

THE GETTING TYPE, A PARSIMONIOUS SOCIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE ORAL CHARACTER

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Characterologies have occupied the attention of writers and psychologists almost since the dawn of time. Each era has seen the emergence of one or more descriptions of the nature of man. Undoubtedly, the most prominent set of such descriptions and the one most influential on the current psychological scene is Freud's theory of psychosexual development which should perhaps be attributed equally to Karl Abraham (1). One of the cornerstones of classical Freudian theory, it provides a description of certain character types which develop in accordance with the assumptions of psychic energy (libido theory) and of psychic determinism.

The present paper will attempt to demonstrate that the so-called "oral traits," while accurately described, may be explained more parsimoniously in social terms. The oral character has been selected not because it is more significant than other aspects of the theory, but merely to illustrate how the Freudian concepts lend themselves to advantage to social, non-libidinal interpretation.

THE ORAL CHARACTER

According to Freudian theory, the earliest cathexis of the libido is vested in the mouth: Through incorporating, holding, biting, spitting out, and closing, tension reduction occurs. Calvin S. Hall describes these as prototypes of later personality traits. He says:

Taking in through the mouth is the prototype for acquisitiveness, holding on for tenacity and determination, biting for destructiveness, spitting out for rejection and contemptuousness, and closing for refusal and negativism. Whether these traits will develop and become part of one's character or not depends upon the amount of frustration and anxiety which is experienced in connection with the prototypic expression (5, p. 104).

Through coping behavior (i.e., sublimation and displacement) and through the use of defense mechanisms, especially projection, reaction formation, fixation, and regression, these prototypes may be elaborated to include certain behavioral modes, interests, and vocational choices. Thus the "oral erotic person" may become a gourmet, a nurse, a singer or fat, while the "oral sadistic person" may become a cigar chewer, a drama critic or a nail biter. The "oral incorporator"

especially may be extremely acquisitive, more for the sake of acquisition than for its content, because it is "only a substitute for what he really wants, namely, food from a loving mother" (5, p. 105). The oral personality is also alluded to as an "oral dependent individual." The alcoholic, for example, falls within this category and is often explained as a person who has substituted one bottle for another.

THE GETTING TYPE

From the point of view of social interaction, the oral personality might more appropriately be called the "getting type." This term is taken from one of Adler's last papers in which he briefly attempted a typology based on characteristic ways in which individuals may relate themselves to others. Adler spoke of a "ruling type," a "getting type," an "avoiding type" and a fourth, ideal type, "prepared for cooperation and contribution" (2, pp. 6-7, and 3, p. 168).

With respect to child rearing practices, there have always been family constellations in which a child was encouraged to get. Most frequently, these roles fell to the youngest in the family, to the ill or handicapped, and to only children, although training in getting was not necessarily restricted to these.

Since World War II, however, cultural trends have encouraged more than previously the emphasis on getting. With the highest standard of living in American history and with depression-bred parents compensating through their children, we train children not only to get but to *demand*. The traditional pressures upon children to "get ahead," which implied doing, have been altered to getting material things, to getting more than the others (otherwise you are a sucker), and to getting a thrill. Getting without doing is considered a triumph; doing and getting reward is merely for suckers.

Another factor operating to encourage getting is the trend in some circles, lay and professional, toward permissiveness and indulgence in the training of children in order not to "frustrate" the child, not to injure the child's psyche. The parents' insecurity in holding their ground in facing the child's demands, and their desire for his approval, make them easy victims of the child's retort, "You don't love me," when they fail to submit to his demands.

A third factor contributing to the emphasis on getting is our age of anxiety, which encourages us to get as much as we can before the hydrogen bomb falls, or the draft catches up with us, or life, the arena of responsibility, must be tackled. After all, parents believe, "You are

only young once," or "There is plenty of time for a child to grow up."

Children growing up with the "getting" complex encounter very little opportunity or necessity to do things. Consequently, they have little awareness of their own abilities to contribute, to be productive, to create, or to give. Thus lacking self-reliance and faith in themselves, they train themselves to get, to get served rather than to serve, to get love rather than to love, and of course, to get by and to get out of things, to avoid responsibilities.

Since getting depends on others, the "getter" attempts to surround himself with people who are willing to comply. He is frequently gregarious, but conditionally; feels comfortable in social situations and uncomfortable alone; and often develops special social skills.

The getter, very frequently, is a self-indulgent person. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Therefore, it is incumbent on him to get as much as possible and to get it *now*. Immediate gratification becomes a primary goal.

