

EGO STRUCTURE



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Ego Structure

Since its introduction in 1905, the term *latency* has been used ambiguously. Understanding of the concept is obscured by confusion surrounding use of the word. There are a number of definitions of *latency*, the most common of which follow:

1. The time period from 6 to 12 years of age. Here age is taken as the sole criterion.
2. A psychic phase whose time of onset and content are physiologically determined. Clinically this phase is characterized by a well-behaved, pliable, and educable child. A change in the defensive organization of the ego is not implicated by this definition; rather, modifications in the behavior of the child are attributed to a biological lessening of the drives at a preordained time.
3. A period of static defenses during which reorganization of the ego defenses results in a stable condition in which the child is well-behaved, pliable, and educable. Hereditary, historical, and phylogenetic factors are implicated.
4. A period of dynamic defenses during which the child experiences a complex reorganization of the defensive structure of the ego. The state of good behavior, pliability, and educability is maintained only as a result of an equilibrium between defenses and drives. This state is possible because of the evolution and ontogenesis of mechanisms of defense. However, it is not obligatory and is facultatively present at the discretion of the culture in which the individual lives.

Disparate as these definitions are, the word *latency* is rarely used with identifying qualifications. Yet a clear usage for *latency* can be achieved if modifying phrases are added that sharpen meaning. “Latency age period” and “state of *latency*” are examples.

Freud and Latency

In “Character and Anal Erotism,” Freud (1908) fixed the timing of *latency* to that period of life with which we now associate it: “the period of ‘sexual *latency*’—i.e., from the completion of the fifth year to the first manifestations of puberty (round about the eleventh year) (p. 171).¹

The idea that latency is the product of a biological lessening of drive activities is mentioned directly by Freud only once, in *The Question of Lay Analysis* (1926c): "During (the period of latency) sexuality normally advances no further; on the contrary, the sexual urges diminish in strength" (p. 210). The drive diminution theory emphasizes the role of biology, heredity, and the id while lessening the role of the ego. Latency is seen as a preordained, physiologically determined, obligatory state in human development. The great influence of the drive diminution theory probably relates to the fact that it was Freud's final statement on the subject. Though some thoughts on latency later appeared in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) and *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), there was little in these works that could be used to support a contradiction of the drive diminution theory.

The concept of latency as an organization of ego defenses, both static and dynamic, was explored in depth by Freud well before 1926. The forerunner of an idea of a unique mechanism of defense in latency is contained in a letter to Fliess dated May 30, 1896 (Freud 1954). Freud mentions two periods as "the transitional periods during which repression usually takes place. . . . Morality and aversion to sexuality . . . provide the motives of defense for obsessional neurosis and hysteria" (pp. 163, 165).

In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (Freud 1905) the concept of defense in latency is presented. "It is during this period of total or only partial latency that are built up the mental forces which are later to impede the course of the sexual instinct" (p. 177). What are these mental forces? Freud points toward suppression as the mechanism responsible for latency. "(The) germs of sexual impulses are already present in the newborn child and . . . these continue to develop for a time, but are then overtaken by a progressive process of suppression. . . . Nothing is known for certain concerning the regularity and periodicity of this oscillating course of development" (p. 176).

What is the origin of this "oscillating course of development"? Freud (1905) tells us that the ego structure in latency develops from phylogenetic and physiological-hereditary bases. The "period of total or only partial latency . . . is organically determined and fixed by heredity" (p. 177). The strength of the drives is seen as sustained; "the activity of those [infantile sexual] impulses does not cease even during this period of latency, though their energy is diverted, wholly or in great part, from their sexual use and directed to other ends [that is, sublimation and reaction-formation]" (p. 178). "From time to time a fragmentary manifestation of sexuality which has evaded sublimation may break through; or some

sexual activity may persist through the whole duration of the latency period until the sexual instinct emerges with greater intensity at puberty” (p. 179). One of the factors that can effect this breakthrough is seduction: “external influences of seduction are capable of provoking interruptions of the latency period or even its cessation, and in this connection the sexual instinct of children proves in fact to be polymorphously perverse” (p. 234). Latency was seen as a situation in which the strength of the defenses dammed up the drives. At any time the defenses might be shattered and the ever present undiminished impact of the drives revealed. Here we find the beginning of the concept of latency as dynamic defense.

Latency as dynamic defense is further developed by Freud (1908) in “Character and Anal Erotism”: “During the period of life which may be called the period of ‘sexual latency’. . . reaction-formations, or counter-forces, such as shame, disgust and morality, are created in the mind. They are actually formed at the expense of the excitations proceeding from the erotogenic zones” (p. 171). The question of whether latency produces defenses or vice versa is not clearly delineated at this point. A relationship to defense is seen as of primary importance, and the drives are seen as qualitatively transmuted but not quantitatively changed.

In “Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning” Freud (1911a) introduced fantasy formation as an adaptive regressive defense related to latency: “The long period of latency, which delays sexual development until puberty . . . [results in a situation in which] the sexual instinct . . . remains far longer under the dominance of the pleasure principle In consequence of these conditions, a closer connection arises . . . between the sexual instinct and fantasy” (p. 222). Satisfaction in reality is withheld, and fantasies develop for the alternative discharge of the drives. A predominance of the fantasy-forming function of the ego in the presence of immature reality testing is one of the key elements in the ego structure of latency.

