CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND SUPEREGO FORMATION

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The Concept of Character

In the context of this chapter, the concept *character* refers to a consistent and dependable pattern of behavior that is the product of personality functions. Generally, such a definition holds up best in adult years. During the latency and early adolescent years, the term character must be used with awareness that ego transformations and cognitive growth produce continuous changes in character. Consistency is not the rule. The permutations of personality that accompany maturation and development during latency and early adolescence (6 to about 15 years of age) cause marked variability in behavior patterns. The internal psychic structures of which personality consists do not become dependably consistent until early adolescence, perhaps about 16 years of age. For this reason, characterological diagnoses have little predictive value in the early teen years and before. Prediction is more reliably based on an evaluation of the developing underlying personality structures. In keeping with this, psychotherapy is most effective in the long-range view when targeted on the development of personality structures (e.g., symbolizing functions, structure of latency, self-reflective awareness) than on symptoms, which are their evanescent products of the moment.

Psychotherapy and Character

Personality describes the panoply of available reactions at work coordinating the needs of conscience, drives, and the outside world. *Character* describes the structure derived when a dependable response resulting in such coordination becomes a property of the individual. Character means fixity; it implies dependability in a socially positive context. In working with latency-age children and early adolescents, not character, but the flexible antecedents from which adult character is to be drawn hold our attention. Psychotherapy during these years contributes to the character of the adult the child is to become.

Personality and Character

The distinction between personality and character becomes especially clear when one turns to the use of these words in generic contexts. Precede each word with the adjective "weak." Is a weak personality the same as a weak character? A weak personality is not well fitted to weather the storms of life. A person of weak character may have a strong personality, but cannot be depended upon, for he uses his strength to serve his own needs. The weak character is not bound to assert strength of personality in the service of a self-discipline that puts the needs of others or social requirements ahead of his own. Mark this well, for it is the key to understanding "falling in love." Men of strong personality can be found amongst felons in prisons. Men of strong character are rarely there.

The term *character* as used here, then, refers to the behavior that involves the interface between the personality and the demands of family, country, and culture. This usage is strongly influenced by generic contexts and the following from Freud's (1905) thinking on the matter:

> What we describe as a person's character is built up . . . from . . . constructions employed for effectively holding in check perverse impulses which have been recognized as unutilizable. [p. 239]

When built up? When constructed? When recognized? These steps in the development of character do not occur the moment before character patterns appear during adolescence or adulthood. Rather they are gradual processes, and occur during the years of latency and early adolescence. These processes accompany the *superego* while it accumulates the contents of its "demands."

Our definition of character may be somewhat different in emphasis from those used elsewhere. For one thing, our emphasis permits the viewing of character as dynamic and variable. This takes into account the fluid nature of character during latency and early adolescence.

From this perspective, we can postulate, and recognize, character patterns in children. There is an heuristic value to such recasting of definitions: it permits the creation and recognition of new categories.

One might have matched the definition to preexisting conclusions. That approach is hallowed by usage, and it is useful if one wishes to exchange ideas within the context of the established order of adultomorphic conventions. In the area of child therapy, such tight semantic boundaries tend to rigidify

and limit the knowledge of childhood character to that which is known of adult patterns.

As a guide to normal development, a knowledge of character patterns appropriate for each stage provides the therapist with an atlas of age-normal organizations of behavior. These patterns can in turn be used to establish appropriate goals by which the course of child therapy may be guided and judged. A latency-age child should derive from therapy the capacity to "enter" latency.

Character in Childhood Versus Adult Character

Character components in childhood have the characteristic of transiency. Childhood character elements consist of two components; the first is the transient character pattern by which a phase is defined (characters en passent), and the second is the set of developing characterological precursors that will produce the permanent form that established character will assume in adult life. Object-ground differentiation fits the latter category. So do awareness of danger, the ability to symbolize, and the capacity for reflective self-awareness. Established character is not present until well into adolescence.

