

Latency in a Fragmented Culture: Industry, Belonging, and the Construction of the Cultural Ideal

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Abstract

In classical psychoanalytic literature, the latency phase is described as a period of drive sublimation and relative quiescence preceding adolescence. This paper proposes that latency is, at its core, a period in which the child builds an answer to two questions – where do I belong, and by what standard am I worthy – and that this process becomes harder to accomplish in contemporary culture when, instead of one coherent cultural ideal, the child receives contradictory standards from family, school, the peer group, and the digital world. The paper links the classical Freudian picture of latency with object relations, ego psychology, and self psychology, systematically threading them through the model of eight basic developmental competencies of personality (OLI IPP), and shows, through the lens of Erikson's industry-versus-inferiority axis, how three seemingly different processes converge: Kohut's decahexis of grandiosity, the Kleinian integration of aggression and libido, and the ego-psychological synthetic function – all of which, at bottom, describe the same capacity: to tolerate an encounter with a present limitation (momentary inferiority) without a collapse of sublimation, so that one can keep trying and still see oneself as competent even when something is not going well. From this theoretical framework, the paper draws concrete therapeutic implications for work with adult clients who carry unresolved "schoolyard problems," illustrated through a composite clinical vignette.

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Introduction

Why is latency the most neglected phase in the psychotherapeutic literature? Freud's early phases and the Oedipal phase receive hundreds of pages of explanation, an entire branch of developmental psychology is devoted to adolescence, while the period between the ages of six and eleven most often passes in a few sentences about the "quiescence of the drives" and "sublimation," as if nothing in particular were happening in the child during those years. This is strange, because it is precisely in this period that the child for the first time independently steps out of the family circle into the wider social world of school and the peer group, where it first receives an answer to the two questions that will accompany it throughout life: where do I belong and by what measure am I worth.

This paper starts from the thesis that latency is not a period of waiting but a period of active construction. The child at this age builds what we might call a cultural ideal, an inner image of what the community values and rewards, and measures itself against that image through industry, achievement, and belonging to the group. Erikson called this task the axis of industry versus inferiority. The classical formulation leaves open the question of what exactly happens when the child fails to build that sense of industry, competence, initiative, and productivity, and, even more important for the contemporary therapist, what happens when the community that ought to offer one coherent cultural ideal instead offers several mutually contradictory ones.

This need for reconceptualization is also recognized by contemporary literature: Maroudas, Wiseman, and Harel (2023) propose a shift from the image of latency as "psychosexual quiescence and psychic rigidity" toward middle childhood as a period of psychic growth, developmental challenges, and emotional fragility (the child is, by their metaphor, "at once a wave and a particle" – in constant growth, yet structured).

The paper has two aims. The theoretical aim is to show that the classical Freudian picture of latency by itself does not sufficiently explain what actually happens in this phase, and that three additional theoretical lenses – object relations, ego psychology, and self psychology – reveal three faces of the same process, which the model of the eight basic developmental competencies of OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy systematically links with the classical psychoanalytic theory of latency into one coherent account. The clinical and contemporary aim is to show that the construction of the cultural ideal is today made difficult in a way that Freud's era did not know, because the child simultaneously receives measures from the family, the school, the peer group, and the digital world that rarely agree; adult clients who come to therapy carrying an unresolved "schoolyard problem," a chronic insecurity about their own worth and their place in the world, often carry precisely the consequence of that fragmentation. The paper concludes with a consideration of what this means for therapeutic work: how to recognize the contradictory inner voices that the client has internalized and how to help the client build his own, integrated cultural ideal. A comprehensive overview of a century of changes in the understanding of latency – from Freud's psychosexual theory to contemporary dynamic systems models – is given by Knight (2014).

The Classical Freudian Picture of Latency

The latency phase begins after the resolution of the Oedipal conflict and lasts until puberty. Freud (1905) saw this period as a relatively calm pause in drive development, but “calm” here does not mean empty – a great deal of inner work is needed in order to achieve and preserve that calm. In order for the raw sexual and aggressive drives to be contained and redirected into learning, play, and social adaptation, three pillars must be established.

The first pillar is a relatively consolidated superego, a psychic agency that does not allow the breakthrough of the raw impulse. Freud (1923) describes its formation as the introjection of parental prohibitions and values, a process that transforms the superego from an external authority into an internal one. Without this consolidation, the drive is neither postponed nor redirected but erupts through acting-out or regressive behavior.

The second pillar is an ego capable of sublimation. Freud (1923) attributes to the ego its own energy that propels it toward the mastery of reality, and it is precisely this energy, together with that released by the repression of the drives, that the ego in latency channels into activities of cultural and social significance. The well-known image of the rider and the horse (Freud, 1923) here takes on concrete content: the horse is temporarily reined in thanks to the superego, while the rider guides it toward new, socially accepted goals.

The third pillar is external: culture and the peer group offer real and symbolic objects toward which the drive energy is directed. School, sport, art, and play function as channels of sublimation that lead to intellectual and moral development, not merely to the discharge of energy (Freud, 1930).

