

The Psychoanalytic Work Ego, Applied Psychoanalysis and the Management of an Impasse: A Study of the Pariah as a Superego Defense

S. Rosenbloom

By way of introduction to this presentation, I will start by describing my long-standing interest in how psychoanalysts make clinical decisions around when to intervene in certain analyses and essentially how the psychoanalytic work ego operates. This has resulted in my writing a series of papers related to the analyst's reveries (1985), the development of the work ego (1992) and the management of countertransference issues in analytic work (1998).

The present paper will partly be devoted to how analysts work when confronted with an impasse in a particular case. I hope to show that most of us struggle with the patient's material and we often find answers to clinical puzzles in a serendipitous manner. As well, this presentation will provide an example of a chance observation that I had when watching a film that proved to be useful in making a formulation related to one of my patients. It is well known that the foundation of psychoanalysis has its origins in Freud's study of artistic productions, be they the Oedipus myth (1910), an examination of Leonardo De Vinci's psyche (1910), and observations of Jensen's Gravidia (1906). The field of applied psychoanalysis has emerged by applying psychoanalytic principles to fictional characters. The example that I offer in this presentation will be an illustration of how my watching part of a film (David Lean's "Passage to India, 1984) turned out to be useful around formulating what was going on in the analysis of a particularly puzzling patient.

The Beginning of George's Analysis

For the most part, this will be a clinical study that focuses on a patient who we will call George, whose presentiment during sessions created resistances which also impacted negatively on my countertransference experiences. My point here is to present George's case material from the psychoanalytic work ego perspective, the influence of the applied

analytic example on my work, as well as a formulation of the patient's conflicts which I arrived at, leading me to interpret a specific superego defense which I will introduce later in this paper.

Just around the time of Covid, a distinguished American colleague referred this patient to me who I began to work with over Zoom. George was a 50-year-old advertising executive who lived in a large American City and who subsequently moved cross-country because of a new job shortly after beginning his analysis. My colleague described George as a sex addict who had been cheating on his wife over a period of 10 years and was finally caught and banned from the family home.

The family consisted of two adult daughters, one a young professional and the other studying at a university. The analyst who saw this patient along with his wife several years ago in short-term couples therapy, was depicted as an affable man. but his wife suspected his infidelity. George, on the other hand, described his wife as a "saint" who he praised considerably. Upon revisiting this previous analyst, he claimed that he did not understand his compulsive behavior and was not related to any affection that he felt towards the other women he had a relationship with. He decided that he needed to understand what led him to behave in this way for all those years. I must admit that I had trepidations in starting with George because of the sex addict diagnosis and because my track record with gamblers and drug addicts had not been a good one. These patients often dropped out of therapy early because of compulsive behavior and lack of psychological mindedness.

In my early sessions with George, he presented the image of an urbane, well-educated man who didn't quite understand why he had been cheating on his wife over a period of years. His presentiment was of a man who experienced considerable shame and guilt about what he had done to his family. I suggested that we should start analysis three times a week to explore his issues, to which he readily agreed. Fairly quickly into his therapy, my patient started each session with copious tears, followed by many minutes of moaning and groaning about what he had done to himself. Any attempts on my part to take a case history was drowned out by George's grief and sorrow around what he had

done to his wife and children. As this continued session after session, I began to feel like a beginning medical student who was desperate for a case history, but was confronted with a patient in crisis. As well, I began to experience a particularly strong countertransference feeling which was the equivalent of watching a television show of a hysterical character leading me of having a strong wish to slap her face. I realized as well, my own difficulty in self-analysis of this countertransference because, for example, my own mother was a demure, quiet depressed lady, who in no way had elicited this type of response that I had in this situation. I also had never experienced this with any other patient in analysis. I only derived a sufficient answer to this to what was going on here later in the therapy.

Over the next two months, I tried to tolerate both my own discomfort and George's sadness. It appeared that his excommunication from his family had a profound effect on him. As well, he often apologized for not being a good patient. Being a veteran psychoanalyst, I began to see that George was going through something which was out of his control and I decided to be as supportive as I could be. Gradually, the uncomfortable feeling that I had, began to reduce and interspersed between my patient's self-flagellation, he began to tell me more about his background. It turned out that during his latency years, his father had an affair with his mother's best friend and was subsequently kicked out of the family home by the mother. Fairly quickly, my patient became the 'prosecutor in chief' against the father and he ordered his two younger siblings to cut off all relations with the father. After divorcing the mother, the father quickly met a new woman and remarried. My patient described himself during this period as 'the king of the hill', often bullying his younger siblings.

In his adolescence, George was sexually inhibited and in early adulthood, married an extremely anxious young woman who required that he spend most of his time helping her manage her anxiety. He had repressed any negative feelings towards his wife and had no coherent idea as to why he was cheating, except for the fact that he felt like he was engaging in compulsive sexual behavior, while still feeling that his wife was a wonderful

woman. This led to questions on my part. Firstly, I wondered why, like his father, he could simply not have divorced his wife. As well, I was struck by the magnitude of his repression around anything related to sexuality and his extent of his dissatisfaction with his wife. In addition, I pondered as to why he had gone so far as to be completely excommunicated from his family. Clearly what I had learned up to this point did not lead me to have a clear formulation as to what was going on. This reminded me of an experience that I described in my paper on countertransference (1998), where I struggled considerably before I had a clearer picture of what was going on in a particular analysis.

As mentioned earlier, I had a particular reaction when watching David Lean's film version of E.M Forster's "Passage to India" (1984), which led me to understand more accurately what was going on in George's analysis. The book with the same title (1924) is a novel that was written by Forster, a tumultuous time in that country's history. Much of the significance of this novel relates to forces pushing for Indian independence from the British Empire. An important point to emphasize is that my formulation information is derived from David Lean's film version which is somewhat different from the novel.

