A STUDY OF THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPT OF CASTRATION ANXIETY IN SYMBOLICALLY CASTRATED AMPUTEES*
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BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The concept of *castration anxiety* is a central one in the psychoanalytic theory of personality postulated by Freud and bears important syntactic relationships to other elements in his psychosexual theory. According to Freud (1910), the universal phenomenon of the Oedipus complex in the child subsides because of the child’s overpowering fear of being castrated for unconscious incestuous wishes, which Freud called “castration anxiety.” The experience of castration anxiety, moreover, marks the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle (ego development), the formation of the super-ego, the beginnings of identification, and the onset of the latency period in psychosexual development (Freud, 1925). How each of these stages develops depends in large measure upon the magnitude of the castration threat perceived.

Castration anxiety was first believed by Freud to emanate from direct threats made by adults to the child during infantile masturbation. This view was modified to include the displaced threat, where by the law of talion, “the organ that sins shall be punished,” that is the offending, masturbating hand. Further elaborations dealt with symbolic manifestations of castration, for instance, death, blindness as in *Oedipus Rex*, and masturbation guilt. The ultimate refinement by Freud viewed castration as an implicit possibility derived from the child’s discovery that a female does not possess a penis (Freud, 1936).

The groundwork for experiencing castration anxiety was thought by Freud to exist in certain pre-Oedipal antecedents involving loss or separation, that is, birth, weaning, and defecation. Thus the ego was early conditioned to experience and react to the castration anxiety of the Oedipal period by repeated object losses of this type. Indeed, where the experience of castration anxiety was espe-

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cially severe, its referral or regression to oral and anal levels was considered possible (Fenichel, 1931 and 1945; Reich, 1949). Freud also postulated that the castration anxiety of the infantile period persists into normal adult life because the Oedipal complex itself persists in disguised forms, such as dreams, and with renewal of masturbation at puberty (Freud, 1936).

Regarding the symbolic aspects of castration, Fenichel (1945) and Ferenczi (1950 and 1955) believed that various physical traumata could reinstate infantile beliefs in the reality of castration. Meng (1938) has further suggested that a physical disability may be perceived symbolically as a castrating experience, either punitive or wish-fulfilling. Its effects might be increased narcissism to compensate for the loss of body narcissism, increased reality testing in accordance with theory, and a lessening of circumambient castration anxiety because of vicarious symbolic castration.

The Problem

Since castration anxiety is alleged to persist into adult life and may be perceived symbolically as physical trauma, it appeared reasonable to test these concepts empirically by contrasting the performance of adult amputees, who are widely regarded by clinicians as symbolically castrated, with a physically normal control group on the Blacky Pictures, a projective technique modeled along the lines of the Freudian theory of psychosexual development. Significant differences, if any, would presumably be attributed to the symbolic meaning of the physical anomaly to the amputee group.

Procedure

The experimental group consisted of 20 adult male amputees: mean age, 35.9; mean education, 12.4 years. The control group consisted of 20 physically normal adult males: mean age, 26.2 years; and mean education 10.9 years. The amputees were drawn at random from volunteer pilot wearers participating in the Prosthetic Devices Study at New York University. The control group had previously been tested by Aronson (1950) in connection with another study in Michigan. Though slight differences were observed between groups with regard to age and education, it was reasoned that these differences would not contribute significantly to the kind of test performance elicited by the Blacky Pictures.