From dyad to triad. Franieck and Günter (2010) situate latency within the continuity of the earlier developmental path: in the earliest period the child experiences the world exclusively through the mother, in a narcissistic fusion without a clear boundary between the self and the other, in what Freud (1930) calls the oceanic feeling. With the arrival of the father as a third, the child learns that relationships are not exclusively fusional; the father functions as a representative of law, the world, and culture, and his presence interrupts that early narcissistic dyad and introduces the child into a wider, real world. The adequate presence of that function in the Oedipal phase enables separation, and in latency that same father is transformed into something broader: the representative of school, culture, and group values. It is precisely in this transition that the superego is consolidated, within which two separate, kindred concepts further develop.

Ego ideal versus cultural ideal. This distinction deserves special attention, because it is often lost in the clinical literature. Franieck and Günter, drawing on Freud’s conception from “The Future of an Illusion” (1927), describe the internalization of culture as a two-stage process. The first level encompasses the oldest, universal prohibitions (incest, cannibalism, murder), whose inhibition makes the survival of civilization possible and whose resolution through the Oedipal conflict forms the superego itself, what Freud calls the vehicle of civilization. The second level, active precisely in latency, encompasses the secondary, culturally specific values by which the already formed superego is supplemented. The ego ideal originates from narcissistic strivings tied to individual perfection and competence, what the child wishes to become for itself. The cultural ideal is tied to a narcissistic reminiscence in the direction of belonging to the group, what the group asks of the child so that it may belong. The first

measures “how good I am,” the second measures “how much I belong,” and children in latency build both measures simultaneously, often without awareness that these are two different demands. Reich (1954) sums up this difference in a formula: the ego ideal expresses what one wishes to be, while the superego expresses what one ought to be.

The origin of the concept of the cultural ideal in Freud’s own work. It is worth pointing out that the concept of the cultural ideal, although Franieck and Günter (2010) formalize and name it, is not their independent innovation but derives directly from Freud’s (1921) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. There Freud describes how the individual, in joining a group, may abandon his own ego ideal and replace it with the group ideal, which is symbolically embodied in the leader, because the leader absorbs the idealized traits of each member of the group. This replacement brings a sense of liberation and triumph, the same narcissistic quality that, according to Freud (1927), lies at the basis of cultural pride: the satisfaction that culture affords its participants is of a narcissistic nature. It rests on pride in what has already been achieved, and that satisfaction is further reinforced by comparison with other cultures that have chosen different ideals. Franieck and Günter merely name and empirically elaborate a mechanism that Freud had already described: the cultural ideal is a group ego ideal, accepted by the same narcissistic logic by which the individual accepts his own.

Terminological evolution: from the ideal ego to the superego. The concept itself went through several revisions in Freud’s work, which explains why the terms are today used less precisely than they should be. In “On Narcissism” (1914) Freud introduces the ideal ego and the ego ideal almost interchangeably, as an agency that inherits infantile narcissism and measures the actual ego against that ideal – what we would today call conscience. In *Group Psychology* (1921) the term ideal ego is abandoned, and the ideal and the “critical agency” (conscience) merge into the ego ideal, the first root of what will become the superego in 1923. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) the superego is constituted as a separate agency, the heir of the Oedipus complex. Only in the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933) does Freud make a fine distinction: the superego is the “vehicle of the ego ideal,” while the ideal itself remains tied to the Oedipal parents as idealized figures.

Later authors resolve this terminological ambiguity in kindred ways. Loewald (1962) distinguishes them by their relation to time: the ideal ego is the earliest, narcissistic stage in which perfection is imagined only in the present, because the difference between the self and the world has not yet been established; only through the integration of the Oedipal objects, at the very beginning of latency, does that future projection become truly one’s own, and the superego is formed. Hammerman (1965), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1975), and Hanly (1984) arrive at a kindred conclusion by different paths: the ego ideal remains closer to primary narcissism and more primitive identification, the superego closer to the Oedipus complex and secondary identification. The common thread, regardless of the author: the ego ideal is a question of “I would like to be,” the superego a question of “I ought to be” – the distinction that Reich condensed into a single sentence.

A garrison at the level of civilization as well. Freud (1916–17), in Lecture XXII of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, describes the development of the libido with a military image: like an army advancing through territory, the libido at each developmental point leaves behind a garrison, a portion of its forces that holds that position. When the advance later meets strong resistance, for example in the form of the

Oedipal conflict, it does not retreat at random but returns exactly to the point where the garrison was strongest, where the defense was already prepared. This image explains why fixation at a particular developmental point, once established, is difficult to abandon, even when the external danger that provoked it has long since passed – a garrison once posted rarely withdraws of its own accord, because regrouping would require the complete conquest of the next developmental territory into which the garrison should be moved, which is not possible with the current capacities. The same military metaphor appears in Freud at the level of civilization itself. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Freud writes that civilization masters the dangerous aggressiveness of the individual by weakening and disarming it and by establishing within him an agency that watches over it, “like a garrison in a conquered city.” The superego is itself a garrison, but a garrison that civilization posts within the individual in the name of culture, not a garrison that the individual builds for himself at points of developmental fixation. These two meanings of the same image, one individual-developmental, the other civilizational, show how deeply the military metaphor was built into Freud’s way of thinking about how control, once established, is maintained long after the external danger has passed.

