

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Apr 18, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/on-female-obsessional-neurosis/>

Marc Strauss

On Female Obsessional Neurosis

Summary:

What is the obsessional neurosis as such is not an easy question, because even the most characteristic symptom such as the ritual or the OCD, as it is called nowadays, belongs to the most different personalities. Lacan used the structural model because there is no symptom that would characterize one structure or clinical type. The diagnosis is based on the coherence of the whole that corresponds to the way a speaking being arranges impossibility: the impossible unification of the living substance of the body and of the subject represented by the signifier. This can be arranged in two ways, psychotic and neurotic. A neurotic, male or female, is someone who wagers on the Other. And neurotic types are different ways of reacting to the discontent provoked by the fact that the Other can be misleading. The obsessional subject wants a world that holds together without any hole, for one single hole can ruin the whole edifice. But obsessional neurosis does not consist only of control but also of symptoms that signal the failure of control. The second part of the question is the sexual differentiation of obsessional neurosis. Lacan left a place for something that, in women, does not derive from this phallic logic. However, even if we can speak of obsession in women, we cannot speak of female obsession. A case will show why here is no other obsession than the one of the phallus, erected in the stiff eternity. Are there more obsessional women as before? And what are the consequences of contemporary discourse that does not leave any place to the signifier of difference, the phallic signifier? Today we live the reign of transparency and of political correctness. This is why male, as well as female obsessional neurosis appears as an unwilling remainder of the fact that it is impossible to sign a contract with enjoyment.

If we want to speak of the female obsessional neurosis, we first have to know what obsessional neurosis is as such. This is not an easy question, because even the most characteristic symptom such as the ritual or the OCD [Obsessional Compulsive Disorder], as it is called nowadays, belongs to the most different personalities. Indeed, what does someone who cries all day in thought of her dead father have in common with a person who cannot leave the house without verifying twenty seven times whether the gas and the taps are turned off?

Lacan used the structural model because there is no symptom that would characterize one structure or clinical type. Put differently, the diagnosis is not based on a characteristic detail, since there is no such detail, but on the coherence of the whole that corresponds to the way a speaking being arranges an impossibility: the impossible unification of the living substance of the body and of the subject represented by the signifier.

As we know, this can be arranged in two ways:

- 1) We can refer to an Other, that is to someone other than ourselves, the one who knows better what we do, and who we recognize as a guide and a judge. This sounds quite religious, and it actually is: the religion of the father that Freud substituted to the exhausted religion of God and that Lacan

replaced with the religion of paternal function, that is of logic, which enables to transform the belief in a Supreme Being into the certainty of a possible unity. The subject knows that it has experienced this unity in the symptom, which is his most singular possession and distinguishes him from the others. Lacan then makes his final leap and passes from the religion of logic to the religion of *sinthome*, as certitude. As the French implies, this certitude is a rock, for example Freud's obstinacy to confound the master signifier with the poor exhausted father.

2) Another way to arrange the irreducible discord between the living and its representation is the attempt to rectify the Other so that it corresponds to the world's reality, in particular to the subject's existence, presence, and voice. Since there is no father that functions in this Other, and since the master signifier is pulverized, we know that we are dealing here with a psychotic chaos, followed by a more or less genius reconstruction work accomplished by the subject itself in order to produce a world that holds together. We can immediately see that rituals serve this purpose. Rituals are signs, which express and also feed the faith; they signal the subject's submission to a purely signifying law, for it does not respond to any necessity that would derive from an obligation or instinct. This is what the ritual expresses, since no necessity can explain it, be it glory or simple survival. A rite can also be ridiculous; in a certain way it even has to be, so that the ridicule is not a result of mere coincidence but of a choice. However, a rite must not be only ridiculous for it feeds the faith, the subject's appeal to purely signifying law. In short, the role of rituals is to establish a sufficient relation between the world of reality and the world of words in order to ensure the existence of tribe. A rite ensures that the world stands upward and enables the subject to do the same.

