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BEYOND THE LAST TABOO: *Talking About Money In Psychotherapy*

In 1986 a psychoanalyst, David Krueger, edited a collection of articles, *The Last Taboo: Money as Symbol and Reality in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis*. As the first part of its title implied, he considered money a taboo subject which was not being adequately dealt with in our clinical work. He contended that, because of this taboo, patients and therapists were colluding to avoid discussion of money in treatment.

After reading Krueger's book, I became interested the idea of the money taboo and I started paying attention to money as an issue in my work with clients. In fall 1999, in *Clinical Social Work Journal*, I published an article called "The Money Taboo: Its effects in everyday life and in the practice of psychotherapy," in which I claimed that: *A cultural taboo regarding discussion of money affects psychotherapists as well as the lay public. As a result, the psychological literature regarding money is sparse while issues relating to money are seldom addressed in our training, our self-analyses or the treatment of our patients.*

When we do talk or write about money, we focus primarily on the fee we charge for our services and tend to ignore the psychological importance of money in shaping our clients intrapsychic and interpersonal lives. In response to this trend, in 2008 I wrote an article, "Beyond the Fee: Addressing Non-Fee, Money-Related Issues."

A most recent example of avoidance of talking about non-fee based problems occurred during the discussion period after the presentation upon which this paper is based. Although the presentation did not focus on the fee, every question or comment offered by an audience of 26 therapists focused only on issues such as how to set the fee, why so many of us find it difficult to ask for payment, what to do if a client does not pay, or how to raise the fee or respond to requests to lower the fee.

This continued even when I pointed out what was happening. No doubt our ability to earn a good living is of significant importance. But, to focus only on money issues that affect us and not those that affect our clients, represents one type of money based countertransference, characterized by an avoidance which diminishes our ability to truly understand our clients. Other money based countertransferences are described in my book, *Money and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals* (NASW Press, forthcoming).

After completing this article, the reader is asked to take this challenge: think of your own clients and try to identify the role money has played in their identity and character formations, their intrapsychic and interpersonal problems and their adaptations.

My Work

A large part of my clinical work, as well as the workshops I have run and what I have been writing about, has been aimed at getting us beyond the last taboo, and talking and thinking more freely about money. By "us," I mean us as a profession and us as the whole society. I created MORE Services for MOney and RElationships (www.monwyworkandlove.com), which offers clinical services and provides educational and clinical resources including copies of the two

articles mentioned above, two bibliographies and a sample of a book published last year, *Money and the Pursuit of Happiness in Good Times and Bad* (which I refer to as a psychologically sophisticated self help book).

How To Think About Money

Money can be thought of as a blank screen onto which we project our wishes and fears. If we think money is security, we are really hoping it will allow us to provide for ourselves or our families at some time in the future. If we think of money as power, we believe it will allow us to buy favor or to influence events in the future.

But the idea of money is so powerful and pervasive in our culture that we tend to forget that it is only a stand-in for

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something else. Physical money does not have inherent value, but only represents the value we assign to it. A piece of green paper with a number and a portrait of a dead president on it is still only a piece of paper. Ideas of money are represented with symbols such as dollar signs and certain beliefs are attached to this representation. Then people develop certain attitudes toward the ideas of money and, because of these beliefs and attitudes where money is involved, people act in certain ways. Some of these beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are mal-adaptive and cause problems for which a therapist's help becomes necessary.

On the other hand, there is no denying that money affects not only our psyches, but also our reality. Our economy is based on our faith in this abstract idea of money, which causes it to have powerful effects on our lives. In response to this reality our adaptations, our way of thinking and feeling, our very identities are formed — sometimes in pathological ways.

We also tend to use money as a tool or strategy to deal with other problems, in which case our use of money is our way of trying to adapt to these problems.

Let me offer case studies which highlight differences between a client for whom money was merely a strategy for achieving his ends, and one for whom money itself created a problem.

Case Study One: An Entrepreneur

Sometimes the idea of becoming rich does fuel a client's activity. In this case, it is not the money itself, but his fantasies about what it will do for him, that causes problems. The first chapter of my money and happiness book, "So You Want to Become Rich," provides a case study of a young man who I call Sandy, described briefly here.

Sandy wanted to become rich and famous. In an attempt to do so, he started an entrepreneurial project which so preoccupied him that, outside of his day job, it took up all of his time. He invested all the money he could spare on this project. He was so involved that he lost contact with friends and became socially isolated. He assumed his girlfriend would want to be part of his plan to become rich, and never considered her needs as an individual. So she left him, which was the precipitating reason for his coming to therapy.

One of the things we learned during his treatment was that since childhood he had been very good at thinking up and effecting projects which would make money, and that his initiative in this area had gained him his father's approval. Part of the underlying reason for his wanting to make money was to gain approval (now thought of as fame) as he had in the past. Another reason was that he came from a family that was less wealthy than those of his cousins and schoolmates, and felt excluded and snubbed by them. So he also wanted to become so much richer and more famous than his cousins that they would have to envy him, as he had envied them. His beliefs about what money would do for him were primary. His attempts to make money were just strategies for gaining approval and for getting revenge for having been snubbed.

