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Reconstruction in a Two-Person World May Be More about the Present than the Past: Freud and the Wolf Man, an Illustration

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The psychoanalytic process of reconstruction has yet to be examined from the perspective of today's two-person psychologies. Earlier writers on the subject have implicated the analyst and his emotional involvement as influences that may distort the valid recovery of memories, while others have written that the transference and the reconstructed past are interdependent. By contrast with both views, it is suggested here that the reconstructed product itself may reflect the transference-countertransference engagement of the dyad: in some instances, and to some extent in all instances, the scene or story of the presumed past will be a version of the current analytic relationship. In certain cases consideration of the conscious and unconscious emotional entanglements of the dyad will reveal that the reconstruction says more about the analytic present than about the past. Freud's Wolf Man case provides a good illustration of this point. While a broad consensus exists that its famous primal scene reconstruction cannot be veridical, it has most often been dismissed as distorted by Freud's theoretical commitments. A closer examination of the relationship between Freud and Pankejeff reveals that the reconstruction is an accurate rendering of warded-off aspects of the dyad's way of being together. The potential clinical utility of adopting this perspective is that it encourages the analyst to reflect on his clinical reconstructions, interrogating them for clues to otherwise elusive aspects of the current clinical relationship.

Richard Gottlieb died as this essay was being prepared for publication. Gottlieb was an esteemed colleague and a devoted mentor to JAPA authors, serving as Associate Editor on this journal for fourteen years. He was a scholar, a frequent contributor to our literature with over a dozen articles on a wide range of topics, recipient of multiple awards, and a generous teacher. Gottlieb was a Training and Supervising Analyst at the Berkshire Psychoanalytic Society; on the faculty of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute; and an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Mount Sinai Medical School.

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Over the past few decades American psychoanalysis has undergone a slow revolution as the idea that the analytic situation must be viewed from the perspective of a two-person psychology has gained ascendance. Today it is well accepted that not only the analysand's engagement but the analyst's as well will inevitably include his or her *unconscious* emotional participation. And since it is has been increasingly understood that much of importance to analysts about their participation will be out of their awareness, the ability to identify telltale clues to their unconscious participation is today considered clinically vital. The relational schools of analysis have long appreciated these facts. Within American ego psychology, British object relations, and other schools the language of transference and countertransference has increasingly included the idea that *both* terms (transference and countertransference) denote ongoing and continuous engagements of which significant portions remain unconscious. More recent developments have emphasized that these engagements are systems of pervasive, back-and-forth, recursively spiraling mutual influences and that they characterize the structured emotional climate of every psychoanalysis. Although progress is under way and more and more cogent questions are being raised, the psychoanalytic “two body problem” has not yet been solved or even adequately described. We continue to struggle to develop concepts and vocabulary that adequately express our developing recognition of the complexity of these interactions.

It is noteworthy that the clinical process (or activity) of *reconstruction* has been left out of our revolution. Much as did Freud (1918) in his dazzling excavation of Sergei Pankejeff's primal scene experience in the Wolf Man case, analysts today seem to think of and describe their reconstructive efforts as activities of the analyst and not also as emergent expressions of the mutual engagement and bidirectional recursive influences of the two-person system. The prevailing view, evident in our literature and clinical conferences, is that the analysand provides clues to reconstruction of the past for the analyst to interpret. What the analysand presents may be selected, revised, or distorted by transference, and what

the analyst reconstructs may be colored beyond recognition by theoretical biases. But the traditional view of reconstruction (and reconstruct*ing*) seems largely to have remained untouched by the new perspective.

I will be suggesting that there are advantages to considering the reconstruction process as an activity of the dyad, of the transference-countertransference, of the analytic relationship, or the two-person field. In other words, I believe we would do well to consider reconstruction a process of *co*-construction during which the analyst will necessarily be unaware of significant aspects of his or her contribution and of parts of the back-and-forth mutual shaping of the relational system that may produce a particular reconstruction.

