

Are We Prisoners of the Past?

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Claims by psychological theorists that personality is “set” rather early in life have been a source of considerable anxiety for millions of parents, fearful that one false move in the crucial early years will seal their child’s fate. These theories also have had an unfortunate influence on psychological thinking about social problems, diverting the focus of our efforts to understand the sources of problematic behavior away from the conditions of adult life and tempting us to write off millions of people as already beyond help. Inordinate emphasis on the impact of early experiences has in addition placed unnecessary constraints on the practices of many psychotherapists, preventing their patients from getting the best help they could. I wish here to reexamine the prevailing view of the role of early experiences and to consider an alternative.

Clearly the most influential figure shaping our modern ideas about the impact of early experiences on character development was Freud. His influence upon our culture is nowhere more evident than in instilling a sense of the absolutely crucial importance of early childhood. More recent psychological theorists have even upped the ante. Whereas Freud believed that our personality structure was largely set around the age of five or six, the most influential recent theorizing in psychoanalysis locates the source of our ability or inability to function successfully as adults even earlier, in the first year or two of life. As will be made apparent as I proceed, these efforts to go further than Freud lead, in fact, backward.

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The evidence of how early experiences shape later development is much misunderstood and the possibilities for alternative accounts are not well appreciated. This confusion is evident not only in the technical psychoanalytic journals but also in efforts to apply psychoanalytic ideas to broader cultural and historical questions. Peter Gay, one of the most distinguished historians to advocate the relevance to his

discipline of psychoanalytic theory and a widely acknowledged expert on Freud, has stated that “more than any other psychologist in history, [Freud] provided scientific demonstrations for Wordsworth’s over-worked poetic dictum that the Child is father of the Man.” This is simply not so. It is very likely true that Freud stimulated interest in this question as no one had before, and his speculations offered detailed hypotheses—some probably correct and some wrong—where before there were vague generalities. But the most humble contemporary, longitudinal researcher, lacking Freud’s genius but utilizing agreed-upon rules of evidence to relate observations made in childhood to observations made later in life, can provide more “scientific demonstrations” regarding the relationship between childhood experiences and adult character than Freud’s method could possibly have provided.

A related assertion by Gay further illustrates the prevailing confusion. In the midst of a defense of Freud’s psychosexual theories, Gay makes a passing comment about the currently fashionable diagnosis of narcissistic personality. Casually, as if it were perfectly obvious and beyond dispute, Gay states that “after all” narcissism is a disorder “originating in a very early, markedly pre-genital sexual phase.” Gay seems not to recognize here that this common psychoanalytic assertion is scarcely based on reliable systematic evidence but is almost totally a product of theory. There is evidence of a sort that certain *themes*, which Freudians call “pre-genital,” are common in the associations of individuals diagnosed as narcissistic personalities. But there is absolutely no evidence as to when narcissistic disorders begin, or that they begin earlier than, say, the neuroses, which are supposedly “oedipal” in origin.

In order to understand this more fully, it is necessary to consider what analysts actually observe and how they go about making sense of it. Though there are significant differences among analytic observers, virtually all note that under the lens of the psychoanalytic situation people reveal wishes, fears, and fantasies that seem quite at odds with ordinary conscious adult thought. Freud’s way of understanding these seemingly “infantile” mental activities was to liken them to archaeological residues, which when uncovered reveal early layers of the individual’s psyche. This is the basic position of contemporary Freudians as well and of the most influential recent variants of psychoanalytic thought,

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such as “object relations” theory and “self psychology.” Theorists of these latter persuasions dispute certain specifics of classical Freudian theory but share the view that the early history of the psyche can be reconstructed from patients’ associations in analysis and from their way of relating to the analyst.

Central to such theories are concepts such as fixation and developmental arrest. They conceive of the strange mental productions emerging in analysis as remnants of archaic psychic formations which, because they were split off from the developing ego—the part of the psyche that can grow and change in response to perceptual input from the environment—remained infantile while the rest of the personality grew up. Like the woolly mammoths that explorers occasionally find buried under the arctic ice, these psychic formations were preserved in their original form, protected against the ordinary processes of change by layers of defense as the flesh of mammoths was protected against decay by layers of deep freeze.

To those who hold such a “woolly mammoth” view of psychological development, the unconscious is timeless and unchanging because new experiences, which must be mediated by the ego, do not penetrate below layers of defense to alter what has been frozen in time. “Archaic” or “infantile” wishes and fears persist in spite of any new experiences which might seem to contradict them.

