

THE OVERSEER REGIME:
A DESCRIPTIVE AND
PRACTICAL STUDY OF THE
OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE
PERSONALITY STYLE

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ABSTRACT

The individual with an obsessive-compulsive personality style is one who has instituted a characteristic type of harsh dictatorship over himself. This report explores the precise nature of this dictatorship and the reasons, both intrapersonal and interpersonal, for its perpetuation in the face of tremendous human costs. Finally, and most importantly, the bulk of this report is devoted to the delineation of a comprehensive therapeutic strategy which the author has found of considerable efficacy in helping obsessive persons to relax this self-imposed tyranny.

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Shapiro (1965) makes the observation that the obsessive-compulsive individual functions as "his own overseer." That is to say, he has instituted an "ironclad dictatorship" (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, 1951) over himself in which he harshly and relentlessly issues "commands, directives, reminders, warnings, and admonitions (to himself) concerning not only what is to be done and what is not to be done but also what is to be wanted, felt and even thought" (Shapiro, 1965, p. 34). The purposes of the present study are (a) to provide a detailed description of the overseer regime which expands upon Shapiro's original delineation; (b) to specify its tremendous human costs for the individual; (c) to clarify some of the primary reasons for the maintenance of this regime despite such costs; and (d) to present a set of treatment recommendations for the psychotherapist seeking to help the obsessive individual to alter this self-imposed regime.

PROPAEDEUTIC CONSIDERATIONS

"Overseer" as a Behavioral Summary Term

The term "overseer" as employed in this paper is best thought of as an image which serves to capture and to organize certain of the ways in which individuals behave. It might also be thought of as a role in which the individual functions in his relationship with himself. Perhaps even more important than capturing the precise positive sense of this term, however, is a caution against a particular sense in which it should not be taken. The term "overseer" does not refer to any ego-alien "part" or "agent" (cf. the sense in which the terms "conscience" and "superego" are often used). Rather, it refers to *this responsible individual* behaving in this role. An individual does not *have* an overseer; he *is* an overseer.

Paradigm Case Methodology and Individual Differences

For purposes of this narrative the overseer will be described as if it were an either-or phenomenon; i.e., as if an individual simply either does or does not engage in the mode of controlling and appraising himself delineated below. Despite this mode of description, it is important to bear in mind that what is being described here is in reality an individual difference specification. Individuals vary along a continuum in the extent to which they engage in this sort of relationship with self, and what is described here may be best thought of as a paradigm case, i.e., a pure type which includes all of the relevant features.

Sample Size and Characteristics

The clinical descriptions and therapeutic recommendations proffered in this report derive from work with 27 individuals seen for around 700 clinical hours over a five-year period. Twenty-five of these individuals

were seen at a community mental health center serving a highly diverse population; the remaining three, at a university student counseling center. The 21 males in this sample comprise 37% of the total number of males treated by the author during this period while the six females comprise but 8% of the total number of treated females. Individuals in the obsessive-compulsive personality sample tended overwhelmingly to be white (100%), middle-class (96%), and well-educated (89% had completed or were about to complete college; 33% had earned a masters degree or higher). In 93% of cases, these individuals were either university students or were currently engaged in professional or other white collar work (e.g., teaching, computer work, low and middle management). Fifteen persons (56%) were married at the time of first clinical contact, including three (11%) who had been divorced and remarried; six other individuals (22%) were divorced and six (22%) were single. In this sample, then, the individual with an obsessive personality style emerges prototypically as a white, middle class, well-educated person who, whether male or female, is oriented towards a professional or other white collar career.

It has previously then been noted (Cawley, 1974) that individuals with obsessive-compulsive personality styles fall into two general categories. The first of these is the category of individuals whose public demeanor is that of a relatively obliging, compliant, "nice guy"; the second category comprises individuals who exhibit a much more arrogant, hostile, and interpersonally controlling face to the world. It is perhaps more accurate, as is so often the case, to think of this dichotomy as in reality a continuum. In any event, the individuals comprising the present sample tend strongly to fall near the outwardly obliging, compliant end of this continuum. The descriptions and recommendations rendered below are thus proffered as most applicable to this population.

THE OVERSEER: DESCRIPTION OF A ROLE

The distinction may be drawn between a person insofar as he is the *perpetrator* of directives and criticisms and that person insofar as he himself is the *object* of these. The term "overseer" refers to the individual in the former, perpetrator, role when the directives issued and criticisms rendered are of certain characteristic sorts. The purpose of this section is to delineate the various ingredients which, taken together, comprise the overseer role.

The Mode of Self-appraisal

Superhuman Standards

The individual *qua* overseer is a critic who adopts a certain characteristic stance. This stance is that of upholding personal standards which are

so elevated, refined, or forthrightly impossible in nature that it is impossible to live up to them. Personal conduct, motives, achievements, and relationships all continually and inevitably fall short of these superhuman standards. And, while the primary focus of this discussion is on relations with oneself, it may be noted that the set of standards imposed is almost invariably a two-edged sword which is wielded by the individual against both self and others.

As important characteristic instances of such superhuman standards, the overseer demands omniscience and omnipotence of himself. This is not ordinarily noticeable in any overt statement of personal standards, but is rather implicit or presupposed in the nature of certain indictments levelled against the self. Thus, such individuals would rarely assert that they are always responsible for the actions of others or that they should know everything; most would readily ascribe to be everyday bromide that "nobody's perfect." Yet closer inspection reveals that such individuals commonly make indictments of self which are intelligible as indictments only if the standards upheld are omniscience and omnipotence. For example, an individual might criticize himself for making an error in a situation where, given the information available to him, such a mistake was unavoidable (implicit standard: omniscience). Another individual might attack himself as somehow responsible for offensive behavior on the part of his spouse or his child where such behavior is clearly beyond the province of his personal autonomy (implicit standard: omnipotence).

Negative Focus

In his role as critic of self, what draws the overseer's attention are deviations from superhuman performance. From the plethora of possible bases of self-appraisal, which include for the ordinary person both positive and negative aspects of the self based on reasonable personal standards, the individual *qua* overseer consistently chooses to focus on the infinitely varied ways in which he falls short of perfection.

Harshness and Injustice

In response to perceived failings in himself, the overseer tends to bring indictments against self which are very harsh and unjust in character. For him, the punishment characteristically does not fit the crime. Rather, the indictments tend to be of an overly severe and vindictive character. For even the mildest and most ordinary of offenses, he will frequently engage in "private self-degradation ceremonies" (Ossorio, 1976) as he passes the sentence: "I find you unworthy and ineligible to participate in life with truly worthwhile people; I find you not a coequal member of the human community."

