“Benevolent Transformation” and the Centrality of Idealization Dynamics in Indian Culture

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Abstract

This paper will explore the centrality of ideals, idealization and the ego-ideal in Indian culture. In looking at idealization as an interpersonal phenomenon, meant to manage complex relational equations and the attendant anxieties, it becomes possible to develop a richer understanding of certain cultural determinants of the experience of being Indian. Contextualizing this in Interpersonal Theory, I propose the term “Benevolent Transformation”, as counterpoint to Sullivan’s “Malevolent Transformation”, to describe the dynamics involved. These dynamics are involved in establishing particular hierarchical relationships, in and outside of treatment, and setting up mutual expectations that often remain unconscious.

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Psychoanalytic Discourse

Introduction

One of the most revered religious holidays in India is the day of Diwali, often referred to as “the festival of lights”. It is important enough that the Indian diaspora in the U.S. has successfully lobbied to have the U.S. Post Office issue a stamp to commemorate the holiday. The day marks the return of the mythological God/Prince, “Rama” to the throne of a kingship that he had voluntarily abandoned for thirteen years. The backstory is that his father, King Dasaratha, in needing to fulfill a promise he had made to Kakeyi, one of his three wives, asked Rama to accept exile for fourteen years and allow one of his younger step-brothers (the son of Kakeyi) to ascend to the throne (both of which were demands of Rama’s step-mother). Rama, accepts the exile very gladly, and with complete grace and humility. It is not just his acceptance of the exile, but the emotions that accompany it that are emphasized in the story, as well as in Indian culture. Why? Why didn’t he fight for his throne? Why didn’t he become enraged and murder his father and become the king? Did he choose self-castration to preempt castration by his father? But his father was hardly a castrating figure. He is in distress and a self-critical state. Was he afraid of his hostile step-mother? But hierarchically speaking, Rama could easily have ascended the throne and overruled his step mother, since Rama was born of the oldest wife (Kaushalya). Every myth can have multiple interpretations. Here is how I choose to interpret this Indian myth. Rama’s father was having a crisis of honor - which in classical psychoanalytic terms can be termed as a crisis of ego-ideal. Rama chose to restore his father’s honor. Not to be seen as a phallic restoration, in my view, but rather a restoration of an ideal self. The father’s anxiety of being shamed was assuaged by his son’s acceptance of exile. The son, in turn, enhanced his own sense of ideals, bolstered his own ego-ideal of being a good son, by offering to give up the throne. That is, to my mind, what is so Indian about the myth. The myth is best appreciated if one looks at it through the lens of ideals, idealization dynamics, the ego-ideal, honor, and shame, rather than castration, guilt, and superego.

Our desire and will to live receive their impulsion on the one hand from the subterranean springs of our biological drive, and on the other hand, from the empyrean pull of the hopes, visions and aspirations embedded in our psychology. Thus, our life force, that which makes us want to live and prosper, is more than “libido”. It is “libido” as a “drive”, plus ego-ideal as a psychological superstructure. We are, at least most of us, in one form or another, suckers for recognition, validation and affirmation. Promise a soldier a medal of honor and he will give his life for his country. Promise a fanatic a place in heaven and he will blow himself and many others up, just to feel closer to fulfilling his ideals. Intrapsychically speaking, closer to his ego-ideal, but more importantly, interpersonally speaking, more secure in receiving the highest validation by the group. Our superego and fears of castration can make us very civilized and compliant, but it is our ego-ideal that gets us to soar and break out of norms and expectations. The notion that idealizing dynamics and the ego-ideal ought to have a more central place in psychoanalytic theory is not new. Many authors including Peter Blos (1962, 1972, 1974), Peter Lomas (1962), Sandler (1963), Schaefer (1967), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985), Slochower (2011) and, Morrison (1983, 1989, 1998) have written about this. If much of psychoanalysis is about the stick, this is about the carrot. For without the carrot, our emotive horses would come to a standstill, no matter how much we use the stick. Of course the carrot does not only, or always, lead us to the high road of self-actualization. On one hand, the fantasy of the (eminently phallic) carrot can be responsible for some of humanity’s more amazing accomplishments; on the other hand it might also seduce the narcissistically vulnerable horse to jump off a cliff - not because of a death instinct, but because of a Don Quixote like fantasy of glory! As Andrew Morrison (1998) put it, “Ideals can either serve us or enslave us.” Or as Annie Reich (1953) put it, "The ego-ideal expresses what one desires to be, the superego what one ought to be." Said another way, in classical theory, the ego-ideal is the heir to primary narcissism, while the superego is the heir to the oedipal complex.2

