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## The Analyst's Creativity During the Treatment Process<sup>1</sup>,<sup>2</sup>

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## **Definition**

I approach the subject of creativity with much awe and, I must confess, with a degree of envy, because while I have some talent for practical, sometimes novel applications, I am sorely limited in the capacity to generate truly unique ideas—not to speak of artistic productions. Let me clarify the distinction between talent and creativity: By talent I mean the potential for developing a special ability. Creativity, on the other hand, generates; it originates. It is "the ability to come up with ideas or artifacts that are new, surprising and valuable" (Boden, 2004, p. 1), often by displacing a relation from one idea to another idea and thereby generating a further "correlative" idea which might be novel (Spearman, 1931, pp. 24-28). Creativity "refers to a particular kind of productivity, namely, that which is both original and integrative in nature. Creativity ... is heightened by innate perceptual sensitivities and the ability to synthesize sense data into Gestalten... [Fortunately] creativity is possible ... in any field of endeavor" (Kahn & Piorkowski, 1974, p. 233). Regarding the perceptual sensitivities, Greenacre (1957) asserts that "early sensory oversensitivity together with greater reactivity to rhythm and gestalt relationships of form would bring ... a wider range of awareness ... [and] form the anlage for the development of a greater richness of capacity for symbolization" (p. 65).

As it is the ability to be original that distinguishes creativity from productivity, I consider myself blessed to have found my way into a field of endeavor, a profession, that provides me—and, of course, all my colleagues—an opportunity to be creative,

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at least in small ways. Because each patient, each family, each group and its members is unique with idiosyncratic emotional and cognitive constellations, each psychoanalyst and each family or group therapist has the opportunity to decipher these unique signs, the symptoms and the symbols, and thus creatively construct original meanings. The process of deciphering and conceptualizing in a psychodynamic treatment is a process of transformation akin to the symbolic transformations required to transpose sensory experience into language, or into musical and pictorial or plastic aesthetic forms (Langer, 1942/1948).

However, to many psychologists who strive to be ever so scientific, emotions—unlike behavior—seem messy, are difficult to measure, and uncomfortable to endure. Years ago, a colleague told me of a Saturday night party he had attended at the home of a psychologist, with several other psychologists also present. The host's toddlers didn't want to go to bed. Repeatedly they barged into the living room while their mother, imbued with—and probably misapplying—the principles of progressive education, could not take charge. Consequently, the guests were not having a good time and one of them, unable to own up to his feelings of annoyance, launched instead into a lengthy discourse on the developmental characteristics of toddlers. In his effort to control both his feelings and the situation, he intellectualized his anger and resorted to a hypertrophied intellectualism.

For psychologists who are uncomfortable with feelings and those who prefer the clarity of experimental methods, programs of behavioral modification and cognitive therapy, with their relatively easily testable outcomes, are frequently the choice of treatment. Intellectualizing psychologists who nevertheless drift into the fields of psychoanalysis and dynamic therapy often tend toward a sterile application of theory, or a formulaic interpretation of dreams and symptoms. For instance, when (as an instructor) I asked my students about the idiosyncratic development or the personality dynamics of a particular patient as evidence for a diagnosis, their answers were more on the order of "vague [intellectual] generalities" than "valid generalizations," to use Susanne Langer's expression (1942/1948, p. 170).

I have also been confronted with anti-intellectual reactions. Some patients shunned the rigors of a psychoanalytic treatment;

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they wanted an "existential" or "humanistic" therapy, a sympathetic "experience-near" treatment. And some psychoanalysts-in-training preferred relying on spontaneity in the consultation room, while confining theory to the classroom. When I asked members of this group of trainees—the spontaneous, gentler, therapists—why an interpretation, or confrontation, or reassuring statement was offered, or why they chose to make an intervention at that moment, or whether it was addressed to (let's say) superego, ego, or transference, I often drew a blank. "It felt right, that's all," they said. This, in my estimation, leaves too much room for imputing the analyst's reactions (including but not limited to countertransference) to the patient. The optimal manner and timing of an intervention most often can be systematically determined by proper attention to the observable dynamic changes in the patient in the course of treatment (Fenichel, 1941).

