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Transition from School to Work

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The issue of work appearing in a text on psychiatry implies that a relationship may exist between personality and work. “Transition” suggests that there are possible developmental lines that may be traced from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood; these have significance for vocational behavior.

Even in Anna Freud’s systematic and unique studies of normality, the concept of developmental sequences is limited to particular, circumscribed parts of the child’s evolving personality. The basic interactions between intrapsychic phenomena at various developmental levels and environmental influences appear to be far more complex than some behaviorists would admit. The variables are myriad on the long road from the young child’s egocentric view of life and his autoerotic play to his games, hobbies, school activities, and arrival at work.

Available evidence indicates that, prior to puberty, the child’s concept of work is in terms of adult activities and that whatever vocational interests he expresses are linked to his wishes to grow up. Ginzberg et al. and others agreed that the young child’s ideas of work are in the realm of fantasies and are unrelated to either actual interests or abilities. I have treated little girls who expressed wishes to do the kind of work their fathers do or to be a

father's secretary as variations of the Oedipal wish for possession of the father. These children perceive their mothers' housework and daily chores as unhappy experiences and verbalize their rejection of a future in that direction. I wonder if I am witnessing the buds of future women's liberation advocates. Many young boys have expressed their wishes to work with their fathers. I have seen this both in those who had experienced closeness and pleasure in a mutually satisfying relationship and in others whose fathers paid only slight attention to them or were primarily involved through discipline and punishment. The boy's need for closeness and identifications with his father obviously influences these early expressions of occupation goals. In other instances, the children are merely expressing their admiration of seemingly omnipotent heroes such as the astronauts who now walk on the moon; their football, baseball, and basketball favorites; and movie stars. Yes, some little girls still want to be movie stars. Children who reach the stage of gratifying relationships with me while in therapy have on occasion expressed the wish to be a doctor or specifically a psychiatrist. My own daughter, at three years of age, was once invited to the stage in the presence of a large audience and, when questioned by the master of ceremonies regarding what she wanted to be, shouted into the microphone, "Superman!"

Following more than two decades of provocative and intensive study of personality factors in occupational choice, Roe concluded that there is little evidence that both specific and general early life experiences can be related to

the choice of adult work. She found that there are many choice points along the road to maturity. Thus, personality can be considered as only one significant factor in the decisions made at a given occupational choice point. Education, personal talents, interests, and experience, as well as external variables in the environment, such as the prevailing economic situation, the societal attitude toward one's race, culture, or religion, and the ever-changing industrial technology influence the ultimate field of employment. It is no secret that prejudicial attitudes still exist in certain industries against particular groups. If, due to government pressures and publicity, hiring does occur in these industries, the opportunities for advancement are still quite limited. When information of this sort sifts down to a college group, the students who feel that the situation will influence their future veer away from certain vocational areas. Males and females have characteristically different developmental lines in their life history, so that understanding factors in the transition from school to work necessarily involves concepts that are not equally relevant to both.

Tiedeman, O'Hara, and Baruch have shown that sex role and family status are no less significant than the self-concept in influencing occupational choice. It should not come as a surprise that their studies indicate that interest and personality inventories are more effective as predictors of choice of work than are aptitude tests. They confirmed the impression of Ginzberg et al. impression that the self-concept in boys is in the process of consolidation

during the high school years. The interests stage during the sophomore year of high school is followed by the development of work values toward the senior year. Rather than attempting to predict vocational choice, many serious researchers in this field are turning their attention to studying the vicissitudes of personality-environment interaction that crystallize into vocational identity. Holland developed a vocational preferences inventory based on six environmental types: realistic, intellectual, social, conventional, enterprising, and artistic. He engaged in longitudinal studies of National Merit Scholarship finalists to relate their choice of major study in college to their scores on his scale.

