

**Phil:** Yeah, I guess they’re trimesters. Well, that’s part of it, too. This is my one, two, three… This is my fourth semester here at Governor State, and I used to be a C student, before when I went to school, and here I have a 4.0. I’m paying for my school, and I’m married, and I have more incentive, I think. And I’m doing well in school.

**Scharff:** Because your family life is more stable, maybe?

**Phil:** Probably. I could probably just coast throughout the rest of the semester and do all right, but I want to do better than all right.

**Scharff:** You want to get the 4.0, keep it there.

**Phil:** I’d like to keep it, yeah.

**Scharff:** Of course.

**Phil:** I’d like to work for it. I don’t know if it’s pathetic, but like it, it’s kind of stressful. My wife and I have talked about this. She’s a good student. She’s a professional now; she teaches. But the… what does she call it? The trade-off or whatnot between, you know, a B or an A/B, or you know, a 3.9 or a 4.0, you know, if you got less than or something, we were talking about that, and it’s, like the perfectionist idea of, “I need to get a 4.0,” and stuff like that.
Scharff: She thinks you’re a bit driven.

Phil: She was, too, and I am, yeah. It’s, I guess it’s a good kind of driven. I’m not, I’m doing a lot better mentally, I think, this semester, than I have, especially last year about this time. I had a different job last semester, and I was going nuts with the job. And with school. And this semester, I’ve got a decent job that’s related to my major and things are looking good on the horizon for me, in my opinion. Whether or not I get all As this semester, I don’t think, in the big picture, think it really matters.

Scharff: But what is the big picture? You graduate when?

Phil: I’ll graduate December of this year.

Scharff: And with a qualification in what?

Phil: Management Information Systems.

Scharff: What, is that computers?

Phil: Yeah. Computer networking, stuff like that.

Scharff: Yeah. So then you’ll be…

Phil: Marketable, hopefully.

Scharff: Very marketable. Yes? At a good salary. In this area.

Phil: Santa Fe, New Mexico, hopefully.

Scharff: Oh, you want to move?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Yeah. Okay.

Phil: So. My wife and I have talked about that, too.

Scharff: So part of this pressure you describe, it’s not so much that you can’t handle the work. It’s that you want to do the work very well in the limited time available to do it, but most of it all, I think it’s that you’re desperate to be finished. You’d like to be free of school and off working.

Phil: A little bit, yeah.

Scharff: Only a little?
Phil: Well, there’s that idea on one hand and the idea that, “Oh, jeez. I’m going to graduate and have to get a real job.” You know, the fear aspect of being done with school.

Scharff: Oh.

Phil: So.

Scharff: What reasons do you have to worry about work? Have you had bad experiences?

Phil: No, I’ve had fairly decent experiences with work, but I don’t know. I’ve always had jobs; I’ve never had a career, so.

Scharff: Jobs, just passing the time with jobs.

Phil: Yeah, I guess. Right now, the job that I do now is more focused, so it’s more toward my career goals. But I’ve worked at gas stations, lumberyards, repaired furniture, worked at the bookstore here. You know, I’ve had all sorts of different jobs while in college.

Scharff: So you know how to get to a job, do a job…

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Put up with a job, put up with people at the job. You have the experience. So I wonder what the… It has to do not with working, with having a job. It has to do with having a career, going somewhere or…

Phil: I guess. Just the whole concept of graduating, sending out resumes, getting… looking for jobs, perhaps, I would hope, getting offers for jobs and then just starting off, I guess. I don’t know what I think. I need to know more. I don’t know. I don’t know exactly what type of job I’ll get with my education. A gentleman that’s in this internship with me, he just got a job offer in Denver, and it sounded fairly decent. And, you know, being… I’m 26, and some of my friends from high school have quote, unquote, “real jobs,” or you know, they’ve graduated college and gotten jobs that you needed that type of degree to get. But you know, I haven’t yet. I guess I’m a little scared of that.

Scharff: Well, you think you’re highly marketable but you’re worried no one will want you.
Phil: Yeah. I know I’m highly marketable, and I know I’m scared.

Scharff: Do you have maybe a legacy of feeling that you’re a bit of screw up?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Uh-huh. What was that? Tell me about that time in your life.

Phil: That “time”?

Scharff: Yeah.