Franieck and Günter (2010) further deepen this distinction by tying it to two layers of narcissism from classical theory. Secondary narcissism, self-love that arises from introjection and identification with the object, is the root of the ego ideal, an already familiar connection in the psychoanalytic literature. The authors, however, add that the cultural ideal too is rooted in narcissism, but in its earlier, more primary layer. The authors draw on Lou Andreas-Salomé (1962) and her idea of a “dual orientation of narcissism,” according to which one direction of narcissism is oriented toward the attainment of individuality and the other toward merging with the whole, and they introduce the concept of an impulse of narcissistic reminiscence: an unconscious trace of that early, dual orientation that remains embedded in the psyche throughout development, like the root of a plant that remains in the soil while the stem grows toward the light. The cultural ideal, the authors argue, is not arbitrary but represents which of the two possible orientations (individuality or merging) a given culture chooses as its basic matrix. Their empirical study confirms this: German children in the research build their cultural ideal around individual competence, an orientation toward the attainment of individuality, while Brazilian children build their cultural ideal around family merging, an orientation toward joining with the whole.

Here it is worth clarifying a seeming paradox, because one might easily think that belonging is reserved only for cultures turned toward merging, while the individualistic orientation leads to a kind of cultural non-belonging. This is not true. Both orientations are equally paths to belonging, merely two different paths to the same goal. The Brazilian child achieves belonging through merging with the family and the group, through how well it preserves the common bond. The German child achieves belonging through individuality, because it belongs to a culture that recognizes and rewards competence, boundaries, and independence as a value. Individualism is not “I belong nowhere, and I do not need that,” but “I belong to a culture that values precisely this kind of self-reliance.” In short, the ego ideal rests on secondary narcissism and asks “how good am I by my own, personal measure?”, while the cultural ideal rests on primary narcissism and asks “through which of the two basic orientations, individuality or merging, does my culture achieve and reward belonging?”

Franiack and Günter (2010) add that this process is not culturally neutral: cultures with a stronger, independent conception of the self reward standing out and competitiveness, while interdependent cultures reward attunement and solidarity: two different paths to the same group cohesion. When the family culture is not in conflict with the wider social environment, the child more easily internalizes the cultural ideal and develops a sense of belonging that further motivates learning and cooperation.

The dominant anxieties of this period arise from that same consolidation. Freud (1923, 1926) notes the transition from the sexual-aggressive anxiety of the earlier phases toward moral anxiety, the fear of punishment by the superego, and realistic anxiety, the fear of failure and of the loss of parental love. Novick and Novick (2005) add anxiety tied to competence and belonging to the group, while Gilmore (1990) describes the particular sensitivity of children of this age to exclusion and shaming, which is expressed as shame and inhibition or as hyperactive compensation. At the basis of these fears stands not bare survival but the ability to preserve the narcissistic equilibrium in the face of the demands of the peer group and of culture.

Expanding the Theoretical Picture: Three Additional Lenses

The classical picture explains why the drive quiets down, but it does not sufficiently explain what the child actually builds while the drive is quiet. Three theoretical currents – object relations, ego psychology, and self psychology – reveal three faces of the same process of integration.

Latency as a new rehearsal of the depressive position. Klein (1935, 1940) situates the depressive position in the first year of life: the moment when the infant integrates the good and the bad image of the mother into one, whole person and for the first time becomes capable of true ambivalence. That integration is not achieved once and for all; every new developmental challenge tests it anew, and the peer group in latency is the first such challenge outside the family circle – rivalry and friendship toward the same person, a failure that must be endured without the collapse of the image of the self. Segal (1957) distinguishes two outcomes: authentic reparation, in which the child endures disappointment and derives real effort from it, and the manic defense, which flees into compulsive, triumphant achievement. The difference is already visible in the schoolyard after a quarrel over a ball: the child who tolerates ambivalence says “I’m angry at him, but he’s still my friend” and returns to the game the next day; the child who cannot tolerate it splits the friend into wholly good or wholly bad.

The transition from play to work. Hartmann’s (1939/1958) synthetic function of the ego explains how the mind connects inner desire with external limitation into a unified act. In latency this function takes on a concrete form: the unstructured play of earlier childhood passes into work, an activity tied to rules, delayed reward, and external evaluation – the school task, sporting discipline, the long-term project. That leap is the ego-psychological concretization of sublimation: the ability to endure delay, accept the rule, and persist through frustration to a real result.

The transformation of the grandiose self. Kohut (1971, 1977) describes how the child’s grandiosity, the need to be perfect and to receive admiration, is gradually transformed into realistic ambitions, under the condition of optimal frustration. In latency this mirroring function is taken over in part by the peer group, which carries a risk that parental mirroring does not carry: a friend can openly win. Benign rivalry allows the child to test grandiosity under real conditions, to lose sometimes and remain

connected; when this process succeeds, grandiosity matures into an ambition that can withstand defeat, and when it fails, the child remains dependent on winning as the only proof of its own worth.