In the past decade, Flanagan and associates began a massive study of 440,000 students from a representative sample of high schools in our country with the focus on such personality variables as interests, abilities, and aptitudes. Their goal is to follow the work patterns for a twenty-year period, but the fluctuating environmental factors and any understanding of individual development will obviously have to be absent. They do plan to include data concerning certain characteristics of the school and community environment. In this way, the social environment is not completely ignored. Super and his associates spent more than thirty years striving toward an understanding of the transition from school to work to strengthen the frame of reference necessary for helpful vocational counseling. Super felt that the counselor's role should not be a static one based on the assumption that the occupational

traits are already fixed and therefore predictable. The accumulating evidence about the transition phenomenon toward work indicates that a dynamic role for the counselor is more appropriate. The counselor must try to understand which factors are crucial for each individual during the developmental stages toward an occupational choice and promote this exploration process. Vocational psychologists can easily become entangled in the maze of phenomena associated with theories of personality that deal with the self-concept. If the transition to work is significantly influenced by the student's picture of himself, the researcher must struggle with techniques to be employed or developed to search out the components that constitute a self-concept. In fact, there is considerable variation in even conceptualizing self-concept (note Eissler, Erikson, Fenichel, S. Freud, Greenacre, Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, Jacobson, Josselyn, Kohut, Levin, Spiegel, Sullivan, and Wheelis). Thus, theories that link self-concept and work can be thorny and much too complex for practical counseling.

The foregoing survey of authorities serves as a background for a closer examination of the previously mentioned work of Ginzberg et al. who conceptualized the transition to work as a very general form of behavior requiring viewpoints from a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. They viewed the transition toward vocational choice as a process that evolves over eight or ten years, while passing through a series of stages. This process has a degree of irreversibility in that earlier

decisions will, in turn, limit the options for later decisions. Finally, they considered compromise prominent in every decision. Therefore, to a large degree, personal attributes are in interaction with environmental circumstances, and the work direction in the transition during maturation is funneled by the total situation, not just the self-concept Ginzberg el al. viewed the transition from school to work as going through an initial fantasy phase between ten and twelve years of age, followed by a tentative period from puberty into middle adolescence to about seventeen years of age, and finalized by the realistic stage, which extends into early adulthood. The fantasy phase is self-explanatory. During the tentative period, the adolescent begins to consider his abilities and interests more seriously. Those who have done poorly in mathematics and science are less prone to speak of careers requiring facility in these areas; however, the subjective approach is still prominent. The adolescent's preoccupation gradually shifts from his interests to his impression of his capacities and to values as with job status. However, the realistic stage includes the necessary compromises with environmental opportunities and actual awareness of skills, ability, and so on, as mentioned above.

In late adolescence, the exploratory activity, with its associated inquiries, varies with the initiative, curiosity, and aggressiveness of the individual. I have had those in this age group call me to discuss the field of psychiatry specifically as well as medicine in general. Such calls have come

from those who do not know me personally but have heard my name or been in an audience where I have been a speaker. Similarly, girls have asked me about social work as a career. Ginzberg et al. believed that the realistic phase concludes with crystallization and specification of a work choice. The significant issue in their concept of sequential phases is the irreversibility feature; namely, the academic selections along the road continue to limit the available options for later decisions. Thus, the time factor during the transition period from school to work is such that the later the decision, the less freedom for a change in direction.

The identity crisis, as described by Erikson, is complex in its dynamics from both the intrapsychic and multi-environmental factors. In New Orleans, as in other old communities, the "who" of identity is reinforced by emphasis on who are the adolescents' relatives and ancestors and who has membership in the private Carnival Krewes and social clubs. There is, however, a noticeable shift occurring in each new wave of the generations, and the old advantages of snobbery for maintaining fixed social status and stabilizing identity are giving way. The grandchildren of some of this community's more outspoken anti-Semites are close friends with Jewish children. Many girls now feel that debuts are a waste of time and money and are shunning the exclusive clubs their families have depended upon for "sucking up" status for their identity. (I refer to "sucking" because it is the easy way to obtain nourishment; all one needs is a mouth.) Real and meaningful identity comes

from one's own performance and personal development, not from ancestors and exclusive clubs. (The ancestor worshipers remind me of the potato—the best part being underground.) Work as a significant factor in one's identity is gradually replacing the traditional value systems of the past. Many of the youth of today wish to become involved in work activities that foster the preservation of the natural environment and the improvement of human relationships on a worldwide basis. Such young people are more interested in *what* they can do in life, and they wish to be identified on the basis of their goals rather than on who their friends may be or how much money their work will generate. Thus, the progress throughout schooling becomes a key issue in the work goals and identity that can be achieved by an individual. Where work identity becomes a pillar in the self-esteem structure, positions of less gratification and status as well as positions that involve delayed retirement can and often do trigger a depressive reaction or other forms of mental disturbance. Therefore, the psychiatrist and physicians in general should understand these work-identity interactions and related problems when confronted with patients.

