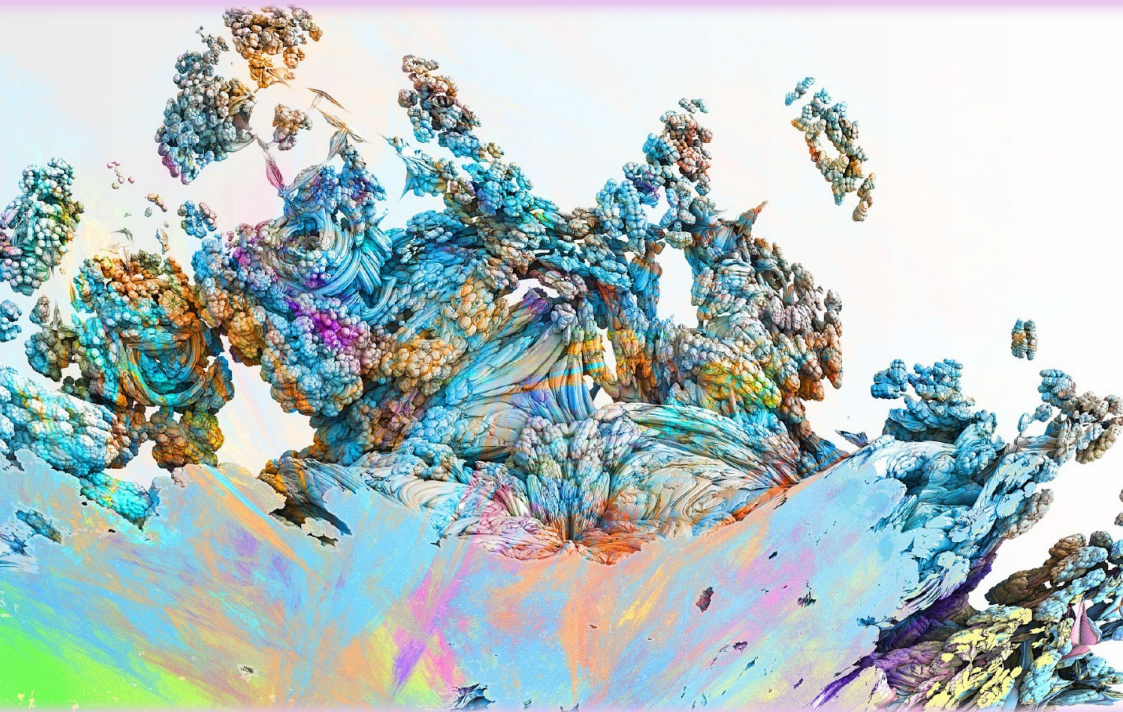


SYMBOLS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

**Regressive  
Symbolization  
Symbols in Psychosis**



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# **REGRESSIVE SYMBOLIZATION:**

## **Symbols In Psychosis**

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Symbols in Structure and Function- Volume 2* by Charles A. Sarnoff, MD

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# REGRESSIVE SYMBOLIZATION: Symbols In Psychosis

## INTRODUCTION

### The Concrete Symbols of Psychosis

The symbols found in psychotic conditions such as schizophrenia are primarily based on concrete or pseudoabstract symbolic linkages. The ontogenesis of the system consciousness in Freud's topographic theory offers a theoretical basis for understanding the points of fixation and the goals of regressions that provide paradigms for the pathological regressive forms of symbolization that occur in psychosis. Analysts who have written on this subject are Spitz (1966), Greenson (1970), Gill (1963) and Mahler (1968). They have championed the role of the topographic theory in the understanding of consciousness. They described its developmental stages as they relate to "mental contents in terms of their relationship to consciousness" (Gill 1963, page 161) Topographic theory offers a framework for describing the mental life of infants during the period in which the ontogenesis of the mature perceptual apparatus occurs. (Spitz 1966, page 124). Usefulness for the topographic theory is clearly indicated in Mahler's (1968) description of the "hatching process", as a "gradual ontogenetic evolution of the sensorium of the percept conscious system, which leads to the infant-toddler's having a permanently alert sensorium . . ." (page 16). One need not limit oneself to the above. It is possible to carry the ontogenesis of the systems consciousness beyond the point, which Mahler described, to an understanding of the full development of the system consciousness as it appears in mature personalities. A complete developmental line in the ontogenesis of consciousness can be described, which offers potential points and pathways for fixation and regression in the formation of symbolic forms throughout its length. Early levels of development are reflected in the regressive symbols that characterize psychotic conditions.

