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The Defense Mechanisms of Psychopaths

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In the psychoanalytical treatment of adults psychopaths defense mechanisms which were directed against the super-ego of the patients represented the major part of the mental processes that had to be treated, and it is the formation of these defense mechanisms that we also find that which most sharply distinguishes psychopathic illness from other mental disturbances.

From the development of the psychiatric concept of psychopathy, we can at this juncture only state that it no longer coincides at all with that of the delinquent and that we nevertheless find psychopaths among all kinds of criminals. Latent criminals, analogous to the latent misfits of **Aichhorn**, are frequently psychopaths. Social maladjustment may be however, far from being psychopathic, even if it results in asocial behaviour.

The tendency of psychoanalysis was to drop entirely the notion of psychopathy and to speak of neurotic character disturbances. Naturally we also regard psychopathy as a character disturbance, which can, however, be distinguished from other character neuroses. It is the special psychopathology that is of crucial import for our purposes; a more precise diagnosis becomes possible on the basis of the inner structure and psychodynamics which we intend to describe.

Psychopathic personalities are those that cannot bear tension, that are bent on immediate gratification of their instinctive needs; for this reason they become asocial, frequently anti-social. They are often aggressive. To be exact, the psychopath does not for the most part, let us say attack society, but society hampers him in his quest for gratification. He is not able to maintain lasting relationships with those he loves. He appears to lack a conscience, or his super-ego appears at least to be highly defective.

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We agree with those writers who assume that psychopaths nevertheless possess a super-ego and are of the opinion that the defense directed against the super-ego creates the impression that the latter is non-existent .

A 37-year-old father of a family stays away from his work one fine afternoon and spends the time in the company of his drinking cronies looking at obscene photographs. This gives him intense pleasure and at the same time he feels extremely uneasy. During all this he is not ashamed of himself in front of his companions and entertains them with lewd remarks. Suddenly he lets some of the photographs slip into his pocket. With the stolen goods in his pocket he goes home in the most blissful mood.

The uneasiness, as the patient's associations showed, was related to violent feelings of guilt, which entailed dereliction of duty and gratification of oral, scopophilic and homosexual tendencies. By committing the theft, which the patient himself regarded as criminal, he had restored his feeling of selfreliance.

We have concluded from similar observations that psychopaths ward off the demands of their super-ego (Fenichel), that they are not simple without scruples, but can leap, as it were, over their own conscience.

Another patient prides himself on loyalty to his friends. Disappointed by his family and out of contact with women, he had one single lasting intimate relationship with a friend his own age. When the patient was arrested for molesting a boy under age, he declared at the first police examination, which was conducted in such a way as to spare him as much as possible, that his friend had committed the same offense. In the analysis his comment in this denunciation of his friend was: If I'm in for it, why should he get away with it?

In the analysis of my counter-transference I was able to ascertain that my initial inner indignation at this behaviour stemmed, among other things, from the fact that this patient dealt with the demand of the super-ego (solidarity with a friend) in a manner I was incapable of. We note again and again during the treatment of psychopaths that they compel us to withdraw partial identifications that we had established with parts of their super-ego. Our disappointment at this and the angry vexation at suddenly finding ourselves in the position of a scrupulous schoolmaster, after we have for some time felt in agreement with the patient's ego about allowing at least this much of morality to remain valid, inform us that **they** have open to them another possibility than we of settling the conflict between the demands of the super-ego and the wishes arising in the id. Pangs of conscience and feelings of guilt, to be sure, occur, but they do not lead as in the case of neuroses to the formation of symptoms. Psychopaths ward off the demands of the super-ego and grant admittance into the ego to some of the forbidden id wishes. A threatening impoverishment of gratification is avoided. Thereupon there frequently

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occurs a feeling of heightened selfreliance which appears to derive less from successful gratification of drives than from the victory of magic omnipotence over the inner censor.

We are able to describe six defense mechanisms, which were to be observed in all patients, alternating and supplementing one another and frequently overlapping, but they were present at varying degrees of intensity and were not all distributed alike in different individuals. If the interpretation of one of these forms of defense is successful, another frequently becomes operative in its stead.

The **projection of the super-ego** on to external authorities, which then assume validity only for this moment becomes particularly evident in analysis.