But let me not be misunderstood. I remain convinced that, as William Faulkner (1951) famously put it, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” The past remains of enormous importance, and analysis can provide clues to it. But my emphasis here is fundamentally different from that of contributors before me. While Blum (1999), for example, perhaps the most thoughtful writer on reconstruction since Greenacre (see, e.g., 1981), acknowledges that countertransference may play a role in reconstruction, still—as I read him—he views its role as a *distorting* influence, one that may obscure the clarity of an otherwise “valid” reconstruction or “accurate memory access” (pp. 1130-1131). For Blum, memory records real experiences that ideally can be reconstructed but for “distorting” influences such as countertransference and theoretical bias. My view is that in addition to the influence of “distortions,” countertransference—or, more broadly, the analytic emotional relationship that includes the analyst's countertransference—will inevitably shape the process and contribute form and content to reconstructed scenes and narratives, as well as to their imputed meaning. The degree of that contribution will doubtless vary from one analysis to another, and at different times within a single analysis, but the influence of the analytic dyadic relationship will never be absent. In some treatments its role will be *de minimus*, while in others it will loom large, and in those where its role is important its recognition may provide helpful insights about the state of the analysis. To Theodore Jacobs's roster of cues to the recognition of countertransference (1973)—the analyst's postures, gestures, and movements—I believe we can usefully add the analyst's reconstructions.

Freud's Wolf Man Reconstruction

Freud's central reconstruction in his Wolf Man analysis offers many advantages as an illustration of my claim. First, it is probably the most widely known, written about, and researched psychoanalytic reconstruction in the history of our discipline. Second, despite the enormous amount of attention it has received, the psychoanalytic community is virtually unanimous in the belief that

it is—in the words of the Wolf Man himself—“terribly far-fetched” (Obholzer 1982, p. 35). Most informed observers have concluded that it is well-nigh impossible for events to have occurred as Freud and Pankejeff reconstructed them. Third, despite its unlikeliness as veridical history, Freud's case report and the subsequent record indicate that the two men talked about the reconstruction recurrently and extensively. It was a fixture of the analysis. They even wrote letters to each other about it after the analysis was over (Pankejeff 1926).

The Structure of the Reconstruction

To summarize the Wolf Man reconstructive sequence, it is a six-part invention that can be thought of as a series of nested concentric circles: (1) The outermost is the published case report, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” itself a reconstruction—Freud's—of certain events that took place between January 1910 and June 1914. (2) The next circle within contains the current events of the analysis itself—what we today call the “here and now” of the analysis. Certain contemporary influences evoked in the analysand his recollection of a dream he had had at age four and moved him to tell it to Freud. (3) Our next circle contains the experiences of the little Sergei on Christmas Eve, the night before his fourth birthday. Because he was born on Christmas Day, he had come to expect a double portion of presents on his fourth birthday—Christmas presents plus birthday presents. The boy went to sleep that night in a state of excited anticipation and experienced the expected presents as expressions of the love he longed for from his father. We can readily imagine that little Sergei could barely get himself to sleep. But neither could he remain asleep, as in our next circle (4) we learn that his sleep was interrupted by a nightmare from which he awakened in a state of terror. The nightmare was the famous Wolf Dream, in which all was still; his bedroom window opened on its own; and outside, perched on a tree, he saw five or seven white wolves with bushy tails, their eyes fixed on him. He awoke in terror. (5) In the fifth circle is the

interpretation of the dream—a process that engaged the two men over the course of months or years and continued beyond the end of their two periods of analytic work together. The dream was interpreted as a representation of an experience the infant Sergei had had when he was but one and a half years old: his observation of the primal scene. It did not exert a traumatic impact on him for another two and a half years, on the night of the dream. The reconstructed primal scene experience is florid in its details. To name but a few, the boy, at

one and a half, was asleep in his parents' bedroom. He awoke at five p.m. due to the diurnal spike in the malarial fever he was then suffering. Upon awakening, he observed his parents, clothed in lightweight white pajamas—it was summertime—engaged in sexual intercourse, his father standing, penetrating his wife from behind, *a tergo*. The young child observed them having intercourse three times. Made anxious by the disappearance of his father's penis into his mother's vagina, he was relieved when he saw it withdrawn intact. In his state of excitement he passed a bowel movement, interrupting them.