## THE ONTOGENESIS OF THE SYSTEM CONSCIOUSNESS

The development of the system consciousness within the developing psyche proceeds through a series of perceptual systems. Remnants of this development are represented in fixations and regressions in symbol formation in later life. At least three increasingly complex stages in the development of the System Cs can be recognized. These are the primal system consciousness, the abstract system consciousness and the mature system consciousness.

### THE PRIMAL SYSTEM CONSCIOUSNESS

The primal system consciousness exists in a perceptual context dominated by synaesthesia, nondisjuncture, and the absence of personal boundaries that would identify the source (internal or external) of perceptual stimuli. The primal system consciousness itself may be divided into two stages. The earliest apparatus (present at birth) senses but does not differentiate two modalities of sensation, immediate internal visceral sensations and immediate external sensations. These sensations, when overly intense are guarded against by "Flight from Perceptions", which is a form of denial. A more sophisticated form of the primal system consciousness comes into being with the development of memory. At this stage (present from about three months on) internal memory sensations are added to the inputs of the conscious perceptual apparatus. Memory sensations in the form of representations of objects, at first visual, later verbal, are included in the awareness content of the primal system consciousness. Early forms of recognition of perceptions become possible. In this more sophisticated perceptual system the mechanism of defense that responds to painful sensations persists to respond to painful memories as though they were perceptions with internal origins. The flight from perception of the primal system consciousness persists as a flight from haptic memory elements. This mechanism is the forerunner of repression. As Freud (1900) noted "... avoidance of memory (is a) repetition of the previous flight from. . . perception" (page 600). "... Avoidance by the psychical process of the memory of anything that had once been distressing affords us the prototype and is the first example of psychical repression" (p. 602). This early form of psychical repression, lacks the reinforcement from counter-cathetic fixation on a substitute representation that characterizes psychoanalytic symbol formation.

## **THE ABSTRACT SYSTEM CONSCIOUSNESS** **(Active from about 15 months)**

As the growing child matures, referent memories based on visual and verbal percepts become organized into patterns (symbol webs, symbol nets, concept clusters derived from linkages based on intrinsic similarities between memory concepts). These memory patterns form the basis for panels to be used in the interpretation of complex new stimuli for the quality (an acceptable level of affect) that will permit entrance into consciousness. Interpretation of percepts and words, consistent with reflective awareness based on concept clusters, becomes possible. Abstract associations between referents become the basis for the symbolic linkages, which guide the selection of manifest symbols. These provide representations in consciousness with less affect.

These thought processes (Freud 1915E) deal with the abstract relationships between objects and the concepts and words that represent them. “. . . By being linked with words, cathexes can be provided with quality (“Quality refers to the characteristic of a “cathexis” that can attract consciousness.”) even when they represent only relations between presentations of objects. Such relations, which become comprehensible only through words, form a major part of our thought-processes.” (page 202).

The developmental step, which provides for the inclusion in human mental capabilities of the capacity to perceive abstract relationships between memory elements such as representations in words of objects, introduces an ability to achieve selective interpretation of events and initiate decision-making on the basis of memory and recognition of similarities. This provides the basis for logical thinking and judgment, and is the basis for what Freud (1900) called a “more delicately adjusted performance” (page 574).