Phil: I don’t know. I’ve said this pretty much on everything here. I’ve been sober for about six and a half years, and I was a fairly large screw up in college. I didn’t quite fit in, in high school, you know, that type of deal. I was, I was on some sports teams, but I didn’t fit in with the jocks and I didn’t fit in too many places, I’d say. I’ve had some periods of time where life hurts, you know, and a lot of people made fun of me for various things.

Scharff: Really?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: For what?

Phil: For what. I was a pretty good wise ass at certain points in my life. Because they’re kids, because I was easy to make fun of, because…

Scharff: Well, you’re saying you brought it on yourself.

Phil: Sometimes, I’m sure I did, and maybe other times I was just there.

Scharff: Well, see, one thing I notice is that I feel you’re rather hard on yourself. You say you’ve got to drive yourself to get that 4.0. You make it sound as if you can’t really manage what you have to manage, although the evidence is you’re managing just fine.

Phil: Yeah, I’d say so.

Scharff: So if these people have a go at you, they’re only confirming what you already think. I don’t know where that feeling about yourself came from. Have you come to understand that from the previous sessions here?
Phil: No. I’ve looked at it, that inferiority feeling or that insecure feeling, low self esteem, whatever you want to call it. I’ve noticed it, and up until I got sober, I wouldn’t have ever noticed it. I just kind of played along or what not. I remember, I don’t know what was going on in college, but I lived with a bunch of guys and two of my roommates were like picking on me one day, and I just snapped. And you know, we got into a big wrestling fight until finally we settled down. But… I just never knew. So as far as where I am now, I’ve come a long way: I didn’t know what I was going to be; didn’t know why I was going to college; wasn’t getting very good grades. You know, I did get kicked out for drinking and stuff like that, and that’s what has helped me sober up.

Scharff: You mean that you learned from that?

Phil: Yeah. First time I went to college, I got thrown out.

Scharff: So it’s all the more precious, then, to be here now.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: How do you maintain your sobriety?

Phil: Going to meetings.

Scharff: How often do you have to go?

Phil: I don’t have to go.

Scharff: Well, how much do you need to go to keep up your sobriety, that’s what I’m asking. Some people go seven nights a week.

Phil: Yeah. I used to when I lived in Madison. Down here, I go Sunday, Thursday, sometimes Friday and then I go to a meeting on Saturday, so three or four a week.

Scharff: Yeah. So that’s another quite large time commitment.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: It’s important for your stability.

Phil: Uh-hm.

Scharff: Well, I see you have a lot to fit in.

Phil: Yeah. Sleep was lacking there for a while. I don’t know if that
was part of why I got sick or not, but I feel I’m on the upswing, even though I still kind of sound sick right now. Yeah, I do have a lot of stuff in my life. I do have a lot of things or balls that I’m trying to juggle, I guess, whatever you want to….

**Scharff:** Yeah, but you’re almost getting to-- you’re quite proud of yourself to be in a position to be juggling it, I think. To be where you are after where you’ve been.

**Phil:** Yeah. I’m glad I’m in college. I’m glad I’m married to somebody that loves me and that’s a wonderful person. And, I’m glad I didn’t just give up and stay working at the gas station for $6 an hour.

**Scharff:** Yeah. Do you understand why your wife loves you?

**Phil:** Do I understand why?

**Scharff:** Yeah.

**Phil:** Not always. Not completely, I don’t think, no. We talk about it, and she loves who I am and how I treat her and things that I bring to her life by being me.

**Scharff:** Which is what?

**Phil:** I make her lunch in the morning. I think of her. I do sweet things, I guess. When we talk, I can hold up my end of the conversation. I’m a feeling person. She likes that.

**Scharff:** One reason she loves you is that you’re able to love her.

**Phil:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** Yeah. And she allows you to express this feeling side of yourself.

**Phil:** Oh, yeah.

**Scharff:** Which maybe the guys would tease you about. Could I be right on that?

**Phil:** Oh, sure... My old college buddies, yeah.

**Scharff:** The college buddies you have now maybe aren’t inclined that way.

**Phil:** I was living with a house full of guys back then. Now I live with
my wife and the…

Scharff: The opportunities for teasing aren’t the same.

Phil: Yeah. At this college, too, people are, for the most part, are more mature, and the people that I have gotten close with here understand. They’re more real in that sense. They can feel and express feelings and talk about being overwhelmed in school, too, I guess. The partiers, the drinkers, I don’t talk too much with, even though I do have classes with them. I don’t engage in the frat talk, or whatever you want to call it, the weekend war stories and whatnot, because I don’t have those anymore, luckily.