The final circle (6) is the most important, because it narrates the meanings of the preceding circles, reversing the sequence of their presumed discovery and inference. This innermost circle articulates the ultimate meaning of the primal scene to Sergei and presents a template for his later symptoms, fears, inhibitions, compulsions, and indecision, as well as the necessary conditions for his falling in love—among other things. It is this final circle—the reconstructed meaning of the reconstructed primal scene of the reconstructed dream, of the reconstructed circumstances of the dream-in-formation, of the transference-countertransference—that will be of the most interest to us going forward.

The significance of the primal scene can be understood only in the context of the four-year-old's experience. Freud writes of “delayed action,” of *Nachträglichkeit*. The reconstructed primal scene tells the story-in-pictures of love and its price. The little boy, now age four, yearns for his father's love. His yearning takes the form of wanting gifts from him. Yet for that love there is a price to pay, or an offering to be made. The little boy understands this offering or sacrifice to be his highly prized possession—his penis. Later in his life, during his analysis, the adult Pankejeff had to give up symbolic phallic derivatives including—as we shall see—his money, will, independence, freedom, and sexual gratification. We know from Freud's footnote to the case, from Sergei's much later interviews with Karin Obholzer, and from what can be inferred from the

symptoms he presented to Ruth Mack Brunswick (1928) that his sense of submitting to Freud was a decisive aspect of the way the adult Pankejeff experienced the exchange. He regretted to the end of his days having submitted to Freud's will. This once intensely religious man is reported to have said he viewed Freud as God. He had a peculiar—not to say idiosyncratic—understanding of what “transference” was. For Pankejeff, transference involved the relinquishment of one's will to one's analyst, the turning over of life's

decision making, suspending one's critical faculties, and relinquishing one's skepticism about psychoanalysis.

Freud's Role in the Dyad

But what about Freud's part in this transference-countertransference story? On this the record is much less complete than it is for Pankejeff, necessitating a greater degree of speculation. Nonetheless, I believe there is sufficient evidence to infer that Freud's engagement was—in Heinrich Racker's terms (1957)—complementary to that of Pankejeff. From our contemporary point of view, Freud engaged in significant ways with Pankejeff as the wished-for father who demanded certain kinds of sacrifices in return for his gifts of love. In this sense the jointly reconstructed primal scene may tell us a great deal more about the clinical present from 1910 through 1914 and onward than about the past when Pankejeff was eighteen months old.

Freud and Pankejeff: The First Meetings

We know enough to tentatively imagine important aspects of the first few meetings of the two men in January and early February of 1910. Freud wrote twice in rapid succession to his friend Ferenczi (February 8 and 13, 1910; Freud 1910b,c) about his new patient, describing him in the first letter as “very rich” and in the second merely as “rich.” Freud's irrational worries about money have long been known. He himself often referred to these worries as constituents of his “money complex” (Freud 1911b, p. 402; see also 1909, p. 270; 1910a, p. 43; 1911a, p. 387). Despite his self-awareness, his experience of money as “laughing gas” (Freud 1899, p. 374), capable of buoying his mood and temporarily banishing his fears of the return of the poverty of his childhood, maintained a firm grip on him. He characterized himself as a wage slave and at times made clear his resentment over having to see many patients a day to support his family. Given this background, a closer look at his second letter suggests a

meaningful association. “On the whole,” Freud (1910c) writes, “I am only a machine for making money and have been working up a sweat in the last few weeks.” His next words are: “A rich young Russian, whom I took on …” (p. 138). And in the published case he observed that “it was obvious that he attached great importance to being taken for rich” and felt very much hurt if he was not (Freud 1918, p. 73).

In these fragments related to their first meeting (possibly more than one), the elements of the reconstructed primal scene exchange are already in evidence. Pankejeff, yearning for Freud's love, agrees to submit to him by turning over a precious part of himself, his wealth, a bulwark of his self-esteem. Freud, for his part, gets a dose of his longed-for laughing gas and sets further terms for Pankejeff's submission: as additional conditions of his love Freud demands that Pankejeff incarcerate himself and prohibits him any sexual contact with his mistress, Therese Keller, later to become his wife. Pankejeff accepted both conditions. He refrained from contact with Therese for at least a year, possibly two.