A patient plans a criminal act, reports on it, and he is not quite I happy about this plan. He says: "It doesn't matter to me if something goes wrong: now I have you, you know!" I express no opinion. The patient: "If you had a better sense of humour and sometimes put in an ironical remark, then you would be the doctor for me. Even if you though the plan, as I do, somewhat ridiculous; as Dr. X did. He has such a nice cynical way about him. Then I would be quite happy about the whole thing".

Projection is an attempt to get rid of the intra-psychic pressure, an attempt to evade one's own responsibility. Only in the event of successful projection, if I were like Dr. X, and showed that this demand is not to be taken seriously, would the patient reveal himself with reference to the impending act as quite devoid of a conscience

Identification with a super-ego bearer is very similar to projection and, like it, assists in social adaptation. We encounter it in normal childhood and adolescence, in group formations and also in many neuroses, e.g., in erythrophobia. Corresponding identifications of psychopaths are distinguished from those occurring in the formation of the super-ego by the fact that they are retained only if they unburden the ego; these identifications immediately promise fresh gratification for demands acquired by way of identification. Then, however, they are more durable than projections.

A patient vigorously rejected my opinion of him, but at the same time greedily accepted my views on other persons and on general questions, in order to proffer them later as his own. When I proposed that he take a job he only laughed at me. Later on, however, he wanted to work. Work now appeared to him as a symbol of adulthood, of the people who "can do what they want". On the other hand, the fact remained: "But I can't look for work". To him duty signified impoverishment of pleasure and threatened him with panic. He demanded: "You'll have to find work for me. I can't

do that myself. If you don't give me any, I just won't work and will go on suffering". Then he took the very first job I agreed with him to take.

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If we consider the situation from the standpoint of the transference instead of from the angle of the defense mechanism, it could also be said: The patient greedily accepted the "work" from me after the formation of an orally possessive transference. "You must not" was transformed by my "gift" into "you may". It becomes clear at once how great the difference between this and an object-related transference is, when I note that the patient scornfully rejected my suggestion that he also arrive at his work on time.

The sexualized oral type of identification with a super-ego bearer also frequently effects relief and a heightening of self-reliance, if the demand acquired by way of identification is not complied with, in so far as it only silences the patient's guilt feeling.

A psychopathic medical student had made his girl friend pregnant for the third time and the psychiatrist, who call for the third abortion, had demanded that he finally break off his relationship with this woman. The promise was given. The patient, who up to this time had been guilt-ridden and close to suicide, experienced immediate relief, which unfortunately continued. On the very next day he again had sexual relations with the girl, but his feeling for months was: "The psychiatrist is a really fine fellow. I'm entirely of his opinion it helped me a great deal to be able to make him that promise".

The view frequently heard to the effect that psychopaths have no super-ego goes back mainly to the operation of a defense mechanism, to the **denial of the super-ego**. The same inner conflicts which yield all the symptoms of the neuroses can be dealt with in still another way by psychopaths. They have the ability to treat the demands of the super-ego just as the child masters portions of reality before the general predominance of the reality principle. The perception of inner demands -which remain pre-conscious- fend off instinctual drives. From the point of view of the observer these people seem to assess reality correctly at all points except precisely where it makes the same demand as the conscience. The denial of an inner demand corresponds at any given time to the denial of a portion of external reality; the equivalent of "moral insanity" is a scotoma in the perception of the external world, a partial lock of adaptation, which strikingly appears in these persons who otherwise often seem intelligent and "normal" as an incomprehensible autism and fantastic unreasonableness. The asocial behaviour resulting from the successful denial of super-ego demands has been described as self-sabotage. It is precisely here that we can see the efficacy of the

super-ego over against an ego that succeeds only in fantasy in warding off demands, an ego that helplessly confronts the ever threatening danger of impoverishment of gratification. The denial becomes inoperative if more gratification is again granted to the ego. In my experience it is precisely the super-ego demands that are most crassly denied that are most intensively cathected. There where the psychopath seems to be most devoid of conscience is precisely the spot where he is most helplessly exposed to his conscience.