Scharff: Luckily. You feel you kind of just got away with it. Got over it in time.

Phil: Oh, I’d be in jail by now if I’d been drinking.

Scharff: Really?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Did you have a few brushes with the law?

Phil: Yeah, that’s what… I had a third degree felony charge that…

Scharff: What exactly is that?

Phil: “Risking and/or causing a catastrophe” is what the charge was. It was… I was…

Scharff: Is that drunken driving?

Phil: No. I was in a blackout and I left the fraternity. I went into my freshman dorm—this was sophomore year—and apparently on my way in, they had two propane tanks outside the head RA’s room, and apparently I banged them together or off the wall until they leaked or something like that.

Scharff: Oh, wow.

Phil: If I had been smoker or something like that, that half of the building and myself would not be here today. So, it was fairly serious.

Scharff: And you didn’t know it was happening?

Phil: No. Intermittent blackout and somebody was chasing me--
I found out it was a cop later--but I got home that night. Nothing happened that night. It happened a couple days later, and then about a couple weeks later, the whole thing came to a head, so to speak.

**Scharff:** Okay, so this is something that’s on your record.

**Phil:** Theoretically, maybe at this point… I was on probation for two years and then it, it should be wiped off my record at this point.

**Scharff:** Okay. So the reason I’m asking is, you sounded so reluctant to believe that someone would want to hire you even though you know you’re highly marketable. I wondered were you thinking that a prospective employer would know this history and…

**Phil:** I’d tell them if they wanted to know, you know.

**Scharff:** So you feel pretty secure about this being in the past, then?

**Phil:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** Okay.

**Phil:** Most everybody I know, knows I am sober, and if they ask, they know what happened.

**Scharff:** You’ve really come to terms with this, then.

**Phil:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** But I think it’s left you feeling a little bit shaky about your worth.

**Phil:** Well, that…

**Scharff:** Or maybe that preceded the drinking, that there was a shakiness there to start with.

**Phil:** I think there was a shakiness there to start with, too. I think drinking really helped me fit in, because it made me feel a part of, you know.

**Scharff:** You could fake like you’re a regular guy.

**Phil:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** Whereas, really, you’re a sensitive person. Or what? I’m not quite getting the sense of you as an adolescent.
Phil: I think I was a little bit less mature than most people of my age group. I think I didn’t really understand life or school or anything. I didn’t know the purpose of it. I just always wanted to have fun: I didn’t study. I played sports; I got through high school. Same thing in college: I didn’t study. I played sports. Here I am, finally studying, getting through college, but I didn’t know what I wanted to be the first time I went to college. I didn’t… The people in my town, I just… I went to my fifth year high school reunion, and I don’t think I’ll go back to any of them. I can’t pinpoint a day where I didn’t feel like I fit in, but I, you know… I’m responsible. I have values. As far as that part of my upbringing. I used to mow lawns all the time. I had a paper route for a number of years. I’d baby sit. People thought I was a nice person that way.

Scharff: So, so in many ways, you were a good kid, but there was a part of you that wanted to behave irresponsibly.

Phil: Well, yeah.

Scharff: Hurt yourself and do damage.

Phil: I got along better with adults, I think, than with kids, for some reason. Like, the adults saw that I was smart or a good person or responsible or what not, but the people in my own age group, just… I don’t know how many friends you’re supposed to have, in high school, or junior high. I had a small group of friends, I guess three of us that still communicate now, and some other intermittent friends. “Grow up, Moose.” My nickname’s Moose, by the way. “Grow up, Moose,” is something that I can recall hearing.

Scharff: So you were just a late developer then, you might say.

Phil: Maybe that’s… Maybe we can just rest at that.

Scharff: Well, I wouldn’t be willing to rest at that. I’m sure you would have known that. Well, why… what would account for that late development? Were you, first of all, were you late physically developing? Was you puberty late?

Phil: I think so.

Scharff: So that’s one thing that boys can make a lot of fun of.
Phil: Going into 9th grade, most people are 13; I was 12. I graduated high school at 17.

Scharff: A year younger all the way through.

Phil: Yeah. So that could have been part of it.

Scharff: Yeah. And then, earlier, you said you were your mother’s last child; you were the baby.

Phil: Yeah. There was only two of us.

