

Regression

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Regression, according to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, is a defense mechanism leading to the temporary or long-term reversion of the ego to an earlier stage of development rather than handling unacceptable impulses in a more adult way. The defense mechanism of regression, in psychoanalytic theory, occurs when thoughts are pushed back out of our consciousness and into our unconscious.

Psychiatrist Joel Gold suggests that careful use of "ARISE" (Adaptive Regression in the service of the Ego) can sometimes yield creative benefits. To the extent that one is handling thoughts and impulses less like an adult, ARISE involves play, appreciation and primitive pleasures, and imagination.

Freud, regression, and neurosis

Freud saw development, fixation, and regression as centrally formative elements in the creation of a neurosis. Arguing that 'the libidinal function goes through a lengthy development', he assumed that 'a development of this kind involves two dangers - first, of inhibition, and secondly, of regression '. Inhibitions produced fixations; and the 'stronger the fixations on its path of development, the more readily will the function evade external difficulties by regressing to the fixations'.

Neurosis for Freud was thus the product of a flight from an unsatisfactory reality 'along the path of involution, of regression, of a return to earlier phases of sexual life, phases from which at one time satisfaction was not withheld. This regression appears to be a twofold one: a temporal one, in so far as the libido, the erotic needs, hark back to stages of development that are earlier in time, and a formal one, in that the original and primitive methods of psychic expression are employed in manifesting those needs'.

Regressive behavior can be complex and harmful, or simple and harmless. A person may revert to an old, usually immature behavior to ventilate feelings of frustration. Regression only becomes a problem when it is used frequently to avoid adult situations and causes problems in the individual's life. Behaviors associated with regression can vary greatly depending upon which stage the person is fixated at: An individual fixated at the oral stage might begin eating or smoking excessively, or might become very verbally aggressive. A fixation at the anal stage might result in excessive tidiness or messiness. Freud recognised that 'it is possible for several fixations to be left behind in the course of development, and each of these may allow an irruption of the libido that has been pushed off - beginning, perhaps, with the later acquired fixations, and going on, as the illness develops, to the original ones'.

In the service of the ego

'Kris supplements Freud's general formulations with a specific notion of "regression in the service of the ego"...the specific means whereby preconscious and unconscious material appear in the creator's consciousness'. Kris thus opened the way for ego psychology to take a more positive view of regression. Jung had earlier argued that 'the patient's regressive tendency...is not just a relapse into infantilism, but an attempt to get at something necessary...the universal feeling of childhood innocence, the sense of security, of protection, of reciprocated love, of trust'. Kris however was concerned rather to differentiate the way that 'Inspiration -...in which the ego controls the primary process and puts it into its service - needs to be contrasted with the opposite...condition, in which the ego is overwhelmed by the primary process'.

Nevertheless his view of regression in the service of the ego could be readily extended into a quasi-Romantic image of the creative process, in which 'it is only in the fiery storm of a profound regression, in the course of which the personality undergoes both dissolution of structure and reorganization, that the genius becomes capable of wresting himself from the traditional pattern that he had been forced to integrate through the identifications necessitated and enforced by the oedipal constellation'.

From there it was perhaps only a small step to the Sixties valorisation of regression as a positive good in itself. 'In this particular type of journey, the direction we have to take is back and in....They will say we are regressed and withdrawn and out of contact with them. True enough, we have a long, long way to back to contact the reality'. Jungians had however already warned that 'romantic regression meant a surrender to the non-rational side which had to be paid for by a sacrifice of the rational and individual side'; and Freud for his part had dourly noted that 'this extraordinary plasticity of mental developments is not unrestricted in direction; it may be described as a special capacity for involution - regression - since it may well happen that a later and higher level of development, once abandoned, cannot be reached again'.

Later views

'Anna Freud (1936) ranked regression first in her enumeration of the defense mechanisms', and similarly suggested that people act out behaviors from the stage of psychosexual development in which they are fixated. For example, an individual fixated at an earlier developmental stage might cry or sulk upon hearing unpleasant news.

Michael Balint 'distinguishes between two types of regression: a nasty "malignant" regression that the Oedipal level neurotic is prone to..and the "benign" regression of the basic-fault patient'. The problem then is what the analyst can do 'to ensure that his patient's regression should be therapeutic and any danger of a pathological regression avoided'.

Others have highlighted the technical dilemmas of dealing with regression from different if

complementary angles. On the one hand, making premature 'assumptions about the patient's state of regression in the therapy...regarded as still at the breast', for example, might block awareness of more adult functioning on the patient's part: of 'the patient's view of the therapist'. The opposite mistake would be 'justifying a retreat from regressive material presented by a patient. When a patient begins to trust the analyst or therapist it will be just such disturbing aspects of the internal world that will be presented for understanding - not for a panic retreat by the therapist'.

Peter Blos suggested that 'revisiting of early psychic positions...helps the adolescent come out of the family envelope', and that 'Regression during adolescence thus advances the cause of development'. Stanley Olinick speaks of 'regression in the service of the other' on the part of the analyst 'during his or her clinical work. Such ego regression is a pre-condition for empathy'.

In fiction

A clear example of regressive behavior in fiction can be seen in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden constantly contradicts the progression of time and the aging process by reverting to childish ideas of escape, unrealistic expectations and frustration produced by his numerous shifts in behavior. His tendencies to reject responsibility and society as a whole because he 'doesn't fit in' also pushes him to prolonged use of reaction formation, unnecessary generalizations and compulsive lying.

Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* presents a picture of a still deeper regression. 'Gollum's extraordinary ideolect, with its infantile cringing and pleading...the playful, wheedling, sentimental argot of the nursery', his solipsism, narcissism - 'Lord Smeagol? Gollum the Great? 'The Gollum! Eat fish every day...Most Precious Gollum!' and creeping on all fours all mark out his regression to early babyhood.