

SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper has three main aspects -

1. To present an 'objective' account of the current situation in group psychotherapy in relation to sexual diversity. To what extent does the group approach, which in respects and values diversity in groups (Thyssen 1992), deal openly and constructively with sexual diversity? What does the group therapy literature tell us about this?
2. To address the 'subjective' aspects of the theme by inviting the listener / reader to reflect on his/her own responses to the challenging material presented by sexual diversity. This is a highly charged subject that touches us as individuals and therapists in different ways. How does our own experience and prejudice influence our work with sexual diversity?
3. To present a model of group psychotherapy that embodies the sexual subject and facilitates the exploration of sexual diversity. These ideas are based on proposals put forward in my book "The Group as an Object of Desire: exploring sexuality in group psychotherapy" (Nitsun 2006). This is within a framework that recognizes sexual identity as a major contemporary issue and an integral part of psychotherapeutic inquiry.

The subjective aspect of ourselves as therapists is important in all our psychotherapeutic work. We are "in there", whatever the subject. But I suggest that this may be all the more important in dealing with sexuality diversity, where the issues and feelings are so personal and so subjective. Also, the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' is not always clear, since knowledge, and the way it is constructed and interpreted, is often intermingled with the subjective.

A glance at the subjective

Going straight to the 'subjective', I wish to begin by showing a picture and asking you to consider your response to it.

Illustration 2

Internet painting by Thomas



What do you see in this picture?

What are the feelings and associations it arouses in you?

Your responses to these questions are for you to consider. You do not have to share them with anyone. But I ask you to take note of your responses and what they might say about you as a therapist working with sexual diversity.

You may be curious about the picture I showed and where it comes from. It is a painting by an American artist called Thomas Ruff who uses sexual images from the internet as his theme. As you can see, he blurs the picture as a way of making a statement about the way we view such images and the different responses we have to them. This is also a way of introducing a subject which has had a profound effect on the culture of sexuality – the internet - to which I will be returning later in my talk.

The ‘objective’ situation

I begin the ‘objective’ consideration of sexuality in group psychotherapy with a comparison between the individual psychoanalytic and group analytic / group psychotherapeutic traditions. How has sexuality been dealt with in these two traditions and how have they approached the theme of sexual diversity?

Sexuality in psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis was born in an explosion of interest and controversy about sexuality. It was the secrecy and hypocrisy about sexuality in late 19th Century Vienna that impressed Freud and that he saw as the basis of many of the problems presenting in the consulting room. Since then, sexuality has maintained a dominant position in the development of psychoanalysis. But there are ambiguities and inconsistencies in this development and I want to highlight some of the distinguishing features of the psychoanalytic discourse on sexuality -

1. There is a discrepancy between the theoretical emphasis on sexuality in psychoanalysis and its application in the consulting room. The bodily aspect of sexuality gives it an immediacy and intensity that may be difficult to communicate and share in the consulting room. If sexual fantasy and feeling are aroused in the treatment pair, there is additional anxiety about exposure and enactment. How do we understand these responses? How much is transference, how much is sexualisation of the relationship and how much is actual sexual attraction? Confusion about these matters is complicated by concern in the last few decades about sexual misconduct between therapist and patient arising in the consulting room: there now exist more stringent rules and punishments. These tensions may account for what appears to be a decreasing emphasis on sexuality in psychoanalytic practice, a situation Mann (2003) has described as the “desexualisation of psychoanalysis”
2. Psychoanalysis has from early on adopted a normative approach to sexuality. Freud regarded bisexuality and early polymorphous sexuality as natural, describing how these tendencies had to be repressed in order to conform to social expectations. However, psychoanalysis increasingly became identified with conventional morality concerning sexual differences. This had a major

influence on the perception and understanding of sexual diversity, with an overriding emphasis on perversion, a point to which I will return later.

3. The outcome of these developments was that psychoanalysis paradoxically had both a liberalizing and a restraining influence – liberalizing in so far as it took the lid off sexuality, but restraining because it reflected orthodox social norms and tended to pathologize all sexual diversity.

Sexuality in group analysis and group psychotherapy

Almost the opposite situation pertains in group psychotherapy. Whereas psychoanalysis is saturated by sexuality, however ambivalently, group psychotherapy, including group analysis is marked by an almost total absence of any discourse on sexuality. There is very little written about it and little clarity about how it is dealt with in the consulting room. Foulkes, who originated group analysis, put limited emphasis on sexuality and, in keeping with the fact that he wrote about 50 years ago, adopted the conservative views of the time. Similarly in the USA, where there is a much greater range of group psychotherapeutic approaches, sexuality has nevertheless been given very little emphasis.

