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THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

ON THE CLINICAL AND THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
REPETITIVE SIGNIFIERS AS EXEMPLIFIED BY
PROPER NAMES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Clinicians educate and steep themselves in the knowledge of many theories, some analytic, some biological, some social, some cognitive, behavioral or environmental. All this effort has as its goal the capacity to work more effectively with people. Toward this end, clinicians meet with people and listen to them describe themselves and their experience. For the speaking being, much of thought and mental representation is mediated by language. Language is, thus, the fertile soil from which the understanding of psychic processes can grow. It is what is said which provides the therapist with the data from which most work proceeds. In this sense, the way in which an individual speaks, the words which they choose, and especially those which are repeated need to be a very special focus in psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

Since the study of language as it reflects the structure of the mind provides the therapist with a tool for analysis beyond introspection, grounding in linguistics is required. The French analyst, Jacques Lacan, integrated his own thinking with linguistic philosophy from Saussure and Pierce and the psychoanalytic theory of Freud to create a new metapsychology and valuable clinical approach. He evolved a unique and useful orientation for understanding and interpretation, making it worthwhile to take the time to study.

Lacan proposed that words were part of a Symbolic Order which reflected the structure of the mind. Words, once attached to certain images, become signifiers and form chains in which each signifier is associated to the ones before and after. In analysis, meaning can be revealed by tracing these signifying chains back toward the original, unconscious thoughts which are barred from speech, the signifieds. The speaking being's ultimate achievement, thus, has been the development of symbolic language. It is this achievement which provides the discourse from which psychotherapeutic interpretations, leading to insight and understanding, is possible.

It has been the purpose of this study to examine the signifier/signified relationship, specifically when the signifier has become repetitive. For this purpose, the category of words known as proper names were chosen as examples of signifiers. A purposive sample of subjects who had formed significant relationships with people of the same name multiple times was chosen. Subjects, for instance, had several best friends with the same name or had been married more than once to spouses who had the same name. The name, thus, is a linguistic signifier which repeats for someone in an uncanny way. This exploratory study investigated the idea that these repetitions are not coincidental. Findings were consistent with the possibility that repetitions are unconsciously determined and that these signifiers have special significance, personal meaning, to the individual for whom they repeat.

The study employed a modified version of the "Role Construct Repertory Test," which was administered to each subject. This test was developed by George Kelly, a psychologist in the 1950s, as part of his

Personal Construct Theory. It is, however, based on analytic assumptions compatible with Lacanian theory. The information elicited from the test was used to tie names to associated feelings, values and beliefs. Seen this way the test material suggests the existence of specific signifying chains. A follow-up interview using signifiers derived from the test, provided background information as a context for the further interpretation of data. This exploration allowed conclusions to be drawn about the ways in which repetitive signifiers may work. Additionally, it was demonstrated that this kind of repetition of a signifier, that is the proper name, may indicate a breakdown in the signifying chain because the signifier was not able to fulfill its function.