



Sexuality and Suffering, Or the Eew! Factor

Muriel Dimen Ph.D.

To cite this article: Muriel Dimen Ph.D. (2005) Sexuality and Suffering, Or the Eew! Factor, Studies in Gender and Sexuality, 6:1, 1-18, DOI: [10.1080/15240650609349262](https://doi.org/10.1080/15240650609349262)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240650609349262>



Published online: 01 Jul 2008.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 160



Citing articles: 29 View citing articles [↗](#)

Sexuality and Suffering, Or the Eew! Factor

Muriel Dimen, Ph.D.

The ubiquitous Eew! Factor—an excited disgust—is layered. Its tangled experiential and constitutive dimensions unfold when the Eew! Factor is examined through the lens of sexual countertransference; sexual countertransference through affect, abjection, and intersubjectivity; and sex itself through all of them. Taking the perspective that sex is neither psychic bedrock nor diagnostic sign, this essay examines three expired, not entirely successful, cases in which this sexual disturbance, which all clinicians, like as not have experienced at one time or another, appeared. Receiving particular attention are matters of transference-countertransference lust and erotic unknowing; racism in the clinical setting; and shame, embarrassment, and humiliation in relation to gender and sexuality.

Writing about sex wobbles drunkenly among the celebratory, the didactic, and the disciplinary. Here is a darker path: the “Eew! Factor,”¹ that sexual moment when you go, “Eew! that’s disgusting!” The Eew! Factor is relative. Maybe yours has never

Muriel Dimen, Ph.D. is Adjunct Clinical Professor of Psychology, New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, and former Professor of Anthropology, Lehman College (CUNY). Her latest book is *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power* (2003, The Analytic Press).

been about sex at all. But like as not each clinician has felt this sexual disturbance—an excited disgust—at some time or another, which is this paper might be subtitled not “*the* clinician’s sexual unease,” but clinicians’ sexual unease.

SEX AND AFFECT

Although the disturbance of sex has many histories and manifestations, here I stress affect’s role. The affects around sex make it difficult to think about. So when examining sex, it helps to weave theory and feeling together by splicing theoretical and philosophical reflections with clinical retrospection. The interleaved experiential and constitutive dimensions of the Eew! Factor’s manifold and mingled aspects unfold when examined through the lens of sexual countertransference; sexual countertransference through affect, abjection, and intersubjectivity; and sex itself through all of them.

As I reexamine the three clinical moments I describe here, I ask your indulgence or, rather, effort. Please don’t supervise these expired, not exactly successful, cases. Although I cannot control how you read, I hope that these cases do what I intend: spark discussion so the unspeakable can enter public discourse. My perspective is relational: neither psychic bedrock nor diagnostic sign, sex can be treated like any other clinical matter. “Sexual countertransference” designates any given clinician’s responses to sexuality, including but not limited to, the desire marking erotic countertransference.

“Sex is a beautiful thing,” soberly taught my parents—or, at least, my mother. Except it isn’t—always. Donald Jones (1995) attributes to sex three different affects: excitement, enjoyment, and contentment, usually in that order. Missing, however, are anxiety, uneasiness, the Eew! Factor, dread—which is a little like anatomizing marriage without dissecting divorce.

Remember *The Joy of Sex*, whose author, the oddly but aptly named Alex Comfort (1972), might have penned instead *The Discomforts of Sex*, whose existence occasions, after all, his book’s long life, Dr. Ruth’s fame, and the success of David Reuben’s (1969) *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex but Were Afraid to Ask*. The 60s–70s sexual revolution contextualizing

these media events emerged from the prudish 50s’ naughty underside, itself a response to the sexual break-out of the 20s and 30s. But the Eew! Factor!¹ lived on.

In countertransference, the affects accompanying sex tend to disturb. Charles Spezzano (1993) criticized a clinician who wrote about having interpreted as sexual his patient’s experience of a haircut. But nothing that the patient said, complained Spezzano, allowed that interpretation. Apart from theoretical premises, the clinician had to have had *feeling*: his subjective experience, whatever its transference–countertransference sources, must have led to his understanding. But the clinician did not mention any countertransference affect.

