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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Creativity, perversion and the violations of expectations

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Abstract

Violations of expectations provide a motive for both creativity and perversion. The term “violations of expectations,” derived from empirical studies of early development, includes surprise, shock, betrayals of trust, as well as the possession of extraordinary talents. In the creative area, violations of expectations are illustrated through aspects of the life and work of Marc Chagall and Richard Wagner, and in perversion through the lives and actions of serial killers.

Key words: *Creativity, perversion, serial killers, violation of expectations*

Stravinsky's ballet *Sacre du Printemps* so shocked its audience when it was first performed in Paris in 1914 that it was called “perverted” by music critics. The audience at its performance broke into a near riot, some bravos but lots of condemnation. It shattered all expectations of what music should sound like (1).

I begin my discussion of perversion and creativity with reference to this musical event for several reasons. First, it illustrates that what is judged to be “perverted” is defined by context, by place and time: what was labeled “perverted” in 1914 is no longer considered to be a perversion of music. Second, Stravinsky's “perverted” creative act was an aspect of an ongoing theme in his life and, I believe, probably in the lives of many creative artists. Stravinsky developed his musical ability almost in secret from his family, who disapproved of this interest. They wanted him to pursue a more conventional career, as a lawyer or businessman. He was able to get Rimsky-Korsakoff as his music teacher.

Furthermore, Igor Stravinsky (2,3) grew up in the shadow of his older brother's death. The loss of their son reinforced the family's determination to be overly concerned about Igor's health and life. The pagan, deliberately crude music of *Sacre du Printemps* was thus a grand defiance of the conservative expectations of his family, amplified *fortissimo*.

Both creativity and perversion have intrigued and challenged psychoanalysts, and have probably even evoked some envy. After all, Freud (4) said that psychoanalysis lays down its arms before the creative artist. He did not express the same awe about the pervert. About perversion, Freud (5) said that it was the opposite of neurosis. The pervert does what the neurotic might only imagine. My definition, however, differs from Freud's. In this paper, I propose that both creativity and perversion are based on violations of expectations. I do not address all creative works or all perverse acts, but rather propose that violations of expectations identify a theme that bridges these two domains.

The terms “expectations” and “violations of expectations” come from empirical studies of early development, where they have been extensively investigated. By the end of their first year, infants develop expectations of how interactions with significant caregivers will go. Optimally, each partner's communicative behavior will conform to the other's expectations. Infants can notice and predict what is expectable in their environment. In fact, neurophysiological evidence suggests that familiarity, repetition and expectancy underlie the most powerful organizing principles of neural functioning (6).

Violations of expectations have a powerful effect on infants, as documented by Cohen and Tronick's “still face” study (7). These researchers instructed normal mothers to simulate a facial expression of flat

affect and lowered activity for two minutes as they interacted with their infants. This departure from affective relatedness violated the expectations of the infants, and they responded with distressed behavior that continued even after the mothers resumed their usual affect and behavior. The “still face” and similar studies demonstrate the disorganizing effect of violations of expectations of predictability, of reliability and of living in a familiar world. They also organize experiences in both partners of “violator” and “being violated”.

However, not all violations of expectations are disorganizing to infants or to adults. To a child a “jack-in-the-box”, or to an adult a surprise party, are joyful, non-threatening violations of expectations. Of course, some children may become terrified by the sudden eruption of the figure from the box, or some adults may become painfully embarrassed by a surprise. For expectations to be violated, we must enter a situation anticipating safety, familiarity and trustworthiness. The intent of the “violator” may range from malevolent or mischievous to playful or teasing. There are numerous variants on the theme of violation of expectation: surprise, shock, defying of institutions, shattering of traditions, ridiculing of customs, transgressing of taboos, betrayals of trust, breaking of rules, invasions of one’s privacy, accidents, trauma, rape, as well as possessing extraordinary gifts, skills and talents.

To illustrate violations of expectations in creative works, I will describe some aspects of the life and work of Marc Chagall (8) and Richard Wagner (9,10). I will illustrate violations of expectations in perversion through the experiences and actions of three serial killers.

