

Perverse relationships:

The perspective of the perpetrator

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(Final version accepted 9 November 2004)

The author examines the theme of perverse relationships within the couple, focusing on the question of men's maltreatment of their female partners, particularly in the psychological sense. Various aspects of the perpetrator's personality and relational style are described. The author takes as her starting point and discusses in depth the concepts of 'narcissistic perversion' (Racamier, 1992) and 'relational perversion' (Pandolfi, 1999), considered useful for understanding and identifying this type of pathology. She postulates that maltreating behaviour, in fact, originates from the encounter of particularly non-empathic relational styles which are typical of certain personalities (mainly, but not exclusively, of the narcissistic disorder) with 'perversity', that is, perversion, understood as a character trait. The author makes a distinction between 'relational perversion' and 'sado-masochistic relationship', and presents a clinical picture deriving from the analysis of a man who maltreats his companion, in order to shed light on the above-mentioned aspects, touching on some problems arising in the analysis of such patients. In conclusion, she considers some aspects of the experience of victims of maltreatment.

Keywords: narcissism, perversion, perversity, abuse, abusive relationship, narcissistic perversion, relational perversion

For today it is infinitely more difficult to commit crimes, and thus these crimes are so subtle that we can hardly perceive or comprehend them, though all around us, in our neighbours, they are committed daily. I maintain and will only attempt to produce the first evidence that still today many people do not die but are murdered

(Bachmann, [1978] 1999).

Introduction

That psychoanalytical thought possesses a richness that is beyond dispute is demonstrated, among other things, by its ability to generate new thoughts and unexpected sensibilities and its flexibility in encountering diverse ideas. Over the past few decades we have witnessed gradual, but significant, changes in the psychoanalytical way of thinking, and looking back we can assess how far we have come from where we started.

Studies on development, for instance, and investigations in the field of trauma, have brought up themes such as child abuse and domestic violence, which had ended up in the shadows. Social and cultural movements outside psychoanalysis have often brought about changes of focus. Psychoanalysis continues to demonstrate

its richness and depth in contact with new problems; it is indeed by applying an analytical method that we can scrutinise and describe them creatively.

In this paper, I propose to study in greater detail some of the psychodynamic aspects of abusive relationships within the couple. I will refer to the heterosexual couple in particular, while allowing that similar dynamics can also be found in homosexual couples. Moreover, I will use the general term 'perpetrator' to refer to a man. I am aware that this is forced, since corresponding situations with the woman as 'perpetrator' also exist, though more rarely. However, my study is restricted to man as perpetrator because it is from this type of situation that my personal reflection derives.

I will look into the peculiar features, if any, of the personality of a man who maltreats his partner and of the mechanisms on which this is based. To this end, I will examine as briefly as possible the concepts of narcissism and perversion, because the dynamics to which I am referring arise from the blending of these two concepts. I will refer to the concepts of 'narcissistic perversion' (Racamier, 1992) and 'relational perversion' (Pandolfi, 1999) as the main basis for my hypotheses. Finally, since talking about relationships without talking about objects would give an impression of incompleteness, I will offer some basic details about the women who are victims of violence and their reactions to it.

Narcissism

Narcissism is one of the most prolific and difficult psychoanalytical concepts to define (Pulver, 1970). Its complexity is already evident in what can be considered its conception, namely the essay 'On narcissism: An introduction' (Freud, 1914). In it, Freud uses the term to explain a series of phenomena which include sexual perversion characterised by the treatment of one's body as a sexual object, a characteristic of the choice of a homosexual object, a phase of libidinal development and a pathogenetic mechanism of schizophrenia (Sandler et al., 1991).

I do not propose in this paper to deal in depth with the many uses and meanings of the term and concept of narcissism, which may be found in the current literature on the subject (Grunberger, 1975; Akhtar and Thomson, 1982; Morrison, 1986; Akhtar, 1989; McWilliams, 1994; Ronningstam, 1998; Green, 2001). I will limit myself to aspects which can shed light on the type of personality bearing this name, thus focusing on a clinical-descriptive, 'experience-near' perspective.

It is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between normality and pathology in the narcissistic personality; to a certain extent, narcissism is the illness of our time (Lasch, 1979). Indeed, a healthy or normal narcissism exists alongside the pathological one. The term 'normal narcissism' denotes the normal aspects of behaviour people have towards themselves: self-esteem, concern for their own physical and mental selves, self-preservation, a sense of their rights, and so forth.

The criteria listed in the *DSM-IV* are rather unrefined. The manual mostly refers to narcissistic grandiosity and lists a series of character traits relating to it. It does not take into account another type: coy, silently grandiose, and hypersensitive to criticism and rejection. Akhtar (1989, 2000) has named the type of grandiose narcissist

'overt', and the hypervigilant and introvert type 'covert' or 'shy', while Gabbard (1994; Gabbard and Twemlow, 1994) has defined these two types as 'oblivious' and 'hypervigilant', respectively. Rosenfeld too (1987) proposed dividing narcissists into two types, 'thick-skinned' and 'thin-skinned'. Both share a serious difficulty in the area of personal identity and in particular in the regulation of self-esteem; but, while in the former the mechanism adopted to deal with narcissistic wounds consists mostly of a reaction-formation, which makes them arrogant and aggressive, in the latter a sense of vulnerability, fragility and constant worrying about narcissistic wounds is typical.

