On the Adolescent Process as a Transformation of the Self

Ernest S. Wolf, John E. Gedo, and David M. Terman

Received July 1, 1972

The purpose of this paper is to clarify and extend the psychoanalytic theory of adolescence. Three sources of data are used: biographical source material about Freud’s adolescence, introspective accounts from the self-analysis of psychoanalysts, and other biographical vignettes and reports from the psychoanalytic literature. It is proposed that a change in the self emerges as the pivotal focus during adolescent development. An intense peer relationship serves to maintain narcissistic balance and the cohesion of the self. This allows deidealization of archaic parental imagoes and their transformation into newly internalized idealizations. The newly acquired idealizations consolidate into a stable ego ideal which eliminates the need for an alter ego relationship. The self-objects chosen for these new idealizations are related to the need to overcome specific disappointments in the archaic

1 Presented at a meeting of The Chicago Psychoanalytic Society on May 23, 1972.

2 Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, The Medical School, Northwestern University, and Director, Mental Health Section, Student Health Service, Northwestern University; Faculty, The Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago. Received M.D. from the University of Maryland; psychiatric training at the Cincinnati General Hospital; graduate of The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Main interests are the development of psychoanalysis from a historical perspective and the psychology of adolescence.

3 Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Abraham Lincoln School of Medicine, University of Illinois; Faculty, Supervising and Training Analyst, The Institute for Psychoanalysis, Chicago. Received M.D. from New York University; psychiatric training from Associated Psychiatric Faculties of Chicago; graduate of The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Main interest is the intellectual history of psychoanalysis.

4 Associate Attending Psychiatrist, Michael Reese Hospital, Chicago. Received M.D. from the University of Chicago; psychiatric training at Michael Reese Hospital, Chicago; graduate of The Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. Main interest is psychoanalytic metapsychology of development.
self-objects. The stability of the new ideals depends on the invulnerability of the idealized self-objects. Transient states of narcissistic disequilibrium manifest as "turmoil."

INTRODUCTION

In her usual lucid manner, Anna Freud (1958) stated that "where adolescence is concerned, it seems easier to describe its pathological manifestations than the normal processes." Her vivid exposition of the recrudescence and exacerbations of infantile neurotic conflicts during this period illuminated the maladjustments of a neglected developmental phase. However, she also called attention to "our bewilderment when faced with all the intricacies of the adolescent process" because reconstructions of adolescence in the analyses of both adults and teenagers are "procedures which have served us well for all other periods of life, [but] prove less satisfactory and less productive of results when applied to adolescents."

In this paper, we hope to contribute to a psychoanalytic understanding of the adolescent process by an examination of certain characteristic creations which are expressive of the reorganization of psychic structures during adolescence. In particular, we shall show how the creative formation of a special type of peer group, which we call an Academia, becomes a vehicle for those transformations of self that lead to the internalization of a new stable ego ideal. We are using the word "self" as a psychoanalytic construct denoting the total configuration of the personality.

It has long been recognized, of course, that it is during adolescence that the ego ideal attains its definitive organization (cf. Blos, 1962, p. 184). Laufer (1964), in a comprehensive review, discussed the content and function of the ego ideal at this phase of development, with special reference to the interactions with drives, defenses, and structural conflicts. In this paper, our interest focuses on the role of idealizations in the reorganization of the self, which Kohut (1972) has proposed as the central task of the adolescent process.

I

The study of adolescent transformations is handicapped by difficulties inherent in the nature of the processes of personality reorganization that occur in this phase of development. The youngster with severe psychopathology is not likely to have attained the level of organization which would make possible the restructuring characteristic of adolescence; the youngster who is relatively free of early fixations leading to developmental disturbances usually traverses this period of inner and outer turmoil without leaving those traces by which one could reconstruct the variety of changes that have occurred. The analyst of adults has great difficulty in reconstructing the events of his patients'