Scharff: And she’s not really hanging onto you, though. But she expects you to...

Phil: She’s hanging on. She’s trying to.

Scharff: …do some things.

Phil: She’s trying to.

Scharff: She is. Well, tell me how because she wants to see you once a month.

Phil: Oh, jeez. She… How is she trying to hang on.

Scharff: Yeah.

Phil: You know, not letting me be me, I guess. I was telling her once I was going to wear a dark shirt with a tie and a jacket. And she’s like, “Oh, god. Dark shirts don’t look good,” or something like that, and it’s just like, oh, jeez. This was on the phone. I was just like, “Okay, Mom. Whatever.” She still tries to tell me what the best thing to do is, you know, instead of letting me just go out and do it, trial and error, being a person. She still wants to hold on, I think.

Scharff: Did she have any reason to think that you wouldn’t know the right thing to do or couldn’t take care of yourself?

Phil: Would she have any reason to? Not that I’m aware of.

Scharff: Well, was there anything that happened in your childhood that could have drawn out her protective motherly feelings? Were you ill, for instance?

Phil: No.
Scharff: Were there difficulties at your birth?

Phil: No.

Scharff: No.

Phil: Not that I’m, I mean, I was a kid. No. Nobody ever told me about it if there was.

Scharff: And you said there were just the two of us. Was there an intention for there to be more of you than that?

Phil: My aunt told me that my mom had an abortion, but I’ve never talked to my mom about it.

Scharff: Would that be before or after you, do you think?

Phil: After me, I think. You know, that’s a family secret right there. There’s I’m sure, more than one.

Scharff: That’s a pretty powerful thing, isn’t it? Your aunt told you this.

Phil: My mom’s sister, yeah.

Scharff: What are you supposed to make of it? Or why she thought you ought to know this?

Phil: Because my aunt and I have a relationship like that. I forget the exact context of how it came up, but you know, she says, “Make sure you don’t tell your mom about this,” and I haven’t. And… I’d say my family’s fairly dysfunctional with family secrets.

Scharff: You mean there are others?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Do you know what they are or do you just suspect?

Phil: Oh, there’s some that were late in coming. Everybody knows now, just, my one aunt, the guy that she married, sexually molested my three younger aunts. My dad has five sisters, so, one of his older sisters, her eventually husband, sexually molested his three younger sisters. And that one aunt that married this guy, you know, she died five years ago, and she wouldn’t believe it.

Scharff: So that’s a very painful thing on that side of the family.
Phil: Yeah. That’s on my dad’s side, and then I guess that, the thing about the abortion with my mom, that’s another secret.

Scharff: That one’s much closer to home, though. I mean, what kind of thoughts does it stir in you? It stirs a lot in me.

Phil: I guess, “hypocrite” is a good word.

Scharff: Hypocrite.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Is she a religious woman?

Phil: No. Not necessarily.

Scharff: But why do you say “hypocrite,” then? That it was a secret, maybe.

Phil: Number one, I don’t know if it is any of my business. I can see that point of view, a little bit. But with her… Stuff that my mom says or does, she’ll… Now that I’m doing well in school, or I did well in standardized testing and stuff like that. She’d say, “Oh, I always knew you had it in you, if you just applied yourself,” or something like that, and I just want to say, “Screw you, Mom.”

Scharff: She’s really rooting for you, but you’d like her out, to stay out of it.

Phil: She roots and digs, it seems, at the same time. Like, “Good for you,” jab. That’s how it feels to me.

Scharff: And that feels dangerous.

Phil: Yeah. I don’t know how open or honest I am with my parents. I don’t think I tell them everything anymore. Just for safety or just because I don’t want them to know, or…

Scharff: You mean you don’t tell them about your plaque or the awards and stuff?

Phil: Oh, they were here for that. I invited them down for that.

Scharff: Oh, yeah. So you don’t exclude them completely. Just from some things.

Phil: My wife and I just joined Debtors Anonymous, and you know,
I’m not going to tell my parents about that.

**Scharff:** Now, is that something you’re ashamed of?

**Phil:** A little bit, but I don’t want to get financial advice from my parents when they aren’t financially sound themselves.