If we now return to the first form, neurosis, we meet several types: hysterical, obsessional, and phobic neurosis. How can they be distinguished, and do they allow us to regulate the entire human field that does not stem from madness? As we already said a neurotic, male or female, is a subject, it is someone who wagers on the Other that knows and judges the quality of representation regarding the subject's unification with enjoyment of the living that affects it, that is with different affects perceived by the body. This Other that knows and judges is necessarily structured, and in order to respond to the very definition of structure, it must also be perforated with lack. The Other is always missing the ultimate signifier, the one that would guarantee this Other as truly Other and transform the faith in the Other into certitude. You can recognize here what Freud said of the father: *semper incertus*. Put differently, the father derives only from a faith in speech. The lack in the Other is more than unpleasant for the subject: it provokes anxiety because the entire representation that a subject makes of itself and its world lies in this very faith in the Other that the subject recognizes as such.

Neurotic types are different ways of reacting to the discontent provoked by the fact that the Other can be misleading, as misleading as the subject that is only represented in the signifier through its "semblances". We can easily displace this anxiety to spiders or any other phobic object.

But one can also ask the father to make an effort and put a word onto this hole, precisely because there is The woman waiting in it. Here we have to turn to the second part of today's question, namely the sexual differentiation of obsessional neurosis. How come there is the woman in this hole? Precisely because in the Other there is no signifier that would designate her. I can understand that this idea was shocking, especially in a country which is as egalitarian as the United States. But there is no reason to be shocked, because Freud and Lacan have been perfectly egalitarian: they actually recognize only one sex, the phallus. However, there are two sexuated positions, on the one side "to have the organ that represents the phallus" and "not be the phallus", and on the other side "to not have the organ that represents the phallus" and "be the phallus". This leads the two groups to situate themselves in relation to one another, to search for as well as to avoid each other. Moreover, Lacan who did not contradict Freud but tried to be conceptual, left a place for something that, in women, does not derive from this phallic logic. But, careful: hysteria does not manifest the feminine part of the subject; it only raises its question. And since the word is missing, it is evident that the father cannot answer, which is why the hysteric supports him. Differently put, she stimulates a desire and reveals herself as its object, not out of the cruelty towards men but because she wants them to become better men:

she wants them to be concerned by the feminine question, and she wants this question to become a question that truly focuses a desire for her.

On the contrary, the obsessional subject wants a world that holds together without any hole, for one single hole can ruin the whole edifice. We can see here a slight resemblance with our description of the psychotic and his rites, but the difference lies in this crucial fact that the world that has to hold together is the world of the Other that subject recognizes and to which it submits itself, under the condition that it does not cease to demonstrate it being without a gap. A manifestation of the gap in the Other would not entail the failure of psychotic's grandiose mission but a betrayal of faith in the father, a faith which may be delirious but certainly not psychotic. The obsessional neurosis is sustained by the wish for an ideal father, as in the case of hysteria, but with the difference that the father is not captured by the feminine enigma. On the contrary, it is a father that nothing disturbs in his power of control, a father without any gap, the one who has to be sustained more than supported, since, by definition, he does not need any support.

We thus have on the one hand, as Lacan says, the hysteric side without faith, and on the other hand the obsessional side of the law of guaranty. We usually conceive that there are mostly women who look for the signifier and for a possible representation of the part of their being that escapes representation. We also conceive that it is mostly men who worry about the good functioning of their organ, and that one has to try to teach them how to master it so that it does not act on its own way. This is even truer because, as we have seen, desire is a failure of their strategy to escape the faint of the subject manifested in desire. For the obsessional subject the only acceptable desire is thus a controlled desire, but of course, if it is controlled, it loses its dynamics and faints in the very moment of satisfaction.

The regulation of obsessional's desire is far from easy, but what is really impossible is the satisfaction that lies in the very control of desire. Differently put, if the hysteric proceeds from the impossibility of this control in order to render its crusade to the name of the father, for the obsessional a father worthy of his name has to make the escape from this control impossible.

I spoke of the necessity to control the organ that acts on its own way. By doing so it obeys the unconscious fantasy and is often in opposition to the subject's wishes. In short, it acts on its own way, whether the body and its manifestations of desire are male or female. Of course, as I already said, a boy who possesses the organ does not have much choice, or in any case, it has much less choice. He has to make use of the organ in the discursively prescribed circumstances. The discourse prescribes different ways to be a man, and these ways are not infinite. On the contrary, the number of possible images of women is infinite, precisely because the discourse does not say what The woman is. One can thus understand that women are essentially hysteric and that the question of their existence as women seems to be more urgent than the question of their existence as speaking beings, which refers to the universal and leaves them malesexual (*hommosexuel*).