In psychotherapy, one should differentiate the personality elements that compose the characters en passent, typifying the phases of childhood, from the personality elements that are developmentally related to—and are the precursors of—adult character. Characters en passent, for instance latency states, should be encouraged through strengthening the structure of latency as an end in itself. Pursuit of developmental precursor functions in child psychotherapy strengthens character in the future adult, albeit no immediate results may be seen, and the personality trait(s) may be considered only peripherally important for adjustment during the age at which treatment takes place (e.g., reflective self-awareness).

Character en Passant

Character en passant refers to any pattern of stable behavior that is as transient as the developmental stage it typifies. The consistent, but soon vanished, character pattern of calm, cooperativeness, pliability, and educability that is found in the child with a healthy latency is an example of such a pattern. One does not expect this pattern to continue into adolescence.

In spite of the above, changes in character that occur in late-latency and early-adolescent psychotherapy patients are not uncommonly attributed to psychotherapeutic interventions. The admonition to beware post hoc ergo propter hoc conclusions is especially appropriate in theorizing about the sources of the character changes that mark the developmental phases of childhood, latency, adolescence, and adulthood. Character change during development is most often the product of maturation of underlying personality skills rather than a reaction to a chance and current event, such as a psychotherapeutic intervention. Psychotherapeutic interventions for which one might seek credit should be the products of strategy and design—or else they are not likely to be meaningful.

The consistent character en passant of typical latency-age children permits education, control of drives, and the expectation that one can take them anywhere and expect good behavior. They appear to be calm, quiet, and cooperative; in fact, they are—dependably so. These character traits may be expected throughout the latency period. Most children of this age can achieve the state of latency.

The State of Latency

The state of latency is the product of a multitude of personality traits. Amongst these are some separate and consecutive personality elements that contribute to the eventual form of adult character, as well as to the latency character. They are the root of character, giving rise anew to traits of character in succeeding developmental periods much in the way that seeds planted in different environments mingle their genetic destinies with the permissions of wind, weather, and soil. They should be differentiated from permutations of character elements. An example of the latter would be the metamorphosis of the structure of latency into the capacity for future planning.

Personality Traits: The Roots of Character

Functions evolved during late latency contribute lasting modifications to the elements that make up the adult superego and adult character. Of the personality traits developed at this time, which contribute to the form of adult character, let us focus on two by way of illustration. These are the acquisition of superego contents and the capacity for reflective self-awareness.

Superego Formation and Character

The Acquisition of Superego Contents

We now shift emphasis from the cognitive maturational aspects of the life cycle, which influence behavior through making possible the production of sustained patterns of character typical of developmental phases, to a focus oh the process of acquiring the ego ideal. The *ego ideal* consists of the superego contents which provide the imagoes by which adult character is defined. In the definition of character that I have been using, the capacity to remember and use internal clues to appropriate behavior is central to successful character development.

The superego comprises three parts. They are (1) the superego demands (the ego ideal), (2) the affects that motivate action (i.e., guilt, shame, depression, and anxiety), and (3) the functions of the ego that implement the demands of the superego.

They may be further studied by breaking their structures into the following elements to be studied:

1. The source of the conceptual contents of the superego
2. The nature of the affects that arise in response to awareness of the degree to which behavior conforms to conceptual contents
3. The dominant affects associated with a particular ontogenetic period of superego development
4. The development of the cognitive skills necessary for the acquisition of conceptual contents
5. The nature of the effectors of the superego (these are defined as functions of the ego concerned with the implementation of superego demands)

If any of these fail, character development will be weak. The following case illustrates intact superego demand contents, but impaired internalization of the affect source.

> A child of 7 was poorly behaved at home, but well behaved in school. I asked him the reason for the difference. This youngster, who had defined guilt as "when you want to do something wrong, but you think you'll get caught" in contrast to the healthier answer "when you know something is wrong, so you don't do it," told me that he behaves in school because the teacher is sharp-eyed, and sure to catch him and report him to his mother in a note, so he won't be able to lie his way out of it.

This child knew right behavior from wrong; however, he had insufficiently internalized the affects needed to enforce the expectations of the world through the medium of threat of punishment from within himself. This failure to develop adequate maturation (internalization of the source) of the superego-motivating affects provides us with information by which we can predict that in addition to his current problems in childhood, there will be inadequate character as an adult. The existence of such a thought illustrates the fact that ego ideal alone does not create character.

