Chapter 2

Termination

The Achilles heel of psychoanalytic technique*

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The psychoanalytic literature dealing with termination is reviewed in support of the central idea of the author that psychoanalysis, and particularly the literature on technique, has so far failed to offer a paradigm for termination. As a result, psychoanalytic practitioners are left without guidelines as to how to bring the psychoanalytic process to an end. In the second part, the reasons and conditions that are responsible for the clinical fact that many analyses are not self-terminating are discussed. Two main reasons are given: Most wishes to terminate are reaction-formation against deeper dependency needs. In the course of psychoanalysis, these are eliminated as resistance, allowing repressed dependency needs to surface. Genuine wishes for independence are difficult to foster. For many analysands, transference love is the best love relationship that life has offered. Understandably, they are reluctant to give it up. In other analyses, the psychoanalyst has inadvertently entered into an equilibrium in the analysand's life. This too makes termination difficult. In real life, only death and hostility bring a libidinal relationship to an end. The kind of termination psychoanalysis demands is without precedent.

A Historical Survey and Statement of the Problem

In retrospect, we should have been more surprised than we were that Freud's papers on technique never included one on termination. Had we idealized Freud less, we would have realized earlier that psychoanalytic technique lacks anything like a "royal road" toward termination. In the early days of psychoanalysis, there were only two kinds of terminations. Either the analysand interrupted the course of the analysis on his or her own—an act usually

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attributed to the analysand's resistance, or the analyst at some unspecified date informed the analysand that the analysis was finished or coming to an end. How many analysands never finish their analysis, we do not know, but we do know that Dorothy Burlingham's (1989) analysis with Sigmund Freud continued for many years, daily, until close to Freud's death.

Hurn (1971) and Blum (1989) concluded that psychoanalysis lacks a paradigm for termination. Blum (1989) found:

During Freud's lifetime there was an opening and middle phase of clinical analysis. There was no description of a concluding or terminating phase in an otherwise open-ended, timeless analytic process... Termination had not been taught or supervised in analytic training. Prior to 1950 it had been assumed that anyone who could conduct analysis properly could terminate it correctly. A terminated case was not required for institute graduation, nor for certification in the American Psychoanalytic Association. (pp. 275, 283)

The first psychoanalysts to address difficulties in termination were Ferenczi and Rank (1924). In keeping with Freud's (1914) idea that during psychoanalysis the infantile neurosis is transformed into a transference neurosis, they advocated that the analyst should set the termination date the moment this transformation occurs. They believed that only then could a repetition of clinging to the early object be avoided. The termination date must be set this early if fixation on the mother is not to give way to transference fixation. They advocated that analysis must end before it can become a vehicle for the repetition-compulsion.

Ferenczi (1927/1955) published the first psychoanalytic article devoted to the process of termination:

The proper ending of an analysis is when neither the physician nor the patient put an end to it, but when it dies of exhaustion.... A truly cured patient frees himself from analysis slowly but surely; so long as he wishes to come to analysis he should continue to do so.... The patient finally becomes convinced that he is continuing analysis only because he is treating it as a new but still a fantasy source of gratification, which in terms of reality yields him nothing. (p. 85)

He emphasized that neurotics will relapse into illness after termination as long as reality and fantasy are not rigidly separated.

In subsequent psychoanalytic literature, it was Ferenczi rather than Rank who was always quoted when the desire to return to the womb was considered an important unconscious wish, as one can see today in the writings of Bela Grunberger (1971/1979) and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (1986). The type of ending that Ferenczi advocated was revived by Goldberg and Marcus (1985) and called "natural termination." After the publication of Ferenczi's diary (1988), it is easy to see that Ferenczi's view of termination was already influenced by his feeling of disappointment in his analysis with Freud.

Arlow (1991) believes that Freud's (1937) "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" is a contribution to technique. Rather, it is an argument against Ferenczi's reproach that Freud failed to bring his analysis to a satisfactory conclusion, and a philosophical statement expressing Freud's belief in the death instinct and other forces limit analyzability. Freud regarded penis envy in women and passivity in men as a "rock bottom" that is immune to psychoanalytic change. In discussing the Wolf Man, Freud noted, "It was a case of treatment inhibiting itself. It was in danger of failing as a result of its partial success" (p. 217). Premature terminations happen because the good is the enemy of the better.