This has led to the following situation -

1. Sexuality in general and sexual diversity in particular have been marginalized in group psychotherapy
2. The lack of an adequate framework for considering sexuality in groups creates ambiguity and uncertainty about how to deal with it in practice
3. The lack of a discourse predicated an uncritical absorption of values and norms concerning sexual diversity in the surrounding environment, with little debate about its meaning in group psychotherapy

Given this unsatisfactory situation, where do we go from here?

The changing landscape of sexual diversity

There have been significant changes in sexual norms in the last few decades with far greater openness about sexual diversity. It is not clear that psychotherapeutic approaches have kept up with these changes. In this section I consider three alternative perspectives of sexual diversity and how they have gradually yielded to a more open and flexible contemporary perspective but with vestiges of prejudice still implicit in psychotherapeutic practice.

Diversity as perversion

I return here to the psychoanalytic emphasis on perversion. I agree with the views of Muriel Dimen (1995) who argues that psychoanalysis was influenced from early on by what she calls “The Discourse of Nature”. Freud, writing at the time of Darwin, was influenced by the exigencies of biology and reproductive survival, within which ‘normal’ sexuality is defined in terms of genital heterosexual intercourse. Sexual

preferences outside of this biological view were generally interpreted as perversions. Although Freud himself had the imaginative ability to comprehend sexuality in its very different forms, his followers concretized notions of perversions and for many decades sexual diversity was routinely pathologized. This was reinforced by strongly conservative attitudes in psychiatry, identified with Kraft-Ebbing, and reflected in the identification and categorization of perversions based on heterosexist perspectives.

Linked to this was the strong tendency in psychoanalysis to pursue a sharp division in the roles of the sexes so that masculinity and femininity were defined in opposition to each other and gender differences conceived as a polarity. This tendency was reinforced by the prevalence of the Oedipus complex as an explanation of sexual development, since the resolution of the complex in conventional terms is seen as identification with the same-sex parent and desire for the opposite sex parent. The combination of these influences led not only to psychoanalysis as a body of theory reflecting and reinforcing social orthodoxy but to treatment approaches that emphasized genital heterosexual adjustment. There are many accounts in the literature of the 20th century of homosexuals of both sexes feeling misunderstood and pathologized in psychotherapy.

Diversity as natural

The tide started turning when both the women's movement and the gay liberation movement of the 60's onwards began to challenge many of these assumptions. The naturalness of women's sexuality and of people's sexual attraction to members of the same sex became key positions in these movements, undermining stereotypes and prejudices that had held sway for many years. The decentering of the sexual subject from its conventional frame was further assisted by the post-modern thinking of the later 20th century, writers like Foucault and Derrida arguing against notions of unitary identities and for the existence of diversity, between individuals and *within* individuals. Society, rather than biology, was increasingly seen as the constructor and mediator of sexual norms and as such could be challenged. A later development still of the 20th century – and continuing in the 21st – are the advances in reproductive technology, resulting in new ways of having children, independent of the necessity for heterosexual intercourse. This further removes biological necessity as the absolute criterion of sexual maturity and adds substance and openness to a wider range of sexual preferences. The outcome in the last decade or two has been dramatic. Take, for example, the civil recognition of gay partnerships in marriage – something that just 5 or 10 years ago would have been thought of as impossible and that now is common in several countries.

Diversity as experimental

If the trend in the 20th century was moving towards a greater appreciation of sexual diversity, through the intellectual and social movements I have described, real expansion of diversity came through the phenomenon that has changed our culture in many ways – the internet. By extending our knowledge of sexuality and opening networks of communication between people of different persuasions, the internet has revealed a vast landscape of sexual diversity. The internet caters for people of every conceivable sexual preference. Although there are problems about this, about the greater opportunity for acting out of dangerous or destructive forms of sexuality, on

the whole the internet has helped to universalize and normalize large areas of sexual difference that have previously remained underground.

Another way in which the internet has encouraged the acknowledgement of sexual diversity is through the creation of virtual relationships. Again, this may be of questionable value, given the retreat from actual relationships to virtual relationships, but it also allows for greater elements of play within individuals' sexual repertoire and facilitates different sexual possibilities. This is epitomized in the creation of alternative identities, sexual and otherwise – also known as avatars – which is integral to internet movements such as Second Life, a virtual universe which is subscribed to by many millions of people and which offers opportunities for fictitious but compelling sexual lives.