While the ego-ideal is classically conceptualized as a psychic structure, and is thus a noun, ‘to idealize’ is a verb, implying a function or activity. To use a forensic metaphor, idealization requires three

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2 During my psychiatric residency training I wrote a paper on the significance of the ego-ideal (Kanwal, 1998). Not until very recently did I come to realize that my early fascination with the ego-ideal was, then unconsciously, anchored in my cultural background!
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components: A motive, a context (or scene of crime) and a victim. In psychological terms I would define it this way: Idealization (interpersonally speaking) is the process by which something originally outside the psyche gets represented, inaccurately (by definition), within the psyche, as being better, more desirable, more valued, or more useful, than it might actually be by some objective measure. So one might say that there is a murder involved. The actual thing is made to disappear, and in its stead now stands the idealized representation. Hence the analogy to the crime scene. But every lethal crime requires a murder weapon - and in this case the weapon is what we call our ‘ideals’. Ideals are the beliefs, symbols, and traditions that we create or find that can be brought into play to commit the so called ‘crime’ whenever required. Ideals are the culturally available weapon of the idealist. I will return to the relevance of this metaphor later.

Idealization Dynamics and Indian Culture

As an immigrant from India, living and practicing in the United States, my experience is that American culture, as compared to Indian culture, tends to be much more irreverent, individualistic and iconoclastic. In contrast to India - where blind faith, the instrument of idealization, is itself idealized as a trait - it is easy to see the prevalence and impact of a more iconoclastic approach in American culture. We love tearing down ideals, from school teachers to athletes to scientists to politicians, to artists and performers - we love to get the dirt out, we don’t hesitate for a moment to dry everyone’s dirty laundry on a public clothesline. Here even God and his messengers are not spared, nor is science. The moment someone becomes an idealized public figure we pounce on the person to see where the flaws might lie and try our best to expose them. The industry of investigative journalism works like an Orwellian anti-idealization ‘Thought Police’.

Indian culture, on the other hand, tends to cultivate, value, and reward idealization of everything - from parents to teachers to crazy, ascetic mystics, to God and Science and Life, the Sun the Moon, the cosmos, and of course the country and culture itself. If you want to know what it is like to be worshipped, admired, reified, or glorified, just go to India and you will be able to find some way to have that experience. The movie “The Best Marigold Exotic Hotel” is based on this brilliant insight into Indian culture. India would be a great place to retire (if you can get past the power cuts) because you can experience what it’s like to be idealized! And who doesn’t want that in their old age and dying days? It is what we desperately need - both at the beginning of our lives, as well as at the end! The culture has evolved a most highly attuned, and exquisitely sophisticated, repertoire of idealizing memes and behaviors. As one of the characters says in the sequel to that movie, “Why die here, when you can die there!” There is only one precautionary caveat, one warning, in tiny letters, on the label to this intoxicating potion. Be warned that the person making you feel idealized is perfectly capable of bad mouthing you to someone else the moment you turn your back. That phenomenon can be better understood once one understands the interpersonal meanings of the idealization dynamics in the culture (which I will return to shortly). But if you can ignore that you can have a wonderful old age in India, and die feeling like a god in the very Best Exotic Marigold Hotel!

When you live in an economy of scarcity and immense inequity, when you are hungry, and poor, or oppressed, or get little attention in an overcrowded household, or see few avenues of ever escaping your deprivations, you need that capacity to idealize, and be idealized. It is not just about narcissistic vulnerability. It is about economic and material deprivation. It is also about hope and aspiration and strength. It is not just about neurosis and compromise formation, it is about survival and adaptation. It is not only about one’s past, it is also about one’s future. Several authors have noted this prevalence of an idealizing attitude in Indian culture. Carstairs alludes to it in his 1958 book, “The twice born”, in the context of family relations as well as friendships. Roland (1988) talks about it in his book “In search of self in India and Japan” as well as in many of his other writings. He emphasizes the relationship of idealization to hierarchical structures and its use as a defense against anger. Kakar (1978), while not dwelling on idealization and ego-ideal as such, refers to the preponderance of “archaic narcissistic configurations” among Indian men. Roland (1988) makes the observation that, "in contrast to the makeup of the Western conscience, where the unconscious superego tends to predominate, the dominant structure of the Indian conscience is the ego-ideal". In Indian culture maintenance of these parental idealizations is highly
encouraged and consensually validated. The continued idealization of parents is in fact a socially adaptive fulfillment of the ego-ideal. When it comes to using therapy, this cultural characteristic can make things difficult, unless one is sensitive to its nuances (Kanwal, 2016).