The overt or thick-skinned type of narcissist is an arrogant, intrusive, often superficial exhibitionist. He wants to be treated in a special way, needs to be admired, seems to think that he deserves everything and is ready to envy and denigrate others. He feels bored and empty, while he behaves like Don Juan. He tends to exploit his partner and then abandon her if he feels she is no longer needed or is attracted by new prey. He pontificates rather than speaks. He is careless of others and of their feelings; in fact, others serve as an audience to admire and mirror his grandiose self. He manipulates to his own advantage, and seduces and intimidates as well. One of his predominant defences is omnipotence, as well as idealisation of himself and depreciation of his object; his grandiosity is ego-syntonic. This type of narcissist can be similar to the psychopathic personality.

The covert, hypervigilant or thin-skinned type is instead extremely sensitive to the reactions and judgement of others whom he idealises; and he is ready to notice in them any minimal hint of criticism which may dramatically hurt him. He therefore tends to feel continually insulted. He is shy and inhibited and, as a consequence, avoids social relationships. He suffers from chronic feelings of inadequacy, helplessness-, and despair. He is afflicted with a profound sense of shame which causes him to make the overt part appear splendid and grandiose. These two types are opposite extremes on a range in which the characteristics of displayed grandiosity and self-centred hypersensitivity are blended in varying proportions (McWilliams, 1994).

One characteristic that the whole narcissist population has in common is the difficulty with object relationships, the incapacity to love. As Gabbard (1994) states, the individual with a narcissistic personality disorder approaches others and treats them as objects to use and discard according to his narcissistic needs. Other people are experienced as not having an existence or needs of their own. One manifestation of the difficulty in relating to others, and of the lack of empathy, is being unable to feel gratitude and remorse, or to thank and apologise (McWilliams and Lependorf, 1990). In fact, both thanking and apologising imply being able to feel concern for another person; recognising one's own error when one apologises, and one's own need (I thank you because you give me something that I lack) when one says thank you. The narcissist is not able to recognise his own need or his own mistake, because it would be too painful or even catastrophic.

Another peculiarity of the narcissistic pathology is lack of guilt, which one could say is substituted with shame. While guilt implies the belief of having done something wrong or something harmful, shame is the feeling of having moral shortcomings, and therefore the fear of being considered negatively as weak, ugly and unpresentable.

There is no space here to discuss all the divergent hypotheses on narcissism.¹ I wish merely to point out that Kohut (1966, 1971) considers narcissism the result of a developmental standstill, while Kernberg (1974, 1975, 1998) takes a structural view and, referring mainly to the grandiose narcissists, suggests that they have an innate strong aggressive drive. Kohut's and Kernberg's hypotheses have quite often been said to differ so much because the two authors are considering two different types of narcissistic patients: Kohut seems to be thinking of a more depressed, awkward and shameful type of narcissist, the 'covert' type, while Kernberg's narcissist seems to be more openly grandiose and arrogant, the 'overt' type.

Moreover, Kernberg (1998) makes a distinction between the narcissistic disorder and the antisocial one, while claiming that the two often overlap. He emphasises how, in the case of the antisocial disorder, there is a more serious fault in the superego, hence remorse and guilt are completely absent. Furthermore, he describes the 'malignant narcissism' syndrome: people characterised by narcissistic disorder, antisocial behaviour, ego-syntonic sadism, aggression and a paranoid orientation. However, unlike those who have an antisocial personality disorder, they are able to experience remorse and guilt to some extent.

It seems important to underline the continuum between narcissistic disorder, borderline disorder, malignant narcissism and antisocial disorder, in the way a person is capable of relating (or not relating) to another person. Each of these personalities has a non-empathetic way of relating to others and disrespect for the rights of others. This behaviour may progress to the very serious antisocial disorder embodied by the serial killer.

Perversion

The term 'perversion' has been used in psychoanalysis to refer, first, strictly to sexual perversion and, second, to a character trait, a relational style and a type of transference (for this latter meaning see Kernberg, 1992; Ogden, 1996; Jiménez, 2004). In its first sense of sexual deviation, the term has become less frequent due to its moralistic connotations; and it has been suggested that it should be substituted with the neologism 'neosexuality' coined by McDougall (1986; see also Leigh, 1998), or even with the expressions 'sexual dysfunction', 'paraphilia' and 'gender identity disorder' (*DSM IV*).

Freud distinguished between aberrations regarding the sexual object and aberrations referring to the aim. He described the developmental process of psychosexuality, whose failure determines a conflict that can produce two different outcomes: neurosis or perversion. '*Neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions*' (1905, p. 165). Subsequently (1919, 1924, 1927), Freud returned to this theme and explained perversions using the concepts of splitting of the ego

¹Green speaks of positive and negative narcissism. In the positive type ('the cathexis of the self being fed, at last partly, at the expense of the object cathexis' (2002, p. 637)) *egoism*, selfishness and self-sufficiency are to the fore. The second, negative type 'is the form narcissism takes when combined with self-destructive drives' (p. 644). It is a tendency towards annihilation, which manifests itself as emptiness, self-contempt and destructive withdrawal.

and denial of castration. In particular, he posited the origin of masochism and sadism in the destructive drives deriving from the death instinct (1924).

With the development of new psychoanalytical schools, perversions have been the subject of varying interpretations. Melanie Klein did not address this issue; however, her theory of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions and her description of the mechanism of projective identification have laid the foundations for a wider understanding of it.

According to Meltzer (1973), perverted sexuality develops from a narcissistic personality structure. The pervert devalues and depreciates good objects. Meltzer links perversion with psychopathy: psychopathy can be said to have its origin in perversion (Sanchez-Medina, 2002). Rosenfeld (1971) too has underlined the importance of narcissism, particularly destructive narcissism, in perverse sexual life.