The upshot of all this change in the construction and representation of sexual diversity is that psychotherapists now face a very different sexual landscape from that of just ten or twenty years ago. For group psychotherapy this presents a particular challenge. The group culture is naturally inclined towards diversity, most psychotherapy groups consisting of heterogeneous populations, and valuing of diversity as a condition for growth and change. Yet, given the absence of a sexual discourse in group psychotherapy, how do we address the current situation?

Parameters of sexual diversity in the group

What do we mean by sexual diversity? If we adopt a wide definition of the term, we may consider the following: homosexuality in its various manifestations (or what may be called the “homosexualities”, since there is no one form of homosexuality); the differing degrees of bisexuality, some enacted and others not; variations in sexual behaviour from celibate to promiscuous; sexual preferences within both heterosexuals and homosexuals that include sadomasochistic fantasies and activities; fetishisms; and transgender identities.

In clinical practice the most common form of sexual diversity likely to be encountered is homosexuality. Given the greater acceptance of homosexuality in society, it is not surprising that many more openly homosexual men and women are presenting for psychotherapy. In both my own National Health Service practice in the UK and my private practice I have seen a steady increase of gay individuals over the years. This filters through to all forms of therapy and certainly group therapy. In most groups I know of, either as conductor or supervisor, there are gay members, quite often constituting a significant proportion of the membership.

This increase in gay referrals and self-referrals fundamentally reflects changing demographics rather than suggesting that gay individuals are inherently more disturbed than any others. At the same time, it seems important to recognize that, while it is easier for people to acknowledge their gayness more openly, there are still anxieties and problems about homosexual identity. In spite of major attitudinal changes in society there remain pockets of fierce conservatism and prejudice. As recently as late 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Christmas address, publically proclaimed homosexuality as evil and undermining the work of the church. While the Catholic church is not generally known for its liberal attitudes, this is a reminder that

large tracts of society still hold conservative and reactionary viewpoints concerning sexual diversity. And this is reflected in the continuing doubts and difficulties of gay people themselves – continuing feelings of isolation and exclusion and continuing struggles with acceptance of their own sexuality. This has come to be known as internalized homophobia. Gay people frequently find themselves in a bind – aware of a more open society in some respects, enjoying some new freedoms but still carrying the burden of prejudice. Recent studies, for example Hegarty (2006), have suggested that while there is greater tolerance of sexual identity differences, including homosexuality, there remains intolerance concerning sexual *practice*.

An important point is that all sexuality, not just homosexuality, may be difficult. However exciting and fulfilling sex can be - and is so for many people at times in their lives and for some more or less continuously throughout life – sexuality for many adults is problematic. Stoller (1979), one of the great contemporary writers on sexuality, has described much of adult sexuality as awkward, variably satisfying and often anxiety-provoking. Christopher Bollas (2000) suggests that “sex is inherently traumatic”. I make this point so as to widen our focus. It is not just those with minority sexual interests who have problems. We all have problems in this sensitive and important area. And part of the difficulty may be the complex nature of much sexuality, including what might be called ‘internal sexual diversity’ – the diversity that exists within each one of us. This can include bisexual fantasies and impulses: confusion about sexual orientation; variations in the object of our sexual desire; conflicting sexual desires, say for active and passive sexual experience; the pulls of auto-erotic versus relational sex; sexual fantasies of a ‘transgressive’ nature; and the changing nature of sexual interests and relationships as we go through life, from youth to old age.

Perhaps the point here is not to isolate sexual diversity as something that belongs to just some individuals but to include it in the wider spectrum of sexuality, the overall pool of fantasy and desire to which we all belong. But this gets back to the problem of sexuality being such a marginal discourse in group psychotherapy. If we are hardly addressing it in our literature, where do we begin? In the next section I want to propose some ideas about how we can fill this gap.

Developing a group psychotherapy perspective of sexuality

Drawing on the ideas in my book, “The Group as an Object of Desire”, I consider the therapy group from three main perspectives – as an embodied group, as a container of the erotic imagination and as a group representing a moral position. I also want to consider the notion of the group as witness (Nitsun 2006).

