

Desire On and Off the Couch

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Introduction:

Desire is under appreciated as a concept in psychoanalytic theory and practice. In American psychoanalytic schools of thought it is not integral, traditionally, to psychoanalytic work. The word is not referenced in the General Subject Index of Strachey's Standard Edition. When utilized, it is often in terms that are concrete such as in psychiatric disorders of desire or not well defined. In the French psychoanalytic literature, desire as a concept is more of a consideration and even a focus.

A working dictionary definition of desire can be found in any dictionary. However, this type of definition does not help us much in terms of understanding and elucidating the idea of desire in the human psyche or its complex clinical manifestations in an analysis. One clinically useful framework for conceptualizing desire analytically is in terms of love (emotional desire), sex (physical desire), and passion (other manifestations of desire). Each term has its own definition and challenges in defining.

To simplify, "love" is meant as the nonphysical aspects of a relationship with others or oneself that involves either being in love with the corresponding thoughts, feelings, and fantasies or loving with the empathy and understanding that are a part of this state of mind. There are deep tie-ins with mother love and other familial relationships, which can have sexual as well as diverse emotional overlays. Infatuation is a kissing cousin of this aspect of desire and longing a shadowy companion.

"Sex" represents the physical aspect of desire that has to do not only with the sexual act but also with other physical manifestations of a relationship. There are psychobiological and physiological dimensions to this aspect of desire. In this sense desire can be connected to or a source of guilt, disgust, dread, etc. The sexual impulses can be directed in a variety of sexual directions. One can be the object or subject of desire. Although physical, fantasies and other mental productions are also related.

"Passion," in this context, is the manifestation of other aspects of desire and/or the enhancement of love and sex. From a classical psychoanalytic viewpoint, it contains the libidinal and aggressive energies that become channeled and manifested or expressed in sublimated or perverse ways. This aspect of desire ties in with desire for knowledge, hostility and vengeance, power, and other types of drive derivatives that are not direct expressions of love and sex. It can fuel creativity or a perversion or fetish. When it is inhibited, frustrated, or repressed, a person may become symptomatic. Or it can be a source of ambition and accomplishment.

So, love, sex, and passion are meant to capture--embody--different basic aspects of desire, and form a kind of anatomy or framework of the term. Obviously, these different characteristics of desire mix and mingle in the way that currents in a stream intertwine. One's desires form an integral part of oneself and self image. Some aspects of one's own desire one may be aware of and some not--or at least not consciously or directly. But they are a part of the fabric of selfhood in the way that unconscious fantasies and feelings are. Like much of what compels us forward, they are rooted in and shaped by the past. Though based in and influenced by transferences, they play out in the interpersonal realm. A patient's desires can be usefully examined in the psychoanalytic setting. Examining their vicissitudes can be a lens for elucidating the psychoanalytic process and a patient's emotional makeup along with helping to resolve the operative conflicts.

Clinical Material:

I would now like to turn to a particular case study and examine how these different aspects of desire and their analysis played a central role in a patient's treatment. I would also comment that it was not until more recently--well after our analytic work was completed and I was reviewing clinical material for this presentation--that I more clearly realized the central role that an examination of desire had played in the analysis of Professor E.

Professor E presented as a college professor in her fifties who was never married, Jewish, and living on her own. She came across as mild mannered, cheerful, and looked younger than her stated age. She had been in a weekly psychotherapy for about ten years and felt that treatment had gone as far as it could. Professor E felt personal issues were interfering with her work with colleagues and students and fell short of her ideal. She found her university-based work unsatisfying and frustrating. She also expressed concern about her enmeshed relationship with her daughter, who had recently left home. Professor E took pride in having raised her without the help of a husband. She wanted to become more independent herself.

Professor E grew up in the mid west, and her family was originally from Eastern Europe. She described her own mother as "depressed, negative, and infantile." Professor E felt that by her own academic success she had rebelled against her mother, who was a college dropout. Her biological father was "like a phantom." He had been a career military man and had worked his way up the ranks to captain. He was "away" when Professor E was born and some of her earliest memories were of looking at pictures of him in a scrapbook. She had no memory of ever living with him, and at age three her parents divorced.

Until age eight, Professor E lived with her mother and a female roommate. The mother had one boyfriend, who apparently committed suicide when Professor E was five. She vividly recalled hearing about it from her mother. Shortly afterward, her mother

remarried a Catholic man. As Jewish, Professor E described feeling like a second-class citizen in her new home and disengaged from the family. At the time of presentation, Professor E had a half-brother who lived in France and was a professional athlete. She felt that her brother had a “better deal” in terms of having more attentive parents and opportunities such as tennis lessons.

My initial impression of Professor E was of a reliable and considerate person with an intellectual style. Ostensibly, she desired to find more fulfillment in work and personal relationships. She felt her intellectual and psychological views were not valued at work, but tended herself to devalue what she had to offer. She had problems with her sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Some masochist tendencies further interfered with her professional and personal relationships.

