The Resolution of Faulty Identification Process In a Borderline Adolescent Girl

Kathleen Amorose, M.S.W.

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses problems of identification which interfere with a borderline adolescent girl’s completion of her adolescent developmental tasks. Therapeutic work entails the provision of a protective environment to assist processes of identification, separation and completion of structural restoration.

The psychoanalytic literature has long reflected that the interrelationship between identification and object relations leads to alteration in ego structure (Freud 1917, 1923, Schecter 1968). Identification, in its most primitive form, represents a fusion of self and object representations. Requisite for the evolution of these fused and primitive representations into well differentiated structures, both in normal development and in therapy, is the experience of an environment which allows separation to occur with sufficient security. Structuralization can then proceed as through the internalization process functions previously performed by external sources are performed increasingly by the developing self.

This paper will illustrate how the repair of the disrupted identification process manifests itself in the first half of a 9 year therapy with a borderline adolescent girl. Her complex problems with identification are made more vivid by her adolescent stage of development as it is in itself a period of heightened tension regarding issues of identity and autonomy and as such can illuminate that which may be more masked in an ego impaired adult. Object relations issues are intertwined with the incapacity to engage in the adolescent developmental task. The unconscious identification is with a negatively cathected primitive part-object and the develop-
opment progress displayed occurs in tandem with the differentiation of this fused and negative representation of self and object.

**Negative Identity**

A negative perception of the primary object provides several difficulties for the identification process and with it the formation of the ego ideal. When excessive amounts of need and aggression are experienced in relation to the primary object, positive self and object images cannot then be accrued and differentiated. The identity, if embraced, is a negative or defensive one. If rejected, in an effort to preserve the self as good, it leaves the self bereft of what must be extracted from the object in service of secure identity formation (Horner 1979). The refusal to identify, while never wholly successful, interferes with the processes essential for the achievement of object constancy and leaves the self dependent on external sources for internal regulation. The ego deficits result in a continued reliance on a dyadic relationship or its substitute to mask or mitigate the anxiety and depression that accompany the structural defects. These affects are manifest especially under increased pressure toward autonomous functioning.

Adolescence presents the structurally impaired ego with additional stress due to the heightened pressures toward separation (Blos 1967). The identifications with the parental ego and superego are normally loosened with the onset of drive development in early adolescence and the adolescent experiences feeling states that are somewhat turbulent and narcissistically tinged. “Good enough” ego development allows for progressive movement from this regressive position because there is a capacity for investment in new objects and for the identifications and reorganization which will leave the ego and superego modified to accommodate adult roles. An essential feature of this normal process is that primary object ties are experienced as loosened, not severed or lost, as new ego structures and ego functions cannot be built up and integrated unless these new formulations are allowed to grow organically from those of the past (Jacobson, 1961).

Without successful disengagement from infantile internalized objects, age appropriate object relations become either hindered, precluded or restricted to replication and substitution (Blos, 1967). The structurally impaired ego experiences the libidinal feelings that dominate both the oedipus and adolescent phases in a distorted form as they carry with them fears of abandonment, merger or destruction in relation to the object, threatening the maintenance of the still essential dyadic relationship. Only when the developing self is on the way to object constancy may it