In *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1915) Freud wrote, “From about the sixth to the eighth year of life onwards, we can observe a halt and retrogression in sexual development which, in cases where it is most propitious culturally, deserves to be called a period of latency. The latency period may also be absent: it need not bring with it any interruption of sexual activity and sexual interests along the whole line” (p. 326). Here we find the implication that latency is culturally influenced.

In "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921) defenses are described as factors which produce latency. Freud writes "... the Oedipus complex, succumbs... from the beginning of the period of latency onwards to a wave of repression" (p. 138).

In "Two Encyclopaedia Articles" Freud (1923b) referred to the role of latency in the transmission of ethics. "Towards the end of the fifth year the early period of sexual life normally comes to an end. It is succeeded by a period of more or less complete *latency*, during which ethical restraints are built up, to act as defenses against the desires of the Oedipus complex" (p. 246).

Development of the concept of latency had now reached a point at which a purely psychological theory of latency as a manifestation of ego function might have been formulated. In 1923, however, Freud's writings on latency again acknowledged the hereditary, biological, and physiological factors first mentioned in "Three Essays" (1905). In "The Ego and the Id" (1923a) he speaks of the biological and historical factors in the child's lengthy dependence and "of his Oedipus complex, the repression of which we have shown to be connected with the interruption of libidinal development by the latency period and so with the diphasic onset of the man's sexual life" (p. 35).

In "A Short Account of Psycho-Analysis" (1924b), Freud again describes latency in terms of defense. He says, "... sexual life reaches a first climax in the third to fifth years of life, and then, after a period of inhibition, sets in again at puberty" (p. 208).

Thus in 1923 Freud's concept of latency contained two divergent points of view which might be considered contradictory. One was the sociological-psychological theory in which the defenses of the ego respond to psychological needs under the pressure of the social demands; the other, the theory that latency is produced by a phylogenetic historical-physiological hereditary complex. In the latter, latency is a state in which defenses are brought to bear on the drives as part of a developmental step whose timing is determined by heredity. In 1924 Freud's works again contained both points of view.

In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" Freud (1924a) indicates that the passing of the Oedipus complex and the onset of latency are defensive responses to the fear of castration. There is a clear statement of the role of defenses (sublimation) in the onset of latency. "The libidinal trends belonging to the Oedipus complex are in part desexualized and sublimated... The whole process has,

on the one hand, preserved the genital organ . . . and on the other has paralyzed it—has removed its function. This process ushers in the latency period, which now interrupts the child's sexual development" (p. 177). Elsewhere in the paper he describes the passing of the Oedipus complex with the appearance of latency as the "next preordained phase of development" (p. 174). In a single paper, then, the view of latency as a preordained phase is juxtaposed with the notion of latency as a phase ushered in by the ego mechanisms of desexualization and sublimation of libidinal trends. The two points of view seem irreconcilable. Freud, of course, recognized the dichotomy and stated that "the justice of both these views cannot be disputed" (p. 174).

Freud finally resolved this problem in "An Autobiographical Study" (1925), indicating clearly that repression initiates latency; reaction formations are produced during latency; and the ego that produces latency is, in turn, a product of phylogenesis. Freud states: "For the most remarkable feature of the sexual life of man is its diphasic onset, its onset in two waves, with an interval between them. It reaches a first climax in the fourth or fifth year of a child's life. But thereafter this early efflorescence of sexuality passes off; the sexual impulses which have shown such liveliness are overcome by repression, and a period of latency follows, which lasts until puberty and during which the reaction formations of morality, shame, and disgust are built up" (p. 37). In a footnote added in 1935 he said: "The period of latency is a physiological phenomenon. It can, however, only give rise to a complete interruption of sexual life in cultural organizations which have made the suppression of infantile sexuality a part of their system" (p. 37, n.).

At some time in the phylogenesis of man, mutation and selection provided the ego function that would permit and support latency as we know it. This much is the hereditary and physiological sine qua non of latency. In individuals who live in a society demanding a latency period, and whose parents conform to the society's demands, these ego functions produce latency.

Physiological views of latency, then, have their roots in the physiological and hereditary factors described by Freud. The concept of latency as a state characterized by social determinants also has roots in the views expressed by Freud in "An Autobiographical Study" (1925). Here he describes factors that trigger ego structures to produce predictable patterns of behavior, which may not be fixed throughout the entire period.

In "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," Freud (1926b) gave an even more detailed picture of this role of the ego functions in the development of latency in man. The concept of retrogression mentioned in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Freud 1916-1917) is elaborated into the view that regression is active in the establishment of latency. He says: "The genital organization of the libido turns out to be feeble and insufficiently resistant, so that when the ego begins its defensive efforts the first thing it succeeds in doing is to throw back the genital organization (of the phallic phase), in whole or in part, to the earlier sadistic-anal level. This fact of regression is decisive for all that follows" (1926b, p. 113). Here regression is described as one of the defenses. "We can most clearly recognize that the motive force of defense is the castration complex and that what is being fended off are the trends of the Oedipus complex. We are at present dealing with the beginning of the latency period" (p. 114).

