Psychodynamic Perspectives of Sexual Perversion

In general, psychodynamic conceptualizations of sexual perversions have mirrored the periodic revisions and the major developments in psychoanalytic views over the past century. These developments can be understood as a progression from the earliest psychoanalytic paradigms—drive or instinctual—to more contemporary concerns with object-relational, interpersonal, and self psychological theory. Whereas earlier psychoanalysts focused on the primary dynamics of the Oedipal complex and accompanying castration anxiety, recent theorists concentrate on preoedipal concerns centering on separation anxiety and associated factors, such as early gender role, the rudimentary formation of the self, the significance of specific early traumatogenic events, and attachment and relational motifs.

REVIEW OF PSYCHODYNAMIC FORMULATIONS

Classical and Revisionistic Views

Freud's original view of psychopathology, the so-called seduction theory, which he expounded in 1895, placed the responsibility for psychic disorders on the sexually perverse father who, in
seducing the future-to-be-neurotic (the hysteric at this point in psychoanalytic theory), fully becomes the toxic etiologic agent of neurotic psychopathology. This focus on the hysteric also launched Freud on his revolutionary discovery of the unconscious. The hysteric, according to Freud, splits off the sexually traumatogenic event and its associated affect, only to have it return in an alienated form in the language of symptom formation. Freud’s heralded theoretical switch in 1899, from believing in the reality of the seductive father to defining the event as a fantasy, set the stage for this more focused work on sexuality. In his classic work *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, published in 1905, Freud asserted that it is not the externally acting, sexually perverse parent, but the internally lodged, somatopsychological sexual instinct itself that is implicated in psychological illness. In this paradigm, the sexual instinct, as expressed in its most primitive and component form, is polymorphously perverse in nature. It proceeds through childhood in the psychosexual stages, becoming maturely integrated and synthesized in the child’s overcoming of castration anxiety and resolution of the Oedipal complex. The problematic progression of this developmental achievement may result in either neurosis or perversion. In Freud’s early writings on sexuality, neurosis is the negative of perversion, meaning that the neurotic’s symptomatic language, inhibited by civilization’s constraining influence on the developing mind, is that of the disguised pervert. Such neurosis is thus opposed to the actual pervert’s more “real” primitive sexual language, that of a bestial pleasure-seeking organism, unchecked by the internalization of culture, and hence more truly representative of man’s basic, infantile instinctual essence. Perversion, then, in this early but foundational view, is a kind of primitively fixated and acted-out concretization of sexual libido, which, when manifested in adult life, is a carryover from infancy that has not undergone any transformation into mature adult genital activity.

The result is a sexuality that is symptomatically acted out in its raw component forms, unlike the neurotic (for Freud, again, the classic example being the “hysteric”), in whom sexuality is a compromise formation displaced in symbolic, nonovertly sexual forms. In contrast to neurosis, the sexually perverse symptom becomes an imperative, insistently driven sexuality, deviant in aim