In 1937, ego psychology had only recently begun. It is striking to see how much weight Freud assigned to the abnormal ego that treats recovery as a danger. He maintained that psychoanalysis achieved its best results when the ego of the patient has not been significantly deformed by the neurotic illness. Mistakenly he thought that this is the case in traumatic neurosis (1937, p. 220).

In the optimistic phase prior to "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," psychoanalysts were preoccupied with what psychoanalysis should achieve rather than what it can achieve. Nunberg (1932/1955) devoted the last page of his book to the changes that should be brought about through analysis. Termination results when (a) what was hitherto unconscious becomes conscious; (b) the representations of the instinct enter consciousness more easily and consequently the id is under less tension; (c) the ego that does not have to spend energy on defenses becomes stronger; (d) fantastic thinking subject to primary process is replaced by realistic thinking subject to secondary process; (e) the ego is enriched through assimilation of repressed material; and (f) the severity of the superego is mitigated tolerating the repressed. It is not difficult to see that these were idealized statements rather than empirical observations.

In keeping with his paper, "The Synthetic Functions of the Ego" (1930), Nunberg stressed that the ego brings the striving of the id into accord with the demands of the superego. In this view, the strengthening of the ego brings peace where intrapsychic conflict had reigned. The unification of Germany and Italy, still fresh in memory, served as a model for this thinking.

Glover (1955) devoted two chapters to the terminal phase. There he observed that "the opportunities of watching a classical analysis coming to a classical termination are much less frequent than is generally supposed" (p. 140). The reason such terminations are rare is that many analytic cases never go beyond transference manifestations, and unless a transference neurosis takes hold, a classical termination was thought by Glover to be
impossible. The great majority of analyses end for external reasons, when a symptomatic improvement occurs, or when the patient defeats the analyst in an oedipal struggle expressed in a premature termination.

In the same volume, Glover published the results of an extensive questionnaire submitted to members of the British Psychoanalytic Society. The majority admitted that their criteria were intuitive. In 1968, a similar oral survey of senior analysts in the United States was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in Boston (Firestein, 1969). The results were fascinating in their diversity.

A somber attitude is found in Waelder's (1960) elementary book on psychoanalysis. He stated:

If the scientific goal of psychoanalysis is the complete understanding of a person's psychic life, normal and pathological and a complete reconstruction of the development of the personality, no analysis is ever complete. From a therapeutic point of view, when the pathological structures have been understood both dynamically and genetically, if all has been worked through and the psychopathology has disappeared or become controllable, therapeutic termination has been achieved. In actual practice this is not always possible. Psychoanalysis should therefore be terminated when one has reached the point of diminishing returns. (pp. 242–243)

This echoes Freud's statement (1937, p. 219) that analysis should terminate when it reaches a stage where no further change could be expected.

In his monograph The Theory of Psychoanalytic Technique, Karl Menninger (1958) devoted the end of a chapter to "the termination of the contract, the separation of the two parties," where he expressed surprise at the vast difference of opinion about the average length of an analysis. He designates as tragic, or even farcical, analyses that last over 10 years. In Menninger's view, termination begins when a change of direction has taken place from regression to progression. A series of insights combine to usher in the termination phase. The analysand realizes that in many respects, he has never grown up and will always be unsatisfied when he compares himself to certain memories and fantasies. The love he sought from the analyst he is now ready to seek elsewhere. He recognizes that the analysis did not fulfill his wishes but did what was needed for him to reach a better understanding of himself:

I have gotten what I paid for; I can do for myself. I can assume a mature role in preference to one of expectant pleading; I can substitute hoping for despairing, enjoying for expecting, giving for taking. I can endure foregoing what must be foregone and accept and enjoy without guilt such pleasures as are accessible to me. (p. 159)

A review of the literature on termination in psychoanalysis (Firestein, 1978) shows, if read critically, that there is disagreement about the "when" as well as the "how." Most papers discuss what analysis should achieve rather than what it does achieve. Warnings to psychoanalysts abound in this literature. We should beware of "symptomatic cure," "flight into health," and "transference cure."

In the first international congress after World War II, an important symposium on termination took place. I have observed that most psychoanalytic schools are initially far more certain of the result they can obtain than they are later in their development. The symposium showed that by that time, ideas of termination were cast in terms of the different schools that had come into existence. Melanie Klein (1950) emphasized that the analyst is introjected into the analysand as a persecutory as well as idealized object. The split between the two must diminish if a reliable termination is to be reached. Only then can good objects as distinguished from idealized objects be securely established. This view advocates a permanent resolution of the conflict that can withstand the test of time.

