British Journal of Psychiatry (1989), **154** (suppl. 4), 81–83

The Concept of Perversion in Psychoanalysis

R. H. ETCHEGOYEN

Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) made possible the understanding of the concept of perversion as a form of psychic conflict resulting from both constitutional and acquired factors. He stated (as against earlier views) that sexual deviations could not be separated from 'normal' sexual behaviour, on the grounds that both sprang from a common source (infantile sexuality). In the first essay, Freud classified sexual deviations into two groups, depending on whether the aim (e.g. sadism and masochism) or the object of the instinct (e.g. homosexuality and paedophilia) were displaced. In the second essay he characterised infantile sexuality as a collection of partial instincts and erotogenic zones, on which both the source and the object of the instinct converged. He also stated that infantile sexuality was auto-erotic, implying that the sexual object was contingent.

In the normal adult, the partial instincts are subordinated to genital primacy and arranged with reference to the sexual object. In the perverse individual, this process has not been accomplished, with the result that a certain partial instinct comes to occupy the centre of erotic life, to the detriment of genital sexuality. From this stemmed the Freudian aphorism that neurosis was the negative of perversion. When Freud and Abraham established the libido theory (Abraham, 1924), perversions were explained as forms of fixation and regression. After escaping integration during the process of libidinal development, partial instincts became established as pacemakers of sexual life.

The Freudian view that neurosis is the negative of perversion is more useful for a definition of neurosis. Infantile sexuality is assumed to have been repressed in neurosis, but not in perversion; in the latter, on the other hand, a partial instinct is presumed to have persisted unhindered from infancy. Later studies, however, showed this to be otherwise: in perversion, infantile sexuality is also subject to repression.

In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910), Freud went on to suggest that masculine homosexuality is based on an identification with the mother, and on a displacement from consciousness of the heterosexual component of the libido. After the erotic tie with the mother has failed, an identification occurs, forcing the subject to act like his mother. Therefore, in perversions (as in the neuroses), partial instincts are also repressed. In "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919), Freud suggested that perverse sado-masochistic fantasies may be linked to the repression of the Oedipus complex. In these cases, at least, sado-masochist perversion would not derive from the persistence of aggressive instincts. It may be the case, however, that these impulses elude repression because they are used to keep at bay both infantile sexuality, and the Oedipus complex. In consequence, perversion and neuroses could no longer be considered as the positive and negative of the same process. Perversion turned out to be a complex phenomenon, in which instincts and defences participate.

Thus, in order to explain perversion, it becomes necessary to involve id impulses, ego defences, and the Oedipus complex. This challenge was taken up by Sachs (1923), who stated that in perversion, the partial instinct does not survive unchanged from infancy, but it is first 'refracted' by the Oedipus complex. In perversion, only a fragment of infantile sexuality appears in consciousness; the rest, and chiefly the Oedipus complex, is repressed. According to Sachs, the ego allows a certain impulse though only in order to repress the rest. The ego "divides in order to reign", and Sachs sees this as the fundamental mechanisms of perversion; all theories thereafter have rested on this view. Sach's thinking was, in a way, structural, in that it took into account the conflict between the ego and the id. It is not by chance that his paper appeared in 1923, the year of publications of Freud's "The Ego and the Id" (Freud 1923*b*).

This year was important in the development of the theory of perversion: the perverse act was considered as having the structure of a symptom, in spite of the fact that it was ego-syntonic and pleasurable. The dividing line between perversion and neurosis was, thus, blurred and from then on, psychoanalytical research took an 180-degrees turn, centring less on the instinct (i.e. the id) than on the ego.

Perversion as the negative of psychosis

In 1922, Freud suggested that perversion might be linked to aggressive and libidinal instincts; five years

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125000295846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later, in his essay on Fetishism, he was to remark on the peculiar ways these patients have to deal with reality. Following this lead, and influenced by Melanie Klein, Glover (1933) went on to suggest that perversions are, so to speak, the negative of psychosis, in as much as they constitute an attempt to paper-over faults in the development of the sense of reality. Years later, some followers of Melanie Klein came to the conclusion that the psychotic part of the personality was pervert. Thus, the aphorism was born that perversion is the negative of (or a defence against) psychosis. Pichon-Riviere (1961, 1970), and later Bleger (1967; Bleger *et al*, 1973) supported this view.

The notion that perversion had to do with the psychotic part of the personality must be given consideration, but to see perversions as a defence against psychosis (a kind of lesser evil) is more a moral than a clinical judgement. In fact, perversion can be as much a defence against psychosis as its cause; for example, it is not uncommon to detect a degree of thought disorder in perverts. Indeed, more than a defence against psychosis, perversion may on occasions be the psychosis itself (Etchegoyen, 1970).