Neff considered the work personality as having a semiautonomous function. This is consistent with my own psychoanalytic observations that individuals with severe character problems can continue to function effectively in skilled and complex occupations. The transition from school to work occurs within the matrix of total personality development. This

developmental process is well known to students of human behavior. It is academic and possibly philosophical to argue whether the sexual and aggressive needs and feelings are the primary drives, the vicissitudes of these instincts leading to interest and pleasure in mastery, or whether mastery is a separate basic drive (Hartmann, Hendrick). Motor patterns and their associated pleasure were seen by Mittelmann as an independent urge intimately connected with almost all other functions of the individual. Lantos identified the latency period as the time when the transition from pleasure in motor activity to pleasure in mastery occurs. Erikson similarly placed the shift in stages at this period when the child wants to learn to do things and to enjoy accomplishment. He called this phase the sense of industry, when the child enjoys recognition and prestige from producing things. During this stage, the child may feel inadequate and inferior when confronted with his unresolved conflicts and when comparing himself unfavorably with the adult world of parents and teachers, or with more effective children. Neff felt that the concept of the superego should include internalization of other social and cultural demands in addition to the earlier childhood precepts of parental prohibitions. Thus, he saw the compulsion to work as a superego demand, and I would suggest an additional related factor, namely, the influence of the ego ideal with its images of the level of achievement desired in one's strivings. In my psychoanalytic work, I have found the entire transition phase from school to work influenced by conflicts in certain individuals.

One man, who was in his late twenties, was having great difficulty maintaining a consistent work level. He was about to lose a crucial position in his employment because he acted out his rage toward a superior authority. He was at that time withdrawn from his coworker peers and usually behaved in an ingratiating manner to his superiors. His school record was erratic, very poor in his earlier years with an apparent learning disability and gradual improvement later, after his father died during the patient's mid-adolescence. The withdrawal from peer-group relations was a chronic pattern during his school years; however, in his early teens there was a brief episode of homosexual submission to a peer. The patient's father was a successful businessman with an excellent reputation, from whom the patient received a mixture of affection and criticism. The worst conflicts occurred around the issue of the patient's poor performance in school. The patient was frequently reminded of his ultimate destiny, that he would end up as a bum, garbage collector, or a street cleaner if he did not "shape up" and do his school work.

The patient not only had a learning problem in his earlier schooling but was also clumsy in sports and subjected to teasing by his peers for his timidity and ineptness. In his early teens he was sent to military school to "make a man of him." Unfortunately, he was "made" there, but not into a man. He felt humiliated by this homosexual experience in which he was in the passive role and felt used, nor did he gain the friendships he sought through his submission. When told of his father's death, he felt guilty and confused by

an awareness of the impulse to laugh. His relationship with his mother was worse than with his father. He had been cared for during early childhood by a series of nursemaids and felt no warm ties to his mother. He both hated and feared his mother's powers because she could dismiss his caretakers.

The early phase of his psychoanalysis was very rough on me, the psychoanalyst. He depreciated and attacked me with every vicious phrase he could muster. This was a difficult period, as I thought the analysis would have a better chance of supporting the stress after a phase of building trust and rapport. However, he had been repressing and suppressing so much rage for so long in his life that he obviously welcomed the opportunity to unload on me. My ability to "take it" became the testing ground for the trust. It also became clear that he did not want to listen to me, just as he always struggled against listening to teachers, because that meant he would have to be passive and submit to my penetrating comments. He finally revealed that he suspected that if he dropped his attacking defense, he would be helpless, and I would then use him sexually. The paranoid mechanisms and homosexual conflicts will not be elaborated on here. I merely wish to extract a few vignettes to demonstrate the relationship between this man's developmental history, personality patterns, and transition to a work style. He revealed his association of knowledge with power. Thus, if he learned more than his father, other authorities, and his peers, he could then "clobber the shit out of them." His learning disturbance continued to bother him even after his father

died, though it was not so paralyzing as in earlier years. Increasing data indicated that this disability was related to his guilt-ridden defenses. He wished to avoid integrating knowledge and the approach to any degree of successful achievement in order to prevent the destructive revengeful fantasies he harbored and feared would erupt in the wake of success. He was in constant fear of being unable to answer pertinent questions by superiors regarding his work activities. He had a history of changing schools and an urge to continue to alter his place of living. If this pattern had continued, from school to work, his record of being an unreliable, transient, and unstable worker would have fulfilled his father's dreaded prophecy.

