Compulsive Eating and Termination Reactions*

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Introduction

In the psychoanalytic process, the analysands consider the analyst as the specific internal figure. They sometimes consider the analyst as their loving and feeding parents or as the bad figure who ignores and abandons them. We call this phenomenon ‘transference’. Transference reveals patients’ specific internal object relations. So, in modern psychoanalysis, transference is the royal road to reaching to unconscious. In the analytic process, when the transference is resolved to a certain level, analyst can evaluate that the analysis has reached the termination phase. In the termination phase, the analysands can see the analyst as they are. The analyst is no longer the beloved, ideal internal object. They can leave the analyst freely. At this moment, the analysand and the analyst decide the date of the end of the analysis and start the process of termination. However, cases involving this kind of smooth termination are rare. Many analysands demonstrate various reactions such as symptoms reoccurrence in the termination phase. Most of the reactions occur because the analysands are afraid of parting from the analyst. They worry about not seeing their analysts, whom they have seen almost daily for several years, and they wonder whether they can live without their analysands. That’s why termination reactions occur. These reactions are a kind of struggle to keep their analysands near them. That is the the essence of the separation reaction (Lee 2006).

Separation is an issue that analysts frequently encounter in the process of analysis (Brenman 1982). The analysands exhibit various separation reactions when they part from their analysands. For example, they keep silent or discuss the fantasy of separation and reunion. Although there are normal separation reactions, there are also the abnormal ones. Upon separation, even the relatively healthy analysands appeal their fears and frustrations and reveal wishes to keep their analysands exclusively. For instance, sometimes they feel jealous of their analysts’ wives, thinking that these women own their analysts. They also feel jealous when their analysts leave them alone and hate analysts who enjoy their own lives.

There are abnormal separation reactions. This comes from the fear of separation. To console themselves about being alone, they engage in loveless sexual encounters, compulsive eating, or excessive drinking. Sometimes they become paranoid and hate their analysands, criticizing them or making complaints. Sometime they shout that they are victimized. Some analysands plan to move to other city in order to forget analysands whom they will be losing soon. Other analysands focus on masturbation or attachment.

These kinds of behaviors are a defense mechanism serving to avoid separation. These behaviors take their mind off of separation while the analysands and their analysands deal with these behaviors. Separation reactions such as these cause analysts to worry that the analysands will run into trouble if the analysis is terminated. So they may reconsider terminating the analysis. Psychotherapist who are experienced with separation knows very well that it is not easy to discuss the meaning of separation with their patients.

Here I will discuss the range of separation reactions displayed by an analysand of mine. At the termination phase, she exhibited various separation reactions. One which was especially impressive to see was compulsive eating, a psy-
chosomatic disorders. Her compulsive eating disappeared dramatically after she understood it as a manifestation of a separation reaction. This is an analytic case that clearly illustrates the relationship between the psyche and the soma. Also, this case affords me an opportunity to confirm the effects of psychoanalytic treatments for psychosomatic disorders.

**Psychoanalytic Case of Compulsive Eating** (Lee 2007)

Mrs. A was a 35-year-old professional woman. She explained to me the reason that she wanted to take the psychoanalysis. She had lived a relatively successful life, but she felt depressed and unhappy. She was not confident and always thought of herself as incompetent. She told me that she tried to read others’ minds while she met others. I thought that her main issues were her low self-esteem and fear of abandonment. The diagnosis seemed to be dysthymic disorder.

After the preliminary interview, I started psychoanalysis with her using a couch four times a week. She continued psychoanalysis with me for 3 years. Although she had some annoying silences and sometimes refused to use the couch, she had kept continuously exploring her unconscious and finally terminated her psychoanalysis after 3 years under mutual agreement. The psychoanalysis was relatively successful.

During the process of analysis, the transference on me was mainly that of her father. She wanted to be loved and recognized by me. One day when she was frustrated with her mother looking at each other with big smiles. In her memory, her father was standing in the kitchen and her mother was holding her newborn brother. Her father’s attitude about her brother’s birth was totally different from the one when Mrs. A was born. When she was born, he was not even willing to see her for 3 days because she was a girl. When she cried very loud, he even told her mother to throw her away. Her low self-esteem and fear of abandonment stemmed from this relationship with her father.