One may object that Freud's requirements were hardly demands for submission but were "merely" matters of psychoanalytic technique. To this I would respond that in the first place Freud was at this time still inventing psychoanalytic technique and that many factors, conscious and unconscious, were at work in its invention. But, more important, today we are no longer so free to view technical matters with such naiveté, as if they were devoid of personal meaning and intention. Our "technical" procedures, such as the setting and collection of fees, use of the couch, and the fundamental rule, have been amply shown by others to inevitably hold meaning for the analyst.

In addition to our knowledge of the structure and emotional heat of their first meeting, we know that Pankejeff "admitted" a few days afterwards that he had thought of Freud as a "Jewish swindler," had had the idea of defecating on Freud's head, and—remarkably—had thought of "using" Freud sexually from behind! (Freud 1910c, p. 138). The die seems cast: the reconstructed primal scene of intercourse *a tergo* is already present except here the roles of the two partners—the demanding Freud and the submissive Pankejeff—are reversed.

Freud's Setting of a Fixed Termination Date and Promise to Cure

Returning now to Freud's setting of a fixed date for the end of the analysis: This "technical" maneuver is the twin of another, Freud's

promise to cure Pankejeff's constipation, no trivial matter since bowel troubles were the patient's "principal subject of complaint" (Freud 1918, pp. 74-75). Both maneuvers might be considered mere applications of technique, but in both instances Freud makes it clear that these were ad hoc measures, even though he rationalized them as technical inventions required by the exigencies of this particular clinical situation. In both, however, Freud's *language* betrays his

intense engagement in a power struggle with his patient; both maneuvers can be understood as “weapons” deployed to effect Pankejeff's submission.

In explaining his promise of cure, Freud wrote that Pankejeff's doubt, “the patient's strongest *weapon*,” is what “enabled him to lie entrenched behind a respectful indifference and to allow the efforts of the treatment [note how these efforts are made to seem impersonal, technical] to slip past him *for years.* ... Nothing changed, and there was no way of convincing him.” But then a solution occurred to Freud, a weapon even stronger than Pankejeff's skepticism. “At last,” Freud wrote, “I recognized the importance of the intestinal trouble for my purposes; ... I promised the patient a complete recovery of his intestinal activity.... I then had the satisfaction of seeing his doubt dwindle away ... and in a few weeks' time [his bowel] recovered its normal functions after their long impairment” (pp. 74-75; emphasis added).

The dyad's power struggle was overtly about anal matters: withholding, submission, and enemas. These were the subjects of their conversation and it seems likely that these subjects were—as is so often the case—of a piece with, or in Levenson's phrase (1972, 1983), “isomorphic” with the very drama they were enacting together. To me Freud's proffered reasons for this deviation are neither spelled out nor completely convincing. My suggestion is that Freud's innovation may have been influenced by the heated reenactment of the primal scene material in the analytic present.

The story of the fixed, in effect forced, termination is similar to the primal scene material in many ways. Although it too is about love, submission, and the price of both, this iteration contains no overtly anal material. Yet Freud's disavowed frustration with Pankejeff's passive aggression is as clear as it had been in their earlier struggle.

About the circumstances leading to his decision to set a fixed date for termination, Freud (1918) wrote, “The patient with whom I am here concerned remained for a long time unassailably entrenched behind an

attitude of obliging apathy.... [When] he began for the first time to feel relief, he immediately gave up working ... in order to remain comfortably in the situation which had been thus established.... Only one way was to be found of overcoming [his resistance]. I was obliged to wait until his attachment to myself had become strong enough ... and then played off this one factor against the other. I determined ... that the treatment must be brought to an end at a particular fixed date, no matter how far it had advanced.... Under the inexorable

pressure of this fixed limit his resistance and his fixation to the illness gave way, and now in a disproportionately short time the analysis produced all the material which made it possible to clear up his inhibitions and remove his symptoms. All the information, too, which enabled me to understand his infantile neurosis is derived from this last period of the work, during which resistance temporarily disappeared ...” (p. 11). The analyst exerted “inexorable pressure” and the analysand “gave way.” And as in the promised cure situation (where Freud speaks of the patient's “weapon” [p. 75]), Freud again provided a military analogy to his ad hoc technical invention. “The situation is the same,” he wrote, “as when to-day an enemy army needs weeks and months to make its way across a stretch of country which in times of peace was traversed by an express train in a few hours and which only a short time before had been passed over by the defending army in a few days” (p. 12).