The foregoing example emphasizes the importance of personality factors that influence work achievements in an adverse manner. Obviously, to arrive at a successful level of work ability, individuals must be capable of cooperative relationships with their superiors and peers and not be blocked by intrapsychic conflicts in achieving their capacity for competence.

The following is a brief example of the complex interaction between personality factors and work attitudes. This example, in contrast with the inhibitions in work, is in the area of work compulsions as a style of living. I analyzed a man in his mid-thirties who worked from about 7:00 a.m. to about 10:00 or 10:30 p.m. with another five or six hours on Saturday and Sunday. His work style was similar to that of many physicians, attorneys, and

businessmen I have treated. Some of these patients were single; others were married. The avoidance of a wife and/or children at home did not appear to be a determining feature of their pattern. With specific individual variations, each of the men in this category felt deprivations regarding his reaction to the type of mothering he experienced in his childhood. In one instance, the mother was depressed, withdrawn, and bedridden; in another, she died early in his childhood; in a third case, his mother remarried following his father's death, and the patient felt rejected by his mother's attention to her new husband, preceded by her depression and her working outside the home following her husband's death. The deprivations are experienced as oral needs and threats to survival. All the above patients had problems regarding overweight from overeating and/or difficulty controlling their alcoholic consumption. The patient in this example had learning problems all the way through his schooling and into his college education. He failed in one college and held on marginally in another. He was very superior intellectually and ingested considerable information, but refused to give it back when confronted with examinations. His toilet training had been traumatic: He was subjected to enemas and had to show his defecated products before he was allowed to flush the toilet. The analysis revealed the association in his mind of examinations with having his bowel irrigated and his product checked over. Furthermore, in his compulsive work pattern, he identified his work with his mother and the financial compensation with her feeding him. He felt close to

his mother, happy and secure while working, but he felt depressed and anxious when away from his occupational activities. This patient was not an example of the Sunday neurosis phenomenon described by Ferenczi or the sublimation of aggression and hostility through work suggested by Menninger. Anxiety is aroused when the person is faced with inactivity, and defense mechanisms are utilized to contain the anxiety, with resulting symptom formation.

The transition from school to work involves much more than a mere change in environment. It is also a change from supportive, friendly relationships with parental and school authorities to impersonal work authorities—the institution, company, or corporation. There is a change in living style and often in community environment. The necessary reorganization of personality orientation to one's self and others may produce a post-adolescent identity crisis or a self-image crisis, to use Wittenberg's concept. The anxiety level may be of sufficient intensity to create a variety of symptoms, including a transient depersonalization. The latter may occur not only in borderline character pathology but also in the neurotic and even so-called normal or healthy person. The feeling is one of confusion toward one's self-image, the familiar continuity regarding sameness of one's personality seems lost, and the ability to feel comfortable and oriented toward the environment is similarly changed. I have seen this phenomenon in people who changed from high school to college, in others

who changed jobs in the same city or changed cities in the same corporation, and in a number of immigrants from a variety of countries such as Germany, England, France, South America, and Asia. I approached these disturbances without drugs or hospitalization. I drew the patients' attention back to their memories of their previous more secure environment and orientation and fostered the reintegration from that point forward. So far, the technique has been successful in my private practice (since 1948), an adequate period of experience.

The adolescent revolt against his own superego, which is identified with the parental and authority restrictions, allows him to feel more independent in the reorganization of his personality. However, in the transition to the work world, which in the young adult may be characterized as the post-adolescent phase, the conflict is somewhat different. The task of establishing an equilibrium between ego ideals and superego is pushed by the necessity to make a number of significant, serious decisions for adult life. Space does not permit a theoretical discussion of whether superego and ego ideal concepts are to be viewed as a single functional unit or as separate concepts (Arlow and Brenner, Erikson, Jacobson).