This ontogenetic step makes a fundamental alteration in the complexion of the potential content of the system consciousness. Abstract relationships enter consciousness and create an “abstract system consciousness”. The ability to make selective interpretations of events and to recognize similarities through awareness of abstract relationships can be a positive development. It provides a pathway for the appearance in consciousness of signal anxiety indicating danger, which results from the abstract linking

of recent perception with uncomfortable affects associated with memories. This capacity, though mostly useful is potentially crippling, for it can initiate the inappropriate avoidance techniques associated with the denial of reality.

### **THE MATURE SYSTEM CONSCIOUSNESS (Present from about 26 months)**

Fortunately, the mature system consciousness, which is the next ontogenetic step, contains an element that can neutralize the negative potential inherent in the transmission of affect through abstract associations. The mature system consciousness has the capacity to perceive and contain the sensory elements of the abstract system consciousness, while excluding that which is anxiety provoking. This is done through a mechanism of repression by which exclusion from consciousness [i.e. denial] is supported by redirection of attention to substitute representations such as manifest symbols. In fact, the mature system consciousness comes into being at the confluence of the abstract system consciousness and the development of repression proper. This occurs during the first half of the third year of life (Sarnoff (1970). Repression proper exists when it is possible to exclude from consciousness the link between what represents and what is represented and its associated anxiety. This occurs when substitute formations, such as manifest symbols, which are either unrelated to the original idea of the thing or so well masked that they are unrecognizable, are cathected in place of direct representations of objects. This is called countercaethesis. When the substitute formation is related to the original idea of the thing, but the association is well masked, we call the substitute formation a manifest symbol. The content of the mature system consciousness contains less than that of the abstract system consciousness, as a result of truncation through repression.

### **ON REPRESSIONS**

In this chapter, when I refer to repression, I refer specifically to that mechanism which retains a rejected idea in the system unconscious through countercaethetic symbol formation. There are other meanings to the word repression. Freud originally (S.W. 1915E) used the term “repression” as a generic term to describe a group of mechanisms of defense whose function “results in keeping something at a distance from consciousness” (page 203). There are a number of defensive configurations, which



produce such “repression”. Freud (1915D) refers to these as “mechanisms of repression” (page 154)

The primal system consciousness, which is the earliest to appear, can deal with discomfiting perceptions by decathecting perception, “avoidance of memory” (1900, page 600), and “flight”. This is related to denial or “primitive repression” (1900, page 600). As Freud pointed out (1900, page 600) flight and avoidance of memory perceptions are really simple precursors of the repression seen in the underpinnings of the mature system consciousness.

The abstract system consciousness, which is activated at 15 months, can deal with the cathexis of thought processes and the awareness of the abstract relationships between perceptions, by such simple means as turning away or flight. However one can fly from perception, but not from awareness. Avoidance of awareness requires a psychic activity, which permits the blocking out from access to consciousness of associational and abstract links between perceptions and memory elements with high valence for attracting affect. This is accomplished through decathexis of the links, which remain in memory as a potential though repressed content and affect. Cathexis of substitute formations such as manifest psychoanalytic symbols reinforce and stabilize this process. The psychic activity, which thus removes access to consciousness from mental events with high affective valence, is called repression proper. This process, which is activated at 24 to 26 months, introduces the mature system consciousness.

The superimposition of repression on the abstract system consciousness creates a perceptual lens offering partial occlusion of the inputs to consciousness. This was described by Freud (1900) as a “sense organ for—a portion—of our thought processes”. (page 574) This is one of the structural elements of the mature system consciousness. It supports a mechanism, through which thoughts and associations, which in the abstract system consciousness have a potential for producing high levels of anxiety (high affective valence) can be excluded from awareness. The ordinary adult conscious experience consists of a mixture of the mature system consciousness, manifestations of irregular regressions along the developmental line of consciousness, and intrusions from the cognitive past.

