Defensive Aspects of the Perverse Discourse

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Abstract

Among the various possible points of view on perversion, perversion as a discourse is chosen, instead of perversion as a diagnostic category. The objective of the article is to circumscribe some of the characteristics of the discursive formations that could be qualified as perverse. The dynamics of the psychoanalytic situation and the transference/counter transference fields are the criteria to circumscribe the perverse discourse.

Aspects défensifs du discours Perverse

Parmi les différents points de vue possibles sur la perversion, la perversion comme un discours est choisi, au lieu de la perversion comme une catégorie de diagnostic. L’objectif de l’article est de circonscrire certaines des caractéristiques des formations discursives qui pourraient être qualifiés de pervers. La dynamique de la situation psychanalytique et les champs du transfert et contretransfert sont les critères pour circonscrire le discours pervers.
In psychoanalysis, the use of the concept of perversion is often imprecise and its boundaries are vague. Perversion entered the psychoanalytic field through a subversion of the idea of perversion as pathology of sexual behavior, as a deviation from the norm. Qualifying infantile sexuality as perverse and polymorphous, Freud changed the original meaning of the term perversion, introducing something as paradoxical as a “normal perversion.”

Freud contributed to psychiatry with the delimitation of some psychopathological categories, such as the obsessive neurosis. However, the expression “psychoanalytic psychopathology” requires quotation marks, since one cannot abstract from the structure of the psychoanalytic situation and from the transference field, which are the foundation both of its practice and of the construction of theoretical tools that allow working in this practice.

The classifying principle guiding the constitution of the psychiatric field considers the Aristotelian prescription that the scientific subject matters should begin by the precise description of phenomena, and the systematic grouping of the entities formally delimited according to their constant similarities and differences. Defining psychiatry as an independent medical specialization, Pinel initiated a form of systematic approach to describe and classify the phenomena, traits and behaviors. This methodology is quite different from that of psychoanalysis (Pereira, 2000).

The psychiatric concept of perversion continues to contaminate the psychoanalytic elaborations on perversion on several levels. We find resonances of the medico-legal area in which perversion was included at the end of the XIX century, designating murderers, necrophilics, sadists and delinquents, in some psychoanalytical elaborations on perversion. The word “perversity” is eventually used as equivalent to perversion, evoking the idea of a vocation to the destruction and exploitation of the other.

In addition to that, the heritage of the psychiatric approach appears in the temptation to define perversion as an unusual or a bizarre sexual behavior; this idea remains in psychoanalysis with no attention to the fact that this definition goes along with the descriptive and classifying methodology which is, in a sense, behaviorist, and not dynamic.

Some Lacanian authors, like Joël Dor (1987), propose three different clinical structures - perverse, psychotic and neurotic - as articulated by distinct operators: refusal (Verleugnung), rejection (Verwerfung) and repression (Verdrängung), respectively. The idea of clinical structures takes the analysts to insensibly slide into a type of diagnosis of the patient that does not take into consideration the epistemological specificity of psychoanalysis as opposed to that of psychiatry.

The psychoanalytic method does not authorize us to suggest a nosography such as that of psychiatry, based on the observation and classification of behavior. In the field of psychoanalysis, properly described by Lacan as a specific form of social practice, or discourse, it is necessary to characterize perversion within the transference field.

Taking psychoanalytic epistemological specificity seriously, we could wonder if it is possible to speak of a perverse transference as a monolithic block, or if we would be justified to speak only of perverse transference movements. The dialogue with the patient presents many aspects, and the psychoanalytic processes go through quite diverse moments, in which there are changes in the patient’s position in the transference field, so that the diagnosis, as a label, tends to fade.
To outline the idea of a perverse discourse, I will start by Freudian indications. Breaking with the previous concept of perversion as a deviation to the norm, as it characterizes infantile sexuality as polymorphous and perverse, Freud’s step, as he considers perversion as part of the normal constitution, signifies to abandon the idea of instinct, to which, in its indetermination, the drive does not adjust.

In the “Three Essays on Sexuality,” Freud (1905/1971) considers that perverse fantasies are repressed in neuroses. On the other hand, in perversion, these fantasies are conscious and/or acted out. Thence comes the idea that neurosis is the negative of perversion. At that moment, perversion could be understood as representing the permanence of sexuality in an infantile pattern, a mere direct expression of the drives that, due to the absence or lack of repression, would not originate a neurotic symptom. However, as a mere expression of the drives, perversion could only be, for analytical treatment, a dilemma.

The fact is that right after 1905, according to Gillespie (1956), one begins to notice that perversions were to be considered as defensive formations and not as aspects of infantile sexuality that escaped defenses. One can already find this idea suggested in the text about Leonardo da Vinci, but it becomes completely explicit in “A Child Is Being Beaten” (1919/1971), in which the stages or maneuvers involved in the fundamental fantasy are linked to the Oedipus complex. Located on the grounds of the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1919/1971), the perverse staging of the fantasies has defensive objectives regarding castration anxiety.

Fetishism (Freud, 1927) is a vicissitude of the object choice that has been taken by psychoanalytic tradition as the paradigm of perversion. The operator of this object choice, which intends to avoid anxiety castration, is Verleugnung – refusal – an operation that leads to the splitting of the ego.

The consequence of the ego splitting is the coexistence of two opposing attitudes that do not fall into contradiction. The splitting avoids conflicts and the formation of a neurotic symptom as a compromise formation. The two independent and opposing attitudes present the peculiarity of not demanding symbolic work aiming at the resolution of this contradiction. Fetish, as the paradigm of a perverse solution, gives the fetishist satisfaction, making his sexual life easier, and bypassing anxiety. Carrying the fetish object in the pocket makes the subject less vulnerable to the whims of desire.