The divided ego of the perverse

Sach's view that the perverse ego "divides in order to reign" has been a fruitful one, and during the last few years, a consensus has almost been reached on the reality of the division of the perverse ego. In 1923, Freud also published "The Infantile Genital Organization", in which he stated that denial and disavowal (Verleugnet) are the first response of young boys to the realisation that females have not got a penis. He applied these ideas in 1927 to the explanation of festishism: the fetishist repressed the affect generated by his fear of castration. This disavowal, as far as it deals with fear of castration, is the mechanism underlying the splitting of the ego (Freud, 1940*a*, *b*).

Fenichel (1945) also mentioned the splitting mechanisms that characterised the perverse ego, although his explanation still revolved around castration anxiety blockading the capacity for genital orgasm. This mechanism is temporarily arrested by the perverse act which, even if only for an instant, is able to affirm that castration does not exist.

Lacan (1949) maintained that the explanation for perversions should be sought in the above-mentioned defence mechanism (Verleugnung), which is different from repression (Verdrangung, characteristic of neurosis), and from occlusion or foreclusion (Verwerfung, the structural basis of psychosis). Lacan argued that the fetishist faces castration by disavowing it, and by 'presentifying' the imago of the feminine penis (i.e. imagining what is non-existent): as Maci has observed, 'presentification' is the reverse of disavowal. The fetish both embodies and veils the female penis (Lacan, 1957–58). In the "mirror stage" (Lacan, 1949), the child is the phallus the mother lacks, the object of the mother's wish to have a phallus. At the height of the Oedipus complex, the father intervenes, placing the child in a third position: it is not the mother's phallus and, from then on, the phallus is to become a symbol. Rosolato (1966) also believes that the fetish metaphorically represents (presentifies) the mother's missing penis.

The Kleinian school, which accepted the importance of early object relations, tried to explain perversions by means of psychotic anxieties occurring during the first year of life (Klein, 1932), as well as by schizoid mechanisms (Klein, 1946). Also, for Meltzer (1973), the splitting of the perverse ego occupies an important place in the pathogeny of perversion, and assumes a special form – dismantling. He argues that while infantile sexuality seeks discharge to avoid jealousy, perverse sexuality, inspired by envious and narcissistic motivations, seeks to annul the other's satisfaction and attempts to avoid dependence by every means at its disposal.

Reflecting the work of several ego psychologists, Gillespie (1940, 1956, 1964) constructed a general theory of perversion in which the splitting of the ego occupied an important position. He, however, did not consider disavowal as a specific mechanism; it was rather the activity of the superego which was central to the psychogenesis of perversion. The superego would demand that the ego, in its constant work of mediation between the id, the superego, and reality, give a green light to the least objectionable impulses.

Perversion and transference

Observations from psychoanalytical treatment provide further information on the concept of perversion. The relationship between the pervert and his analyst has been described as singular, and is referred to as transference perversion (Etchegoyen, 1977). Although not explicitly touching upon this concept, Joseph (1971) has listed its most significant modalities, and affirmed that perversion can only be resolved if the analyst detects and interprets it within the framework of transference. The quasi diabolic way (erotisation of the relationship, passivity to provoke his impatience) in which these patients try to pervert the transference process, puts to the test the analyst's skills. These mechanisms, according to Joseph, are not only defences through which the

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125000295846 Published online by Cambridge University Press

patient tries to get rid of his impulses and feelings, but also concrete attacks against the analyst as a hated and envied object.

Meltzer (1973) has also called attention to the persistent impact of perverse transference on the analyst, and a basing himself on Racker's (1960) studies on countertransference, has pointed out some of its pitfalls. Also pertinent to this point are the works of Riesenberg (1970) and Urtubey (1971–72).

Etchegoyen (1973) has discussed elsewhere ways through which an instinct may become transformed into ideas, and has suggested that the pervert does not truly feel the call of sex. From this viewpoint, it would be envy, linked to a feeling of guilt, which would lead the pervert to experience sex not as a wish but as an idea. Views consistent with the above have been offered by Clavreul (1968) and by Rosolato (1968).

This paper has attempted to contribute to the delineating of perversion as a psychoanalytical concept, as well as to the clarification of its relationships to neurosis and psychosis. In so doing, it has sought to point out the value of considering the psychodynamics of mental functioning for the purpose of thoroughly assessing the patient.

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R. H. Etchegoyen, MD, *International Psychoanalytical Association, Buenos Aires, Argentina*

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