A second connection between idealization and Indian culture can be seen through the perspective of shame. Following anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s terminology, India is a ‘shame’ culture more than a ‘guilt’ culture. In fact, I remember as a child, my grandmother often referring to westerners, especially western women, as “shameless”. In keeping with the generally oppressive stance towards women in India (which she had accepted and internalized all her life), it was, for her, the defining distinction between Indian and western culture. Many expressions of shame are idealized and socially validated in Indian culture, much more so for women, of course, than men. The Hindi words “lajja” and “sharam” refer to socially expected behaviors such as a daughter-in-law hiding her face from her father-in-law, or a woman hiding her face generally in public (with a practiced pull of the edge of her sari—the typical clothing worn by women, and designed to meet such needs), lest she come across as too sexually provocative.

So the relationship of shame to idealization is twofold: Observing ‘proper shame’ may be ego-ideal fulfilling, and may enhance one’s self-esteem. On the other hand, a loss of honor, that is, a falling from one’s declared or socially expected ideal can induce a deep sense of shame.

‘Benevolent Transformation’

In this section I will discuss ‘Benevolent Transformation’ as a developmental and interpersonal phenomenon parallel to, Harry Stack Sullivan’s idea of the “Malevolent Transformation”. This is a term I am coining because of being struck by the difference I feel between Indian and American culture, and also because of experiences I have had in working with Indian patients, and American patients. This is not to imply by any means that the ‘Benevolent Transformation’ is unique to Indian or eastern cultures. However the overall preponderance of this phenomenon in Indian culture outlines an interesting and significant cultural characteristic.

For those who may not be very familiar with Sullivan’s work, Interpersonal theory and Sullivan’s notion of “malevolent transformation”, let me outline the basics.

According to Sullivan (1953), the experience of anxiety is usefully understood as an experience that evolves out of interactions between people. Instead of focusing on anxiety as a consequence of conflict between drives and reality, he thinks of it as a dynamic field fluctuation where each individual is constantly trying to maintain his or her sense of self-esteem and security. Anxiety he feels is contagious between the earliest caretakers and the child. From the very early beginnings, from the way the child is held, or fed or looked at and responded to, Sullivan sees interactions as communicating either anxiety or security. Interactions that reduce anxiety and increase security are seen as constituting “tenderness” - a term Sullivan preferred over love. These interactions he states, then get “integrated” as what he calls “dynamisms” into the evolving “self-system” of the child. Akin to object representations, they later create predilections of personality and interactive patterns. One such interactive pattern that can get created early in childhood is what Sullivan calls the “Malevolent Transformation”. He sees this as one of the most tragic developmental consequences of anxiety ridden interactions between parent and child. Sullivan first introduced this idea in his book, “The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry” in 1953. He describes it this way, “When a child comes to feel that exhibiting a need for tenderness evokes a response on the part of the caretaker that is ‘malevolent’, i.e., the caretaker is experiencing anger, resentment and anxiety, then the child learns to hide his or her need (because the need for tenderness now has become associated with hurt and anxiety), and instead takes on a different attitude - the malevolent attitude - “the attitude that one really lives among enemies.” (p. 214).

I am sure we have all met people like that, in our offices or otherwise. People who are ready to call it quits before even giving themselves a chance to get what they want from life. People who are sure that they are going to be rejected so they never even try to date. People who won’t even apply for a job because they are certain that they will be perceived as being incompetent. To one degree or the other they
see the world as being malevolent rather than benevolent. Rather than negotiate with the environment to get what they want, they take the path of hostility and/or withdrawal.

What I am calling a ‘Benevolent Transformation’ acts differently, almost in the opposite way. Instead of hostility directed towards a fantasied malevolent environment, ‘Benevolent Transformation’ proceeds from a fantasy of a benevolent other, and acts to transform the other, as well as one’s interactions with the other, into a benevolent one. I think this phenomenon is significant and consistent enough to merit its own name. Let me now elaborate how this interpersonal mechanism works.