But if one looks more closely at the minute details of people’s lives, it is possible to see how these seemingly infantile thoughts and wishes in fact persist not in spite of everyday reality but precisely because of that reality. Consider, for example, the so-called narcissistic personality referred to in the comment by Gay above. This personality type has been the object of enormous interest in recent years. These individuals, because of their combination of insecurity and grandiosity, tend to elicit from others either admiration for their exploits or hostile, competitive, or rejecting responses to their pretensions and self-involvement. This combination of reactions feeds both their grandiosity and their insecurity and reinforces the feeling that who they really are is insufficient, that only a blown-up version of themselves can survive in this world.

At some level, however, this inflated version feels false and hollow and thus contributes both to a sense of vulnerability and to further defensive efforts to cover over that feeling—with the result that they set up similar interactions with other people that keep the whole process going. If one looks closely enough—with more probing questions than free association permits—one sees that the past is endlessly re-created in the present and that the wishes, fears, and fantasies that

(however unconsciously) dominate the person’s life do not persist as a simple archaeological preservation but rather as the ironic product of the very efforts the person makes to overcome them.

From such a perspective, it does not make sense to ask from when a person’s difficulties date. In a certain sense *all* disorders—indeed, all personality traits—originate early, but only in the sense that early experiences skew the kinds of later experiences we encounter. Whether one grows up to become neurotic, psychotic, or unusually healthy, one’s development can be traced back to the very earliest stages of life. One type of personality does not begin any earlier than any other. Rather, what is crucial is the direction of development, the kinds of influences one encounters, and the nature of the patterns of human interaction one establishes and, in all likelihood, repeats.

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The archaeological, “woolly mammoth” model is problematic in a number of important respects. Because it locates the heart of the causal nexus not in the continuing series of experiences—right up to the present—that are engendered by experiences early in life, but rather in the persisting direct influence of unassimilated and unaltered bits of childhood psychic functioning, it focuses psychoanalytic inquiry on the epistemologically suspect quest to reconstruct the earliest years of childhood from the experiences of analysts with their adult patients. This greatly increases its vulnerability to criticisms such as that of Frederick Crews, who ridiculed the penchant of psychoanalysts to “base conclusions about early childhood on remarks made by supine grownups.”

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At the same time, while not totally excluding attention to the actual world of interacting adults, the archaeological model subtly but significantly renders such concerns secondary and sometimes even superficial to many analysts. This has had problematic implications for the application of a psychoanalytic perspective to social analysis.

There is an important place for a psychoanalytic perspective in probing social and historical processes. The moving forces of history include more than the rational pursuit of national and class interests. Understanding the role of psychological conflict and of hid-

den desires, fantasies, and fears provides an essential dimension to social analysis. But ways of framing this understanding that stress “early” experiences can be incomplete and even seriously misleading.

Efforts, for example, to understand some of the differences between men and women that affect our society in so many ways have relied considerably in recent years on theories about differences in the earlier influences on boys and girls. According to Nancy Chodorow’s influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, boys must separate from the primary object of attachment in order to gain a sense of male identity, and this has fateful consequences. Girls, according to Chodorow,

emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another’s needs or feelings as one’s own. . . . Furthermore, girls do not define themselves in terms of the denial of pre-oedipal relational modes to the same extent as do boys. Therefore, regression to these modes tends not to feel as much a basic threat to their ego. From very early, then, because they are parented by a person of the same gender . . . girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world.

Despite some oversimplifications, these conjectures are interesting and suggest research to determine whether children parented more equally by the two sexes turn out as predicted by the theory. But even if these highly speculative notions about largely preverbal years were to be confirmed, extremely important questions would remain. Theories which focus very sharply on the consequences of very early experiences can lead us away from asking how tendencies developed very early are maintained and, very importantly, how they can be altered.

However it comes about, for example, that men tend to be less openly expressive of fear, less able to cry and to seek help, once such a pattern is established it tends to be maintained by its own consequences. Males, in defending against such “soft” feelings, afford themselves fewer opportunities for gratifying or putting to rest these needs. As a result, they build up and become even more threatening. It thus becomes necessary to defend against them still more intensely, and the vicious circle is repeated.

