

Violent relationships or perverse relationships: reflections from the theoretical point of view on a series of cases requiring the evaluation of an expert in forensic psychiatry

Relazioni violente e relazioni perverse: riflessioni teoriche da una casistica peritale

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Abstract

This article takes a cue from an expert case study to reflect on some difunctional modalities present in the adult heterosexual couple. In particular, we analyze the different mechanisms that intervene in sexual paraphilia and in character perversion, in the phenomena of manipulation and collusion, in situations of ambivalence and ambiguity, as well as in the various forms of violence. The aim is to give further interpretations of the phenomenon of destructiveness in the adult couple.

Keywords: perversion, perversity, collusion, manipulation, ambiguity, ambivalence, aggression, violence.

Riassunto

Prendendo spunto da una casistica peritale, il presente contributo intende approfondire alcune modalità disfunzionali presenti nella coppia eterosessuale adulta. In particolare, si analizzano i diversi meccanismi che intervengono nella parafilia sessuale e nella perversione caratteriale, nei fenomeni di manipolazione e di collusione, nelle situazioni di ambivalenza e ambiguità, nonché nelle varie forme di violenza. L'obiettivo quello di fornire ulteriori chiavi interpretative del fenomeno della distruttività nelle coppie adulte eterofile.

Parole chiave: perversione, perversità, collusione, manipolazione, ambiguità, ambivalenza, aggressività, violenza.

Violent relationships or perverse relationships: reflections from the theoretical point of view on a series of cases requiring the evaluation of an expert in forensic psychiatry

Introduction

Aim of the present work is to make some reflections from a theoretical standpoint on violent relationships and perverse relationships in adult heterosexual couples, based on some paradigmatic cases for which the judge requested an expert forensic psychology opinion. After illustrating the reference case series, with the support of the literature¹ the various problems exemplified by the cases in this series described will be considered. Sexuality in these cases, which then prompted our reflections, then becomes the battleground in which fundamental problems and relational and intergenerational struggles are rehearsed and staged. In sexuality and with the body, the subjects involved and examined by us explicate various levels of suffering, the other's view of the world, of self, in the harried search for illusory and pathogenic balances and compensations. The fact that sexuality involves an exchange between bodies, minds, and regulatory and emotional needs, disturbed, as in the cases in question, makes the position of the subjects involved in destructive couple dynamics, particularly problematic, complex and interesting to examine relative to behaviors of criminological, psychological and forensic psychiatric interest. Briefly, the concept of interpersonal relationship will be defined, indicating the potential content of human aggression and violence constructs, distinguishing sexual perversion from relational perversion and qualifying the various mechanisms that can motivate these and, finally, exploring the sense and significance of destructiveness in different types of interpersonal relationships.

Case series

A paraphilic relationship

A cohabiting couple, the man 50-years-old and a freelance worker, and the woman 30-years-old, a tourist operator. Before they met up, they had both previously been promiscuous, having occasional chance relationships with other heterosexual partners that they met through a social network. The couple went out together for six months

and then cohabited for four years. Their relationship progressively became paraphilic, characterized by a sadistic, active role of the woman and masochistic, passive role of the man. They had constant recourse to bondage techniques and the use of sex toys. There was also continual conflict between them due to the woman's jealousy and physical aggression that led them to need to have frequent recourse to the Casualties department, at which the man's injuries were justified by fictitious tales. In their last sexual encounter, the woman had got angry while she was using a pestle to sodomize him. The neighbors heard him shout: "Stop, please stop", then other screams, followed by silence that lasted about a day. After two days the woman called an ambulance and the man was admitted to hospital for what the woman described as "...such a high fever that he lost consciousness". In hospital, the man was declared dead. Autopsy identified the cause of death as septic shock due to rectal perforation with a foreign body. The woman collaborated actively in the reconstruction of the events but denied any desire to injure, let alone kill the man. She was tried and found guilty of manslaughter.

