

THEODOR REIK – RECOGNIZING THE  
RELEVANCE OF HIS CONTRIBUTIONS  
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Just 40 years ago, on December 31, 1969, Theodor Reik passed away at the age of 81. From 1910, when he met Freud at the age of 22, he spent the next 59 years totally devoted to psychoanalysis. More than 40 books, in German and English, attest to his productive power and to his unique and creative approach to the treatment of the neurosis and his applied psychoanalytic studies of man's culture and his social and religious institutions.

After experiencing a successful professional career in Vienna, Berlin, and The Hague, Reik and his family narrowly escaped from Nazi occupation forces and arrived in New York City in June, 1938. At 50 years of age, he expected to be received with open arms but was mistaken. Firstly, he was not fully accepted by the New York Psychoanalytic Society because he was not a physician. Secondly, in spite of his close association with Freud, Reik's theoretical orientation (to be discussed below) was not compatible with the prevailing orientation of the medical psychoanalytic community. Reik felt deeply rejected and infuriated, but he was resolved carry on in his practice and writing.

However, 40 years after his death, there is evidence that in recent years, the Reikian approach to understanding and treating the neurosis is valid and valuable. In other words, Reik's work appears to have become appreciated and utilized in a number of theoretical and treatment orientations of the analytic community.

The basic question to be addressed is: why was Reik's approach dismissed and criticized by the mainstream psychoanalytic orientations of the day? To put the answer to the question in perspective, two preliminary questions will be addressed: (1) who was Theodor Reik? (2) What are the unique aspects of his work?

Reik was born on May 12, 1888 into an unhappy, middle class Jewish family in Vienna. His mother was withdrawn and depressed, having lost four children before Theodor's arrival. His father, a civil servant, preferred his two older sons. Reik, deprived of parental affection and love, was also deeply affected by the rivalry with his two older brothers. A sister was born several years after Reik's birth. They grew to become close and mutually supportive into adulthood.

In 1906, when Reik was 18 years old, his father had a heart attack. He was told to run to the pharmacy for medicine. When he returned, his father was dead. Reik was guilt ridden. He was about to tell his father that he had been accepted by the University of Vienna, but regrettably, it was too late.

In tribute to his father, who loved Goethe's work, Reik was compelled to read all the work of Goethe during his first year at the University of Vienna.

Reik majored in experimental psychology with the famed Wilhelm Wundt. He also studied French and German literature. He displayed a high and critical intellect. It was a classical education, typical of the bright students of Vienna at the time.

In 1910, at the age of 22, critical events occurred in the troubled life of this young man. Reik's mother died and he was alone. His lifelong fear of becoming an orphan became a reality. The following events transpired: (1) One of his professors disparaged Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* but Reik read it and became enthralled. (2) Reik read all of Freud's work. (3) Reik attended Freud's lectures at the University of Vienna. (3) Reik sent an early draft of a paper to Freud, which became his Ph.D. dissertation.

Freud read Reik's paper and immediately recognized a first rate intelligence. In fact, Freud detected an uncanny talent and capacity in the young Reik for examining and determining the dynamics of the unconscious. Freud was so taken with Reik at this early point in their emerging father-son relationship that he said, "Reik is one of our best hopes."

Reik dove into the world of psychoanalysis, on the coat tails of Freud and completed several articles in applied psychoanalysis. On November 15, 1911, at 23 years of age, Reik presented a paper to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, "On Death and Sexuality." As a result, he was unanimously voted in as a member of the Society.

In 1912, Reik completed his dissertation: *Flaubert and His Temptation of St. Anthony: A Contribution to the Psychology of Artists.*" It was the first dissertation employing psychoanalytic concepts.

In 1913, Reik published an article in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, "On the Effects of Unconscious Death Wishes" by Anonymous. This was the first clinical paper after having completed over 20 articles on applied psychoanalysis. This article revealed how tortured Reik was regarding his unconscious death wishes of his father and even his wife to be, Ella.

What is of importance is the already highly developed interest and concern, both personally and professionally, of Reik's writing on unconscious guilt and aggressive feelings, the unconscious need for punishment and the compulsion to confess. These factors permeated his personal life and as we shall see, became the theoretical core of all his work. It is quite clear why Reik's personal issues coincided and merged so intimately with the concepts and theories of the new science of psychoanalysis. Freud and psychoanalysis became the foundation of Reik's life.

In 1913, at Freud's instigation, Reik moved to Berlin and entered analysis with Karl Abraham. The next year he married his childhood girl friend, Ella. In 1915, his first child, a son, was born; he entered the Austrian Army and served with distinction as an officer for three years.

After the war, Reik entered practice in Vienna and continued his close relationship with Freud. Then, in 1928, Reik moved to Berlin, entered private practice and taught at the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute. Germany was becoming dangerous; Ella was seriously ill and their marriage was failing; he was experiencing anxiety and feelings of guilt regarding his marital problems.

In 1934, Reik moved to The Hague to escape Nazism. With his marriage dissolving, his guilt feelings intensified and he entered analysis with Freud. The short but intensive treatment proved helpful and he became more deeply aware of the unconscious guilt and death wishes that plagued him since childhood. Sadly, Ella died in 1937.

Finally Reik escaped from Holland and arrived in New York City in June, 1938. For the rest of his life, he resided in the upper west side of New York City.