## ON REGRESSIVE SYMBOLIZATION

When fantasies organized according to primary process enter consciousness, the symbolizations

that underlie them are regressive in nature. When this defensive function of the personality (psychoanalytic symbolization) has failed, as a defensive function of the personality fails, the result may be one of two possibilities. In the first possibility, no symbol appears to buffer the conscious awareness of a stressful perception. Anxiety becomes intense. A dreamer awakes. A wake person becomes uncomfortable. In the second possibility, a symbol is produced whose associative link to that which it represents retains sustained and viable access to consciousness. The symbol becomes transparent to meanings and affects that are linked to its referent. When the second possibility occurs, the operation of the symbolizing function is identical with symbolizing activities seen during the developmental period associated with the abstract system consciousness. The identifying characteristic of the abstract system consciousness is the absence of repression proper. Concurrently there is lost the ability to diffuse the potential of reality perceptions for stirring up conscious affect through intrinsic and superficial similarities to memories and past conflicts, which have strong affective associations. When a regressed symbol retains a link in awareness to that which it represents within the mnemonic systems and the affects involved, an affect porous symbol is produced. These are predominantly the symbols, which occur in phobia formation. Regressions of the symbolizing function, in a person who has achieved full psychoanalytic symbol formation, may be said to be accompanied by some abrogation of repression.

Brenner (1957 and 1966) has dealt with this process extensively as "Return of the Repressed" (1966, page 391). When lifting of repression occurs, a memory once lost returns, or a desire that has been long without articulation with an object, finds fulfillment or at least desire is felt as a surge of affect and can be verbalized. True transference manifestations are fueled by such shifts in the psychological equilibrium. At times, when repression is lifted, other psychic mechanisms are mobilized to block and mask the impact of drive, resulting in an organization of concatenations of defenses. One such, containing denial, displacement, and affect porous symbols produces phobic symptoms. This substitution of alternative mechanisms of defense is usually productive of neurotic symptoms. There are other mechanisms for response to abrogation of repression, such as regression to an ego state such as that which existed prior to the development of repression proper. A distinguishing clinical characteristic of regressive symbolization is the presence of strong affect as a component of its pathological elements. Brierly (1936) spoke of "regression to feeling speech . . . in analysis of early infantile situations" (page 265), and said " . . . some fantasies revealed in analysis . . . have never been accessible to the definitive

ego or self consciousness. This is, doubtless, one reason why some affects are so inaccessible and their associated fantasies so difficult to verbalize. They are genetically preverbal". (page 265). Today, we might say in addition that they are genetically presymbolic or derived from a time in development prior to the appearance of the mature system consciousness.

### **Regressive Symbolization in Psychotic States**

Consider that according to Piaget (1951) and Sarnoff (1970) repression as we see it in the organization of the mature mechanisms of defense assigned to the ego, only becomes operative at twenty-four to twenty-six months of age. This being the case, it should be possible for regressions to reach a level of psychic development equivalent to functioning prior to the establishment of repression proper as a mechanism of defense. When there is regression to the level at which symbols become affect porous, affect charged symbolic linkages escape from repression and gain access to consciousness. The individual runs the risk of anxiety states associated with a poor sense of reality and psychotic ideation. Regression to the abstract system consciousness is accompanied by the loss of repression and the appearance of concrete symbolic linkages in consciousness, which can produce states of anxiety accompanied by bizarre behavior by way of reaction. Some case reports follow to illustrate this clinically.

I.R. was a thirteen-year-old boy, whose analysis was transferred because interpretations linking current associations and productions to "deep" unconscious meanings caused greater and greater anxiety in the youngster. Although he began his first analysis because of a severe phobia involving being bitten by birds, his symptoms at transfer were marked diffuse anxiety and a belief that people were talking about him and making fun of him. One evening, while he was in this state, his father invited a business acquaintance to dinner, and wishing to impress, had arranged that the main dish be filet mignon.

It had been arranged that the meat would be brought to the dining room in its original long cylindrical, uncut form and then sliced at the table. The meat was brought to the table on a cutting board, accompanied by a large knife. As the father began, with gusto, to sever chunks from the tube of meat, the lad stirred uneasily in his seat, got up and began to move around the room in an agitated state. He began to giggle, utter obscenities and insult the guest. A report of the incident was made to the analyst that very

evening through a phone call by the parents. During the following analytic hours, the patient reported that he had become anxious as his father cut the meat because "I couldn't tell if he were cutting off my penis or the meat".