It is important to mark that Freud characterizes the refusal and the ego splitting as mechanisms that always occur in childhood and may occur both in neurosis and in psychosis (Freud, 1940/1971). In his stand of coherently refusing to establish rigid boundaries between what is normal and what is pathological, Freud presents, for the perverse defense, a counterpart in the psychopathology of everyday life. Instead of defining a perverse structure, in contrast to the neurotic and psychotic structures, Freud seems to be dealing with the idea of a maneuver that can be used in the attempt to avoid anxiety.

Lacan (1986) also avoids this clear separation when he establishes, in his seminar 4, an articulation between phobia and fetishism, in a tradition that goes back to a work by Hans Sachs. In 1923, Sachs showed the presence of both a neurotic phobia and a perverse acting in the same clinical case, as two resources that alternated in different moments of an analysis.
around the same impulse, the exhibitionist. Thus, Sachs considers the boundaries between the neurotic and perverse symptoms as being quite fluid.

What does it mean to consider perversion as a discourse structure, and not as a clinical structure? When Lacan, in seminar XVII, introduces his discourses, as forms of social bonding, he does not mention a perverse discourse. This allows for the interpretation that only hysteria, among the “clinical types,” makes social bonds (see Quinet, 2002, p.196), once the author affirms that “Only the hysterical discourse is correct and transmissible” (Lacan, 1973, p.15). Undoubtedly, the capability of transmission of the hysterical discourse has proved itself effective in the construction of psychoanalysis. However, there remains a doubt among some alternatives: if Lacan suggests that hysteria is the only discourse that could transmit psychoanalysis; if it is the only discourse that one can transmit, or, yet, if he considered that other discourses could be eventually formalized in the future of the analytical knowledge.

The psychoanalytical practice allows us to hear the perverse discourse, if we do not define perversion as an absolute dilemma in the psychoanalytic clinic. Instead of considering it as a challenge to the social law that regulates sexuality, analytical practice may lead to locate it in the challenge to the analytical setting. Stating it more accurately, the perverse discourse is best characterized by the challenge to the law represented by the wish of the other, since this is the law that brings us face to face with castration anxiety.

What are the consequences of ego splitting when we enter the idea of a perverse discourse? The splitting establishes an argumentative lability in which the subject may say and unsay, perhaps without lying, anything that will spare him anxiety in the situation he is involved in, with no commitment to what has been said.

If, on one hand, the perverse discourse saves anxiety, on the other, it does not save work. The refusal to castration generates an unstable result in which castration anxiety can only be precariously avoided. Lacan (1962-1963) noticed the important role of dramatization, of the vocation for the stage that is present in the perverse mechanisms. The refusal to castration has as an instrument an arrangement or staging in which other people take an active part. They should play, in this theater, the part that the subject expects of them, or anxiety will occur. To attain this effect, the subject works very hard and his activity in favor of the refusal, which may appear in the forms of seduction, control, imposition and others, is often interpreted as the result of a commitment to his/her wish. As a director of actors, he demands a perfect staging in which all goes as planned.

The perverse discourse is committed to the endless search to cast the supporting actors in the adequate roles and, therefore, it is imperative and seductive, as alternative ways to manipulate other people. When the people who are called up to participate in the staging directed by the subject fail to cooperate, the defensive effort of the refusal may fall apart and bring on castration anxiety. This anxiety, usually of a depressive order, can lead the subject to psychoanalysis. However, the ego splitting allows the subject to live the co-existence of contradictions without registering them. Thus, if after an anxiety episode, the protective staging may be restored, the victory over castration will heal the narcissistic wound immediately, and the continuity of the psychoanalytical process may be threatened.

The constant acting that characterizes the perverse style tries to establish a game that is determined by the subject’s own rules, which gives it a tyrannical accent. Lacan brings a valuable contribution to outline a perverse discourse, when he defines the place in which the
subject tries to occupy as being that of the object to the wish of the other, at the same time seeking to place the other in the position of split subject, provoking his anxiety (Lacan, 1962-1963; 1963/1966). This movement tries to promote the one-sidedness of castration, only the other will suffer, and his anxiety shall be avoided. It is easy to notice that it is not very different from the English concept of the projective identification.

In Lacan’s approach to perversion, the place of the object cause of the wish is sought, and the partner sustains the role of the split subject, submitted to anxiety. To generate anxiety in the other or to lead him to failure are means that the subject, sustained on imaginary grounds, uses to get rid of his own anxiety. The perverse maneuver avoids the wish, since wishing evokes castration anxiety, from which every effort is made, in this discourse, to flee from. But at the same time, there is an imaginary spectator of the scene, whom the subject fantasizes to be, as an instrument, completing or fulfilling with his acting.

Perverse activism can be understood exactly as this pressure to get the other to “take over” the thoughts and feelings that arouse anxiety. To what extent the analyst will accept anxiety in his countertransference, and how he handles what has been projected in him, is the path to intervene in the perverse discourse in its defensive role in relation to anxiety. The objective of the treatment would be the search to gradually overcome the inflexibility of the ego splitting, establishing certain permeability between what Freud considered as the two attitudes that do not influence one another, through symbolization. It is important not to forget that, in spite of the imaginary resources that proliferate in the perverse discourse, the mark of castration, refused as it may be, is still present.

References