A perversified relationship

A married couple in which the female was 55 years old, a pediatrician, and the male 60 years old, a surveyor. The premarital history of the woman can be summarized as: third child, brought up by relatives due to the parents' poor economic conditions; no previous affective relationship until she met the man at University; two voluntary abortions because of unwanted pregnancies, particularly by the man. The man's previous history was the second of three children, born in a low economic bracket family, irregular schooling, a previous relationship with another woman that was interrupted when she became pregnant and underwent voluntary abortion, again imposed by him. The present couple's plan to marry was justified by the woman's idea of "saving" him ("*...I would change him over time*") and man's pseudo-cathartic concept ("*...I had to make it up to her in some way for the abortions*"). Their marriage lasted fifteen years, featuring four other pregnancies, two of which ended in spontaneous abortions. Their psychological relationship was modeled on male domination and female subordination. Their first daughter suffered the onset of psychosis at the age of 18, was admitted to a psychiatric ward and underwent specialist treatment that is still ongoing. Their second daughter developed anorexia nervosa in adolescence, and later revealed that her father, who had meanwhile become a member of a satanic sect, had sexually abused her. The man was convicted of aggravated sexual assault.

1 On this issue see: Barbieri, 2006, 2008, 2019, 2021; Barbieri, De Zuani & Luzzago, 2007; Barbieri, Convertini, Dassisti & Grattagliano; Barbieri & Grattagliano, 2018, 2020, 2022; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Catanesi, 2019; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Janiri, 2021; Barbieri, Grattagliano & Suma, 2020; Barbieri & Luzzago, 2006, 2008; Barbieri, Rocca & Grattagliano, 2022; Grattagliano et al., 2012; Grattagliano & Tangari, 2015.

A manipulatory-collusive relationship

A married couple in which the woman was 38 years old, a psychologist operating in the community, and the man 46 years old, a gardener. The woman's premarital history: first-born with a younger sister with whom she had only a rather formal relationship; her father was an "...*architect, an esthete, a man who was more easily disappointed than pleased*", and her mother "...*lived in her husband's shadow*". Her first affective experience occurred during adolescence and ended after about four years when she discovered her partner was homosexual. For the next two years, her behavior was of reactive type (almost daily use of hemp and alcohol, sexual relationships of one-night stand type). Then she started training experience at a drug addiction community center during her degree course in psychology. The man's premarital history: death of his father in infancy and mother during adolescence, after which he lived with his sister. A habitual drugs user (hashish and cocaine), as an adult, he had convictions for drug detention and pushing. He met the woman during her training at the community center while he was on a disintoxication course. They got engaged after six months and started living together after a year. For about two years, their relationship was manipulative on his part and collusive on hers. One year after their marriage, they had a daughter but their relationship remained dysfunctional, due to the man frequently falling back into the habit of drug abuse, and became rapidly more conflictual, ending in episodes of male aggression, both verbal and physical. The man was convicted of maltreatment of both the wife and the daughter.

An ambiguous-ambivalent relationship

Married couple: the woman was 30 years old, a qualified nurse, while the man was 40 years old, a plastic surgeon. The woman's premarital history: her parents had separated when she was a child and so she had no father figure, while the relations with her mother's companion were strongly conflictual. Before she met her husband she had had two previous affairs; she ended the first one because the man "told lies", and the second because of the man's verbal aggression and abuse of alcohol and cannabis. She met the husband when she needed treatment (for a form of acne) and they got engaged after three months ("...*it was the classic coup de foudre*"), and married after only eight months ("...*right from the honeymoon I realized there was no complicity, neither sexual nor emotional...*"). The woman interrupted the relationship when she discovered she had hidden homophilic feelings ("...*I felt attracted by a female colleague...we lived together like a real couple for about six months...then she became jealous and possessive...so I left her for a previous flame of hers...*"). The man was accused of persecution and rape and remanded for trial but after the couple's separation and divorce, the accusations were withdrawn.

What is a relationship?

