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Adult Development and Transference

ROBERT A. NEMIROFF AND CALVIN A. COLARUSSO

Transference has been defined as the displacement of patterns of feelings and behavior that were originally experienced with significant figures of one’s childhood to individuals in one’s current relationships (Moore & Fine, 1968, p. 92). Transference has always been understood to have its roots in the infantile past. Freud focused on the events of the oedipal phase and the infantile neurosis as the source of neurotic transference (Freud, 1905, 1912, 1913, 1915-1917). Gradually, other analysts (Kernberg, 1975; Klein, 1948, Kohut, 1971, 1977; Kramer, 1979) explored the relationships between preoedipal development and transference.

As we have pointed out, the most prevalent psychoanalytic conception today does not hold that adults undergo dynamic development. Indeed, such distinguished developmentalists as Anna Freud, Humberto Nagera, and W. Ernst Freud (1965) wrote in their work on the adult profile:

In this instance assessment is concerned not with an ongoing process but with a finished product in which, by implication, the ultimate developmental stages should have been reached. The developmental point of view may be upheld only insofar as success or failure to reach this level or to maintain it determines the so-called maturity or immaturity of the adult personality. (p. 10)

The paper on which this chapter is based was presented by Dr. Colarusso at the spring 1981 meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in San Juan as part of a panel entitled “The Changing Vistas of Transference: The Effect of Developmental Concepts on the Understanding of Transference.”
Their statement may not be limited so much by a failure to see the adult as dynamic and changing as by what they choose to call *development*. For them, as for the majority of analysts, the term refers primarily to the formation of psychic structure, a process that is confined to childhood and adolescence.

The view of adulthood that we and some others hold agrees with the following statement by Morton Shane (1977):

The use of the developmental approach implies that the analytic patient, regardless of age, is considered to be still in the process of ongoing development as opposed to merely being in possession of a past that influences his present conscious and unconscious life. (pp. 95-96)

Likewise, we remind the reader that the definition of development to which we adhere is that of Rene Spitz (1965, p. 5): "The emergence of exchanges between the organism on one hand, and the inner and outer environment on the other."

Whereas most analysts readily acknowledge the developmental role of organic maturation and physical progression in childhood and adolescence, few acknowledge that the forces of physical aging and retrogression may be equally important factors in developmental processes in the second half of life. With respect to the effects of bodily changes on adult development, we maintain that the organism continues as a dominant influence in the developmental processes and is expressed psychologically through the normative increasing awareness of physical aging and a growing preoccupation with time limitation and the inevitability of personal death. As at all points throughout life, depending on individual experience, the phase-specific developmental tasks that must be engaged can serve as stimuli to developmental progression, that is, significant intrapsychic growth or as niduses for arrest and fixation.

And what of the other pole of development—the inner and outer environment? It is a psychoanalytic truism that the outer environment as characterized, for instance, by the mother of infancy or the oedipal father has a powerful effect on childhood development. But, as with the body, the environment is usually afforded an inconsequential role in adult development. Witness the following statement by Eissler (1975):

In early life periods, biology and the primary demands of reality furnish the guidelines of a necessary development. The guidelines of latency, puberty and adolescence are increasingly defined by the demands of culture and sexual maturation. The adult, though, should be more or less free, even though limited by the general biological framework. In the ideal case internal processes