Current Concepts of Latency

The theory of the primary diminution of drive activity in latency is mentioned by Anna Freud in *Normality and Pathology in Childhood* (1965). She speaks of "the post-oedipal lessening of drive urgency and the transference of the libido from the parental figures" (p. 66). Later she states: "Extreme castration fear, death fears and wishes, together with the defenses against them, which dominate the scene at the height of the phallic-oedipal phase, and which create the well-known inhibitions, masculine overcompensations, passive and regressive modes of the period . . . disappear as if by magic as soon as the child takes the first steps into the latency period . . . as an immediate reaction to the *biologically determined lessening of drive activity*" (p. 163; italics mine). "The drop in pressure from the drives at this time corresponds to the high level of social response during latency" (p. 179). In a panel discussion on latency at a meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in 1956, it was speculated that "there may be a biological diminution in the libidinal drive, in addition to repression, which then allows the aggressive energy to predominate" (Friend 1957, p. 528). In a 1951 panel discussion on child analysis Bornstein divided latency into two phases (5% to 8, and 8 to 10), and asserted that one of the characteristics of the later period is that "sexual demands have become less exerting" (p. 281).

The theory of the origin of latency ego defenses was also put forth in the panel discussion and in Bornstein's paper. She described "surging impulses" and said that "temporary regression to pregenitality is adopted by the ego." She notes further that new defenses against the pregenital impulses must be

evolved by the child, and that reaction formation is one of these (p. 280). These concepts relate to those delineated in "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" (Freud 1926b). Throughout the recent literature, mention is made of a sustained masturbatory temptation in latency which must be continuously defended against. One can well conclude that the existence of this temptation attests to the sustained strength of the drives during the onset of latency. Nor is a diminution in the urgency of the drives reflected in any lessening of the defenses that are maintained to counteract them.

Clinical Findings

The theory of latency as defense is supported by clinical findings, as the following observations of latency age children will show.

When a child moves from prelatency into latency during a psychoanalysis, one can observe a shift from acting out of pregenital, genital, and oedipal wishes with members of the immediate family to a state in which excited feelings with the family are felt only momentarily. These are dealt with through a complex of defenses resulting in the appearance of fantasies or fantasy-oriented actions which at one time both conceal and reveal the true attitudes and reactions of the child. These fantasies require little energy, and free the rest of the child's energies for useful work.

A little girl was brought to analysis at age 6 because of failure to progress to reading readiness in the first grade, lack of spontaneity, regressed behavior, and uncontrolled masturbation. As an infant she was picked up continually; she was weaned at 28 months. She walked at 12 months and talked at 16 months. She had been toilet-trained at 3 after a stormy and scream-filled period of pressure from her mother. Bladder training had been delayed until this age because of a constriction of the urethra which required sounding. Concurrent with a separation of several months from her parents, which took place after toilet-training had been completed, there was regression in bladder control.

At the start of treatment the child would come into the playroom without her mother, but would soon want to return to her in the waiting room. After about three weeks she began to have episodes of encopresis on the way to, and during, the sessions. Because of these episodes it was necessary for the mother to clean her. Just preceding the onset of the encopresis the mother had stopped washing and cleaning the child's perineum after she had gone to the bathroom. It can be assumed the resulting diminution in stimulation was a factor in a concomitant cessation of the child's open masturbation.

I repeatedly told the patient that she wished to remain a baby and not to grow up. At times she herself said this spontaneously. I pointed out to her the role of the encopresis in helping her to remain a little baby who is taken care of by mother and that if she were successful, she wouldn't learn or get to be a mommy herself. The encopretic episodes soon gave way to periods during which she would insist upon straightening up my office. During this activity she talked about how the maid would scream if she could see how messy things were. With

this change of behavior, she began to report fantasies and was able to begin the first steps in reading. She had entered the latency stage. A return to perineal cleansing and stimulation by the father after toileting evoked a resurgence of oedipal feelings. When the mother reproved the father, the child ordered the mother out of the room saying, "Go away and leave us alone. I like it." Thus the drives were available to the child in full strength in spite of the onset of latency.

This case illustrates the association between anal regression, reaction formations, and the freeing of energy for useful work that occurs with the onset of latency. It also shows the sustained availability of drive strength during the latency period.

Perhaps the most telling clinical observation to contradict the theory that in latency "sexual urges diminish in strength" (Freud 1926c, p. 210) is the fact that sexual intercourse is possible during latency. It occurs in children who have been seduced into genital sexual activity.

A 9-year-old girl, who lived in a foster home, was seen once a week in psychotherapy because of periods of excitement and forgetfulness whenever the family was preparing to visit the foster mother's aunt. At other times she was alert and calm, and did average work in school. The child had little to say about the episodes of excitement and confusion. Matters were somewhat clarified when the child's social worker received a report from the foster mother that during a visit to the aunt, the child had as usual retired with her 13-year-old foster cousin to his room to play. When the foster mother found that she had to leave earlier than expected, she went to the room to get the girl and found the two children "mating." This behavior was prohibited on subsequent visits and the child's episodes of excitement and forgetfulness stopped.