The consequences of such a pattern of suppressed longing and unacknowledged defense on the part of males in our society are manifold. Very likely it contributes to the considerably shorter life span of males. There is evidence, for example, that male health is at considerably greater risk following the death of a spouse than is the health of women. Some experts have suggested that the ability of women to establish more

nurturant mutual support networks than men do, as well as their greater ability to cry and express emotion, helps to mitigate the impact of the loss.

The male pattern of defense—the ongoing vicious circle of stoic unemotionality and counterdependency both generating and masking powerful but unconscious dependent longings—likely has other important consequences, both personal and social. The relations between the sexes, and the ways in which each seek to maintain—and thereby continue to generate the need for—particular images of gender are important determinants of almost every feature of our society. Indeed, it may well be that the self-perpetuating pattern of male defense against “softer” needs contributes to the likelihood of war. Examination of this dynamic as it repeats itself throughout the life cycle, and not just in terms of early childhood events, is essential to the understanding of a host of social processes.

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The departure from the archaeological model has significant implications for the practice of psychotherapy as well. For many years that model has placed serious limits on what analysts were permitted to do. The rules of psychoanalytic practice are largely negative ones, forbidding analysts to be too active or too personal, to give advice or direction, or to make use of the variety of new kinds of interventions that have been developed by therapists of other persuasions in recent years.

The rationale for these proscriptions is complex, but a number of key features are rooted in the assumptions of the model of the buried woolly mammoth. Since the primary forces feeding the patient’s difficulties are seen as not just unconscious but—even more importantly—as inaccessible to the influence of ongoing events in the person’s life, there would seem, from this perspective, to be little point in attempting directly to change anything about how the person is presently living. The “real” sources of the person’s difficulties would remain untouched, and one disturbance or another would be expected to persist. Moreover, actions to aid the patient with his or her difficulties, outside the limited range of possibilities that analysis permits—mostly listening and occasionally interpreting the meaning of what is being said—are seen as not just ineffectual but as positively antithetical to the attempt at cure. A key aim of the therapy is for the patient to understand that the reactions s/he is having (to the analyst and to others in his or her life) have less to do with what is actually going on than with inclinations deeply buried within him/herself long ago. If the analyst were to intervene in a wider range of ways, or in any other way to make him/herself

known to the patient, it would be much harder for the patient to recognize that her or his reactions came from within. Only by remaining a shadowy, highly ambiguous figure, whose behavior (or apparent lack thereof) could not possibly justify the patient's feelings, could the analyst persuade the patient that his or her reactions to the analyst were rooted in the past and not in the realities of the interaction between them.

There are a number of difficulties with this position. To begin with, it is virtually impossible to remain anywhere near as anonymous as would be necessary for this approach to make sense. Consider, for example, the following description by Ralph Greenson, an analyst who believed firmly in the notion of analytic neutrality, but whose reports of what actually transpired showed an unusual candor. A patient of Greenson's, a Republican, had told him that he had tried for a while to adopt Greenson's liberal Democratic politics. Greenson, thinking that like any good analyst he had refrained from revealing his own inclinations, asked the patient how he knew about Greenson's politics. Greenson reports:

He then told me that whenever he said anything favorable about a Republican politician, I always asked for associations. On the other hand, whenever he said anything hostile about a Republican, I remained silent, as though in agreement. Whenever he had a kind word for Roosevelt, I said nothing. Whenever he attacked Roosevelt, I would ask who did Roosevelt remind him of, as though I was out to prove that hating Roosevelt was infantile.

Interestingly, Greenson discussed this event under the rubric of "contaminations" of the transference. But there is little reason to think there was anything exceptional about this occurrence other than that the patient was able to articulate it to Greenson and that Greenson had the honesty to report it in public. Analysts cannot control such patterning in their interactions with patients for a reason one would think they would readily accept: As with everyone else, important aspects of their behavior are not under conscious control.

Even if anonymity were not so quixotic a goal, without the constraining assumptions of the model of the locked-in past there would be little reason to attempt it. Over the past few decades, important advances have been made by therapists operating from premises quite different from those of psychoanalysis. These therapists—behavior therapists, family therapists, and others—have developed innovative methods of intervention in ongoing patterns of behavior that have clearly demonstrated effectiveness. Based on the critique of the "woolly mammoth" model presented here, it has

been possible to develop an integrated therapeutic approach in which these newer modes of intervention are combined with a psychodynamic understanding of unconscious motivation, conflict, and defense.