In his paintings, Chagall violated the onlookers’ expectation that, through the force of gravity, bodies will stand on the ground rather than float through the air. Chagall began his autobiography by stating:

But, first of all, I was born dead. I did not want to live. Imagine a white bubble that does not want to live. . . . They pricked the bubble with needles, they plunged it into a pail of water. At last it emitted a feeble whimper. But the main thing was, I was born dead. I hope the psychologists have the grace not to draw improper conclusions from that! (8:1)

Wagner (9) begins his autobiography with a remarkably similar account. He wrote that, at birth, he was so weak that his mother almost wished him dead. It seemed unlikely that he would ever be strong and survive. Whether or not these events were faithfully reported or liberally embellished over the years is irrelevant for this discussion. They capture family legends. Both artists clearly believed these tales and

grew up with the sense that they were defying expectations by their aliveness.

In Wagner’s operas as well as in his life, defiance against authority and betrayal of trust are prominent themes. As composer, for example, he violated the expectations of his audience in *Tristan und Isolde*. The ascending chords of the love motive that opens the opera teases the listener into expecting a resolution that does not come until the very end of the opera, four hours later.

In his opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, he fashioned a libretto replete with violations of expectations. For example, the hero, Walther, having fallen in love with Eva, learns that her father will give her hand in marriage to the mastersinger who wins the song contest to be held in a few days. Walther decides to audition to become a Meistersinger. His song is creative but does not comply with the strict academic rules for a master-song. In spite of his modest training, he arrogantly expected to pass the audition, but he failed. The judge at this audition happens to be the only other contestant in the song contest and hence Walther’s rival.

This violation of expectations, inflicted on Walther’s archaic grandiosity by old-fashioned conventions, is a narcissistic blow that provides the motivation for much of the opera. In the final act, at the song contest, after the rival for Eva’s hand makes a fool out of himself, Walther sings again. This time, the expectations of the Meistersingers and the townsfolk are violated. Having undergone a transformation throughout the opera, Walther now shapes his creativity and sings in a more disciplined way. He wins the day and the lady.

In his life, Wagner was notorious for betraying the trust of his friends (10). He would borrow money from them and would “borrow” their wives. He returned neither.

To illustrate the violations of expectations as a perversion, I will describe three serial killers. These are men who have killed three or more “strangers”, for no obvious reason. Even the usual surface motives for murder, such as monetary gain, revenge or sexual jealousy, are not characteristic of this group. The most frequent victims are young children, runaways, prostitutes and men and women in isolated places. All are vulnerable and often in need of help. The serial killer’s motivations derive from specific fantasies, as well as attempts to deal with early trauma and serious affective dysregulation. Typically, serial killers lull their victims into trust and safety, only to turn on them and kill them (11).

Henry Lee Lucas Newton, was the youngest son in a dysfunctional family (12). His father had been a severe alcoholic who had lost both legs in an accident. His mother, a prostitute, beat Lucas and

killed his pet animals. When he attended primary school, she dressed him as a girl and kept him in girls' clothing. Both Lucas and his father were subjected to watching his mother have sex with other men. His earliest memory was of his mother finishing up with a customer, then pulling out a shotgun and shooting the man in the leg. Lucas observed the man's blood spatter all over the room. Thus, in his early life, he was the victim of repetitive betrayals of trust and violations of expectation of living in a safe, predictable world. As a teenager, Lucas was cruel to animals and had sex with their corpses. In his thirties, he began his killing spree.

Ted Bundy (13–15) led two lives: one as a respectable law student and volunteer counselor in a rape victim clinic, the other as a murderer of more than twenty-one young women. Bundy was born in a group home for unwed mothers, where he was left for three months. He was raised by his grandparents as their adopted son. His mother was called his "sister". She claimed that Bundy's father was a student who deserted her, but there was some suspicion that Bundy's mother had been the victim of incest and that his grandfather was the real father. The grandfather was intolerant, tyrannical, volatile and sadistic to animals, as well as the possessor of a large collection of pornography. The world in which Bundy was raised consisted of abuse, lies and deceptions.

In his early twenties, Bundy wanted a serious relationship with a woman, felt ashamed of his background and believed he had nothing to offer the kind of woman he wanted. He met the daughter of a wealthy family who was "everything he wanted" and strikingly beautiful, with long dark hair parted down the middle. He was infatuated but she lost interest in him. He was devastated when she finally broke off with him.