The child explained to me that she had first been introduced to sexual intercourse by her brother when she was 6 and he was 7. At the time, they lived with their mother in a two-room apartment with curtains, but no doors, between the rooms. The children, peeking through the curtains, were able to observe the mother having intercourse with a series of men. Eventually they imitated what they saw. The brother had initially been placed in a cottage setting with other boys, but frequent attempts to seduce these boys into anal intercourse led to his placement in a foster home at the age of 8. There were unsubstantiated reports from his school that he was accepting money from older boys for his passive participation in anal intercourse.

In such children urgency of the sexual drive is not diminished. Hence the changes that occur in latency cannot be explained in terms of a diminution in drive energies, but rather in terms of a shift in the way they are discharged. The drives in latency may be stirred into activity at any time by seduction or sympathetic stimulation. The regression that occurs in the face of oedipal stresses results in the replacement of phallic with anal-sadistic drives, which are then defended against by the emerging mechanisms of defense that typify the character of the latency child. These are sublimation, reaction formation, fantasy, regression, and repression.

These latency defenses permit the child to direct his energies toward cooperative behavior and

learning. What happens when a situation in real life threatens to bring the sadomasochistic drives out into the open? What happens when life situations reawaken the phallic oedipal wishes? In some children, as in the second case above, there is a deterioration of the latency defenses. Normally a protective set of mechanisms within the ego structure of latency comes into action, producing fantasies that serve as a safety valve and preserve the latency. When a latency-age child has thoughts, excitements, and fantasies about an overstimulating parent and the structure of latency is not available, drives may be stimulated. These can threaten the stability of the latency adjustment. Examples of this may be seen in the case of a cruelly punishing father who provokes aggressive or murderous feelings in his son, or in the case of a seductive parent who stimulates fear of retaliation from the parent of the same sex. In the presence of the structure of latency, the content of the stimulating situation is repressed quickly and replaced with substitute mental events, including highly detailed fantasies. These may take such forms as fantasies of carefully planned robberies, fears of being attacked or kidnapped, romantic thoughts of marriage, and sexual relations that are abruptly interrupted by a punishing intruder. Needs of the moment are satisfied through the medium of fantasy. Feelings toward the primary objects or their substitutes are safely displaced onto symbols.

An 8-year-old boy was brought to analysis because he talked back to his parents, failed to learn in school, had a diminished attention span, fidgeted, stole, had few friends, was the butt of jokes and beatings by other boys, and was a clown in class. Further, his parents feared he would become a homosexual. When first seen he was unable to pay attention to any activity for more than three minutes. Although he tried to be cooperative he was repeatedly overwhelmed by his feelings, frequently teasing and attempting to provoke the interviewer by either verbal or active threats to destroy objects in the room. This behavior recurred frequently during the analytic sessions. More commonly, however, he would play out his fantasies, and invariably the stories he played out could be related to events of the day with which he could not deal directly.

When it was discovered that the patient had stolen or had failed to do his homework, his father scolded and beat him. The boy reported feelings of intense humiliation and anger. He would run from the room swearing vengeance, and in his own room his mind would be filled with fantasies of killing his father. After a few moments his mind would go blank. He could then return to his father and be friendly. This is not an uncommon reaction in children after being beaten. However, later in the day, the child would dwell on fantasies of his own greatness and schemes for robbing. He worked out the street plan near my office, and

evolved a design for a bank robbery. Another scheme, a play fantasy, involved the entry of men into a house in which a great deal of money was hidden in a safe. After the owner of the house was forced to open the safe, the gang prepared to kill him. They were stopped by the police, who fought and killed the robbers. This was acted out with gusto, the patient playing all the parts. At one time, when punishments had raised his aggressive drives to new heights, he actually broke into the house of a neighbor and stole some coins. When the lights of the neighbor's car indicated that they were returning, the patient left the house, buried some of the coins, and then reentered the house and hid, waiting to be captured and punished.

During one session, while describing a particularly strong interchange with his father, he "ran out of things to say" and decided to make up a story. He went from the playroom into my office and announced that the desk was a castle. He told the story of poor peasants who were being mistreated by a king and who were arming themselves for revolt under their leader, Marshall (the patient's middle name). They stormed the castle and took the king captive. The multitude cried, "Kill him, Marshall, kill the king." Marshall went up to the king with sword drawn. He raised his arm to kill. At that moment, the patient turned to me and said, "I'm thirsty. I'll be right back after I get a drink of water." He returned but could remember nothing of the fantasy of killing the king. It had been subjected to repression. The symbol for the father, in the context of killing, had lost its mask and had acquired a valence for attracting affect. The story could not continue under these circumstances. It had failed in its function.

In reflecting on the relationship of punishment, feelings of humiliation, and the creation of these fantasies, the youngster once remarked, "I get angry. I run away and think of killing them and saying to myself, 'I hate them. I hate them.' But then I forget it and before you know it, I'm making up these stories to take out my feelings."