Case Study Two: Granddaughter of a Rich Man

A young adult woman was brought to me by her mother, who complained that she was too rebellious. The daughter, a Caucasian, was living with an African American man, which the

mother considered a rebellion against the family. Part of the concern was that the daughter's grandfather was quite rich and she could inherit his wealth if she did not displease him. If he knew what she was doing, however, it was likely she would be disinherited. Because the daughter was not the one who asked for therapy, the mother agreed to pay for her sessions and, on this basis, the daughter agreed to try it out.

Although this young woman had a job, she was not financially independent. She had always relied on the family money for things she could not easily afford: help with her rent, a comfortable car, a vacation in Europe. She wanted to believe she could be independent, but was not willing to give up her reliance on her grandfather's largess as a way to live a more affluent life.

What she had not told even her mother was that she not only lived with her African-American "boyfriend," but was actually married to him. Yet she could not bring him with her on visits home for fear of causing problems. And, although he wanted a family, she would not agree to have children for fear of being disinherited. Although she claimed to love her husband, her attachment to the family money was stronger than it was to him. Unlike the case of Sandy, whose problems were caused by fantasies about what money could do for him in the future, in the granddaughter's case, it was the reality of the money itself that was a major cause of her problems. She had grown up with a cushion of wealth that, along with the threats of disinheritance, created in her a dependent character. The best she could do in an attempt to live a relatively independent life was to create a web of lies and deceit to get what she wanted.

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How To Discuss Money With Clients

How can we best approach the discussion of money with our clients? Given the possibility that, due to the money taboo, clients may be made uncomfortable and resistant to talking about money, how direct or circumspect should we be in asking questions in this area? When and how is it appropriate to ask such questions? Do we need to be any more careful than we are when we ask other kinds of questions? And, are there particular techniques we can use to assist us in addressing money-related questions?

In the book, *New Ways to Have Conversations about Money with Our Clients*, Judith Stern Peck wrote that she believes talking about money is generally problematical. She recommends addressing this problem by first exploring the client's value system in order to lay the groundwork within the context of his values. While I agree that some clients are resistant to talking about it, I do not believe that clients are always so resistant to questions about their relationships to money. I tend to be more direct, and feel comfortable asking most clients about this relationship or pointing out something about how they are relating to money whenever I think it is pertinent and appropriate. I believe

that my own comfort in this area allows most clients to talk with me about money without much difficulty. Your comfort and confidence in your ability to raise money-related questions in a way the client can accept, and to offer clinically appropriate guidance, or even to make judicious use of confrontation, will depend on your having come to terms with your own relationship to money. This is so that you can avoid acting out countertransference having to do with your own beliefs and attitudes about money. It will also depend on having learned to recognize the client's comfort level and to understand the various ways that money can affect a person's development and adaptation. This requires developing self awareness, as well as educating yourself about money as a psychological force. There are a variety of ways to develop your expertise in this area. Reading is one way; a bibliography is offered on my website.

In the money and psychotherapy book, I describe six techniques to help clients be more comfortable discussing money and to help them to gain insight into their "money personalities" and money-related concerns. Briefly, I recommend asking some questions about the client's money history and relationship to money during the intake interview. This is a time when the client expects the clinician to be taking a general history, so these kinds of questions are likely to be understood as being in an appropriate context. By asking such questions at this time, the clinician also sends the message that talking about money is not taboo within the treatment relationship. The client's response to such questions will also give the clinician a sense of how comfortable the client is about answering money-related questions. Some clients will experience the therapist's questions as a welcome invitation to talk about issues they thought were taboo, and that they may have otherwise avoided.

Where it is evident that the client's relationship to money is problematical and should be a focus of treatment, asking him to write a money autobiography to be shared with the therapist is another useful technique. It can help both of you to become aware of how his money-based beliefs and attitudes were formed and how this affects him in the present. In my book, I include a detailed outline which a client can use as a guide for writing such an autobiography. I also suggest several questions that can be asked or exercises that can be used, when appropriate, to draw out information about the client's wishes or memories having to do with money.

One technique that is often used in child therapy, but which I use with adults as well, is to ask what the client would wish for if a genie suddenly appeared and granted him three magic wishes. In my experience, the client often wishes for money. When this happens, it offers the opportunity to ask follow-up questions such as, *What would you do with the money?* or *What would having the money do for you?* Sometimes the answers can be quite revealing. One client may want money to help someone else, while another may want it to support himself in splendid isolation, and a third may talk about his desire to go to school or start a business. Thus, this question can lead to an understanding of a client's level of relatedness, narcissism or aspirations.

Similarly, asking a client for his earliest memory about money can often reveal a lot about his core concerns. One client told me that her father held a dollar bill in his fist and told her she could have it if she could get it from him. She tried to pry his fingers open and begged him to open his hand, to no avail. When, as a last resort, she tried biting his hand to get him to open it, she was spanked. This told me something about why she always thought of men as withholding.

Summary

In this article, I discussed the money taboo in the clinical work and writing in our profession, giving particular note to how difficult it is for private practitioners to think or talk about money except in relationship to the fee. I have emphasized the importance of thinking about money as a psychological force affecting our clients' development and adaptations. I have offered suggestions about some techniques we can use to make it easier to talk about money in psychotherapy, and shared some brief case vignettes.

Richard Trachtman, Ph.D., LCSW, has been a psychotherapist and social worker, both in private practice and for mental health clinics and social work agencies, since 1964. In addition, he

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