Any interchange or interaction, relationship or link between two or more subjects through communication of verbal and/or nonverbal type is qualifiable as a relationship. Different types of relationship are distinguished on the basis of the underlying motivations, ends, quality, quantity and duration. A relationship is a fundamental anthropological structure, because from the bio-psycho-social standpoint every interpersonal relationship is both the matrix and the result of the personality of each subject. In fact, while on one hand there can be no personality characteristics outside a whole series of inter-/intra-personal relationships, on the other, it is through relationships that the mode of functioning of the individual personality is expressed, and the worldview that stems from it develops. The set of relationships, of greater or lesser adaptivity to the social context and to others, determines the individual's subjectivity and consciousness throughout the existence. However, the individual also contributes to modify the social context, being an integral and relevant part of it. Thus, interpersonal relationships are most affected by, and most strongly reflect the individual-environment interactions.

This is why it seems important to take into account both the transition of the relationship to subjectivity (in this context both the "mirror phase" according to Lacan – 1974 –, guaranteeing the processes of individuation of, separation from, and link to the whole world and to the external environment, or "maternal *reverie*", according to Bion – 1970 –) and the transition from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity (see, in this regard, Virgil, in the IV Eclogue, who teaches the consequences of certain relationships: "*Begin, baby boy, to recognize your mother with a smile...he whose parents did not smile will not be deemed worthy neither of the table of a god nor of the bridal bed of a goddess*"² - von Albrecht, 2012; Cucchiarelli, 2017).

The anthropo-phenomenological point of view is centered upon the fact that our "way-of-being-in-the-world" (*Dasein*) is, above all, always a "way-of-being-toward-others" (*mit-einander-sein*), in a plethora of relations developing within the social world (*Mitwelt*), natural environment (*Umwelt*) and our own internal world (*Eigenwelt*) (Callieri, 2007). Intersubjectivity is a concept naturally derived from the phenomenological idea of two individuals or subjects meeting each other out of themselves into the world.

Besides, group and family are the matrix of the identity of each single member, where the various complex shades of identity, roles and expectations originate and are rooted. Such a matrix is the source of the psychosocial roles through the intersubjective relationships (Trentini, 1998).

2 Original text: «*Incipe parve puer risu conoscere matrem...qui (cui) non risere parenti (parentes), nec deus hunc mensa dea nec dignata cubili est...*» (vv. 60-64).

Violence and aggressiveness

Violence and aggressiveness are not actually synonyms, as is usually thought, but are considered as collective terms (*Kofferwort*) (Storr, 1968), or containers of meanings that can be very different (Migone, Rabaiotti, 2003 a e b). The etymology does, in fact, justify different interpretations: aggressiveness, from the Latin *ad* (toward, against) and *gradior* (proceed), can indicate the approach to another that integrates a force aimed at either creating or destroying the relationship with that other. In the same way, violence, from the Greek *bios* (life), can qualify a force, either creative or destructive, that is inherent to survival itself. The different disciplines (anthropology, ethology, psychology, sociology, etc.) have over time not only expressed different concepts of these phenomena but also offered various explanations of their origins. However the issue has remained controversial and is still a matter of debate.

This is why violence (that refers to a more archaic psychic level, marked by elementary impulses that are indispensable for survival, and linked to psychic energy of a sexual nature) has been distinguished from aggressiveness (that refers to a more evolved level, qualified by more complex, elaborate impulses, largely linked to an object) (Bergeret, 1984, 1992, 1998). Therefore, while in the first stage what emerges is violence, as a creative force integrated within the flow of the libido, in the second aggressiveness arises, as a destructive force of a narcissistic nature, that can actually be understood as a synonym of destructiveness. From this standpoint, a distinction has been proposed (but there is no universal agreement on this issue) between aggression and aggressiveness: the former (from *ad-gradior*, to move toward, or approach) must be seen as a crucially important vital energy serving to create new relationships (Frielingsdorf, 2002), as well as to offer support and affection as from infancy (Spitz, 1953, 1965). Instead, the latter is a negative, devastating force that could be comparable to the malignant aggression or cruelty (Fromm), as well as the violence, in the sense of a transformed aggressiveness (Durbin, Bowlby, 1939).

