

Psychoanalytic theory and the ghost in the nursery



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In this essay I will be referring to Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud and Selma Fraiberg to explain how the psychoanalytic theory views the ghost in the nursery and the compulsion to repeat, and John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and Peter Fonagy to account for these concepts on behalf of the attachment theory.

In her paper ' Ghosts in the nursery' Fraiberg et al. (1975) uses the term ' ghosts' to represent negative experiences parents had as children which they repressed and excluded all feelings from in order to deal with the situation. Fraiberg explains that if the parents do not allow themselves to feel this pain, they will be pushing the affect associated with these memories into the unconscious. These unresolved issues will manifest themselves in dreams and in behaviours with their own infants. Like ghosts these unresolved issues are invisible (unconscious), and like ghosts, they come back to haunt us. These parents are likely to unconsciously repeat their parents' behaviour with their own children since they would not be able to empathise with their own children and understand their feelings. This leads to the compulsion to repeat.

Fraiberg et al's (1975) explanation seems very simplistic and reductionist. It seems that if parents do not allow themselves to feel childhood pains, they are bound to repeat pains caused to them on their children. It seems that development does not teach us anything and the later relationships that we form are not able to dispel the ghost. As we will see other theories account other factors responsible for the compulsion to repeat.

Freud and Breuer (1893) first refer to people forgetting certain moments in life in their paper on Hysteria. They argue that experiences in a person's life which are not available to conscious thought because they were a result of trauma had not been properly abreacted. These situations could not have been dealt with either because they were so painful that their bearer decided to forget them or because they occurred when the person was in an 'abnormal psychological state' (Pg 11). They explain that during such situations splitting of consciousness occurs making it difficult for the person to connect to his memories and so the feeling related to the experience is transformed into a physical symptom. At this time Freud dealt with these forgetful memories by inducing a hypnotic state in his patients whereby they could associate memories to their feels and cathartic energy was released. However, soon Freud realised that through hypnosis he was forcing people to talk about their memories and was not allowing resistance to occur.

Freud's first reference to the compulsion to repeat was in 1914 when he postulated that in obsessional neurosis, forgetting is characterized by 'dissolving thought-connections, failing to draw the right conclusions and isolating memories.' (pg. 149). Although the person does not remember the trauma, he unconsciously re-enacts this event in his life. This is seen in psychoanalysis during transference e. g. 'Rat Man' (Freud, 1955) was transferring his ambivalent relationship towards his father onto Freud. Freud (1909) explains that these repressed experiences are like ghosts who reappear in our life: "In an analysis...a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unladen ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken." (pg. 122). The more resistance there

is to repress the memories, the more the person will replace remembering by acting out. The resolution of this lies in how the therapist handles transference. Transference acting as a playground (Freud 1914, Pg. 154) will allow repressed material to show the secret of its game in the person's mind and for the analyst to find out what the resistance consists of. It is only when the patient is able to talk about his resistance can the analyst discover the "repressed instinctual impulses which are feeding the resistance" (Freud 1914, Pg. 155).

In Freud's explanation so far it seems that compulsion to repeat can only be resolved through transference. Freud gives a lot of importance to childhood trauma and not to how the current experiences are affecting a person's life.

Beyond the pleasure principle

Bowlby (1979) criticised Freud for only looking at the person's internal conflict and not giving enough attention to the person's external environment (pg. 21). Bowlby believed that ghosts can be dispelled by environmental change. Bowlby (1969) refers to experiments on rhesus monkeys (Griffin and Harlow, 1966) and on puppies (Scott, 1963) to point out to a sensitive period in which attachment can be formed or be forever doomed. Animals that were kept away from contact for the first six months of their life did not show recovery of social interactions. He postulates that attachment, or the lack of it, acts in similar way in infants. Thus, if a baby is not shown sensitivity, it is unlikely that the baby would be able to do so with his own children, and so the ghosts of his past will reappear and he has no

choice other than to repeat what was done onto him. Bowlby emphasises that attachment is an evolutionary process that helps the infant to survive.