Like all emotions, sexual feeling tends to be catching—I feel it, you feel it. Reporting on sexual matters in clinical space, Davies (1994), de Peyer (2002), and Samuels (1985), for example, record a profound if not surprising amount of personal discomfort. Among the many reasons for this unease, I want to emphasize affective contagion, which de Peyer’s case shows especially well. Like all emotions, sexual feeling tends to be catching—I feel it, you feel it. “On the deepest level,” wrote Steve Mitchell (2000), “affective states are transpersonal” (p. 61). Recent theory, for example, Ruth Stein’s (1991), situates affect in the primal swirl of infant and caretaker. Feelings arrive at once corporeally and psychically, but corporeality is as much a two-person as a one-body phenomenon, standing, as we know, for both psychic and interpersonal reality (Fairbairn, 1954; Shapiro, 1996; Aron and Anderson, 1998; Harris, 1998; Dimen, 2000). To quote Mitchell (2000) again: “Questions like, ‘Who started it?’ and ‘Who did what to whom?’ tend to be meaningless when intense affective connections are involved, as in strong sexual attraction, terror, murderous rage, or joyous exhilaration” (p. 61).

What makes sexual affect special? “Sexual speech is inherently performative in that it materializes what it aims to describe,” says Virginia Goldner (2003, p. 120), elucidating Foucault’s take on psychoanalytic and confessional speech as “inscribed in an

¹ A term coined by Stephen Hartman.

erotic circuit of scrutiny and disclosure.” Because words are as visceral as psychosocial, and because, as Bakhtin’s (1934–1935) theory of heteroglossia has it, my *parole*, or speech, is always already permeated by yours, sex talk is also sexy talk (Gallop, 1992; Dimen, 1999). Or at least it may be.

In the analytic situation, where sex comes to us in spoken words and body-language, even conversations that attempt to contain its excess and analyze its action-driven character are bathed in its heat, and [we] are thus always at risk of collapsing into a forced choice between “talking dirty” or not talking at all [Goldner, 2002, p. 10].

Speaking sex, then, may threaten to violate ethics (Gabbard, 1989; Maroda, 1994) or catalyze the treatment (Samuels, 1985; Davies, 1994). You just don’t know. The ambiguity is, currently, inherent.

ABJECTION

My effort to limn clinicians’ sexual unease is part of a larger project, individual and collective, of reconsidering sexuality postclassically, beyond but not exclusive of the oedipal, inclusive of narcissism but registering culture too. Take, for example, a roundtable on developmental dialogues of sexuality held in 2002 at a New York City meeting of the Division of Psychoanalysis, American Psychological Association (Slavin et al., 2004). Ultimately the debate concerned whether sex was intersubjective (Seligman and Davies) or Other (Stein). Davies voiced the pull toward synthesis: the two sides, she insisted, were not so far apart. But, although I usually go for that third space too, this time I wanted the two sides to disagree more.

It is necessary to maintain a tension between sex as emerging in object relation and sex as Other. Although I cannot argue the point here, I want to explain why I take this stance. One reason is political: I fear that, if we imagine we can locate everything sexual in everything we know about intersubjectivity, it would not be too difficult to reduce sex to familiar forms of object relation that are overtly blessed, or damned, by social

norms. The other, psychoanalytical, reason is cognate: there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in normativity. Preserving sexuality as Other “stretches the clinical imagination about what patients’ inner worlds are like and, given the chance, could be like” (Dimen, 2003, p. 178). In sex as in psychoanalysis, shouldn’t there be room for discovery and invention, for surprise, if also disturbance?

In going for the sexual stretch, though, we are likely to come upon abjection. Before I turn to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) ideas about this iffy state, I want to survey how the *OED* defines “abject” and its derivatives: to cast away, out, down; to reject, abase, lower; by implication, to feel discarded, rejected, dejected. Go further and you get to the affects that are, for Kristeva, abject central: humiliation, shame, and disgust. These affects arrive with a feeling of horror infusing what Kristeva deems abjection’s primordial form, food loathing—or, as I call it, food alarm. One of my food alarms is seaweed. Seaweed in miso soup or sushi rolls, not to mention in the sea or on the shore—that’s fine. But when, every year or so, I try a bite from a nice salad where that awful stuff, neither containing nor contained, sits on its plate, a siren screams silently and hyperventilation nears. Kristeva’s evocation of “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness” (p. 2) is right on the money. Eew!