Origins of the Ego Ideal

What is the process by which children acquire internalized culture imagoes (ego ideal)? Culture imagoes are the social patterns that shape the unyielding banks through which behavior flows. The obligatory twists and turns in patterns of flow give us the basis for judging character in the adult. The sources of these patterns are many. The time of their acquisition is spread throughout child development. This concept is at odds with the classical psychoanalytic view that all of the contents of the superego demands are derived from the introjects of the parents, acquired at about 6 years of age during the passing of the Oedipus complex. If the latter were true, it would be no wonder that there has been little emphasis on character in the child psychiatric literature. In a sense, the final whistle was blown before the game began!

Sources of Ego Ideal Found in Art and Narrative

Cassirer (1923), Berkeley, and Hume (see Meisenhelder 1977) have pointed out that there is a sort of *symbolic moralism* by which our words shape our ethical expectations of ourselves from the moment we begin to speak. In latency, the fairy tale and moral story prospectively dictate the expectations of society. They replace the rites of passage which for primitive peoples dictate to youngsters sitting on the hinge between childhood and the adult world, the behavior to be expected in their adult years.

Awareness of diversity of views and the awareness of motivation in selecting a course of action introduce the potential for ethical considerations in evaluation of one's own decisions and those of others. Ethical decisions encountered in the lives of others and in the activities of characters in the

histories, myths, folktales, and current events with which the child comes into contact have far-reaching effects in shaping the ethical characteristics added to the ego ideal during latency. A verbal catalog of solutions begins to accumulate. Much more subtle and complex problems can be solved through the use of the virtual library of potential responses acquired during this period.

Curiosity and concept hunger support the educability of those in the latency state. There is a need for stories, legends, myths, and other verbal schemata for use as patterned outlets for the drives, whose outlets previously had been through the evocation of sensations and experiences related to prior gratifications. As these patterned outlets are acquired, associated ethical concepts augment the content of the ego ideal. The influence of society through cautionary tales presented in the media of the culture (Dhondy 1985) skews these contents to match its needs and to ensure conformity and proper fit for the individual in the society of the masses.

Examples of such cautionary tales are any movie or story that tells a tale of a person in a moment of life transition. Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars" is followed as he makes the transition to independent manhood. Ulysses in the *Odyssey* is in transition from war to peace. Predominant are tales that tell of the preambles to marriage. For each problem shown, there is a solution, which the watching child adds to his armamentarium of memories to be called upon when he must choose to do the right thing in a new situation. Examples told by teachers and set by fiction as well as by parents and friends serve for many children the prime function formerly served by myth. For many, if not most, the religious moral tale still serves. Values such as morality, ethics, the importance of marriage, and home are there to channel the life pattern and foster acceptable decisions. These culture elements "supply the symbols" (J. Campbell 1968) that carry the spirit and essence of a society forward and shape character in the next stage of life for children on the "thresholds of transformation" between prior stages of life and adulthood.

As the child begins passively to participate in the myths of his culture and to recognize ethical crises akin to those he is experiencing in the adventures of the protagonists with whom he identifies, he finds within those stories elements that are familiar and comfortable for him, or which provide him with responses that he can use in his own problem solving tasks. When the child expresses his drives through fantasies, identification with characters, internalization, and introjection of certain components related to that character, he becomes himself like the character.

Parental Guides to the Ego Ideal

The early latency child is guided to the character stability of latency by superego contents informed by parental admonitions. The child learns what to do, or not to do, either because the parent says so or as a result of introjection of parental attitudes and behavior. There is no logic at work in the process. The child is guided by an absolute. Piaget has referred to this type of superego guiding content as a morality of constraint. (See Flavell 1963.)

A child in early latency may have internalized such behavioral guides and still not behave properly. There is a further requirement, adequate ability for abstraction, so that the child can comprehend where or when a given behavior is required and where not. (That is, the child must be able to differentiate the situations where rules and guides to behavior apply.) When the internalized concept of right and wrong is coupled with the abstraction-based ability to know when to apply the knowledge, what I have chosen to call *behavioral constancy* has become a part of the child's behavior. Only then can we say that the typical, though deciduous, latency character has been established. Only then are the foundations of adult character and morality set in place.