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1978, 1984, 1991) has written a number of articles and books on perversion. To summarise, she maintains that there is a sadistic background behind all forms of perversion, regardless of their specific contents. The aim of the pervert is the destruction of reality, understood as the difference between the sexes and among the generations, and as the necessary acknowledgement of the generative capability of the parents and the helplessness of the child. It is these differences that the pervert aims to destroy through a process that makes everything equal: anus and vagina, faeces and milk, defecation and birth, penis and faecal scybala. Chasseguet-Smirgel often quotes the books of de Sade to illustrate that, in the sadistic universe, the apparent multiplicity (which instead becomes monotonous repetition) of the various perverse acts has to do with an attempt to fragment, destroy and abolish differences, just as in the digestive process, in which faeces become homogeneous and no one type of food is distinguishable from the other. There is a faecalisation that abolishes all differences which are hated by the pervert. Chasseguet-Smirgel agrees with Stoller (1975) according to whom perversion is an 'erotic form of hatred'.

Khan (1979) wrote extensively on perversion. One of his most significant contributions was the idea of perversion as defence against a relationship through an appearance of intimacy; the perverse subject in any case needs to keep control over the relationship and is incapable of reciprocity. De Masi (2003) too has dealt with perversions. In his view, the pervert's fundamental aim is domination of the object and the manic triumph deriving from this. De Masi feels it is more useful to examine the vicissitudes of aggression rather than of sexuality in order to understand the pathogenesis of sado-masochistic perversion.

De Masi's book, and the works of Chasseguet-Smirgel, Rosenfeld, Meltzer and Khan,⁷ allow us to glimpse how the perverse mechanism—which finds the ideal place to express itself in sexuality—may be considered the origin and the cause of character traits, behavioural styles and relational features. I will now address these aspects.

From sexual perversion to relational perversion

Henceforward, I will use the term 'perversion' in the sense of behaviours and relational styles whose main characteristics are determination of deviations, changes

⁷See also Arlow (1971), Grossmann (1992, 1993) and Parsons (2000).

for the worse, which spoil and corrupt. Meltzer (1973) also referred to this meaning of the term when he stated that there is no human activity which cannot be perverted, given that the essence of the perverse impulse is to transform good into bad, while maintaining the appearance of good.

In psychoanalytical literature, the term 'perversity' is also often used. It has a non-sexual implication, and is similar to the concept of distortion, reversal and alteration of what is real, true or right (Coen, 1992; De Masi, 2003). To avoid redundancies, however, I will be using only the term 'perversion'.

How, then, is the concept of perversion linked to that of narcissism? First, a link is suggested by many authors (Cooper, 1989; Kernberg, 1991; Goldberg, 1995; Hirigoyen, 2000; Pandolfi, 1999; Celenza, 2000). Racamier (1992) particularly stresses the narcissistic origin of the perverse pathology. Second, logic itself dictates that such a link may exist. In fact, an essential feature of the narcissistic personality is indifference towards object relations. The narcissist does not acknowledge the existence of the other. Maldonado (1987) actually states—apparently paradoxically—that proper narcissism requires the presence of an object relation; but with an object that is not acknowledged as such, but used by the subject in order to maintain the illusion of being able to do without any object. Therefore, between the two partners of a narcissistic relationship, what takes place is an 'empty' form of communication. In other words, the narcissist relates to self-objects, since he does not establish a proper relationship with the other; in fact, he uses the other person as a mirror to verify his own identity and support his own self-esteem.

Furthermore, the essence of the perverse way of relating—or relational perversion—consists of transforming object relations into power relations by not acknowledging the other person's rights, using him/her at one's own will and corrupting the relationship in order to control it.

The forms of relational perversion

For the past few years I have had the chance to get to know women who were maltreated in their families. Sometimes, albeit more rarely, I have also had the opportunity to analyse men who maltreat their partners. In order to understand these men, I have felt the need for more detailed descriptions and a more convincing theoretical framework. Maltreatment is a huge issue which psychoanalysis has not yet specifically dealt with, with few exceptions (e.g. Fonagy, 1998). It includes a certain variety of forms, which is not, however, as wide as one might imagine; the 'banality of evil' also implies a limited range of behaviours, lack of imagination and repetitiveness.

We should first distinguish between psychological and physical maltreatment, not only because of the evident diversity of such acts, but above all because they relate to different profiles and features of the personality of the perpetrator. In psychological maltreatment, for example, what is happening is mainly an attempt to control the object through denigration, devaluation, reproach and sarcasm. In the case of physical maltreatment, acting violently towards another person's body, other mechanisms should be taken into consideration. One might think, for example, that in such situations there might be a faulty control of impulses

(which is typical of borderline pathologies). We know, however—as Fonagy (1998) states—that the episodes of physical violence are often of long duration: from 2 to 24 hours. This makes the explanation based on failed or impossible control of impulses less convincing, even if one cannot rule out that sometimes this mechanism is at play.

My reflections, however, particularly address those types of relational perversions that originate from a narcissistic personality structure and that, even if they do not reach physical violence, nevertheless undermine the victim through the systematic use of psychological violence. Hirigoyen (2000), a psychiatrist dealing with the victims of perverse violence in families and in the workplace, briefly outlines the phenomenology of perversion. First, she posits the stability of this character trait. She also states that the pervert never questions his own behaviour, since he cannot experience conflict within himself; he must expel it, transfer it to someone else. The pervert makes other people suffer by ‘destroying’ them, and he creates an atmosphere of distress and fear around him. Another of his characteristics is cynicism, believing and acting as if there is nothing good, noble or sacred in the world, as if everything deserves the same contempt (Eiguer, 1999).

Coen (1992) has written about perversion, referring to the ‘misuse’ of a person by someone else. He describes perversions as forms of pathological dependency, as stable defence organisations that are quite resistant to change. The exploitation of another person in order to put one’s conflict outside oneself may be considered perverse, according to Coen, regardless of whether the relationship is experienced on a sexual level or not. He states that in such relationships the other person is ‘dehumanised’ and degraded to a part-object, a receptacle of the subject’s projective identification, of his omnipotent manipulation and exploitation. The purpose of a pervert is to control the other person, denying her separateness and autonomy.