Abjection appears to be a one-person, one-body experience of Otherness. Implicitly, however, it is part of an intersubjective and developmental process. Kristeva’s food loathing in reaction to “skin on milk’s surface” leads to the thought: “‘I’ want none of that element, sign of [my parents’] desire” (pp. 2–3). Note her “I” in scare quotes, which alerts us to the developmental matter. If, Kristeva goes on, we think in terms of “subjective diachrony”—and what is that if not development?—abjection turns out to be “a *precondition of narcissism*” (p. 13), precondition as both prerequisite and prior stage. On one hand, says Kristeva, “Even before being *like*, ‘I’ am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*.” Separating through rejecting and abjecting—that *is* who one is. On the other, the uncanniness, “familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome.” The abject state is “Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a

thing” (p. 2). Might we recognize here Sullivan’s (1953) “not-me”?

Abjection’s position on what Freud (1905) called “the frontier between the physical and the mental” (p. 168) locates it close to narcissism, which thereby takes on a new look. Narcissism as I am using it denotes “less a psychiatric character phenomenon and more a developmental position” (Ken Corbett, 2003, personal communication). The oneness with which it is usually endowed contains, as we know, the seeds of its own transformation. Inevitably corporeal and psychically inevitable, abjection registers that moment when one is not quite separate but no longer merged either. This uncertainty introduces to narcissism the discomforts of borders in the between spaces. “Abjection,” says Kristeva (1982), “preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (p. 10). Violence. Ungrounded affect. Loss. “The abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost” (p. 15). Would you have thought of transitional space as shot through with pain?

Abjection is desire before self and object have psychically cohered and, by so cohering, constituted each other (p. 5). In Kristeva’s view, it renders narcissism a condition of torment and impossibility. No wonder abjection registers in liminal substances that evoke fascinated disgust—feces, to take the prime example, but urine, semen, vaginal fluids, menstrual blood, snot, pimples, pus, skin excrescences. These border materials, neither fully alive nor fully dead, signify what must be rejected in order that life exist—death—but that must *exist* in order that life exist (pp. 2–3). Abjection inhabits the space between deprivation and signification, as the Lacanians might put it. Finally, abjection signifies the breast, mother, and femininity, the disgust they inspire, and their consequent repudiation (Grosz, 1994).

HUMILIATION, NARCISSISM, AND SEXUAL PAIN

Let me try some of these musings out clinically. L, considerably younger than I, found me attractive. I responded in kind. At

one point, I shared my feelings with him, to make the sexuality into what Ogden (1994), following Green, calls an object of knowledge or reflection. The disclosure relieved some anxiety, but an unease lingered that I would now name abjection because of the hovering shame and humiliation linked, for him, with maternal tantalization.

Sexual abjection is, to some extent, unspeakable, as de Peyer (2002), in a case study, has shown. The sexual disturbance between us—our Eew! Factor—was never fully translated into some other analytic pleasure, that is, analytic knowing. Rather, you might say that for years every session took place against a background of erotic unknowing. Did our muteness in fact help him to leave as he did, having regained his sexual potency? I want to claim success, even as I suspect failure. It is true that he continued in a state of abjection and gradually replaced me with another tantalizing object, the money he would win or lose at the track. Yet something shifted later, for he returned for a couple of visits to make sure I was still alive and to tell me that he wasn't gambling anymore.

You could say simply that L and I were frustrated: we couldn't do it, we could only sort of speak it. But frustration is more interesting than that. Think of its relation to abjection. Frustration marks sexual desire, as loss tinges attachment and pain, love. You may have a steady partner, but that does not always mean you get to have sex when or how you want it, or that you even want it now that it's available. When I spoke of these matters in Stockbridge in February 2002, Paul Lippmann alluded wistfully to “our efforts to have sexual lives.” Sexual desire, Freud (1941) thought, is inherently unsatisfiable: “*En attendant toujours quelque chose qui ne venait point* [Always waiting for something that never came]” (quoted by Green, 1996, p. 872). Concurring, Lacan (1977) saw satisfaction as a necessarily alluring impossibility critical to the crystalization of subjectivity, sanity, and culture. I don't know about this view of sexual satisfaction as an endlessly receding mirage, but it's not a useless perspective either, especially in a culture that means every sexual encounter to end atop Mt. Everest.