Although psychoanalytic ego psychology stressed the significance of attaining secondary ego autonomy and the enlargement of the conflict-free sphere of the ego, Hartmann (1939) lowered the sights by noting that "a healthy person must have the capacity to suffer anxiety and to be depressed" (p. 6). Aarons (1965), following in Hartmann's footsteps, suggested that "the analysand's ego functions must attain a position of maximum secondary autonomy." Similarly, Zetzel (1965) stated that "the analyst as an object for continued object ego identification must be retained within the area of autonomous ego functions" (p. 50).

Under the influence of Arlow and Brenner (1964), the entire vocabulary of the Hartmann era, with its emphasis on secondary autonomy and conflict-free spheres, was pushed aside. The aim of analysis shifted to bring about a change from pathological compromise formation to a relatively healthy one.

Brenner (1976) asked when an analysis should be terminated, or how much one should expect to alter a patient's psychic conflict for the better (p. 173). He answered that it is a question of balancing pros and cons, for symptoms often disappear as do characterological problems, "but psychic conflict that results from instinctual wishes never disappears" (p. 176).

I interpret Brenner's remark to mean that the beneficial results of psychoanalysis cannot be looked upon as a permanent achievement. What has in fact been achieved is a balance of forces that hold true for certain conditions but can be overturned in less favorable ones. Brenner's view mirrors the circumstances of our outer world, for we now believe less in the permanence of any social order.

Within the Brennerian orbit, termination is arbitrary, but the statement that psychic conflict never disappears, although true, must be modified
in practical terms. The conflict ceases to be significant when (a) it is no longer expressed in symptoms or character traits; (b) misuse of reality as an arena for the expression of intrapsychic conflict has come to an end; or (c) anxiety and depressive affects no longer dominate the intrapsychic picture. This can happen only when the ego, in Nunberg’s (1930) earlier formulation, is strong enough to dominate the other intrapsychic agencies. Under Brenner’s (1976) influence, we have to recognize that health is not the peaceful state of Pax Romana, but the result of a new ego dictatorship over other components of the personality. The power of basic fantasies over a person has been broken, but they still exist and may at some future date rebel against the ego.

Arlow’s (1969) growing emphasis on the significance of unconscious fantasy function, and the view that unconscious fantasies are hierarchically organized like different editions of a book around a small number of infantile wishes, also influenced thinking on termination. Abend (1988) urged a greater emphasis on specific fantasies that arise when the termination phase is considered. He suggested that as long as the wish to terminate is fueled by unconscious fantasies, the termination is bound to be premature. He noted, however, that these termination fantasies do not always emerge with sufficient clarity, leaving a residue of primary process fantasies associated with termination.

How can termination best be achieved? Fleming and Benedek (1966), in keeping with the ethos prevalent in the 1960s, emphasized mutual agreement rather than the psychoanalyst setting an arbitrary date. They felt setting a date in advance activated the mourning process, which is the very essence of the termination work. Their views were influential and echoed in subsequent literature.

Most analyses terminate at the end of the analytic year or when the analysand embarks upon a new life goal such as a new job, marriage, or the birth of a child. However, such termination has been criticized as being based on an outer rather than an inner state. Loewald (1962), like Fleming and Benedek, stressed that the replacement of the real analyst by an internalized one can only be achieved through a process of mourning. What needs emphasis is that, without the support and presence of the analyst, mourning may turn into depression or hostility toward the analyst after termination.

A decisive new step in the real world tends to eliminate the mourning process. Because so many analysands cannot terminate, Kubie (1968) suggested that the work of termination be undertaken by a new analyst. To bring psychoanalysis closer to life, many analysts have resorted to a termination based on weaning. Stone (1961) suggested that, in certain cases at least, the process of weaning be emulated by the gradual reduction of hours.

In an article written in 1969, I suggested that impending termination is often communicated by a dream. In such situations, dreams are reported because the patient can communicate only in code. It is an indication of inner conflict (p. 363). Following the primary process, a dream can express both a wish to leave and a fear of loss. This was emphasized by Bond, Franco, and Richards (1992). They devoted a chapter in their book to “indicators of pretermination as revealed in dreams” and another to “the good termination dream.”