Bion (1977) sees grandiosity and belonging to the group as two opposing forces, narcissism and sociality, mediated by the capacity for “feeling with” and “feeling like” the other members of the group; when the group rejects a member, a narcissistic wound arises, a threat to the very sense of worth, not merely an ordinary failure. Rosenfeld (1987) and Green (2001) add nuances that prevent the automatic equation of narcissism with pathology: Rosenfeld separates the pathological narcissistic object relation from narcissistic protection, a healthy builder of self-esteem, while Green distinguishes positive, “life” narcissism, which strives toward integration, from negative, “deadly” narcissism, which strives to reduce the investment in the self to zero. The aim of latency, then, is not the abolition of narcissism but its maturation: healthy narcissism is not the opposite of social belonging but, as Bion suggests, its precondition, because a child without any self-esteem has nothing from which to build the capacity for “feeling with” others.

We propose that these three processes – the integration of ambivalence, the synthesis of desire and rule, and the maturation of grandiosity – be read as three descriptions, from three different angles, of the development of the same ability: the ability to endure limitation without a collapse of sublimation.

OLI Basic Developmental Competencies in the Latency Period

OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy views development through eight basic developmental competencies. These are functional abilities for processing and managing emotions. Unlike defense mechanisms, they do not distort reality. They are built gradually, through practice, until they become automatic, similar to walking or speaking.

Latency is a second chance for all of them. If some ability had until that moment been poorly developed, the new environment, school and the peer group, can strengthen it. But equally, if the environment does not provide what is needed, latency can further entrench an already existing arrest.

Neutralization and mentalization. These two abilities work side by side: neutralization quiets the affect and turns it into energy directed toward solving a problem; mentalization understands one’s own and others’ actions as meaningful, on the basis of wishes, needs, and intentions. Latency is a second chance for both, under the condition of a stable environment in which adults respond calmly to affect and the child is allowed to speak about feelings before immediately acting on them. Without that condition, two outcomes arise: hyperintellectualization, in which the child philosophizes about motives but the thinking never turns into a real act (from the outside it resembles industry, on the inside it is an arrest), or the abandonment of thinking in favor of direct discharge through action and risky decisions, without thinking ahead. Morra (2020), in the case of a child preoccupied with the theme of infinity and death, cautiously raises the question of whether early philosophizing may also have a healthier side, when it is shared with an adult who understands its emotional meaning, rather than being a pure defense against anxiety.

Object integration and object constancy. These two abilities too depend on the same condition: a consistent, structured environment that acts from a position of friendly

power, an authority that is at once firm and well-meaning. This principle is confirmed by the most successful therapeutic approaches for more severe disorders – borderline personality disorder, addictions, antisocial personality organization: Winnicott (1960) called it the holding and containing environment, Jones (1953) elaborated it into the model of the therapeutic community, Linehan (1993; Linehan et al., 1991) built it into dialectical behavior therapy. A school and a family that together provide such an environment strengthen this ability; when they fail to do so, which in the 21st century is ever more difficult, because the child today passes through the family, the school, the peer group, and the digital world, none of which any longer has a monopoly over its time and attention, chaotic behavior has ever more serious consequences and hinders the return to sublimation in the service of autonomy.

Frustration tolerance. We divide frustration into four kinds according to developmental phase: oral (receiving, waiting), anal (giving, control), phallic (rivalry, defeat), and narcissistic (the self-object needs for merging and idealization). Sublimation turns the raw, aggressive-libidinal force that frustration awakens into the ability to wait, to share, and to compete healthily; without it there arises passive avoidance or a desperate, unfair demand for immediate satisfaction. Narcissistic frustration deserves particular attention: here sublimation turns the need for mirroring and idealization into mature ambition, and the child learns that the absence of complete admiration does not abolish its worth. Without mastery, the outcome is similar across all four kinds: the child avoids situations in which frustration might appear, and that avoidance over time shapes ever larger life decisions, at the cost of development in that area coming permanently to a halt.

Tolerance of ambivalence. This ability is, above all, the ability to make a decision: in order to sublimate a loss, a defeat, or a forbidden wish, the child must endure the ambivalence between the options offered and its own wishes and possibilities, choose one option, and stay with it. Segal (1957) links this ability with the depressive position: out of the ability to endure the loss of the whole, loved object is built the very ability of symbolization, the foundation of all sublimation. Klein (1957) adds that gratitude, the ability to acknowledge and receive the good that the object has given, grows from the same source as reparation; we propose that gratitude, following this logic, precedes sublimation in the sequence of the child's experience. Latency daily offers small occasions for this practice through the choice of activities and friends; when the choice remains bearable, tolerance of ambivalence strengthens, and when it fails, defensive patterns develop – superficiality, the avoidance of decisions – which in adolescence begin to shape the rest of life.

Initiative and will. These two abilities constitute what Erikson calls industry, and both rest on sublimation: free will comes when the child learns to direct persistent effort toward a real goal, instead of remaining trapped in counter-will or blind obedience; developmental initiative comes when the child learns to turn the risk of exposure and competition into a productive undertaking, instead of into reckless pushing ahead or complete withdrawal. What sets latency apart is that these two processes for the first time gain a real, external stage outside the family: the child who succeeds emerges with the experience that effort and risk bring a result, the child in whom sublimation fails emerges with the opposite experience, which becomes the basis for further avoidance in adult life.