When he was 16, he reflected on the story of the peasant killing the king in association to the following dream fragment: "I'm in this hotel. I walk into a room. There is a woman there undressing. She has large breasts like my sister. She smiles. Then her husband comes into the room. He asks what I'm doing there. I say that I was pushed down the staircase and fell into the room. He looks like he's going to hit me. I don't know whether to fight or run." His association to this dream was, "I can't get even with my father any more by making up stories of killing the king. I've got to find another way to handle my problems." Fantasies had become ineffective as a discharge of his parricidal wishes.

From the three cases just described we can discern three separate clinical pathological states that are encountered in relation to latency: failure to enter latency, a regressive deterioration of the structure of latency, and regression to prelatency behavior.

Failure to enter latency, illustrated in the first case, resulted from a maturational defect in an ego function. The child lacked the capacity to form symbols, which impaired her capacity to form fantasies. Thus hobbled, she could not vent the drives stirred up by parental seductions, and remained in a state of constant excitation. There was no energy left to devote to learning. Parental stimulation together with the ego defect destroyed her latency in its beginnings.

The third case illustrates regressive deterioration of the structure of latency. All components of the structure of latency, especially fantasy formation, were present and operable. Latency-age fantasy formation provided for some drive discharge while preserving a degree of pliability, educability, and socially acceptable behavior. As long as this child could discharge aggression toward his father through fantasies he maintained his ability to learn and appeared to be a normal latency child. When his aggression reached large proportions, though, he became anxious and distractible. He ceased to daydream, and instead acted out his fantasy of being a thief by entering the house of a neighbor and

stealing. Petty pilfering in department stores is sometimes related to similar dynamics. When fantasies are constantly being acted out, neurotic delinquency as a pattern of maladjustment results (see A. Freud 1949). Such behavior in latency presages the possibility of delinquency in adolescence.

If regressive deterioration of the structure of latency becomes chronic, the child becomes so involved in his fantasies that he has no energy for useful work. There is a regression to prelatency behavior, as illustrated in the second case. Parents often participate in the acting out of pregenital fantasies. In these situations, the latency state is no longer available. The child experiences difficulty in peer relationship, impulse control, and learning.

It should be noted that the latency phase is typically characterized by an instability manifested in shifts between normal latency and the three states mentioned above. There is no intimation of serious pathology when one of these shifts occurs unless, as mentioned in the prior paragraph, the shift becomes characteristic, chronic, and results in behavior that interferes with the progress and growth of the child. The potential stability of the state of latency in a child is defined in terms of the strength and stability of the ego structures related to the production of latency.

When a conflict or feeling which occurs during the latency period cannot be experienced consciously by a child because of strong fears and intense feelings, the conflict cannot be dealt with on a realistic level. The ideas are repressed and represented in consciousness in the form of distorted fantasy. The repression serves as a two-edged sword. In a positive sense, it holds reactions in check so that there can develop a period of calm when learning can take place. On the other hand, as a result of repression, pregenital and oedipal conflicts are not resolved. In adult life the presence of wishes and conflicts more appropriate to childhood may persist, causing emotional difficulties.

Except in those situations in which the drives are so strongly stimulated that acting out occurs, fantasies are positive influences on development. They serve to reduce tension and to help the child resolve otherwise unresolvable conflicts. The term "structure of latency" is used to denote the configuration of defenses in the latency ego that provides stabilizing discharge by way of fantasy. It is introduced for heuristic purposes, in the belief that naming helps students to focus on a concept so that its limits, form, and phenomena will be more effectively delineated.

Freud (1911a) first pointed out that in latency “a closer connection arises . . . between . . . instinct and fantasy” (p. 222). Here we expand on this concept. In latency, more than in any other period of psychological development, fantasy is linked to the drives as a derivative and a sole outlet. In adolescence and beyond, fantasy detracts from relationship with the real world and object seeking as the means of solving emotional problems. Only in the creative artist is fantasy seen as a form of sublimation.

In latency, however, fantasy gives vent to the drives and permits the child to live in peace with the parental figures. This can be illustrated by further material from the first case above.

The child, as a result of analytic work, had developed reaction formations and some capacity to learn. She was then confronted by a frustration which stirred murderous feelings toward her mother with accompanying oedipal feelings toward her father. A description of a fantasy in statu nascendi of this 6-year-old girl follows.

A friend had spent the afternoon with her. In the evening the mother took the friend home. When the mother returned she found her child in a rage. She pulled at her hair, wrenched the cloth of her dress, and said, “I want someone to sleep with at night.” She had wanted her friend to stay. Her mother explained to her that sleepover dates are for more grownup girls in their teens, and added that grownup means being able to study, use books, read, and be promoted. She told the child that she would not be promoted if she did not work. The child became silent and prepared for bed. Before going to sleep she told her mother the first detailed fantasy that she had ever reported.

“There was a little girl. She was naughty. Her mother told her she would punish her by not letting her go to school, and went to school to tell the teacher. The girl followed her. When they got home, the girl fired down the house. The mother was killed. When the father came home he saw the house fired down and he asked the girl what happened. He didn’t punish her because she told the truth. They moved to another house. A stepmother came, but she didn’t stay long. Then the girl and the father moved away to a new house where they lived together.”