Acontextualism

Whereas in a court of law, such considerations as extenuating circumstances, the physical and mental state of the individual, and other situational factors are taken into account as relevant to both verdict and sentence, the overseer commonly ignores context in the judgments he passes on himself. Superhuman standards again come into play as he (implicitly) reasons thus: "No matter how tired or sick I may have been, no matter how provocative my mate, and no matter the many other pressures upon me, I should not have lost my temper. In *my* case, circumstances shouldn't matter."

Bases for Action Choice

Compared with the ordinary person, the individual in his role of overseer to self has restricted the range of possible types of reasons for engaging in action. In common with others, he regards three kinds of reasons as legitimate and important. First, he regards ethical reasons in these manners. Considerations of right, of wrong, and of moral duty and obligation constitute for him legitimate grounds for action. Compared with the ordinary person, however, he was extended the range of applicability of moral considerations, and is well known for his proclivity to perceive moral "shoulds" as relevant in the most amazing array of circumstances (Shapiro, 1965). Second, prudential or instrumental reasons are of paramount importance to the individual qua overseer. The criterion of action choice here is the consideration of whether or not present activities will bring some greater extrinsic good in the future. Actions which seem to promise such benefit are selected, those which do not are rejected. Third and finally, reasons of social custom and propriety assume legitimacy and importance for the obsessive individual. Great attention is paid to conforming to societal and subgroup norms for what constitutes acceptable and appropriate behavior, and to engaging in those actions and postures appropriate to his various social roles (e.g., "father," "husband," or "boss") (Shapiro, 1965). Thus, in summary, the individual in his role of overseer to self places the requirement on all of his behavior that it must be moral, it must be in line with societal and subgroup norms and expectations of him, and it must at all costs be "productive," "constructive," or "useful" in the achievement of some extrinsic end.

What is most pertinent with regard to action choice, however, is not these positive reasons for action, despite the fact that they are so frequently carried to extremes. What is most salient here is what is missing. The overseer consistently does not entertain hedonic reasons in his choice of actions. He does not do something because it is "fun" or "enjoyable" or "pleasurable." Indeed, it has often been noted (Shapiro,

1965; Rado, 1959; Salzman, 1968; MacKinnon and Michels, 1971) that he suffers from a substantial inability to experience such emotions. Not only does the obsessive individual *not* act for such reasons; to a considerable extent he *cannot* enjoy to begin with. To employ a phrase often reserved for discussions of schizophrenia, he is substantially "anhedonic." Further, the individual *qua* overseer does not select actions because they possess any *intrinsic* significance or meaningfulness for him. He does not choose a vocation, for example, because it possesses intrinsic interest for him, but because it is the "logical thing to do given his talents," or because it will bring him some further good which he deems desirable. Again, as with enjoyment, it is accurate to say that this individual is substantially *unable* to find intrinsic significance in what he does.

Under the regime of the overseer, then life becomes for the individual substantially a matter of "going through the motions." The individual continually does what he ethically "should" do, does all the "correct" things from the standpoints of societal roles and mores, and is ever engaged in "constructive" instrumental action which he believes will improve his lot in the future (and I do not wish to join previous authors who seem to regard such reasons as totally without legitimacy). However, many of his actions are to a considerable degree meaningless and empty to him. They possess little intrinsic significance and they bring him little pleasure or joy. As one patient aptly described her dilemma, "I do all the right things, but there's nothing there for me. I keep thinking that somewhere along the line I'll get a 'big cookie' for all my hard work, but it never seems to come."

Mode of Self-control: Coercion

The healthy person must at time drive or force himself to do things. However, much of his activity is not so impelled, but consists in a natural, undriven participation in that which has intrinsic appeal or meaning for him, or in that which brings him enjoyment. To ask such an individual how he "makes himself" engage in such activity would be akin to asking an individual who has just completed a thriller which he "just couldn't put down" the question, "How did you make yourself finish the book?"

The individual who has adopted the role of overseer, however, resorts routinely and characteristically to *coercion* in order to impel himself to action. Far more than the ordinary individual, if he is to do anything, he must *make* himself do it. This is the overwhelmingly predominant mode of self-control and of action which he knows. He pursues this relentlessly for fear that he will become indolent, nonproductive, or even problematically impulsive should he fail to do so. Given the aforementioned lack of intrinsic meaning or of enjoyment which this individual finds in action, it

is indeed unsurprising that the overseer resorts so extensively to coercive measures. There is in fact little in which he would participate spontaneously if he did not coerce himself.

An important result for the individual of this coercive overseer regime is a continuous sense of pressure to work, to do something "constructive" or "productive," and never to let down. Attempts to relax or to engage in recreational or other activities with no utilitarian or ethical value prove futile, due to his relentless sense of pressure. The individual either returns to more constructive pursuits or has his idleness poisoned by a gnawing self-recrimination. As a rule the individual is very far from being aware that he himself is the source of this pressure and experiences the pressure as outside the realm of his personal autonomy (Shapiro, 1965).

SUMMARY

Overall then, the individual who appraises and controls himself in the manner which I have designated the "overseer" subjects himself to a most painful regime. His superhuman personal standards and continual negative focus doom him to a constant sense of personal failure. The harshness and injustice of the indictments of self which he metes out result in continual feelings of depression and a conviction of inferior, unworthy personal status in the human community. His emphasis on moral obligation, custom, and continuous instrumental activity in the absence either of intrinsic meaningfulness or of joy doom him to a depressing, alienated existence best characterized as "going through the motions." And finally, his relentless driving and coercion of self to work and to do something productive and useful at all times doom him to a very painful and constant sense of pressure and an inability to relax and engage in any manner of recreational or other non-utilitarian activity with any degree of personal comfort.

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF THE OVERSEER REGIME

Rebellion

Tyranny breeds rebellion. It is hardly a secret, in human relationships, that if an individual consistently coerces others, systematically disregards their wants and interests, and enforces this coercive regime in an unjust, punitive fashion, the others are likely to rebel. They may, if they are able, utterly refuse to comply. Or they may, if they are unable or unwilling to do this, engage in delay tactics, sabotage, inadequate imple-

mentation, or (at a minimum) an actively rejecting attitude towards the harshly dictated assignments.

Quite apart from his well-known sensitivity to influence from others, the obsessive-compulsive individual frequently resists even his own self-imposed overseer regime. He rebels. At times, the rebellion may be complete, in which case what is observable is complete paralysis with regard to some self-dictated action. At other times, the rebellion may be partial, resulting in endless procrastination, poor performance, or a refusal to care for the self-imposed activity. It is as if the individual *qua* object or victim of his own tyranny is forever saying to the overseer either "you can't make me do it at all," or, at a minimum, "you can make me do it, but you can't make me do it well, do it on your time schedule, or like it."