You could also locate the Eew! Factor between L and me in narcissism's unease—unstable identity, elemental uncertainty,

fragility, spatial ambivalence, inability to distinguish inside from outside, pleasure from pain. What happens when sexual feeling enters? Required reading here would be Laplanche's (1976) account of the enigmatic message, sexuality as an unconscious transmission to the infant from the mother's or, as we might now emend it, the parental unconscious. Thus sexuality is always already an inarticulable mystery, an "alien internal entity."

Agreeing with but going beyond Laplanche, Stein (1998) limns the excess of sexuality, its transcendence and loss of self that contrast with and even contradict the state of mind required for ordinary life. Making a further distinction, Benjamin (1998) proposes to regard excess as a result of "failures in affective containment [that] may produce sexual tension rather than reflect some interpersonal transmission of unconscious sexual content" (p. 7). Davies (2001), unearthing yet another effect of the unmetabolizable spillover of parent-child intimacy, has suggested that parents' unavoidable silence about their children's sexual feeling will inevitably imbue sexuality with a sense of trauma. As she suggests, you may say to your child, "Oh you're so angry. I know what that's like," but you probably won't say, "Oh, you're turned on, aren't you?"

To return to the clinic, analysts may need to serve as containers for excess and trauma. But we need also to accept pain and discomfort's permanence in sex, hence in sexual transference-countertransference. Consider Kristeva's (1982) slant on "the edenic image of primary narcissism": "the archaic relation to the mother . . . is . . . of no solace. . . . For the subject will always be marked by the uncertainty of his borders and of his affective valency as well" (p. 62). Cognate with this rather *undyllic* maternal relation is *jouissance*, which we generally read as orgasm in all its ineffability, but is sometimes pain or shame to the nth degree. "Freud's expansion of the sexual beyond the genital," explains Tim Dean (2001), "is redescribed by Lacan in terms of *jouissance*, a form of enjoyment so intense as to be barely distinguishable from suffering and pain" (p. 271).

EMBARRASSMENT, RACISM, AND DISGUST

Think here of the French folk song: *Plaisir d'amour, Ne dure qu'un moment, Chagrin d'amour, Dure toute la vie. Chagrin d'amour* [the

pleasure of love lasts but a moment. The sorrow of love lasts a lifetime.] or, at least, pain or suffering. That’s what we need to add to our thinking about sexual countertransference and transference, even about sex itself, whatever that might be. With L, for instance, there was a congeries of emotions, shared and unshared, ranging from excitement and playfulness, to contemplative quietude, to fear, rage, disgust, and mortification. With A, in contrast, embarrassment ruled the clinical day. Probably both of us were embarrassed, but I was so locked in my discomfort that I never found hers. Once, for example, she picked up a minor celebrity. The morning after, he threw 50 bucks on the night table. “I took it,” she shrugged with what I now see as an embarrassed laugh.

What’s a nice vanilla analyst to do? I am trying to puzzle out my countertransference blind spot. A was a fledgling, temping for a living. I was a fledgling too, conducting a once-weekly treatment early in my practice. Had we worked in the transference, I am sure I could have caught my reenactment of her mother’s emotional abandonment of her. As it was, I failed to hear her plea that I see through her happy little mask to the frightened girl armed with a sexuality that she didn’t know how to use. “Perhaps,” I might have said, “you are asking me for something but you don’t know what it is. I sense this encounter unsettled you, and you don’t quite know how to think about it.”

But embarrassment? For enlightenment, let us turn to abjection’s psychic and cultural ramifications. Since sexuality happens not only within but between psyches, its focus is not always clear. Sex may be for me, it may be for you; it may be for us, it may be for someone else. A source of both pleasure and pain, it may lead to self-gratification or other-gratification or both, and which goal governs any particular sexual encounter varies unpredictably from time to time, and person to person, even within any one coupling. Not only exploitation, but self-deception, is always possible. One person seems sexually gratified but is not: think faked orgasms. Another appears to feel love, or at least like, but actually feels indifference. Or disgust. You don’t always know, even in a legitimated, long-term relationship, whether you are exploiting or being exploited or sharing; Kernberg (1995) almost prescribes part-object exploitation for conjugality.

A did not know how to negotiate this minefield. I didn't either. Who does? There is a great deal of pressure not to notice sexual abjection. Enter culture, which I introduce to pry open the closed-mindedness that exploits abjection. Sex is value laden, emotions are saturated with values, and values are emotionally charged (Jaggar, 1983; Stein, 1991; Spezzano, 1993; Tomkins, 1995). I have no doubt that A and I, even though we were from different subcultures and classes, shared a prevailing morality wedding sex to love and mutual respect, and in respect of which trading in sex, for example, is embarrassing.