**Scharff:** Okay. But you were telling me you have a job and you’re paying for school?

**Phil:** Uh-huh.

**Scharff:** It’s like, how could you not be a debtor?

**Phil:** I could not use my charge card as much.

**Scharff:** Okay. Is it your problem, or, it’s shared with your wife?

**Phil:** We both have it.

**Scharff:** What are you buying?

**Phil:** What we thought we needed, I guess. We haven’t used our credit cards in over a month and a half, and we’re doing all right now. Before that, I’d charge clothes, charge gas, charge food.

**Scharff:** You mean charge basics or…

**Phil:** There were basics, and there were, you know, we’d go to plays and stuff like that and charge that, and go out to dinner and charge that.

**Scharff:** You mean, live just a little better than you can really afford?

**Phil:** Yeah. Consistently.

**Scharff:** Mm-hmm. But you’re not talking about enormously ridiculous expenses. Like a big vacation or expensive car…

**Phil:** No.

**Scharff:** No.

**Phil:** We had to rent a car twice, unexpected car repairs. When we first moved here, we bought a lot of stuff on the credit card for the apartment. You know, we had lamps; we bought new lamps. We had towels; we bought new towels. Or whatever. I can’t exactly remember what that was back then, but on a regular basis, we would spend more
than we earned.

Scharff: Okay, well, it’s like the overuse of alcohol in a way. Something gets a bit out of your control and then leads you into harm’s way, but like the alcohol, you’ve taken steps to end it by looking for support among others with the same problem. It does imply that there’s a part of your personality that you’re still working on, doesn’t it?

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: That you, that you’re impatient to have things. You’re tired of being 26, and living like a poor college student.

Phil: That’s part of it. A buddy of mine got married last year. He graduated college in four years and has a job and he and his wife bought a house together and stuff like that. And I compare myself to my friends that way sometimes, and I get a little bummed.

Scharff: You’re a bit behind.

Phil: Yeah. And then…

Scharff: At 26 you feel you should have a house?

Phil: I’d like to have a house. I’d like to have a lot of things. But, I also know that I’ve done things in my life that they haven’t. My sister got married four years ago, and I—in Vermont—and I hopped on my motorcycle and was gone for three months. I left two months before the wedding, and got up to Vermont for the wedding, and then a month afterwards, made it out to California and stuff like that, so.

Scharff: So you’ve traveled in the States.

Phil: Yeah. I’ve done stuff like that. And I’m sober. I’ve got to always remember that I always look at things as tradeoffs. You know, I could be working full time, but not getting my potential pay, and instead I’m going to school, doing something that I like to do, learning things that I like.

Scharff: Well, it’s geared to the future.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: But you would like it now. That’s what you’re struggling with.

Phil: Yeah. I’d like to be up-to-date with classes. I’d like to graduate
today. I’d like to buy a new motorcycle. I’d like to do lots of things.

**Scharff:** Have fun.

**Phil:** Yeah.

**Scharff:** Move to Santa Fe.

**Phil:** Mm-hmm.

**Scharff:** Listen, I didn’t want to finish without addressing this matter of the abortion secret.

**Phil:** Mm-hmm.

**Scharff:** I agree with you it’s none of your business what your mother did with her body or what decision she made. I think, though, it does have implications. I don’t know what they are because it’s never been discussed. But I mean, it has me wondering, well, did it mean that she and your father really wanted this child but couldn’t afford the child, so therefore she had to have an abortion? Did it mean that this was an unplanned conception and an embarrassment to them, that they had to get rid of this child? Did it mean....

**Phil:** I think partially it was right after I was born. She got pregnant again.

**Scharff:** Too soon.

**Phil:** Too soon, and then financially, also. Those were two of the factors.

**Scharff:** Right. Okay, so this was a conception soon after your birth.

**Phil:** Mm-hmm. I think so.

**Scharff:** So then she has to get rid of this fetus to make room for you, basically. To be able to afford you and be able to take care of you, give you your full time as a baby, as you might say. I mean, it wouldn’t be stretching things too far to say that she could have had feelings about taking that loss, or what she did, that might have led her to be particularly attached to you because you were the child she had left at that time.

**Phil:** Could be. Yeah.
Scharff: I mean, I don’t know. The only reason I’m saying this is to suggest to you the value of discussing it with her. Now I realize you’d be betraying your aunt, but who is more important? I’m really asking you: your mother or your aunt?

Phil: Who’s more important? I guess my mom’s more important is the answer I’m supposed to say.

Scharff: You’re supposed to say. But maybe your aunt’s meant a lot to you and I don’t understand.