The key to reconciling approaches previously regarded as antithetical is an understanding of the circular nature of causality in human behavior. In contrast to the theory of the locked-in past, the model implied here is one in which unconscious processes are not impervious to life events but are maintained by the consequences they generate. They do indeed tend to persist, but the way they persist is different. As a consequence, the way they can be changed looks different. What becomes apparent is that there are *many* ways they can change—and many ways that change can be undermined.

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Consider, for example, someone for whom early in life strong feelings of anger were stirred which needed to be defended against. As part of the defensive effort, such a person might be unusually meek, cooperative, unassertive. The defensive nature of these behaviors (some of which would in other circumstances be healthy and socially valuable) would be revealed by their being compulsive and indiscriminating and by indications in the person's dreams, slips of speech, and so forth, that behind them lay a good deal of anger. From the orthodox psychoanalytic perspective the anger would be seen as a direct continuation of the anger from childhood, still pressing for expression and hence still being desperately defended against. It would be like a foreign body in the psyche, having to do with a prior era in the patient's life, not with the present. The causality would be one-directional: The persisting anger from the past would clearly be the impetus and the defensive effort to ward it off a reaction to it.

But from the perspective I have offered here, which I call cyclical psychodynamics because of its emphasis on the repeated cycles in people's lives, the anger is as much a *product* of the person's way of life as the cause.

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Whatever its origins, it is now perpetuated by the very efforts the person makes to keep it under wraps; in being so excessively self-effacing, the person induces others to act in ways that ignore or override his or her needs, and this frustration eventually stirs anger, either consciously or unconsciously. Since anger is unacceptable to such a person, it must once again be defended against, and the stage is set for still another repetition of the cycle. The anger being defended against today, therefore, is not anger from childhood but, as it were, anger from yesterday. And that anger, in turn, is a product of defensive efforts taken the day before. In all of this, a crucial factor is how the conflict over anger and the defensive efforts undertaken lead to behavior which enlists other people, often unwittingly and un-

willingly, into the role of oppressor. Such a process can always be found in neurotic patterns of living. Put differently, every neurosis requires accomplices.

This analysis suggests that intervening in this self-perpetuating cycle would be aided by active and systematic efforts to help the patient begin to act more assertively and hence to elicit different responses from potential accomplices. The initiation of new patterns of interaction with others would be viewed not as the final outcome of the therapy—following rather automatically and spontaneously from the gains resulting from the therapist's interpretations—but as part of the very process by which change occurs. In a given case, the therapist might, for example, work with the patient on practicing ways of handling differently situations in which s/he had tended to automatically submit. Or patient and therapist might agree upon a series of graduated challenges that would enable the patient to effectively take on new ways of interacting without getting in over her or his head.

Such methods have been most closely associated with the work of behavior therapists, but they are not the exclusive property of that school and fit readily into psychodynamic therapy of the kind I have described. In being incorporated into therapy of this sort, however, the procedures change in subtle ways and their overall meaning changes quite considerably. In part this is a result of the cyclical psychodynamic therapist's concern with the unconscious conflict, fears, and fantasies that are associated with the patient's inhibitions. This will lead the therapist to assess differently what is the appropriate next step and to anticipate differently what kinds of resistances, "misunderstandings," changes of heart, and so forth are likely to occur.

At least as importantly, the therapist employing these methods from the viewpoint of the framework described here will be very concerned with the meaning of his or her interventions for the patient. At an unconscious level, the therapist's willingness to intervene in this more active way might be experienced by the patient as an attempt to boss and dominate; as a seduction; as an effort at ingratiation arising out of the therapist's weakness; as an act of caring in stark contrast to the patient's aloof and unhelpful parents; or in any of the variety of other ways of which the human imagination is capable. To some analysts, this is reason to refrain from using such methods. Committed to a sharply dichotomous conception of inner and outer realities, they believe that if the therapist is "really" doing something it will interfere with the patient's gaining understanding of his or her unconscious inclinations and achieving deep and lasting change. It is essential to recognize, however, that the patient's reaction is always

a function both of his or her previous experience and psychic organization and of what the analyst is actually doing, and that it is impossible for the analyst to do nothing. Refraining from intervening actively is no more neutral than agreeing to do so. Indeed, there are few more powerful and provocative social stimuli than remaining silent in response to highly charged pleas for help or expressions of feeling.

