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EVOLVING CONCEPTS OF FUGUE: AN HISTORICAL REVIEW AND AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

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Abstract

The concept of "fugue" has been defined differently by different authors in the past few decades. The current, DSM-III definition is the most specific and narrow that has been offered. When the DSM-III criteria are applied, very few of the cases existing in the literature meet all the criteria. The present case of fugue occurred in a fifteen-year-old girl and lasted six days. The fugue was of the most complete type; the patient assumed a new identity, spoke a foreign language she had studied in school, "regressed" to an earlier period in history, altered radically her dress and grooming, and showed skills, interests and personality features she had not shown before. While previous accounts of fugues often have been sketchy, the present case is unique in the amount of data that were available to the author. Records were available from four mental health professionals who saw the girl while she was in a fugue state. The mother's diary was particularly illuminating. The input of three theoretical viewpoints are evaluated: situational, psychodynamic and family systems. Each of these viewpoints seems to contribute most to a particular dimension of the case: the situational viewpoint helps explain the etiology; psychodynamics help explain unconscious motivations or meanings the symptoms probably had for the patient; the family systems viewpoint helps to explain the sudden remission of the fugue.