Racamier (1992) claims that the main objective of the perverse action is to trample on the truth and manipulate things and people for one’s own purposes in order to avoid any internal conflict. By using the other person, the pervert spares himself psychic work, or rather, defends himself against the pain that psychic work entails, and makes someone else ‘pay the bill’.

In the relationship with a narcissist the other person, the object, may not be aware of the use she is being put to; in fact, she may at least initially even find pleasure in sharing her partner’s grandiose excitement. But, when the relationship becomes narcissistic-perverse, actual maltreatment takes place, and the object more clearly takes on the status of victim. In fact, the pervert cannot act on his own; he needs another person, someone he can use for his own purposes, exploit and destroy. In this sense, perversion is really a relational pathology; it can only be seen in the relationship with another person, a true ‘prey’ that the pervert manipulates and subjugates. Narcissistic perversion, Racamier (1992) writes, is characterised by the need to assert oneself at someone else’s expense and by the pleasure deriving from this. It is not erotic, even if some aspects of sexual perversion may be associated with eroticism. Pandolfi (1999) states that relational perversions are mainly seen in the couple, as well as in families and groups. Indeed, she stresses the relational aspect, saying that the pervert needs another person and is dependent on her.

In the film *Gaslight*, Charles Boyer plays a husband who tries to drive his wife (Ingrid Bergman) mad by making her no longer trust her own perceptions. For this purpose, among other things, he tampers with the gas-lit lamps in the house. With understandable anxiety, the woman feels that she is going mad. The ending of the film makes it clear that the husband is a criminal psychopath. The title of the film has given rise to the expression 'gaslighting' to indicate a kind of behaviour more or less consciously aimed at making a person have doubts about herself and her own judgement about reality, making her feel confused and afraid of going mad (Calef and Weinshel, 1981). This type of behaviour is frequently found in the accounts of women subjected to maltreatment; indeed, it is a typical aspect of the maltreatment itself.

I suggest that maltreating behaviour should be considered as related to a psychopathology that extends over a continuum ranging from narcissistic disorder to borderline disorder and further to malignant narcissism, and finally to the most extreme forms of antisocial personality disorder. This axis is crossed by another, namely the axis of perversion. Around this intersection of two axes an area of varying density is created, which represents the range of types of behaviour which can be defined either as narcissistic perversion, or as relational perversion.

In any case, my intention with the notion of relational (or narcissistic) perversion is to provide a framework especially for the forms of *psychological* maltreatment—thus particularly considering the intersection of the narcissistic and perverse axes—since physical maltreatment and sexual abuse need instead to be considered within the context of borderline disorder, malignant narcissism and antisocial disorder, with the addition of a perverse trait. The expression 'narcissistic perversion' denotes the intrapsychic mechanism of this perversion, while 'relational perversion' highlights a relational, intersubjective phenomenology.

Examples of the above continuum of personality types, from the narcissist to the erotic serial killer, can also be found in literature. Don Juan stands at one end of the spectrum, Bluebeard at the other. And while, as Stendhal writes, 'Don Juan reduces love to the level of an ordinary affair ... and in brief he destroys love instead of enjoying it more than others, as is commonly believed' ([1822] 1975, p. 206), Bluebeard is an even more disturbing character: what really counts for him is the annihilation of woman. However, both characters have a common feature: their indifference towards the other. Don Juan, Bluebeard and their descendants do not accept woman as an independent, whole being (Wertheimer, 1999).

A clinical illustration

B is a man in his forties when his analysis starts. He has been suffering for a few months from a phobic symptomatology which interferes with his activity as an entrepreneur. It is, in fact, a claustro-agoraphobic anxiety which prevents him from using lifts, buses, planes or trains. B has a partner with whom he has lived for many years, and with whom he has a satisfactory relationship. He is an intelligent, smart person; he uses language well and does not seem to have difficulty talking about himself.

His original family consists of a very authoritarian, quarrelsome, violent father and a weak, distant, cold mother, who was submissive and afraid of her husband.

She was never able to protect her children from her husband's violence, and had set up a kind of role-reversal with her two sons, from whom she expected help in the parental function and whom she considered more as narcissistic extensions of herself than as children to love. The family that had once been important and well known had gone into economic decline because of bad financial speculations by the patient's grandfather. His father had always endured this new state of near-poverty with shame, a sentiment he had passed on to B. The task of returning the family to its ancient splendour had been entrusted to B and he had achieved this by means of undoubted ability and great determination.

At our first meeting, B made an odd impression on me, and for a long time I was unable to understand why. He conveyed a sense of duplicity: on the one hand, I had the feeling that I was dealing with a frightened, needy person deeply suffering from phobic anxiety; but, on the other, I had a wholly different sensation that this was a strong, seductive man, who was maybe even a bit aggressive and shameless. It was difficult to explain the reason for that feeling, considering how things went during that meeting. B did not say anything that could be defined as shameless, arrogant or aggressive. There were just some small, non-verbal hints: an expression, a way of catching my eye, of smiling knowingly, of seeking consent in my eyes, of trying to impose a sort of superiority that was taken for granted. All in all it was only a feeling, which, however, put me on the alert; I told myself that I should wait, keeping my eyes and ears open.

We began the analysis (four sessions a week, on the couch). The phobic symptomatology began to improve, to the point of considerably diminishing. B felt supported and his phobic anxieties seemed to find a sort of containment. The patient again began taking trains and planes, and using the lift without experiencing a feeling of suffocation and of being unable to escape. His business enterprise became more powerful, and the economic results were more and more satisfactory. The relationship with his partner apparently proceeded unproblematically.