## **Components of Treatment**

The challenge to both groups of therapists is simultaneously to remain aware of three components of the treatment situation:

- 1. The patient's (i.e., individual, group or family) communications, context, and history.
- 2. The therapist's thoughts, feelings, and intuitions.
- 3. The theories of personality and technique.

Only then—only when patient, therapist, and theory have been taken into account—can meaningful (though of course not infallible) decisions be arrived at with respect to possible interventions. Regarding the interventions, one has to consider:

- 1. Their nature, including silence.
- 2. The choice of words.
- 3. The timing.

With some experience, therapists follow this process outside of conscious awareness with lightning speed, and they are then alerted by the end result of the process, namely, the consciously apprehended intuition that this or that comment is in order. This is the flash of knowledge that results from a preconscious

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integration of disparate factors. The analyst's prior work with the patient no less than the technical training provides the necessary preparation and the material for "incubation"—the relaxation of "the conscious cognition of the left brain hemisphere" so as to allow "the right hemisphere subliminal processes to operate" (John Curtis Gowan cited in Harman, 1984, p. 22). This is the process preceding a significant interpretational transformation, a creative synthesis that manifests itself as a moment of illumination or intuition.

I am reminded here that a senior colleague told of having burst out with a threat to thrash a patient's backside if he dealt in drugs. "Bursting out" didn't leave time for consciously, logically, checking the appropriateness of the intervention *before* it was made, but *retrospective* assessment, supported by the patient's responses, proved this unusual, spontaneous intervention by the experienced psychoanalyst to have been appropriate and effective at that moment. Although we don't know how the intervention may have harmed the treatment later on, it was certainly novel and creative in that it represented a unique synthesis in a reality-oriented communicable form. Ideally, however, a psychoanalyst takes the steps of finding the facts, the problems and—one hopes—the solutions, and then verifying (Wallas, 1926) by the available means: patients' responses, internal consistency of the hour, and consistency with the patients' history.

When I thought ahead to preparing this article, I suddenly remembered a silly story that produced a storm of laughter in our little group of 8- or 9-year-olds, many, many decades ago, as we strolled home after school.

The story is about some boys who met a man with a very long beard. They stopped him to ask whether in bed at night he slept with his beard on top of or under the quilt. The man looked puzzled and said he didn't know and had never noticed, but he promised to tell the boys when next they met. When the boys met the man again, he looked very angry and said, "I didn't sleep for nights on end, because I was kept awake watching my beard."

What is the meaning of remembering this children's story? In the present context, it is not its latent sexual and aggressive components and their age-appropriate expression. What is going on? Was I concerned that the inquiry about the creative process

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is as pointless as the boys' question? Was I worried that this discourse, like the boys' question, may be irritating to my colleagues?

The real importance of remembering the man with the beard may be that there is a core similarity between the children's story and the topic addressed here. Both are inquiries into a *process*, and both processes, what we do during sleep and how we construct novel syntheses, occur outside of conscious awareness. And the fact that the story literally popped! into my consciousness illustrates one step in the creative process. The memory presented itself *suddenly* as an intuition. As in a dream, the *current personal* meaning of the communication, that is, the story of *yore*, is presented in condensed, symbolic form: I visualized the specific street, our little group of girls and boys, as if we were the boys in the story. I had an image of a tall, lean man with a white beard almost down to his navel; and in my belly I felt both the children's laughter and the horror of the man's anger. The story carried emotional meanings. Simultaneously, on another plane, the verbal symbols constituted the discursive, conceptual form of the manifest story. Discursively the story developed logically, step by step.

## Two Interacting Cognitive Realms

It was all there, at once: a flash of a visual image; intuition without the benefit of rational thought. My feelings as well as my preconscious apprehension of the similarities of the two situations were revealed in the *pictured* story, now no longer in its *discursive* form, but in nondiscursive, *presentational* form (Langer, 1942/1948). In this way, elements of different origins synthesized to create a more complex meaning. Two levels of cognition were at play, each operating in a different realm (*Bereich*). My associations crossed the boundaries between different experiential systems (*Erfahrungssysteme*) that are ordinarily not connected. But at the moment when my affective-cognitive balance was out of equilibrium, crossing the boundaries created a double meaning (*Doppelsinnung*—sometimes translated as ambiguity, but there seemed to be no ambiguity here) (Matussek, 1974).