The history of Professor E’s relationship with men remained sketchy during the initial consultation and first phase of treatment. She described an active social and sexual life in her teenage years and early twenties. When she wanted to have a child of her own, she used her boyfriend to become pregnant and then encouraged him to leave. For several months, she had dated a poet who moved to Europe. A seven-year relationship she had been in during her late thirties ended abruptly because of the man’s “psychiatric difficulties.”

Professor E’s ambivalent desires about me and the psychoanalytic situation were evident from the start. In the first session she literally had one foot on and one foot off the couch. She always came promptly for the appointment, but from the time that I opened the door for her to come in until she lay down, she tried to make some personal contact such as by commenting on my art.

The patient struggled with desiring to show herself to me by taking off her glasses and shoes. But she was afraid to get too close or be too open lest she get hurt. She wanted to call me by my first name but was concerned about it being too intimate. So Professor E was ambivalent. She wanted to be the object of my interest and desire but was uncomfortable with wanting that. I too wanted to connect with her and establish a therapeutic relationship. But I wanted to maintain a professional distance in keeping with psychoanalytic parameters and technique.

The main transference during this phase of the analysis was with me as a withholding parent. Like many other situations, she experienced analysis as depriving. Because she could not see me, I was “away” like her father had been. As she elaborated on her desires and fears about getting closer to me, it helped her feel more comfortable in working analytically.

During the next year of analysis, issues of time and money were central in examining the nature of Professor E’s desires. For Professor E, money was a kind of currency of love and that affected her paying me. As we better understood her relationship to money

and its meaning in terms of her family dynamics, she became more comfortable with her own professional success. As the patient further examined her conflicts around being loved and desired, she found herself feeling less vulnerable with men and freer to pursue a relationship. So, looking at her desires involving love and intimacy allowed her to feel more comfortable sexually and with her physical desires.

Correspondingly, she was able to begin a “real relationship” with a man for the first time in many years, perhaps ever. Professor E saw this man as the quite, engineer he was. She used their relationship to defend against feelings of closeness toward me, but he also served as a surrogate for being closer to me. She brought in dreams that expressed those wishes and desires. In one dream her “purse” had a double meaning and not offering it was a way of withholding her womanhood/vagina from me. Like with her father, she feared that her desire and resentment would drive me and other men away.

Unconsciously, Professor E desired that her analysis to conform to her sexual fantasy life. She wanted to engage me in her erotic, sadomasochistic struggle by putting me in a position of forcing her to come on time and pay against her will. Through interpretive work, such desires became more explicit and a subject for us to further examine.

During the third year of psychoanalysis, our psychoanalytic relationship became a window into the patient’s inner life. She was able to discover and explore aspects of herself that she had had hitherto only a limited sense of, such her yearning to be with a powerful man. This desire served, in part, as a protection against being vulnerable and desperate. Throughout the year Professor E further distinguished herself as a professor winning praise from both students and faculty and a special teaching award.

Transferentially, she tended to see some of my choices such as changing offices or taking a summer break as my hurting her or at least doing something against her. As she had more insight into the maternal tie-in of these feelings, she took my choices less personally. Correspondingly, the patient felt more comfortable with our not meeting. She considered it as an opportunity to see what things would be like on her own and to practice some of the lessons gleaned during the year. So Professor E desired to become more genuinely autonomous.

During the penultimate year of Professor E’s analysis, we continued to examine and work through her discomfort about fulfilling certain desires that could be considered passionate pursuits. In her professional life, such conflicts played out with her hesitancy to publish a book. Her constructive use of an “enactment” allowed us to recognize a spanking fantasy that had been present in her unconscious mental life since childhood. Analysis of this event allowed us to better understand the centrality of masochistic desires in her psychology.

In terms of her academic career, Professor E had a window of opportunity to publish a book. She dragged her feet for months by not reviewing the final manuscript. I

analyzed her resistance to moving forward professionally in various ways including further exploring her sadomasochistic needs and fantasies. She agreed with my interpretations along these lines, but they did nothing to change her behavior. Feeling like a helpless child, she continued to act in passively aggressive ways to gain love and attention. She talked for lengthy hour after hour about her not doing what she was supposed to. Still nothing changed.

I found myself feeling more frustrated and interpreted the hostility toward me in her not moving forward with her career. I desired to help her and felt ineffectual. I invited her to consider how she might be making me feel in her passivity in moving forward and her motivations for doing so. We explored aspects of this situation in terms of parental transferences. Still, nothing changed. At the end of one session, echoing a remark of her Dean, I quipped, "Finish your book."

The next session, Professor E reported feeling good about having gotten me to say something that was not in my job description. Her response to my remark was to review the final manuscript and send it off. Her initial association to the sequence of events was to her mother's having undermined her education and growth. She felt, in contrast, that my statement had expressed support and distinguished me from her mother.