Phil: It’s easier to talk about life with my aunt than with my mom.

Scharff: She’s more open?

Phil: Yeah. Even if she doesn’t agree, it’s easier for my aunt to not agree with what I’m doing than with my mom to not agree with what I’m doing.

Scharff: She doesn’t give you the jab.

Phil: Yeah.

Scharff: Yeah. And this is your mother’s sister.

Phil: Mom’s sister. My mom’s older sister, yeah. She’s only got one sister, but she’s older.

Scharff: Was she a better-organized person than your mother? You were saying there was something dysfunctional about your family.

Phil: Was she better organized? In…

Scharff: Is her family less dysfunctional, let us say?

Phil: Oh, I don’t know.

Scharff: No.

Phil: Probably not. I don’t know. Just…

Scharff: Well, perhaps the appeal was just that she wasn’t your mother. Wasn’t quite as close in on you.

Phil: That could be.

Scharff: You do seem to feel that your mother was too close in on you.

Phil: Yeah. I do feel that. It’s just like, “Back off for a second.” Yeah.
Scharff: And you haven’t talked much about your father. You feel he didn’t protect you enough from your mom? Get her off your case?

Phil: Do I feel that? Not right now, I don’t. No. I don’t think so.

Scharff: Okay, well. We’re about at the end of our interview here. Do you think that you’ve felt wary of letting me get too close to private areas of yourself?

Phil: Today? Yeah.

Scharff: Yes. Would you like to speculate about why?

Phil: Would have been easier just to talk about other things today.

Scharff: Because you’re under stress?

Phil: I don’t know why. Just because that’s always easier.

Scharff: Yeah, it’s always easier. But…

Phil: Growth is…

Scharff: Underneath all that stress there may be some, even though your life is going well, there may be some unhappiness that you might really want some help with. And as you go through these progressive interviews, you might be getting closer to the point where you wish you could open up a bit more. And you know, it’s me today. Maybe next time you feel more like doing it? I don’t know.

Phil: I do the best I can each time, and I know that I’m here to try to get a little bit better, so, I might reluctantly talk about stuff, but I talk about it. You know, I didn’t really hide anything from you.

Scharff: No, I noticed that. You told me things I didn’t even ask. Yeah. But still there’s a feeling of keeping me at bay just a little bit, which you do in a very charming kind of way.

Phil: Thank you. I don’t know if that’s a compliment or not. Probably not, but… I had a charming way? What do you mean by that?

Scharff: Well, you smile, and you’re quite engaging. And you deal with the studio people in that same easy manner. Yet, when you meet with me in this, it’s a sort of a peculiar intimate situation, there’s naturally some reluctance. Because A) it’s not really private, and, B) you’ll never see me again. But I’m just giving you the feedback that
I sense something of that feeling of imminent intrusiveness where if someone like me might get close to you, the next thing you get is a jab. Like I’m asking you about your awards, and in a very charming way, you said, “I don’t really know what they are.” You know, like you blow it off. And I now think it’s so that I would not come in and say, “Well, I knew you had it in you.” You know? Something nasty about it that you might expect from me if I knew too much, of how much pleasure you’re actually taking in how far you’ve come. Things that you feel good about, but you don’t want to be too boastful of them. It’s almost as if you’re still a bit surprised about where you’re at and what you’ve done for yourself.

**Phil:** Sometimes, I am. Yeah.

**Scharff:** Well, we’re going to finish, I think.

**Phil:** Okay.

**Scharff:** Thank you for talking to me, Phil.

**Phil:** Thanks.
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Scharff’s Reflections on the Session

This companion piece to the DVD presents Jill Savege Scharff’s musings at crucial moments in the interview. The patient-therapist dialogue is summarized and paraphrased to provide the context for the therapist’s internal work, an essential part of the object relations approach. A full-length account of this interview and the object relations technique that it demonstrates can be found in Object Relations Individual Therapy by Jill Savege Scharff and David E. Scharff. This piece is adapted from the original by permission of Rowman and Littlefield.

