What Cures: The Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis (A Symposium)

The following essays were part of a panel presentation at the 40th Anniversary conference of the William Alanson White Institute entitled “Psychoanalytic Controversies and the Interpersonal Tradition” held at the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York City on November 5th, 1983. The panel was chaired by Albert Bryt, M.D.

Separation-Individuation and the Compulsion to Repeat

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The insistent, repetitive need to cling to self defeating behaviors, interactions, and feeling states makes psychoanalytic treatment long and arduous. Even after careful exploration of the psychodynamic meanings of repetitive patterns the patient is often unable to fully relinquish these maladaptive responses. What important functions do these painful repetitions serve? Why are they so persistent? How can we alter our psychoanalytic approach to more forcefully confront and diminish this “compulsion to repeat”?

The relationship between repetition, transference, and resistance which Freud elaborated in Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through (1914) remains a cornerstone of psychoanalytic theory. Freud viewed repetition as a part of the ego’s defensive apparatus which functions in the service of resistance. “These repetitions which emerge with such unwished for exactitude always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life.” (Freud, 1920) He argued that the tendency to repeat early patterns in-
creases as resistance increases. Action in the present replaces memory for the past. Paradoxically, transference serves as both a resistance and a way to uncover the repressed past. Investigation of conflicts expressed in the transference relationship allows the patient to integrate dissociated aspects of his childhood into the adult personality.

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) Freud hypothesized that repetition could be used to bring about mastery. Freud described his 18-month-old grandson's repetitive game of throwing small objects away and saying "All Gone." Later he made it re-appear with a joyful, "There." Freud understood the game as the child's compensation for allowing mother to leave without protest. The child had staged the disappearance and return of the small objects to bring it all under his control. He became the active master of his environment. Mafev (1969), Loewald (1971) and Lipin (1965) have each elaborated this aspect of Freud's theory. Hendrick (1942) even proposed that there must be an instinct to mastery.

Segal (1969) viewed acting out as a later repetitive defensive effort to master or bind the anxiety by repeating in an active role aspects of the stimulating experience that were passively imposed originally. Greenberg (1967) concluded that repetitive phenomena should be handled therapeutically by understanding them as belated attempts to master old traumas, or as the hoped for happy endings to past frustrations.

In 1920, Freud formulated the concept of the Death Instinct to explain the extraordinary power of the compulsion to repeat. He postulated that a biological drive to return to an earlier state, one devoid of stimulation, was the irreducible and elementary factor that could override the Pleasure Principle. The conception of repetitions as defenses against memory and attempts at mastery did not offer a sufficient explanation for the compulsive nature of these repetitions.

The death instinct remains the least accepted aspect of Freud's theory. Fromm (1973) asserted that the notion of a death instinct could not possibly have emerged from Freud's clinical experience, but rather that he was overly attached to the physiological theories he had been taught and that he and his followers were saddled with the theory of the death instinct. Man, according to Fromm, is motivated more by the need to increase tension than by the need to reduce tension.

Freud's unflagging belief in Thanatos, indicates that he felt repetitive phenomena had tremendous power. The source of this power was to be found in a drive to an earlier state. Perhaps he would have been on firmer footing if he thought of the earlier state as emotional rather than biological. The strength of early attachments may offer a more parsimonious explanation for the compulsion to repeat.

I am proposing that recent investigations of attachment and separation in early life give us a fuller understanding of the repetition compulsion. It is my contention that repetitious behaviors serve the important function of permitting a symbolic affective re-connection to the parental figures of early childhood. This is consistent with Fairbairn's (1952) position that "libido is object seeking, not pleasure seeking." The need for this continuous reattachment appears to be rooted in disturbances in the separation-individuation process. The compulsion to repeat complex maladaptive patterns of behavior is seen as intimately related to difficulties in tolerating a sense of separateness. Such difficulties interfere with the individual's ability to act in spontaneous, flexible, and realistic ways. Furthermore, repetitious behaviors serve to reduce anxiety, associated with early fears of abandonment and/or engulfment.

In Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Freud anticipates the importance of separation issues by noting that childhood anxiety is nothing more than the feeling of loss of the loved person. That early bonding and attachment are necessary for both physical and emotional survival has been well documented by Provence and Lipton (1962), Spitz (1965), and Bowlby (1969). In addition, Sullivan (1953), Winnicott (1965) and Ainsworth (1978) have elaborated on the ways that parental anxiety, rejection, and overbearing attitudes generate intolerable quantities of separation anxiety in the child.