At the same time, our subcultural differences worked on us, or at least me, insidiously, because this treatment never went deep or long enough for me to walk another conscious minefield of my own: racism. Looking back, I see that I believed that, in A's immiserated black and Latino subculture, exchanging sex for money stood on a continuum of acceptable behavior. Since this belief seemed to abject people of color and since I was ashamed of it, I could never make my way through it to see how embarrassed she was, to speculate on the transference implications, or to probe my countertransference by imagining myself as a hooker or resurrecting a hooker fantasy of my own. Was she embarrassed because I was the white middle-class lady doctor whom she paid for one-week stands as her one-night stand lover paid her? Because she sensed my abjecting racism? Because her need for care, so miserably unmet, left her begging for crumbs?

As I was drafting this article, however, I recalled Judith Walkowitz's (1980) feminist research on working-class Jewish women in New York City at the turn of the last century. Then and now, Walkowitz argues, dominant middle-class values have obscured the freedom with which some women have historically mined their own sexuality on their own behalf. In any given family of the group she studied, for example, there might have been one sister who married and reproduced right away; another who lived alone and worked in a factory or wrote books; one who did that and later married and had children; one who hooked and used her job to find the right man; and one who just ran a whorehouse (and, like Polly Adler, 1953, wrote a memoir). Indeed, I wonder if such a narrative might befit the cocotte in Freud's (1920) contemporaneous case of the

psychogenesis of homosexuality in a woman. Could A's *mores* have been so described? I don't know. Maybe even suggesting so is offensive. The point is that a gendered and cultural, if not also personal, Eew! Factor prevented me from *thinking* about any of this then.

That psychoanalysis contributes to that familiar construction which filled my countertransference—sex belongs only in the region of intimacy—is a commonplace. The structure of *Three Essays*, Ethel Person (1986) has pointed out, begins in the wild sexual aberrations of adulthood. After having relished infancy's polymorphous perversity, the book finally narrows its prescriptions to the reproductive heterosexuality of maturity in which sexual health is defined as the release of semen into the vagina. But we know that sex was and remains far more multifaceted than that, and we are embarrassed by our own multiplicity, which, in cultural and psychoanalytic theory, turns out to consist of deviations.

This affectively complicated knowledge circles back to the first half of *Three Essays*. Sex, says Stein (Slavin et al., 2004), may be transgressive, transcendent, and transformative, but it is also ridiculous. Think, she suggests, about all that embarrassing licking and slobbering. Now let's add the visual to the oral: who is pretty at the height of passion? Maya Angelou (1981) quipped about someone she didn't like: “She was utterly unable to make me ugly up my face between the sheets” (p. 102). Way back in 1915, Freud (1905) uneasily pondered the same problem. “There is in my mind,” he confided in a footnote to *Three Essays*, “no doubt that the concept of ‘beautiful’ has its roots in sexual excitation and that its original meaning was ‘sexually stimulating.’” Universalizing his unease, he added, “This is related to the fact that we never regard the genitals themselves, which produce the strongest sexual excitation, as really ‘beautiful’” (p. 156 n. 2).

Note the word *really*. Genitals seem disgusting as well as beautiful. Stein (Slavin et al., 2004) was addressing what Freud knew, that sexual disgust is unavoidable and overcoming it is part of sexual experience. Sexual excitement transports you into bodily and sensory realms of abjection foreclosed long ago in the necessities of maturation. For one thing, you encounter the

groinal odors and sensations that you learned to associate with the toilet and its privacy. To have sex, you have to climb psychic and symbolic, not to mention sensory, barriers established to civilize you and to render you and your caretakers happy and proud. “Libido,” said Freud (1912) “thrives on obstacles” (p. 187) and “in its strength enjoys overriding . . . disgust” (1905, p. 152). Certainly disgust is one emotion you learn to employ for toilet training. No wonder it is embarrassing to talk of the pleasure/pain of sex. Think about the grunts, moans, and screams, the farts, the sound and feeling of sticky membrane on sticky membrane. And I haven’t even mentioned taste. Eew!