One association of hers to the interaction was to being "spurred on." She thought of horseback riding at sleep-away camp. The spurs, she imagined, hurt the horse but also "tickled" it to go faster. She further recalled various stimulating punishments of her stepfather and wondered what they meant to her in terms of his caring. I observed how she had gotten me to spur her on. She smiled and reflected further on how she had sought a verbal spanking. It alleviated her guilt. Also, it was exciting for her to elicit a response from a "powerful man" and in causing my response made her on some level feel powerful. Correspondingly, Professor E began to date various men who were substantial and accomplished in different ways such a fellow college professor, a movie producer, and other professionals.

During this period of psychoanalysis, the centrality of Professor E's masochism was revealed more clearly as a part of her intrapsychic life. It was not only a way of and punishment for sexual desires and their symbolic derivatives in passion, but also a connection to her mother in her appeal for sympathy, revenge, and erotic pleasure. Like with her mother, she tended to experienced me as someone she had to fight with and defy rather than really challenge through fulfilling herself. Understanding more about her feelings toward me in the mother transference allowed her to feel freer to pursue her goals and interests. She got a laptop, leased a new car, and took several other steps toward improving her life.

So Professor E's desires for sex and love shifted more toward a passion to pursue her aims and interests. This aspect of desire ties in more with the idea of libidinal energies

fueling purpose and achievement, which relates notions of sublimation. She also desired to know more, not just about herself but me and other people.

The last months of Professor E's analysis focused primarily on issues of termination. In this phase of our work, desire also served as a useful concept for understanding the analytic material. Fantasies that we explored around treatment ending included becoming whole, her being an hermaphrodite, and having a sexual or "real" relationship with me. The hermaphroditic fantasy--having or desiring to have both male and female genitals--served as a defense against not wanting to suffer disappointment or hurt by a man.

Ostensibly, my desire was to continue to help her as much as possible through analysis. But, I also wanted to make sure that she had a successful termination phase for its own sake and my own sense of completion.

Professor E imagined that in ending the treatment would become "Ferenzian," in our performing mutual analysis on each other. This idea contained the fantasy of our "touching" each other in different ways. She imagined the couch as bed and us having "oral" sex. She felt frustrated by the limitations of our relationship and wanted me to be even more "open" in my handling of her. Behind these notions lay certain fantasies that soon emerged, namely that we might consummate our relationship sexually. Professor E desired to know more about me. Her inquiring reflected greater comfort on her part with her desire to know other private things about me and my interests as well as of herself.

In the course of Professor E's analysis, a complex shift of conflicts resulted in a new and healthier constellation of compromise formations that allowed more freedom of choice for personal growth. She was more satisfied with what she had, more comfortable with her desires, took more pleasure in her life, and strove for more of what she wanted. In other words, she could pursue her desires in a less conflicted and more gratifying way. She could be passionate in those pursuits, feeling more secure with an enhanced sense of her own self worth.

Discussion:

My discussion in the paper version of this presentation includes individual sections on physical and emotional desire, passion as well as attachment theory, libido theory and Lacan, and neuroscience. But for the purposes of this discussion, I wanted simply to comment on a countertransference aspect of our psychoanalytic relationship.

In a general way, I wanted to help Professor E free herself from the neurotic constraints that bound her. They had been a source of pain and suffering for her personal attainments and professional achievement. I believed that by helping her better

understand herself through our relationship with its real and transference dimensions this personal growth could be best facilitated. So I desired to help her.

From the start of our work together I found that my desire to help both abetted and hindered our work. On the one hand, she felt that in my being Jewish and younger, I was in a better position to understand her than her previous therapist, who was a WASP and older. I was also distinguished from family members of the Catholic home she grew up in when her mother remarried. So in that regard, we were in it together. I too felt we shared a common bond. I identified with Professor E in terms of some of her own masochistic tendencies. This identification probably contributed to my being less "neutral" in terms of my wanting to help her in her own advancement.

One defining moment of our analytic work together where this confluence came together was around her submitting the final draft of her book for publication. My spurring her on to "Finish your book" had in it my wanting her to progress to her next level for various needs and interests of my own. It may also have had in it some residual feelings of a relationship with my own mother that at times could be frustrating in terms of my desire for her to change. I both wanted to be more recognized by her and to recognize that I and other people were trying to work with her. In any case, my comment to Professor E, its effect, and subsequent analysis served to further our work together.

Conclusion:

This tripartite model of desire provides a useful framework for understanding some of the complex, clinical phenomenon of an analysis. I have tried to use the analysis of Professor E to exemplify how in specific ways the analysis of manifestations of desire came into play without my focusing on them at the time of her analysis. She became more comfortable with her own conflictual desires and better able to pursue her aims and interests while finding greater satisfaction in her life. My being comfortable with my own interests and desires, psychoanalytically speaking, facilitated her personal and professional growth.