The embodied group

Contrary to the impression that sexuality may be off the agenda in groups, given its marginalization in the literature, most group therapists would probably agree that sexuality is usually very present in groups, whether openly discussed or not. Among the few writers who have directly addressed this issue, Moeller (2002) described the group as “a highly charged libidinal network” and Tylim (2003) described it as a “theatre of desire”. In my own writing, I have drawn attention to the bodily, non-

verbal aspects of the group, where members sit in close proximity to each other, close enough to see, to touch, to smell. Sexual attraction, desire and fantasy enter into the here and now of the group, in addition to members' awareness of their sexuality and relationships outside of the consulting room. Group therapy therefore is not just an interaction between minds, which is how it is often described (Behr and Hearst 2005) but between bodies, and these bodies in their different ways are sexual bodies. This may seem obvious but it is an observation that has so far not been developed in our field. Almost all of the emphasis has been on verbal communication and the meeting of minds. It is time to look at bodies meeting and communicating.

The erotic imagination

I use the term "the erotic imagination" to describe not just a single individual's erotic fantasies and thoughts but a wider erotic imagination, a container of the diverse range of desires and fantasies. I suggest that a therapy group generates a particular erotic imagination, comprising the members' individual desires but within a matrix that is greater than the sum of its parts. This includes conscious and unconscious fantasy. The freer the erotic imagination, the more scope it gives for exploration in the group and the more likely it will be that members will share the hidden aspects of their sexuality. Conversely, restraints on the erotic imagination will be reflected in inhibition and concealment in the group. Although this might not matter for some members, it might be crucial for others, particularly those who are anxious about 'transgressive' thoughts and impulses, those who are concealing painful aspects of their sexuality and those who are especially prone to shame.

Group morality

Groups also hold a moral position, whether overt or covert. Since sexuality is so constrained by social norms, the way the therapy group represents the surrounding morality will strongly influence the freedom with which sexuality is addressed in the group. I want to make a plea for a generous morality. Elias (1978), a sociologist who influenced Foulkes' thinking about groups, has written extensively about the power of social restraints. He makes a distinction between 'necessary restraints' and 'unnecessary restraints'. The former refers to restraints that are a necessary part of an ordered, sane society, the latter to restraints that reflect the operation of vested interests and arbitrary controls. Whereas the former are needed in the interest of a well-functioning society, the latter are open to challenge and revision. I suggest that this is true of the restraints surrounding sexual diversity. While restraints are entirely appropriate in situations where harm may come to an individual/s – and there are forms of sexual diversity that have a dangerous and destructive potential and that are genuinely perverse – this does not hold true for the majority. Notions of perversion are too easily conflated with difference. The therapy group, rather than simply mirroring conventional restraints, is in principle free to question them. In this sense, it has the potential to become a benign authority, a fairer, kinder morality than the morality of the super-ego, the harsh, critical function of the self and culture that is the internalization of repressive social controls (Elias 1978)

The revised morality of the group may go some way towards mitigating the shame that is so often an aspect of sexuality. Revealing sexuality in a group is usually difficult. It is one of the most private and personal aspects of ourselves, rarely

discussed with others in any detail or depth. The bodily aspect of sexuality adds to this sensitivity. The body, in its nakedness, may be enshrouded in shame. This is probably true of all sexuality but more so with sexual diversity, since the shame about difference may be even greater. This is where a group that reflects a benign morality may be of real value. The emergence of such a morality in the group and how it is shaped, possibly through the therapist's attitudes and interventions, possibly through members openness and curiosity, is therefore of crucial importance in facilitating the wider reaches of the sexual subject.

The group as witness

Unlike individual therapy, where there are just two players in the room, each enacting a very different role, groups have the advantage of several members in addition to the therapist. The opportunity for a range of observations and opinions is an integral part of the group therapeutic process, adding the strength of diversity to whichever discourse is uppermost. I suggest this is another advantage for the exploration of sexuality. While revealing sexuality in a group may be difficult for the reasons outlined above, largely to do with shame, the subject may nevertheless benefit from the different views that are usually forthcoming in a group. One of the difficulties of dealing with intimacy in ordinary life is the relative isolation in which this may occur. Intimacy, sexual or otherwise, usually takes place between two people. Whereas this is an appropriate condition for the expression of intimacy, it can also be the occasion for anxiety, invasion and abuse. Bringing matters of intimacy into a group opens the experience to new forms of facilitation and understanding. I have described this in my writing as "re-contextualizing intimacy"