The presentational form (the form in which the memory

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of the man with the beard manifested itself to me) is a "thing presentation" (Freud, 1923/1961, p. 20) in contrast to the word presentation of the conscious, secondary process that characterizes the discursive form and logic. Thing presentations are images—sometimes sensory perceptions—rather than ideas. And they are organized according to the primary process, that is, with mobile cathexis and according to their ego-centric, affective significance. We can consider the presentational form as akin to Piaget's (Phillips, 1969) sensory-motor and the later concrete-operational levels of cognitive development. In contrast, the discursive form that characterizes the secondary process corresponds roughly to Piaget's formal-operational level of cognitive development. It provides the ability to maneuver logically, conserving the essential attributes of the objects (in contrast to their personal affective meanings). Although Piaget's principle of "conservation" is not identical with Freud's idea of bound cathexis, the two do seem related in their strict focus on the objects' essential attributes. Perhaps "bound cathexis" is a prerequisite for performing the operation of conservation. The creative process requires both. In other words, creativity "involves the integration of two distinct modes of perception; the gestalt-free mode that characterizes the first several years of childhood and a mode, acquired later ... that makes use of gestalten" (Gedo, 1996, p. 12).

Here we have two opposing processes: One is fluid, affective, with easy displacement and condensation, and in the unconscious, exempt from mutual contradiction (Freud, 1963)—hence it is symbolic. The other is bound, verbally connotative of a class and denotative of specific objects,—hence logical. According to Rothenberg (1988), thinking creatively necessitates thinking in these disjunctive ways simultaneously. Furthermore, a balance must be maintained between the fluidity of unconscious ideation and the bound cathexis of logical thought, between chaos and order, between freedom and the constraints of structure (Guntern, 1995).<sup>3</sup>

In order to promote creativity, it is necessary to maintain a measure of flexibility, a degree of permeability between the boundaries of the two cognitive modes: logical thought and free-associative ideation. Arriving at the higher order syntheses that result in original productions requires flexible movement between

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the primary and secondary processes, between the preconscious and the conscious. It is a necessary (though not a sufficient) condition for the creation of *new* symbolic transformations, that is, from sensory experience and imagery to verbal symbols and from discrete items into a synthesis of meaningful Gestalten or concepts. This, according to **Rothenberg (1988)**, frequently occurs as a "rapid fleeting and transitory experience" by consciously and deliberately bringing "multiple entities together in a mental conception" (p. 8). He considers this to be a special type of cognition that can be categorized neither as primary process ideation nor as secondary process thinking and is not a "regression in the service of the ego" as postulated by Ernst **Kris (1952)**.

# **Artists and Therapists**

According to Arieti (1976), it is artists who join disparate elements to create a "concrete universal," whereas analysts "separate elements." I tend to disagree: Rather than separating elements, I believe, the psychoanalysts' and therapists' main task is *ordering* the patients' disparate associations by finding common elements, seeing and *joining* similarities as well as dissimilarities in the patients' past and present and in the patients' inner life and external reality. Finally, using the mobile cathexis of the primary process in tandem with the logical screening of the secondary process, the analyst/therapist finds "acceptable, emerging representations" that are, in fact, a synthesis of the patients' communications. From the patients' raw material, the analyst constructs new schemata. These new schemata result from a "match," a "click" between the realms of primary and secondary processes. Arieti calls this Eureka-moment the tertiary process. Thus, the analyst *reveals* unconscious content. This complex process has been referred to as the "mirror reversal of dreaming." The dream *disguises* (rather than reveals) by means of its particular symbolic transformation, often based on condensation (Rothenberg, 1988, p. 69). The analyst *reveals* by transposing amorphous, hazy sensory experiences and images and memories into words—thence to ideas. The resultant communications are enhanced with more precise meaning both to communicator and

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to communicant—speaker and listener—in our case, patient and therapist, therapist and patient.