However, it has also been observed (de Zulueta, 1999) that whilst violence is a form of behavior, to be assessed in the social context on the basis of the related variables, aggressiveness is the biological basis. The result is an integration of the problems defining the dichotomies: innate or acquired, nature and culture, biology and history that would take into account both the multiplicity of the underlying bio-psycho-social factors and the complexity of their interactions.

Perversion and perversity

The terms *perversity* and *perversion* derive from the French qualifying adjective *pervers*, but denominate two very different conditions from the psychopathological viewpoint. The former indicates a type of sexual act that is divorced from empathic communication, recognition of the alter-ego and any form of dynamic exchange, of giving or inte-

grating. The latter designates a quality of a relationship in which the psychic object either is not formed at all, or is only partially formed, giving rise to polymorphic sexual relations, and an omnipotent denial of differences between the genders and even among generations. Ergo: while sexually perverse subjects are affected by a well-defined deviation of the sexual instinct (goal or object), subjects with a perverted character are individuals for whom others have no subjectivity, whose affective investments transcend these others, seen as objects to be confined within an instrumental relationship whose aim is to fill the pervert's severe personal psycho-development deficiencies (Bergeret, 1984, 1992, 1998; Filippini 2005; Hirigoyen, 2001, 2006). Perversion and perversity can share the lack of suffering and guilt feelings, as manifestations of the inadequacy of the Ego and weakness of the Super-Ego, but while sexual paraphilia expresses aggressive components and partial genital perversions, characterial and relational perversity manifests above all in the form of destructive components, in which the erotic relationship is nothing more than a corollary. In this case, more than ever, it is important to recall the distinction between sexual paraphilia – as an erotic form of hate (Stoller, 1978) – and characterial and relational perversity – that recruits eroticism in the service of aggressiveness (Kernberg, 2006, 2019). This latter can be coexistent in paraphilic subjects but is often present in those with a severely narcissistic personality disorder. This distinction tailors the notion of narcissistic perversion, that evolves as a perverted relationship in which the narcissism of one of the partners attempts to control the narcissism of the other from within, and vice versa (Racamier, 1993).

Perverting mechanisms

There are multiple dynamics that lead a person to “pervert”, in the sense of significantly altering human relationships of a more or less erotic type. In the present contribution, only those recognized and documented in the case series are considered.

Collusion and manipulation

Collusion (from the Latin *cum ludere* = to play together) refers to the complicity that develops between two subjects as a result of the combination of unsatisfied ancient psychic needs that each member of the couple attempts to fill in the relationship with the other. This manipulation (from the medieval Latin *manus plere* = the quantum that fills the hand, involves a system of strategies adopted from a position of power, aimed at destroying the identity of an individual through mental control, fostering dependency and conformism and inhibiting the individual's autonomy. From a certain standpoint, these can be seen as the two faces of the same coin, whereby a collusive state develops when there is a reciprocal interweave of deficiencies between two subjects, each of which has the “illusion” that the other can release them from their own underlying

deficiencies. In practice, the apparent fit between them is only an unaware and involuntary reaction, which can be used to trick the other and use them as a tool; the other member of the couple, meanwhile, falls in with this controlling, instrumentalizing behavior by the partner (Norsa, 2007; Norza, Zavattini, 1997; Willi, 2001).

In this context, various types of collusive behaviors have been described (Pasini, 1995); in particular:

- narcissistic collusion, in which love is seen as fusion and self-confirmation (confirmation of one's own value through the partner);
- oral collusion, in which love is conceived as a form of maternal care (one of the partners, who denies her/his dependency, tries to "save" the other by acting as a loving mother figure, but only succeeds in causing the regression of the other partner);
- anal collusion, in which love is reduced to possession of, or dominion over the other, with the formation of either an antithetic but complementary couple (dominant/dominated), or a specular but symmetrical couple (dominant/dominant);
- oedipic-phallic collusion, in which love is seen as a repetition of the parent-child relationship, or confirmation of the male role. In fact, while in oedipic collusion one partner tends to choose the other similar to the opposite sex parent, in phallic collusion s/he tends to choose a partner adopting the male role.