In summary, there are several reasons the termination date should be set in advance. The first is to wait out the elation often associated with termination and allow the mourning process to be worked through. The second is a growing belief that there are specific primary process fantasies associated with termination that require time to emerge. These fantasies have a tendency to remain repressed until the analysand is convinced he or she really is terminating. A third function of the termination process is to assist the ego in accepting the reality principle and relinquishing hopes for a glorious termination that is beyond the capacity of the ego (Oren, 1955).

I am fully aware that no historical survey can be free from the bias of the summarizer. My aim in citing the literature was to confirm that psychoanalysis never developed the technique of termination to the same level as transference analysis or analysis of defenses. If my argument is convincing, then my title “The Achilles Heel” is justified.

WHY PSYCHOANALYSIS NEED NOT BE A SELF-TERMINATING PROCESS

Psychoanalysis is the only significant human relationship that terminates abruptly. In real life, we encounter three types of termination of human relationships: geographical separation, transformation of a friendly or love relationship into a hostile one, and death. The analysand, however, is supposed to bring about separation under conditions of love and gratitude. All life experience runs against such a termination. To be sure, the child separates from the parent, but this separation occurs in stages and is never complete. Psychoanalysis makes demands on internalization that are not asked for in any other human relationship.

By analyzing defenses, the analytic process eliminates the neurotic wishes to terminate; the analysis exposes fear of reliance on the analyst, a host of paranoid fears, and finally works through the fear of many analysands that they will be forsaken. When this stage of security and trust is reached, a passive regression within the analysis becomes possible. We can then hope for a new beginning with a genuine nondefensive separation process. In practical terms, it is easier to terminate an analysis if the possibility of a newer love relationship or a reordering of an older love relationship is realistically possible. When this is not the case, termination is more difficult, as there is less for the analysand to gain.
There are analysands for whom transference love, in spite of its lack of physical intimacy, is the best love relationship they ever had because of the potentialities for fantasy and idealization. When at some point the analyst feels no new insights are forthcoming and pressures the analysand to terminate, the analysis may terminate but the analysand quickly seeks a new analyst so the state of transference love can continue.

I indicated (Bergmann, 1987) that the selection of a love object depends on two different capacities. There is the capacity to combine the refining of an old love object with the capacity to hope that the new love object will heal the wounds the old one inflicted. It is also dependent on the ego’s capacity to tolerate a compromise formation where the selected object is good enough, even though it falls short of all one’s wishes. When neither the first nor the second condition is attainable, transference love will be preferred to love in real life.

Under such conditions, there is great pressure on the analysand to start a new analysis. Given that analysts today are divided into warring schools, the analysand is likely to find a sympathetic analyst of a different school who will agree that the limitations of his previous analysis were due to the previous analyst’s school. New hope is kindled, and a new beginning will be made that may or may not result in a better termination.

In a previous publication (Bergmann, 1988), I observed that Annie Reich (1958) was the first to recognize that transference may not always be resolvable. This is particularly true when the analyst represents “the first really reliable object relationship in the patient’s life” (p. 236). I emphasized that in many cases, the state of transference love may not successfully translate into a capacity to love in real life. Because the analyst makes fewer demands on the analysand than persons in real life and asks for less reciprocity, many people can develop transference love but are incapable of translating it into real love. I (Bergmann, 1988) further noted:

Every analysand enters analysis with some combination of primary process fantasies of what the analysis will accomplish and realistic secondary process realizable hopes. As the transference deepens and transference neurosis gains in strength, the primary processes become increasingly important. However, the decision to terminate, if it is not faulty or premature, is by its very nature a secondary process decision. (p. 149)

We learned from Freud (1905, p. 222) that all findings are refinements. To the extent to which the analyst has become “a primary love object,” the analysand, upon termination, may look to refine a love object modeled after the analyst. Such a transfer may or may not be appropriate from the point of view of the ego, for example, when an analyzed woman finds a much older person because the analyst was old. Dewald (1982) stressed that successful termination requires the process of mourning on the part of the analysand as well as the analyst. A too-early reframing of a new object often results if the analysand is trying to avoid the mourning process. Novick (1982) deepened our understanding of the termination process when he stated: “It is not the analyst as a real or transference object who is relinquished and mourned, but a part of the self, often the infantile self which is guiltily discarded.” Loewald (1988) also stressed mourning as the key to termination. But he added the important observation that in some cases, the transference neurosis comes into full bloom under the pressure of the vacillation to terminate or not to terminate. For at that moment, the past becomes acutely alive. It is during this period of threatening termination that passive homosexual wishes may emerge for the first time. Thus, the prolonged analysis that never reaches the termination phase shields the analysand from many painful feelings and deepening insights.

