Symbolic Equation and Phantasy

IPI Satellite Program
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Patients A, B and C

- Patient A: Violin = penis; playing violin = masturbation
- Patient B: Violin is associated to penis; playing duet is associated with intercourse
- Patient C: Wet shoes = traumatic attack; disinfecting wet shoes = fending off traumatic attack
Symbolic Equation v. Symbolic Representation

- **Symbolic equation:**
  - The symbol is equated with the object symbolized so that the two are felt to be identical.

- **Symbolic representation:**
  - The symbol represents the object but is not equated with it.

(Segal, 1957, 1978, 1991)
Basic Questions

- Can patients A and C be said to be symbolizing at all?
- If so, how are they different than patient B?
- What conditions lead to the development of symbolic equation v. symbolic representation?
- What is the role of phantasy?
Phantasy in Freud

- Originates primarily as cs. or pcs. day-dreaming
- Formed by secondary process (rational thought)
- Wish-fulfilling (of unconscious wish)
- Appears relatively late in development (after capacity for play and rational thought)
- Phantasies are intermittent in psychic life (‘A happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one.’ - 1908b)

(Freud 1908a, 1908b, 1910, 1911, 1917a, 1917b)
Phantasy in Klein

- Mental expression of instinct as the instinct aims at its objects
- Operates continuously from the outset
- Underlies introjection and projection - foundation of first object relations and creation of self- and object-representations
- Content of early phantasy is about body, but becomes elaborated (into defenses, wish-fulfillments, anxieties, ego-mechanisms, adaptation to reality, etc.) with experience
- Primary content of unconscious and conscious thought processes
- Changes over time with stages of psychological development

Phantasy in the Paranoid/Schizoid Position

- **Omnipotence**: phantasy defines reality of the world
- **Splitting**: Objects - at first, largely constructed out of phantasy, then out of actual experience plus phantasy - are not experienced as whole, but are split into good and bad
- **Repression**: Rids the conscious psyche of frightening phantasies and phantasied objects
- **Projective Identification**: Aspects of self (self- or object-representations, also constructed in part via phantasy) are split off and projected into an object. Identification with projected parts leads to attempts to control them
The infant experiences primitive physical or emotional states with P/S phantasy.

Mother understands the infant’s states.

Accepts them without regression or retaliation.

Processes them in her own mind to gain perspective and place them in context.

Gives them back to the infant in metabolized, mentalized and mature form.

(Bion, 1963)
Phantasy in the Depressive Position

- Objects are felt to be whole objects
- Ambivalence toward objects is fully experienced
- Negative emotions will not destroy good objects
- Ambivalent feelings about the object create fears of loss or harm to the object, leading to guilt and attempts at repair
- Growing sense of reality
- Phantasy-constructed objects are moderated, placed in conjunction with objects of opposite valence, no longer define reality
- Phantasies are drawn back into the self as characteristics of one’s own experiences
Phantasy and Symbolic Equation

- In symbolic equation, P/S level phantasy is in use
- Omnipotence, splitting, repression and projective identification create the symbol as identical to the thing symbolized
- Phantasy in symbolic equation represents a failure of differentiation of internal and external, reflecting a similar failure in differentiation of self and object
Phantasy and Symbolic Representation

- In symbolic representation, phantasy at the Depressive level is at work
- This phantasy:
  - Is not projectively identified in the object
  - Is understood to originate from the internal world, which is experienced as different than the external world
  - Creates the possibility of representation because of the separation between self and object
References

References