In this fantasy we see the characteristic shift from the primary object to a substitute. The child is represented by a little girl. All the major people in the child’s life are represented, and yet the child does not recognize herself. The anger at the frustrating mother in reality appears in thin disguise in the content of a story told at bedtime. The real mother hears the story but the anger is not directed at her. Rather, she is to be entertained by her child’s inventiveness. The consuming flames that “fire down” the house and kill the mother in the story represent the anger transmuted into a symbolic story element.

Such fantasies are the normal products of the structure of latency that help the child deal with unbearable wishes in relation to the parental figures. In prelatency the wishes are expressed directly. In adolescence, substitute objects are sought or the wishes obscured by regression. In latency, these wishes

normally find expression in fantasies and their derivative, play.

A prime example of such a fantasy is the well-known “plumber” fantasy of Little Hans (Freud 1909), which can be seen as an attempt to resolve an oedipal conflict during early latency. Hans had fear of castration. He produced the fantasy: “The plumber came; and first he took away my behind with a pair of pincers, and then gave me another, and then the same with my widdler”(p 98). Hans’s father interpreted to him that the replacement organs were bigger than those removed. Hans agreed. Freud commented, “With (this) fantasy the anxiety which arose from his castration complex was also overcome, and his painful expectations were given a happier turn” (p. 100). Through the use of the structure of latency, Hans set aside his conflicts and anxieties. His improvement was less the result of gaining insight than of a shift of his defenses from those producing phobias to those producing the state of latency.

It must be kept in mind that such fantasies are normal in latency. It would have been inadvisable to return the child described in the first case to the original situation of anger at the mother. In this child, insight was present in excess and was a source of anxiety that sapped the capacity to function and to learn. It is important to encourage the development and maintenance of the latency-state ego in children on the borderline of latency. On the other hand, neurotic children who are well able to enter the state of latency may benefit from the interpretation of their fantasies. This is illustrated by the following clinical example.

A 10-year-old girl insisted on playing out a game in the session. She did her best to dislodge some clay that she had driven into a corner. She told of the difficulty of removing it. She spoke of the great value it had because it had been in the “cave” so long. When asked about constipation problems, she spoke of her parents’ concern with her constipation and of long wrangles with her grandmother about drinking prune juice. She got more attention when she was constipated. But her symptom was a mixed blessing, for she paid for her pleasure in retention with gas pains, stomachaches, and painful bowel movements. She was able to question her behavior, understand her motivation, and gain relief from her constipation. For this neurotic child, the interpretation of her fantasy opened a mine of information which she had formerly withheld. In such children, the interpretation of fantasy results in an understanding of her relationship with her parents and the nature of her fantasies. In contrast, in the borderline latency child such an interpretation would have stirred up massive aggression in response to the anxiety that the latency fantasy had formerly quelled.

The mechanisms and techniques of fantasy formation in latency are characteristic of the period. If we define the ego as the group of functions that regulate the relationship between the id, the superego, and the world of reality, we must acknowledge that the ego of the latency child is different from that of the adult in content, conformation, and degree of intensity with which certain mechanisms of defense are

used. This can best be illustrated by describing the mechanisms of defense in latency.

The child of 5 is struggling to cope with unresolved conflicts over instinctual urges. He cannot fulfill his oedipal wishes, for he cannot kill his father; nor can he have intercourse with his mother. But his sexual urges in relation to his parents have an exciting quality. Of course they are not seen by the child in the same light in which similar feelings are viewed by a healthy adult. To the 5-year-old, the world of excitement and gratification is frightening and overwhelming. Like the explorer whose leap into the unknown jungle is edged with fright, the child views the step into genitality as a thing of wonder and of fear. Society provides neither gratification nor explanation of this unknown realm. The child's attempts to solve the riddle, to experience this new world, are met with frustration, threats of castration, and fear of loss of love. He responds by repressing his drives.

When perceptual awareness is withdrawn from the arena of oedipality and genitality, attention cathexis may be shifted to such reality activities as athletics. Alternatively, there may be regression to prior stages of development at which earlier drives and conflicts, now safely negotiated, were experienced. The child may return to the sadomasochistic, smearing fantasies of the anal stage. This is one reason that parental aggression so stimulates children during latency: they are more attuned to aggression than to oedipal sexuality even though genital sexuality is the underlying problem defended against by the regression to anality.

Since the child is older and has further developed his techniques for dealing with his anal drive energies, clinically he looks quite different from the younger child he was when first confronted with these urges. As a latency age child, he now represses and sublimates them. He develops obsessive-compulsive defenses such as counting, obsessional thoughts, and the collecting of stamps, coins, and rocks. Reaction formations are developed and strengthened, so that we see an industrious child who is aware of reality. Clinically, at this point, the child is capable of producing states of latency.

Oedipal, aggressive, or sexual situations arise which may stimulate the child to the point that his impending reactions are unacceptable to him or to caretakers, parents, or teachers. Acting on such impulsive reactions may occur (failure to enter latency). In children with sufficient defenses, there are two alternatives to such behavior: regression may occur to an anal-sadistic level of drive organization, or

the increase in related aggressive drive derivatives may shatter the latency state if the defenses against aggression are overwhelmed (regression to the prelatency state). The second alternative uses the structure of latency as a safety valve. The overstimulated drives of the child are channeled into fantasy, regression is prevented, and the state of latency is preserved.