If we move from a one-person psychology to a two-person psychology, as Balint (1969/1979) suggested, we will note that both analysts and analysands must contend with two opposing forces. The first is the struggle against a utopian solution, the high expectation that both have about what psychoanalysis ought to achieve rather than what it realistically can achieve. The other and opposite danger is of a premature loss of faith, as succumbing to a depression or a sense of defeat before the repetition-compulsion. Both patient and analyst may be in danger of bowing prematurely before the power of the repetition-compulsion or of the superego of the analysand that does not permit progression beyond a certain point. Often, this point is reached when the analysand senses that his or her capacity for enjoying life or success have gone past what the analyst has achieved. An analysand may terminate the analysis out of fear of an oedipal victory. Cases of such clinical stalemates are frequently discussed in supervision and clinical seminars. New insights into a case gained by the therapist often bring about a new hope of curability.

We should differentiate between preconditions for psychoanalysis and preconditions for termination of analysis. Many analysands develop the capacity for free association, are capable of expressing and utilizing transference interpretations, and do well in analyzing their dreams. Yet they are unable to terminate because the preconditions for termination are very different from those for analyzability. Unfortunately, we cannot judge ahead of time whether a given analysand will develop the capacity to replace the analyst by self-analysis and continue his or her inner development after termination. Our theory assumes that the analyst is a fantasy object, and when the power of fantasy recedes, real objects offering mutuality and real gratification will be sought, but this is not always true in all situations.

I wish to emphasize one further aspect of the problem that has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in the literature on termination. Most patients seek psychotherapy or psychoanalysis when a preexisting equilibrium in
their lives has ended for outer or inner reasons. The disequilibrium has evoked feelings of anxiety or depression, and analytic help is sought because the patient alone cannot find a new balance. It happens quite frequently that the analysis helps establish an equilibrium.

For example, an analysand enters analysis because of unbearable marital conflict or because of conflict between the marriage and extramarital relationships. The analysis establishes a new equilibrium, and instead of extramarital relationships, the analysand now finds that he or she can tolerate the marriage, provided the complaints about the marital partner and some of the love feelings frustrated in the marriage can be directed toward the analyst. The analyst as the other love object is more acceptable and safer than an extramarital love object. When this situation is not understood, or even if it is understood and subject to psychoanalysis, it may still happen that the restoration of a new equilibrium without the analyst's participation is beyond the capacity of analyst and patient to achieve. This can result in a prolonged analysis or, if the analysis is terminated, the preexisting analytic equilibrium demands refinding. Because human perfection is never obtained, the analysand will seek the lost equilibrium by a new analysis.

In the hopeful cases, it is the new ego, as Nunberg (1930) has foreseen, that brings about termination in its quest for a richer life after termination. But we may not always be able to effect this. The ego’s capacity to bring about termination is a new and highly complex ego function that must be implanted, nurtured, and supported by the analyst throughout the duration of the analysis. Freud (1937) recognized many of the forces that limited the power of psychoanalysis. To these we must add another: the inability of many to acquire the necessary ego strength for termination. If we do not succeed in fostering this capacity, we face the danger of the sorcerer’s apprentice, who can cast the spell but does not know how to bring the magic he has evoked to an end.

Particularly difficult, but also deeply moving, are the former analysands who return to us when they are confronted with terminal illness. Now the aim is no longer cure, but to die in close relationship with a person who did not disappoint the analysand. Such returns, which incidentally occur more frequently when the analyst grows older, represent the final battle between libido and aggression. As the life force begins to ebb, these returning analysands have convinced me with particular force that the analyst remains the libidinal object often of last resort.

In spite of the large literature on termination, no paradigm of termination has been made part of the professional equipment of the psychoanalytic practitioner. In this absence, the psychoanalyst is under the pressure of his superego to terminate treatment, often prematurely, to escape the inner accusation that he exploits the analysand for libidinal or financial purposes. At the same time, he is under the opposite pressure, based on the idealization of psychoanalysis, that more would have been achieved had he or she been more experienced or knowledgeable. Though there are general signs that the analysand has entered the termination phase, the termination moment is still a matter of art rather than science. Some analysts and analysands are better at guessing when the optimal point has been reached than others. Premature terminations and unproductively prolonged analyses cannot, at the present time at least, be avoided.

REFERENCES