The foregoing analysis accounts in good part for certain (amply justified) phenomenological facts about obsessive individuals. Characteristically, they do report a sense of paralysis, a sense that, at times, even though they clearly believe they should do something, that they just "can't act" or can't "make themselves do it." A more literate patient related in this connection an identification with the lines in a T. S. Eliot poem, "Between the idea and the reality, between the motion and the act, falls the shadow" (in Drew, 1963, p. 242). Further, obsessive individuals often report a sense of tremendous inefficiency. They feel (and justifiably) that they expend a great deal of energy and time to accomplish what others do with far greater ease and efficiency. Finally, many individuals report that, despite such enormous expenditures of energy, the ultimate quality of their performance is far from satisfactory (even by ordinary human standards). For example, one such individual reported numerous occasions on which he had studied diligently for a tremendous number of hours, ultimately only to receive a grade of "D" or "F" on a university examination. This same individual, once he had succeeded in therapy in diminishing his relentlessly self-coercive ways, was able to achieve grades of "B" and of "C" in the identical courses with far less effort than he had previously expended to get the lower grades.

Maintenance of Inadequate Levels of Personal Differentiation

The obsessive individual is at heart a very undifferentiated person. For the most part, the use of this term in the present report is consistent with its use by Bowen (1966, 1971, 1976), and the reader is referred to that author's work for a more exhaustive treatment of the concept.

To be well differentiated is to have clearly defined certain very important types of facts about oneself, and to be able to take authentic personal action stands consistent with such definitions. (a) It is to have clearly defined, in the conative sphere, the nature of one's fundamental wants, likes, interests, and life goals. Whom does one like, whom love? What

forms of life participation, vocational or avocational, does one find intrinsically meaningful, fulfilling, and enjoyable? (b) To be well differentiated is to be clear about the nature of one's personal values, principles, and obligations. What does one believe to be morally right or wrong? What obligations and responsibilities does one have toward one's parents, children, spouse, and community? What are the limits of these responsibilities: where does one's own responsibilities end and those of others begin? (c) Finally, to be well differentiated is to be clear on matters of personal disagreement and on one's personal limits of tolerance. Is one clear on when one genuinely disagrees with others or objects to their actions? Is one clear on the boundaries of what one is willing to tolerate and not tolerate from others in one's relationships with them?

The concept of differentiation might be termed an "interface" concept. That is to say, it is a concept predicable both of an individual and of his social system. Thus, to say that a person is well differentiated is both to say something about him as an individual and about the clarity of the personal boundaries existing between him and other members of his social system. It is to say that there is clarity with respect to what exactly are *his* wants, interests, values, responsibilities, limits, and life goals, and what are those of *others* in his social network.

When it comes to differentiation, to use an old saying, "Actions speak louder than words." The criterion par excellence for determining levels of personal differentiation is not what the individual might merely *say* about his principles, limits, and life goals, but his ability to take authentic personal action consistent with his self-definitions. Is the individual able, with reasonable comfort and conviction, to specify his preferences and to actively pursue his coequal right to have these preferences honored in situations where there exists the possibility of a conflict of interest with significant others? Can he communicate and enforce personal limits regarding what he is willing to do and not do, tolerate and not tolerate, in such relationships? Can he act comfortably and with conviction on his values or is he easily corrupted in these by pressure to change from others?

To return to our primary concern in this report, the obsessive individual is one who is markedly undifferentiated. Emerging typically from a relatively undifferentiated family system, he has never genuinely defined himself on the sorts of life issues delineated above. He does not possess the freely adopted, integrated set of self-definitions which constitute what Bowen (1966) terms "solid self," and which brings with it what Erikson (1963) refers to as a "strong sense of identity." Beneath a facade of tenacious certitude, he does not know where he stands. If he were to abandon the societal conventions, moral codes, and social role definitions which he coercively imposes upon himself as guides to action, he would

be (and on some level knows he would be) a "leaf in the wind," blown about and easily moved by every social force impinging upon him. Lacking the sense of solid core self which comes with adequate differentiation, he must cling in a desperate fashion (often described as "rigid") to such guides.

The historical reasons for the substantial absence of freely adopted, integrated interests, values and limits on the part of the obsessive individual have often been described, and will only be touched upon here. Psychoanalytic authors (Cameron, 1963; Freud, 1972; Salzman, 1968) have attested that early in development, and particularly during that stage variously referred to as "anal" (Freud, 1927) or as the stage of "autonomy versus shame and doubt" (Erikson, 1963), obsessive individuals have had their attempts at self-assertive and autonomous action substantially stifled. These authors have stressed the presence in the family milieu of a harsh, overly-controlling, tyrannical parental regime which, sometimes approximates in intensity that of the later overseer, and sometimes not. The mode of later self control which I have described under the rubric "overseer," and which they would describe as overly severe superego functioning, would then be seen fundamentally as an internalization of the previously external parental mode of control. A further determinant of the harshness of this regime would be the strength of the aggressive component of the Oedipal wishes. [This psychoanalytic picture of *the* obsessive-compulsive background should not blind the reader to other possible historical factors. "A person has a given personal characteristic if he acquired it in *one* of the ways in which it can be acquired" (Ossorio, 1969/1981, p. 33).] The crucial element in this account is that the child is substantially denied the fundamental developmental opportunities to define self freely on matters of interest, value, personal limit, and life goal, and to act on such definitions.

The foregoing paragraph is concerned with the *past* subjugation of self-definition by other individuals during the formative years. The adoption by an individual of that mode of self-appraisal and control which is the overseer regime substantially guarantees a *continued* failure to adequately differentiate a self. For all of the elements of this tyrannical regime are essentially inimical to the establishment of freely adopted, integrated wants, interests, values, limits, and life goals. The elements of coercion, harsh and unjust enforcement, imposed superhuman standards, and imposed action choices based on inadequately integrated ethical values, social roles, and societal conventions all conspire against increased levels of differentiation. In this regime, everything is imposed, little chosen; self is rarely consulted regarding intrinsically meaningful or enjoyable interests and wants; self is in rebellion. The individual *qua* overseer, essentially a bully ever dictating and coercively forcing self into

activity to which the individual has no established intrinsic connection, thus maintains the low level of differentiation which he has brought from his family or origin, and with it the underlying sense of personal weakness and insubstantiality.

