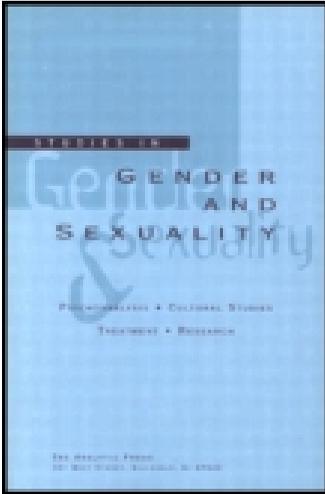


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Studies in Gender and Sexuality

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hsgs20>

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Published online: 31 May 2013.

To cite this article: Steven Kuchuck (2013) Reflections on the Therapeutic Action of Desire, Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 14:2, 133-139, DOI: [10.1080/15240657.2013.791597](https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2013.791597)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2013.791597>

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Reflections on the Therapeutic Action of Desire

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When feelings of love and desire for an external object are so powerful that they distract from the treatment relationship or manifest as an erotic transference, they can undermine or destroy an analysis. Likewise, when the analyst's erotic responses are more than he or she can tolerate, acting out can prove fatal. Conversely, when the erotic is contained, desire can become an important part of the therapeutic action. An extended clinical example is presented to explore these themes and related variables of repressed and liberated desire as well as the connection between age and erotic longing.

INTRODUCTION

As I open the door to the waiting room to begin an initial consultation, an uneasy sense of familiarity washes over me as Mark and I walk into the treatment room and take our seats. We look at each other and prepare to speak; I wonder if he has thoughts similar to mine, although I also know that this question might merely be the result of my own internal resonance. I'm struck by the physical resemblance between us—or is the face my father's? I allow for the fact that the feeling of familiarity might have more to do with the story that brings him here than the physical presentation. I am also very much aware that desire has entered the room and will be a constant presence in the weeks and months to come. This essay is a reflection on elements of that desire, including age and unrequited longing, and the opportunities for growth or stagnation that desire and the erotic present.¹

IDENTIFICATIONS

Mark, my elder by 1½ years almost to the month, is talking about his partner John, who is just a few years younger and recently threw him a milestone birthday party. In a patient-analyst match replete with uncanny physical resemblance; overlapping themes; and familiar, sometimes similar biographical details, I note this newest coincidence. My partner, who is exactly the same age as Mark and works in a related field, is in the middle of planning a very similar party for me. We have been together for the same number of years as Mark and John, and like most long-term couples, have also had our share of existential crises, heartache, and joy. There are additional

¹Although there are subtle and not-so-subtle semantic differences, at various points in this article I use the terms (erotic) *desire*, *hunger*, and *longing* interchangeably.

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historical and here-and-now commonalities that Mark and I share—religious and cultural background, and growing up in neighboring towns, for example, although significant differences as well. At this point, what may be most important to note is that this is a case which has provided ample opportunity for multiple identifications and internal and external object resonance, with the intertwining of age and desire an ongoing presence in the transference-countertransference. As is elaborated later in the article, I believe that it is in part these similarities that have allowed for mutual if asymmetrical experiences of the erotic that have informed the therapeutic action.

BEGINNINGS

Mark, an emergency room physician and hospital administrator, entered treatment to address job-related stress and with the goal of figuring out whether or not to pursue or mourn a love affair, salvage his relationship with John, or become single. Mark was in love with an escort he had hired while traveling abroad several years ago, the young man his junior by several decades and professing strong feelings for Mark as well. Mark had gone back overseas on several occasions to visit him, and eventually helped the man to immigrate to the United States. They had been spending a great deal of time together in and out of bed, and the relationship had many markings of a true affair. Although my patient knew that his feelings for the sex worker were likely not fully reciprocated in kind and that finances might be as strong a motivator for the young man's attachment as any other, he also despaired of ever getting over him and held out hope that the escort might somehow come to realize similar feelings, give up his line of work, and commit himself to my patient.