Freud and Pankejeff: After the Fixed Termination

Despite Freud's resolve that their analytic relationship end come July 2014, “no matter how far it had advanced,” it did not end. Returning to Vienna in 1919, now impecunious—his vast wealth appropriated by the Russian revolution—Pankejeff undertook his second analysis with Freud, this one lasting only a few months, with Freud treating Pankejeff without a fee, the first of the many gifts, in kind or money, he gave or arranged for him over the ensuing years. Much later, speaking to Obholzer, Pankejeff disputed Muriel Gardiner's earlier report (1964) that Freud regularly took up annual collections for him. He said that instead “what happened was that I sometimes went to him and he gave me a few pounds but no large sums.... Those were mere *gifts*, nothing regular ...” (Obholzer 1982, pp. 60-61; emphasis added). Nonetheless, it has been clear to all observers—including Pankejeff himself—that his dependence on Freud and, after him, on the analytic community was monumental and unremitting. This

was more than a mere financial dependence, for Pankejeff adopted psychoanalysis and his connection to Freud as central to his identity and to such emotional stability as he was capable of. The aspect I wish to stress in the present context is *Freud's* relationship with *him* after the completion of the two analyses. Pankejeff had submitted to him and become his famous “case in point.” In return, I am suggesting, Freud's recurrent monetary gifts were symbols of his paternal love as configured in their reconstructed primal scene. Another part of that configuration was the fact that that love came at the price of submission and the relinquishment of prized parts of himself, reflected in Pankejeff's lifelong posture of helpless dependency, first on Freud and later on

Ruth Mack Brunswick, Muriel Gardiner, and Kurt Eissler, among the many others who continued to treat him without a fee, arrange publication of his memoir, support him financially, refer students to him for Russian lessons, and be a market for his paintings. We may add here Harold Blum's informed and wise speculation that the analytic community may even have provided Pankejeff a monetary gift, “an indirect honorarium” (Blum 2013, p. 964), to undergo a Rorschach test at age sixty-nine.

Discussion

I credit Edgar Levenson, the brilliant relational analyst, for being the first to observe that in psychoanalytic treatment the subject matter the dyad is speaking about is in some way the very subject they are enacting together. Levenson referred to this relationship as “isomorphic,” to these similarities as “isomorphisms.” *We are doing together what we are talking about.* Others after Levenson have confirmed, vividly and convincingly illustrated, and extended the implications of this truth, an observation that can be verified by any analyst on any working day. While Levenson attributed this phenomenon, perhaps correctly, to its being a property of self-organizing complex systems, others have approached it from different perspectives. Consider the groundbreaking work of Racker on countertransference. Surely if a patient's transference may induce a concordant or complementary countertransference, it is as surely true that the analytic pair will be joined together in a reciprocal emotional entanglement. Similarly, the mechanism of projective identification implies an entanglement. These have been some of our ways as analysts to theorize what I earlier characterized as our dicipline's “two body problem.”

My effort has been to extend Levenson's observation—and that of our two-person psychologies more broadly—to include the processes and products of clinical reconstruction. Reconstructions are a feature of virtually all analyses, whether explicitly spoken of as such or not. They may assume a greater importance in certain analyses than in others. It is my sense that when the analytic pair engage in talking about a particular reconstruction recurrently, and over an extended period, reconstruction will both assume and reflect the shape of the relationship between analyst and analysand. My view of Freud's work in the Wolf Man case has been based on this assumption: these two men were engaged in performing together what they were spending so much of their time talking about.

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