SHAME, HATRED, AND SEX

It is not far from embarrassment to shame. Embarrassment, writes Andrew Morrison (1989), is a mild form of shame. In it, you feel exposed for some feeling or act that transgresses interpersonal or social morality but keeps you within the pale. Embarrassment may or may not snowball into shame, in which, in contrast, you feel that your core is corroded and that you should be excommunicated. Shame, perhaps, *is* the state of narcissistic injury. It is, Morrison suggests, the other side of self-regard (p. 42).

Shame spreads as easily as poison ivy. One patient calls it “wildfire”: you tell of one moment of shame, then another comes back, and then another, and another, until all you are is shame. Shame self-replicates; if you near the shame feelings of someone with narcissistic injury, then that person feels, lo and behold, ashamed. Through its performativity, shame also oozes into intersubjective space, which in psychotherapy makes countertransference errors very easy. “The shame of patients is contagious,” Morrison explains, “often resonating with the clinician’s own shame experiences—the therapist’s own sense of failure, self-deficiency, and life disappointments” (p. 6). I don’t doubt that this contagion featured in my work with L and with A.

Shame, Kristeva (1982) holds, is core to abjection, but the reasons for this become clear only if we consider abjection

relationally. You can see how this works in Fairbairn’s (1954) take on frustration. Characteristically turning a classical concept on its head, Fairbairn argued that, in an object-relations as opposed to an impulse psychology, “frustration is always emotionally equivalent to rejection” (p. 13). This equivalence between frustration, on one hand, and exclusion and hurt, on the other, obtains because an object is always already present in psychic reality: “If the child is essentially object-seeking, frustration is inevitably experienced as rejection on the part of the object” (p. 13). If rejection comes, can humiliation and its cognate affect, shame, be far behind? Frustration being usual—whether in object seeking, in selfing, or in sex—shame partners pleasure from the getgo.

Talk about *chagrin d’amour*. When shame attends frustration, then disgust, hatred, and other effects of aggression are not far behind. How often, for example, we say, “making love” when we mean “having sex.” Are we in reaction formation? Recall that Sándor Ferenczi (1933) concluded his amazing “The Confusion of Tongues” by referring to “the hate-impregnated love of adult mating” (p. 206). I cannot here deconstruct this fascinating, unsettling paradox of maturity, but will just note Stoller’s (1975, 1979) thoughts on the subject and indicate its roots in paranoid-schizoid splitting and in abjection. Clearly, the achievement of ambivalence is necessary to negotiate it. But ambivalence is, as we know, unstable. I quote Meltzer’s (1973) intriguing thought that a libidinal/object-relational “stage might be successfully traversed but . . . never truly dismantled” (p. 27). Having sexual feeling as adults, we always risk the shifting of positions—the return of abjection’s unease and horror, of paranoid-schizoid suffering.

In my final clinical example, I track how excitement and revulsion attend the circulating affects of shame, hate, and love in transference and countertransference. W, a slender fellow with an ivory complexion, graceful black hair, green eyes, and a face I’d call chiseled, was not physically to my taste at all, but I could see how a girl could fall for him. And you can already see the war between my feelings for and against him. Tightly focused on his lucrative work, he was, if not exactly a mama’s boy, fused to her in an underground sort of way.

As withholding from me as he was from his girlfriend (whose wishes for his commitment I was unable to grant; he'd been referred by his girlfriend's therapist), W had a sexual secret: he kept a lover on the side. Now, even though I do not escape the cultural belief that sex is a subset of intimacy, still I think that, adultery being as ubiquitous as French bistros, monogamy cannot really be a criterion for mental health and probity. But there was an Eew! Factor, perhaps, a hateful thrill he may have felt at withholding from his girlfriend and turning to a degraded lover. I wonder if, countertransferentially, I too felt that thrill, in complementary or concordant (Racker, 1968) fashion.

What really angered me was the degradation he effected, the disgust he felt, and the hatred he manifested—and the emergence of all those affects in me about him and about myself. W's lover was a woman whose lower status and dark skin, explicitly exciting for him, were also so embarrassing that he could not or would not reveal any of the identifying details. Was she Latina? Black? Indian? His silence, coupled with his eroticized racism and classism, offended me. Another hateful thrill: his treating all of us as part-objects. Looking back, I see that I felt humiliation, excluded like his lover, not to mention his girlfriend, who was, unlike him but like me, Jewish and as such may have already participated in the abjection necessary to his sexuality. (And here, in the land of part-objects, we might think back to A and to the Eew! of \$50 tossed on the table and the corresponding Eew! of picking it up.)