Mr. J.T. was a twenty-two year old engineer, who lived alone in a small city far from his home town. He had few friends. His relationships with women were rudimentary. He reported a single episode of homosexual activity. He had a strong interest in intellectual games involving the meaning of words. During his vacation, he went to a convention of people with similar interests. As part of the program, the participants were divided into groups to investigate reinstilling words with meaning. A young woman suggested to Mr. T's group that they all look at the sky to experience the true meaning of blue. After this, they discussed their experiences.

Mr. T. suggested that they sit in a circle staring at the back of each other's head to experience with surety, that which was felt with doubt and uncertainty so much of the time, namely, being stared at. The group thought this a wonderful idea and immediately formed a circle and commenced to stare. After, they all began to discuss the experience; that is, all but Mr. T. He remained as he sat, staring into space. One of the convention leaders, who had been called immediately, hustled him onto a train with a ticket to a distant part of the state. The conductor of the train called the police, when Mr. T. could not be made to respond at the end of the line.

At first, Mr. T. struggled. He became cooperative in the ambulance. He became convinced that it was right for him to go to the hospital when he noticed that the traffic lights were changing to let the ambulance go through. He had interpreted the effect of a routine light staggering system to be a sign that God was speeding his journey. While in the hospital, a diagnosis of schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type was made. Once, while on the ward, he caused some complaints from fellow patients because he monopolized the drinking fountain. When asked about this, he insisted that he was doing this to aid the ward staff in keeping control over the patients on the disturbed ward. He explained it as follows. The water fountain spigot to his mind was shaped like a penis. When he drank from it, he was performing fellatio on all the men on the ward. That was what made them calm and quiet.

The meat cut was the penis cut. The staring eyes were no longer verbal metaphors or symbols but realities. The changing lights ceased to be casual miracles of science and became instead a message from a transcendent God guiding the patient alone. The water spigot, through its form, could be linked as a symbol to the male genital. The link of form seen without repression and reinforced by poor reality

testing, could be used for the sympathetic magical control of others.

In each of these situations, common items, which would not have attracted such attention from a mind with a mature system consciousness, became a source of anxiety or the basis for magical thinking. The mature mind, functioning with an adult system consciousness, represses the link between conflicts and potential symbols in the surround, permitting the individual freedom from a distracting or sometimes overwhelming anxiety laden stirring into consciousness of an awareness of conflicts and complexes. Failure of repression of the link, when it occurs, reflects a regression to the functional apparatus of the abstract system consciousness.

### **Fixation in the Abstract System Consciousness**

Fixation in the abstract system consciousness differs from regression to the abstract system consciousness. Fixation in the abstract system consciousness is seen clinically in the ubiquitous absence of psychoanalytic symbols in the psychic life of the individual, concomitant with a failure to utilize repression in dealing with distressing links through similarity between perceptions and conflict laden memories. Clinically, this may be seen in children who fail to maintain latency because of inability to develop a competent ego structure of latency. Regression to the abstract system consciousness is seen clinically in a regressive form of symbolization in which interpretations of the environment reveal that the link between that which is symbolized and the symbol itself has not been repressed. In essence, in regressive symbolization, there has been regression in the symbolizing function of the structural grouping of mental functions categorized under the rubric ego, to that stage in the ontogenesis of the system consciousness prior to the maturation of the capacity to develop and utilize repression. Characteristically primary process thinking appears in consciousness with regression to immature topographic systems.

During the development leading up to the mature topographic system, there are a number of immature perceptual systems in which primary process style thinking is available to consciousness. It is a characteristic of the mature system conscious to be devoid of primary process style thinking. Since primary process style thinking is available to immature perceptual systems, where primary process elements in relation to symbolism enter consciousness, in a person capable of psychoanalytic symbols, we

may assume that there has been a regression in the functioning of the perceptual apparatus to the abstract system consciousness or earlier.