Conflicts between ego ideals and superego stir the self-image crisis. Wittenberg distinguished the pseudoideal from the true ego ideal. The former is linked with the grandiose, omnipotent fantasies of childhood. Learning

problems in the college years may be in certain instances a result of such impossible expectations and a rigid, cruel superego demand for fulfillment of the superman achievements. The ensuing feelings of discontent, failure, and severe self-hatred and projected or real perception of disappointment in the parents have led some students to drop out and run away. In others, these feelings have led to the sad situations of suicide or serious drug usage copouts.

I am now psychoanalyzing a twenty-three-year-old white woman who arrives with filthy feet, either with sandals or barefoot, wearing loose, baggy, shredded blue jeans and a sweatshirt. She smells from avoiding usual bathing activities, but is intensely idealistic about ecology and voices a devotion to cleaning up our polluted environment. She has suffered severe feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and guilt over her rejection of parental and community values. Although she is a college graduate, she has avoided the discipline of a remunerative occupation and has felt that she must work toward saving mankind from its self-destructive course. She feared that treatment might force her into the social mold she abhors, because she saw the therapist as a representative of middle-class social values. As she has come to perceive the focus of therapy as an opportunity to understand her conflicts, an opportunity allowing her to choose from a range of options besides the single one she had felt compelled to adopt, she has learned to trust the therapist. Her dread, almost panic, of maturation and adulthood

became clear and has helped her to understand her tendency to cling to men who wished to control and dominate her. She felt a sense of security in adopting their values, joining their causes, and identifying with the sense of excitement they engendered in her. Their apparent comfort in being rebels, criticizing society, and living a Bohemian life gave her the stimulation she felt was really living. Gradually, she has realized she had merely substituted one mother for another—regarding controls, dependency, and demands. The one advantage of the present "mother" over the original one is the many forms of pleasure she can experience in bed. In bed, she and her mentor can reverse roles: There he wants her to be the aggressor and dominate him. However, she has as much conflict regarding her sex role in bed as she has in her "baby" role in the rest of their relationship.

The above is another vignette illustrating the self-image dilemma between superego and pseudo-ego ideals during this transition phase of life. The maturational conflicts are complex during development and interfere with the choice of work and the choice of mates. Marriage to a man who has decided on a career within the established system could gratify her wish to be a mother and have a secure and stable family life, but such a choice is unacceptable as long as she pursues her pseudo-ego ideal. She could feel as if she has submitted to her superego mother, which she would consider a regression to childhood. Yet, she unconsciously acts out her wishes to be the everlasting child by enjoying the pleasures of every impulse and avoiding as

much reality and self-discipline as possible. Behind her wish for equality of the sexes, her women's liberation activities, and her preference for the loose shirts concealing her breasts and the pants zipping in the front is her envy of the male. She resented a man reacting to her with "Oh, she's a girl" recently when she put on a dress for a special occasion. He had previously seen her only in her typical costume. Wishes for a baby would come to the surface in her fantasies during intercourse and, as in many instances of this constellation, the wishes are acted out unconsciously by laxity in the use of contraceptives. She became pregnant and panicked at the thought of having a baby or even marrying the father. Her escape fantasies first went to suicide, but, as she worked with the issues in treatment, she finally decided to go on living and had an abortion. Then she had to force the conflict between her ego ideal of being a good mother and the reality of seeing herself as a woman who would destroy her baby.

Understandably, psychoanalytic work with young men and women during their self-image dilemma is difficult and must be done with thoughtfulness, kindness, and as much understanding as one can muster from training and experience. A rigid, harsh superego that demands fulfillment of several ego ideals can be a constant source of conflict and symptom formation, particularly depression. To be a good parent and spend time at home with one's child and spouse may be opposed by the wish to be dedicated to one's work and achieve success according to whatever values are

used in measuring that goal. The conscience can lash out at the self-image either way, producing a continuous state of discontent, irritability, and a sense of failure. One defensive maneuver intended as a solution to a superego-ego ideal or pseudo-ego ideal conflict is to attack the representatives of the superego. In the preceding case illustration, the young woman was intent on humiliating her parents and thus diminishing their values and influence on her. When the superego is projected to the society or government, the hostility is in that direction. The provocations are brought to a point where attacks from these sources are unconsciously welcomed to rationalize and justify the conclusion that authorities are indeed bad and the "system" must be destroyed. The newspapers and television coverage have given us ample evidence of these destructive counteracts by these young people who are having great difficulty in navigating the transition from school to work.