Patrick, Pine and Bergman (1975), detail the maturational thrusts toward autonomous functioning and the reactions to separation which characterize the separation-individuation process—a process which continues into the third year of life. Their research demonstrates that a child's capacity to tolerate awareness of physical and psychological separateness and to develop a range of individualized behaviors depends on a complicated interplay of the child's constitutional endowment on the one hand, and the mother's ability to respond appropriately to that endowment on the
other. Ideally, she remains emotionally accessible while indicating that both she and her child can tolerate longer separations in terms of space and time. The demand on mother and child vary qualitatively as the child grows.

In the first year of life the child experiences both the longing for union and the fear of engulfment. Pacella (1980) designates this a basic human conflict. This conflict, he writes, "necessitates those psychic operations which serve as defense against this bipolar anxiety and sets in motion various maneuvers of the ego which have as their aim to hold and to keep the object at an optimal distance from the self."

Researchers on infancy have used the phrase optimal distance to refer to the positioning of mother and child in which the child feels sufficiently reassured by mother’s presence to expand his repertoire of motor, cognitive, and social skills. Mother’s task in helping the child establish an optimal distance is particularly strained in the rapprochement sub-phase (15-22 months) when the child’s tolerance for separateness often fluctuates dramatically (Mahler, 1975). This older, more experienced toddler is confronted by a diminished sense of omnipotence. He recognizes his limitations and his dependency on mother at the same time as he realizes more clearly that he and mother are separate.

Mother’s ability to diminish separation anxiety without undermining her child’s striving toward autonomy has a profound influence on his ultimate capacity to experience himself as separate. Throughout the separation-individuation process, but particularly during the rapprochement subphase, mother’s conflicts over separateness and the child’s conflicts over separateness may impinge on each other in such a way that it becomes impossible for the child to establish a reasonably optimal distance from mother.

If mother and child are unable to find an optimal distance reciprocal anxieties are generated. As the parent-child dyad represents the child’s attempts to avoid unbearable feelings of isolation or fusion. Sometimes the child’s best efforts at steering a safe course are unsuccessful in allowing him to feel reasonably comfortable with closeness, separateness, and autonomy.

Often, the tolerable distance which the child finds—his particular way of reassuring himself that mother is neither deserting nor engulfing him—does not permit him to achieve sufficient separation-individuation. His solution, borne out of the need to maintain a sense of attachment while following the imperatives of his biological growth may lead him to adapt constricted modes of interacting and may limit his ability to explore the environment and develop his own skills. If increasingly autonomous functioning is associated with intense anxiety over separateness—either because mother disapproves of such activity or because she pushes for more independence than the child can bear—the child is driven to repeat those interactions which convince him that he is still attached to her. These ways of connecting are not necessarily comforting in Winnicott’s (1965) or Sullivan’s (1953) sense.

Let me offer a simple illustration. Mother finds her three-year-old son’s appeals for physical closeness and encouragement excessive and intrusive. She tells him that he is a big boy; that she does not need to wave to him as he climbs the jungle gym. She refuses his request to come watch him. Consciously eager to please her and to feel that he can do it, he begins his ascent with determination. As he climbs higher his sense of vulnerability increases. He cannot comfort himself with a glimpse of her. He calls to her in panic. She reluctantly comes to him, scolds him for being such a baby, and tells him she is disappointed. As she becomes angrier, he wails that he is too frightened to go on. In order to maintain contact with her he emphasizes his dependency and helplessness.

He sacrifices feeling accomplished in order not to experience the anxiety of separateness. We may see derivatives of this compromise in his adult life. Strivings towards professional success, for instance, may be thwarted by compulsive self-doubt and self-destructive behaviors. I am suggesting that his repeated need to inhibit adaptive functioning serves to reconnect him to mother. By insisting on his helplessness he unconsciously engages in an internal dialogue with the scolding mother. Reliving this dialogue permits him to maintain a sense of attachment. This process occurs...
internally and may or may not be enacted interpersonally. These repetitive phenomena represent the individuals' efforts to reunite with early parental figures.

Anxiety is diminished even though the individual does not necessarily recreate a gratifying or soothing situation. What he does recreate is a situation which is familiar, reminiscent of being with the parent, having the sound, touch, and emotional quality of an interaction with the parent. It leaves him feeling as he felt in the presence of the parent, even though that feeling might be painful and undesirable. In Mitchell's (1983) words, it is a similar notion of the anxiety reducing aspects of attachment. "Fantasized internal objects provide a sense of connection or anchoring... and this can provide an illusory sense of security."

The repetitions, or as I am hypothesizing, the need to reunite with parental figures becomes heightened in times of psychological stress. The anxiety generated by situations or feelings of symbolic sexual union with father. The pain of being left served as punishment for this and other forbidden fantasies. Her contempt for the man's inferior intelligence allowed her to maintain the fantasy that the idealized father would some day come along and take her away from the inferior, stupid mother. She maintained this early split to preserve some aspect of the good parent from her parents.