REASONS FOR PERPETUATION OF THE OVERSEER REGIME

When a life style entails as much meaninglessness, joylessness, personal pain, and degradation as that which the individual *qua* overseer imposes upon himself, why does he perpetuate it? The answers to this particular version of the "neurotic paradox" (Mowrer, 1948) are obviously of the utmost practical importance for the psychotherapist aiming to help such individuals to attain more rewarding forms of participation in life.

Lack of More Viable Alternatives

To make the simplest and most obvious (yet often overlooked) point first, the individual who has adopted those modes of appraising and managing self which comprise the overseer role continues to do so because these are the best means at his disposal. These are the ways he has learned to appraise and to control himself; he is usually at a genuine loss with regard to knowing and being able to implement more effective and less costly ways of achieving these ends.

Satisfactions of the Overseer's Supercritical Stance

To criticize by finding fault is to raise oneself above. To act in the role of "that critic whose standards are so refined and elevated that all is found wanting" is to lay claim to a rather exalted status. The art critic, for example, who when all of his fellow critics are hailing some work, states that "Well personally, I found it rather flawed," in doing so raises himself both above his fellow critics and above the artist himself. The satisfactions attendant upon doing so are for most of us considerable, and are not least among those enjoyed by the individual *qua* overseer. Giving up the overseer role is, among other things, giving up these claims to superior status and these attendant satisfactions.

Reasons Grounded in Lack of Differentiation

In the preceding section it was noted that the obsessive individual is one who is very significantly undifferentiated. It was further noted that his relative lack of freely adopted, integrated, authentic interests, principles, and personal limits, and his lack of confidence in his ability to act effectively on these if he had them, result in strong underlying feelings of personal insubstantiality and weakness. For him, the idea of dropping his

facade of tenacious certitude is unthinkable, for it would surely expose him to the danger of being overrun by others. This state of affairs provides a multiplicity of reasons why the obsessive individual perpetuates his (otherwise painful) overseer regime.

Fundamentally, given this sense of underlying insubstantiality, other people become inherently dangerous. If the obsessive-compulsive individual could crystallize his life motto into a few sentences, he might say, "They will overwhelm me if I let them. They are inherently coercive and bent on my subjugation, and I am at heart weak, insubstantial, and ill-equipped to fight. Therefore I must constantly be on my guard, resist anything which smacks of coercion, and continually restrain myself from the temptation to let them know that I care or that I want anything from them." In this motto, one finds intelligibility for the interpersonal distancing, the vigilant mistrust, the sensitivity and resistance to interpersonal influence, and the absence of emotional expressiveness (to express oneself emotionally is ipso facto to communicate that one cares) that have often been attributed to obsessive individuals.

However, the continued maintenance of this stance vis-à-vis others requires a great deal of personal constraint. Tendencies in oneself to seek closeness, to drop one's guard and trust another, to cooperate with or to give in to others, to express caring or involvement, to let another know that one wants something from them—all of these must be restrained and suppressed lest the individual expose himself to the perceived danger of subjugation. For these purposes, the maintenance of that internal police state which is the overseer regime appears to the obsessive individual a vital necessity.

Further, the maintenance of this stance vis-à-vis others engenders strong feelings of anger and inclinations to act on this. The perception of others as out to subjugate him, the feeling that because of his weakness his back is to the wall and he must fight very strongly, the continual frustration of his needs for affection and intimacy: all of these engender considerable anger against others. However, the obsessive individual has powerful reasons not to act overtly on this anger. In his view, only negative consequences can ensue from such expression. Primarily, his fears are, on the one hand, that he will prevail but will go too far and be too destructive and, on the other hand, that he will not prevail but will be subjected to a humiliating and intolerable defeat at the hands of another. Again, powerful controls and restraints, the overseer regime, are needed to insure that self will not act rashly on the very considerable anger felt towards others.

Several further reasons which are related to the individual's lack of differentiation have already been mentioned in other contexts, and will only briefly be reiterated in this connection. First, if one does not possess integrated values, interests, and limits which serve as natural guides to

action, it makes good sense to *impose* a substitute set of these. It has to be one of the more intolerable of human experiences to have nowhere to stand and to be buffeted about by every interpersonal force that impinges upon one. Enter the overseer. Second, lacking intrinsically meaningful and enjoyable loves and interests, the individual is not naturally drawn toward any forms of life participation. Left to his own inclinations, the individual fears, he would do nothing, and this lack of “productivity” would be utterly abhorrent to him. Enter again the overseer, needed here to drive and coerce the individual to such ego-alien but “productive” activity.

THERAPEUTIC RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive psychotherapy for the overseer regime is simultaneously a comprehensive psychotherapy for the obsessive-compulsive personality. In my experience, such a therapy can most profitably be pursued by placing a primary emphasis on two basic approaches. The first of these is very direct, and consists in straightforward attempts to help the individual to relax the harsh, tyrannical regime which he has imposed upon himself. The second approach is less direct but no less fundamental, focussing on helping the individual to increase his level of personal differentiation; the aim here is to ameliorate many of the basic conditions which have necessitated the individual's maintenance of the overseer regime. In general, improvements in either of these two spheres will have positive ramifications for the other. This interactive state of affairs notwithstanding, each of these general emphases will be discussed separately in the pages to follow.

Goal #1: Relaxation of the Overseer Regime

The author has found it beneficial to work with obsessive-compulsive individuals in a very direct way on the goal of relaxing the tyrannical overseer regime which they have imposed upon themselves. The therapeutic aim here is that the individual come to be less harsh, less unjust, less unrealistic in his demands on self, and less relentlessly coercive in his approach to himself. In this section, some of the therapeutic means which the author has found most useful for achieving this goal will be presented.

Helping the Individual to “Own” the Overseer Role

The great majority of obsessive individuals are not aware that they engage in those behaviors which comprise the role of the overseer. Rather, they experience the *effects* of their own tyranny, the deep personal sense of worthlessness, the depression, the relentless pressure to work,

etc., as *visited upon them*. In their eyes, they feel wholly *victims*, persons upon whom these feelings are visited by some ego-alien force which they are genuinely unable to control or to understand. Such a view is further reinforced by the fact that, as a rule, despite their best efforts, these individuals have been unable to find any ways to alter this very painful state of affairs.

Thus, an integral part of the therapeutic strategy is to help the individual to realize that he *is* an overseer. He must see, in the clearest fashion that he is *perpetrating* a certain kind of tyrannical regime, comprised of certain repetitive self-directed actions and appraisals, on himself. To use the classical Gestalt expression, the individual must "own" the overseer role rather than experience its consequences as the result of some ego-alien forces impinging upon him.

