

The Problems of Guilt Conference

Main Speaker Abstracts

‘Guilts’, ‘Innocences’, and Responsibility

Nicola Abel-Hirsch (British Psychoanalytical Society, UK)

The paper will look at when ‘guilts’ and ‘innocences’ are used as though they were actions. When the world is being taken to be a place that must always be managed in order to control it, there can be a belief on the patient’s part that the analyst can only be held on to by trapping him or her in guilt; and a belief that the patient must be an ‘innocent’ and afforded care, rather than being one of an analytic patient/analyst couple. The experience for patient and analyst of working with these beliefs (and the attendant suspicious relations between action and symbolic functioning) will be explored in the detail of some clinical sessions.

Guilt: Disavowal, Repression and Representation

Eileen McGinley (British Psychoanalytical Society, UK)

In this paper I will address two clinical examples in which guilt, while remaining disavowed and repressed, exerted a paralysing and destructive influence. The recognition of this situation in psychoanalysis and understanding of the unconscious phantasies which bound the guilt, allowed psychic change to take place in both.

In the first, after a period of melancholic grievances, guilt the patient felt towards her husband who had died suddenly became more consciously available to her, and once recognised, helped her to recover a sense of a mutually loving relationship between them that had been distorted by her hatred which had erupted on his death. A turning point emerged when she became aware that in her melancholic pre-occupations, she had neglected her children and others in her life. With this insight, she began to direct her guilt and loving concern towards her children to whom she could make symbolic reparation.

In the second example, compulsive and repetitive acts of infidelity to a loved partner by Ms A were accompanied by the apparent absence of guilt or remorse, but a compulsive need to “confess” after the fact. These repeated enactments were out of character and threatened to destroy a potentially creative partnership. In analysis, what initially appeared as the absence of morally expected guilt and remorse at her unfaithfulness, emerged as a deeper, more desperate need to disavow persecutory guilt and to defend

against the return of a “black depression”, linked to an infantile situation connected with the death of a sibling.

I will discuss some of the wider implications of these different situations.

Bearing guilt: A clinical exploration

Fakhry Davids (British Psychoanalytical Society, UK)

Early on in a patient’s analysis breaks in analytic care unleashed an inner catastrophe that plunged him into a state of near-breakdown from which he sought refuge in a “bunker”. The protection he obtained in this way allowed him to gradually consolidate a better experience in the transference, which he used to repair his fractured life. In the process a series of grievances against his objects came to light. The clinical narrative I shall describe attempts to explore to what extent these grievances represent resentment at real shortcomings and failures on the part of his objects and to what extent they defend against guilt for powerful and damaging attacks made on them on account of their shortcomings. I go on to explore considerations related to the concept of reparation.