Although space restrictions and privacy concerns prohibit me from providing a detailed genetic history, there are a few details that are particularly important to mention. Mark grew up in a family where his own needs placed a distant second to those of his professor-physician parents, who Mark believed were more able to attend to their students' and patients' needs than those of their only child. Mark felt most valued when able to balance the demands of a benign but emotionally absent gambling-addicted father and depressed, frightened, and needy mother. A high academic achiever and gifted painter and poet, Mark learned to repress sexual and affective needs until much later in life and then allowed himself only partial gratification. He described a childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood spent as mother's constant companion and confidant, and whether at home, with extended family and friends, or in his romantic relationships, Mark was the "good boy," sacrificing his needs and self-expression on the altar of the other's. As for his own wishes and desires, these were merely a reflection of and defined by the Other's (especially mother's) desire. Helping Mark to develop greater autonomy in response and opposition to the Other's desire was a challenge we'd need to address (Lacan, 1973).

AWAKENINGS

Not surprisingly, we discovered that similar patterns repeated themselves in his current, long-term relationship. In analysis, we understood how quickly his partner had become his parental oppressor, seemingly demanding allegiance and attunement or, alternatively, smothering him as if in maternal embrace. Seeking a sexual companion for hire while out of the country seemed like a compromise to Mark. It was something that he hoped might introduce an element of sexual

adventure and escape from a deadened erotic life without threatening what he recognized as an otherwise stable and gratifying relationship. What happened instead took Mark completely by surprise. He hadn't counted on the awakening of longing, desire, and hunger for ownership and control that his purchase would lead to (Atlas-Koch and Kuchuck, 2012). Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he was in touch with affective and physical needs—not only felt but met—that overwhelmed but thrilled and threatened to destabilize all that he had known and come to count on.

Mark's partner learned of these goings-on when about two years into the affair, he discovered Mark's diary. Soon after confronting my patient, the two began couples therapy and each entered into individual treatment as well. What John probably didn't know was that Mark was still in love, and in tremendous pain, struggling with confusion and ambivalence about how or whether or not to terminate the connection with his lover once and for all. Although he recognized the likely impossibility of building a lasting relationship with this man and was wracked by guilt, shame, and moral concerns, it was also true that he had never before felt so alive and in touch with his own needs and desires. In the beginning months and years of our work, he would wonder aloud how something so obviously wrong could feel so enlivening, gratifying, and healing. Further complicating the situation was the fact that Mark deeply cared for and loved his partner, even though he no longer knew if he was in love with or attracted to him.

In sessions, we made space for these brand-new feelings and came to learn why the longing and desire had needed to lay dormant and unrecognized for so many decades. Desire, as Lacan (1936) notes, evolves from and is related to lack, and is always characterized by absence and incompleteness. Desire, finally unchained, was a delightful but indeed, also torturous companion. It empowered and strengthened, but also pained and caused emotional and relational upheaval in its endless drive to capture and tame youthful passion. And this initially felt desire led to additional desire as it often does, especially since the sating was always incomplete; his further and varied desires, as well as the contagious factor of this newfound appetite that led to my erotic, romantic, and other feelings of desire, as well as his partner's and his lover's similar states.

We might understand Mark's exciting but also painful yearning as a quest to experience what's missing from the self (Frommer, 2006). Related to this notion, Galit Atlas-Koch (2011) discusses a female patient whose seemingly insatiable sexual hunger is an attempt to become whole. Elaborating on Heidegger, Atlas-Koch notes that it is only in the emptiness that we may eventually see the filling in of self, healing attachments, and greater satisfaction and fullness. Emptiness leads to, allows for, springs from and informs desire, and is therefore always paired with pursuit of fulfillment and degrees of satiation. As Dimen (2012) reminds us, Lacan instructs that we need to track desire and the gaps in which it arises throughout a treatment. Patient and analyst desire might best be approached by allowing it to be felt and then letting it go, for such is the slippery nature of desire.

It was never entirely clear to either of us to what extent the lover's interest was financial, sexual, and/or romantic, although I was skeptical about the possibility of it being much more than the former. Mark, as mentioned, mostly clung to the hope that the feelings of love were or might become mutual. Still, new sexual and sometimes minor romantic trysts—this time nonfinancial—were sought and found online, as a third (Ogden, 1994) that might fit in ways his partner and lover could not thus far. In every case, the object of desire was considerably younger, as

desire and youth became intertwined and confounded. We understood this in part to represent a revisiting of younger self-states and a time of greater hope for the future, a wish to parent these younger selves, rescue and power fantasies and the desire for beauty and perfection that many men and sometimes women—gay or straight—experience in midlife and beyond. But there are other explanations as well.