These eight competencies do not function separately. A child who cannot tolerate frustration will also more hardly tolerate ambivalence toward a friend who has just frustrated it. A child without stable object constancy will more hardly find the will to persist when alone, outside the parental gaze. It is precisely this interweaving that explains why latency, a seemingly narrow developmental phase, carries within itself such a large part of the psychic architecture.

Industry versus Inferiority: The Knot of Integration

Erikson (1950) called this developmental crisis industry versus inferiority. It is interesting that in everyday speech we use the expression “laziness” for the opposite of industry. But the word laziness itself carries a moral overtone that obscures what is actually happening. A child who fails to develop industry rarely experiences itself as lazy, morally deficient, unwilling to invest effort. It experiences itself as inadequate, structurally incapable of producing what is asked of it, regardless of the effort it invests. This difference is not merely terminological: we see laziness as a choice that can be corrected by the decision to invest more effort; inadequacy is a lack of capacity that a decision by itself does not repair.

As we have proposed, the three additional theoretical lenses can be read as three descriptions of the same process, seen from three different points. Kohut’s decaathesis of grandiosity describes this process through the fate of narcissism: the child in latency practices surviving a blow to its own grandiose image of itself – defeat, criticism, and comparison with peers who are better – without that image disintegrating into fragments. The Kleinian integration of aggression and libido describes the same process through the fate of the object: the child in latency practices enduring that the same teacher, the same parent, the same friend simultaneously loves and frustrates, without splitting into a wholly good and a wholly bad figure. Also, the child learns not to split the image of itself upon encountering its limitations: industry implies that we go on trying and attempting, even after failed attempts. A few failures do not mean absolute inferiority, and being bad at something is the first step in becoming good at something. The ego-psychological synthetic function describes the same process through the fate of action: the child practices connecting inner desire with external limitation into one, coherent act that moves toward a real goal, instead of remaining torn between desire and rule.

This formulation also changes the clinical picture of what we call the sense of inferiority in the adult client. A client who says in therapy “I was never good enough” rarely describes one, isolated failure; he describes a chronic inability to integrate failure, criticism, or comparison into his own narrative without a fragmentation of the self. When a limitation threatens the self instead of being merely information about the current state of a skill, the only available defense becomes either the complete avoidance of exposure, outwardly resembling modesty or a lack of ambition, or a compulsive, manic achievement that never allows itself a moment of real, sad, but bearable failure. Industry, in the full sense, is not the absence of failure but the ability for failure to occur, to be felt, and to be integrated, while the child nonetheless remains in the game.

The child may emerge from the latency period with a real, resilient sense of competence (industry), or with one of two distortions, chronic avoidance of exposure or compulsive, never-good-enough achievement. The following section shows why a healthy

developmental outcome of latency is today less certain than in Freud's time. Once the child had to integrate limitations before one, coherent measure of worth, whereas today it does so before several, mutually contradictory systems of values.

The Problem of the Fragmented Cultural Ideal

Freud imagined latency as a period of the calming of the drives that requires a predictable environment and consistent rules. Sarnoff (1976) names this requirement precisely, as the work of latency: latency is not a passive respite but active psychic work that the child must carry out, and that work is possible only in a sufficiently reliable environment, protected from sexual and aggressive hyperstimulation. Instead of such a lull, the contemporary child receives constant hyperstimulation: media, social networks, and popular culture ceaselessly incite sexualization, aggression, consumption, and competitive logic, and thereby delay or hinder the development of sublimation and intellectual curiosity. Morra (2020) describes contemporary families as hyperstimulating and "fluid" in their own structure and roles, incapable of freeing the child from Oedipal and pre-Oedipal attachments, precisely the function that the father as a third ought to perform. When that work of latency is absent, the child is pushed toward an early, unstable process of adolescence, built, as Denis (2003) and Guignard (2011) describe it, on quicksand, without a stable inner structure that could support that process. The pervasiveness of digital devices, if not accompanied by adult guidance, becomes one of the main sources of this hyperstimulation in children of latency age (Bergès-Bounes and Forget, 2017). Families are often chaotic and inconsistent, and the wider system of values contradictory: what adults promote as an ideal (a good pupil, an obedient child, responsibility) collides with what the peer group rewards – popularity, transgression, the breaking of rules. On social networks this contradiction is further amplified: the child is at once called upon to be a "nerd" and a "cool kid," obedient and rebellious, moral and pragmatic.

Empirical material gives this a cautious frame: a meta-analysis of 87 studies with 159,425 children (Eirich et al., 2022) finds a WEAK, but significant and correlational (not causal) link between longer screen time and behavioral problems in children up to age 12 ($r \approx .11$ for externalizing, $r \approx .07$ for internalizing; the authors explicitly warn that the link is not to be read causally). Theoretically more relevant for latency is the proposed mechanism: screens may crowd out sleep, movement, social exchange, and learning – precisely the activities through which the child builds competencies and the cultural ideal. The influence of the digital world specifically on the early latency period is examined in detail by Meersand (2017).