As the child matures, reaching about 8 years of age, there is a shift in cognition. The capacity to abstract that permits the differentiation of situations undergoes further maturation; and the capacity to recall abstractions about concrete situations is enriched, so that prior experience with abstractions can be applied to new situations. In line with this, the child's attention can be called to the role of his behavior in the world. At least this potential is available, and may be developed if the parent, or the analyst, succeeds in involving the child in discussions that invoke this skill. At that point, the child can use reflective self-awareness to reinforce internalized superego demands from early latency. In the words of Piaget, a "morality of cooperation" can be established. (See Flavell 1963.)

During the latency years, specific cognitive maturational events provide the child with the potential for transforming cultural demands into an organized, relatively immutable set of internally available memory elements to be used by the child in the regulation of drive and impulse and the organization of social behavior. *Behavioral constancy* is developed at this age. It is the moral equivalent of object constancy. The child is capable of retaining complex ethical concepts, and of appreciating and

differentiating the situations in which they apply. With the development of object constancy, an image of the departed object is retainable. With the development of behavioral constancy, concepts of behavior with a degree of subtlety not previously possible can be retained in the absence of the object (the source of the admonitions). Maturation of verbal memory and abstract thinking permit the retention and ensuing transmission into the child's future life of subtle shadings of meaning in moral expectations, as found in the *morality of cooperation,* which contains subtleties, considers motivations, and implies that decisions to act require choices on the part of the child. The individual recognizes that he may choose the way he is going to act in relation to the dictates of the superego.

With such resources, the latency-age character pattern can be enhanced by conscious decision. Morality begins to draw from the germ of reason. There are many who do not develop this second means for acquiring the moral strictures required for social adaptation. Those who do not become adults who conform out of a sense of duty rather than as the result of wisdom. Superego contents remain unchanged at this time. They continue to reflect internalized parental wishes and tastes. Changes that take in the influence of peers do not begin to come into force until after age 9, and usually not in full force until the rebelliousness of adolescence.

Sources of Ego Ideal in Projection-Introjection

Important mechanisms for the acquisition of information for inclusion in the superego demands are coupled projection and introjection. This pattern of coupled defenses has its origins in the separation-individuation period of early childhood. At that time, the child learns that there is a difference between himself and the world outside. There is a self, and there is an object world. As the child establishes the difference between himself and the object world he slowly becomes aware of the content and nature of the object world, especially the nature of the mother.

The child introjects, when the mother goes away, certain partial images of the mother. If the mother has been a person onto whom hostility has been projected, she will be incorporated as hostile and punishing. The child may then distort his view of himself into a person who is hostile and overly aggressive. Projection of interpretations onto the world, followed by adjustments and corrections of the interpretation based on the impact of reality, followed in turn by introjections based on the resulting

experience, which change one's view of oneself and the pattern of behavior which is expected of one, is the paradigm of the process of coupled projection and introjection that is repeated constantly over the years. As a result of this coupled mechanism, the reciprocal influence of memory and environment shapes the expectations of the superego.

The child approaches the world through his projections, which are partially corrected under the influence of reality. From teachers and other children, and from stories that he hears, little pictures of the world are provided for incorporation in his own world view. His view of himself, notions of what his superego is *expected* to demand of him, and his interpretation of the world are thus altered. At first, the child, in achieving this alteration of the content of the superego (ego ideal), projects an image based upon earlier projections and introjections. Maternal admonitions to behave, which have become self-expectations, are projected onto the school situation. In turn, the teacher's behavior influences the child and contributes to modifications of the child's expectation of himself. The teacher, other children, and other people in the society take on and continue the role that the mother had been serving in conveying superego content to the child.

Elements that modify superego content in this way are multiple: parents, teachers, pastoral guides, and other children are quite important. Also of great importance because of the shift to greater use of verbal psychic contents, both as a means of problem solving and as the object of drives, are the ethical contexts of stories and tales told during latency. The degree to which reality contacts can alter projections and superego expectations is governed by the tenacity with which the child holds prior beliefs with which he has identified. The more intensely a child cathects his introjects with narcissistic libidinal energies, the less easily will misapprehensions contained in projections of them be modified by reality experiences. As a result, apprehensions of self and expectations of reality will be less easily shaken. Such introjects hold the interest of the child and produce pathological patterns. Even in normal children, narcissistic involvement often leads to an overvaluation of new knowledge at the expense of future knowledge.