The core idea behind ‘Benevolent Transformation’ is that when an individual encounters an interaction where there is a threat to his or her self-esteem and security, and when that self-esteem is embedded in strong ego-ideal/shame dynamics, the individual might avoid the threat is to raise the other individual’s sense of self-esteem to such a point that the person feels a pressure to diminish the threat, because continuing the threat would create a sense of shame in that other individual. Think of it as the “The gunfight at the OK Corral”. Except in this stand-off (as opposed to the quintessentially American reference I am using here) instead of a mutual disadvantage the situation is configured to end in a mutual advantage, provided both parties play ball.

Let me try to illustrate further: Individual A approaches Individual B because he needs something. His self-esteem is threatened by taking this position of need. He is in danger of feeling less than Individual B. So the way he approaches Individual B for this favor is that he takes an attitude of obsequiousness. He tailors his approach in such a manner that Individual B feels idealized. If Individual B accepts this approach and allows himself to experience this idealization in a gratifying manner, then Individual B has now something to lose if he does not gratify Individual A. So this is the point where it is like the OK Corral stand off. But, in this case, if the game plays out the way it is supposed to, both parties have the possibility of gaining self-esteem. If Individual B gives Individual A what he needs, then Individual B will have fulfilled his ego-ideal of the moment. Individual A will not only get what he came for, but his self-esteem will also increase because he has now been accepted by Individual B - so Individual A is benefiting from his identification with his idealized object. It is like you buy a share in an idealized company, let’s say Apple, and when that company does well, you do well, even though the money they are operating with is your money. But you still get a return. The company feels good because they have shareholders. The shareholder feels good because he gets a return. All is well as long as the mutual admiration continues.

There is a way in which this interaction is fueled by the possibility of being shamed, for both parties. Individual A is in danger of being shamed if he approaches Individual B and meets a refusal to give. Individual B may be in danger of feeling shamed in the eyes of Individual A if he does not fulfill his idealized role. So the potential of shame drives this stand off towards an outcome of mutual advantage.

We can see how this is an alternative - and opposite - to the Malevolent Transformation. Instead of refusing help due to the anticipation of hostility from the environment, instead of making tenderness impossible because of the anticipation of hostility, the person manages the situation by making it even more likely that the tenderness will be provided.

To define the term in Sullivanian language: ‘Benevolent Transformation’ is the imbuing of an individual with idealized qualities in order to maximize the chances of that individual responding with tenderness, rather than hostility.

“Tenderness” refers to any need that will eventually result in a heightened sense of security and self-esteem. So it can be a need for food or money or a job, or a hug, or a promotion, or fee arrangement with a therapist (Kanwal, 2016). You can see this dynamic operating on a daily basis - on the streets - in the way beggars might approach you calling you there “mai-baap” (mother and father!), or in the household in the way a son approaches a father or a spouse approaches his or her partner; you can see it in the workplace in how an employee approaches a boss, in school in how students approach their teachers, or, if you are working with Indian patients, and you are on the lookout for it, you will often see it in the way a patient approaches the therapist.
Roland comments on this dynamic also, although I am aware of only one place where he links it to the ego-ideal. Mostly he talks about the idea of “symbiotic reciprocity” in the general sense of the complexity and subtlety of empathic exchanges between individuals in Indian culture. When he does refer to the ego-ideal he states, in his book, Journeys to foreign selves: Asians and Asian Americans in a Global Era, (2011), “... there is a shared interdependence with the infant, toddler and young child being able to be more dependent than most Euro-American children on their caregivers. In turn, the latter are enhanced in their self-esteem by satisfying their ego-ideal of one who is able to take care of others” (p. 47).

This culturally accepted, and expected, interpersonal pattern can be used, abused and modified, consciously or unconsciously, depending on the need of the moment. It can vary from being perfectly adaptive and healthy, to being narcissistically regressive, to being anchored in a psychopathic character structure. Its main function is to diminish the interpersonal anxieties often attendant in, and generated by, a very hierarchical and highly structured social system. This includes economic inequities, age differences, caste distinctions, educational disparities - all existing within, and stabilized to an extent by, a complex lattice work of relational rules and regulations.

