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13 Working with Unconscious
and Explicit Memories in

Psychodynamic Psychotherapy in Patients with Chronic Depression

Svenja Taubner

Institute for Psychology, University of Kassel, Kassel and
International Psychoanalytic University Berlin, Berlin, Germany

13.1 Introduction

Psychoanalytic theory understands psychopathology within a developmental framework. Mental disorders like depression are seen as rooted in the individual past of a patient, that is, either as a residuum of early experience or as the expression of primitive modes of psychic functioning (Fonagy & Target, 2003). Within this framework, psychoanalytic concepts focus on the consequences of early interactions with significant others. These are thought to not only influence the development of psychic functioning but also build up the content of the individual self. The self as the subjectively experienced part of a psyche is seen as an integration of representations. These representations are memories of past interactions with others that shape how we experience ourselves and others in the present. Being part of the implicit memory, representations function as schemas that operate below consciousness. Whenever an individual takes part in a social interaction, representations serve as knowledge base and form expectations. Different terms have been used in psychoanalytic theory to name psychic representations: Kernberg (1984) focused on the dissociation of positive and negative self-object-affect triads in the borderline personality organization. Stern (2000) described the normal process of storing repeated infant-caregiver experiences in the episodic memory as “representations of interactions that have been generalized” (RIGs). In Stern’s view, RIGs create an unconscious expectation of the other (“mother will behave in a way as she has behaved before”), but new experiences with significant others can change RIGs. The older an individual becomes, the more interactions will contribute to the formation of RIGs, which in turn will lead to a decreased changeability of the representations. The unique contribution of Sandler and Sandler’s (1998)

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