When the manipulative-collusive interweave is interrupted, an aggressive quota is always present, that can be either hetero-directed (due to the underlying rage and desire for revenge), or self-directed (motivated by feelings of bereavement or guilt).

Other types of manipulators have also been illustrated (Stern, 2009, 2011), namely:

- the seducer (with him everything seems to be exceptional; he appears as attentive, gentle, caring and romantic; he can also take in friends and relatives; he reacts to protest by making the victim feel inadequate and disappointing; for this reason, when the seductive game is over, the victim must uncomplainingly suffer blame, criticism and the knowledge of betrayal, that is always denied by the seducer);
- the intimidator (who relies on an aggressive verbal and/or physical attitude to bend the other to his will, through the threat of revenge or loss; all his actions have the aim of inducing the victim to feel inadequate and ineffective, and so to remain imprisoned in his net);
- the passive-aggressive subject, or good boy (he appears gentle and caring, but comes over as too normal, too wise, too well-balanced, thereby making the other feel inferior, because these excesses are just a way to diminish the other; the true motivation is not goodness but pseudo-goodness, or goodness mannerisms).

Gaslighting

The *gaslighting* phenomenon is contiguous to that of manipulation, as a form of psychological abuse in which the subject or group induces doubts in the victim about her/his own mental health, perception of reality and validity of personal memories (Stern, 2018). This reality has been denominated gaslighting after the play "Gaslight" shown in 1938, and the film of the same name produced in 1944. It narrates the attempts of a husband to make his wife believe she suffers from a mental disorder, by increasing or decreasing the luminosity of the gaslights to create hallucinogenic effects. Since then, various different gaslighting techniques have been classified (Marlow-macoy, 2020; Green, 2020; Barlow, 2021), such as: casting doubts about the victim's memories to undermine her/his confidence; refusing to speak to the victim to evade any responsibility; banalizing or ignoring the victim's feelings; denying that previous words or acts ever occurred; deviating the focus of discussion to cast doubts on the victim's credibility; denigrating the victim's basic characteristics (gender, race, ethnic origin, nationality, age, etc.). These techniques recall in some ways the *neutralization strategies* first described long before (Matza, Sykes, 1957), consisting of: denying any personal responsibility; euphemistically underestimating illicit conduct; dehumanizing the victim; making moral or pseudo-value judgments justifying a previous wrong action; playing down the transgressive act; ignoring the consequences of the crime; blaming the victim; accusing the accusers.

Ambiguity and ambivalence

Ambiguity is a mental state in which two contrary terms can coexist, because two opposite qualities are contemporarily present and contribute together to two different, opposing natures. *Ambivalence* is a condition that is inherent to any affective relationship, varying in degree from case to case, so that the reciprocal investments derive from a combination of both negative and positive feelings. In the former case love and hate are not clearly distinguishable and so result confused and interchangeable (e.g. homicide-suicide in depression melancholy, in which «*nec tecum, nec sine te vivere possum*»). In the latter, these feelings are sufficiently differentiated but can alternate in the same subject, sometimes very rapidly (e.g. stability-instability in the borderline state in which «*Die sine te vivere possum, nocte...*»). In both cases there can be a notable quota of destructiveness, that can also be triggered by contingent factors and the transformation of one situation to another (Bleger, 1992; Dalle Luche, Bertacca, 2005, 2007).

Destructiveness in the above-described relational typologies

The sense and meaning of destructiveness in all the defective and dysfunctional situations examined above depend on the mechanisms that regulate both the thymic-pathic and the sexual sphere. In paraphilic relationships, at least

one of the partners is affected by sexual perversion and the other is surely collusive, or else both interact as a result of a personal perversion that entirely mirrors that of the partner. The Other is destroyed because what should be aimed at producing life and pleasure is in reality transformed into the opposite: *Eros* becomes the mirror (narcissistic) of *Thanatos*.