In describing this kind of interpersonal use of idealization, the Freudian emphasis on the ego-ideal as being the heir to primary narcissism is not so useful. Narcissistic vulnerabilities are no doubt often present, and even when not pathologically significant, could be easily theorized given their ubiquity in all of us. But that would miss something. To use A.K. Ramanujan’s (1989) description of how Indians tend to think, it is “context-sensitive”, rather than “context-free” behavior. Theorizing such behavior as being deeply anchored in a characterological narcissistic vulnerability ignores the context-sensitive nature of this interpersonal dynamic. It makes it hard to explain why immigrants can behave in this culturally expected pattern while socializing with their own cultural group, and behave quite differently when interacting with individuals from (in this case) American culture.

It is also not always a defense against aggression, although sometimes it may be. At other times, more often, it is a defense against envy. As alluded to earlier, to transform a person into an idealized version is to kill off the real person and replace him or her with the idealized version (in fantasy). It is in that killing off process that it becomes a useful defense against envy of the other. Once idealized, any hostile feelings towards the other can be more easily ignored, especially in a context where one’s experience of aggression is likely to induce shame and anxieties of being ‘exiled’ from the group. At times idealization is simply a way that works, because it fits in with what is culturally expected. Carstairs (1958) describes encountering this dynamic also. He writes, “When confronted with a prompt generous, idealistic response to a friendly overture, I would be embarrassed. I found myself regarding my new friends’ protestations as exaggerated and unresponsive.” (p. 44)

One other point I would like to mention briefly here is the issue of the fantasy involved in this kind of interaction from a developmental perspective. My attention was drawn to this by Akhtar’s (1996) paper on pathological optimism. ‘Benevolent Transformation’ may be seen as an incorrigibly optimistic fantasy that the infant or young child can somehow coax the mother to provide her breast, if he or she can approach her in just the right way. The mother of course has to be accepting, and desiring, of this manipulation. Akhtar describes two kinds of optimistic fantasies in that paper: “Someday...” and “If only...”. “Someday” fantasies have to do with maintaining the hope that sooner or later something good will happen. It is about the future. “If only” fantasies are about the past - if only things had gone differently. I would suggest that the kind of fantasy I am implying in this cultural trait could be called a “Somehow...” fantasy. That is, “Somehow or the other I can get the other person to give me what I want”. An Indian shopkeeper, e.g., will pursue you interminably until you agree to buy something. If you have been to an Indian bazaar, I am sure you know what I mean. It’s an interpersonal kind of grandiosity. The idea that if one persists long enough and hard enough, the other person will respond favorably. One is coerced into behaving benevolently. On a related note, in a different paper, Akhtar (2012) in describing “beguiling generosity” states, “Under the patina of flattery and material indulgence, the giver is out to realize his or her own instinctual, narcissistic, or social aims.” Benevolent transformation is an interpersonal maneuver that can be coercively used to
elicit ‘generosity’. However, because of that coercive element, what it may elicit may sometimes be “beguiling” rather than genuine generosity.

Kakar’s (2001) description of the Indian on-demand mothering style may also be developmentally relevant to the development of one’s capacity for ‘Benevolent transformation’. It is certainly possible that the cultural expectation of being able to elicit maternal/caretaker attention on-demand into late childhood facilitates the development of a capacity for ‘Benevolent Transformation’ in Indians. That along with the intense context-specific relational training that growing up in an Indian household requires.

‘Benevolent Transformation’ and Idealizing Transference

‘Benevolent Transformation’ is not the same thing as idealizing transference, although they can often go hand in hand. ‘Benevolent Transformation’ is often momentary, whereas an idealizing transference tends to be more sustained. ‘Benevolent Transformation’ is not anchored in a reactivation of a particular idealized parental figure in the past. It is anchored instead in the activation of an early, but also constantly reinforced, learned, interactional pattern that requires the participation of the other for it to become manifest. Without the acceptance and response of the other, there is no transformation. That is why my emphasis is on the interpersonal.

