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Parents and the Psychopathology of Their Children. Responsibility? Helplessness? Influence?

While formulating his first etiological hypothesis regarding hysterical disorders, Sigmund Freud was looking for their conditionings in real traumas caused by sexual abuse occurred during infancy to his contemporary patients. Family members and house servants were considered to be the perpetrators of this abuse. Although later Freud restrained himself from unambiguously connecting psychopathology of the adults with their childhood experiences, the possibility of this connection has never been ruled out. The conviction regarding the lack of “traces of reality in the unconscious” arrived simultaneously with the concepts of crucial connection between infant experiences, the later stages of human development and evolution of symptoms – just like in the analysis of Wolf Man. In the richness of ideas and conceptualizations deriving from Freud’s thinking one can come across literal connection of a patient’s close relatives’ behaviour and the development of his psychopathology, as well as utter denial of such dependences.

Working with patients in their infancy and adolescence who have to challenge the problem of psychic disorders arouses many countertransference feelings that are connected to the question of parents’ responsibility for symptoms of their children. The therapist’s feelings and thoughts that are not reflected upon can make patient’s individual therapy, relationship with parents during therapy or family therapy more difficult in this case. These feelings and thoughts can be strengthened by theoretical concepts worshipped by a therapist; these theoretical concepts can also be used to deal with the emerging countertransference.

Understanding of the conditions of our attitude towards the question of parents’ responsibility for the child’s symptoms may prove to be a significant aspect of getting to know the patient’s internal world and other members of his family.