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The patient mentioned above, who had stolen the obscene photographs, was able on the following day to go to a nudist film without his former inhibitions. When, however, he was reproached on the job a few days later for some minor mistake, he could not utter another word for hours on end and had to drink to excess before he could summon the courage to go home at all.

Another psychopathic patient, whom I had assisted out of a severe depression, contentedly went off on a trip abroad without, however, paying his bill. In the next few days he plagued me with desperate telephone calls: he said his tormenting insomnia had come back. I explained to him that he would not be able to sleep until he had paid my bill, while he insisted that this debt did not weigh on his conscience in the least. Then he paid and there was another phone call. He didn't need the damned analyst any more; half a glass of beer before going to bed had brought him the desired sleep. The denied commandment insisted on its debenture.

The **restriction of the ego** has been described by **Anna Freud** as being in children on activity of a special kind in the face of demands from the external world. Just as the total person can shun a conflict with the external world, so psychopaths can evade a conflict with an internal instance.

A patient whose ambition was freed during treatment from inhibitions is not able to achieve his aim. Just at the point when anyone else would begin to suffer from a sense of failure, this person began to make long, aimless, trips abroad. When he was up in a plane his ambition to be a great man was gratified. The demand that he should "freely associate" had at the same time become inoperative. Instead of freely associating, he journeyed through foreign lands and told me about his travels.

By restricting itself the ego renounces the enjoyment of a gratification proposed by the super-ego; it shrinks from the demand of the super-ego and obtains a different, substitute gratification which is dictated by the super-ego and more by the id.

The **subornation of the super-ego**, the achievement of instinctual satisfaction by way of prior or simultaneous fulfillment of an imposed ideal, or by way of punishment, occurs also in perfectly healthy persons and in neurotics, the object being to free the ego from pressure. Wit, humour and other mediatory functions make the severe superego an enticing offer involving the countenancing, nevertheless, under certain conditions, of gratifications.

A patient who has left his wife because he does not want to support her any longer says after a short period of stupor: "When I am away I can write her funny letters. I am good at that; she just has to laugh. You just have to console people who are sad". Another patient develops criminological interests described by him

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as serious; he regards himself as a crime expert and as long as he has this feeling can even plan crimes without any inhibitions and feelings of guilt.

The erection of a secondary super-ego which countenances instinctual satisfaction permits many successful leaders of gangs and some politicians to present their psychopathic behaviour as "a fight for a good cause". The mentally healthy person can, at the very most, suborn his super-ego only in fantasy.

The lasting **isolation of the super-ego**, indeed of entire super-ego systems, which are actively kept at a distance by the ego, so that although, to be sure, they are still present they are not operative against instinctual wishes, was derived from the observation of compulsion neuroses. Even if all previously described forms of defense can isolate the ego from claims of the super-ego, we believe nevertheless that we may speak of isolation only where, in psychopaths, the super-ego is split off as a whole, intact, experienced as a part of the personality as such and not, let us say, projected or otherwise reduced to silence. Symptoms in the ego, as in the compulsion neurosis where achievement implies a compromise with the super-ego, are then no longer demonstrable in the case of psychopaths.

All these forms of defense cripple the critical and inhibitive functions of the super-ego. They can, however, ward off only temporarily aggression directed against the ego and cannot exclude unconscious feelings of guilt and the need for punishment.

Why, in the case of psychopaths, the ego erects defenses against the demands of the super-ego and not against those of the id can be understood if it is assumed that the ego regresses to a plane of libidinal organization where immediate gratification was possible. If gratification is not possible, if

id impulses have to be rejected, the ego suffers an impoverishment of libido. Instead of a development of anxiety in the ego, there arises a feeling of annihilation. Instinctual anxiety is to a great extent unknown to such persons, but they are more susceptible to panic and collapse than are neurotics. Collapse occurs in the shape of self-abandon and sudden tendencies to suicide, if the analysis ever gets to the point where the analyst is cathected as object and expects the patient to reject his infantile wishes.

The psychopath's object relationships follows an archaic, narcissistic pattern; he hardly ever evolves those of the mature type. The object which no longer gratifies needs is in real life (and also in the transference) given up at once. The incapacity for lasting relationships to love-objects is a characteristic of all psychopaths.