The essential practical point here is that so long as the overseer role is experienced in an ego-alien, "monkey-on-my-back" fashion, i.e., so long as this role is not owned, the individual is not in a position to act differently in this regard. The individual *qua* overseer, *qua* perpetrator, is where most of the power is; the individual *qua* object of this, *qua* victim, has far less. And, as in any relationship involving individuals of unequal power and status, attempts at change are best initiated and implemented by the ascendant party.

Obviously, there is no single way to accomplish this end. There are, rather, a host of ways. The following suggestions are proffered as a few among the many possibilities which the author has found especially useful.

1. Once it has been established in a given case that an individual has imposed the overseer regime upon himself, the therapist may introduce and define this concept itself and clearly articulate its particular applicability to and its consequences for this person. For the author, the overseer image will then be maintained as one central theme in the therapy and will as a rule be utilized again and again in different contexts until significant improvement is noted. The image of the overseer provides for the individual a relatively sharp definition for one of his core problems, points by its very nature some clear directions for change (e.g., "superhuman" implies "human"), and provides a central image to which a multiplicity of problems in living (e.g., inferiority, depression, sense of pressure, etc.) may then be traced.
2. In order to facilitate the sense that he *is* an actively perpetrating overseer, the psychotherapist may employ the strategy of suggesting to the individual that he engage in overseer role behaviors consciously and deliberately. He may suggest for example, either as a homework assignment or as an active exercise during the therapy hour, that the individual select some personal action or trait and that

he deliberately attack himself for this in a harsh and unjust manner, ignore any possible mitigating circumstances, and lay down a superhuman requirement that he must adhere to without exception in the future. (The exact nature of this suggestion of course, would be tailored to the individual.) In addition to the advantages of enhanced awareness and ownership inherent in compliance, the use of such directives presents further possibilities to the psychotherapist. For example, in employing them, he might incorporate a constructive use of humor and exaggeration to the point of ridiculousness (e.g., he might respectfully but good-naturedly chide the client: "C'mon, really make a federal case out of it!") or he might employ paradoxical instructions (e.g., the instruction to "Ignore mitigating circumstances," is somewhat akin to the old trick of instructing someone, "Whatever you do, don't think about a pink elephant.").

3. The individual may, with regard to the overseer, be systematically approached as one who is in power, not as one who is helplessly victimized. Thus, where the individual gives problem descriptions in which he is cast as a powerless victim, the therapist may shift the portrayal to one in which the individual is cast as an active perpetrator. For example, should the individual present the problem that he has been quite depressed on a given day, the therapist might remark that it sounds as if the individual is attacking himself with particular vigor on this occasion and wonder if they might explore this. Similarly, should the individual report an "unshakable sense of pressure," painful feelings of inferiority and ineligibility for relationships, or an inability to get over a paralysis with regard in some needed action, the therapist may revert to the corresponding overseer function which the individual is actively perpetrating, and approach the problem in question from this position of greater power.

Constructive Alternatives to Overseer Role Behaviors

If the individual is to move away from controlling and appraising himself in the overseer mode, it is helpful to him to perceive alternative modes of behavior. If he is to move away from coercion, but fears that he will become indolent if he does so, what alternative is available to him which avoids this particular danger? If he is to abandon superhuman standards, but understandably does not want to abandon every "should" in his life and thus become amoral, what can he do? If he wishes to soften his harsh, unjust, attacks on himself, is there some positive specification possible for alternative approaches? The following concepts are proffered as such constructive alternatives.

1. "*The Friend Who Will Tell You.*" Often, the obsessive individual who wishes to soften his overly harsh, unjust attacks on self for perceived

failures and transgressions is confronted with a dilemma. Like most persons who have gone to extremes, the only perceived alternative is the opposite extreme (Kelly, 1955). Here in particular, the perceived alternative is a total abandonment of personal standards and critical appraisal of his own behavior, and he finds this unthinkable. Unfortunately, many therapists, with their abhorrence of all "shoulds," are not of much help to this individual.

A viable alternative for such persons, and one which does not entail an abandonment of personal standards or responsible self-criticism, is given in the notion of "the Friend Who Will Tell You." Like the overseer stance, "the Friend Who Will Tell You" delineates a possible mode of appraisal of and reaction to one's own actions. An individual who utilizes this mode with himself is akin in two-person systems to a very honest friend, one who will call a spade a spade, for better or for worse, but would continue to remain a friend. He is like a friend who might say, "Yeah, that was a rotten thing to do; you really ought to quit doing that; but of course we're still friends." His reactions are characterized by justice, honesty, realistic standard setting, and a lack of hatred.

Most obsessive individuals, though not all, are capable of this mode of judgment, and in fact employ it routinely in appraising the actions or characteristics of other persons whom they like. Thus, an entrée to making such appraisals reflexive is to start by posing the question, "What if your friend did this (or had this characteristic)? What would your judgement of him be?". The "this" in question is, of course, some action or characteristic of the individual himself which is here attributed to his friend. Once this perspective is conveyed, the individual would be encouraged to actively practice this mode of appraisal both inside and outside of the hour. He would not be urged to necessarily *believe* his appraisals, but simply to *make* them, and then to "try them on for size" in the case of self. Once he has mastered a self-reflexive employment of this perspective, he has by definition more of a choice, and his choice can be emphatically pointed out to him. (Note: A frequent initial response to this approach is for the client to come back with statements to the effect that "What's all right for him is not all right for me." The author's typical tack at this point is to make the arrogance of this position clear and to portray the client's existential dilemma as one of choosing whether or not to "come down off it.")

2. *The "Good Boss."* In stark contrast to the overseer is what might be termed the "Good Boss." The overseer is in fact a poor boss. He is precisely analogous to a boss who is insensitive to and unheeding of his employees' feelings and interests, relentlessly coercive and stifling of their autonomy, and harsh and vindictive in his interactions with them.

While he is effective to some extent, he also engenders enormous resistance and rebellion, immense ill will, and abysmal morale. In contrast, the "Good Boss" who is sensitive to and heeding of employees' wants and feelings, who does not impose superhuman expectations on them, who is not relentlessly on the backs of his employees, and who acknowledges successful performance, is typically a great deal more effective in enlisting the cooperative efforts of those under his authority.

Again, as in the case of the "Friend Who Will Tell You," the author has found it most profitable both to convey the concept to the individual, taking care to emphasize its compatibility with his existing values (here, productivity and self-control), and then, if the individual demonstrates an interest in this approach, to provide active opportunities in the forms of role playing and homework assignments. Mere presentation of concepts to obsessive individuals without encouragement to *action* can easily result in little or no change; they will *think* a great deal about the concept and *do* very little with it.

