THE RENOVATIVE ASPECT OF PSYCHOANALYTIC RECONSTRUCTION IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Joyce Edward

ABSTRACT: Reconstruction of the origins of present day psychic phenomena constitutes an essential component of psychoanalytically oriented treatment. The clinician seeks to help restore to the patient a picture of the past and to correct or revise those early impressions that have been distorted as a result of cognitive immaturity or altered by the employment of defense, fantasy, or compensatory adaptations. It is this renovative aspect of reconstruction which will be elaborated upon, drawing from the treatment of a borderline woman who, since childhood, had overly employed the autoerotic resources of her body to compensate for missed object experiences. Ultimately this effort came to block her development, distort organization, and compromise self valuation. By tracing her polymorphous perversity in adulthood back to its origins, it was possible to enable her to regard her responses to chronic childhood trauma in a new light. This in turn aided in the revision of the predominantly negatively coloured self representations, leading to more positive development in the narcissistic sphere of her personality.

A major goal of psychoanalytically oriented treatment is that of freeing an individual from the pathogenic power of the past. This involves, among other things, reconstructing a picture of those events which once turned development in a deviant direction. Freud (1937) viewed this search for the origins of psychic phenomena as one of the distinguishing features of psychoanalysis as a treatment method.

Reconstruction, however, is not the creation of psychoanalysis. It is, in fact, an ubiquitous human activity. The quest for antecedents, the search for causality (Nunberg, 1958), an interest in looking to the past for a clearer understanding of present and future, has engrossed common

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folk as well as scholars throughout history. This preoccupation probably
distinguishes humans from animals as much as does language (Young,
1978). There have been individuals who, like Freud, have elevated this
pursuit beyond the ordinary. St. Augustine, a Catholic churchman of the
fourth century, reconstructed the feelings, experiences, and impressions
of his earliest years in a remarkable book “The Confessions” (Fremantle,
1954). Drawing upon the observations of infants and memories of his own
childhood, Augustine traced the impact of both that which he recalled
and that which he retrieved of his early experiences on the evolution of
his being. He came to appreciate that what he had become had been
shaped not only by the actual experiences of the past, but by what he had
made of those experiences in his mind.

It remained for Freud, however, to recognize the relationship be-
tween psychopathology and reminiscences, to formulate a comprehensive
theory of human development, and to propose a method for discovering
traces of the past in dreams, free associations, affects, fantasies, para-
praxes and transference phenomena, which continues to orient our clin-
ical work to this day.

Of those analysts after Freud, Phyllis Greenacre (1975, 1981) has
been perhaps foremost in further elaborating on the subject of reconstruc-
tion. She refers to two constituents of the process, “restoration” and “ren-
ovation” (1975, p. 694). To my knowledge Greenacre has not defined these
terms precisely. I draw from Hartmann (1958) in employing restoration
to mean the “regaining of buried material” and “renovation” to signify
the “discovering (not just rediscovering) the correct relationships of the
elements to each other, taking into account meaning connections as well
as causal connections” (p. 64). Restoration, in other words, may be re-
garded as the retrieval of the impressions of past experiences as they
have been registered in the mind in either the unconscious or precon-
scious (Freud, 1915). Renovation may be thought of as those efforts that
are made in a psychoanalytically oriented treatment to clarify, organize,
connect, correct or to revise or give additional meanings to the impres-
sions of the past which have been consciously remembered or which are
retrieved in the course of treatment.

It is the renovative component of reconstruction which will be consid-
ered in this paper. Demonstrated will be the way in which the renovation
of a borderline woman’s distorted conceptions of her responses to early
trauma helped to alter her self representations and promote develop-
ment, particularly in the narcissistic sphere of her personality. As you
will note, the reconstructions described here have to do with precon-
scious impressions. Though we commonly think of what is preconscious
as being capable of entering consciousness relatively easily, Freud recog-
nized that this accessibility varies. At some points in his theory construc-
tion he even suggested the possibility of a censorship between the precon-