

The Illusion of the Other: Selfobject Psychopathology in Masochism

Masochism has broadly been defined as the enjoyment of suffering or a tendency to seek opportunity for being offended or hurt. Within psychoanalytic thought the precise meaning of masochism has undergone a variety of transformations and currently there appears to be little consistency in its usage. As originally conceived by Freud, masochistic behavior was fundamentally and etiologically related to sexual fantasies and perversions. This was the case even when a self-defeating behavior was ostensibly nonsexual (moral masochism). Although some theorists continue to adhere to the libidinal roots of self-destructive behavior, there has been a decided theoretical broadening of the concept of moral masochism or masochistic character psychopathology.

From the more classical perspective, Brenner defines masochism as the seeking of unpleasure for the sake of sexual gratification. He goes on, however, to implicate the superego, which is not invariably sexualized, as a factor in masochistic compromise formations. Speaking from an object-relations perspective, Kernberg sees self-destructive behavior as a reflection of an identification with a sadistic parent and also emphasizes that self-defeating behavior functions as an outlet for aggressive drives and as a way of punishing the object.

Recently Simmons has described masochism along a continuum of behavior from altruism to sexual perversions, with moral masochism being somewhere in between these two extremes. He states, however, that with moral masochism or masochistic personality the basic impairment is with self-esteem and with an individual feeling that he or she does not have any value in the world. Shainess also notes the severely damaged self-esteem of masochistic individuals and implicates a defective separation-individuation process.

Although recent formulations of masochistic character pathology emphasize the importance of defects in the regulation of self-esteem, they do not elaborate on the specific organization of the damage itself. In this presentation I shall attempt to integrate the findings of the current infant research with a self-psychological perspective to understand and conceptualize the masochistic self. Contemporary findings in infant research will be utilized to understand the necessary conditions required by

the nascent self for the establishment of self-cohesion, one with a positive emotional balance and colorization. Utilizing the Kohutian perspective, I will then set forth an hypothesis on the nature of the selfobject experience between a child and his or her caretakers that leads to the formation of masochism.

Specifically, a cold, unattuned maternal object, combined with an idealized yet emotionally unavailable and distant paternal object are intrapsychically condensed into masochistic selfobject experience. The maternal selfobject experience, lacking in adequate mirroring, forges a self which is experienced as anergic, weak, without cohesion and consequently dependent. In an attempt to restore vitality and prevent fragmentation, the emotionally less noxious but unavailable paternal object is nonetheless idealized and accommodated into selfobject experience. This particular constellation of intrapsychic experience is replicated in later life by masochistic interpersonal relations, whereby a partner is emotionally cold and even cruel, but is idealized and whose illusionary presence is nonetheless required for the experience of a sense of cohesion and stability.

The masochistic self is then seen not as one who receives pleasure from pain, but as a manifestation of a compromise formation functioning to engender a selfobject experience which leads to adequate self-functioning. A brief case example of a 34-year-old female with masochistic traits will also be presented.

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