In her childhood, she acted like a boy, becoming the leader of other children. She also played a role of protector for her brother. She would not let anybody bother her brother. After they became adults, she kept playing this role of protector. She gave most of her money to her brother when he got married. During our analysis, she said that she became her brother’s slave. She said that she chose to become a slave in order to become a good daughter so that her parents would recognize her. She has never requested anything from her parents. She always said, “Everything’s fine. Don’t worry about me. I am doing well for myself.” Additionally, she always got the best scores in school and was successful in her job. She actually became a daughter of whom her parents were very proud, however, she was always depressed with the thought of ‘I have no ability. I am incompetent.’ She thought she would not be abandoned if only she showed her strong, independent personality to her parents. So she resisted showing her weakness to her parents. In the transference relations, she also tried to hide her weakness from me. For example, in our sessions, she tried very hard not to let me see her cry. She was very ashamed of herself and regretted it on the day when she cried. For her, tears were for weak people. I helped her explore this sense of shame. Her sense of shame of tearing was related to her father who had cried, telling his hard-luck story whenever he had been drunk. And for her, crying was also a behavior that would make her parents worry. This was related to her fear that ‘I must not make my parents worry. I should always make them happy. Otherwise, I will be abandoned.’ After understanding her mind through the analysis, she could cry in the analytic sessions even though she felt ashamed. According to her, she seemed that she had an iceberg of sadness in her mind. And at the termination phase, she said that she cried so much in the sessions because the iceberg had been melting in her mind. She added that her mind had become happy and comfortable.

She perceived the separation as an abandonment. For instance, I got an e-mail on one day after 9 months of starting
the analysis. That day was the holiday so we did not have a session. In the e-mail, she said that she had a terrible nightmare and was very scared and fearful, so she had sent me an e-mail. In her dream, she came to me for the analysis, but the door was locked. She cried loudly in front of the door because she felt she was abandoned. She perceived not having an analysis on a holiday as being abandoned. She was so afraid of being abandoned by me. It was a very strong transference response. I explained that to her and she understood that she had a fear of abandonment in her unconscious mind. At the termination phase, she said that “I could trust the analysis more during the process of analyzing my dream of that night, and was more motivated to continue the analysis.”

The other example of a termination response was that she was depressed on weekends and holidays when she felt abandoned. This separation reaction was more evident especially in the termination phase. She was even paranoid. I will summarize her reactions at the termination phase.

**Termination Reactions and Compulsive Eating**

After we decided the date of termination, she showed several termination reactions. She felt sorry for not seeing the fallen leaves of the gingko trees on the way to my office. She also said she was depressed and exhausted on those days. I explained to her that the depressed feelings came out because she anticipated losing me. She agreed and told me to be afraid of parting from me. She said that the time had gone too fast and she felt pitiful. She could understand that her pity and depressed feelings were related to the termination of the analysis.

At the termination phase, her main conflict appeared again. One of them was anger related to sexual discrimination. At that time, a male professor had said ‘women are the lower animals who give birth to children’ during his lecture. She felt so angry but she could not express this feeling. She was too exhausted and had to lie in bed for a few hours. She realized that she put that professor and her father, who had also perpetrated sexual discrimination, in the same group. Also she said that she had lived pitifully, trying to fill the insufficient space left by this experience. Thankfully through the analysis, she realized that she was a valuable person who could be loved even though she had no penis. She finally seemed to admit her feminine identity.

At the termination phase, she was also mad at me, acting like a daughter who would never be loved. She thought the reason that she was not loved was because she was incompetent. She displayed frequent silences in the sessions or fantasies that some unfortunate accident would happen to me. She visited to a psychologist and even tried to prematurely quit the analysis. I helped her explore these reactions and interpreted it repeatedly as reactions of termination. She seemed to understand her reactions to termination. She also understood that she had thought everything was linked with me. She was starting to understand transference.

After that, she was in pain, feeling abandoned. She said she was in pain for feeling miserable and ugly. Also, she suffered from insomnia. However, she understood this to be a reaction to termination of our analysis. After understanding the reason for her insomnia, she said that she could sleep ‘mysteriously’ well.