Of course, we must suspect here W's own self-disgust, signaled by the occasional bulimic episode, as well as what, I speculate, may, in fact, have been his real sexual secret. Looking back, I wonder whether he was disguising not class and race, but gender. You see, as I was writing that monogamy could not be a criterion for mental health, I made a slip of the pen or, rather, of the keyboard. I had first written, not "monogamy," but "heterosexuality." If, then, heterosexuality could not be a criterion for mental health, then perhaps W was masking his lover's gender. Had I reflected on my heterosexual countertransference of humiliated, controlled, and hating female to his withholding, domineering, and hateful male, might I have been able to speculate about homosexual acts or wishes? Other

features, after all, would have supported that hypothesis. After reading, in his girlfriend’s diary, about her last boyfriend, he became so angry he would repeatedly grill her about her sexual past. Who was he interested in, his girl or her lover?

Yet another speculation forms. At issue was perhaps not object choice but his own gender or sexual identity. Recall his bulimia, more often than not what Louise Kaplan (1991) calls a “female perversion.” When, for example, he would take his Maserati out of the garage, he would circle it several times, dramatizing his search for dings, not because he expected damage but to intimidate the garage attendants. “I don’t like to do it,” he explained, “but I have to.” How hypermasculine, how hard edged, in contrast to the little boy whose mother found him so pretty that she would sit him on her lap in the bow window of their suburban home to show him off to the neighbors. How great was his struggle not to be her thing. Was his real secret a disgusting and shameful feminine identification projected and abjected onto a debased female lover, mistress, or analyst?

CONCLUSION

The hate that accompanies frustration, rejection, humiliating and shame is a prime cause of sexual suffering, whether at home or in the consulting room. Once inside the act, however, this disturbance evaporates. Space precludes further explanation, but I can share Goldner’s (2003) observation of our reluctance to theorize good sex lest it fizzle. I do want to mention a friend’s response to this thesis of the Eew! Factor. He shrugged. “You mean,” I replied, “for you, it’s all part of it?” So this Eew! Factor requires deconstruction. Do I—or, if you agree with me—*we* come to it because of a certain personal and professional, not to say theoretical, idealization of sex? The Eew! Factor, and certainly clinicians’ sexual unease, may be multiply inflected by gender, sexual preference, time of life, character, cohabitational status, and certainly other features.

Perhaps you know of Leo Bersani’s (1988) one-liner: “There is a secret about sex: most people don’t like it.” Drawing on Bataille’s notions of sex, death, and disgust, Bersani speaks of the shattering of the ego that constitutes *jouissance*, and that

terrifies us and makes us want to forget to have sex. A culture theorist, Bersani writes in a one-person psychology. Add the two-person model and we would also have to think about how, when passion runs high, the balance between love and hate swings nauseatingly. Now hate is up, now love. You cannot predict. The depressive position, maturity, even sanity, and, as the Lacanians would have it, membership in the symbolic, human order, fail. We fall into dread and disgust. Journalist Amy Taubin (1994) writes about hate-fucking, an idea suggested to her by her maverick analyst, the late Ernst Pavel, which she sees registered in Mike Leigh's film *Naked*. But when hate pops out in sex, what happens to self-regard? Perhaps it turns to disgust. Eew!

REFERENCES

- Adler, P. (1953), *A House Is Not a Home*. New York: Rinehart.
- Angelou, M. (1981), *The Heart of a Woman*. New York: Random House.
- Aron, L. & Anderson, F. S. (1998), *Relational Perspectives on the Body*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1934–1935), Discourse of the novel. In: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist (trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 259–420.
- Benjamin, J. (1998), How intersubjective is sex? Keynote address at annual meeting of Division of Psychoanalysis (Division 39), American Psychological Association, Boston, April.
- Bersani, L. (1988), Is the rectum a grave? In: *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. D. Crimp. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 197–222.
- Comfort, A., ed. (1972), *The Joy of Sex*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Davies, J. M. (1994), Love in the afternoon: A relational reconsideration of desire and dread in the countertransference. *Psychoanal. Dial.*, 4:153–170.
- (2001), Erotic overstimulation and the co-construction of sexual meanings in transference and countertransference experience. *Psychoanal. Quart.*, 70:757–788.
- Dean, T. (2001), *Beyond Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Peyer, J. (2002), Private terrors: Sexualized aggression and a psychoanalyst's fear of her patient. *Psychoanal. Dial.*, 12:509–530.
- Dimen, M. (1999), Between *lust* and *libido*: Sex, psychoanalysis, and the moment before. *Psychoanal. Dial.*, 9:415–440.