The case examples represent schizophrenia and schizophrena-form conditions. In the material presented, symbols no longer masked meaning, nor was anxiety mute or unfelt. Primary process style thinking was available to consciousness both as a source of verbalization and of motivation for action. That which could represent and that which could be represented were seen as associated. When it was appropriate, because the perceived links caused recognition of danger, this awareness was marked by anxiety.

In these cases the poor functioning of repressive mechanisms is related to a regression in the topographic sphere to a time before the development of the mature system consciousness. This applies to that portion of overt psychotic manifestations that have to do with thinking disorders, perceptual distortions and anxiety. As a case in point, Mr. T's view of the spigot as a penis, was an example of a regressive symbolization (a regression in the topographic sphere). The fellatio behavior aimed at calming the ward (an ego regression) was an example of a restitutive delusion of which the regressed symbol formed only a part.

## SUMMARY

The human being undergoes an ontogenesis that continues for years after its expulsion from the womb. One of the important areas in which the psyche weaves its way from the new born state to maturity involves the increasingly complex way in which conscious perception is organized. Three main stages of this perceptual organization are described. The first system to develop is the primal system consciousness. In this system, there is total awareness of affects, concrete phenomena, sensations and objects in the surround. The second, called the abstract system consciousness, adds abstract relationships between perceptions and memories to those elements that are available to consciousness. The third, called the adult system consciousness, subtracts from the abstract system through the medium of repression, those perceptions which have a high valence for attracting affect. This results in a psychic apparatus, which is capable of buffering anxiety.

The ontogenesis of the system consciousness follows this closely ordered hierarchical series of stages, which are characterized by increasing complexity with increasing age. The genetic impact of this developmental line on later psychopathology and related states of fixations and regressions can be pursued with profitable results. Failures in symbolizing function during psychotic decompensations can be related to regression to early stages of perceptual organization (i.e., the abstract system consciousness), which existed before the maturational introduction of repression proper during the first half of the third year of life.

The concrete symbols of the primal system consciousness are seen as connected to and equated with their referents, rather than abstractly related to them. Painful abstract relationships between representations and referents are not repressed with the creation of these concrete symbolic forms. A locked relationship between objects is established in consciousness. No variant or alternative meaning based on intrinsic abstract similarities is admissible. Psychotic use of these symbols is colored by regression to representations, which are consciously identified with their referents and do not permit reality influences to motivate or create change.

The symbols of the abstract system consciousness are seen as abstractly related to their referents. Like the psychoanalytic symbols of the mature system consciousness, the manifest representations of abstract symbols are not consciously connected with their referents in the mind of the symbolizer. Regression to the abstract system consciousness represents a psychotic use of symbols to master great anxiety. These symbols are denial based exclusions from consciousness supported by substitute formations such as occurs in paranoia and latency ego mechanisms of restraint (See this Volume P 54 and Sarnoff (1976). The defensive false beliefs that these representations populate are clung to as a means of adjustment, in which an impulse or response is denied recognition within the self boundary of the person and is projected onto an object displaced from the true source of difficulty. They are wholly evocative. There is little emphasis on adaptation to reality. The immutable evocative psychic reality of the psychotic person does not respond to the fact that reality has changed or is changeable. Such psychotic symbols resist influence and change. There is no possibility of the adaptation to reality seen in the sublimative potential of psychoanalytic symbols. An immutable psychic reality is created which does not recognize or respond to the fact that reality changes or is changeable. The psychotic retires to a world of unchanging false image symbols locked beyond the reach of reality by narcissistic loading. Such symbols



are not tuned to communications influenced by the needs of the world and of the listener who wishes to be understood. An example of another symbolic form created without repression may be seen in the experience of the young child for whom the loved primary object (parent) is lost when with the passage of time she changes. The manifest memory of her as she was serves as a symbol for the entity she has become without the interposition of the symbolizing function.