The presence of another woman preserved her connection to mother in a disguised way. She could defend against the wish to have the "other woman" all to herself. At another level she was mother in a special relationship with the man. The other woman (mother) had sadistically taunted her for sleeping in the same room as her parents. She requested sleeping in the living room or music room. Mother replied, "I just don't know how safe you would feel sleeping that close to the front door." Eight months later she began sleeping on the living room couch. Her view of mother as ridiculous and annoying served to cover the extent of their mutual dependency. The idealization of father masked her disappointment in his emotional remoteness, her rage at him for returning and reclaiming mother, her distress at his choosing to have sex with mother while being so charming and exciting to her, and anger at him for not protecting her from mother's alternately engulfing involvement and sudden withdrawals.

Repetitions are always multiply determined. Hers was no exception. Through the repetition she was able to express her rage at men (father) for constantly leaving her, particularly leaving her for the other woman (mother). Her relationships permitted a symbolic sexual union and a sense of connection or anchoring... and this can provide an illusory sense of security."

The elucidation of these and other psychodynamic meanings of her repetition, in terms of her life experiences as well as in the transference, left her still unable to fully relinquish these maladaptive patterns. Her reluctance to abandon these repetitions became a focal point of the analysis. What functions did these repetitions serve? Why did she insist on maintaining these painful self-destructive behaviors? The function of the repetition is intimately
linked to the content of the repetition. However, I have found it clinically useful to elucidate the function in a detailed and distinct way.

The patient was involved with a married lawyer, who lived in California. She was angry and disappointed that he had forgotten her birthday, but was sustained by vivid sexual fantasies centered on a planned meeting in Boston the following month. During this time she met another lawyer. He was single, a partner in a well respected law firm, and "good looking in a most conventional way." She felt flat and unexcited on their dinner date. Since her repetitive pattern was now quite clear to her she decided to accept his offer that they go hiking together and "see what happens." The day was pleasant enough, but she became anxious and pulled away when he suggested dinner at his apartment. She left feeling uneasy and empty. Awareness of her discomfort was an important first step in clarifying the function of the repetition. In thinking about establishing a relationship with this available, unmarried lawyer, she was not simply bored. She felt anxious and uncomfortable.

She countered this anxiety by fantasizing about the lawyer in California. The patient was surprised that an available man's suggesting a more intimate relationship would create so much anxiety. After all that was what she claimed she wanted. She quelled her discomfort by returning to thoughts about the married man.

The patient's sense of loss and anxiety when she anticipated involving herself in a close relationship which did not reproduce the family configuration had many roots. She would be giving up the gratifications of oedipal and preoedipal wishes towards both parents. In addition experiencing herself as a separate autonomous individual who could form relationships which were independent of her attachment to earlier figures elicited feelings of isolation and discomfort. Each step toward intimacy with an available man elicited the uneasy feeling that things weren't quite right. She felt strangely alone with these men—more isolated and fearful than when she was living by herself waiting for the occasional telephone call from California.

As a child she had spent a great deal of time "living in a world of fantasy." This allowed for periodic withdrawal from the overstimulating and all consuming relationships with her parents. Being able to maintain this degree of distance diminished her fear of fusion. Emerging from the fantasy allowed for a re-union with her parents which in turn reduced anxiety over separateness. This delicate balance allowed her to maintain a tolerable distance.

Involvement with an available man means separating from the family matrix. Her repetitive pattern, on the other hand, served the purpose of reducing dual anxieties over engulfment and abandonment. Elucidating this function of her repetitive behavior eventually led her to understand and overcome her enormous resistance to change and to become emotionally involved with an "available" man.

The wish to reunite with the parents of early childhood is manifest within the psychoanalytic process as well as outside it. This aspect of the need to repeat can most usefully be clarified in the transference relationship. To facilitate change transference needs to be viewed as more than an acting out of unconscious conflicts which serve defensive and wish fulfilling purposes. Transference is also a way of denying separateness by repeating early attachments. The strength of the wish to remain attached may elicit rigid and perseverative transference responses.

The patient's reluctance to relinquish maladaptive ways of interacting must be forcefully addressed. Analytic inquiry should shift to the function served by the repetition as it occurs in the transference. The analyst's position, which favors growth combined with his empathy for the patient's terror in separating provides an environment in which the patient can confront his difficulties in altering neurotic patterns. To alter repetitive phenomena, analysis of the transference must focus explicitly on difficulties in separating as they manifest themselves in the patient's attempts to reproduce a tolerable distance with the analyst.

