AN EXAMPLE OF PREVERBAL DETERMINANTS IN A CLASSICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Ego psychology adds a valuable dimension to classical psychoanalytic theory and technique by illuminating some of the factors that shape the development of self and object representations. Insight into identity formation can, in some cases, uncover preverbal determinants that create obstacles to oedipal resolution. This is illustrated in an analytic case that reached an impasse during the termination phase, which was resolved when the preverbal component of this resistance was recognized and interpreted.

The contribution of ego psychology to psychoanalytic theory and technique has received wide recognition in the literature. Much less has been written about the contribution of ego psychology to classical psychoanalytic theory and technique. A classical psychoanalytic case will be presented to illustrate one example of the application of this valuable expansion of theory to technique.

A brief review of concepts seems in order before proceeding. Ego psychology and classical analysis will be discussed as they relate to this paper.

Ego psychology expands classical psychoanalytic theory to encompass preoedipal and preverbal development. Preverbal development is subsumed under preoedipal development and pertains to the period from birth until speech appears as an indicator of ego organization (Spitz, 1965) and facilitator of the separation-individuation process. The ego psychological expansion of analytic theory pertains to all aspects of development as psychic structure forms out of interaction between the innate endowment and the environment. It takes into account constitutional factors, psychosexual development, the ego and the id, the affective climate and its impact on object relations and identity formation, and the
interplay of all of these forces on the maturation and development of the young child.

The vicissitudes of early development determine how equipped a child is to enter and deal with the stresses of the oedipal phase and all that follows. There is general agreement that classical analysis requires that sufficient structure formation occur during the first three or four years of life to enable the child to reach the oedipal phase competently. The attainment of neurotic structure assumes the achievement of designated developmental milestones: dominance of the phallic phase and the corresponding anxiety level; a stage of ego development, including speech for communication in addition to need-fulfillment, some capacity for abstract thought, and a repertoire of defenses and defense mechanisms; separated self and object representations, including gender identity, and the establishment of self and object constancy.

If this developmental foundation exists, the child enters the oedipal position proper. But if, for a variety of reasons, that child does not have the resources to negotiate safe passage, he or she becomes entangled in conflict. That conflict then persists through latency, adolescence, and adulthood, altered somewhat by the forces at play during the intervening years, until the adult neurotic, propelled by suffering and and hope, enters the analyst's office. The analytic situation offers the opportunity of replaying, through the transference neurosis, the drama of that early time when the developmental derailment took place. Based on structural theory, it follows that classical interpretations address intersystemic conflict, with the aim of uncovering, reworking, and working through the real events and infantile distortions that caused the unresolved conflicts of the infantile neurosis. The analyst uses interpretation as a primary tool to liberate affects that form a bridge to buried memories and to infantile distortions. Through the work of reconstruction, the past is recovered and rediscovered.

The thesis of this paper is that our expanded understanding of early development deepens the work of reconstruction. More specifically, insight into identity formation allows us to discover preverbal determinants to the obstacles that prevent oedipal resolution at the phase-specific time. By developing a theory of earliest self and object relations, the ego psychologists have provided the means for recognizing preverbal communications in the transference. Freud noted that a gap pertaining to early object relations existed in his theory. Hartmann (1958), A. Freud (1946), Spitz (1965), Mahler (1968), Blanck and Blanck (1979), et al., all contributed to bridging this theoretical gap and have enriched Freud's theory in a manner that is faithful to his basic principles.

In order to illustrate the effect of this theoretical expansion as it applies to the case I shall present, let us review Freud's (1924a) description of the last round of the boy's passage through the oedipal phase in