3. *Charity.* This concept overlaps to some extent with that of the "Friend Who Will Tell You." However, since contempt is such an important issue here and since some obsessive individuals seem genuinely at a loss with respect to the concept or perspective of "friendship," there is often a utility for this second concept. Charity is defined by Webster (1961) as "lenience in judging men and their actions." A more pragmatic definition, at least for the purposes of the psychotherapist, is the definition of charity as "an exploitation of the non-invidious yet realistic conceptual possibilities" where judgment of one's self and fellow man are concerned (Osorio, Note 1). To illustrate this concept, let us suppose that the wife of an individual is given to spending quite a lot of time on her personal appearance. The individual might, with equal realism, construe this behavior in a variety of quite disparate ways. He might see his wife as "vain" or "neurotic" or "overly concerned with external appearances," and thus a "rightful object of his scorn." Or he might take it that she is "feminine," that this is "just her way," and/or that her behavior arises out of a very human and understandable insecurity but is in no sense contemptible. These characterizations of her actions do not differ in realism; they do differ in charity as defined above. The obsessive individual in his role of overseer is invariably given to an exploitation of the more invidious conceptual possibilities in his relations with self (and usually, with others). Again, the imparting of this concept and an encouragement of the client to actively practice adopting a more charitable approach in his judgements enable the individual qua overseer to have greater choice in the matter of how he will appraise, and thus treat, both himself and others.

Discouraging the Use of Overseer Tactics on the Overseer

When the obsessive individual becomes aware of his harsh, tyrannical ways, it is only to be expected that he will react to these newly perceived faults in himself as he has historically to other faults: i.e., he will approach them as an overseer. Thus, he will adopt a hypercritical, self-hating and coercive approach towards his own hypercriticism, self-hatred and coercion. Such a harshly negative reaction is not entirely a bad beginning here. Certainly it is preferable to another reaction found in some more severe obsessives, total abjectness. However, like anger at one's parents, which at first serves the constructive function of enabling the individual to begin to differentiate from them, in the long run it is not constructive. Ultimately, the individual's stance in relation to his own overseer role must be a more understanding, charitable (but not condoning) one, or the individual finds himself in the kind of paradoxical dilemma described by Watts (1940) where he remarks that ". . . the hate of hatred is only adding one hate to another, and its results are as contrary as those of the war that was fought to end all wars" (p. 59). The overseer *is* oneself; vindictive rejection of the overseer is vindictive rejection of oneself. On its face, it amounts to a perpetuation of the precise problem.

How may the therapist help the individual avoid this dilemma? First, the therapist may, quite simply, clearly delineate this possibility to the individual. This is a therapeutic maneuver which incorporates both self-awareness (insight) elements and, to a certain degree, the element of "spitting in the client's beer." The obsessive can continue to do as he has been doing, but his new awareness may make it more difficult to do so with unfettered impunity; he has become too aware to continue doing so. Secondly, a further therapeutic activity which often proves helpful in this regard is to acquaint the individual with the very human benefits, satisfactions, and even past necessities that attach to his being an overseer. Where the individual's reaction may be one of contemptuous, enraged rejection of this aspect of self, the therapist's conveyed attitude is more the following honest but light-hearted one: "Now don't be so hard on your poor old overseer. You once needed him and he's brought you through some rough times. And he still does a lot for you, including giving you some of the few pleasures you're now getting out of life. You might want to change and stop being an overseer 'cause it hurts like hell, but, boy, show a little appreciation—he's done the best he's known how and hasn't done a half bad job getting you this far".

Summary: Goal #1

The first goal with the obsessive-compulsive individual, then, is that of helping him to become intimately aware of, and ultimately to relax, the tyrannical overseer regime which he has imposed upon himself. Recom-

mended approaches to the accomplishment of this goal have included (a) helping the individual to clearly perceive himself as a perpetrating overseer and to "own" this behavior (vs. experiencing it as ego-alien), (b) acquainting the individual with alternative modes of appraising and controlling himself, and encouraging active experimentation with these modes, and (c) discouraging the ultimately non-productive use of overseer tactics on the overseer. Consistent, systematic emphases are employed throughout both on realistically portraying the individual to himself as one who is an active perpetrator, and on utilizing change strategies which call upon the individual to operate from this position of far greater leverage and power. In an ideal therapeutic course, the individual will progress from an initial position of experiencing himself as a victim of forces beyond his control to a clear realization that he is the active perpetrator of these "forces" to an ultimate ability, operating from the overseer position, to relax his self-imposed tyranny.

Goal #2a: Differentiation: Action in the Interpersonal World

As related in the introduction to this section, the second general goal of psychotherapy for the obsessive-compulsive individual is that of helping him to increase his basic level of differentiation. Under this rubric is included both the degree to which he has defined a set of genuine, integrated wants, principles, personal limits, and life goals, and his ability to take effective action with other persons consistent with these self-definitions. What is logically predictable from the intimate connection between such differentiation and employment of overseer tactics is also what actually happens: i.e., any progress which the individual is able to make and maintain with regard to differentiation reduces his need to perpetuate the overseer regime. For reasons which will become clearer in the final part of this section, that component of differentiation which is concerned with action in the interpersonal world will be discussed first.

The obsessive individual would dearly love to solve all his problems in living in the privacy of his own mind. He would prefer that he not have to take any action which might leave him vulnerable or bring him into potential conflict with others—e.g., openly defining and actively pursuing personal wants and interests, delineating and taking action stands with respect to his limits of tolerance, strongly and clearly objecting to the actions of others. Exclusively rational therapies, where the entire approach consists in reconstruing self and world, or exclusively insight-oriented approaches, focusing entirely on self-understanding, have a special appeal for the obsessive in that they hold out the hope that by private, cognitive means alone his problems may be resolved. It is extremely doubtful that such hopes can be fulfilled.

The issue of personal power in the interpersonal world is of the utmost

centrality for the obsessive individual. At heart, his sense of self is somewhat akin to that of an anemic individual who is weighing his chances of success in professional football. He does not fundamentally believe that he has what it takes. For this reason, the goal of new and more powerful, self-assertive forms of personal participation with others assumes paramount importance in treatment. It is sustained, effective, rewarding participation with others, both confrontative and affectional in nature, which more than anything else convince this individual that genuine increases in personal power have been achieved. It is the author's experience that an explicit focus on and encouragement of new interpersonal behavior is essential to successful treatment.

Paving the Way to Increased Personal Power: Realistic Portrayal of the Individual as Already Powerful

It is certainly far easier to move from one perceived success, or from a history of same, to further success, than it is to progress from failure to success. The obsessive individual, who perceives himself both past and present as weak and ineffectual, and as having to go a long way to achieve personal power, is in the latter dilemma. Too often, to add to the difficulty, the psychotherapist joins him in this view. At best, this does nothing to mitigate the problem; at worst, it compounds it.

