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Working with Sadism: An Embodied Relational Approach

By Morit Heitzler

By Morit Heitzler. An exploration of the particular clinical challenges of working with sadism in the therapeutic relationship — whether the client's own sadistic impulses, their experience of being the object of sadism, or the dynamics of sadomasochistic relational patterns that play out in the therapy itself.

KEY THEMES

— Sadism as a relational pattern in therapy

— The therapist's experience of being the object of sadistic impulses

— Countertransference in sadistic enactments

— Dehumanisation and the restoration of humanity

— Clinical approach to sadomasochistic relational dynamics

Sadism as Relational Dynamic

Sadism — in its clinical sense, not limited to its sexual connotations — is a relational dynamic in which one person takes pleasure in the pain, humiliation, or dehumanisation of another. This dynamic appears in therapeutic work in various forms: in the client's sadistic attacks on the therapist, in the therapist's experience of working with a client who has been a perpetrator of sadistic abuse, and in the more subtle forms of sadomasochistic interaction that can develop in therapeutic relationships that are not sufficiently examined.

What distinguishes a psychodynamically informed approach to sadism from a purely behavioural or cognitive one is the recognition that sadistic behaviour is always a relational communication — that it expresses something about the person's experience of relationship, their history of having been dehumanised, and their attempts to master that experience by enacting it from the other position.

The body psychotherapy tradition adds a crucial dimension: the recognition that sadistic dynamics are held somatically, expressed through the body, and accessible through the therapist's own embodied countertransference.

The Therapist's Experience

One of the most challenging aspects of working with sadistic clients or with survivors of sadistic abuse is the impact on the therapist. The therapist who is the object of a client's sadistic attacks — whether explicit or subtle — is being put in touch with the experience of dehumanisation that constitutes the heart of the sadistic wound.

This is not merely an unpleasant experience to be managed and set aside. It is clinically significant information: what the therapist is being made to feel is what the client either felt or inflicted (or both). The capacity to remain present to this experience — to allow oneself to be affected without being overwhelmed, to acknowledge the impact without defensively denying it — is central to effective work with sadistic dynamics.

The embodied dimension of this is particularly important. Sadistic dynamics often manifest through subtle somatic communications — the quality of the client's gaze, the tone of their voice, the way they occupy physical space in the room. The therapist who is attuned to their own somatic experience will register these communications before they have been consciously processed, and this somatic registration is itself valuable clinical information.

Restoring Humanity

The therapeutic goal in working with sadistic dynamics is not the elimination of the sadistic impulse — which is likely to be replaced by a more covert version — but the restoration of the client's capacity to experience both themselves and others as fully human.

Dehumanisation — the perception of oneself or others as objects rather than subjects — lies at the heart of sadism. The therapeutic relationship, when it can survive the sadistic attacks and remain genuinely present, offers something that contradicts this dehumanisation: the experience of an other who remains human in the face of being treated as less than human.

This is extraordinarily demanding work. It requires the therapist to maintain their own humanity — their genuine presence, their genuine affect, their genuine care — in the face of repeated attempts to reduce them to an object. The body psychotherapy tradition's emphasis on the therapist's own embodied aliveness is directly relevant here: it is precisely this aliveness that sadism attempts to extinguish, and its maintenance in the face of that attempt that makes the relationship therapeutic.

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