On one occasion, she discussed one of her dreams. She was lying on her father’s lap comfortably. It was a very satisfactory dream. That was a transference dream. She analyzed it by herself. She told me that she seemed to see her mind wanting to block her father out and forbid him from her dreams. So, she felt uncomfortable until the next day. She said the dream reflected that she could comfortably admit her feelings about liking her father. I explained to her that lying on her father’s lap was related to lying on the couch. She seemed to actually enjoy the long silence during the analysis. She said that she wanted to tell me, “Please leave me as it is without breaking the silence.” After that, she brought me another dream in which she and I had fallen asleep together on the couch. It showed her mounted wish to be with me, not to separate from me.

When the analysis was left four or five weeks from completion, she said that she often ate food as if she was starving. This was compulsive eating. Because she opened the refrigerator too often, her husband asked her “Why do you eat so much these days?” Her hands grabbed any food without thought. It was the first time when she had ever done this. She understood that it was related to losing me. She felt the pain of loss deep inside of her mind. She said that she had been reminded of the old saying, ‘There is no party that never ends’, and she should have prepared for her party to end.

In the days that followed, she exhibited paranoid, angry reactions. One day, a week before termination, I received a phone call from her. She wanted to meet me earlier than our scheduled appointment. She entered my office, refused to lie on
the couch, and started to speak as if she was angry. She complained that the reason that I was trying to rush the termination was because I was disappointed at the results of her analysis. She thought that, because of this, I had wanted to severe relations with her. In addition, she felt that other residents of the department of psychiatry, as well as myself, regarded her as a disgusting woman. She said that she felt victimized. Evidently she had become paranoid. Her voice was loud and had trembled with anger. It was the first time that I had ever seen such behavior in the 3 years of her analysis.

I understood that the reason for showing such a paranoid separation reaction was because she was sorry for having to part from me; however, I was worried about her. I explained to her that she regarded parting from me as being abandoned by me.

"Mrs. A, it is difficult for you to say goodbye to me. Also you want to keep this relation with me and don’t want to terminate it. At the termination phase, every analysand has this difficulty. After the analysis, you may be in such pain and very angry when you think about parting from me. In your unconscious, you may perceive this anger as stemming from my driving you away because I don’t like you and see you as incompetent. However, as you know, the termination was decided with our mutual agreement. You also know that I do not abandon you. At the termination phase, these hidden conflicts came to the surface. So it is also a great opportunity to understand these conflicts. It will be the very valuable time."

The interpretation was effective. She understood that her behavior had been her reaction to the termination and she quickly recovered from her paranoid status. Interestingly, her compulsive eating also disappeared at that time. And she found the lyrics of pop song to support her improved outlook.

"That was winter time. I will take more care of myself living a life without you. I hope you take care of yourself and be good in days without me."

She said as if she could speak to the child in her mind (child-within) at that moment, she would have said to her, ‘I have become a lovely daughter now that my father and mother care.’ And then she burst into tears. She said that, in the past, she had been in pain when she had thought she was a despised person. However, she could not see herself as the good daughter her parents saw. Through the analysis, she was able to recognize that she had felt the shortage of love and had not been able to love herself. She said that it seemed as though the child whom her parents had not raised, had finally grown up in my office through the analysis.

She told me that the termination was not only about sadness, but also about excitement regarding her life afterwards. Before the analysis, she was depressed about her life, but afterwards, she could live more comfortably. At that moment, she cried. She told me that this would be the last time she would be ashamed to show tears.

I said, “You have been very sincere about your analysis over the past three years. While separation may be very difficult for you, you have confirmed your self-esteem to me. I understand that you have learned many things from your analysis, however, I have also learned a lot from your analysis.”

During the last session, she wanted to tell me that she appreciated me. However, she felt exhausted and empty like a deflated ball. She told me that she was having trouble speaking because she was choked up. However, she said that she had suddenly felt as though she had woken from a dream at home on the previous day. She knew that her feeling about her parents had been an illusion. “But the feeling was true. There would be no place for me to delete such feelings if not in here.”

She also said that she could now live well, thanks to me. And she added, “Separation will be sad for everyone.”

I told her “This is it for today” as I always had done when our time was up. She stood up from the couch and smiling, she said goodbye. I said to her, “Take care.” I was very proud of her and had high expectation for her life.