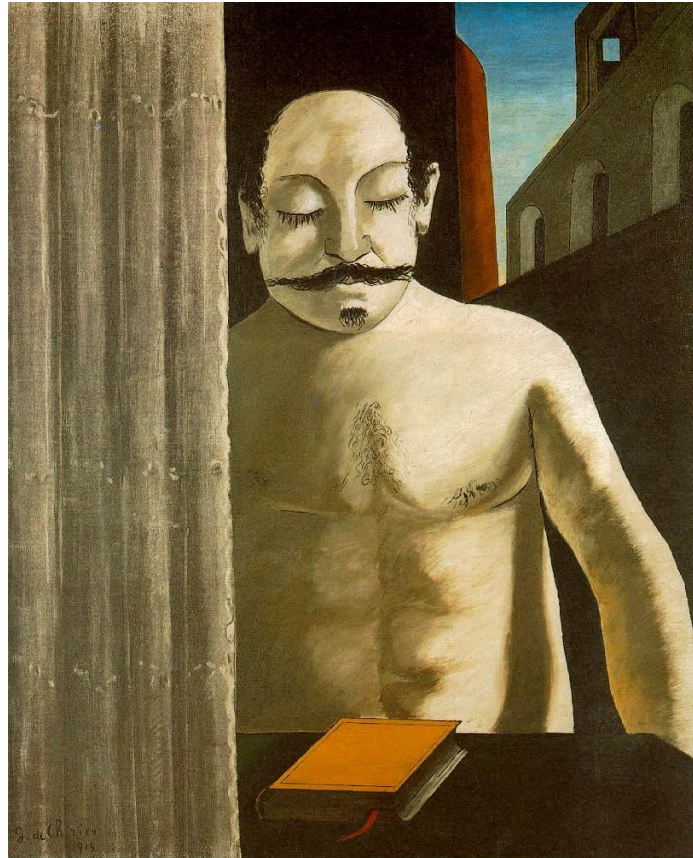
These comments suggest that the therapy group can be a valuable context for the exploration of sexuality in general and sexual diversity in particular. Given the conditions I outline, the group may help to bridge the differences that are so much a part of sexuality. It remains for me to consider the therapist's role in this process and to make some final points about ethical considerations.

The group therapist

I suggest that the therapist has a crucial role in influencing the sexual discourse in group psychotherapy. Group members are sensitive to the therapist's attitudes and expectations: the therapist's morality undoubtedly affects the discourse. In turn, this depends very much on who the therapist is, his or her own sexual experience and what attitudes he or she brings to the subject of sexual diversity. I say this recognizing that few of us are free of preferences of our own, as well as inhibitions and prejudices. As Mitchell (1996) points out, the expectation is not that we free ourselves totally of prejudice, since this is impossible, but that we are able to reflect on our process, whether on our own or with others.

Illustration 2

"The Child's Brain"



I want to illustrate this point with another work of art, this time a painting by the Italian surrealist artist, Giorgio de Chirico. The painting is called "The Child's Brain", which is a peculiar title given that there is no child in painting. What it suggests rather is that this is the image of the father in the child's mind. It is the child's perception of the father and perhaps especially the sexual father. The man's nakedness, the sensual quality of his eyebrows and moustache, all suggest that the father may be engrossed in a sexual fantasy. But what is the fantasy? The book on the table may represent the variety of sexual narratives and the red bookmark that you can see may signify the particularity of the father's sexuality.

I suggest that in the same way that the father's sexuality has a major influence on the child's development, so in the group the therapist's sexual experience and openness to the book of sexual narratives is a crucial factor. Again, I don't believe that there is a right or wrong but that openness to one's own difference and recognition of one's own prejudice is vital. Here I return full circle to the subjective perspective I suggested at the beginning of my talk.

Ethics

I suggest that there are ethical aspects to the sexual subject in group therapy. In general, there is an overlap of ethical and diversity issues in group psychotherapy

practice but this has particular relevance to sexual diversity. We are familiar with ethics as related to questions of sexual acting-out in psychotherapy. There are some fundamental boundary requirements that protect group members and ourselves as therapists from sexual transgression and exploitation. These are ethical considerations. But ethics also apply to the therapist's management of sexual diversity. How one makes decisions about what sexual differences to include in the group, how one approaches this difference and how one intervenes in the exploration of sexual diversity are all ethical concerns. Whereas the subject of sexual diversity has in the past been open to ethical judgement in a different way – how valid is it to live a sexually alternative life? – I suggest that we have turned the corner and that the ethical concern now is how humanly and imaginatively we deal with sexual diversity.

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