So, if the neurotic's subjective position in face of castration can be the same in both sexes, why would there be no obsessional women? The difference between obsessional men and women would relate to the field where women can perform their control determined by the social discourse. Some fifty years ago women were essentially cordoned to domestic universe, they were in charge of housekeeping, the health of its members and sometimes even of its prosperity. But since women have the right to the same area of professional competition as men, their field of action became larger and rendered the previous one obsolete, which means that their symptomatology resembles more and more to the symptomatology of obsessional men.

Still, there is one dimension of neurosis that we have not yet developed, namely the manifestations of the failure of subjective position, the return of the repressed failure. We already know that obsessional neurosis does not consist only of control but also of symptoms that signal the failure of control. It is a fiasco that makes a more or less big spot on the immaculate tissue of well-controlled world; a spot for which we know that it is shit. This is the anal dimension of obsessional desire which returns precisely when it is inappropriate.

Now, is there a difference in returned manifestations, in symptoms, according to sexes? Thoughts that impose themselves to women and show their insufficiency, mediocrity, and defectiveness, are not fundamentally different than those in men. What is more specific is the mode of manifestation of their insufficiency, mediocrity, and defectiveness. They have access to men's obsessional symptoms, but they also have their own. For example: the preoccupations that refer to their body, beauty, or maternity. However, even if we can speak of obsession in women, I do not think that we can speak of female obsession; there is no other obsession than the one of the phallus, erected in the stiff eternity.

Let us take the example of a young woman who seeks consultation because she is invaded by rituals of verification and horrible ideas. For example, that she by accident starts a fire that would destroy the apartment that her parents bought and arranged for her; or, that her insults and cruel humiliations make her boyfriend suffer, even though she is happy with him and feels protected. In fact, she insists that she does not have any reproach towards her parents who did everything for her and wanted her to be happy, even if they were sometimes a bit clumsy in their exaggeration. She does not recall any frustration, misunderstanding, or violence from her childhood. She was maybe even a bit too spoiled; she remembers that she did not want to leave the house to go to school where she had difficulties to integrate and to make friends. She also anxiously remembers a teacher who did not like her. The same situation repeated during her first employment where she was confronted with a hostile superior who was cruelly humiliating her and reproaching her that she has no character, nor personality. As a matter of fact, she admits that she always doubted of having an original personality, and secretly fears that she is a bit stupid. Nevertheless, she claims to be sure that she did not do anything wrong, and even the infantile sexuality or at least sexual curiosity does not evoke anything for her.

After she spoke of the teacher, she noticed that our conversations do not calm her rituals at all; on the contrary, they make them even more intrusive. She was deeply moved when she remembered certain hostility towards the teacher, and she recalled two other memories: in the first one she was mocking her younger brother who was not as good at school, and her mother told her to stop. The second one intrigues her more because she never forgot it and she always remembers it with great anxiety: her father once mocked her brother and she joined him to do the same. When her mother saw this she addressed her quite sharply and she aggressively said: "You want us to get divorced?" She was dumbfounded by this interpellation. The mother of course did not know how right she was, nor did the daughter. The young girl put up with the reaction of anxiety and shame. Her analysis will of course allow her to clarify her hostility towards her mother, which is not only oedipal rivalry but a more profound horror of femininity and of the lack from which it consists. In her adult life, she does not see herself as a woman surrounded by men but more as a baby protected and rocked by a man. Man is thus more a maternal figure, while women are not mothers but in the first place dangerous enemies who think only of humiliating her. Put differently, she does not revere her femininity and its enigma, like a hysteric; on the contrary, the less this femininity is manifested, the better she feels... with reserve regarding the incomprehensible thoughts that contradict her ideals of gentleness and peace.

As Freud said, behind obsession there is always the basic neurosis that is hysteria. Her case is no exception, and as all neurotics, she hides from the position of the object of the Other, which is how Lacan defines the hysteric strategy. But her own avoiding strategy is to deny this desire in its most uncontrollable and even indecent aspect, in order to replace it with a fairy tale world where she plays the role of princess. And she could succeed, if only there were no damned obsessions! In the course of analysis, she will have to realize that she is not a little saint and that she has as many bad thoughts as everyone else. When the moment comes, the question of her enjoyment will arise, also at the level of her body. She will have to ask herself what she wants as a woman and how to be one of them.