However, as our analytic work progressed, I became increasingly aware of the narcissistic personality structure on to which the phobic disorder was grafted. Behind a façade of correctness, B felt he was 'special'; with a sort of polite yet inflexible determination, he demanded to be entitled to a 'special' kind of treatment. For example, after he started travelling, he happened to skip several sessions because of his job. He never questioned that he had to pay for the sessions he cancelled at the very last minute, but, if I mentioned these absences, he let the subject drop, making me feel that he considered it unimportant. He seemed to prefer me to restrict myself to admiring his skills and acting as a mirror for his great progress.

Later, I also realised that B spent his time, energy-, and money on his 'Don Juanism'. He did not speak directly about this; sometimes, however, I was able to pick up a hint or two, however hard he tried to prevent me from discussing that subject. Sometimes I managed to grasp one of his communications about it, which he conveyed almost in passing. For example, he once told me that a certain woman, a well-known, well-respected lady, had given him to understand that his advances would be favourably welcomed. He then changed the subject; I told him—in order to probe further—that there certainly were many women interested in him—and his

analyst was a woman, too, for that matter. His response was polite but determined: what I was saying had nothing to do with it. To him, I was actually not a woman, but only 'a psychoanalyst'! This failure to recognise the gender of the analyst is not rare, but in this case it took on a specific significance, as we will see later.

Things went on in this manner for quite some time, until Z appeared on the scene. She was a very young woman to whom B (to his own surprise) began to feel more and more attracted. Previously, with all the women he had dated, he seemed to have separated quite distinctly sexual pleasure from personal involvement, which he had always managed to avoid. He felt a strong sexual attraction towards Z, but at the same time he was worried: he was very afraid he might lose his control over the relationship and over his own mind. Nevertheless, he did not want to give up this relationship. He did not want to renounce the strong emotions it was able to excite in him.

Gradually, however, I began to realise that B was maltreating his young lover. On one occasion, for example, he told me that he had got angry with her and offended her, calling her 'whore', although she had done nothing serious. She had started crying, asking him why he was treating her like that. I echoed her question, asking him, 'Yes, why?', and he replied unhesitatingly that, as everyone knows, women are unfaithful, unreliable, 'all whores'. He then added that, if he maltreated her, it was because she deserved it, even if it was not quite clear what her fault might have been. After a number of similar incidents, B was worried and afraid that his relationship might end. However, it seemed that his worry was not about hurting Z, but rather about making a mistake which might bring about unpleasant, unwanted consequences. In brief, he focused all his interest on himself, and he seemed quite unable to put himself in her shoes.

At the same time, however, he kept talking to me about his love life, unlike in the early years of analysis, when he had concealed this whole area of his life. He talked to me about it because he wanted me to help him preserve his sentimental relationship. Reversing Bion's famous statement, I could say that I was 'his best colleague'. Gradually, he began to realise that I did not despise him as deeply as he was afraid I might. As for me, I was helped to maintain an attitude of 'respectful listening' (Nissim Momigliano, 2001) both by my interest in better understanding his way of being and by being able to glimpse the helpless child behind his narcissistic arrogance.

Another aspect of the ways and motives of his maltreating behaviour towards his partner that emerged was that B was afraid he could not trust, and entrust himself to, a person, a woman, who might exploit, abandon and ridicule him. In this sense, he told me that his father openly claimed that women should not be trusted. He seemed to identify himself with his father and to have deeply assimilated his attitude towards women. He was afraid of them, even though he was unaware of this aspect, and consequently wanted control, indeed dominion, over them. He did not trust them. To this had also contributed the fact of having a weak, unprotective mother, who had made him feel alone and betrayed.

Sometimes a few words from Z, however neutral and innocent they were, could arouse his suspicion. He seemed to find in those words a clear confirmation that Z

did not really love him, indeed wanted to 'cheat' on him. In such moments, violence was unleashed. Afterwards, B did not repent, but was ashamed of having lost control of himself. He also feared he might be abandoned. On the other hand, he seemed unable to really understand his victim, her fearful reactions and her timid attempts to distance herself from him. He eventually commented on these episodes, but in a strangely coarse manner, quite in contrast with the finesse he was able to show on other occasions; for example, he would say, 'After all, she asked for it'.

Then, more and more clearly, I began to see his perverse, split-off side, which had not been analysed for a long time, even though in our first meeting it had given rise to that feeling of duplicity I mentioned above.³ I was able to get closer to the area of perversion only when and because B had become worried about the possible consequences of his behaviour (he was, in fact, afraid of losing Z and experienced the fact of feeling the need for her with anguish). I also realised that the relationship with his 'official' partner was considered good by him, since B did not feel emotionally involved with his companion, and this allowed him to have less fear of dependence. With her, he demonstrated a less openly maltreating behaviour, owing to this emotional distance.

Another reason that had made it possible for B to let me get closer to his narcissistic-perverse side was that he considered the analytic relationship as good and reliable up to that point, since it had given him a remedy against his phobic anxiety. I was then able to tell him that he had an ambiguous attitude towards me (a woman analyst). On the one hand, he saw me, just like the other women in his life, as a docile, useful tool for his purposes, as in the case of the recovery from his phobic anxieties. On the other hand, however, he was simply denying that part of me which might have troubled him, namely, my femininity, which to him was synonymous with weakness (his mother's weakness) as well as threat (the threat of dependency). He kept on thinking of me as 'gender-neutral', simply a doctor.

