REGRESSIVE ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONSHIPS
BY ALBERT E. SCHEFLEN, M.D.

Close relationships involving only two persons have a tendency to become regressive. When this occurs (at least among the majority of middle-class Americans) a fairly characteristic pattern develops. The social mobility of at least one partner becomes limited, and opportunities for mature gratifications within the relationship also decrease.

Such relationships are variously termed regressive, infantile, symbiotic or neurotic. Facets of individual psychodynamics which are basic to understanding regressive relatedness were originally described by Freud: narcissistic identification,\textsuperscript{1} transference,\textsuperscript{2} regression,\textsuperscript{3} and introjection and identification.\textsuperscript{4,5}

Numerous later authors have developed concepts of the dynamics of immature object relationships as they occur in psychosis,\textsuperscript{6-12} in other psychiatric syndromes,\textsuperscript{13-15} and in psychosexual development.\textsuperscript{16-21} It is a fundamental principle that later object relationships recapitulate those of early childhood.

Yet descriptions of the regressive one-to-one relationships between adults seem to be lacking in the psychoanalytic literature, except in the framework of individual psychopathology and in case history fragments. In this paper, descriptions of characteristic patterns in adults will be emphasized from a somewhat more “interactional” viewpoint than is customary in psychoanalysis.

The adjectives “regressive” or “infantile” are merely statements about degree of neurotic loyalty or “stickiness,” and the predominance of pregenital types of relatedness. Although psychotic and infantile patients have a proclivity for “gruesome twosomes,” the picture is frequently presented also by people who would not be considered mentally ill. Such a relatedness in marriage or in a parent-child relationship seems to belong to the psychopathology of everyday life. The phenomenon is often idealized, as in the image of devoted daughters like Elsie Dinsmore or Elizabeth Barrett, in the poetic or romantic tradition of love, in the religious fantasy of St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross or Martin Buber,\textsuperscript{22} and in some interpretations of the current ideals of “togetherness” or of devotion to the organization.\textsuperscript{23}
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REGRESSIVE ONE-TO-ONE

These regressive relationships are maintained because of unconscious needs; they are, moreover, unrealistic, because they exist at the cost of an impairment of other object relations, although they themselves provide only a minimal need gratification. Closeness is maintained in spite of strong dissatisfaction and in spite of the wish to dissolve the partnership. This paradox, when conscious, is generally rationalized by making the relationship appear consistent with cultural-ethical principles or with such "realities" as economies, convenience, health or the need to rear children. Religious and moral principles, of course, also reinforce the need to continue these relationships.

It is obvious to others and often also to the partners of such a twosome that their attachment evidences a terrible fear of being alone. Less obvious but quite as important, is the function of such a twosome as an escape from triangular or Oedipal problems. The twosome sometimes seems to be displayed as a regressive, defensive proof of the absence of Oedipal strivings, although the third party is apparently always present, at least in fantasy.

The invariable characteristics of the gruesome twosome are: (1) limitations of relatedness to others; (2) decreasing gratification within the relationship; (3) the maintenance of the attachment by mutual exploitation of the partner's anxieties.

1. Limitation upon Relatedness to Others

The partners of a gruesome twosome relate to others less than the social norm and less than they desire. The exchange of satisfactions with third parties which does occur is either accompanied by guilt and anxiety, or is carried out as an act of defiance, or else is done in secret or in fantasy only.

The partners of the gruesome twosome are easily spotted in the social situation. They huddle together and look wistfully at guests who circulate. They either do not relate to each other, or they force a conversation which shows no evidence of being pleasurable. If one of the partners converses actively with a third party, the other is prone to show jealousy, through a hurt withdrawal or sulkiness. Each secretly eyes the other's every contact. Sometimes one of the two tests the fidelity of the partner, or becomes over-involved with others, in order to retaliate, to rebel, or to frighten the partner.