Nevertheless, things are not that simple with obsession, be it in men or in women. Anxiety is much more present in obsessional neurosis than in hysteria. In fact, in hysteria, it is the other, the partner who behaves badly, as Mr. K. did with Dora. For a while psychiatry described the beautiful hysteric indifference towards the symptom, which does not mean that a hysteric is indifferent to everything; on the contrary, it is very

sensible to the other and its desire. On the other hand, the obsessional subject takes upon itself the guaranty for an ideal world order of which it dreams. This position seems to be very close to the psychotic, who holds together the world's order and does not tolerate the slightest accident in it. But as we have already said, there is a difference: if in psychosis the necessary reconstruction of the world bears a megalomaniac dimension, in obsessional neurosis the subject represents itself in the gaze of the other who judges it and who has to admire it. Put differently, what is at stake in psychosis is existence, existence of world as well as existence of subject, while in neurosis the subject also wants to assure an existence, but this time the existence of the phallus. We can notice the mortifying paradox of obsessional neurosis where desire counts only if it is absolutely controlled, whereas control and desire are incompatible. I already had the occasion to express the paradox in which an obsessional boy got caught, and which was caused by a phrase that he believed to have heard from his mother, addressed to him: "If I knew you before your father, I would have married you." Again, the difference with the psychotic is that for the obsessional subject, a breach does not lead to catastrophic collapse of the world but to a catastrophic collapse of its own image. For the obsessional subject, the loss of control is a run, including its intestinal resonances, and with the mortal shame that accompanies it. Therefore, a subject in analysis always has to mourn, mourn the Other: the ideal father in hysteria, and the image that is almost necessary to oneself in obsessional neurosis. We can understand that the subject delays the moment of grasping the dirt that it is... the dirt that it is as well – only that a bit of dirtiness signifies its life failure.

Last question: we all agree that nowadays there are more obsessional women as before. We have already mentioned that today, the fields of activity are less differentiated according to both sexes than in Freud's time. Nevertheless, at the time the three "K", *Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche* (children, kitchen, church) of which Freud spoke, properly designated the behavior of many women whose age excluded them from the seduction game. And compared with today, this period was extraordinarily short back then. You certainly remember the first scene in *Gone with the Wind*, where Scarlett complains about being 18 and already too old to find a husband. And, as we have already said, women can also manifest their obsession in the domains that were since recently essentially occupied by men.

I will conclude with a slightly polemic point. Some Lacanian colleagues speak of more and more frequent obsessional ideas and even of obsessional neurosis in women, as a consequence of contemporary discourse that does not leave any place to the signifier of difference, the phallic signifier, and to its imaginary representation in the masculine organ. The contemporary discourse would be the discourse of foreclosure of the signifier of difference, and therefore of the phallus, which would mean that the incision of sex is not effective any more. This would manifest in the symptomatic return of thoughts that are marked as compulsive because of their extreme obscenity. To me it seems, on the contrary, that we cannot speak of the foreclosure of the phallus that would characterize contemporary discourse. Even less so given that humans have always tried to get rid of sexuality, or at least to control it. Nevertheless, what is true is that people, especially fathers, have more and more difficulties to incarnate not the power that they have indeed lost in time, but desire. To incarnate desire is from a certain point of view contrary to power, for a desire always exceeds the subject. The subject can only assume it and make it its own, or it can protect itself from it and refuse it. It is true that Dora's father, the father of the young homosexual, and the fathers of Freud's hysterics were all conformist bourgeois, but their guilty pleasures were part of this conformism, whereas nowadays pleasure, at all costs, has to comply to very strict collective norms. Today we live the reign of transparency and of political correctness. This is why male, as well as female obsessional neurosis appears as an unwilling remainder of the fact that it is impossible to sign a contract with enjoyment.

Bio:

Marc Strauss is psychiatrist and psychoanalyst in Paris. Founding member of the International School of Psychoanalysis of the Forums of Lacanian Field, member of The European Federation of Psychoanalysis (Strasbourg), teacher in Clinical College of Psychoanalysis. He is the author of numerous articles and book

chapters on psychoanalysis. [strauss.m@wanadoo.fr]

Publication Date:

November 19, 2014