- (2000), The body as Rorschach. *Studies Gender & Sexual.*, 1:9–39.
- (2003), *Sexuality, Intimacy, Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Fairbairn, W. R. D. (1954), Observations on the nature of hysterical states. *Brit. J. Med. Psychol.*, 27:105–125.
- Ferenczi, S. (1933), The confusion of tongues between adults and the child. *Contemp. Psychoanal.*, 24:196–206, 1988.
- Freud, S. (1905), Three essays on the theory of sexuality. *Standard Edition*, 7:125–243. London: Hogarth Press, 1953.
- (1912), On the universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love, *Standard Edition*, 11:179–190. London: Hogarth Press, 1957.
- (1920), The psychogenesis of a case of homosexuality in a woman. *Standard Edition*, 18:145–172. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Gabbard, G., ed. (1989), *Sexual Exploitation in Professional Relationships*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Gallop, J. (1982), *The Daughter’s Seduction: Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Goldner, V. (2003), Ironic gender/Authentic sex. *Studies in Gender & Sexual.*, 4:113–139.
- Green, A. (1996), Has sexuality anything to do with psychoanalysis? *Internat. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 76:871–883.
- Grosz, E. (1994), *Volatile Bodies*. New York: Routledge.
- Harris, A. (1998), Psychic envelopes and sonorous baths: Siting the body relational theory and clinical practice. In: *Relational Perspectives on the Body*, ed. L. Aron & F. S. Anderson. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2004, pp. 39–64.
- Jaggar, A. B. (1983), *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld.
- Jones, J. M. (1995), *Affects as Process*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Kaplan, L. (1991), *Female Perversions*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Kernberg, O. (1995), *Love Relations: Normality and Pathology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1982), *Powers of Horror*, trans. L. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lacan, J. (1977), *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. A. Sheridan. London: Tavistock.
- Laplanche, J. (1976), *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Mehlman. Annapolis, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Maroda, K. (1994), *The Power of Countertransference*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2004.
- Meltzer, D. (1973), *Sexual States of Mind*. Perthshire, Scotland: Clunie Press, 1979.
- Mitchell, S. A. (2000), *Relationality: From Attachment to Intersubjectivity*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.

- Morrison, A. (1989), *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Ogden, T. (1994), *Subjects of Analysis*. New York: Aronson.
- Person, E. (1986), A psychoanalytic approach. In: *Theories of Sexuality*, ed. J. Geer & W. O'Donohue. New York: Plenum, pp. 385–410.
- Racker, H. (1968), *Transference and Countertransference*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Reuben, D. (1969), *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex But Were Afraid to Ask*. New York: McKay.
- Samuels, A. (1985), Symbolic dimensions of Eros in transference and countertransference. *Internat. Rev. Psychoanal.* 12:199–214.
- Shapiro, S. A. (1996), The embodied analyst in the Victorian consulting room. *Gender & Psychoanal.*, 1:297–322.
- Slavin, J. H., Oxenhandler, N., Seligman, S., Stein, R. & Davies, J. M. (2004) Roundtable: Dialogues on sexuality in development and treatment, *Studies Gender & Sexuality*, 5:371–418.
- Spezzano, C. (1993), *Affect in Psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Stein, R. E. (1991), *Psychoanalytic Theories of Affect*. New York: Praeger.
- (1998), The poignant, the excessive and the enigmatic in sexuality. *Internat. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 79:253–268.
- Stoller, R. (1975), *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- (1979), *Sexual Excitement*. New York: Pantheon.
- Sullivan, H. S. (1953), *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*. New York: Norton.
- Taubin, A. (1994), Female trouble. *Village Voice*, April 15, p. 20.
- Tomkins, S. S. (1995), *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. V. Demos. Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
- Walkowitz, J. (1980), *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Three East Tenth Street, #181
New York, NY 10003
mdimen@psychoanalysis.net