If one examines the self-indulgent person's credo closely, one can detect the source of his insistent demands. "For tomorrow we die," betrays his pessimism. Without abilities to rely upon should he be left without people to gratify his demands, how much faith can he have in himself or in life? Many getters resort to alcohol or narcotics because, in typical getter fashion, they either can get high or get less tense, or get some kicks, or because this facilitates social interaction, or conditions the environment (it gets others to take care of them.)

Frequently, the pessimistic getter, unable to face his pessimism, covers up by radiating a superficial optimism. He believes, "In the long run, nothing will happen anyway; therefore, I might as well take the easy way now." The chronic gambler, for example, falls into this group. Covering up the pessimism with optimism is the nuclear process of manic-depressive psychosis and explains why the cycloid personality has been associated with the oral character.

Since getting seems so important, getting more and more becomes even more desirable. "Necessary" is perhaps a better word than "desirable" since the individual feels that his personal worth, upon which his feeling of belongingness rests, depends upon acquiring more. If getting ever stops, nothing is left. Therefore, the getter often eats too much, drinks too much, bites off too much business, tries to learn everything or gain as much fame or money as possible. Naturally

the getter feels one should get as many kicks out of life as possible.

Unfortunately for the getter, life very frequently says "no" to him. Therefore, he often feels that life is unfair; for after all, does not life owe something to him? Life appears as cruel, and people just do not love him. When a person feels this way, he is particularly sensitive to criticism. This is the so-called projection onto others of one's own "oral aggressive needs," and one is prone to be depressed. Actually, it is the feeling that life is unfair that makes the individual susceptible to depressive episodes. Such individuals operate according to the German proverb, "*Wenn man dir gibt, nimm; wenn man von dir nimmt, schrei.*" ("If they give to you, take; if they take from you, holler.") And is not depression merely a silent form of hollering?

THE QUESTION OF PARSIMONY

Compared to the Freudian "oral character," the Adlerian "getting type" is undoubtedly the simpler construct. While both describe essentially the same behavioral phenomena, as we have attempted to show, the latter assumes only the self-consistency of the individual which would link his early experiences and interpretations of his social situation with his present behavior. The Freudian concept, on the other hand, assumes libido, its early cathexis in the mouth, and its frustration at that stage together with anxiety, plus the reflection of all these in the present conduct of the individual—all assumptions which have not been verified and probably are unverifiable.

The proofs furnished by the Freudians are unconvincing. While it is undeniable that in later life sensual gratification may occur through activities of the mouth, especially the lips, as kissing or sucking one's thumb, does this fact really necessitate the assumption of the lasting significance of an oral phase of development? After all, people receive gratification from scratching their ears, or by stroking their children or pets, or by olfactorily savoring a good wine. In these instances no one assumes an olfactory or tactual phase of development. Similarly, there is no need to connect an assumed early libidinal gratification with later character development, even when similar traits occur in adulthood.

As evidence of the prominence of the oral zone in character development, psychoanalysts very frequently allude to such universal expressions as, "I could eat you up," "I can't swallow it," "Let me chew on it for a while," etc. But such evidence, however reasonable on the surface, does not account for other expressions which might

more properly be attributed to some zone of the body outside the scope of the erogenous zones. For example, the grasping personality is very frequently attributed either to the holding-on oral personality or to the retentive anal personality. But could we not also make a case for the grasping personality to be one who has fixated at the manual or tactual level of development? Could we not also say that the manipulative person is one who, as a child, enjoyed playing with his blocks?

When we regard character not as a mere mechanistic outcome of certain infantile libidinal experiences, but as an expression of the manner in which an individual contemporaneously experiences himself in relationship to life, the Freudian concept does not furnish greater explanatory value regarding dynamics, in spite of its greater complexity. The greater value of the Freudian concept would lie only in its genetic implications, doubtful as these are. The deprivation of the love object, the breast, which the Freudians use as explanation of the genesis of depression, is probably no more than an expression of the observation that people who are trained to get become angry when others do not give or are not around to give. Likewise, an "oral dependent person" is merely one who has learned to put others into his service through such "oral traits" as charm or by manipulating others. Such traits as independence, on the other hand, are often seen by psychoanalysts as reaction formations against the desire for dependence.

Also by the criterion of prediction, does the Freudian concept fail to be superior. From the theory of psychosexual development, at best postdictive statements can be made. Assuming the fact that "oral characters" exist, one cannot predict such a character development from a knowledge of an infant's experience.

CONCLUSION

While the observations made by the Freudians on the oral character may be accurate, the development of this particular personality structure may be explained more parsimoniously in the social rather than libidinal terms of Adler's getting type. The Freudian concept of character in general is a reflection of the individual's psychosexual experiences during infancy. In our conception, character is an expression of the manner in which an individual contemporaneously experiences himself in relationship to life, and a reflection of his interpretation of the cultural values of his society (4).

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