LOVE AND HATE

Contemporary psychoanalysts do well to caution against misuse of the term *perversion*. All too often, as we know, it has been used to assume pathology where none may exist and as the basis of a false binary between normal and abnormal (for a brilliantly elucidated discussion of this topic, see Dimen, 2001). As both Robert Stoller (1974) and Ruth Stein (2005) each emphasized, the perverse is present in all of us and historically has been too easily pointed to as an absolute that obfuscates the so-called normal continuum of perverse mechanisms and behaviors—sexual and otherwise—that give our lives color and excitement. All three understood, however, that the abuses of power and distortion that exist on the far ends of this continuum where Mark does sometimes reside can in fact interfere with human relating, sexual and romantic relationships, and self-regulation.

Desire that is forced underground, as it was for Mark and probably still is for most gay and lesbian youth and young adults—perhaps everyone to some extent—becomes perverted. Blocked, perverted desire—again, existing to a greater or lesser extent in every human being—becomes a disguise for (unacceptable) hate and an attempt to transform anger and hatred into love and erotic desire (Stoller, 1974; Stein, 2005). In other words, when anger is feared and threatens to destroy the object and oneself, as in Mark's case (primarily because of family dynamics), it becomes converted into a more acceptable and less frightening form: erotic desire. In addition to the interpretations offered earlier, I understood Mark's pursuit of numerous and younger sexual objects that he felt able to mentor, dominate, and control, as well as the erotic transference to me, as just such attempts at disguise and transformation. There were sadistic elements revealed—as when he fantasized attacking and seeking revenge against his lovers and me when he was unable to control us in ways that felt urgent—as well as paranoid fears of our retaliation and a masochistic turning against himself when the desire couldn't be realized and the rage, untransformed, had nowhere to go.

Eventually, a primary focus of our work became to recognize the historical impossibility of identifying and articulating this anger and other affect and needs, not to mention the difficulty expecting and tolerating that the feelings be heard and the needs met. In particular, we focused on the anger forced underground and also felt in response to an externally imposed and perceived need for self-censoring and repression. We experimented with finding ways that he might bring this challenge to his relationships with friends, with me, and with his partner John by focusing on the content and dynamics of his interactions with others, and as is discussed later, through working in the transference. Indeed, over time, Mark did become more able to reveal what he was feeling, what he needed, and what he wanted from each of us. He had his doubts that we—especially John—could meet these expectations or survive his need and affect, and therefore, often, self-fulfilling prophecies and loyalty to depriving objects helped to maintain the status quo.

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Initial progress was evidenced by a slowly growing ability to identify and express needs and feelings—now including anger, in and out of therapy. In fact, for a period of time, Mark was especially quick to anger. Troubled and eventually infuriated by the boundaries and limitations of analysis that could at times feel arbitrary and cruel, Mark began to lash out at me during and between his appointments. Angry phone messages and e-mails accused me of being uncaring—as evidenced by my refusal to more actively self-disclose or spend time with him outside of sessions—and motivated only by money. I was no better than a prostitute, he declared. Although his comments could sting and stir my own defensive anger, I recognized the value of the deepening and evolving transference. I had joined his partner, lover, and more to the point his parents as a valued but unavailable object of desire. Newly freed and not as terrifying as it once was, Mark's anger no longer only assumed the form of desire. Now, more likely to be felt directly, it defended against and comingled with feelings of hurt, vulnerability, and sexual and romantic longing.