Jovanović (2024a) traces this change through the concept of the vertical unconscious. Unlike the horizontal unconscious, organized around repression as the dominant mechanism, the vertical unconscious rests on splitting and atomization, new defense mechanisms that lead to a state in which the conscious parts of the mind remain mutually unconnected. A child exposed to an overload of external stimuli – informational, technological, sexual – does not develop one, coherent ego that integrates experience, but an ego that functions in parallel, weakly connected segments: the version of the self that exists for the parents, the version for teachers, the version for peers in person, and the version for the anonymous or semi-anonymous audience on the network rarely meet in one, reflective consciousness that would compare and reconcile them. Jovanović and Stevanović (2024) trace a parallel change on the side of the superego: the path from the

neuroses of conflict of the Victorian age, in which the ego dreaded a strict, moralistic superego, through the narcissistic culture with a narcissistic ego ideal, to the perverse culture in which the superego is, in their words, demolished, and the exploitation of the other and the drawing of the other into one's own exploitation become the new normal state of mind.

These two works, read together, give a more precise language for what we have described as the difference between the ego ideal and the cultural ideal. The child in latency, according to the classical model, builds one cultural ideal that comes through the family as its first representative, and that ideal, however strict or mild, however individualistically or collectivistically colored, remains one, internally coherent.

Franiack and Günter (2010) showed this cultural coloring empirically: in a study with 41 children in Germany and 41 in Brazil (Franiack, 2005), German children and parents were organized around a model of individual competence (self-reliance, personal achievement), Brazilian children around a model of family idealization (solidarity, social empathy). The most striking finding: the variable "brave self," parental encouragement of the child toward boldness and risk-taking, had opposite effects in each culture – in Brazilian children associated with greater social empathy, in German children with greater anxiety. The same parental act, in other words, does not carry one, universal psychic meaning but is refracted through the cultural matrix of the child. If even one, coherent cultural filter differs so markedly in its processing of the same signal, it is hard to imagine what happens to a child who must simultaneously process four filters – familial, scholastic, peer, and digital – that are mutually opposed. It should be emphasized that this study shows the variation of the cultural ideal between two milieus, not fragmentation within a single child; its transfer to the situation of simultaneous, contradictory measures in the same child represents a theoretical assumption of this paper, not a direct empirical finding.

Developmental Needs of Children in the Latency Period

In order for the latency period to fulfill its function, the child needs five conditions in the environment, whose absence directly explains the fragmentation described in the previous section: (1) stability and predictability, a reliable, structured environment with consistent adult figures (Morra, 2020); (2) clear, consistent boundaries, which now are not merely prohibitions as in the Oedipal phase but frameworks for acting, and which, when contradictory between home, school, and the internet, leave the child without an orientation point; (3) group belonging and cultural fit, the harmony or disharmony between the family culture and the culture of the wider community, which directly determines how easily the child internalizes a sense of belonging, most sharply in children of migrant families (Franiack and Günter, 2010); (4) structured fields of competence, school, sport, and play as arenas where energy is sublimated into competition and knowledge; and (5) the affective availability of the parents, an emotional anchorage that accompanies the child's first successes and failures in the external world. When these conditions are met, the aggressive and sexual drives are sublimated into learning, play, and exploration, a healthy ego ideal is formed, and a cultural ideal that do not exclude one another; their absence leads to different patterns of pathological development, depending on which condition was most lacking.

Pathological Development in the Latency Phase

Freud (1905, 1923) sees the failure of latency as a consequence of insufficiently stable boundaries and incomplete repression: the drive remains raw and erupts through acting-out, aggressiveness, or maladapted sexual behavior. Erikson (1950, 1963) distributes this failure across two poles: maladaptation arises when the environment overemphasizes achievement, the child develops hyperintellectualization and compulsive achievement, and represses its emotional life through rationalization and rigidity. Anna Freud (see Sandler and Freud, 1985) sees early intellectualization in latency as a worrying sign of a possible schizoid structure; Morra (2020) nuances this assessment through the case of Filip, a nine-year-old from a deeply disturbed family who early on asked the therapist “Is God omnipotent? If He is, then He is evil,” and after eighteen months of work arrived at the question of his own mortality. According to Morra’s interpretation, this early philosophizing was not a defense that replaces feeling but an attempt by the child to process affect at the symbolic level, made possible precisely because he had a therapist who followed its emotional meaning: the same, seemingly worrying phenomenon can be both a symptom and a sign that the child is building the ability to think what it would otherwise have to evacuate through action.

Within a broader, as yet unpublished theoretical work on the characterology of OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, we propose the working hypothesis that malignity and maladaptation are organized into a recognizable network of latency subtypes, from inert-withdrawing to grandiose virtuoso patterns, connected by what we call the ternary schema of the will (Jovanović, 2013): a deficit of will says “I cannot,” a rigid will says “I must,” a mature will says “I choose.” We here only announce this network, not as a confirmed classification but as a proposal elaborated in the aforementioned work.

