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PSYCHOSOMATIC NEUROSIS AS EXPRESSION OF A BARRIER AGAINST INDULGENCE IN CRAVED BUT PROHIBITED SEXUAL DRIVES

Ben Karpman

The author is Chief Psychotherapist in St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D. C. His last contribution to this *Journal* appeared in May-June, 1953. The article below deals with the same type of abnormality as the former. The symptoms of the case described here are of unconscious cravings held in severe restraint. The result? The restrained drives were expressed in psychosomatic manifestations. Had the aggressive tendency been stronger and uppermost the outcome could have been criminal behavior. Indeed, the case and treatment may be interpreted as a demonstration of the successful application of measures of prevention of criminal behavior.—EDITOR.

In a previous communication on the subject,¹ the author attempted to maintain the thesis that there is a very close psychogenic relationship between crime and insanity, using the latter term in its widest sense to include all aberrations in the emotional and mental field that are traceable directly to psychogenic causation. This he has done through the presentation of a deep-seated psychosis which, while remaining socially innocuous and wholly non-criminal, has revealed itself as having a very rich fantasy life that was completely preoccupied with many antisocial acts. Viewing insanity in its larger sense to include not only psychoses but the vast number of neuroses, it is now desired to continue the thesis that like situations occur in neuroses although these manifest themselves in a somewhat different way. For demonstration, a case is cited of a neurosis in which, too, mental life was continually preoccupied with prohibited antisocial behavior, specifically incest and homosexuality; the cravings, however, were entirely repressed and made harmless so far as the social behavior of the individual is concerned but emerged on the surface in the form of particular symptoms which on analysis were revealed as symbolic of the underlying prohibited trends.

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The subject is a young woman who has been married and divorced and whose history since the age of fourteen is one of a variety of physical symptoms. All tests made at a hospital where she remained for a week were negative. Her numerous physical symptoms had no physical causes; the condition appeared to be purely psychic.

When she began analysis, her most outstanding symptom was her

1. KARPMAN, BEN, *Psychosis as a Defense Against Yielding to Perverse (Paraphiliac) Sexual Crimes*. J. CRIM. L., CRIMINOL. AND POL. SCI., 44, No. 1, May-June, 1953.

inability to swallow solid food. She had not eaten any meat for four years, subsisting almost wholly on liquids, and said that at one time she had even been afraid to drink a glass of water. She was in analysis a little over a year, at the end of which time she could eat anything but meat, and not long afterwards that, too, was added to her diet and all her food phobias vanished into thin air.

Analysis disclosed that the patient's psychosomatic symptoms represented defense reactions against socially prohibited instinctual sexual drives. The first and greatest of these was incest.

[Complete information on symptoms in this case can be had by addressing the author at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D. C. —EDITOR.]

The patient says, "I always feel as if I were being punished for something. But what am I being punished for? What have I done that is so terrible?" The victim of a neurosis has seldom done anything "that is so terrible." The neurosis is a punishment for the things which he unconsciously wanted to do—but didn't. It is a defense against the prohibited act; it stands between him and the commission of the act; his sickness is a punishment in advance for the criminal act which he wants to commit, but does not dare to.

The patient's free-playing phantasy was quite as guilt-producing as a prohibited act itself, for it is the conscious preoccupation with the desire to engage in a prohibited act; and it is the guilt which it produces that often keeps the prohibited act confined to the limits of phantasy and prevents such phantasy from being acted out in real antisocial behavior. Such guilt-producing phantasies need not even be conscious ones; sometimes completely unconscious phantasies are as effective in the production of guilt as conscious ones; indeed, even more so. In such a case the patient has the feeling of guilt, but no intimation whatever as to the cause of such feeling. At one time our patient says, "Perhaps it isn't just what happened to me that was of traumatic significance, but what I wished might happen." This statement is indicative of the development of insight, for she has begun to realize that "what I wished might happen" can be quite as important as what actually did happen.