### **Case Illustration**

Recently a patient, Maria, reported that she had spent an entire day, 11 hours, sitting in a chair. She read a little, looked at some television programs, and mostly just sat there. She could not get up. She could not move. It was as if she had been nailed to the chair. She said there was no reason to get up; her life is pointless; she enjoys nothing; and even her contacts with her adult children leave her empty. She generally feels so empty, and she doesn't even feel ashamed of her size anymore (at 309 lbs.). If she wishes to maintain contact with her children, it has to be according *their* rules. Of course, she's available when they need her, but it's always according to the way *they* want things done. Nobody cares about *her* needs.

To this, I made some sympathetic but innocuous comments about the rules in her home growing up, and about her having had to be available to her mother (who had sexually abused her), and having had to behave in just the way mother wanted and not being permitted to be herself. None of this was new to her or to me. But then Maria wondered why as a child she could not tell her parents to "bug off and do

what she wanted, be who she wanted to be. Maria concluded that growing up in that household, it would have been an impossibility. Even her mother followed rules. Her mother was a simple woman but she had heard about Watson's child-rearing methods. How often did mother tell Maria how difficult it was to abide by the rule to let the baby Maria cry and not feed her unless 4 hours had elapsed! Maria was used to hearing mother's tales of her own suffering growing up shamefully poor in Ireland, and she heard innumerable times about how difficult it was for mother to let the baby cry. "And guess whom I felt sorry for?" asked Maria. "Mother, of course. It never occurred to me to think about myself." Then Maria cried pitifully.

And I had an insight.

Again two levels of cognition were at play in me, each operating

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in a different realm (*Bereich*) Throughout I had mental images of Maria's house now and then—all of my own fabrication, as I have never seen either one. I also had memories of the tearing at my heartstrings when my children or grandchildren cried inconsolably, and I felt the possible sensation and frustration that a hungry baby might feel when left to cry for a long time. It was all in presentational form, like a stage set in the background, but quite inchoate. At the same time, operating from a different experiential realm, I became concerned about how to help Maria. I feared that I might not find a satisfactory intervention. As if looking through an index, I searched my memory for theoretical and technical information. Thus I experienced both the emotional and the intellectual components of the events, and I was engaged in two regions of my mind, two *Erfahrungssysteme*, that ordinarily might not be connected. At that moment, my affective-cognitive balance was again out of equilibrium, and therefore associations crossed the boundaries. On a preconscious (or perhaps unconscious) level, using displacement and condensation, I found common affective elements and saw some similarities in the patient's past and present, in her inner life and external reality, despite the disparate associations she had offered. Then, by crossing the boundary from primary process to the secondary process, I found an "acceptable, emerging representation." Moreover, I had the opportunity to verify it in my mind by reference to theory, and later by the patient's response. I had synthesized the material into a new schema. I had found the "match," the "click," between the primary and secondary processes. Like a bolt of lightning, the revelation—the intuition—illuminated my hitherto dim awareness: *Maria on the chair was simultaneously enacting both mother and infant*.

Maria's immobility was an enactment of the fusion between the rule-abiding mother who would not move to feed her infant and the hungry, empty, uncared-for infant stuck in the crib. I now had a communicable message in discursive form. Maria responded to my interpretation instantly with loud, free, melodious laughter.

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# The Ego in Creativity

According to Holt (1967), inasmuch as the primary process is "a special system of processing information in the service of a synthetic necessity" (p. 383), creative activity involving the primary process can be considered an ego activity. Creativity is both an ego function in the service of mastery and a part of the synthetic function of the ego, where it serves to establish a cohesive "self-schema," self-continuity and identity. In this connection, Kohut (1957) mentions musical activity as an example of ego mastery. And on this basis, Noy (1969) takes issue with Kris's (1952) concept of "regression in the service of the ego."

No regression is necessary, claims Noy (1969), because although unconscious *content* may be "frozen," unconscious *functions* do not remain frozen. He offers as examples the differences between children's and adult dreams, the latter employing abstract ideas that are inaccessible to an immature mind. Similarly, concretizations of adults schizophrenia can be quite sophisticated (Tanglewood = tangled woods). Thus, just as in the secondary process causal thinking and concept formation develop, "the level of [primary process] organization and performance changes, develops, improves." (Noy, 1969, p. 158).