Later, I was also able to link his behaviour with that of his father, who was so authoritarian as to border on sadistic. We realised that he identified himself with his authoritarian, sadistic father, while he projected on to Z a weak, frightened part of himself. His anger, which was the source of his maltreating behaviour, served the function of keeping these two parts of himself separate, and of expelling any possible pain out of himself.

Discussion

Several different considerations may be drawn from this clinical vignette. A narcissistic pathology is in play here; there is a sense of shame about having been poor, the determination to achieve that success which he believes is due to him; the feeling that he is 'special' and has the right to treat other people according to his own desires. He was a son admired for his potential skills; he was considered predestined to take the family back to its former glory. But there is also similar behaviour to that of Don Juan, a way of exploiting the other person—the woman, in fact.

³This corresponds to the idea of Riesenbergl-Malcolm (cited in Jiménez, 2004) according to which perversion is revealed in analysis more through 'tone and nuances' than through the narrated content.

In this case, there is also an association between narcissistic organisation and phobic disorders, the latter, as I said before, being the reason why B asked for analysis. If the perverse narcissist comes to analysis, in fact, it is because of some concomitant problem, not for the perverse-narcissistic disorder in itself.

In B's case, both the phobic disorder and the perverse trait seem to me to originate from the same matrix. He had been more admired than loved by his parents. He had suffered from his father's violent, authoritarian character, he had been afraid of him and had defensively identified himself with him. In his relationship with his mother, he had not been able to experience an intimacy that would have given him security and comfort; on the contrary, he had felt the burden of her attitude of dependence on him. He had distanced himself from her, despising her, and had extended this feeling to the whole female world.

His maltreatment of Z, his Don Juan behaviour, his inability to put himself in the shoes of the women he seduced and his failure to recognise their otherness and rights: all this made him feel strong in that it allowed him to deny his feelings of infantile terror and dependency. It was a kind of triumphant revenge on the weakness of his mother and of women in general (but also on the experienced—and denied—weakness of the unprotected child he had been).

As I said above, it was in this matrix that both the perverse trait and the phobic disorder for which he had asked for analysis had their origin. In fact, just as he was beginning to be successful, a strong anguish about being shut up in closed spaces manifested itself in him. Behind the appearance of a conflict between the desire for success and the fear of failure, which were the superficial aspects, his phobic anguish corresponded above all to the fear of being shut up in situations of clinging, threatening dependence. He feared his own dependence, which made him feel as weak as the women he used. These aspects, however, only became accessible when it was possible to analyse the traits of perversion (although in the meantime a symptomatic improvement had been possible thanks to analytical holding).

But the aspect I wish to stress in this case is the shift from the narcissistic style of relating to the behaviour and narcissistic-perverse way of relating (or of relational perversion) that B enacted with Z. In a comprehensive paper, Fonagy (1998) attempts to understand the specific psychopathology of men who are violent towards their partners. Although he addresses the issue of physical maltreatment and abuse, I think that his hypotheses also shed some light on psychological maltreatment. He convincingly suggests a connection between attachment styles, quality of parental care and the capacity for mentalisation. Attachment theory (which is the basis of his argument) cannot be discussed exhaustively here; it is enough to say that Bowlby's studies and those of his followers have made it possible to codify a number of different styles of attachment of the child to the caregiver which are defined as secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised. In brief, Fonagy claims that the disorganised style of attachment is often the result of relationships between abusive or maltreating parents and their children (parents that are violent towards each other or towards their children). Under the pressure of the need to find some comfort, on the one hand, and to escape from the abusive parent, on the other, the child's mind finds a compromise, accepting physical comfort and creating at the same time a

kind of mental distance from the parent. However, in doing so, the children damage their own capacity to mentalise, since they cannot use the parents for the necessary function of mirroring and interpreting their own mental states. Furthermore, they cannot even afford to understand their parents' states of mind, since they would have to face both hatred and the evidence of not being loved. Fonagy writes that these patients may regress when they become adults, in some situations, to 'non-mentalising thought'.

Emotionally involving relationships may therefore be experienced as a threat to the integrity of a precarious self, which has defensively adopted a narcissistic structure. The subject fears the risk of a dependency that might annihilate the presence of self-sufficiency. There is the fear of catastrophic fragmentation and collapse (all this was present in B's case). The immediate solution is an externalisation of the conflict, a projection on to the partner of the role of victim, of one's own identification with a violent (therefore powerful) parent and of the manic triumph which ensues. I use the term 'manic' here in its proper meaning, that is, as the other face of denial.

These men are not completely devoid of empathy; indeed, they are quite empathetic with that part of themselves which they expel into the woman, which they can see again when they manage to make her suffer. After such episodes, Fonagy claims, men experience a decrease in tension, like 'a restoration of an inner Gestalt', a strange state of tranquillity. 'The calm reflects the successful destruction of the woman's psychic independence. She is once again the mere vehicle of her partner's pathological projective processes' (1998, p. 24).

One could object that it is useless to introduce a new concept—namely, relational perversion—when there already is one, that is, sado-masochism. However, even if it is unhelpful to multiply terms and concepts—according to Occam's rule that *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* [entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity]—I think that the concept of relational perversion refers to phenomena which are not adequately described by the term 'sado-masochism'; first, this term has primarily a connotation of sexual perversion and stresses the fact that *both* members of the couple experience pleasure in their way of relating. Second, there may also be role-reversal in a sado-masochistic relationship. In the case of relational perversion, there is no role-reversal; the perverser cannot allow that to take place. Only *he* can exert his power in the relationship and experience a kind of pleasure in that. Furthermore, my suggestion of adopting the term 'relational perversion' has the purpose of highlighting the concept of interpersonal relationship which may include, albeit not necessarily, sexuality. It is a type of relationship in which the roles are different (just as, on the level of reality, responsibilities are also different).