It is a serious mistake, both tactically and from the point of view of providing an accurate portrayal of reality, to view the obsessive individual as factually weak and powerless. (It would be an equal mistake to view the more arrogant obsessive as not entertaining severe underlying doubts about this.) For, where this individual might focus on a perceived lack of direct self-assertion and a feeling that he is pushed around by others as the bases for his conclusions, frequently he is both distorting these factors to some extent and eliminating from his consideration many further pieces of evidence relating to the accurate assessment of his personal power.

The obsessive individual typically has numerous factual weapons at his command for dealing with others. (a) Frequently, he has long since demonstrated that he can say "no," that he can refuse. And, while he might see himself as continually "knuckling under" to others because he initially says "yes," closer inspection frequently reveals that in the sphere of action he has in no sense knuckled under. He has, on many occasions, procrastinated, factually not complied, or in some way sabotaged the fulfillment of the request or demand of the other person. Thus, while he may have been dishonest, he has not in fact "knuckled under." (b) Further, where he perceives himself as generally "taking it lying down" with respect to perceived provocations from others, closer inspection again reveals that this is often not the case. What the obsessive is

looking at typically in drawing his conclusion is his immediate overt response to the perceived provocation, not at the fact that he has later in some way avenged the wrong done to him, perhaps in a rather severe way. One individual, for example, when his fiancée was half an hour late for a social engagement, did not take this matter up directly with her, but avenged himself by being moody, irritable, and preoccupied the whole evening, thus ruining the occasion for her. Where he perceived himself as “taking it lying down,” the therapist viewed it more as a case of “revenge by overkill.” (c) Many obsessives make heavy use of the very effective weapons of withdrawal, both physical and emotional, and rejection. In their hands, these become powerful weapons, especially effective in dealing with those who care for them. Typically, they are not aware of the power which they are factually exercising here. (d) Finally, many obsessive individuals possess considerable expertise in the intellectual sphere and are quite adept at making others feel stupid and ridiculous. In response to perceived provocations in other more personal spheres, which they are reluctant to confront directly, the more intellectually gifted individual will often wreak his revenge by making other individuals feel like idiots for having the particular political views, philosophies, or personal tastes which they do.

It is of the utmost importance that the therapist not join his client in denying or mitigating the power inherent in these tactics. However he might view the morality or the “appropriateness” of these, his client has truly underestimated his personal power and would do well to revise this estimate and to have a realistic picture of his considerable weapons and skill at their use. I am not talking here about condoning these actions or about mitigating their problematic aspects—only about addressing the client’s perceived weakness and defenselessness by being realistic regarding these matters.

With each newly emerging situation touching upon the issue of personal power, the therapist has choices in how he elects to portray the individual to himself. Depending on these portrayals, the individual is given reason to see himself as more or less powerful and autonomous, more or less in control. And since it is generally easier to act from a position of greater power and control, realistic portrayals which so describe the individual convey (if believed) an enhanced ability to act (Ossorio, 1976). For example, let us suppose that an obsessive individual is reporting that his wife is engaging in a great deal of extreme, provocative behavior (e.g., overspending to the point of severe financial strain on the family) and that this individual has not directly communicated his strong opposition to this or the limits of his personal tolerance. The therapist in such a circumstance might portray this in different ways. He might, for example, take up the matter of the individual’s “fear of asserting himself,” “inability to set

limits," or "difficulty with getting in touch with and expressing his anger." Or he might portray the individual to himself as "writing his wife a lot of blank checks," "emotionally rejecting her by refusing to communicate his genuine position and feelings on the matter," or as "punishing her by giving her the silent treatment." The former set of portrayals characterize the individual in a weaker position (fearful, unable, not assertive); the latter characterize him as more powerful and more a perpetrator than a victim (writing blank checks, rejecting, punishing). Relative to the former portrayals, the acceptance of the latter characterizations conveys an enhanced perception of personal power and a comparatively improved position from which to act (e.g., it is easier to "stop rejecting" than to "overcome one's fears"). Providing characterizations in which the individual is initially portrayed as more powerful, and consistently following through by working on the difficulty in question from this angle of greater leverage, considerably enhances the ability of the individual to change. Finally, to those who would be concerned about the apparently greater pejorative quality of some of these characterizations, what is true for the ordinary person is not necessarily true for the obsessive. More often than not, he would much prefer to be seen as "punishing" or "rejecting" than as "fearful" or "unassertive." Assuming a basic therapeutic relationship in which the client is assured that the therapist is fundamentally on his side and not attacking him, the status-enhancing aspects of being described as powerful and in control will usually more than compensate for the more negative elements in such descriptions.

Encouraging Increased Self-assertive Communication and Action

What the obsessive individual typically engages in far too rarely is honest, direct, self-assertive communication to others and the taking of actions consistent with this communication. He seldom communicates clearly and firmly regarding his personal wants and interests where these might conflict with those of the other person, nor does he act in ways consistent with such communicated wants. He tends as a rule not to voice direct, strong objections to behavior on the part of others which is unjust, inconsiderate, or otherwise provocative to him. He frequently does not clearly and outwardly communicate the limits of his personal tolerance to others; i.e., he does not overtly take the position that "this is where I draw the line and there will be consequences if you don't respect my limits," and then act consistently with this stand.

It is the comparative absence of this sort of communicative behavior and this sort of active stand-taking that importantly accounts for much of the obsessive individual's experience. It is an important determinant of why he perceives himself as so weak, ineffectual, and lacking in power. It is an important determinant of why he lives his life beset with so much

inner rage: failing to address wrongs and to get what he wants overtly and directly, he accumulates grievances; feeling so powerless, his rage assumes proportions which the confidently assertive individual rarely experiences in ordinary day-to-day living. Finally, it is an important determinant of his lack of self-definition (see next section), his sometimes vigilant suspiciousness (an endangered, powerless person must keep a sharper watch for potential dangers), and his need to maintain emotional distance from others (lest he be overrun).

For these reasons, a vitally important goal with the obsessive individual is that of helping him to engage in direct, honest, communication regarding his genuine wants, feelings, objections, and personal limits of tolerance, and to take action consistent with this communication. The author attempts to facilitate the attainment of this goal through: (a) a clear, direct communication of this problem and its importance to the individual; (b) an encouragement throughout therapy to think clearly about what current actions he most importantly wants and needs to take; (c) various behavioral techniques (e.g., role-playing with feedback, cognitive behavior rehearsal) which facilitate the ease and skill with which action can be taken; and (d) explicit acknowledgement and reinforcement of assertive communication and action when the individual engages in these. Inasmuch as an abundant literature already exists documenting techniques for the achievement of such ends (e.g., Alberti and Emmons, 1974; Bowen, 1966; Salter, 1949; Satir, 1967), further details regarding these will not be reported here.