In looking at how this might manifest in the clinical setting, I would suggest paying attention to those moments where you feel the pressure to succumb to a demand (perhaps disguised as a request) and where it feels that if you don’t, you will end up feeling diminished or be left with a sense of shame. So this is not the “guilt trip” we are so used to talking about. This is a “shame trip”. Or it is a coercive participation in a dynamic that leaves you wondering why you agreed to that lowering of the fee, or extra time, or request to know where you are going on vacation, when in fact you had no intention of doing so. And you realize that if you didn’t, it would have made you feel less great. It would have left you feeling that you deprived your patient and yourself of a chance to have a good feeling. Think back on those moments and think of recognizing it as a ‘Benevolent Transformation’, no matter what the cultural background of the patient. If you acceded to the demand, the patient may come back the next session and interact with you as if nothing happened. You are unlikely to encounter an ongoing gratitude. It is as if the patient knows that you got something out of it also. It was a bribe. Nothing happens in India without a bribe! The patient gave you the bribe, and you took it. So there is no need for gratitude. No crime was committed if there is no one interested in reporting it. However, if you don’t agree to participate. If you cheat in the OK Corral gunfight, then someone dies. Then the patient may come back injured, and you may be feeling like you are not such a good therapist or person, and it may take some awareness to figure out what happened! When it is accompanied by an ongoing idealizing transference then there is a double jeopardy. Then the injury is deeper, and there is a sense of sustained disillusionment. In the case of ‘Benevolent Transformation’, there is not a sustained disillusionment, rather, there is a sense of failure and shame experienced by the patient, and (depending on the cultural training of the therapist), possibly also by the therapist.

Technical Considerations

Unlike the instructions often given in dealing with an idealizing transference - i.e., that one might want to delay the interpretation and analysis of an idealizing transference until the patient is able to tolerate the disillusionment of a parental figure, in this case it is best to catch and interpret as early as possible. Once you set the precedent of taking a bribe, it becomes harder and harder to extricate yourself from that expectational pattern. However, particularly when working with patients from India, I would suggest that there is a culturally syntonic way to approach the disruption of the attempted ‘Benevolent Transformation’, especially in the beginning phase. Rather than interpretive, the refusal to participate has to be explanatory, polite, humble, and non-judgmental so that it induces minimal shame in the patient for having asked. It is refusal with an apology. A technique you will often see Indians use in social interactions. In fact the phrase “maaf karna” - please forgive me - is all that is required to convey that you are “unable” to participate in the giving. As if you really have no other choice but to say “no” - a lot of this is in the tone and body
language. Indians are very practiced at that. While it is helpful to catch it early in most cases, sometimes it is also necessary to tolerate being transformed in this way, without becoming too anxious at the overly enhanced status it implies, or too critically interpretive of the obsequiousness accompanying the interaction. Patients can often end up culturally bewildered at the response of a therapist who misreads the interaction. For example, a white, American supervisee reported that her Indian patient asked her for “instructions for living her life”, and when the therapist offered such advice (in spite of herself), the patient complied, and expressed great gratitude for having received such good advice. The therapist, not used to such quick compliance and praise, felt quite uncomfortable and had a wish to tell the patient that she was trying to please her (the therapist) in the same way that she was still “enmeshed” with her mother, and needing of her approval. I suggested that she see this in a cultural context instead and try to explore what this ‘Benevolent Transformation’ might be evoking in her (the supervisee). This led to the two of them being able to talk about their cultural difference, particularly as it related to their age difference (the therapist being an older woman) and the coincident expectations of how the relationship ought to be structured. Underlying the ‘Benevolent Transformation’ was the patient’s feeling that it was a good therapist’s “duty” to ‘give’ direction and it was the patient’s “duty” not only to follow the advice, but to make the therapist feel good about having given it. The therapist was being transformed into a benevolent figure partly to coerce her into giving, and partly because that’s what the patient thought the therapist expected. An interpretation focused on enmeshment dynamics, dependency, and the need for ‘individuation’ would have been way too simplistic.

Conclusion

We don’t often take enough note of ego-ideal and idealization issues and their relationship to shame. As a result of the confusion between ego-ideal and superego, often the distinction between shame and guilt is obscured. This distinction becomes even more important when dealing with patients from certain cultures - such as India. In this paper I have tried to emphasize that a subset of idealization dynamics can be seen as a culturally entrenched, consensually validated, interpersonal pattern. I have referred to this as ‘Benevolent Transformation’. This term is helpfully understood in contrast to Sullivan’s concept of “Malevolent Transformation”. While malevolent transformation leads to individuals becoming withdrawn or hostile in their interpersonal style, and thus not being able to receive “tenderness”, ‘Benevolent Transformation’ leads to individuals getting what they want from others, that is, increasing their chances of eliciting tenderness. The dysfunctional aspects of this pattern lie in the potential for unrealistic expectations, generation of shame due to breakdown of the negotiation, or use of the dynamic in the context of sociopathic traits. Technical considerations revolve around developing an awareness of the particular kind of counter-transference it can evoke, and being attentive to the cultural context it derives from.
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References