As noted earlier, physical and biographical similarities have been part of my subjective and therefore, probably our intersubjective experience and various forms of desire have permeated the room from the beginning. But once the transference became more overtly eroticized and recognized and verbally acknowledged as such by Mark and me, the presence of desire was more keenly felt by each of us. Now, related core issues of need, hunger, sexual identity, longing and capacity for intimacy, among others, were even more noticeably present and available for examination. When desire is overpowering and uncontained, the erotic transference can threaten to undermine or even destroy a treatment (Blum, 1973). Likewise, although fortunately not as common, when the analyst's erotic responses are more than he or she can tolerate, dangerous acting-out can prove fatal (Gabbard, 1989). But when an adequate amount of what might be called observing ego, mentalizing, and/or metabolizing can be brought to bear as I believe has been the case in Mark's analysis, the erotic can actually aid rather than hinder the therapeutic action by allowing internalized self and object representations and strong affects to become more accessible via the transference-countertransference (Kuchuck, 2012) and for other reasons I explore shortly.

THERAPEUTIC ACTION

Interestingly, Mark's erotic responses made me feel considerably younger than the 18 months that separated us, which I expect was at least partly a function of his need for me to assume this role: sometimes a boy and at other times a young man in my 20s or 30s. These were spaces that sometimes felt pleasurable—to be young again while being admired and wanted; disorienting—which I think reflected some of Mark's younger, less evolved self-states; and impinged upon and controlled—in response to my patient's perverse, controlling, and dominating sexual enactments in the transference. Although the erotic transference was not a factor that tended to stir my own sexual or romantic responses beyond very minimal and fleeting moments of arousal, it did in fact activate what James Herzog described as father hunger for each of us. Mark and I alternated between enacting the role of nurturing father we longed for on the one hand, and on the other hand, feeling ourselves to be the hungry but now fed sons in relation to each other

as the transference good-enough, oedipally admiring and attracted father (Herzog, 2001). Elsewhere, I've written about this dynamic, and the curative aspects of the male analyst's contained, undisclosed sexual and romantic attraction to certain male patients, especially for those men who, despite this normative developmental need, were not adored and desired by their fathers. As part of that earlier work, I also presented two extended case examples in which the erotic countertransference was in full bloom (Kuchuck, 2012). Although I am concerned by and curious about the inevitable absence of these feelings in some treatments where it might otherwise aid in the therapeutic action—including this one—I do believe that there were other elements of desire that emerged in my work with Mark that had a similarly healing effect.

Because, as mentioned, desire is not only desire but also transformed hostility and can have a contagious affect, and because of certain subjective and intersubjective factors already referred to, it has been a dominant element in this treatment. It is always in the room; his for me and the younger men in his life and mine, albeit fleetingly, in response to being the object of his desire and as identified with him in his desire for the others he discusses.

I believe that the presence of desire—whether his or mine for those he longs for—serves a similar function of therapeutic action to when the analyst is erotically drawn to the patient (Celenza, 2010; Hirsch, 2010; Kuchuck, 2012). This is because there may be therapeutic feelings of twinship and comradeship in what evolves via cross identification in the transference-countertransference field as our shared desire for the same or similar objects. It seems to me that he may feel and make use of this shared arousal and fantasied quest even though not explicitly disclosed. Related, he may also take comfort in sensing that I, too, am familiar with the more hostile and sadistic elements of desire and no stranger to unrequited longing, the latter common for gays and lesbians because the earliest and even later objects of desire and erotic longing are forbidden and unattainable. Certainly, there has also been an overall therapeutic benefit to allowing Mark's desire and eroticism to take center stage.

MOVING FORWARD

The work goes on. As the transference and other elements of the treatment environment have expanded to include space for a fuller range of affect and childhood and adult dependency needs and self-states, age seems to have diminished—although not disappeared—as a central component of erotic desire. Mark has mostly although not completely let go of his relationship with the escort and other men. And he has decided that he wants to remain in his current long-term relationship. In fact, his attachment to his partner has deepened and become far less ambivalent; marriage plans are now in place.

Affect regulation and expression do continue as challenges, however, and it remains to be seen to what extent his longing for other and younger men will remain, and, although already lessened, how much hatred will continue to fuel and be subsumed by desire. If these factors continue to play a central role, there is a question as to whether or not they can become more integrated rather than split off and undermining of intimacy and self-regulation. That stated, we also recognize the role this longing has played in attempting to achieve companionship and regulation. In treatment as in life, desire does still hover. Released from its former position of exile, these days, it mostly empowers and enlivens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With great appreciation to Galit Atlas and Hillary Grill for their important contributions.

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