What makes feasible the integrative approach I am describing here is a different understanding of the warded-off feelings or impulses that become evident in the course of therapeutic exploration. Since the unconscious inclination is not regarded as a direct residue of the past, which the patient must come to understand by looking inward and backward, but as a consequence of the patient's ongoing way of interacting with others, directly intervening in that pattern is not a way of distracting attention from the true sources of the patient's difficulties. Rather, it is a reparative effort aimed directly at what is maintaining those difficulties now.

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An influential line of psychologically oriented social commentators—represented, for example, by Herbert Marcuse, Russell Jacoby, and Christopher Lasch—tends to view alterations in the classical psychoanalytic model such as those offered here as socially regressive. In critiques of neo-Freudian theorists such as Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, and Harry Stack Sullivan—whose modifications of Freudian theory bear some resemblance to those I am suggesting—these writers argue that despite the neo-Freudian intent to engage in social criticism, the import of their effort was in fact to weaken our appreciation of the impact of society on the psyche. The neo-Freudian view, these critics aver, prevents us from fully appreciating the depth of inhumanity that characterizes the social order; moreover, by envisioning a greater possibility for easily improving one's life, it essentially encourages conformist adaptation to society as it is.

That Freud's theory gives little if any encouragement that changes in society will make more than minor differences in people's ability to achieve real fulfillment, that the logic of his biological emphasis and of his stress on the preponderant importance of the first few years of life provides little sustenance to those who would work for fundamental social change, seems scarcely to give these critics pause. What matters is, in Russell Jacoby's words, that he "takes so seriously the damage." What seems most essential for these authors is less any specific feature of Freud's thought than his staunch pessimism. For them, Freud shows how the depredations of our society have sunk into our very

marrow, into our second nature. Although they recognize that Freud's theory points ineluctably toward the conclusion that the same frustrations and deprivations will occur in *any* society, their antagonism toward any theorists who attempt to rework Freud's gratuitously pessimistic formulations is unyielding. It matters little that following Freud's theory would deny us even the dimmest beacon toward a way out of our fix. He is valued for showing how bad things really are.

The stance of critics such as Marcuse or Jacoby seems to me to illustrate well what Michael Lerner has called "surplus powerlessness." Surplus powerlessness is a response to an oppressive reality that, in effect, goes reality one better and induces an inability to see or use even the little bit of leverage for change that might exist. Lerner describes its operation at every level of society, but the first observations which seemed to him to call for the concept involved an unwillingness or inability among his fellow activists in the sixties really to believe in the possibility of succeeding in changing society. This was not a conscious attitude but, indeed, often one that seemed to lay behind manifest attitudes that were quite the opposite, appearing to imply unusually strong militancy and commitment. Among its most important manifestations is the choice of rhetoric or action "guaranteed to estrange those who would potentially listen to them." The writings of the critics I am discussing here fit this picture well. They tend to be totalistic: The present society is not just badly in need of change; it is so utterly and thoroughly antithetical to all human needs that the possibility of any genuine fulfillment at all, indeed even of genuine personhood, is denied. Such rhetoric is bracing, but its consequence is that nowhere is there seen even a toehold for launching effective action. All that can be done is dialectical kvetching.

It is an error to equate being more radical with how totally opposed one is to the given order. Commitment to lines of analysis that have a chance of changing things is more to the point. If we are serious about change, as therapists or as social critics, we have to be able to see not only what is wrong but what there is to build on. This includes being able to recognize every possible factor maintaining the status quo that might be subject to our intervention. Shifting our conception of the influences responsible for our present situation away from the nursery and from our DNA points us to the office, the factory, the union hall, the corner bar, the shopping center, and the family huddled around the television set. The picture of causality offered by the present analysis is not one of simple cause and effect. Social and interpersonal influences don't impact on passive individuals. The emphasis on circularity in the analysis presented here leads us to ask how we each

participate in the institutions and in the interpersonal patterns in which we are trapped.

Such an analysis presents us with more responsibility—and more opportunity. Self-blame and a feeling of complete impotence are two sides of the same coin; they both follow from looking at only one direction of the causal chain. Social and interpersonal forces both impinge upon us and are the product of our collective action, as we all constantly shape each other's world. Alone each of us is indeed helpless to change very much about our lives. In the practice of psychotherapy much harm has resulted from the efforts of therapists to help their patients achieve “autonomy.” Being able to stand alone is the false ideal of the culture of Ronald Reagan. Patients who benefit from psychotherapy are those who learn the lesson of mutuality, who move beyond both helpless dependency and the false ideal of independence. Mutuality and interdependence are the lessons we must learn on a social level as well. Our fates lie in each other. □