Fantasy formation may be used to quiet the stirrings that would otherwise shatter the mental equilibrium of latency. At first, the stressful situation is remembered with full force. Then it, or its traces, are repressed. The remembered situation—for instance, unexpected nudity in the home, seduction by an adult, sustained and unjust punishment—is fragmented. (Only parts of a stressful situation are represented in any one latency fantasy.) The fragments are displaced onto symbolic representations that are then elaborated and synthesized into a series of coherent conscious fantasies. These fantasies discharge the drives and protect the mental equilibrium of the latency state. Here the structure of latency is at work. The preservation of the state of latency is one of its three main activities.

The primary mechanisms of defense characterizing the ego structures that institute and maintain the latency state may be summarized as follows.

1. In dealing with oedipality and genitality: regression to anal-sadistic drive organization; reality cathexis; repression.
2. In dealing with the regression to anal-sadistic drive organization: sublimation; obsessive-compulsive defenses (doing and undoing); reaction formation, repression (it is this second group that may be called “the latency mechanisms of restraint”).
3. In dealing with breakthroughs of the anal, genital, and oedipal conflicts once the latency state has been established: repression; fragmentation; displacement; symbol formation; synthesis and secondary elaboration; fantasy formation (it is this third group that I designate the “structure of latency”).

The development of latency is strongly influenced by society. There are primitive cultures and subcultures in which latency is not encouraged and sexual activity is encouraged, as in Case 2. Malinowski (1962) describes such a society:

[A]mong the Trobriand Islanders ‘Sexual Freedom’ is considerable. It begins very early, children already taking a great deal of interest in certain pursuits and amusement which come as near sexuality as their unripe age allows. This is by no means regarded as improper or immoral, is known and tolerated by the elders, and

abetted by games and customary arrangements. Later on, after boys and girls have reached maturity, their freedom remains the same. [p. 5]

Here there is no latency as we know it. Since there is no biological obligation to enter latency in human beings, a parent in our culture, through his or her behavior toward the child, may lead him to manifest some infantile drive. The most common example of this is the parent who stimulates the child's aggression. The result may vary from stable latency with occasional temper tantrums to a fully disorganized child with no capacity to delay need gratification. The disorganized child may appear psychotic because of the degree of disorganization. Such a child rarely hallucinates, and when hallucinations do occur they are of the superego type. Should the condition continue untreated, the child in some instances will mature and even settle down, but he will never become all he is capable of being, since so much important basic learning time has been usurped by the excitement of an interrupted latency. The child who continues to be stimulated by the parent aggressively or sexually turns intensely to fantasy formation, as in the third case above, in order to deal with the overwhelming excitement that stirs within him. Direct gratification of body needs short-circuits the achievements that the interposition of delay would provide. There is interference with the ego functions required in learning skills. Frequently this is at the root of emotionally derived learning and reading disorders.

A clinical situation that is the mirror image of the one just described is that of latency-age children who enter physiological puberty prematurely (idiopathic isosexual puberty). These children can produce a state of latency in spite of premature pubescence. Parental and social influences, as well as phase-specific psychological development, are sometimes used to explain the fact that psychological stages develop independently of the flow of hormones (Krim 1962). This is further exemplified in adolescence by girls with Turner's syndrome (Hampson, Hampson, and Money 1959). In these children there is no puberty in the early teens because of gonadal dysgenesis. Still, under the influence of parental, societal, and peer expectations they become interested in clothes and boys, and experience all the trials and tribulations of adolescence. In idiopathic isosexual puberty, in Turner's syndrome, and in the onset of latency, cultural factors outweigh the biological ones in determining the manifest behavior of the child in latency and adolescence.

From the standpoint of culture, latency is necessary for the formation of civilization. Latency provides the period of time in which children can learn the complicated skills needed in the society. The

child learns to accommodate himself to the world. Sexual gratification and oedipal feelings are allayed so that the child can live in peace with those people who love him. This is vital at a time when it is necessary to have someone care for him because of his economic dependence and his need to learn social skills, attitudes, and manners of living. The child can remain within the family as an accepted part of the family, and is still able to accept the authority of the parents. It is a period when the child consolidates his image of himself in relation to the world.

The latency years may be divided into two phases: from 6 to 8 (the early phase) and from 8 to 12 (the later phase). The first is marked by the child's preoccupation with himself. There is an inhibition of masturbatory activity. Fantasies contain amorphous monsters. The superego is strict and brutal. Real objects are denied to the child as drive outlets. In the early phase, fantasy used defensively is the primary means of adjusting to emotional stresses. Fantasy becomes a defense. The child uses reality only to disengage himself from untenable and unfulfillable drives and fantasies. Cathexis of reality, for instance, in school or sports, serves as a guarantee of the secondarily autonomous functions of the ego (Rapaport 1958).