First and foremost, Reik was a classical Freudian, but Reikian style. However, he disagreed with Freud on some basic theoretical points. For example, he retained the topographical model. For Reik, the analyst's mission is to directly address, confront and uncover, with the patient, the unconscious guilt and the unconscious need for punishment issues buried below the surface. This is carried out by the explicit utilization of the analyst's unconscious in concert with the patient's unconscious. It is the employment of the analyst's intuition, hunches, analysis of dreams and free floating attention that results in a very subjective process and thus bring to consciousness buried guilt issues.

For Reik, "The repressed has been so far, and will always be, the main objective of analytic examination." It is the influence of admonitions and restraints experienced in the basic socialization process that repression emerges and inhibits spontaneous behavior. The suppression of instinctual impulses is the universal stage where a sense of unconscious guilt and the origin of the superego emerge. The particular neurotic development of the personality emerges, depending on the relative benign-hostile quality of the superego. The more hostile and demanding the superego, the greater and more destructive will be the feelings of unconscious guilt and a pervasive but unconscious need for punishment. Under the circumstances, the patient has an unconscious compulsion to confess so as to relieve the deep but fundamentally unconscious feelings of guilt. In effect, this basic formulation could be labeled as the Psychology of the Superego.

In sum, it is Reik's mission to bring to the awareness of the patient the unconscious guilt and unconscious need for punishment issues that impacts the patient's life. It is through direct but **empathic confrontation** that Reik wishes to help the patient reach awareness of these unconscious issues. The whole process for Reik is fundamentally an act of confession. Reik's exposition of his neurotic model is found in his book, *The Compulsion to Confess and Need for Punishment* (1925, 1959). In this volume, a particular paragraph reveals an essential experience needed to deter the onset of neurosis: love:

When we love ourselves, we continue and maintain on our own only what we have experienced from without since our childhood – the love that had once been given us. Unconsciously, we are never alone, as the ego is itself the precipitate of our earliest and most significant identifications. If

it is true, as the poets proclaim, that all suffering is loneliness, in endopsychic perception it originates in one's own inability to love, which expresses itself as an unconscious feeling of guilt.

Jarred but not defeated by the lack of total acceptance of the New York analytic community, Reik moved forward on several fronts: he developed his private practice; psychologists, social workers and others interested in psychoanalysis met with Reik to learn from him; Reik published a number of significant books. From 1937 to 1949, publications included: *Surprise and the Psychoanalyst* (1937); *From 30 Years with Freud* (1940); *Masochism in Modern Man* (1941); *A Psychologist Looks at Love* (1944); *Psychology of Sex Relations* (1945); *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948); *Fragment of a Great Confession* (1949).

These books, especially *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948) catapulted Reik into public prominence. In fact, it can be argued that Reik became the primary educator of psychoanalysis in America.

Furthermore, in 1948, the first American non-medical psychoanalytic training institute was incorporated in New York City, under the leadership of Theodor Reik. It was named the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis (NPAP).

During this period and into the 1950's and 1960's Reik continued to write and espouse his position that for the neurosis, it is unconscious guilt, unconscious need for punishment and the compulsion to confess that must be addressed in an empathic manner, employing the interplay of the both the patients' and analysts' unconscious. On a very speculative level, it appears to me that Reik's view of humankind as guilt ridden and punishment driven requires an intimate and loving interplay of unconscious minds. Such interplay opens up the possibility of freeing the guilt ridden from the pain and suffering and psychic conflict imposed from within.

During this period, Reik's battles with Fenichel and Reich centered on the subjective vs. and more scientific approaches to therapy and psychoanalysis. In spite of the battles, Reik stood his ground and enjoyed the public prominence given him. He was honored numerous by his intellectual home, the members of NPAP. In 1953, on the occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday, Robert Lindner edited a book of essays in honor of Reik. From 1963 to 1981, *The Psychoanalytic Review*, the esteemed journal of NPAP, published five editions honoring Reik and his work. More currently, in 2006, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, under the editorship of Joseph Reppen, published several essays on Reik's work.

On May 8, 2010, NPAP is planning an all-day conference on the legacy of Reik. Speakers are: Dany Nobus, Anna Aragno, Jeremy Safran, Martin Bergman, Harold Blum and Otto Kernberg.

In sum, it appears that a greater recognition of the relevance of Reik's view of the neurosis and its treatment has occurred in today's multi theoretical environment. In mid 20th century, the predominant medical psychoanalytic establishment was searching for

greater “scientific status” which at least meant the appearance of rigor and adherence to the scientific method. Reik, it appears, was a threat to the prevailing winds of the time, especially with his many published books and his high recognition in the world at large. Furthermore, his model of guilt ridden and masochistic man in search relief from suffering was not a paradigm appropriate to the structural model of the day. On the other hand, in today’s world, Lacon and his advocates as well as advocates of the intersubjective orientation have recognized the cogency and relevance of Reik’s work.

It appears that it took close to 40 years after Reik’s passing to recognize and appreciate the man and his work.

#### Notes

Thank you to Murray H. Sherman, a student and colleague of Reik. His seminal articles, primarily published in *The Psychoanalytic Review*, were invaluable in the preparation of this essay.

Portions of my article, *Theodor Reik and Masochism*, published in *Issues in Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Vol. 27, No.1, 2005, are contained in this essay.

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