Discussion and Summary

I have not discussed the complete process of her analysis in this presentation. However, it is understandable why she was terribly afraid of ‘exposing her weaknesses her dependent wishes’ like a baby. Also we can understand how she lived in fear of abandonment, of ‘if she were weak, she would be abandoned by her father.’ She equated losing her parents’ love with dying from starving. The compulsive eating at the termination phase clearly illustrated her fear of starving. She identified separating from me with becoming a baby who loses its parents and starves. Freud wrote that eating com-
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Compulsive eating is motivated by a fear of starvation (Freud 1926). In the literature, several authors who have reported the developmental origins of compulsive eating have identified extensive difficulty with separation both in the parents and in the individual patients. A common theme in the developmental history of compulsive eating patients was the absence of transitional objects, such as a teddy bear or a blanket, to help the child separate psychologically from the mother (Goodsitt 1983). This developmental struggle to separate may be played out instead by using the body itself as the transitional object with ingestion of food representing a wish for a symbiotic merger with mother (Humphrey & Stern 1988). The psychodynamic observations regarding difficulties with separation in compulsive eating patients have been confirmed by empirical research (Patton 1992). A group of 40 patients with an eating disorder was compared with a control group of 40 women with normal eating patterns to see how they would respond to subliminal or supraliminal stimuli. Each group was shown an abandonment or a control stimulus at exposure durations that were either subliminal or supraliminal. Following exposure to an abandonment stimulus, the group with eating disorders ate significantly more crackers than did subjects in the control group. The investigators concluded that compulsive eating was indeed a defense against an unconscious fear of abandonment.

Mrs. A understood this compulsive eating as a separation reaction during the termination phase. After understanding this dynamism, her compulsive eating disappeared. In addition, her low self-esteem and sense of shame were related to penis envy and narcissistic desires. She had effectively hidden them with her perfect self-control. There are also coexisting wishes at the oral stage and an Oedipal conflict.

This was a psychoanalytic case illustrating the relationship between the psyche (fear of abandon) and the soma (hungry feeling). In this case, compulsive eating was treated after understanding the unconscious meaning of the symptom in the psychoanalytic process.

Key Words: Termination reaction · Compulsive eating · Fear of abandonment.

References

국문초록

중결기에 나타난 강박적 식사행위

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정신분석의 종결은 피분석자에게는 이별의 아픔과 사랑의 상실이라는 고통을 준다. 여기서 다양한 종결기 반응들이 나온다. 본 논문에서 나는 종결기에 나타난 강박적 식사행위가 분석을 통해서 치료되는 과정을 소개했다.

‘A’ 부인은 열등감과 우울증으로 정신분석을 받았다. 그녀의 갈등은 ‘버림 받는 두려움’에서 나오고 있었다. 특히 아버지에게 버림 받는 것을 모면하려고 방어하면서 살아왔다. 그녀와 나는 카우처를 이용하는 정신분석을 주 4 회로 3년간 지속했고 합의하여 종결했다. 그녀는 자신의 ‘약점이 노출된다’든지 자기 간 ‘의존욕구가 드러나는 것’을 극심하게 두려워하는 사람이었다. 분석을 통해서 그녀는 자기가 ‘나약하면 아버지에게 버림 받는다’는 두려움을 가지고 살아왔던 것을 이해할 수 있었다. 부모의 사랑을 잃는 것을 굳이 죽는 것과 동일시했던 것이다. 본 환자에서 특이했던 것은 종결기 반응이었다. 그 중에서도 강박적 식사(compulsive eating)였다. 그녀의 무의식은 나와 해어지는 것을 사랑하는 대상을 상실하는 것으로 인식했다. 아기는 자기를 보살펴주는 대상을 잃을 때 굶주리게 된다. 환자가 배고픔을 느긴 이유가 이것이었다. 자기의 배고픔이 종결반응이고 전이현상이라는 것을 이해한 후에 강박적 식사행위는 극적으로 사라졌다.

정신(버림 받는 두려움)과 신체(강박적 식사)의 관계를 보여주는 증례였다. 정신신체장애 중 하나인 강박적 식사행위가 그 증상의 무의식적 역동을 이해한 후에 치료된 증례로 본 증례를 소개하였다.