I felt vaguely tense as Phil sat back in the chair and looked at me, waiting for me to start. He had the appearance of a college student who was still interested in being one of the guys, dating, and having fun. I felt surprised that he was married. I had the idea that he was waiting for action. But what kind? His unshaven face, his shifting glance, and his slightly defiant, mocking smile made me think of him momentarily as a convict. Anxious at the start of the interview, I took a sip of water. Phil did too. At that moment, we were like two friends in a pub searching for a drink together to ease the flow of our conversation. He was already quite connected to me. I suspected that his physical mirroring of my movements stemmed from a capacity for unconscious communication with a women’s anxiety and a wish to make things all right between him and her. I also noted that his deep-set eyes moved from left to right as if dodging my gaze, and his body followed suit, as if dodging me or dribbling past me. It seemed to me that he wanted to connect, but he had something to fear from me.

As he spoke of the stress of balancing work and family life, he evoked in me a sense of concern about him and a wish to relieve his stress, like the response of a mother whose child who is busy with exams. I might have pointed this out, but it felt premature, and I sensed that it might be felt as infantilizing and belittling.

He soon got on to the topic of his mother anyway when he told me that he could not say ‘No’ to his mother who wanted him to attend a baby shower for his older sister.
Phil preferred to go and suffer. I thought that he must be feeling that this baby shower had special importance to her, far more than for his sister, and that there was an unconscious reason for his participation that went beyond the usual pleasure in a family reunion and celebration.

He continued, “I tend to feel that I can’t say things directly to her, and then I’ll suddenly go ‘ppff!’ and get it out there.”

I had the fantasy of him as a baby burping and spitting out milk. His head dodging from side to side was like that of a baby who will not fix on the nipple and who feels smothered by the breast.

“You were her baby,” I said. “So she would want you there.”

“Well, yeah, I was, and I left home for graduate school.”

Phil went on to talk pessimistically about his prospects. He had a good work history since adolescence, and a 4.0 average; so it did not make sense that he was worried about his career.

I said, “Despite being so marketable you’re afraid no one wants you. Could you be suffering from a legacy of being a screw-up?”

He laughed with relief and told me that he hadn’t known why he was in college, and spent the whole time drunk. He said, “I got kicked out for drinking and that sobered me up. I learned from that, and things are going well now.”

I said, “You look like you feel you just got over it in time. What was going to happen to you?”

“I would have ended up in jail,” he replied.

Immediately I thought of my fantasy in the opening moments imagining Phil as a convict.

“I had a third degree felony charge,” he said. “’Threatening to cause a catastrophe’. I was in a blackout and I banged two propane cylinders together until they leaked. If I’d been a smoker, half the building and me with it wouldn’t be here today.”

I felt appalled at how close to total destruction he had been. What an explosive way to find himself. No wonder he felt a bit shaky.

Phil returned to the subject of his mother and how she told him what
to do. “There were just the two of us,” he said. “Me and my sister, and for some reason, she seemed to want to hold on to me. To this day she still tells me what to do, how to dress, how to be a person. There is no reason for her to hold on,” he concluded.

As he spoke, I noticed that his body and his eyes had stopped shifting from side to side. He was looking intently at me. Our body postures and arm gestures were in mirror image. I felt that we were in a state of deep unconscious communication. His phrase ‘just the two of us’ came back to my mind.

I asked him, “Was there supposed to be someone else?”

He looked a bit stunned, recovered his balance, metaphorically went ‘ppff’ and got it out there. “My aunt told me my mother had an abortion. That’s a family secret. It’s not my business what stuff my Mom does.” He went on to describe some other stuff she does. “For instance, she is pleased with my scores and says things like ‘I always knew you had it in you -- if you just applied yourself. She roots for me and digs at the same time. ‘Good for you!’ Then, jab.” He thrust his arm forward as if stabbing the groin of someone nearby.

I had the fantasy of a crude abortion implement being inserted.

I said, “You’re very engaging and you relate well to me as you do with you’re aunt, and then I feel kept at bay as you do with your mother. I sense that you are wary, ready to shift or dodge an imminent intrusiveness that you feel from me. I think of it as a fear of the jab.”

Phil remained quiet and thoughtful and put his hands over his genitals.

Phil related to me as a college authority, a professional whose opinion might be of interest, an aunt to whom he felt close, and a mother from whom he feared an aggressive cut-down. Phil has a capacity for love and intimacy, for facing reality and being productive, and for admitting his history and much of his weakness, but he has shaky self-esteem, fear of failure, and a guarded attitude to women other than his wife and aunt. Interest drew him to the interview, not the pressure of symptoms, and so there was no basis on which to recommend therapy, otherwise I would have recommended weekly psychotherapy.
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