She denied having wrong "feelings toward my father." Now when a patient tells us that he or she "never had" certain thoughts or feelings, we can usually anticipate uncovering evidence that he or she not only did have the thoughts or feelings which have been denied, but that they played an important, if not vital, part in the development of the neurosis. If one actually does not entertain thoughts or feelings of a for-

bidden character, one does not go out of his way to deny them before it has even been suggested that one might have entertained them. Consequently we are prepared to learn that the patient *did* have sexual feelings toward her father.

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From this early incident there developed a situation familiar to many psychoanalytic pictures. It is what we call the Electra Complex, the female counterpart of the Oedipus Complex in a boy. It is the disproportionate emotional attachment of the girl to her father, just as the Oedipus Complex is the corresponding attachment of the boy to his mother. Subsequently she describes this emotional situation in considerable detail.

All my life I have thought so much of my daddy. Not like most daughters think of their daddy. He just seemed to be perfect to me. I didn't think he could ever do anything wrong. If my mother and daddy had an argument, I would feel it was my mother's fault. I would always feel so strange when I was around my daddy, so afraid I would do or say something that wouldn't be just right. I was so conscious of being near him lots of times, that I would even blush when talking with him. As a small child I pictured myself in love with Daddy. So I developed a great sense of guilt.

The long statement just quoted was made at the end of the analysis and represents insight gained as a result of the analytic procedure. Such insight is never gained overnight, but develops from a long, slow, and blood-sweating process, attended throughout with the utmost resistance on the part of the patient, who grudgingly gives ground inch by inch to the evidence presented by the unconscious material which has been uncovered.

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So we have, first and foremost, an incestuous parental fixation. Out of that there grew, as there invariably does, a whole series of antisocial impulses. Prohibited sexual impulses represent a form of aggression. The primary psychic conflict then becomes one between aggression and guilt. Guilt is the universal factor which immobilizes aggression; rendering it ineffective and innocuous. Sometimes, however, the aggression breaks through in sporadic manifestations. We have already learned from the patient's quoted statement that she had unconscious death wishes directed against her mother. She tells us that on one occasion she threw a rock at her mother; and we also learn that she once threw a butcher knife at her husband. She says in one place that "it does me good to hurt other people. And I like to swear and curse . . . The nicer a person is to me, the madder I get and the more I wish to curse.

And it is always men, and one I like." She gets mad at people who are nice to her because they are not the one person who she wishes would be nice to her, namely, her father. She can "accept no substitutes," and because the other people are substitutes they arouse her antagonism. On one occasion she says, "I have often pictured strangling a man, or feared that I would do it, with a necktie."

As a compromise with, or as a defense against, her incestuous wishes, she also makes side-roads into the fields of sexual perversion. She plays with the idea of homosexuality. In a majority of cases, homosexuality is a defense against incest, the lesser of two evils, as it were. The patient says that "ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a boy, a man. They have nothing to worry about . . . I have always had a desire to be a man . . . There was a time, before I was married, I would wear ties, shirts, short hair, trying to look like a man . . . A man does not run any risk. This is another indication that her mild homosexual interests are associated with escape from incest which is supported by her dreams.

Toward the end of the analysis, after reporting that from eating mashed potato she had progressed to eating a whole potato, she says, "I know I have a guilty feeling and that I am punishing myself for something." She has thus reached the stage of slowly developing insight where she realizes that she is punishing herself, whereas originally she thought that she was being punished; and she knows that her punishment is predicated on guilt. As we have already seen, from her quoted statement made at the end of the analysis, she finally became aware of the reason for her guilt feelings, as well as of the psychosomatic symptoms which she had used as a means of self-punishment.

This case illustrates the strong conflict between aggression, represented by incestuous desires, mother antagonism, her wish to be a man, periodic outbursts of temper, irritability, even an occasional approach to violent behavior, etc., and guilt, represented by the need for punishment.