So what kind of survival would an infant have if attachment is disrupted or inadequate? Bowlby's (1944) own research on juvenile thieves sheds light on the link between hostile and neurotic mothers leading to delinquent children and at times even affectionless characters. He believes that delinquent children try to satisfy their libido which is missing from object-relationships. However, this is not gratifying as the objects stole did not reward them as much as the lost love of their mother (pg. 114).

Bowlby (1979) suggests that the infant forms an inner working model which acts a template for future relationships - "from the cradle to the grave" (pg. 129). This has been supported by studies such as that of Hazan and Shaver (1987) where attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978) in infancy are applied to love relationships in adulthood. This explains that the compulsion to repeat is not only enacted from generation to generation with one's children but also in a love relationship. Thus the attachment theory is able to explain how a person is able to make adaptation to social situations.

Bowlby (1969) is also aware that it is not only the mother who is responsible for this relationship between her and the baby, but each baby has his own characteristics which evokes different reactions in the mother (pg 340 - 342).

Bowlby (1979) explains that when one becomes a parent "powerful emotions are evoked" (pg. 17) related to how we felt as children towards our parents and siblings. A parent might not be able to regulate these old feelings
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because they have not resolved the ambivalent conflict concerning these feelings. When the parent was young, she might have defended herself against these feelings by repressing, displacing or projecting them. With all the changes parenthood brings with it, these conflicts are renewed and come back to haunt us. Such a parent will find herself tormented by these forces and has no option other than resorting to the defences used in childhood to deal with feelings regarding her own child, using their own children as their scapegoats - " seeing motes in their children's eyes to avoid seeing beams in their own" (Pg. 19). Unfortunately parents are not aware of these processes or the intentions behind their actions. The solution of this is helping parents deal with their own emotional problems arising from childhood to cast out the ghosts. For Bowlby (1979) it seems that in the early months of parenthood, parents are more open to receive help since the relationships in the new family are still plastic. At this stage, parents can be helped with little effort and skills, however if they seek to become better parents they would need to come to terms with their unconscious conflict. So it seems that for Bowlby in order to abolish the ghost, the most important thing is to commit to change in the environment.

According to Anna Freud (1936, pg. 117-131) parents undergo the compulsion to repeat because of an ego defense experienced in their childhood which she labels ' identification with the aggressor'. If a child endures a trauma, he[1]feels helpless and is likely to identify with the aggressor as a normal part of the growth of the superego. This will enable the child to feel stronger and fear less. He will either imitate the actions of the aggressor, take on this features (e. g. wearing high heels to feel tall), or

pretend to be the aggressor (pg. 121). In this way he does not feel a victim of the aggressor as this will eventually lead him to repeat the actions of his aggressor with his toys, peers and later with his own children. Anna Freud believes that if they will continue with this aggressive behaviour, it will lead to paranoia.

According to Fraiberg et al. (1975) it is not clear why a person chooses this defense (pg 419).

Fonagy et. al. (1991) use the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) and Ainsworth's Strange Situation (Ainsworth et. al., 1978) to explain that the adult's type of attachment to their own parent/s will be very similar to the attachment they build with their own children. They explain that the attachment we build with our parents acts as an internal working model which compels parents to repeat this attachment with their children. They found that ghosts may only appear in relation to one parent (pg. 124). Each parent responds to their child depending on the defences used in their childhood. Fonagy et al. (1991) explain that parents need to be able to attune to the feelings expressed (reflect) by their infants since they do not yet have the mental capacity to understand their feelings. However if a parent is not able to observe her own mental function, it is highly unlikely that s/he will be able to reflect the infant's feelings. This will hinder the child from developing a reflective self leading to the use of defensive thinking processes ' which are likely ... to distort, disorganize, or limit access to memories, feelings, interactions and recognition of options' (Main, 1991, pg. 146). This lack of meta-cognitive monitoring (as labelled by Main, 1991) may

lead to a vicious cycle as the infant will not be able to provide an appropriate psychic development to his own infant leading to the compulsion to repeat.

Foetal Alcohol syndrome leading to impulsive behaviour not accounted for (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997) with the interaction of other factors, such as abuse, from their environment. Also neuropsychiatric and cognitive impairments; chronic stress - compounding of factors resulting from early experiences which damage the child.