Summary: Goal #2a

The psychotherapist, then, can help the individual to new and more powerful forms of participation in the interpersonal world by pursuing a two-fold strategy. First, rather than "buying" the individual's portrayal of self as weak, defenseless, and in danger of being overrun, the psychotherapist portrays him (and more importantly, *treats* him) as already powerful. The therapist emphasizes the power inherent in the individual's already existing interpersonal strategies and describes new situations in such a fashion that the individual's power is enhanced. Secondly, the psychotherapist works in a very explicit fashion with the individual on increasing the extent to which he engages in direct, assertive communication of his wants, feelings, objections, and limits, and on the extent to which he actively takes stands consistent with such communication.

Goal #2b: Differentiation: Increased Self-definition

With regard to the general goal of increased personal differentiation, the element of action has been taken up prior to the element of self-

definition for a particular reason. This reason is that the individual's historical failure to define his wants, interests, limits, etc., is partially but importantly intelligible as a "sour grapes" phenomenon. Like the fox in the ancient fable who disclaimed a liking for grapes on the basis of his inability to get them, the obsessive individual has elected not to define his wants and limits importantly on the basis that he has despaired of his ability to engage in effective action to achieve them. When his perception of his power to achieve these increases, there will be a predictable increase in his willingness to define his wants and limits.

There is of course a distinctly circular element here. On the one hand, continued successful action leads to an accrued confidence that one can act effectively and thus that there is point to defining self. On the other hand, defining where one stands on life issues and defining what it is that one does care for lends a clear directionality to the behavior of the obsessive individual, who is so prone to become mired in ambivalence and indecision. The ordering of these topics here reflects the belief that the issue of perceived power is in some sense more fundamental here.

Thus the third and final goal to be focussed upon in this presentation is that of self-definition. The obsessive individual badly needs to increase the degree to which he is clear on what he *does* in fact like and dislike, what he *is* in fact interested in, what *are* his responsibilities, what *are* his limits of tolerance, etc., rather than relying so extensively on the poorly integrated pseudo-definitions which he has legislated into existence. As has been the case throughout this account, there are many therapeutic operations for accomplishing this goal. And again, as before, the author will be relating those which have proven empirically to be most beneficial.

It has frequently proven helpful with obsessive individuals to relate ideas or concepts which both elucidate the nature of their self-definitional dilemmas and point a direction for change. Examples of such ideas and concepts include the notion of intrinsically motivated activity, the distinction between "being interested" and "legislating interest," and the futility of a life entailing all means and no ends. It should be clear from what has been said thus far that to present and to discuss such concepts is only a beginning—it draws a needed distinction, points a direction. Typically, much more in the way of self-consultation and of *action* is needed if the individual is actually to experience a way of life which entails, for example, considerable intrinsic meaning.

A second general tactic, and one commonly employed in a great deal of therapy, is that of pulling out from the warp and woof of the obsessive's presentations important elements of self-definition. The therapist reflects, questions, calls for clarification, and in other ways amplifies these elements, enabling the client to become more sharply and clearly focussed on them. For example, the therapist might pick up on a note of irritation

and disagreement in a client who is always proclaiming to his spouse that "anything is fine with me." Or he might reflect and thus highlight an interest mentioned in passing by a very alienated obsessive, and call for elaboration and clarification of the expressed interest. To cite a final example, the therapist might pick up on a client's veiled threat to leave his spouse, and attempt to draw the client out on whether or not he believes that some personal limit has been violated; if so, he might further urge the client to delineate the exact nature of this limit. Depending on the general level of differentiation of the individual in question, such statements of genuine interest, disaffection, or personal limit may be more or less difficult to come by.

A final general tactic which often proves beneficial is that of aiding self-definition by focusing on areas of personal conflict and decision. Like the proverbial rat in the maze who is "buried in thought at the choice point" (Guthrie, 1952), the obsessive individual in conflict has a tendency to become distressingly mired in thought about conflicting possibilities at the expense of decision and action. The therapist may be of considerable benefit if he can highlight such areas of conflict, and engage the client in active attempts to achieve a personal resolution. While there are many ways to accomplish this, a particularly effective technique for those obsessives who can and will try it is the Gestalt split-chair exercise. In this exercise, the therapist takes two chairs and positions them so that they are directly facing each other. He then directs the individual to actively debate the conflict with himself. In each chair he is to take one side (and *only* one side) of the conflict and to express clearly and congruently that part of himself which is on that side of the issue. He then shifts back and forth in what ideally becomes a very active, involved confrontation with self about this issue. Through this process, the therapist adopts a neutral stance in the conflict in which, in the role of "alter-ego" to each of the two "opponents," he reflects feelings, asks pertinent questions, calls for clear statements of position and, perhaps above all, continually inquires regarding matters of intrinsic interest and personal enjoyment in each pole of the conflict. This process of unambivalently "trying on for size" each side of the conflict and of engaging in such involved dialectic can result in some of the more rapid and well-integrated self-definitions possible in psychotherapy.

Summary: Goal #2b

In this section, the vital importance to the obsessive individual of achieving a clear, integrated, convicted sense of his personal wants, interests, principles, limits, responsibilities, and life goals has been reaffirmed. Three general tactics which have proven beneficial for the author in

pursuing this goal have been described. (a) In an educational vein, general concepts or ideas which elucidate aspects of his self-definitional dilemma and which point a direction for change may be imparted and discussed. (b) The therapist may, in whatever fashion, extract from the client's statements important elements of self-definition, and focus on these in ways which enhance their clarity and importance to the individual. (c) The therapist may help the individual to achieve clarity on important areas of life conflict and decision, carefully delineate the poles of such conflict, and engage in useful efforts to achieve an integrated personal resolution.

In practice, there is in the author's therapy with obsessive individuals a constant weaving back and forth between the two aspects of personal differentiation, self-definition and action. Each successful sequence, i.e., each occasion on which the individual is able, with conviction, to define self on some life matter and to take effective, sustained action consistent with this definition, is a step forward. If the individual is clear about his own success (and the therapist may at times have to help the individual in this regard), each such step provides grounds for increased confidence that he can act to some effect in the world and take charge of his own life. With each such success comes an increased sense of personal substantiality and power, a corresponding decline in the sense that one's integrity is endangered by others, and, finally, a diminished need to maintain that harsh, tyrannical, self-imposed police state which is the overseer regime.

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NOTE

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