An exception are hysterical characters, who typically do not develop any of these subtypes but show a lack of latency consolidation altogether, because latency is interrupted by pubertal sexuality before the working ego functions have had time to consolidate. This finding reminds us that the fragmentation of the cultural ideal is not the only path to incomplete consolidation: in these characters the Oedipal theme remains the dominant organizing force.

The problem of latency also gives us a better understanding of the well-known personality disorders from the DSM classification. Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is an extreme form of what was supposed to be built, rigid conscientiousness and a need for control (Freud, 1908) – in OLI terms, a deficit of tolerance of ambivalence, where the person, through compulsive control, abolishes ambivalence instead of integrating it. The avoidant pattern arises when the child internalizes a chronic sense of inferiority and a fear of peer evaluation – a deficit of initiative, where the person organizes his whole life around avoiding the scene on which comparison could occur. Disorders in the spectrum of narcissism arise when an adequate distribution of narcissistic energy between the ego ideal and the cultural ideal does not take place (Franićek and Günter, 2010) – a deficit in the tolerance of narcissistic frustrations, where grandiosity remains raw and dependent on continuous external confirmation.

These categories are not always pure; a child often carries a combination of deficits, especially when it is exposed to an unattuned family and wider culture as a result of migration or social marginalization, where a chronic sense of non-belonging overlaps

with depressive tendencies and identity confusion. Anna Freud (1936) and Hartmann (1939/1958, 1964) add an important note here: the abilities for learning, concentration, and the execution of tasks, what they call the working ego functions, are central capacities that are built in latency, and their deficit rarely remains isolated to one, pure diagnostic category but rather threads through several of them simultaneously.

Clinical Illustration

The following vignette is composite and anonymized, assembled so as to illustrate the dynamics described in the previous sections, not to represent one, recognizable person.

The client is a little over fifty years old and holds a managerial position in a technology company. She came to therapy because she is considering leaving the corporate world for independent consultancy entrepreneurship. She says of herself that she is prone to “piling things onto herself” and that she is accompanied by the chronic question “am I good enough,” despite the fact that she proved herself in her career long ago; independent work would mean that she must prove her worth to herself, without an institution that delivers that confirmation through a title and a salary.

Her experience of latency carries exactly the kind of doubleness that we have described. As a child she associated with older children, striving to catch up with them; when she surpassed them, the teacher would say in front of the class, “if that younger one can, why can’t you?” Her effort was not seen in any situation, because both catching up and surpassing were taken for granted, not noticed as progress. This is a vicious circle in which the invisibility of effort, instead of rendering it meaningless, only entrenches it.

The same dynamic erupts on family vacations as well: she would rather sit on the beach, but she almost always takes part in the active holiday with the teenagers, because it seems to her that she is missing out on something. In our work we arrived at the difference between “I can do this, but I won’t” and “I can do this, and therefore I must, in order to show that I can” – the latter is Rank’s (1936) conscientiousness of duty in its pure form, an act that looks like a free choice but is in fact a proving of oneself before an inner court that does not accept refusal as a legitimate answer.

The sentence “he could, he just won’t” we usually tie to the immature anger of dependent structures that do not yet experience the object as limited; maturation implies a shift toward “he cannot, and that is sad, we all have limits.” In this client that same sentence today stands before her from the other side: as a mother she should be the one who without guilt says “I could dive with you, but I won’t,” not feeling that she is depriving anyone of anything. That same ability to say “I can, but I choose otherwise” without a need to justify it with proof is also what she lacks in order to make the decision to leave the corporate framework as a free choice, and not as yet another field on which she must prove success in advance before she even tries.

Therapeutic Implications

When an adult client carries an unresolved schoolyard problem, therapeutic work targets three abilities that we can view hierarchically: each higher ability rests on the foundation of the preceding, lower one.

Recognizing the contradictory inner voices. The therapist’s first task is not to immediately seek one clear measure behind the client’s insecurity, but to help the client identify and recognize several different, often opposing inner voices, each formed in a

different segment of the latency period. In the client from the previous section, one voice demands that she catch up with the older children, another demands that she surpass them, a third tells her that her kind of “feminine” competence is not a real value in the “masculine” engineering world. While these voices are unconscious and unacknowledged, they act as one, monolithic verdict, “you are never good enough.” Only when they are separated and named individually can the client evaluate each one for itself, instead of enduring them as a single, unquestionable judgment. Object integration and tolerance of ambivalence are the key abilities that must carry this process.

Recognizing the voices, by itself, does not free the client from the need to satisfy each of them. In the client from the previous section we observe a need to be good enough for the older children, and for the teacher, and for the engineering culture that does not recognize her kind of competence as valuable. There is present a fantasy of her own perfection that would at the same time please each of these voices, which in reality is impossible. Therapeutic work here targets precisely that fantasy: what Kohut calls the decathexis of grandiosity is the gradual withdrawal of narcissistic investment from the idea that there exists one, final measure that would silence all the voices, and its redirection into a real but limited ambition. In the client, this is seen most clearly in the difference between “I must prove” and “I can, but I won’t”: the first sentence still seeks the approval of the voices, the second no longer seeks anything, because worth no longer depends on whether someone else has noticed the effort. Only when that need for confirmation eases does space open for the next task: now that we no longer have to prove worth to any individual voice, we can try to combine the different values for which the different voices advocate into one, coherent image of the self. In other words, it is necessary for the client to develop, to a sufficient degree, tolerance of the frustration of narcissistic needs, before moving on to the next level.