One observation should be made here which would seem quite important. In nearly all of these cases we are not concerned with the patient's present conscious attitude, but with the emotional residuals of infancy and early childhood. The poet Wordsworth came near to anticipating the essence of psychoanalytic thought when he said, in one of his short poems, "The Child is Father of the Man." When we speak of cases like this we do not think of conscious abnormal adulthood wants. Such adult desire would be absurd in the face of all our cultural and educational patterns. What we are concerned with is a present-day emotional turmoil resulting from a long past emotional problem which has never

been resolved, and which therefore leaves the individual with a warped, paralyzed or crippled emotional development. If anyone questions the validity of the persistence of such past, unconscious emotional forces, let me remind him that the case here discussed is but one among many thousands which attest to the enduring strength of unconscious emotional forces, and which present cumulative evidence that cannot be denied.

It has important meanings for criminology that this woman has made a normal and satisfactory heterosexual adjustment; is now happily married and the mother of a child.

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Throughout the presentation the reader has become aware of the emphasis placed on two great factors in human life, viz., aggression and guilt. Though Freud has long spoken of aggression as an instinct in its own right, the present writer views aggression not as an instinct in itself but merely as an inseparable part of any instinctive behavior. It is characteristic of instinct that in order to realize itself, that is, to reach a goal, energy must be expended, which energy is provided by aggression; therefore aggression is a part and parcel of any instinctive behavior. But aggression as it is born with us is crude, primitive, naked, which, in humans at least, is not allowed to come to open expression for then life would have become intolerable, everybody expending his aggression on the next person. Aggression, therefore, has to be tamed, and the great taming force in our life is guilt which has its origin in many repressive mechanisms. It is guilt that makes conscience possible. It is guilt that controls our behavior so that we are able to live up to what society expects of us. But while forced to attempt the control of aggression, human beings have never quite yielded to it and every so often we find instances where the guilt and the repressive forces are weakened whereupon the original aggression comes to the surface. One might say that our entire culture and behavior is essentially an interplay between aggression and guilt. When the guilt is strongest, aggression is tamed and we have a citizen, a member of the community who is able to live up to society's best expectation; or if disturbed in its function, guilt leads to neurosis or psychosis. When, however, aggression gets the upper hand, then we have the criminal or any other antisocial behavior. The determinator of the forces that allow for one expression or another is a problem with which psychodynamic criminality is at present occupied.

It need not be supposed that just because in this particular case analysis has shown the neurotic symptom to be but a symbol of prohibited antisocial behavior which is not allowed to come to open expression, that this is necessarily true of every neurosis one meets. It is merely submitted that what is presented here is a type or a pattern of which there may be numerous examples in actual daily life. Psychiatry, above all, does not generalize but emphasizes individualization of clinical material, and it is only by individualization that it is able to effect an understanding and the cure of a case.

The concept advanced here of symptoms as symbolic of underlying instinctive trends is important as revealing the very close psychogenic relationship that exists between criminality and insanity.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

1. The case is presented of a woman whose outstanding symptom was her inability to swallow solid food.

2. It is shown that the symptom involved a displacement from below to above.

3. She was found to have a persisting father fixation, dating from early childhood.

4. She feared pregnancy because, to her, it meant punishment for wishing incestuous relations with her father.

5. She has also shown aggressive tendencies, offering a temptation to commit violent acts; was preoccupied with ideas of homosexual relations.

6. Her psychosomatic symptoms were self-inflicted punishment and a defense dictated by tremendous guilt because of her incestuous desires.

7. Following analysis, she was able to eat anything, was freed from her unnatural fears, achieved normal heterosexual desire, married and has a child, something which was unthinkable before.

8. The case illustrates the part played by guilt in immobilizing aggression, and in the creation of symptoms which penalize the patient for antisocial desires and at the same time prevent such desires from being carried out. Society is thus saved a criminal, but at the price of a personal neurosis and personal suffering.

9. It is submitted here that criminality being psychogenetically closely related to a highly specific form of a neurosis, can effectually be treated psychotherapeutically, and the aggression behind it released and

redirected into socially acceptable channels. This on occasions has already been done as the literature on the subject clearly shows. But it must be individual treatment, not mass treatment; doubtfully in prisons, but better in mental institutions.