The transition may lay dormant for many years and break out after ten or twenty years of a seemingly happy marriage and work situation. I can offer two brief examples. One concerns a married woman in her early forties and the mother of six children who decided that her husband had prevented her from having her own identity. She felt that all through the marriage she was expected to do all the things necessary to foster his social aspirations and personal pleasure and to help him fulfill his self-image. She felt empty, drained, and exhausted from the rapid succession of births and subsequent

child-care requirements as well as an overwhelming boredom with the friends he considered of value to him. When the children were older, she enrolled in postgraduate courses and began a series of affairs. She had married shortly after college and was a bright, gifted, attractive woman, but felt frustrated about her own self-image and ego-ideal system, which included much more than motherhood and being a wife. Her individual activities, outside of the home, gave her an exciting sense of autonomy and a freedom from the symbiotic and unconsciously incestuous attachments to her husband. She felt much more of a sexual identity and a clearer impression of her ego boundaries when with other men in her academic milieu. Her husband and their social life were seen by her as a single unit and a threat to her survival as an individual. Much to his surprise, she suddenly announced to him that she wanted a divorce. After these circumstances occurred, treatment was sought because she was uncertain of her decision and troubled by the conflict with her superego and with the various pressures her husband brought to bear on her.

The other example is a male in his forties who had married after high school and walked out on his wife after their silver anniversary. They, too, had several children and appeared to be inseparable during their married life. He sold his successful business and decided he wanted to have a fresh start in life. This fresh start included dating girls in their early twenties and a lack of decision regarding his work interests. His wife was so shocked she became

suicidal and was hospitalized. Their marriage also had all the earmarks of the symbiotic and unresolved aspects of psychosexual and identity conflicts.

The various defense mechanisms utilized in the struggles accompanying transition from school to work include projection, regression, denial, identification, and acting out. When pathological degrees of narcissism, ambivalence, and defense mechanisms weaken reality testing, the symptoms will vary with the character structure. The desperate effort to cling to waning youth in the transition from school to work is revived when people have delayed this consolidation of their personality, as in the two preceding examples. They attempt to look, act, and think young. The reality of the adult world appears boring, and they seek their last chance to live an exciting life and recapture or develop their sense of individuality and identity. Both groups—the young people in transition and the older ones who try to return to a new transition—have in common an aggressive, firm, and anxious desire to return to living by the pleasure principle. There is an underlying depressive longing for freedom and happiness without the burden of responsibilities to anyone but themselves and a wish for fulfillment of their self-image.

The adolescents in transition are alert to the effect of their behavior, achievements, and goals on their parents' self-image. They have difficulty at times deciding whether they are gratifying themselves or their parents when

they are progressing in an acceptable direction. Similarly, if hostility and parental conflict are high, they feel both cryptic pleasure and guilt when their parents are embarrassed or enraged at unacceptable directions. I reported a study of learning problems in adolescents where these conflicts entered into the school failures. In another study of 110 student nurses, I found that the autonomy need—to handle their own problems and make their own decisions regarding the pursuit of nursing as a career or to drop out and explore other work goals—prevented many girls from consulting others with their problems. They avoided not only the available student advisors but also their own peer group. The fear of outside influence on their identity struggles and sensitivity regarding their self-images led to impulsive decisions to drop out of training. The student nurses would present false excuses to the director of their school to rationalize their action. As a result, the school did not know how to approach or to solve the real problem of their relatively high dropout rate. My study of this group in transition from school to work led to an approach that favorably influenced the problem.

In conclusion, the transition from school to work does involve problems of personality interaction with academic, social, and economic factors. The personality factors can enhance or disturb the development of the work behavior. However, the crystallization of a work personality allows for semiautonomous function. Thus upheavals in nonwork areas of the personality may not necessarily influence work patterns. On the other hand,

disorders in the development of a successful transition from school to work cannot be solved by simply placing the person in a training school. This chapter, hopefully, will contribute some understanding of the interaction and vicissitudes of the dynamics involved.

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