Hartmann’s synthetic function, which we have described as the ability to connect inner desire with external limitation into a coherent act, takes on a new application in therapy: instead of connecting desire with limitation in a single task, the client learns to combine several conflicting identity demands into one, bearable image of the self. The aim is an integration in which competence and belonging, academic success and gender role, effort and its recognition can coexist, without one having to defeat the other.

Building one’s own, integrated cultural ideal. The last and most demanding step is for the client, often for the first time in life, to consciously choose by what measure he wishes to measure himself, instead of accepting the inherited measure as given. This step in practice rarely happens through insight by itself; it happens through repeated practice in real, everyday situations, precisely those that originally formed the problem. In the client, this meant literally uttering the sentence “I can, but I won’t” in the family context and remaining in her own body while the reaction of those around her comes, instead of automatically withdrawing into proving. In the taxonomy of therapeutic goals of OLI IPP, through this working-through and practice of the sentence “I can, but I won’t,” free will is developed through an explicit tolerance of another’s disappointment. The client knows that his act may perhaps fail another’s expectation and remains present with the discomfort that follows, instead of avoiding it in advance or compensating for it with subsequent excessive effort. The therapist here does not offer a new, more correct measure that should replace the old one; the therapist holds a space in which the client discovers that refusal need not entail punishment and that a limitation need not be accompanied by guilt.

These three levels follow the sequence established through the work. First, object integration and tolerance of ambivalence (Klein, Segal) are checked and consolidated. On that foundation one can further work on the gradual decathexis of grandiosity (Kohut), by which tolerance of the frustration of narcissistic needs is developed. Finally, the synthetic function of the ego (Hartmann) applied to the whole identity strengthens the mature will.

Object integration and tolerance of ambivalence are built through a renewed working-through of the depressive position in the face of new challenges of culture, so that the self and the object can be seen as good enough despite the contradictory demands of that same, fragmented culture. The decathexis of grandiosity further frees the client from the need for constant confirmation from others, through the development of real self-esteem and ambitions, by which tolerance of the frustration of narcissistic needs is strengthened. In everyday language, the client accepts and endures that the world cannot be pleased. The synthetic function enables the client to satisfy his drive needs through willed action attuned to the aspects of culture that are meaningful to him, which brings a sense of competence: "I can function in this culture or community. I am good enough, I am able to learn diligently and master the skills that are meaningful to me for life, and I do so in accordance with my talents and limits, within the communities important to me to which I feel I belong." The questions of latency - the questions of belonging to a culture, of contribution to the community, and of one's own worth within the community - remain present throughout life. The mastery of sublimation is an ever-current task that therapy can continue where development, because of a fragmented environment, came to a halt.

Conclusion

Latency is not a pause in development, nor an idle stretch before adolescence. It is a period in which the child builds two answers, one to the question of how much it is worth, and the other to the question of where it belongs. The classical Freudian picture, object relations theory, ego psychology, and self psychology describe, each in its own language, the same developmental knot: the ability for sublimation to be practiced and maintained despite limitations and failures. For some things we are talented and diligently develop that talent; for others we are inferior, but through effort we become better to the extent that life demands; and for some we remain inferior, and that is all right, because we need not all be good at everything, just as a top athlete need not also be a top mathematician. Most of us would feel inferior before the task of traveling into space, but that does not mean we are not enterprising, productive, and competent in those spheres that we ourselves have chosen as important.

This developmental task has always been demanding. Freud's time offered the child, at least in principle, one, coherent measure by which that task was solved. Today the child rarely has that support. The family, the school, the peer group, and the digital world offer parallel, often conflicting measures, and the child must integrate not one limitation but several, mutually contradictory demands before it even reaches the question of whether it is "good enough." The vertical unconscious and the fragmentation of the superego, which Jovanović and Stevanović describe in the contemporary cultural context, shape the everyday experience of the child in the classroom and the schoolyard

and leave a trace that the therapist meets decades later, in a seemingly successful, competent adult client who still does not know by what measure to measure himself. (This claim should be understood as a hypothesis, not as an established historical fact: the Vienna of Freud's era too was culturally heterogeneous. What is asserted here is the relative increase in the number and mutual contradiction of the measures to which the contemporary child is exposed.)

This paper is an attempt to return latency to the center of attention as a living, active process that continues to unfold, or remains unfinished even in adulthood. Further research could empirically examine to what extent the fragmentation of the cultural ideal correlates with specific OLI competency deficits and whether therapeutic work that explicitly targets the synthetic function applied to identity, as proposed here, accelerates integration better than an approach that targets individual symptoms. Until then, it remains for every therapist, in encountering the client's own schoolyard problem, to recognize that it is important to work through the confusion that arises when the client tries to evaluate himself according to several mutually conflicting criteria.

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