CHAPTER 10

THE TWO FACES OF CHANGE
PROGRESSION AND REGRESSION

SAM KIRSCHNER AND DIANA ADILE KIRSCHNER

PROGRESSIVE ABREACTIVE REGRESSION

How do people change? Is it a simple linear process, an easy evolution, from beginning state A, intervening variable or stimulus B, to resulting C? Or is the process more complex and nonlinear? Clinical theory and practice, supported by empirical evidence, indicate that the latter is true and that indeed human growth and evolution follow a complex rhythmic pattern. This chapter will examine a developmental model of the growth pattern and the implications of this paradigm for psychotherapy.

In psychoanalytic thought, we find the notion of change through regression in the analytic process. The patient regresses on the analytic couch, accessing primary process thought, thereby making the repressed unconscious material conscious. The freeing of psychological energy leads to the strengthening and promoting of ego functioning. Various psychoanalytic theorists have offered variations on this theme of regression leading to progression. For example, Kris (1951) and Bellak (1958) have described regression in the service of the ego as a reduction in the cognitive and selective functions of the ego for the facilitation of the other synthetic ego functions. Kris (1951) specifically argued that in
the genesis of the creative arts there is a regression to primary process thought in the service of enhanced progressive functioning.

The regress to progress theme as an explanation for how people can change also appears in the literature on human development. For example, Erik Erikson (1950), in his seminal work, *Childhood and Society*, observed that young children may, at times, regress to more babyish modes of behavior. In one vivid scene, he described how Ann, a 4-year-old, became all mouth and thumb in a very “oral” display. Then, she quickly became enlivened, grabbing and kicking her doll and grasping a play car that was lying in the consulting room. In Erikson’s view, children oscillate between what he called an “avenue of regression” that leads inward and a progressive avenue that leads outward toward initiative.

Margaret Mahler’s (1980) description of the subphases of separation/individuation in early childhood carries the regress to progress concept out of the exclusively intrapsychic arena into the interpersonal domain. According to Mahler (1980), in the rapprochement subphase, the child ventures out to explore and master the world followed by periodic retreats into the reassuring arms of the mothering one. These retreats occur because the toddler experiences anxiety when separating from the secure base of the parent. In order for the child to venture forward again with diminished conflict, he or she needs to be emotionally anchored and held by the availability of mother’s dependable nurturance and by the “go” signals he or she gets with regard to further explorations of the world. As the child separates, he or she tends to introject the loving mothering one. When all goes well, there is the development of object constancy—an omnipresent internalized image of the caring parent to whom the child can refer throughout life.

Rapprochement theory can be seen as not only expanding our view of change beyond the intrapsychic into the interpersonal arena, but also expanding our linear view of the change process, that is, regress to progress, to a more dialectical position. In the dialectical view of Mahler, an ongoing oscillation occurs between regression and progression in which progression outward is followed by a regression inward and toward a significant other (mother), which in turn is followed by further progression out to the world. While Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) developed their model based on observations of young children, it is our contention that their dialectical model can be applied to human development throughout the life cycle. Specifically, we are positing that change occurs through a very active rapprochement process with different significant others throughout life.

In our view, the mother is simply the first (and most profound)