The later phase of latency is marked by increasing availability of the outside world as the source of objects through which fantasies may be gratified. Masturbatory activity becomes less proscribed. There is a softening of the superego. Fantasies contain figures that resemble people: the monsters and ghosts of early latency are now changed into witches and robbers. In effect, the child's thoughts and fantasies begin to dwell upon gratifications with objects that resemble human forms. He can accept his oedipal urges a little more, and so can represent the parents with symbols that are somewhat less disguised. As a result of maturation the child becomes more aware of the world, his place in it, and his relationship to the future. The cognitive reorganization of the ego functions which occurs at this time lays the groundwork for the onset of adolescence. This period is therefore of importance if the origins and events of early adolescence are to be understood.

In the second phase of latency as cognitive function and reality testing improve, the mechanism of fantasy formation becomes less tenable and weakens. By the time the child is 11 or 12, he usually forsakes fantasy as a means for drive discharge and begins to integrate reality. The fantasizing function of the structure of latency comes to serve future planning by providing fantasies with reality content.

Parents become more real as sexual objects. The child develops new techniques to deal with his incestuous feelings. Infantile drives, once dealt with through repression and fantasy formation, gradually reassert themselves because of the growing strength of reality testing. Latency wavers as puberty and parental encouragement of teen-age interests become manifest. The structure of latency crumbles as a defense, and the child is thrown into the chaos of adolescence.

One might well ask if fantasy is given up completely at the end of latency. The answer is obviously no; fantasy merely ceases to be the preferred means for expressing the drives. More mature object relations with the real world are developed in its stead. There are, of course, exceptions. In neurotics the persistence of fantasy is manifested in the development of symptoms. Freud (1911a) tells us that the artist has persistence of fantasy and is able "to mould his fantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality. Thus in a certain fashion he actually becomes the hero . . . [and] favorite he desires to be without following the long roundabout path of making real alterations in the external world" (p. 224). For the average person, the skill of weaving fantasy to cope with drive needs and experiences of humiliation is harnessed to that area of ego operations which may be called future planning. Reality elements replace psychoanalytic symbols, and plans for tomorrow replace fantasies of the moment.

From the point of view of development, late latency is a period of transition. The structure of the ego is transformed and the instincts are withdrawn from fantasy and are articulated with real situations and real objects. Since we are dealing with an exposition and elaboration of Freud's concept (1911a) that in latency a closer connection arises between instinct and fantasy (p. 222), it would be useful to pursue what lies behind the loosening of the connection.

In prelatency, the child had been buoyed by feelings of omnipotence and indestructibility. The introduction of castration fear, fear of loss of love, and the incest barrier made unbearable all fantasies which involved the parent in sexual and aggressive contexts. The poor reality-testing and the level of cognitive function of the child permitted the use of repression, fragmentation, displacement, symbol formation, and synthesis of symbols into story patterns to be used for the production of fantasies which could serve as safe means of drive discharge, avoiding danger to loved ones. In youngsters in the state of latency, situations which stir up the core fantasies of prelatency are thus resolved through the formation

of seemingly unrelated conscious fantasies.

The configuration of ego functions that produce this activity becomes an important part of the structure of latency. Formation of benign fantasy provides a buffer permitting the continuation of the total ego structure in latency. Failure or default of these mechanisms may result from excessive stimulation of sexual or aggressive drives. School regression and aggressive outbursts in latency children are explained by this phenomenon. In the absence of such stimuli, the child may continue to use fantasy for vicarious problem solving, and thus guard against the incursions of drives and their demand for objects.

However, latency is not endless, and at the age of 7 ½ to 8 years, improvements in reality testing and cognitive function begin to impair the child's use of fantasy for solving problems. The marked improvement in cognitive function includes maturation of the capacity to appreciate cause and effect relationships between objects which are concretely present (Piaget's concrete operational thinking; see Woodward 1965, pp. 74-75). There is also greater objectivity. Reality objects become less assimilated to the subject's wishes. By the age of 12, this process reaches its height. Words can no longer magically change the relationships among real things and real people. Reality becomes an arena for the discharge of the drives. The stage is set for the turmoil of adolescence. The demands of the world and of prelatency fantasies are now to be faced and resolved.

Summary

Clinical data support the position that the latency state is a socially guided configuration of ego structures, and the related view that drive strengths are sustained during the latency period. In the state of latency, fantasy formation is used as a means of problem solving in which conflicts are played out in thought, rather than in reality. This spares the individual a conflict with real objects in the environment and diminishes the impact of drives to the extent that maturation and sublimation are facilitated. In this way the relative stability and diminished drive pressures typical of the period come into being. In later latency, when maturational improvement in reality testing gradually minimizes the defensive effectiveness of manifest fantasy formation, there is a gradual shift to the use of more reality-oriented defenses. This sets the stage for adolescence.

The specific cognitive organization used by the latency-age child to deal with the processing of drive energies while awake is sufficiently foreign to the ways of the adult and late adolescent that it may be understood why memories based upon or encoded in these experiences of thought do not find their way easily into the free associations of patients in later years.

Notes

- [1](#) In Freud's writings, references to mechanisms of defense in latency may be found in the following works: sublimation, (1905, 1924b); reaction formation, (1905, 1923b); fantasy, (1911a); regression, (1916-17, 1926b); and repression, (1921, 1923a).