Since in regression to the oral stage where needs are to be gratified immediately no kind of tension can be endured and no gratification postponed, external hindrances to gratification, e.g., bodily pain, are frequently denied as far as possible. Unavoidable restrictions, e.g., imprisonment, lead to acting-out directed against the

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environment, where drives which are largely pre-genital are given satisfaction. The acting-out of psychopaths -contrary to this of neurotics- is of no use to the unfolding of an inner conflict, but it is the expression of an apparently uninhibited way of the pleasure principle. The psychopath excludes the external world and the monitory voice of the super-ego by means of his special kind of cowardice, shamelessness, boldness and impudence, by his lying, deceitfulness and his entire polymorph criminal and perverse activities, and thus avoids collapse. He acts with the courage of unconscious desperation.

We suppose that what occurs in psychopaths is a one-sided development of the ego-autonomy. Ego interests are accentuated, but other functions of the ego, such as its organizing and controlling functions, are less developed. Ego needs get their way against the super-ego by means of the above-mentioned defense mechanism; inhibitive parts of the ego cannot hold their own in the face of instinctual demands. The often effective functioning of the intelligence and of other autonomous functions would seem to find an explanation in the fact that the primary autonomy of the ego continues to mature, while the development of its secondary autonomy (according to **Hartman**) is severely disturbed. It is rather in this characteristic than in a specific incapacity to develop a super-ego that we discover too the biological dispositions to psychopathy, in the sense of "primordial, innate ego differences" according to **Freud**.

The functional alterations, customarily effected by the warding off of formerly libidinous and aggressive tendencies, do not seem to occur. The formation of a sphere of the ego free from conflicts is rendered impossible by deficiency in neutralization or by secondary cathexis with sexual and aggressive energy. It thus becomes understandable that the defense mechanism remain in the service of gratification of instinctual drives instead of, as in a healthy ego, serving as intermediaries between self-preservation, the striving after pleasure and the commandments of the super-ego.

The re-direction of defenses, away from the instinctual demands arising in the id, against the super-ego and against the external world, in so far as it threatens similar restrictions which we have described as the factor which distinguishes psychopaths from neurotics suffering from character disturbances and other psychic afflictions, would not appear unusual if we could at this point pursue the genesis of the super-ego. Negative introjections from the oral phase apparently form the basis of a quite unusual development of the super-ego. Frequent changes of parent substitutes or guardians or a continual alteration between excessive gratification and aggressiveness make the oedipal objects permanently incomprehensible to the already developed faculty of abstract thought. What is right at one time turns out to be wrong the next time. Only regression to a mode of comprehension characteristic of the primary process and to cathexis leading to satisfaction of needs enables these objects to become assimilable at

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all. Owing to the lack of lasting libidinous ties the aggression directed towards objects remains unmodified and is not neutralized. Thereby the prohibitive parent becomes, at the level of the Oedipus conflict, the focus of enormous hatred. Introjection of the negating object proceeds, as in the case of the neurotic, by way of oral regression. However, the object is introjected along with the attached non-neutralized aggression. It is, at the same time, destroyed and incorporated, laden as it is with the primitive energy of the primary process. The introjected object is debased and devalued to the point of the dissolution of its coherence. The ego triumphs and discharges its oral hatred. However, it celebrates but a Pyrrhic victory. It must be henceforth either perish from the irreconcilable requital of this hatred or draw on all its energy to ward it off.

The psychopath has introjected parricide instead of the father and, from then on, must repeat it again and again in order not to perish. It is from this repetition that he derives his feeling of self and

not from indulgence or even from autonomous achievements which, in any case, cannot turn out to his advantage.

His super-ego is still more deeply rooted in the id than that of the neurotic. The defense otherwise directed against the primary drives can without any great permutation be applied against the claims of such a super-ego. Unconscious pangs of conscience and feelings of guilt up to the point of annihilation are as far as possible warded off. Castration anxiety and anxiety at loss of love are experienced in only a mild form. Annihilation is a permanent threat, in the sense of the most primordial oral anxiety.

The great range of defense mechanism at its disposal and the unhampered gratification of its drives are of little benefit to the total personality of the psychopath. Without the assurance provided by a lasting libidinous cathexis his ego hovers between the moral danger of privation (narcissistic scar) and annihilation (mortification).

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