Parents who had found children compliant during the latency years begin to notice signs of defiance during late latency and early adolescence. As children gain more independence physically, their financial and emotional dependence becomes painful. They object to their passivity in these areas

in relation to their parents. The aggressive drive increases, and besides, is augmented by the loss of ludic symbols as a tool for discharge. The aggression is projected onto the parents. This causes feelings of passivity to intensify. The child's cathexes are withdrawn from this painful situation with the parents and, at first defensively and later constructively, are directed toward peers. Contacts with peer groups are established. Narcissistic mortification at a passive position in relation to the parents results in a rejection of internalized imagoes identified with the parents. The shift from parents to peers in the sense of who is important results in the establishment of a new group of objects to be related to through projection-introjection as a source of role models and elements of ego ideal. Evaluations of acceptable behavior are strongly attuned still to the morality of the home. However, the role of arbiter and source of superego motivating affects has been projected onto the new young swain or peers. Much of the aggression continues to be projected onto the parents, and a good deal of it takes the form of defiance of the parents. This intensifies the acquisition of ego ideal elements that come from the peers and are at odds with the parental wishes. In this way the parental role model shapes adolescent behavior inversely. This is an important factor, but not total.

Projection of parental expectations onto the group occurs, if only because there are no other sources of reference save experiences with parents. Modifications of concepts by the peer group reshape this portion of the ego ideal. With introjections in reaction to partings from peers, enforcement through peer pressure, or as reactive implementation of rage at the presence of parental demands within, these concepts become part of the internalized superego. Thus do changes take place in superego expectations (ego ideal).

An important source of superego content is introjection of the characteristics of loved objects. This accompanies repeated separations. Since the child may have been capable of symbolic distortions and the projection of aggression at the time of the original introjection, there is often distortion of information communicated to him. This is retained with modifications in content and in the intensity of affect. Such distorted parental admonitions represent the parent to the child. The child relates to an absent parent through obeying these admonitions. In effect, he obeys the distorted and remembered parent. Right or wrong does not govern what is to be done. "Good" behavior derives from acquiescence to the distortion-enhanced will of the authority. The peer substitutes of early adolescence participate in this process when they become for the moment the primary objects of the child during late latency and early adolescence.

Reorganizations of superego contents take place during late latency and early adolescence. Two sets of superego contents are established: those derived from introjection and parental imagoes and those learned from the influence on projections of contact with the peer group. The child may alternate between them, depending upon circumstances. This mixed late-latency superego organization tends to persist and dominate behavior until about 26 years of age. At that age people begin to divest themselves of the alternatives and begin again to manifest guilt and identifications with the original internalized parental views.

The organization of ego ideal contents derived from the peer group has a more primitive quality than the organization of the' original parental introjects. It is formed during a period of disorganization preceding a reorganization. The instinctual energies involved are less neutralized. The group-derived content has an organization similar to the shame-driven primitive superego organization of prelatency. The children are less concerned with right, wrong, and guilt and more with shame feelings, group approval, and what others will think. Such an immature superego organization tends to be fragile and mutable.

Reflective Self-Awareness

Capacity for reflective self-awareness is not an important and valued element in the character pattern that typifies the early-latency child. It comes to be expected in some children in late latency, and should be present in adolescence. In adulthood the ability to stop and reflect on what one has done or wishes to do, and to make adjustments in accordance with the needs of family, country, and culture is considered to be a sign of strong character (see Smith 1811).

Reflective self-awareness is the product of the application of the abstract conceptual memory organization to the observation of self. One's sense of where one belongs in the social milieu, awareness of that which is expected of one by society, choosing the direction to be taken by plans for change are all subsumed under this personality skill.