In perversified relationships, the interaction proceeds along the register of a distortion of the anthropological meeting point, whereby the partner of so-called love and pleasure is destroyed to bring about the opposite effect: *Eros* becomes the hitman (psychopathic) of *Thanatos*.

In manipulative-collusive relationships, one or both partners seeks compensation for unsatisfied needs and desires and so destructiveness explodes when the vicious circle is interrupted. One or both members of the relationship seek/s compensation in the other for unsatisfied lacks and needs, and the destructiveness explodes, in a hetero-directed (fed by poorly controlled or completely uncontrolled rage and the desire for revenge), or self-directed form (that originates from a sense of bereavement or guilt that has not been internally processed): *Eros* becomes the mimesis (marginal or anankastic) of *Thanatos*.

In ambiguous and ambivalent relationships there is a great deal of confusion and lack of authenticity in the reciprocal affective investments, that provoke not only the destruction of the relationship but also of the two partners. In fact, even if the ambiguity is overcome, the feelings of love and hate, although distinct, can alternate so fast as to trigger aggressive or defensive reactions in the other partner: *Eros* becomes the simulacrum (symbiotic-functional) of *Thanatos*.

This type of relationship generally leads to serious crime: assault and battery, rape, attempted homicide, homicide, and finally homicide-suicide. A historical example is the seven stages described (Sighele, 1891) that lead from suicide to homicide (pure suicide; double suicide; homicide accepted by the victim and suicide committed by the perpetrator of the homicide; homicide not accepted by the victim and suicide committed by the perpetrator of the homicide; homicide and involuntary failure of the suicide; homicide and voluntary failure of the suicide; pure homicide). The psychopathological pathways underlying these crimes can develop either within a fairly short time (rage VS impulsiveness), or grow over a longer period (hate VS revenge), but always follow the same trajectory stemming from an initial lack of differentiation between love and hate (ambiguity) and progressively becoming more diversified (ambivalence). These cause the onset not only of psychopathological (perverse sexual relations) and deviant behavior (perverted relations as regards both character and behavior), but also of criminal behaviors (self-/hetero-destructive behavior within the couple). This issue refers to the phenomena denominated as IVP (Intimate Violence Partner) and DVA (Domestic Violence and Abuse), comprising different forms of maltreatment, for which two different conceptions have been proposed. These comprise a more restrictive view (that of the Divi-

sion of Violence Prevention National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, for which IPV includes physical, sexual and psychological violence, as well as stalking) and a wider ranging view (that of the Massachusetts Medical Society Committee on Violence, Intervention and Prevention, for which IPV covers: physical attacks, sexual aggression, different forms of psychological abuse – ranging from intimidation to denigration –, economic control, social isolation, spiritual abuse, the destruction of personal property or goods).

Conclusions

The key to interpreting such behaviors is provided by the anthropo-phenomenological lesson according to which “...sexual life is the history; the sexual history of a man offers us the key that explains his life, because it is through his sexuality that he plans his way of being toward the world, toward others and toward his own future. Every psychological constituent can enter his sexual history, conceived as an elaboration of a general form of life» (De Vincentis, Callieri Castellani, 1972, page 182). If this is true, then crime can on one hand become the “epiphenomenon” of destructiveness, as a means (sometimes the only one!) of creating a container for contents (affective, emotional, erotic) that are otherwise completely lacking, and on the other, become the “diving board” from which to jump off and build a new sense and a new meaning of Self and the Other, inside a new “life-project” (*Lebensprojekt*) and a new “world-project” (*Weltprojekt*). To paraphrase Jaspers (1950, 1964), for whom madness is the safety net viaticum, in the dialectics between violent and perverse relationships, crime can become the prolegomenon of a palingenesis, in other words the prodromic element of a new existential dimension, that is always desirable (if still possible) both for the victim and for the aggressor.

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