Shortly after the break-up, Bundy found another girlfriend, who later described Bundy as having been preoccupied with sex and violence, and fascinated with bondage and sodomy. She agreed to act out some of his sexual fantasies with him. While still involved with her, he contacted his first love to get back with her. Neither woman knew about the other.

When Bundy tried to rekindle his first love, he was more self-assured and articulate. He courted with expensive gifts and luxurious dinners. Two months later, he ended their relationship. She was shocked and hurt. He had succeeded in wooing her, engaging her expectation that he was interested in her and winning her trust, only precipitously to shatter her expectations by abandoning her. She concluded that Bundy's courtship had been deliberately planned, to be in a position where he could make her fall in love with him, just to reject her, as she had rejected him.

Presumably, the pattern of seduction and establishment of trust, followed by betrayal, which Bundy enacted here and later in his serial killings, was derived from his early experience of being the victim of his mother's abandonment and deception. Like his first girlfriend, many of his victims had long black hair parted down the middle.

Early photos of Arthur Shawcross (16) already showed him with a blank, affectless look; suggesting that something seemed wrong. By the age of five or six, he suffered from frequent nightmares and enuresis. Antisocial behavior patterns began in the first and second grades and subsequently became more and more pronounced. His father was passive and retiring, while his mother was domineering and judgmental of Arthur and his father. He soon turned on younger children and seemed to enjoy making them cry through sadistic bullying, provoking them to feel pain, rage and fear.

In his twenties, Shawcross married a woman with a four-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter. She described him as fascinated by her children and playing with them enthusiastically, almost as if he were a kid himself. Increasingly, Shawcross was drawn to children, invited them to go fishing, rough-housed with them and ended up abusing them. A ten-year-old boy, whom he befriended, became his first murder victim. Later, a little girl became Shawcross' second victim, and he was imprisoned for 25 years. Upon his release, he became a familiar figure in the red light district and began a pattern of serial killing of prostitutes.

Conclusion

I end with a hypothesis, a speculation. Violations of expectations play a role in many – if not all – instances of creativity and perversion, but in different ways. As a child, more likely, the creative person violated the expectations of others, for example beginning with the very act of their early survival, as in the case of Chagall and Wagner, or their later survival as in the case of Stravinsky. On the other hand, the future pervert, taking the serial killer as an example, grew up in a world that can be characterized as consisting of "still faces". Their expectation of living in a responsive, trustworthy, predictable world was consistently violated. They became familiar with the role of victimizer through their victimization.

That those who suffered abuse in their childhood would grow up to be the abusers of others is well known. As psychoanalysts, however, we can also be alert to those who were the source of amazement and wonder in that they defeated the odds through their survival. In proposing to define perversion as based on violations of expectations, we can explore and

address the subjectivity and experience of the two participants, victim and victimizer, without judging behavior according to some external standard. Although my illustrations were of successful creative artists, we can, when analyzing obstacles in the paths to creativity, be alert to those experiences that provided an impetus to repeat an early violation of expectations in their numerous variations.

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Summaries in German and Spanish

Lachmann FM. Kreativität, Perversion und die Verletzungen von Erwartungen.

Verletzungen von Erwartungen liefern ein Motiv für beides: Kreativität und Perversion. Diese Benennung, aus empirischen Untersuchungen früher Entwicklung abgeleitet, schließt sowohl Überraschung, Schock, Verrat von Vertrauen ein wie auch die Verfügung über außergewöhnliche Talente. Im kreativen Bereich werden Verletzungen von Erwartungen durch Aspekte von Leben und Werk von Chagall und Richard Wagner illustriert und im Bereich der Perversionen durch Leben und Aktionen von Serien-Mördern.

Lachmann FM. Creatividad, perversion y violación de las expectativas.

La violación de las expectativas provee un motivo para ambas, la creatividad y la perversion. Este término, derivado de estudios empíricos sobre el desarrollo temprano, incluye sorpresa, shock, revelación de la verdad, así como la posesión de talentos extraordinarios. En la creativa violación de expectativas se ilustran aspectos de la vida y del trabajo de Marc Chagall y Richard Wagner y en la perversion a través de sus vidas y acciones de asesinos en serie.