Not all peoples of the cultures of the world develop an abstract conceptual memory organization. Therefore, not all peoples have a self-directed awareness, stored as memory, which consists of

consciousness of the intrinsic characteristics of things observed and understood about the self in society. For countless eons, the frozen cultures of mankind have eschewed and even condemned the development of such skills. They have preferred to have the laws and limits of human potential within the culture locked in place through myth and dictum. As a result, people were not afforded the opportunity to reflect on themselves or see themselves as individuals with a potential for change.

The sense of *history* (with its root admonition that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it) is a culture element that is a late development. It is a multi-personal manifestation of reflective self-awareness. The group reflects on itself through the act of history, somewhat in the way an individual seeks himself through reflective self-awareness.

Reflective self-awareness of one's role in a social system is a recent accretion of culture. (It, too, has a related root admonition: the uninspected life is not worth living). Memory for the abstract enables people to reflect on and understand themselves and guide their actions in adaptation to new, perhaps unique, and differentiated situations, as well as typical ones. A recent and not universally admired character trait, it is the basis for adaptation and survival in a swiftly changing world.

In many parts of Western society, the skills of reflective self-awareness are acquired as a result of normal social intercourse with parents and teachers. Such results evolve seemingly without effort in children exposed to parents who use such thinking themselves. In these families there occurs a confluence of increasing maturational potentials in the child and preexisting parental skills. As the child's cognitive potential matures, the parental mold shapes its promise into an actuality. One is reminded by this natural process of one of Wordsworth's Lucy poems:

> And she shall lean her ear in many a secret place
>
> Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
>
> And beauty born of murmuring sound
>
> Shall pass into her face.

Children who are deaf, isolated from adults, or are stutterers may miss this developmental step. It takes so long for adults to communicate or exchange ideas with such children that the chance to set

examples for abstract concept memory and to develop reflective self-awareness is bypassed. Therefore, in therapy with such children, extra attention to reflective self-awareness is necessary.

Reflective self-awareness is often gained, or at the least hurried, during psychotherapy. It is an epigenetic product of the therapeutic interaction. Self-awareness in a form akin to the observations of a third party is achieved through identification with the therapist's confrontations, observations, constructions, and interpretations. This process of identification proceeds smoothly and unintentionally in the child therapy situation. These are the secret dividends of the psychoanalytic process of insight as it is applied in child therapy. Acquisition of the skills involved in reflective self-awareness readies the child for comprehending, remembering, and using interpretations.

Children who emphasize evocative symbols actively during psychotherapy avoid the acquisition of reflective self-awareness. In fact, all forms of repression and psychoanalytic symbol formation that bend toward the evocative pole serve to block this insight-oriented skill.

Recognizing that it is possible to induce this skill, what is to stop the child therapist from maneuvering his resistant or deficient patient in the direction of such growth? It is possible to devise active maneuvers as part of the therapeutic strategies that will enhance or develop this precursor of adult character. This might be done even though the latency character pattern of the child is being carried adequately by more immature personality elements.

Summary

It is useful in doing psychotherapy on a long-term basis to be aware of the expected character transformations that accompany the transitions from one stage of life to the next. In this way, one does not come to explain improvements with one's theories or blame them on one's psychotherapeutic techniques alone. There are character profiles in this regard which are distinct enough to be characterized as expected at different phases. The demarcation between phases may be so sharp that often the age of an individual can be identified from a description of character traits.

The typical latency-age child is capable of periods of educability, during which he is calm, quiet, and compliant. Sexuality is expressed through the symbolizing function. Drives and conflicts are

processed in states of latency through such internal mechanisms, leaving the child free to adapt comfortably to society, which in turn expects little in the way of contribution from the child.

With the arrival of the adolescent years, there is a need pendant to biological and cognitive maturation to turn to the world for the resolution of conflict and the gratification of drives. Asceticism, withdrawal, experimentation, or chaotic behavior patterns make up a menu of characters en passant from which the typical characters of adolescence are derived. In early adolescence, cathexes are turned toward peers and society. Parental imagoes are replaced with internalizations of peer pressure. New moralities come into play and contribute essential elements to adult character. Personality strengthenings in the form of ego reorganizations can be expected at the age of 18. In those with chaotic behavior patterns that extend beyond adolescence, a reassertion of introjected parental imagoes in the area of superego demands can be hoped for by the mid-twenties.