'Where are the happy moments?'

If the concept of sado-masochistic relation is misleading, it is also, however, often invoked because it seems to provide an explanation of the behaviour of both members of the couple. In fact, to speak of relational perversion without speaking of the other pole of the relationship—the woman who suffers the perverse action—can only give an impression of incompleteness. Although it is not possible to deal with this

theme exhaustively in this paper, I will try to give some indications to show how my reflections are orientated.

One of the first questions is whether there exists a *specificity* to the victim, in other words, whether it is possible to trace a profile of the person subjected to maltreatment, just as it is possible to compose a mosaic of the psychopathological profile of the perpetrator (which is the hypothesis I propose in this paper). Hirigoyen (2000) claims that the victim has no specific features of her own; indeed, she asserts that saying that a perverse narcissist behaves perversely with one partner in particular and not with others would be the same as saying what the perpetrators themselves assert (and B himself said): 'She asked for it'.

However, those working in the field of maltreatment often find themselves wondering why women submit to it, why they do not manage to escape before it happens and what binds them to the abusive relationship. The ideas that there is a collusion between the two partners, or indeed that the woman experiences masochistic pleasure from maltreatment, are the easiest and most often-used explanations. But let us examine these explanations more closely to see if they are, in fact, useful.

As I have already asserted, domestic violence manifests itself along a continuum of increasing seriousness. At one extreme, there is psychological violence, at the other physical and sexual violence which puts the woman's very life at risk. The most serious cases of abuse often involve women who have already been victimised during their lives, who come from violent families where they have witnessed violence between their parents or have themselves been abused. These women have not learned to be protective of themselves and, more generally, bear the stigmata of the damage suffered within their personality structure. This also applies to men, who, however, more often tend to identify themselves with the role of the maltreating parent.

However, this paper deals specifically with psychological violence. It is true that, when investigating the personality of women who have undergone this type of maltreatment, one comes across similar, albeit less devastating, situations to those described above in a certain percentage of cases: people who have witnessed violence or who have suffered because of parents' neglect of them, or again who have had to experience a role-reversal, themselves taking on the parental functions that are lacking, and which has prevented them from experiencing the security of being loved or from recognising their right to be loved.

These observations, which hold true in many cases, do not, however, constitute *the* explanation for the phenomenon. It seems to me, above all, that, in the case of psychological maltreatment, the most interesting aspect is not so much the definition of a sort of predisposing personality (in any case a difficult task given the absence of significant recurrent features in the typology of the victims) as an understanding of the dynamics of relational perversion and the way this impacts on the victim. By this, I mean understanding what an abused person becomes.

In one of the most heart-rending arias of the *Nozze di Figaro* by Mozart (libretto by da Ponte), the Countess nostalgically recalls 'the happy moments' she lived in the past with her unfaithful, lying husband:

Dove sono i bei momenti	Where are the happy moments
Di dolcezza, e di piacer,	Of sweetness and of pleasure
Dove andaro i giuramenti	Whatever happened to the oaths
Di quel labbro menzogner?	From those lying lips?
Perché mai, se in pianti e in pene	Why oh why if for me all is changed
Per me tutto si cangiò	Into sorrow and pain
La memoria di quel bene	The memory of that love
Dal mio sen non trapassò?	Remains still in my mind?

Like the countess in the *Nozze*, maltreated women begin to wonder at a certain point what has happened to what they believed was a relationship worthy of the name. The woman realises that 'something is not right' little by little, sometimes after a series of episodes which start to make sense when they are linked to one another, although one of the particular difficulties for the victim of a perverse narcissist is staying lucid. Regarding this, I would point out how the overturning of logic and creation of a false reality are typical characteristics of the perverse action.

So, at the beginning the woman reacts with disorientation and confusion. Unable to understand what is happening, she tends to attribute to herself the responsibility and fault for the malfunctioning of the relationship. She tends to think that if she were a better person things would go better; she tries to modify her behaviour, but to no avail. Her partner's devaluation and criticism are always at the ready, but, while he is very clear in maintaining that his companion is in the wrong, he is instead very ambiguous when it comes to making a clear pronouncement as to what she actually should do to improve things.

Why do women submit to maltreatment? I think that, like the females of other animal species, women use all their resources to preserve the nest. They are also pushed into doing so by their upbringing, by society and by cultural tradition. It is also worth reiterating that the perverse action is such just because it seduces and manipulates. In the words of the Chinese saying: 'Hit your wife every evening; you don't know why you are doing it, but she does'. Thus, in the perverse relationship the woman finds herself thinking that if her husband is maltreating her it means that she is guilty. It is, to be sure, a reverse logic, but it is still a logic, that is, something which lends order to the world, and this is in any case preferable to chaos, confusion, not understanding why the relationship is becoming so absurd, a kind of monstrous labyrinth. One might say then that the woman's assumption of responsibility for a situation which does not depend on her, indeed, of which she is the victim, besides coinciding with the man's attribution of the fault, is also a defence against accepting the painful recognition of an absurd, confusing, incomprehensible situation which moreover deals a death-blow to the hopes placed on the relationship and to the commitment and energy used to preserve it.

In addition, as the partner's behaviour gets more and more irrational and incomprehensible, completely absorbing the woman's energies in strategies to cope with the situation, on the one hand, she isolates herself, becomes too bound up in the relationship and is prevented from mixing with other people by her partner's

possessive, controlling attitude. On the other hand, by submitting to and accepting the moral blackmail, and being afraid of it, she accepts not speaking about her private hell to outsiders. Thus, in an apparently paradoxical way she ends up protecting the companion who maltreats her, allowing him to keep his façade of normality and render it convincing. In this sense the relationship is strengthened, precisely in a perverse way; the woman becomes more and more indispensable to her companion, who is less and less willing to let her go.