In a section of the movie, a young woman, Adele Quest, is accompanied to India by an older lady. This trip, in part, involves a potential decision by Adele as to whether she wants to marry a young Raj official who is situated in India. Adele and her companion are quite interested in Indian culture and come to see that members of the British Raj mistreat native Indians. As the story goes, this leads Adele to think twice about marrying the man to whom she is engaged. In one scene, she tells her fiancé that she is breaking the engagement. In this story, the two ladies encounter a friendly Indian doctor who is keen to show them the sites in the region, including the 'fictional' Malabar caves. In a later scene, Adele cycles into the jungle and finds some abandoned artistic works which display significant sexual imagery. At this same moment a group of screaming, frightening monkeys appear on the scene, leading Adele to flee from the jungle. She goes back to her former fiancé and claims that she has changed her mind and wants to marry him.

Later on in the film, the two ladies accompany the Indian doctor to the Malabar caves where they are separated because the older lady suffered from heat exhaustion, making it difficult for her to climb up to the caves. In the cave, Adele finds herself going through a disturbing emotional reaction which causes her to exit the cave. With her clothes torn and disheveled, she runs down to a car below. She then accuses the Indian doctor of rape, despite the fact that he is nowhere near her.

Much tumult ensues, amid protests arising against the British authorities and Adele goes into seclusion. The scene switches to the trial of the Indian doctor. Again, this quite clearly highlights the nature of the Indian native-Raj conflict. At the trial, when Adele is put on the stand and questioned carefully, she says that the rape didn't happen and it was all a mistake. The Indian doctor becomes a hero while Adele goes back to England as a shunned woman and as a pariah.

Not to over-dramatize the formulation which arose in my mind during this difficult period in George's analysis, numerous questions arose in my mind around this part of the story. For example, why did Adele accuse the Indian doctor of rape and then withdraw her accusation? Literary critics dealt with this material in a variety of ways. One of my academic friends viewed this behavior as the affirmation of Adele's independence. What did Adele 'want' in this situation? This was a question that flashed through my mind because of my training in the Freudian Structural Model. Fully aware of my applied analytic reasoning about this film, it was evident to me that Adele was both ambivalent about her engagement and was also struggling with severe sexual conflicts. One can make a simple analytic interpretation that she projected her sexual wishes onto the Indian doctor. After denying the rape accusation, she then became a pariah in India which allows her to escape the situation, thus avoiding her conflicts.

At this point, I realized that some of the same dynamics were operating in George's case. Like his father, he had probably married a woman who was taxing and irritating just like his own mother. Incidentally, I realized that my countertransference response was probably due to a projective identification of George's internal experiences with his mother. Unlike the father, George's self-designation as 'prosecutor in chief' of the father created a superego pressure that led to two phenomena. Unlike his father, he could not access his wish to leave his wife, and he started to cheat on her with no clear realization as to why he was doing it. This went on for such a long period of time, that when he was caught, he became a pariah to his family. This was confirmed as George described to me how he was completely shunned by his siblings and children alike when he visited his family and tried to explain what he had learned from his analysis about his behavior.

Shortly after the breakup, George met a woman online, which later evolved into a serious more appropriate relationship and someone who was a very supportive and sexually satisfying partner. He ended up marrying this woman two years into his analysis. I introduced this earlier formulation to him gradually and my patient began to realize how trapped he had felt in his marriage. I realized as well, that becoming a pariah was a severe form of punishment by his superego.

A less severe example is that of a patient of mine, who, after getting drunk and staying out until three in the morning, was locked out of his house by his wife. I believe that this patient's superego was rigged to punish him under certain circumstances. On the day in question, Mr. X described himself as having a happy and successful day at work, unlike his background which included a need to take care of a psychotic mother who was prone to outbursts and suicidal threats. Clearly, there was no room for fun for this patient. By going out after work and getting stone drunk, he induced the talion response of his superego, leading to being temporarily ex-communicated by his wife. I would argue that in George's particular case, his superego was triggered to lead to a far greater punishment around his cheating and ensuing ex-communication by his family.

The concept of the pariah is more commonly seen in political situations and in fictional portrayals, as commonly seen in writers such as Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo. In most instances, the pariah state arises because of real external circumstances. In the psychoanalytic Pep website, the only reference in the title section is to Wilfred Bion's adoption of the O Theory which appeared as too spiritual and not based that much on clinical material, leading many analysts to dismiss this new theoretical venture.

In closing, I would say that the talion response of the superego is a common phenomenon which appears in many analyses.

References

Carveth, D.L. (2023). *Guilt: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge, 80 pp.

Forster, E.M. (1924). *A Passage to India*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Freud, S. (1923). *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. The Standard Edition. Vol. XIX. London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1910). *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*. The Standard Edition. Vol. XI. London: Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1910). *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men and Other Works*.

Freud, S. (1906). *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*. The Standard Edition. Vol. IX. London: Hogarth Press.

Kulish, N. & Holtzman, D. (1998). *Persephone, the Loss of Virginitly and the Female Oedipal Complex*. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 79: 57-71.

Lean, D., Director. (1984). *A Passage to India* (Film).

Rosenbloom, S. (1998) *The Complexities and Pitfalls of Working with the Countertransference*. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 67:256-275.

Rosenbloom, S. (1992) The Development of the Work Ego in the Beginning Analyst: Thoughts on Identity Formation of the Psychoanalyst. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 73:117-126.

Rosenbloom, S. (1985). *Reveries in Psychoanalytic Work*. Presentation: Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Montreal.