The patient discussed earlier acknowledged her pleasure in involving herself in a close relationship which did not reproduce the family matrix. Her expression of joy seemed to indicate an important step toward autonomy. She stormed into the next session demanding an explanation: "Why are there no cups in the bathroom? Considering your fees, I don't think a glass of water is too much to ask for." The manifest content of her complaint reflected her rage at the unyielding mother. We focused instead on the function served by her need to be a disappointed bickering child in relation to the analyst-mother. She reported the fleeting fantasy that the cups were not replaced because of fusion.
cause she had acted like a "big shot." Some time later, she had the thought: "If I keep writing briefs like that I won't need you anymore. Then I would feel like I had lost part of myself."

Maintaining the stance of a demanding child reassured her that she was still attached to mother and that mother would not abandon her. It became clear that experiences of autonomy and separateness were followed by attempts to re-establish early patterns of attachment in the transference. The transference relationship is a contemporary reflection of the struggle to find a balance between the primary wish for attachment, the anxieties of engulfment and abandonment, and the maturational thrust toward autonomy. The predictable meetings and separations inherent in the process of psychoanalysis stimulate particular transference reactions.

Examination of the emotional impact of routine separations, such as the end of the session, the weekend break, and vacations can help to clarify the patient's early efforts and difficulties in finding a tolerable distance. The "psychoanalytic situation" (Stone, 1961) offers rich possibilities for working through conflicts about attachment, aloneness, and loss. However the framework in which psychoanalysis is conducted can also harbor the analyst's counter-resistance to fully engaging painful separation issues. Mamm (1973) assert that there is a universal reluctance to engage issues of separation and loss. When powerful and disturbing feelings of separation are activated in the transference-countertransference relationship the analytic setting offers the analyst built in defenses against fully experiencing his and/or the patient's sense of abandonment, loss, or engulfment. The analyst has established the illusion that he will not be caught off guard by feelings of loss and separation. Sullivan (1956) stated, "Certainly, this surviving unresolved past of the person—the underlying reality of the transference and repetition compulsion of Freud—is a ubiquitous complicating factor in interpersonal relations which cannot safely be ignored in any inquiry into human relations." Careful scrutiny of the patient's and analyst's reactions to routine separations in the treatment setting is essential to working through separation-individuation conflicts and serves to diminish the compulsion to repeat.

I hypothesize that the need to reconnect with early figures represents one important function of the compulsion to repeat. This need is rooted in disturbances in the separation-individuation process. The patient's re-enactment of early attachments in the transference relationship includes a denial of the separation from the parent. Often as the patient begins to function in a more separated and individuated fashion strenuous efforts are made to reattach to the parent through the transference relationship. The return of symptoms during the termination phase is a manifestation of this phenomenon. Focusing explicitly on the function served by repetitive patterns of behavior often serves to clarify the conflicted nature of important early attachments. Sullivan (1956) stated, "Certainly, this surviving unresolved past of the person—the underlying reality of the transference and repetition compulsion of Freud—is a ubiquitous complicating factor in interpersonal relations which cannot safely be ignored in any inquiry into human relations." Careful scrutiny of the patient's and analyst's reactions to routine separations in the treatment setting is essential to working through separation-individuation conflicts and serves to diminish the compulsion to repeat.
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Relationship and Psychic Work: Questions on the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis

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I

PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A METHOD OF CURE assumes a need for or a tendency toward integration. This tendency has been described as attributed to the pressure of the unconscious or repressed to become conscious, the working of Eros seeking to unite units and objects, and/or to the integrative capacities of the ego. These are obviously abstractions utilized to express the idea that the human being seeks to have the need, as we might put it in the idiom of our day, to “get it together”—to get aspects of the self together, to establish links between different psychic experiences, to make connections with others. Getting things together does not exclude differentiation and taking cognizance of reality; on the contrary, it is furthered by them. But certain inescapable discrepancies in maturation and development, likely traumata and perhaps even constitutional imbalances are seen as throwing up powerful obstacles which become part of the psyche and act to disrupt and hinder the integrative trends. Internal conflict or discontinuity is therefore inevitable. The persistence of conflict is abetted by resistance, by the reluctance or unwillingness to become aware of conflict and to engage one’s energies to cure is the attempt to facilitate integration by way of working with the resistances. Mutative work in psychoanalysis is the successful overcoming of resistance. The notion of inherently integrative forces at work can be referred to a biological or an organismic model, without thereby reducing psychoanalysis to biology. Both the patient’s experience which we deal with and the process we engage ourselves in with the other person seem to me to have an organic-like quality. Psychoanalysis does not follow a linear sequence. It has, rather, a Gestalt character, reaching for closure.

Insofar as the integration is with another, it takes on the form of a dialogue under pressure. This dialogue under pressure psychoanalysis has in common, in its cultural roots, with religion and...