# **Primary Process Development**

Noy (1969) classifies the primary process into four stages:

- 1. Process and product remain unconscious (e.g., when persons remain unaware of both their behavior and its determinants).
- 2. Process remains unconscious and product becomes conscious (dream process remains unknown [e.g., condensation], while the dream content [an unknown face or a strange word] is remembered).
- 3. Process and product become conscious ex post facto (when a slip of the tongue and its components come into awareness after the utterance).
- 4. Process and product are *conscious* and *controlled*—processes of displacement, reversal, or condensation are used deliberately, as in jokes and poetry, for example, and primary process productions

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are controlled and regulated "in terms of reality." (p. 165)

Therefore, primary and secondary processes should not be distinguished (topographically) by their state of being unconscious and

conscious, according to Noy. Rather, the distinguishing feature is that secondary process is dependent on feedback while primary process is not. Feedback from contact with reality (and also from mental functions, i.e., from internal processing) is necessary for the growth, development, and maintenance of the secondary process. Thus certain primary processes may send feedback information, gradually making reality-oriented monitoring of primary process possible. This transforms select processes and detaches them from the rest of the primary processes. Ultimately, they can become integrated with and used as logical thought processes in the performance of the creative activity and thus resemble the secondary process, as might be the case with the deliberate use of condensation. Noy (1969) posits that "special artistic talent has to do with an ability to use primary processes ... deliberately [and such] a 'primary process' function is like a regular secondary function, like any ability of any craftsman" (pp. 166-167), so that poets, for instance, like any other craftsmen, construct their rhymes, etc. without any regression. Indeed, the differences between secondary and primary processes are more functional than developmental, the one dealing with reality and the other with the assimilation of experiences, feelings, and personal meanings.

# Regression and Shifts

If both primary process and its products can develop, and if select ones can become conscious, controlled, and regulated in terms of reality, then it becomes unnecessary to resort to the concept of "regression in the service of the ego" during creative activities, as advanced by Kris. Kris (1952) asserts that the ego's use of the primary process during the creative process is a "primitivization of the ego functions." He explains that "under certain conditions the ego regulates regression, and … the integrative functions of the ego include voluntary and temporary withdrawal

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of cathexis from one area or another to regain improved control." Kris also speaks of the ego's "control of regression in terms of shifts in the cathexis of ego functions," such as the shift between [conscious] perception and preconscious ideation (pp. 312-313). But Noy (1969) assuming, as does Holt (1969) that both the primary and secondary processes undergo development, each in its own realm, believes that instead of speaking of regression, it is preferable to speak of a "shift from one [system] to the other" (pp. 176-177).

#### Conclusion

However one chooses to define the shift, as psychoanalysts we know that in the course of each session we continually shift. As we listen to patients' associations with freely hovering attention, imagery and ideation and our own feeling states alternate with theoretical and technical evaluations. Preconscious primary processes and conscious secondary processes operate hand in hand. This requires a degree of flexibility, as already mentioned. And it takes courage—even a bit of rebelliousness—to resist the social and superego pressures to conform to generally accepted views and values. These pressures stultify and rigidify thought and inhibit the formulation of new transformations. Therefore, in the search for solutions, the conventional logical, discursive methods of the secondary process may fail, and conformity becomes a great impediment to creativity. *Divergent* thinking, not conformity, permits original solutions. These solutions, in the form of primary process integrations and reorganizations of disparate facts, suddenly appear, seemingly from nowhere: as surprising revelations of the previously unknown or as inspiration, like breaths taken in from outside of oneself.

Yet not every original idea that reveals itself turns out to be relevant, or true, or communicable. Not every creative innovation is practical. Secondary process reality testing, in terms of the scientific method, does occupy an indispensable place in the therapeutic endeavor: Each idea, assessment, interpretation, and hypothesis about the patient needs to be verified. We can check our intuitions and insights against the extant theories; we can

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use the method of internal consistency; and we should always be prepared to correct and revise. This is the balance I strive for.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> First presented February 5, 2004, to the Faculty Group and Family Therapy Conference, Mt. Sinai Hospital, NYC, Dr. Hillel Swiller, Director.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Dr. Morton Seigal for his careful reading of and thoughtful comments on this article.

<sup>3</sup> Gleichgewicht zwischen Ordnung und Chaos—"Freiheit und Strukturzwang in der richtigen Balance ... gilt auch im kreativen Prozess" (Guntern, 1995, p. 8).

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