In conclusion, I believe that what binds the woman to the relationship are above all the *effects*, the outcomes of the perverse action, the way in which this gnaws at the victim, undermining her resources and abilities. These effects are truly *specific* and are the brand which perversion burns into the victim's existence. It is this particular aspect, the way in which perversion penetrates and erodes the personality of its object, that is worthy of further research.

Translations of summary

Perverse Beziehungen: die Perspektive des Täters. Die Autorin untersucht das Thema der perversen Beziehungen im Paar und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Misshandlung – besonders im psychologischen Sinn – der Partnerinnen durch den Mann. Verschiedenartige Aspekte der Persönlichkeit und des Beziehungsstils des Täters werden beschrieben. Die Autorin setzt an den Konzepten der „narzisstischen Perversion“ (Racamier, 1992) und der „relationalen Perversion“ (Pandolfi, 1999) an, die sie eingehend diskutiert. Diese Konzepte sind hilfreich für das Verständnis und für die Identifizierung dieser Art von Pathologie. Sie postuliert, dass missbräuchliches Verhalten seinen Ursprung im Zusammentreffen von ausgesprochen unempathischen Beziehungsstilen, die für bestimmte Persönlichkeiten (vor allem, aber nicht ausschließlich, für die narzisstische Störung) charakteristisch sind, mit „Perversität“, d.h. Perversion, verstanden als Charakterzug, hat. Sie unterscheidet zwischen „relationaler Perversion“ und „somasochistischer Beziehung“ und präsentiert, um Licht auf die oben erwähnten Aspekte zu werfen, ein klinisches Bild aus der Analyse eines Mannes, der seine Partnerin misshandelt. Dabei werden einige der Probleme thematisiert, die in der Analyse solcher Patienten auftauchen. Abschließend untersucht die Autorin bestimmte Aspekte der Missbrauchsoffer.

Relaciones perversas: la perspectiva del maltratador. La autora examina las relaciones perversas de pareja, y profundiza en la cuestión del maltrato, sobre todo psicológico, de hombres hacia sus parejas femeninas. Se describen diferentes aspectos de la personalidad y el estilo relacional del maltratador. La autora toma como punto de partida y discute en profundidad los conceptos de “perversion narcisista” (Racamier 1992) y “perversion relacional” (Pandolfi 1999), por considerarlos útiles para la comprensión y la identificación de este tipo de patología. La autora plantea la hipótesis de que en realidad el maltrato se origina en el encuentro de estilos relacionales de ciertas personalidades (sobre todo, pero no exclusivamente, de desorden narcisista) que son especialmente poco empáticas con la “perversidad”, es decir la perversion, entendida como rasgo de carácter. Filippini distingue entre “perversion relacional” y “relación sadomasoquista”, y lo ilustra mediante una viñeta clínica que proviene del análisis de un hombre que maltrata a su compañera, abordando algunos problemas que surgen en el análisis de esos pacientes. En conclusión, la autora plantea algunas consideraciones sobre las víctimas del maltrato.

Les relations perverses : la perspective de l'auteur de maltraitances. L'article étudie le thème des relations perverses au sein du couple, s'intéressant à la question de la maltraitance des hommes envers leurs partenaires féminins, en particulier au sens psychologique. Divers aspects de la personnalité de l'auteur de maltraitance et du mode relationnel sont décrits. L'article a pour point de départ et discute en profondeur les concepts de « perversion narcissique » (Racamier, 1992) et de « perversion relationnelle » (Pandolfi, 1999), considérés comme utiles à la compréhension et à l'identification de ce type de pathologie. L'auteur de l'article fait l'hypothèse que la conduite de maltraitance a pour origine la rencontre entre de modes relationnels particulièrement dénués d'empathie, caractéristiques de certaines personnalités (principalement, mais non exclusivement, les troubles narcissiques) avec une « perversité », c'est-à-dire une perversion comprise comme un trait de caractère. L'auteur fait une distinction entre « perversion relationnelle » et

« relation sadomasochique » et présente une vignette clinique issue de l'analyse d'un homme maltraitant sa compagne, de façon à éclaircir les aspects décrits ci-dessus, relatifs à certaines questions qui apparaissent au cours de l'analyse de tels patients. En conclusion, l'auteur discute certains aspects concernant les victimes de maltraitance.

Rapporti perversi: il punto di vista del perpetratore. L'Autrice prende in esame il tema delle relazioni perverse di coppia, approfondendo la questione del maltrattamento, soprattutto psicologico, da parte di uomini nei confronti delle loro compagne. Vengono descritti vari aspetti della personalità e dello stile relazionale dell'uomo maltrattante. L'autrice assume come punti di partenza i concetti di "perversione narcisistica" (Racamier 1992) e di "perversione relazionale" (Pandolfi 1999), che discute in modo approfondito, in quanto li considera utili a comprendere e identificare questo tipo di patologia. Essa ipotizza infatti che i comportamenti di maltrattamento prendano origine proprio dall'incontro di stili relazionali particolarmente non empatici tipici di certe personalità – principalmente, ma non solo, del disturbo narcisistico – con la 'perversità', cioè con la perversione intesa come tratto di carattere. L'autrice opera una distinzione tra perversione relazionale e relazione sadomasochistica ed espone una vignetta clinica proveniente dall'analisi di un uomo che maltratta la sua compagna, allo scopo di mettere in luce gli aspetti sopra menzionati e di accennare ad alcuni problemi che si incontrano nell'analisi di questi pazienti. In conclusione, essa presenta infine alcune considerazioni sulle vittime delle relazioni di maltrattamento.

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