TREATMENT OF OLDER ADOLESCENTS IN TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS: RAPPROCHEMENT CRISIS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT: This paper draws largely upon the developmental theory of Margaret Mahler. It depicts a seemingly regressive revisitation of disturbed older male adolescents in transitional residential programs to unresolved elements of the original rapprochement crisis in the separation-individuation process. It describes how cycles of intense shadowing and darting behavior reemerge as the possibility of authentic independent functioning beckons. There is presentation of the way in which this revisitation, including splitting phenomena, is manifested in the residential treatment environment. Therapeutic implications are focused upon. A practice vignette illuminates the metapsychological thrust of the paper.

The author draws upon his therapeutic experience with emotionally disturbed older male adolescents in considering a seemingly regressive reinvestment with parents as the demand for and possibility of authentic independent functioning beckons. This reinvestment is much akin to a later-day version of the rapprochement crisis described by Mahler and her colleagues (1975) regarding child development between the ages of 18 and 24 months.

This paper explores the various ways in which this rapprochement revisitation is manifested and some implications for therapeutic handling.

The particular population observed includes adolescents, 18 to 21 years of age, with severe character disorders or borderline personality organizations—in Kernberg’s (1975, 1976) sense of the term. The program in question is a residential treatment transitional facility for those who usually cannot return home and must prepare for autonomous living in the community. The residents served have been unable to remain at home in the first place because of the severity of their pathology (including drug, delinquent, and other maladaptive patterns), severity of family disturbance and/or unavailability of suitably tolerant and appropriate community resources such as special school programs. All the residents have either failed at outpatient treatment efforts or have not been able to use sources of help available sufficiently to alter pathological trends. Many have had previous psychiatric hospitalizations or periods of more structured residential treatment.
Recapitulation of Original Rapprochement Crisis

The theoretical formulations of Mahler and Kernberg locate severe character pathology and borderline conditions in arrested development in the separation-individuation process and in failure to resolve the rapprochement crisis in particular. For purposes of examining the revisitation of the rapprochement crisis in the older adolescent population with which we deal, a brief review of Mahler's descriptive and conceptual view of the original rapprochement crisis is in order. Mahler and her colleagues (1975), in intensive clinical observations of infant behavior and mother-child interaction in a specially designed nursery program, identified rapprochement as the third subphase in four interrelated subphases (differentiation and development of body image, practicing, rapprochement, consolidation of individuality and the beginning of object constancy) of the separation-individuation process.

The infant moves from symbiotic oneness with mother, begins to "hatch" from the symbiotic membrane, experiences the mothering person as separate and special. Then, with maturing locomotion capacity, he explores the larger world beyond mother. During the practicing subphase, about 10-16 months, the child normally, when permitted by the mother and other circumstances, omnipotently discovers his ability to come and go and master aspects of the larger world in which he must live.

Approximately between 18 and 24 months the child's inattention to mother's whereabouts subsides and an anxious sense of vulnerability regarding the new separateness ensues. This period is characterized by a "rapidly alternating desire to push mother away and cling to her—a behavioral sequence that the word ambitendency describes most accurately" (Mahler, 1975, p. 95). Mahler and her colleagues also refer to alternations of "darting" and "shadowing" behavior in regard to this phenomenon. It seems the child is anxious lest his freedom and separateness cost him his mother's nurturing care.

Normally, the mother accepts the child's ambivalence, remaining predictably available for him to come and go. Further, the mother encourages the child's move toward independence, "gently pushes him in this direction much as the mother bird gently pushes her little ones out of the nest" (p. 79). Mahler, in fact, sees this as perhaps "the sine qua non of normal (healthy) individuation" (pp. 79, 80).

However, the rapprochement crisis does not always get so easily resolved. It is fraught with possibilities of pathological outcome. The mother who is more emotionally unavailable at the time of rapprochement generates excessive anxiety in her offspring. He will often invest enormous energy in pursuing and wooing the mother. As Mahler et al. observe, "in some cases the process drains so much of the child's available developmental energy that, as a result, not enough energy, not enough libido and not enough constructive (neutralized) aggression are left for